

LOVE,


Daddy Sized

DADDY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARGOT SCOTT

Love, Daddy by Margot Scott

An ex-con with a secret can't resist his former cellmate's daughter.

I never claimed to be a saint. But it wasn't until I found myself in cuffs that I learned the damage I was capable of. The only sunshine on those gray prison days came in the form of letters from a hopeful teenager with a quick wit.

But the letters weren't addressed to me. They were meant for my bastard cellmate, who'd sooner toss them on the floor with the rest of his trash.

So I picked them up, read them, and wrote back, signing each letter, *Love, Dad.*

For four years, I kept up the lie, telling myself this girl deserved better than a deadbeat who won't even open her letters. But the truth is, she deserves better than both of us.

My first task as a free man is to walk into the salon where she works and admit that I'm a liar. But the pink-haired, tattooed bombshell who greets me is a far cry from the awkward teen I envisioned.

Gone are the braces, the pigtails, and picture-day smiles. Tatum Fitzroy is a grown woman with a body like a winding backroad and a dirty-girl lip bite that makes me wonder if coming clean is really worth the destruction.

Author's note: Slip into something spicy with the Daddy Sized Series, bursting at the seams with curvy heroines and older daddies who can't keep their hands to themselves. Love, Daddy is a spicy, age-gap romance featuring an obsessed ex-con daddy and a spunky, curvy hair stylist.

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Edited by Kathleen Payne

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one

LUCAS

MY HEART IS a jackhammer in the concrete of my chest as I walk into the salon. It's stupid to be so nervous. This is just a fucking haircut, right?

Hell, who am I kidding? The truth is, I've been watching this salon from across the street for the better part of two days, waiting for a chance to make my move. I've orchestrated the perfect opportunity to bump into my target, all casual-like: afternoon on a school day during a barely cracked window of time when the moms of Knoxville can spare a few minutes to ditch their split ends.

The hum of blow-dryers fill the space like fog, pierced by bursts of laughter. I've waited 'til the salon is so busy that they'll have to put me with the stylist assistant.

Only, now that the moment's arrived, I'm second guessing myself.

It's innocent enough, this desire to see Tatum in the flesh. We've been corresponding for years; it's only natural. I've long since memorized every precious word in each letter I received from her, so it's easy for me to recall the details she shared about her job.

I guess everyone has to start somewhere, she wrote. But I'm SO eager to move off mannequins and onto real people. Honestly, it drives me bonkers, having to go grab lunches for the stylists, like that has anything at all to do

with cosmetology. Still, the work is steady, and we get dental, so that's something.

I couldn't help smiling as I pictured her darting all over the salon, washing coffee mugs, sweeping up hair clippings, greeting customers. It's a comforting scene, one that I played over and over in my mind like a movie whose leading lady has been my ever-constant companion during those grueling years on the inside.

Seeing it all live and in color right now is a head trip. The past few days, I've seen more of my fantasies come to life than I'm fully prepared to admit. Everything from a hot cup of damn fine coffee to a private shower, restaurant food to internet porn. Good Lord, they've made *big* strides in internet porn over the last six years. But that's hardly my favorite thing about being a free man.

The best perk, hands down, has to be getting to see my pen pal in the flesh. For the past four years of my six-year sentence, I've been corresponding with Tatum.

Only, she doesn't know it.

A receptionist glances up from her tablet and offers me a smile that showcases a smear of mauve lipstick on her teeth.

"Hi there," she says with a soft Southern lilt. "How can I help you today?"

I scan the room, looking for Tatum, and note how almost every station is occupied.

Perfect.

I clear my throat. "Hi, um, I don't have a reservation or anything..."

"An appointment?" the receptionist says gently, inclining her head. "Not a problem at all. We take walk-ins." Her long, manicured fingernail clacks each time she touches the tablet's glass face. "It looks like the only person available right now is our stylist assistant. Are you familiar with what that means?"

"Yeah, that's fine—"

"It means she isn't a *full* stylist. She's still learning the ropes. But honestly, a men's cut is easy-peasy, so I'm sure she'll do just fine." More tapping on the tablet. "Can I get a name, please?"

"Ah, Lucas Young?" I don't know why I hitch my tone at the end, like

it's a question.

“And a telephone number?”

I clear my throat to loosen it. “What for?”

The receptionist sighs, some of the customer-service warmth draining from her smile. “So we can look up your account in the future, sir.”

I nod and give her the number, allowing my gaze to dart across the salon, trying to spot Tatum, desperate to see her coming. My palms feel clammy, and I can feel the pulse of my heartbeat in my neck. It's an altogether unpleasant feeling that part of me hopes will never end.

A shock of pink emerges from around the corner of the L-shaped salon. My vision tunnels at her approach. Pink hair, pink lips. She meets my gaze, her eyes the pale blue of a summer sky after a storm. When she smiles, my heart stutters in my chest.

“You got a walk-in,” the receptionist says to Tatum.

“Hi there,” Tatum says, offering me her hand. I hesitate for a moment, drinking in the sweet anticipation of finally touching her skin. I take her hand, shake it, and don't want to let it go. “I'm Tatum. Why don't you follow me on back and we'll get you shampooed.”

I nod and watch her as she turns on her heel and heads toward the back of the salon. The black-and-white checkered floor squeaks beneath the soles of my work boots, but I'm barely paying attention to that, or to the bustle of the busy salon around us. Instead, I'm watching her hips as they sway, struck dumb by the sight of her. She doesn't know me, but I know her. I have her high school graduation photo tucked gently into the folds of my wallet, like a treasure. But this is so much better. Seeing her smile, touching her hand. I swallow hard and try to think of how to couch the thing I've come all the way here to tell her.

“Have a seat,” she says, gesturing to the barber's chair.

Not yet, I tell myself, pressing my lips into a thin line. I sit, at her mercy, as she reclines the chair so that my head hangs over the shampooing sink.

She turns the water on. “Not too hot, is it?”

“It's fine,” I grunt.

Tatum wets my hair, and then she touches me. She massages my scalp as she works the shampoo into a lather, and I feel as though I could melt into a puddle and be sucked straight down the drain. She's tender but firm, working with an easy sureness that shouldn't surprise me, but it does, given how freely she writes about her anxieties.

Sometimes I feel like I'll never be as good as the other stylists here. I try to remember that they all started out where I am now, but it feels like an impossible mountain to climb. Most days I wonder what I'm even doing here. If I'll ever be good enough...

The sharp recollection of her letters brings me crashing back to reality. I came here to tell her the truth about the letters she wrote, and about the ones she got back. She deserves to know who she's been sharing her hopes, dreams, and opinions with all these years, like she deserves to understand why any future letters she sends will go unanswered.

She shuts the water off and gently squeezes the excess moisture out of my hair, before draping a towel around my shoulders and helping me to sit up.

"Thanks," I mutter, rising to my full height, which is at least a foot taller than she is. She smiles up at me.

"Right this way." She points to another barber's chair in front of a broad mirror, and I move over to it, dodging a pile of shorn hair as I go.

I sit down and examine my reflection in the mirror. Prison hasn't been particularly kind to me; I look like I've aged a dozen years in the six I've been gone. Still, I've gotten used to the salt-and-pepper hair, and I don't altogether mind the lines that bloom at the corner of my eyes when I smile. One thing all that free time in prison did afford me was the opportunity to work out every day. I'm more chiseled than I've been in my entire life, and it feels good.

So why, then, am I having a hard time looking myself in the eye?

"All right," Tatum says, placing her hands on my shoulders. "What brings you into my clutches?"

Ah, that's right. I'm lying to this beautiful creature.

Two years into my sentence, I got paired with a new cellmate, a transfer from another prison upstate. Gene Fitzroy was a nasty son of a bitch, just as likely to curse your name and spit in your face as to say hello. Fortunately, the gangly bastard took one look at me and decided I was just a little bigger and meaner looking than he was willing to mess with. This made for a

copacetic, if cold, living arrangement, which suited the both of us just fine. But everything changed for me the day I found the birthday card from Tatum.

I hadn't seen them deliver the card to Fitzroy, but I'd watched the man crumple it in his fist and drop it to the floor. There isn't much to do in prison besides play cards, read books, work out, and attend Bible meetings. Sometimes a volunteer would come in and put on a yoga class or a writing workshop, but those were short-lived. Suffice it to say, the mustard-yellow card with a cheese grater on the front and the words, *Happy Birthday to a GRATE dad*, piqued my interest. I snatched it up when he wasn't looking, smoothed it out, cracked it open.

I know you probably won't respond to this card either, but Happy Birthday, Dad.

Enclosed was a photograph of a cherub-cheeked teen with braces and braided pigtails. On the back, someone had scrawled, *Tatum, 16*, in the bottom right corner.

That card and Tatum's sweet face were the first things to charm a smile from me in the two years since my sentence had begun. But instead of feeling like the luckiest father alive, that son of a bitch Fitzroy had tossed his kid's photo aside like a piece of garbage.

At sixteen, I was already living with my grandparents, my folks long gone, probably high or looking for a way to get there. Studying Tatum's photograph, I remembered what it felt like to simultaneously hate my folks while still craving their love and attention. I recalled the emptiness, like a chasm in my chest, begging to be filled. That feeling was what made me pick up a pen and paper. I kept it brief.

Thanks for the birthday card. I'm sorry I've been such a disappointment. It's not your fault. You deserve better and I hope you find it.

Love, Dad.

I assumed that'd be the beginning and the end of it. When her reply showed up in the mail a week later, Fitzroy didn't even bother to open the envelope. That indifference made swiping the letter out of the trash easy enough, but I still wanted to snap his fucking thumb over it.

Tatum's letter was a splash of color in that cold, gray place: considerate, funny, and chock-full of heart. I couldn't let it go unanswered. So I wrote back again, and again, and again, signing off each letter with love and a silent prayer that she'd respond.

And she did.

But now the letters would stop coming. I'm free, and while Gene Fitzroy is still behind bars, he's not gonna take up the mantle of replying to Tatum's letters. And she deserves to know why. She deserves not to have her heart broken—*again*.

"Sir?" Tatum says, bringing me back to the salon.

"Sorry," I grumble, trying not to stammer like an idiot. "Maybe just, um... Clean it up a bit?"

She tilts her head to the side, running her fingers through my wet hair. I'd let it get long—too long—but she looks at it like maybe she likes it anyway. "Long on the top, short on the sides?" she suggests, and I nod my assent. She can do whatever the hell she likes, as far as I'm concerned.

She gets to work, her hands moving with confident dexterity, displaying no sign of the lack of confidence she expressed in her letters. She catches me watching her in the mirror.

"So," she says. "You from around here?"

I go to shake my head.

"Nah," I say mildly.

"Where're you from?"

I'm about to say, *a little place northeast of Brentwood*, but I can't. I came here to tell her the truth. So instead, I say, "Riverbend." I don't have to add the *Maximum Security Penitentiary* to the end of it; she knows what it means.

Her hands still for the length of a heartbeat. I think maybe I've lost her forever. But she gives me a smile that's a soft place for me to land.

"Funny," she says, her voice barely audible above the background hum of blow dryers and conversation. "That's where my dad is now."

This is it. This is the moment where I rip off the Band-Aid and let the wound start to heal in the open air. But then she continues, “Maybe you know him? Gene Fitzroy?”

“Can’t say I’ve heard the name.” It kills me to lie to her face.

“He says it's not so bad there, all things considered. The commissary has fineries like instant ramen and his favorite, sour cream and onion potato chips.” She chortles. “Apparently he almost got into an actual prison brawl over a bag of chips.” She catches my gaze in the mirror. “I’m kidding. He's on his best behavior. I'm actually really proud of him.”

I can’t believe she remembers all that, after four years’ worth of letters. Silly, stupid details about her dad’s life on the inside. That was me, my writing, my life, my experience. She read it all, and she remembers.

And I can't do it. Goddamn it, I just can't do it...

“Sounds like you have a real special relationship.” I try on a smile that looks more like a grimace. *Coward*, I think to myself.

“We do.” Her pink lips curve up at the corners. “We didn't always. But now he's... Well, this might sound sad but he's my best friend.”

“Doesn't sound sad at all.” My heart leaps into my throat.

Coward, bastard, son of a bitch.

Tatum works quietly for a spell, and I try to think of some other way, any other way, that I can make this work. Maybe...maybe I can just keep writing to her, intercept her letters at the mailbox.

Sure, yeah, then I can add mail fraud to my list of felonies. And anyway, how the fuck would I even manage that?

“What’d you do before Riverbend?” she asks. “For work, I mean.”

Time’s running out; my haircut is nearly finished, and I don't have a plan. It's all I can do not to sink down lower in the chair.

“I was a carpenter,” I tell her. “Foreman, actually. Not sure what I’m gonna do for work now I’m back on the outside.”

“So you’re good with your hands,” she says.

I arch my brow. *Is she flirting with me?* No. Not possible...

“You could say that.”

“Where’ve they got you living now?” she asks. “Halfway house?”

I give a slight shake of my head and she places a steadying finger on my jaw, holding me in place. I relish the slight pressure, the heat from her skin.

“Motel,” I say. “Just ‘til I figure some things out.”

“That doesn’t sound very cozy.”

“It’s not. But it suits me fine...for now.”

“When’s the last time you had a homecooked meal?”

I reach back into my memory and come up blank. Tatum takes the long pause for the response it is.

“Well, that settles it,” she says, propping her fist on one deliciously curved hip. “What you need is a hot, homecooked meal. And I know just where you can get it.”

“Where’s that?”

“My kitchen.”

God, yes...

“Oh, no, I couldn’t—”

“I won’t take no for an answer.” She lays her scissors down on her workstation and fetches her hairdryer. “If my dad just got out of prison and I couldn’t be there to bring him home, I’d want someone else to do the kind thing.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“Please,” she says, and the gentle pleading in her eyes makes my heart clench. “I can’t cook for my dad, so this is the closest thing I’ve got.”

My heart drops like a stone into the wishing well of my stomach, and I exhale a sigh.

Coward, bastard.

“How can I say no to that?”

two

TATUM

MY MOUTH WATERS at the rich scent of Aunt Nina's classic chicken and dumplings. I rub cold bits of butter into brown sugar and cinnamon for the peach cobbler, while Nina fixes us another round of her made-up cocktails, crafted out of whatever liquor she has lying around. When I was a kid, my aunt made me cocktails with sparkling water and grenadine. I'm not quite twenty-one yet, but so long as I only partake at home, she's okay with me sampling the hard stuff.

"Here, sweet pea," Nina says, handing over a coffee mug full of—I sniff—rum? "I call this one Nina's Crabapple Delight."

I chuckle and sip. The sour apple bite hits first, then finishes with the smooth taste of coconut rum. Not bad. Not great, but not bad.

"Thanks." Setting down my drink, I return my full attention to the cobbler. For some reason, it feels *extremely important* that I get this dessert *just right*.

Nina sighs. I glance up to find her eyeing me with a shrewd expression, and not for the first time this evening.

"What?" I ask. "Did I get butter on my face again?"

Aunt Nina is a vision in a floral kimono, her graying curls piled elegantly atop her head, and her banged wrists jingling like Christmas bells with every gesture. She raised me when my mom skipped town and my dad went to prison for armed robbery.

"*Must* you allow Marcellus to be your sous chef?"

Oh, right. My crested gecko, Marcellus, is seated atop my shoulder, overseeing the proceedings. Marcellus is the cutest lizard this side of the Mississippi, sand-colored with black spots, and delicate crests that give him

the appearance of luscious eyelashes. He's unable to blink, so he licks his eyeballs, and I find this adorable.

"He likes to be with us," I say.

"He likes your body heat," Nina counters, swirling the Crabapple Delight in her own mug.

"Well, I like his company. He's my baby." And he is. I'd had him for eight years now, because Aunt Nina didn't know that crested geckos could live for up to 20 years in captivity and thought he'd make a nice, and temporary, pet. He was a comfort in the months after my dad was first put away, and he remains a comfort now.

"Fine," she concedes, "No more about Marcellus, who is definitely contaminating our entire meal. But remind me—"

"Aunt Nina..."

"Just remind me again, please, about the stranger joining us for dinner." She says this like her work hasn't brought countless strangers through our home over the years. A self-employed seamstress by trade, Nina's *big* into New Age mysticism and spirituality. Not a week goes by when there isn't a short parade marching through our apartment seeking tarot readings and astrology charts.

I sigh a long-suffering sigh and set aside the crumble topping for the cobbler.

"I met him at the salon." I've told her this story six times now, and for some reason, Nina keeps asking me to tell it again, as though I've purposely left out a piece of vital information. "I thought, since he's new in town—"

"Uh-huh."

"Just got out of prison—"

"Right."

"And he's a carpenter. Or he was. Before everything."

"Mmhmm, and you thought we'd offer him a hot meal and a job?"

"Why not?" I ask. Aunt Nina owns the duplex that she and I call home. Usually, she rents out the other unit, but it's been recently vacated and in dire need of a face lift.

"I can think of a few reasons," Nina says, over the rim of her mug. "But I'm no tyrant. I'll make you a deal."

"No." I know where this is going, so I turn her attention back to the dessert and encourage her to finish slicing the peaches. I simply will not allow her to base her opinion of Lucas on a tarot spread.

“Just let me give him a quick reading.”

“No.”

“And we can see what kind of man he is before we give him the keys to our livelihood.”

“The cards aren't going to tell you what kind of man he is, Nina,” I say, readying the cobbler to go into the oven.

“An aura reading then.”

“No.”

“Chakra—”

“Nina.”

“Tea leaves?”

I hesitate, and she jumps at the opportunity, darting past me to fetch the teapot and fill it with fresh water before setting it atop the stove and turning on the burner.

“Just some innocent tea leaves,” she says.

“I swear to God, Nina, if you scare him off—”

“The important question is, why are you so concerned about me scaring off this man you've just met?” She waggles her eyebrows. “You got a crush or something?”

She's teasing me, but I feel the heat rush into my face. There is something about Lucas Young that draws me to him. I don't know what it is. He's barely said more than a dozen words to me, but I feel like I know him. I feel like he knows me better than I know myself.

I shake my head. *Now I'm thinking crazy.*

Nina watches this entire thought process play out on my face. She leans back against the countertop and swirls her mug. “Be careful, sweet pea,” she says gently. “We don't know why he was locked up. He could be trouble, and maybe another troubled man isn't what you need in your life.”

The doorbell rings. *Speaking of trouble...*

I dart past Nina to open the front door. There he is, his blue-and-green flannel tucked neatly into his slim-fitting jeans.

“Evening,” he says, and sidles into the living room, his gaze alighting on my face before dipping down to my shoulder. “Erm, who do we have here?”

“Oh!” I scoop Marcellus into my hand and hold him up for Lucas to see. “This is Marcellus.”

“Very nice to meet you, Marcellus,” Lucas says, a glint in his hazel eyes.

“You introduce the lizard before me?” Nina says, playfully, sauntering up

behind me.

Lucas chuckles and inclines his head. “Apologies, ma’am.”

“Aunt Nina, this is Lucas Young,” I say. “Lucas, this is my aunt, Nina Fitzroy.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Fitzroy,” he says, offering his hand. She takes it, looking intently into his eyes as she shakes his hand.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Young,” she says. “Won’t you come in? Dumplings are ready and cobbler’s in the oven. Oh, and we have tea!”

I can barely suppress a groan.

Lucas follows Nina dutifully into the dining room where a good chunk of Aunt Nina’s boho collectibles live. There’s barely a single unadorned surface, aside from the small, round dining table, set for three. Potted plants, doilies, trinkets, crystals, you name it, it litters every shelf. Still, the room manages to look warm and inviting, if a bit cluttered, like a crystal shop you can eat in. I love it.

Lucas takes a seat at the table, and I sit next to him, while Nina goes to fetch the tea. Because, of course, that’s the first thing on her mind: reading his leaves. Not feeding the poor man who’s just gotten out of prison, but invading his metaphysical privacy.

Then again, maybe it’s smart to let her do her assessment, as I haven’t exactly done due diligence myself. I mean, what do I really know about this guy, anyway? That he has gorgeous silver streaks in his hair? Arresting hazel eyes? Broad shoulders and a tight, round ass unlike anything I’d ever—

Jesus, girl, get it together. He’s a convicted felon. I blink at Lucas, and it feels as if I’m emerging from some kind of spell. It seemed like a good idea at the time, inviting this man into our home. But now that he’s here, at our table, I suddenly feel claustrophobic.

“Thank you for having me,” he says, his voice low and sonorous. “I’m very much looking forward to a homecooked meal.”

“Sure,” I say, forcing a casual tone. “It’s no big deal.”

Nina returns with her tea tray and sets it down on the table.

“Here we are,” she says. “How do you take your tea, Mr. Young?”

“Please, call me Lucas.”

“Aunt Nina, isn’t tea for *after* dinner?” I say pointedly, but she’s already pouring it.

“Says who?”

“I dunno, *decorum?*”

“Since when do we give a hoot about decorum in this house?” Nina flashes a dimpled smile at Lucas as she hands him the tea. “Sugar?”

“No thank you, ma'am," he says, taking the cup and saucer. He sips, and blinks down at the floating leaves with surprise.

“Those’ll settle to the bottom in a second,” Nina says.

Rolling my eyes, I take my usual seat and keep my hands busy by pouring a cup of tea for me and one for my aunt.

“So, Lucas,” Nina says, as I slide her cup in front of her, “why were you in prison?”

Is it possible to die from second-hand embarrassment? I cringe, my cheeks burning.

“You don’t have to answer that,” I say. When I finally muster the nerve to look over at Lucas, he seems unfazed.

“It’s not a problem.” He takes a long pull of tea. I catch Nina glancing down into the cup just as Lucas begins to speak. “I believe I already told Tatum that I used to be a foreman.”

“That you did,” Nina says.

“Well, you see, I was at the local watering hole with my crew after hours, and one of the guys—a new hire—invited his girlfriend to join us. Nice girl, quiet. Didn’t say much, ‘til she asked her boyfriend if they could go home. But he wasn’t ready to go yet. She asked him again a short while later, and he got rough with her. Real rough.”

A chill runs down my back. Lucas clears his throat, his gaze on the tablecloth.

“I stepped in, as any decent man would’ve done, and when the asshole—pardon my language—stumbled off, I offered the girl a ride home. She politely refused, saying it would only make things worse. So, I waited with her until he came stumbling back. I followed them out, at a distance, and when I saw him hit her...” He shakes his head, and I swear I see the vein in his neck bulge and pulse. “I saw red. Before I knew it, I was on the guy with a big chunk of broken concrete in my hand and I was... I would've bashed his skull in if I hadn't heard her screaming.”

Lucas swallows hard, his shoulders hunching somewhat. I feel a strange and sudden urge to wrap my arms around him, which, when I think about it, seems like an odd reaction to him confessing to almost killing a guy. Still, I can’t say that I wouldn’t have punched the asshole myself.

“I plead guilty to second degree battery and served my time,” he says. “It

was my first—and my last—offense.”

His gaze flits to my face, and there’s no missing the anxiety in his stare. My heart aches for him, and so do other parts of me, parts that I’m not ready to admit are ignited by his attention.

“Well,” Nina says at last, reaching across the table to lay her hand over his. “That is some story, Lucas. And I’m so grateful that you felt comfortable sharing it with us.”

Lucas nods, shifting uncomfortably beneath my aunt’s gaze. Nina has a way of doing that, of seeing straight through people. She slides his cup and saucer toward her, and in one deft motion, flips the cup over, depositing the contents into the saucer. She uprights the cup and begins studying the leaves that have washed up onto the sides. I don’t read tea leaves myself, so it just looks like junk to me, but not to Nina.

“Guilt,” Nina says. “A great wave of guilt has carried you through most of this year.” She lifts her gaze to his face. “Perhaps for the crime you committed?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “No, ma’am. I only regret that such a heinous individual is now considered a victim in the eyes of the law, instead of being held accountable for the crimes he committed.”

Lucas’ strong, confident words send a warm shiver down my spine.

“Hmm.” Nina squints at the cup. “Something else, then. Something that’s positively tearing you up inside.”

The oven timer beeps. I rise from my chair and say, “Dinner’s ready. Aunt Nina, that means it’s time to stop interrogating the poor man.”

“It’s no problem,” he says kindly.

His warm gaze washes over me. Whatever else Lucas has to feel guilty about doesn’t matter tonight. He’s here, at my table, because I asked him to be. I got scared earlier, started doubting my intuition, as well as the man before me. Vulnerability hasn’t always come easily to me, but I’m trying to be better about risking my heart. It’s what my dad would want. If I hadn’t sent him a birthday card years ago, who knows if we’d have a relationship now?

I head into the kitchen to take the dumplings out of the oven. I plate a few helpings for Lucas and my aunt, and bring the plates back to the table, just in time to hear my aunt say, “Well, I think it’s settled, then.”

“What’s settled?” I set the plates down in front of Lucas and Nina, lingering warily, reluctant to fetch my own plate until I understand precisely

what has transpired in the literal minute and a half that I was away from the table.

“Lucas has agreed to help us out by doing the work on the unit next door,” Nina says too casually, “in exchange for room and board.”

Say what?

Lucas looks abashed as he glances up at me. “I don’t have to, if you’re not comfortable with it, Tatum.”

My name sounds delicious coming from his mouth.

“Of course she’s comfortable. We wouldn’t dream of charging you to stay in the unit while you’re fixing it up for us. Now, Tatum, you know how much I adore my reptilian grandson, but I have to draw the line at the dinner table.”

I’m still reeling from the bombshell my aunt just dropped into our laps when she gestures to Marcellus on my shoulder.

“Right...” I gently transfer Marcellus to my palm. “Excuse me, I have to put my lizard to bed.”

I practically float up the stairs and down the hall to my bedroom. Lucas Young is moving in next door. I place Marcellus in his terrarium and then sink down into the fluff of my unmade bed, my mind and body swirling with conflicting emotions.

What’s the big deal? I tell myself. We’ve had tenants for as long as I’ve lived here. But the thought of this particular tenant working and sleeping and showering on the other side of the wall makes my skin feel hot all over.

This hardened criminal, a practical stranger, who’s old enough to be my dad but who looks at my lips like he wants to taste them... Do I really want *this man* living next door?

Yes, I think. Yes, I do.

three

LUCAS

IT HAPPENS SO FAST I don't have time to think about what the consequences might be. Or maybe that's a cop out. Maybe I don't want to think about it, because for the first time in years, things are starting to swing my way.

I don't have much in the way of belongings, so move-in day is fairly straightforward. Still, Tatum volunteers to help me lug a few bags inside, and she seems happy to help. Eager, even. And I'm not about to pass up an opportunity to spend a little more time with her. I let her carry a duffel bag full of clothes, while I manage the few personal items I kept in storage while I was in prison.

The apartment is old, and whoever lived here last didn't exactly help with the upkeep. The paint is flaking, there are holes and stains from where pictures were hung on the walls. The cabinet doors are all but falling off their hinges, and the Formica countertop linoleum is scuffed to hell. The carpet will need replacing, and don't even get me started on the bathroom.

But I've never been happier to move into an apartment in my entire life.

"I didn't realize what a shithole it was," Tatum says, absently trailing a finger over a hole in the wall.

"Language," I say, without thinking. She snaps to attention, and I see a pretty blush rise into her cheeks.

"Sorry, *Dad*," she mutters. I tense, the title hitting a little too close to home. She continues her casual inspection of the apartment, but I'm not looking at the room. I'm looking at her, and the way the afternoon sunlight sets her skin aglow.

"I'm just grateful to be here, Tatum," I say, inching closer to her. "I'm

grateful for all the help you've given me.”

She arches one shoulder in a shrug, “Well, I figure, why not help someone, if I can?” She smiles, and when she does, she lights up the room. “Though I guess you should really be thanking my Aunt Nina.”

I chuckle. “I take it I passed her tea leaf test, huh?”

Tatum grins, tucking an errant lock of hair behind her ear. “I guess so.” I’m close enough now that I can smell her, citrus sweet, like oranges. “We need to get you some furniture.”

“I can manage,” I say. But she just waves her hand.

“No, I have an idea. Come with me.”

And she takes my hand.

We hold hands all the way to my truck. I help her inside the cabin before climbing into the driver’s seat, my heart pounding like a hammer against my chest. She gives me directions, and we listen to the radio with the windows down until she tells me to pull off the main road. The day’s clear and bright, and the air smells sweetly of fallen leaves. It’ll get cold soon, but not yet.

We turn into a long, dirt drive, and I see a handmade sign that reads “Estate Sale: Saturday, 10 to 4.” And I understand.

“It’s one of my clients,” she explains. “My *first* client, actually. His grandmother passed recently, and they’re trying to get rid of as much as they can, as fast as they can.”

His grandmother, she says. My grip tightens on the steering wheel.

“Sorry to hear that,” I grumble, trying not to let the tension seep into my tone.

“The house just sold last week, so they need to clear out all her stuff.”

“He tell you all that during a haircut?”

I see her head swivel toward me in my peripheral.

“Talking to my clients is half the job,” she says, and I swear I can hear her smile.

I park beside a few other cars and then help Tatum climb out. Our shoes crunch on the gravel path to the front door. It is a nice enough home, modestly sized but comfortable, and as soon as we step foot inside, we’re met with warm greetings from, ostensibly, the grandson.

“Hey, Tater Tot.” He hugs Tatum, and I feel my hackles rise. “Good to see ya.”

“I wish it was under better circumstances,” she says. “Lucas, this is Simon. Simon, this is Lucas Young. He just moved into my Aunt Nina’s

rental unit.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Simon says, shaking my hand. He’s younger than me, probably just a few years older than Tatum. A bit gangly, like a puppy who hasn’t grown into his paws.

I shake his hand firmly.

“Pleasure’s mine, son.”

He opens and closes his fist a few times, then says, “Like I told Tatum, everything’s for sale. Just make an offer. The bigger pieces, if you can get ‘em out yourselves, you can have for half, because otherwise we’ll just have to pay someone to haul ‘em away.”

“Thanks, Simon,” Tatum says. “I really appreciate it.”

“Any time.” He smiles at her in a way that makes my blood boil.

I take Tatum’s hand, and she steps closer to me, close enough that I can feel her body heat against my side.

“We’ll just go have a look.” I smile tightly at Simon, who casts a not-so-stealthy glance down at our joined hands.

“Sure,” he says. “Yeah, go right ahead.”

And we do.

“Just *look* at all this,” Tatum says, as we head into the dining room. A sturdy oak table and four chairs has a piece of paper on it that says “\$200 OBO” but it’s also covered in dishware in a variety of patterns.

But the table can wait.

“Let’s check out the bedrooms,” I say, and lead her down a long hall. There are two bedrooms, and both have beds with frames for sale. Personally, I like the queen-size guest bed, with the brass frame. An image of Tatum tied to that bedframe flashes through my mind. I swallow hard and push it away.

“Ooh, this is pretty,” she purrs. “We could get you a new bedspread, something a little more masculine than pink flowers.”

“What if I like pink flowers?”

Tatum grins. “Then by all means, keep the dead woman’s linens.”

She strums her fingernails on the matching brass side table with a glass top, and I think maybe I’ll take it all. And the dresser, in distressed white wood.

“But you really should test the mattress first,” she says, climbing onto the bed and laying down.

“Shoes,” I say, and she kicks them off before continuing. She shifts onto her side, props her head on her hand, and smiles up at me. One thing’s for

damn sure: she's not the same cherub-cheeked teenager I started writing to four years ago. The invitation in her gaze is unmistakable.

I can't help myself. I sit down on the mattress beside her.

"It's a little springy," she says, bouncing a little so that her breasts tremble within the confines of her t-shirt. I force myself to look away before she catches me staring. "But not uncomfortable."

"It'll do me just fine."

Bedframe, mattress, box spring, side table, dresser, and a set of everyday dishware; that's what we get for me. And for her...

I spot a small, emerald ring set in a thin band of gold, and think it would look perfect on her finger. When I ask Simon how much it is, he tells me it is six-hundred bucks.

"It's a family heirloom thing," he says. "Genuine twenty-four karat gold. You understand."

"I got—" I sort through my cash as Tatum carts the box of dishware to the truck. "—three-forty left. Can I bring you the rest later this afternoon?"

Simon glances between me and Tatum and folds his bony arms across his chest.

"I don't think so, man," he says. I don't need a psychic to tell me he's just being a hard ass because he doesn't want me gifting the ring to Tatum.

"Not a problem." I march over to the truck where the dresser is waiting to be loaded on. I pick it up, wrapping it in a bear hug, and bring it back over to Simon. "Here," I say, with a huff, placing it down right in front of him. The piece is heavy, solid wood, but I've done little more than lift weights for the last six years, and it shows. "I'll take the ring instead."

I lay the remainder in cash down on the dresser and leave with the ring.

The drive back to the duplex feels shorter than the trip to the estate sale, as Tatum and I quiz one another on the things we love best.

"Okay, okay," she says excitedly. "Favorite movie of all time?"

"Hmm," I hum, considering. "Probably *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*."

She rolls her eyes. "That is such an old man thing to say."

I laugh, full-bodied. "Old? Now see here, young lady—"

“All right, maybe not *old*, maybe just...*middle aged*.”

“Now that’s ageist, right there.”

She sticks out her tongue.

“Put that tongue back in your mouth,” I say with a smirk, “or I’ll make you use it.”

“For what?” she asks, her tone shifting. At a stoplight, I venture a glance in her direction, and find her leaning toward me over the center console. I’m drawn to her like a magnet, but I resist. I tell myself I can’t do that, I can’t kiss her, no matter how much I want to.

Instead, I give a slow shake of my head. “Favorite food?”

“Oh, that one’s easy,” she says. “Oreos in milk. But they have to be Double-stuff Oreos, and they have to be in milk for the exact right amount of time.”

“And what is the exact right amount of time?”

“Long enough for the cookies to get soggy, but not so long that they fall apart.”

I smile. With her, it seems like I am just constantly smiling.

“Got it.”

We pull into the parking lot in front of her Aunt’s place, and I hop out of the truck, coming around to open her door for her. She slides down onto the pavement, her hand in mine. She doesn’t let go until we’ve come around to the back of the truck. One of Simon’s relatives had helped me get most of the stuff into the truck back at the estate sale, but now it’s just Tatum and me, faced with getting a whole lot of furniture up the stairs.

“It’s fine,” she says, sensing my hesitation. “We got this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. How hard could it be?”

The bedframe and side table I can handle on my own, same with the box spring. But the mattress, while not especially heavy, is unwieldy. I can get it off the truck fine, but I can’t keep a good grip on it.

“Here,” she says, grabbing the back end. “Let me help.”

We’re halfway to the door when I feel her drop her side of the mattress.

“Shit,” she hisses.

I glance over and find her on her knees on the pavement. I drop the mattress before she can make another sound.

“Tatum,” I say, crouching down at her side, “are you hurt?”

“It’s nothing,” she says, hissing sharply through her teeth. “I just tripped.”

She drops back onto her bottom, revealing quite the scrape on both her knees. "I'm fine."

Blood trickles down her legs. I rise and offer her my hand.

"Come on. Let's get you cleaned up." I hoist her to her feet and have her lean on me, as we make our way up the steps to her unit, the mattress left sprawled on the pavement.

I bring her inside and sit her down on the sofa.

"I can manage, really," she says.

"I'm sure you can. Just tell me where your first aid kit is anyway."

She rolls her eyes but grins all the same, and points toward the hall. "In the bathroom, beneath the sink. It's in a red canvas bag."

I give a sharp nod and go to fetch it, overwhelmed by the scent of citrus in the bathroom. I locate the first aid kit and return to her side, opening it up to see what I have to work with. Gauze, Band-Aids, bacitracin. Good, good.

"And clean rags?"

"Cabinet at the end of the hall," she says.

I glance back and catch her watching me, a curious expression on her face. Like she doesn't understand why I'd bother. It's only a scratch, her face says, as lines of blood race each other down the bare skin of both her shins.

I fetch a washcloth and avail myself to soap and water at the bathroom sink before returning to her side and kneeling in front of her.

"This might sting a little," I warn, before pressing the cloth to her knee.

She winces but doesn't flinch. I work as quickly and gently as I can, cleaning up both her legs. A few stubborn bits of gravel necessitate the use of the first-aid kit's tweezers, but she shouldn't need stitches. I clean the scrapes again with some hydrogen peroxide, put a dab of bacitracin on them, and bandage her up.

"There," I say, "good as new."

She stares down at me, and I up at her, a strange vantage point since I'm so used to towering above her when we're both standing. It suddenly registers that my hand is resting just above her knee. I clear my throat, pulling away, but she catches that hand in her own and holds it.

"Tatum," I say, my voice hovering just above a whisper.

"Shh... Don't say anything. I just wanna try something." And she leans forward and presses her lips to mine.

Kissing Tatum feels like sweet relief, like the culmination of every fantasy I've had about her, every day for the past few years. Here she is, this

beautiful girl, no longer just a photo in my wallet. I lift my hand to her face, gently cradling her cheek, and drink her in. Her lips part for me. I taste her sweetness, like mint and cinnamon.

The jingling of keys just outside the front door tickles my ears, ripping me out of the moment. We break apart and I spring to my feet just in time for Nina to make her entrance.

“Well,” she says with a warm smile, “hello there, Lucas Young.”

“Ma'am,” I say, with a nod of my head.

“Is that your stuff strewn about the driveway?”

Right. The mattress.

“Yes, ma'am. Sorry about that.”

“I took him to Mrs. Darvey's estate sale,” Tatum says, rising to stand beside me.

“I'll take care of it now,” I say, striding toward the door.

“Wait, I'll help you,” Tatum says, but I can't be around her. I'll tear her clothes off. I'm an animal in rut that needs to be caged.

“No,” I say quickly, “thank you. I can manage. And you should elevate those knees.”

“What knees?” As Nina begins to fuss over Tatum's injuries, I slip out, the taste of Tatum still sweet on my tongue.

four

TATUM

I DON'T KNOW what came over me, what made me bold enough to lean forward and just kiss him like that. But it was all I could do not to grip his gorgeous, salt and pepper hair and hold him against my lips, Aunt Nina be damned.

My cheeks are still flushed as Nina comes over to take my hands, urging me to sit beside her on the sofa. My head is swimming, and I hardly register the questions she lobs my way. But then she snaps her fingers in front of my face, forcing me to focus.

“My goodness, girly.” A sly smirk plays on her lips. “You’ve got it bad.”

“Got what? What have I got?” I ask, still dazed.

“A crush. A big one, by the looks of it.”

I roll my eyes, mostly because I can’t trust my own voice. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, no?” She waggles a finger at me. “Don’t think I didn’t see you shoot apart when I walked through that door.”

I bite my bottom lip as Aunt Nina tucks an errant curl behind my ear. “You don’t disapprove?”

“Oh, honey, as long as he’s kind to you and treats you right, what’s there to disapprove of?”

I flop back against the couch with a sigh. “You don’t think it’s weird that he’s old enough to be...” I don’t have to finish the sentence. My father is Aunt Nina’s brother, after all.

She shifts on the couch next to me, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet beneath her. “It’s unorthodox. But I’ve never seen you this interested in a boy your own age, let alone a *man*.”

“I’ve never really been interested,” I admit.

Nina reaches over to the side table to fetch her tarot cards. This is her way of letting me know she has a client coming over or calling. I rise to my feet.

“Do me a favor, sweetheart,” she says, and I am already grabbing the folding card table she uses to do her spreads. I set it in front of her, and she pats my hand. “You’re a doll. I have a caller at noon, but it should only take an hour.”

“I’m on the schedule at the salon, one to eight.”

“I’ll have dinner for you when you get home,” she says.

My knees only burn a little as I head upstairs to my bedroom. The late morning light streams in through the venetian blinds, carving the sun into graceful shafts of light. Marcellus is in his terrarium, basking in a sunbeam. I open the little glass door and scoop him up, cradling him gently as I take a seat at my desk.

“I need my writing buddy.” I place him on my chest, just below my clavicle, and pull out my legal pad. I’m halfway through the latest letter to my dad. It’s already three pages along and I’m not finished yet. I go back and re-read some of what I’ve written.

And I like what you said about “all things happening when they’re supposed to.” That really resonates with me, because I think I’m the type of person who is just waiting to get to the next thing, you know? Okay, high school is done. Next. Okay, I finished beauty school, next. Okay, I’m a stylist assistant, next. I understand what you mean about trying to appreciate the moment. It’s just hard when everything feels like it’s the thing that happens before my real life begins.

But I have more to tell him. Something does feel like it is beginning. For

the first time, maybe ever, I feel like I'm at the start of something important. I write.

I'm coming back to this letter after a few days, and I know it might seem like it's out of nowhere, but I have something to tell you. I met someone that I really like. He just walked into the salon one day—a total surprise—and he said he'd just been released from prison. I invited him to our house for dinner and Nina asked him to move in. I know it sounds fast, but he makes me feel so...special. And today we went to an estate sale, and he kissed me.

No, that isn't how it went. I kissed him.

A *thud* on the other side of the wall catches my attention. I lay down my pen and return Marcellus to his terrarium before making my way to the far side of the room, to the wall behind my bed. I hear the *thud* again and press my hand against the wall.

I hear grunting, the scraping sound of furniture against the floorboards, and the springs of a mattress. It hits me that this is one of the shared walls between the two duplex units.

And on the other side of this wall, it seems, is Lucas' new bedroom.

My heart pounds as I climb quietly onto my bed and press my ear to the wall, and listen. I can't make out much beyond the rushing of my own blood at first, but after a few seconds, I can hear him, Lucas, moving furniture around his room. I hear him lift things onto the mattress, hear him make up the bed with some of the linens we procured from the estate sale—the ones *Gram definitely did not die on*, according to Simon's sister. I can hear him open drawers, maybe put things away.

And I'm captivated, just by the simple mundanities of his life. I want to be a part of it, want to be a part of him. I've never felt this way before, and I

don't understand it. If I'm honest, I'm a little afraid of it.

I hear him grunt with the effort of moving something, and I feel a twinge between my thighs. He left so quickly, just now. I didn't have the opportunity to discover where things might go after the kiss. I'm not well versed in the realities of romance. A virgin at twenty, I'm an anomaly among my friend group, most of whom have been having sex since our sophomore year of high school. I guess I just wasn't that eager to grow up so quickly. That, and I was a very awkward tween. But something is awake in me now, and I am eager to explore it.

Maybe it's the sense of safety that comes from having a wall between us that makes me feel bolder than usual. Biting my lip, I glance at myself in the mirror. My hair is styled, my makeup minimal, aside from my signature pink lipstick that matches my hair color. I'm wearing my favorite high-waisted denim shorts and a white peasant blouse.

But I can do better.

I open my dresser drawer and find the prettiest bra I own—white lace, classic—and tug my shirt up over my head. I get rid of the lightly padded tee-shirt bra, and don the lace, admiring my full, heavy breasts in the mirror above the dresser. There's a matching set of panties somewhere, but they must be in the wash because I can't find them fast enough for what I have in mind.

I grab my phone off the desk and then pad over to the window overlooking the backyard. Lucas and I exchanged phone numbers after his haircut, just in case he needed directions to my house or had to cancel, or whatever. So far, the only texts we've exchanged have been purely perfunctory: meet you outside at 10, looking forward to it, etc.

But now...

I hold my phone aloft in selfie-mode and snap a few pics. They're suggestive without being downright pornographic, and I like how perky and plump my breasts look in the bra. I grin, my heart racing, as I send the photo to Lucas, along with a short message.

Still thinking about that kiss.

It's almost instantaneous, the chime of his phone notifying him of my text on the other side of the wall. I scurry back to the bed and press my ear to the wall again, just in time to hear him groan lightly and mutter, "God damn," under his breath.

I look down at my phone and see the three little dots that mean he's typing. One minute they're there, dot, dot, dot...and then they vanish. I sigh heavily and drop down onto my bed. He is *not* just going to leave me on read like that, is he?

Then I feel my phone buzz in my hand. Relief and trepidation ripple through me as I open the text message.

LUCAS

I can hear you through the wall, too, gorgeous.

My face flushes with fire, and I don't know what to do. I've been caught. But I don't have time to consider my actions before another text from Lucas appears.

LUCAS

Send me another, this time without the bra.

I grin, moving as quietly as I can, setting my phone down to shrug out of my bra. There's something about Lucas giving me orders that makes me want to comply with his every command. I snap a few more selfies, my nipples erect in the cool air of my bedroom, and examine them with a much less generous eye than I had for the first set of photos. I'm suddenly self-conscious. What if he doesn't like what he sees?

Another text arrives, as if he can read my mind.

LUCAS

You are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen, and I want to see more of you.

That makes it easy to hit send.

LUCAS

Good girl.

Now show me that pretty cunt.

I didn't think my body could burn any hotter, but I was wrong. My insides feel like embers being stoked into a flame. No one has ever sent me a text like that before in my life, and I'm suddenly obsessed with being the object of Lucas' desire.

I shimmy out of my denim shorts, careful not to snag the bandages on my

knees, and sprawl out on my bed in nothing but my panties. After struggling with the angle for a few minutes, I text him back.

Ummm... I'm not really sure how. I've never done this before.

LUCAS

Set a timer and find something to prop the phone against. Then spread your legs for me.

I swallow hard and scramble off the bed to do what he asked. I look around my room for an ideal spot to set my phone up and discover that propping it against Marcellus' terrarium is the best option.

"Sorry, buddy," I say to the gecko, whose tongue darts out to lick his eyeball in response.

I do as Lucas instructed and set a timer, rushing back over to the bed and laying down, knees spread. For the final touch, I pull my panties aside and wait until I hear the fake-snap of the smartphone camera.

When I examine the photo, I'm shocked to see how clearly wet I am. I send it immediately, knowing that if I wait longer than a few heartbeats, I'll chicken out and not send it at all. He replies immediately.

LUCAS

Fuck. Good girl.

You look delicious.

I don't know where to take it from here. I want more, but I don't know what "more" really means. So, I do the only thing I can think of.

I showed you mine, now show me yours.

I lean against the wall, trying to hear him. He moves around the room, his footsteps heavier than before, and I hear the spring of the mattress. I close my eyes and imagine him, naked with his cock in his fist, and feel a pulse at the apex of my thighs.

My phone vibrates.

I tap the notification, revealing a shirtless photo of Lucas. He is absolutely ripped, his abs like a washboard. He has a tattoo of a pirate ship sailing into the mouth of a skull on his chest, and what looks like a compass star, rounding the curve of his bicep. I can't get enough of these mysterious glyphs, the uncharted places, pieces of Lucas I'm still discovering. I want

more, more, more...

That's not exactly what I meant.

LUCAS

You don't like it?

Oh, I like it. But I want more.

LUCAS

More?

More of you.

I blush to send that last message, nervous that I might come across as desperate or needy. But the truth is, I *am* desperate. I feel like I need him, like my body might combust if I don't feel his touch.

"All in good time, baby girl," I hear him say from the other side of the wall. "All in good time."

I send him a frowny face emoji, and I hear him chuckle.

LUCAS

Greedy little thing. You want more, do you?

Yes.

LUCAS

Yes, what?

Yes, please?

LUCAS

Good girl. Just pick up.

Pick up? I blink, confused at first, but then I realize what he means when I get the notification that Lucas Young wants to video chat. I answer the call immediately, and I can see how red my cheeks are in my own image. But I can't spare worries about my own face when his is right there, sporting a smile like he's lit from the inside with the devil's own fire.

"Hey, baby girl," he says. "Are you touching yourself for me?"

five

LUCAS

I WAS in trouble the moment Tatum's first text came through. But I was done for the second I saw her pretty pussy. She's been such a good girl, obeying my every command, showing me every inch I've asked for. Selfish as I am, I let myself bask in the moment, ignoring the ethical questions surrounding the fact that I haven't told her who I am, and why it might feel like I know her so well, despite the fact that we're newly acquainted.

"Hi," she says, smiling shyly into her phone's camera.

"We're long past 'Hi' baby girl. I believe I asked you a question."

"Umm..." She looks away. "No. I'm not touching myself yet."

"Why not?"

Her cheeks glow as she bites her lip.

"I dunno," she mumbles, lashes lowered.

"Do it," I say, tugging my cock free of my boxers and reclining back against my pillow. "Touch that pretty pussy for me."

I see her shift on the screen as she gets into position.

"Nuh-uh," I say, my voice gruff with need, "Put the phone back where it was. I want to see all of you."

She laughs nervously, but she does as she's told, propping her phone up against something and then returning to the bed. She sheds her panties quickly, leaving only a pair of socks with what looks like squirrels on them, and I'm so hard, I feel like I might come just from the sight of her. She crosses her arms self-consciously in front of her, not to cover her breasts or her cunt, but her stomach.

I sigh. She has no idea how fucking luscious she is.

"Don't hide from me, baby girl. Let me see you."

Tatum hesitates for a moment before letting her arms drop to the side. She's delicious; I salivate at the sight of her. Her curves look so soft. I've never been more desperate to get my hands on somebody. She lifts and cups her breasts, one in each hand, and squeezes, and I begin to stroke up and down the length of my shaft, seeking relief from the torment of being teased by this perfect creature. She's the fucking Venus of Willendorf, and I am here to worship at her altar. She pinches her nipples between her thumbs and index fingers 'til they grow hard and darker in color. I stroke myself faster, imagining what they might taste like.

"I want to see you, too," she says, her voice husky with desire.

I sit up and look around. With so little furniture, there isn't really anywhere to set my phone up, so I just hold it high enough that she can see me as I jerk off to the sight of her.

"You're so big," she says, and it sounds like a moan.

"But you won't have any problem taking me," I say, and watch her lashes flutter in response.

"Um," she stammers, "I've never..."

I bring my phone closer to my face so that I can see her, brows arched in question.

"I've never taken...anything," she says.

"Nothing?" Goddamn. I knew she was inexperienced, but not quite to this degree. It's not like I expected her to reveal the nuances of her sexual exploits to the man she thought was her father. I just assumed she kept the ins and outs of her dating life to herself, not that she didn't have much to speak of.

"Well," she says, canting her head gently to one side. "I've taken my own fingers, of course."

"Anything else?"

She averts her gaze before turning over and rising, walking out of the frame of the camera. I hear her rustling around somewhere off screen before she returns with a hot pink vibrator the size and shape of a medium zucchini. She grins devilishly.

"This," she says. "I've taken this."

"Show me," I say. "I want to watch you take it."

Tatum situates herself on the bed, knees spread, and it looks like she might plunge the toy home. But then she hesitates, bringing it to her mouth. She gives the toy a few licks before sliding it between her lips, deep into her mouth. I groan involuntarily, watching her suck that pink toy like a cock. I

have to stop jerking off before I come too soon, before the show even has a chance to get started.

After a few torturous minutes, she withdraws the vibrator and turns it on. I hear the low-grade buzzing as she trails it over the slopes of her body, bringing it to rest against her clit. She arches her back and works it steadily between her folds, before sliding into her sweet, slick pussy.

I am beyond words now. I can only watch as she fucks herself, her eyes locked on the screen where she's watching me watch her juices glisten on the shaft of the toy.

"I like that you can see me," she says. "I like that I want to do whatever you tell me to do."

"Is that so?" I have never been harder in my life.

"Mmhmm," she groans, allowing her eyes to close.

"What are you imagining?"

"You," she says.

"Tell me more. What am I doing?"

"You're putting your big cock where this toy is right now." She uses her other hand to rub her clit as she slides the toy in and out of her cunt.

"I want you to come for me, Tatum. Be a good girl and come for me."

"Yes," she whimpers, "yes..." Her entire body tenses and she lets out a small cry before she's rocked by the force of her orgasm. Her thighs tremble. The sight of her release sends me over the edge, shooting spurts of cum onto the bare plane of my abdomen.

Her breasts heave as she pants, catching her breath. I watch as the toy slips from her cleft to the mattress. She stays there, bared to me, with a languid smile on her gorgeous face. I can't help but smile back as I admire the tattoos all over her body, stunning artwork on the loveliest canvas.

"God, Tatum, that was..."

"I know," she says. "It really was." Her posture changes suddenly. I can hear Nina calling her from somewhere else in the house. She rises quickly and runs over to snag the phone. "I've gotta get dressed for work."

"That's a damn shame." I chuckle. She worries her lip as tension colors her features. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing, I just..." She runs a fidgety hand through her hair. "Look, this won't make things weird, right? Like you're not going to avoid me now, are you?"

I furrow my brow. "Why would I avoid you?"

She sets the phone down so that I'm looking straight up at her ceiling fan, listening to the rustle of her clothing as she gets dressed.

"I don't know," she says, off camera. "I guess I'm just worried or whatever. Boys can be like that, you know? I've seen it happen to friends. You give them a taste and they lose interest."

"Maybe. But I'm not a boy, I'm a man, and I think you're the most extraordinary woman I've ever known."

She picks up the phone, cheeks glowing beneath the compliment. "You do?"

"I really do."

She smiles, and it lights up the world. I'm fucking falling for this girl. No, that's not true. I started falling a long time ago.

"Okay," she says, satisfied. "I have to go now, for real."

"Can I take you out?" I ask quickly. "On a proper date?"

"Sure, I'd like that."

I keep the phone in my hand long after she's already left for work, like I'm holding onto a piece of her, something to tide me over 'til I can hold her in my arms—*for real*.

I choose an upscale Italian restaurant that requires a blazer for our date. I feel like a giddy-ass teenager making the laughably short trek from my front steps to her doorway.

Tatum opens the door before I can even raise my hand to knock, dressed in a yellow sundress with black polka dots beneath a black cropped sweater, chunky black heels with white socks. She's pin-up model gorgeous.

"Are those for me?" she asks, eyes wide as she takes in the bouquet of long-stemmed roses I'm holding.

"Of course." I hand them over, and she buries her face among the soft petals, inhaling their fragrance.

"Thank you so much," she says. "They're lovely."

"So are you."

"Is that Lucas?" Nina calls from inside.

Tatum rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "Yes, Nina."

"Well, have him come on in and say hello!"

Tatum steps back with a sigh, and throws the door open wide. I step inside, raking my fingers through my hair before moving more deeply into the apartment. Nina appears from the kitchen, red kimono flowing, and Marcellus cupped gently in one hand.

“Well, hello there, mister,” she says. I meet her halfway as she leans in to air kiss my cheeks.

“Nice to see you again,” I say to Nina before addressing the gecko. “And you, too, bud.”

“Marcellus is struggling with a shed,” Tatum explains as she goes about putting the roses into a vase of water. “Nina’s helping him get the rest of his skin off.”

“And he gets a little treat for being such a good boy,” Nina says fondly to the lizard before heading back into the kitchen. I follow them, watching Nina open a jar of baby food—pureed pear. She dips a Q-tip into the mush and holds it out for Marcellus, whose long tongue immediately darts out to lap it up. It’s so absurd I can’t help but chuckle.

“Roses,” Nina says, with an approving nod. “Nice touch.”

“Lucas is very nice.” Tatum sets the filled vase on the kitchen table.

“Now that Marcellus has had his dinner,” Nina says, turning to me, “where are you two off to?”

“*Regina Cucina*,” I say. “We have a seven o’clock reservation.”

“And here I am, jabbering away.” Nina waves her hands, shooing us from the apartment. “Go, go, enjoy, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“That doesn’t leave much off the menu.” Tatum smacks a kiss to Nina’s cheek before I catch them giving each other a conspiratorial smile, and then we’re out the door.

I take her hand as we head for my truck. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she says. “So do you—er, handsome, I mean.”

I chuckle, pausing when she goes near the mailbox.

“Hang on one sec.” She rifles through her handbag. My blood runs cold when I see her pull a letter out of her bag, addressed to her father at the penitentiary.

The one who won’t respond.

I want to stop her, but I can’t think of a good enough reason that wouldn’t sound suspicious. She drops the letter into the mailbox, and my mouth goes dry.

“Ok,” she says, “we can go now. I just wanted to get that letter out to my

dad.” I nod because I don’t know what to say. “It’s weird. He hasn’t written back in a while.”

I swallow past the tightness in my throat.

“Mail delivery can be kind of erratic on the inside.” The half-lie feels like a rock in the pit of my stomach.

“Right,” she says. “That makes sense. The state of the American prison system is abysmal, so I’m sure something as simple as mail delivery is pretty easily disrupted.”

Again, I just nod, because I know that the first rule of lying is to stay as close to the truth as you can. I feel like an asshole. But I push the feeling aside, for Tatum’s benefit, or so I tell myself. I want this night to be perfect for her. I want it to be an evening she’ll look back on with fondness and pleasure, because it’s no less than what she deserves.

“Nobody’s ever gotten me flowers before,” she says quietly, gazing out the window of my truck as we drive toward the restaurant. “I don’t count the aloe vera plant Aunt Nina gave me for my sunburn last summer.”

“I’m pleased you liked them.” I feel strangely nervous as I pull into the restaurant’s parking lot. I’m just so desperate for everything to go right tonight. Watching her post that letter as we were leaving gave me the sinking sensation that things were doomed to go awry.

No. No. I shake my head and walk around to help Tatum out of the truck.

“Thank you, sir.” She smiles, breasts bouncing as she hops down.

I hold her hand all the way into the restaurant.

Regina Cucina is old-school Italian, with burgundy leather booths, white tablecloths, and low lighting. We sit across from one another, and a tuxedo-clad waiter with a wild tuft of white hair approaches, menus in hand.

“One for the young lady,” he says, handing Tatum a leather-bound menu, “and one for her father.”

Tatum giggles, blushing at the server’s mistake. I can’t help but chuckle uneasily along with her. The waiter glances nervously between us and presses his hands together in the gesture of a prayer.

“*Mi scuzi*,” he says. “I have made a mistake?”

“The young lady and I are not related,” I say simply. He nods.

“May I offer the couple a complimentary appetizer this evening, then?” he asks, recovering smoothly.

“That would be fine,” I say.

He takes our drink orders and then returns with a plate of delicately sliced

and fried zucchini.

“Wow,” Tatum purrs when he’s gone again. I serve her some zucchini before serving myself. “This looks delicious, *Dad.*”

I huff, bracing for the pang of guilt that doesn’t come. The playful way she said the word “dad” just now feels different from the way she talks about her father. There’s a playfulness to it.

“*You* look delicious, baby girl. Now eat your veggies.”

“Yes, sir.” She gives a mock salute, and the teasing glint in her eye almost makes me want to call the waiter back to tell him, *you’re goddamn right, I’m her daddy.*

six

TATUM

I FEEL LIKE A PRINCESS. No, it's better than that because this isn't some fairy tale. It's me and this handsome, incredible man walking through the park, laughing and eating what is, I swear, the *best* rocky-road ice cream cone I've ever had. Or maybe it just tastes so good because of the company. Lucas watches my mouth as I lick my dessert with a little more enthusiasm than is necessary.

"I feel like you can tell a lot about a person by their ice cream order," I say.

"Is that so?" He takes a slow pull from his strawberry milkshake. "What does my order say about me?"

"Well, a milkshake says practical, classic, a little safe, perhaps."

He laughs. "Safe?"

"Sure. I'm over here dripping chocolate all over my fingers, willing to risk staining my dress on this date for the sake of having what I *really* want. And you're just drinking your ice cream."

"Who says that this isn't what I really want?" He pauses, and I look him over from head to toe. He doesn't exactly seem like the kind of guy who compromises when it really matters.

"Fair enough. I do admire that you chose strawberry, that you weren't afraid of something *pink*."

He laughs again. "And what does your order say about you?"

"Oh, indulgent and mentally unstable," I say, grinning. He chuckles.

"Noted. It does look good though."

"Wanna trade?" I ask, holding the cone out to him.

"Sure," he says, and we do. He licks my ice cream, and I drink his

milkshake.

We walk on until we come to a little bridge overlooking the pond. I lean against the railing. He sidles up to me, and it all feels perfect.

Too perfect.

“Why do you like me?” I ask him.

He turns to me with a look of surprise. “The hell kind of question is that?”

“A serious question. I mean, it’s not like you and I have much in common, aside from you being hot and me being adorable.”

“I think our text thread makes it clear that I find you white-hot *and* adorable.”

My face heats up. *Yes, I suppose it does...*

“Just humor me, Lucas.” I hate that I feel the need to ask him this question. I’m not insecure about most things girls my age worry about. I like my face, and I’ve made peace with my chub to the point that I enjoy wearing clothes that accentuate my curves. This isn’t about worthiness. It’s about trust. As much as I hate to give anyone else control over my feelings, I can’t deny that being abandoned by my parents didn’t leave a few scars and sore spots.

He bites into his ice cream cone and chews for a long moment.

“I like you because being with you makes me feel things I haven’t felt in a long time.”

“What kind of feelings?”

“Hope, for starters. You make me want to imagine a future; that’s something I haven’t allowed myself to do since before I went inside. I had an interview today for a new job, and I’m pretty sure you were the reason I got it.”

“Wait, really? That’s awesome. Tell me everything.”

He offers me the bottom point of the ice cream cone and then wipes his hands on a napkin. “It’s just a carpentry job through a prisoner re-entry program. But it’s decent money, and I’ll get to work with my hands.”

“Good. You need to furnish your new place. Maybe you can make yourself some furniture.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“No?”

He shakes his head, pulls his cell phone from his pocket, scrolls, and angles the screen toward me. Looking down, I see an expertly crafted table in

shining dark wood with a set of four chairs.

“Did you make this?” I ask. It looks like a photo straight out of a furniture catalogue, and a fancy one at that.

“I did,” he confirms, and I see the glow of pride all over him in the light from his phone. This is something he’s good at.

“Why work for someone else, then? Why not just keep making stuff like this on your own and selling it?”

“Lumber’s expensive, and these pieces are incredibly time-consuming. Plus, I don’t have a workshop, so…” Lucas shrugs. “Everyone’s gotta start somewhere. So, this is me. Starting over.”

“Well, I think it’s fantastic. But what did you mean when you said I was the reason you got the job?”

He slides his hand into his pocket. “You reminded me how it felt to fight for something I wanted. And right now, I want to be the man you deserve.”

My chest squeezes. I press my forehead to his chest and sigh with pleasure as he runs his fingers through my hair. My whole life, I’ve fought hard to stay positive in the face of pain and rejection. It’s not easy to see the silver lining in every situation, but the thought that I could inspire a good man like Lucas to dream of a future for himself makes it all worth it.

“Will you make something for me some day?” I ask him.

“Of course,” he says. “Anything you want.”

“Anything?” I glance up at him with a cheeky grin.

But he nods solemnly, like it’s a vow.

“Anything.”

I tap my fingertip against my chin. “Maybe a bed,” I say, not meaning to be suggestive, but his lips quirk all the same.

“It would be my pleasure,” he says.

“I think you mean *our* pleasure.”

He presses his lips to mine. I open my mouth to him, letting chocolate and vanilla mingle with strawberries and cream. Just when my knees are danger of buckling out from under me, he pulls back with a solemn expression.

“Look, Tatum, back to your question—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Now, hang on.” He runs his thumb across my bottom lip. “I get that you’ve been dealt a shit hand in your young life. Lots of folks who haven’t gone through a quarter of what you’ve been through haven’t turned out half

as well. And yet, somehow, you've ended up *kind* in an inconsiderate world. You could've been cold, but you're a goddamned ray of sunshine personified. Why do I like you? Because you could have been a little gray rain cloud, but instead you're a burst of color. That's why."

I stand there, at a complete loss for words, with my jaw hanging. But where my voice fails me, my body takes control. Gripping him by the knot of his tie, I draw his lips to mine. We kiss and kiss some more, bodies pressed firmly together, until the metallic jingle of a dog's leash pulls us back to Earth.

"Guess I should probably get you home." Lucas takes my hand as we walk back in the direction of his truck. I float beside him, my mind swimming and body pulsating with every step. Lucas sees my scars. He sees where I'm most sensitive, and he handles those areas with the tenderness they require, like he's always known where they are.

He says I make him want to imagine a future.

I'm already there.

"Do you want kids?" I ask suddenly.

Lucas laughs like I caught him off guard, the skin around his eyes creased with amusement. "Not tonight, but someday, sure."

"How many?"

He's quiet for a few seconds. "Two or three, I think. You?"

"Two," I say, "a boy and a girl. But I'm open to other suggestions."

Damn, Aunt Nina was right. I've got it bad. My cheeks are smoldering, and I'm glad for the cover of night to hide the blush. I glance over at Lucas, who's gazing straight ahead.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask.

He stops walking and turns to take my other hand so that he's holding both. "I'm thinking I really hope you get exactly what you want for the future. Because you deserve it."

"You deserve good things, too."

An emotion I can't put a name to flickers across his rugged features, half hidden in shadow beneath the warm light of a lamppost. He gives my hands a squeeze and then says, "Speaking of things you deserve—" He pulls a small object from his pocket. "—I got you a little something."

"What? You've already given me plenty tonight."

Lucas hands me the object—a small box—shifting his weight. *Is he nervous?* I tease off the lid, revealing a gold ring laid with a small, dark

gemstone. I step closer to the lamppost to get a better look at the stone: an oblong, bottle-green emerald.

“When did you even have time to get this?”

“I picked it up at the estate sale.”

“But...don’t tell me this is why you put that dresser back.”

“It was worth it.” He takes the box from my hands and teases out the ring, which he then slips onto the third finger of my right hand. The emerald glitters in the light from the lamppost.

No man or boy has ever given me jewelry before. Not even my father.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “It’s beautiful.”

He pulls me close and kisses my temple.

“Not half as beautiful as you, baby girl. But I’m glad you think so.”

I can't help but steal glances at Lucas as we traverse the empty roads leading back to the duplex. He's so handsome it should be illegal, with his dark hair and chiseled jaw. I try to play it cool,

but there's a palpable tension between us. I can feel the attraction building like electricity in the air, and I know he feels it too. I see it in the tilt of his lips, in the way he steals glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

As we pull into the driveway, I can hardly breathe. I don't want the night to end, but I'm not sure how to move things from the truck to the bedroom. Lucas parks, then turns to me.

“I had a really great time tonight, Tatum.”

My stomach flutters. I touch the emerald ring just to prove that it’s real.

“Me too, Lucas. I had a really great time.” I feel so lame for echoing what he already said, but my heart is hammering in my chest. I can barely breathe, let alone speak.

We stare at each other for a moment, the chemistry between us almost unbearable. I want to kiss him. I’m pretty sure he wants to kiss me, too, but I can see the hesitation on his face. I can't help wondering if I’ve misread the situation.

He takes my hand, and I feel a jolt of electricity run through me. He looks into my eyes and says, “I don't want this night to end.”

Relief surges through me. “Neither do I.”

He leans in and presses his lips to mine. It's a soft, cautious kiss at first, but as I open to him and allow him to slide his tongue into my mouth, his comes up to cup my breast. I moan into his open mouth. A moment later, he breaks the kiss and leans his forehead against mine.

"I've been wanting to touch you like this all night," he rasps.

I feel my cheeks flush. "Me, too."

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me close, and I feel his heart beating against my chest. We sit in silence, just holding each other, as I wait for him to keep going, touching me everywhere.

Then he pulls back.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he says.

What? *Tomorrow?*

I jump out of the truck before he has a chance to come around and open the door for me.

"What do you mean tomorrow?" I ask, hands on my hips.

"Tatum —"

"You're really gonna end the night here? After yesterday, after what we already did?"

"I can't—"

"Why not?" I demand.

He averts his gaze, and suddenly my confidence evaporates into mist. I take a step back, away from him.

"You've changed your mind about me."

He shakes his head. "No, Tatum. It's nothing like that."

"Then what is it like? Because I thought we were both looking forward to this."

Lucas scrubs a hand down his stubbled face. When he meets my gaze again, there's a hunger there that threatens to swallow me whole.

"If I take you upstairs now, I won't be able to keep my hands off you. I'll make you mine in every sense of the word."

I melt at the longing in his tone but manage to stand my ground. "I want to be yours, Lucas."

The gears turn behind his eyes, and with one curt nod of his head, he seems to make a decision. He takes my hand, leading me up the steps to his unit. He opens the door to let me inside, and as soon as he closes it behind us, he's on me, his mouth on mine, his hands running up and down the length of my body.

In his fervor to undress me, he rips one of the straps off my dress, but I don't care. I'm down to my bra and panties in seconds.

"Wait, wait," I say, against his lips. "Your turn."

He nips my bottom lip as he kicks off his shoes, then tugs his shirt off over his head. The sight of his abs rippling in the light from the kitchen does things to my lower belly. He tugs his pants down next, his underwear with them, and his cock springs free, fully erect.

"Oh, God..." I can't help but stare; he's huge. He grips himself in his fist, and I trail my gaze up along his forearm, the curve of his prominent bicep, along the sharp line of his jaw, to his eyes.

"I'm going to fuck that pretty pink cunt of yours," he says, his voice low and gravely. His words leave no room for hesitation, and I feel my body clenching and tingling with the urge to comply.

"Go to the bedroom and take your clothes off," he commands, and I am all too eager to do as he says.

I pad through the living room and up the stairs to the bedroom, aware of his presence like a shadow behind me. I take off my bra and let my breasts spill free, nipples hard in the cool night air. I shimmy out of my panties and let them puddle at my feet before turning to face him. His gaze is a warm hand roaming down my body. He wets his lips.

"Lay down on the bed and spread your legs." His tone is gentle, yet firm, almost fatherly.

I lay down on his bed and spread my thighs for him. He moves closer.

"Wider," he says. I comply. "Good girl. Now use your fingers to spread your pussy lips for me."

His vulgar words make my insides tighten. I open my folds for him, gazing down over the slopes of my body to watch him climb onto the mattress, between my legs. His hot breath gusts over my inner thighs just before he presses a series of kisses down my pubic mound.

"Say 'Thank you, Daddy,' for what I'm about to do," he growls.

Did he just...? My voice catches in my throat as I feel his tongue flick over my clit. I arch my back.

"Say it, Tatum."

I swallow hard. I can't remember the last time I called my own father Daddy, but I'm embarrassed to admit that, on Lucas, the word fits. Like a pair of vintage shoes that might as well have been made for you.

"Thank you, Daddy," I say on the wings of a sigh.

He laps at me like a man dying of thirst who's just found an oasis. I moan with pleasure, as his tongue moves in concentric circles over my clit. It feels so good, better than I ever imagined.

Tension builds inside me. He slides his tongue down between my folds, then dips inside me. I whimper as he fucks me with his tongue, my hips rocking involuntarily, like my body's found something new to crave.

"I want to feel you come for me, baby girl," he says, before returning his attention to my clit. I just nod, having lost the ability to form coherent sentences. He slides first one and then two fingers inside me, pumping gently and working his tongue against me, driving me closer and closer to the cliff.

"That's it," he growls. "Come on Daddy's fingers. I want to feel this pussy throb."

My body has no choice but to obey his command; I come fiercely, the muscled walls of my pussy gripping his fingers.

"That's a good girl," he says, withdrawing his fingers to suck them clean.

I lay there, panting, as he moves over me, leaning down to kiss me so I can taste myself on his lips. I've never tasted myself before, and the illicit thrill of sucking my own juices from Lucas' tongue makes me bold. I reach between us and curl my hand around his shaft, directing it toward my opening.

The sound he makes when the head touches my folds sends a warm shiver through me. He bucks forward, then seems to catch himself.

"Goddamn..." He groans. "You ready for me to fuck you, baby?"

"Please," I whisper.

Cupping my face with both hands, he gazes down at me with so much lust and admiration that I almost start to cry. "This might hurt for a moment, but it won't always hurt. I'll go as slow as I can."

"Okay." I grasp his shoulders tightly as he thrusts inside, and I'm stretched to the breaking point. I cry out and he covers my mouth with his, gently rocking so that his cock strokes in and out of me. It hurts a little—he's a lot bigger than my favorite sex toy—but the ache subsides quickly in favor of a satisfying sense of fullness. He grunts, his pace quickening, and I moan, digging my nails into his back.

"You wanted Daddy's cock, didn't you?" he asks, his voice gruff as sandpaper.

"Yes," I say, because I did want it, and I do. I'd never wanted anything so badly in my life.

“Good girl. Take it all.” He buries himself inside me to the hilt. I arch my back, canting my hips in time with his thrusts. After a few more thrusts, he pulls out suddenly, and flips me over. “On your knees, baby,” he says, and I hoist my ass into the air just as he commanded.

He slides into me, somehow even deeper than before.

“Oh, fuck, Daddy...”

His fingers dig into the soft flesh of my bottom as he fucks me hard, his skin smacking against mine

“That’s daddy’s good girl.” He reaches around to play with my clit as he works his cock in and out of me. The combination of inner and outer stimulation reduces me to nothing but a vessel for sensation, a storm of pleasure punctuated by the occasional lightning bolt of pain.

I feel another orgasm rush toward me then, just as his pace begins to quicken.

“God, I feel you tightening,” Lucas rasps. “That’s it, good girl. Come on my cock. Milk daddy’s cock with your pussy.”

“I want your cum, too, Daddy,” I say, breathless. I’ve never said anything like that out loud, but it feels good. Sexy. Scandalous. “I want you to come inside me.”

My orgasm crests and breaks like a wave upon rocks. We cry out in tandem, as he thrusts deep and then holds himself inside me. I feel his cock throb. I press back against his hips, squeezing every inch of his shaft as he comes inside of me, and I come around him.

After, we collapse onto the bed, sweating, panting, and complete.

“That was...” I can’t find the words. But Lucas gets it, gets *me*.

“It was.” He clears his throat awkwardly. “Is it all right that I said... When I asked you to call me...”

I roll over to face him and cup his cheek. He studies my expression like a puzzle he’s having trouble solving. “It was better than all right. It was hot. *Really* hot.”

He exhales through his nose, looking relieved. I gasp as he slides his hand down my body, between my legs, and slips two fingers inside me.

“You know why you like it when Daddy turns your tight pussy into a cream pie?” When he raises his hand again, his fingers are glistening. “Because you’re my dirty girl. Say it.”

“I’m your dirty little girl.” I squeeze my thighs together as he smears our combined wetness onto my lips and then kisses me.

seven

LUCAS

FALLING in love with Tatum is the easiest thing I've ever done. Tempering my obsession so that I don't scare her off? That's the real challenge.

The days melt into weeks. Tatum and I find a calm and easy rhythm to our lives. She spends her days at the salon, working her way up to being a full stylist, and I spend mine working with my hands. The carpentry job is rewarding, if exhausting, but it's satisfying to watch a house come together and know that I had a hand in creating it. I come home tired and content most days, then Tatum and I make dinner together. Sometimes we eat with Nina, sometimes we dine alone. We talk about our days, our hopes, our dreams for the future. We watch TV, read quietly side by side, and hang out with Marcellus.

Our lives are the peaceful kind of quiet I've always wanted but didn't think I'd get to have. Not with Tatum, anyway. On weekends, we find more furniture for my apartment until it's almost as over-decorated as Nina's —*almost*.

But I love it; it feels like an extension of Tatum's home, and she's helped to make it her own, which helps it feel more like mine. Because what I've discovered over the course of falling in love with her is that she is my home.

And I don't know how to tell her. Because there's still this *thing* between us, this heartbreaking secret I carry. It's always there, skulking around the back of my mind, reminding me how fragile our relationship really is, turning what should be a perfectly pleasant Sunday breakfast into something tainted by lies.

"What's wrong, baby girl?"

Tatum sits at my kitchen table, her chin in her hand and clouds in her eyes. She's got a blank piece of paper and a pen in front of her, but she isn't writing.

"I haven't heard from my dad for a couple of months now. I'm starting to get worried."

My heart starts to pound but I do my best to keep a straight face. I refresh the coffee in her mug and then sit down beside her.

"I'm sure he's fine," I say.

"How can you be sure? He's never gone this long between letters." She looks at me, concern knitting her brows. "Do you think I should go see him?"

Panic builds in my chest like a pressure cooker. I make myself get up and pour the rest of my coffee in the sink. "I think you should do what you think is best. But I've got to be honest, I don't like the idea of you going to a place like that. Besides, it's pretty far..."

I trail off, trying to gauge her response. I don't want to push her.

She sighs. "Yeah, you're probably right."

In a burst of action, she crumples the blank paper into a tight ball and tosses it aside. Staring at the crumpled page, I feel like the biggest pile of shit on the planet. This is all my fault; I'm the reason she feels this way.

"Let me take your mind off it," I say, resting my hands on her shoulders from behind. "It's a beautiful day. Let's go out, have a picnic."

She brightens at this. "Really?"

"Sure. You go get dressed. I'll get everything ready."

We're on the road in under an hour, windows down, radio blaring, and a picnic basket ratchet-strapped to my truck bed. I know exactly where I'm taking her: Big Ridge Lake, just south of Norris Lake. It's too cold to swim this time of year, but the view is still pretty.

I pick a spot near the tree line, and spread a gingham blanket down beneath a lopsided willow that keeps the sun off us. We eat turkey sandwiches and sip sparkling cider while we watch the ducks paddle by in neat little rows. Tatum tosses the popcorn we brought into the water to catch their attention, and soon enough, she's attracted a crowd.

I watch her feed the ducks, looking less burdened than she did this morning. She's got on a pale-blue dress with a high neckline and a higher hem. Just staring at her thighs makes my pants feel tighter. I think of stripping her naked and taking her right here in the park where anyone could see, where everyone would know that she is completely mine. In my

imagination, she's face-down on the blanket with her gorgeous round ass in the air and my cock deep inside her. It's not long before I'm practically salivating, I want her so badly.

When the popcorn's gone and the ducks have taken their leave, she returns to the blanket.

"What's that look for?" she asks me. From the way she's biting her lip, I suspect she knows exactly what I'm thinking, or something close to it. I wrap my arm around her waist and press my lips to the shell of her ear.

"I want to make you come," I say plainly, appreciating the color as it rises into her cheeks.

"Now?" she whispers.

"Now."

"But Daddy—" she begins, and I raise a hand. She silences immediately.

"I know where we are, but there's no one around. Besides, your pussy is mine whenever I want it, isn't that right?"

"Yes, Daddy..."

"And I want it now."

After a quick glance around the empty park, she begins inching her skirt up her thighs. I lay my hand over hers to stop her.

"I want you on your hands and knees, baby girl." It makes my dick ache, how quickly she follows my instructions. I kneel behind her and lift her skirt, exposing her pale yellow panties.

"Face down, sweetheart," I say, my tone gruff with the force of my arousal. She complies, and her ass lifts a bit higher in the air. I take my time sliding her panties down over the curve of her bottom, letting them pool in the crook of her knees. She's a vision, her sweet cunt glistening already.

"Spread your legs a bit wider for me, baby."

"But, Daddy, what if someone sees?"

"You think I'd let anyone else get a look at this juicy pussy?"

"No..."

"Trust me, there's no one around for miles."

"But—"

"I'll take care of you," I say, and I will. Nothing will happen, and no one will see this beautiful pussy but me.

She gasps as I slide my middle finger between her folds, finding the hard little nub of her clitoris. I rub gently, teasing a whimper from her lips as she begins to squirm against me. The skin of her bottom dots with goosebumps as

a breeze hits us both. I smile and rub her a little harder.

“Please, Daddy,” she whispers. I grin, my erection straining painfully against my jeans. But I won’t fuck her here, at least not with my cock.

I slide two fingers into her greedy little cunt and curl them forward, putting pressure on her favorite spot. She lets out a cry that echoes over the lake, and I wonder if anyone’s heard her. Part of me hopes that they have. Stilling my hand, I chuckle devilishly as she begins to move of her own volition, fucking herself on my fingers and reaching up to stroke her clit.

“You want to come, don’t you, baby girl?”

“Yes.” She breathes. “I need to—”

“And what if I say no?” I tease. She stops rubbing herself. “Good girl. You know what to do.”

“Please let me come, Daddy,” she begs. I move my fingers slowly, relishing the velvety softness of her cunt. She’s so fucking wet, her juices are practically dripping down my hand.

It gives me an idea.

“You can come, baby girl,” I say, “if you can take Daddy’s finger in your ass.”

Tatum gasps. “But...Daddy...”

I slide one pair of fingers out of her pussy and quickly replace them with fingers from my other hand. She whines softly as I circle her puckered back entrance with my slickened fingers.

“Have you ever put a finger in your ass, baby? Or is Daddy gonna be the first to fuck this hole?”

“You’re the first.”

A sense of deep satisfaction surges through me. I put the slightest bit of pressure on her asshole, and her pussy clenches in response.

“Deep breath for me, baby girl... That’s it. Now, exhale...”

I ease my finger into her ass as she sighs. I’m barely halfway inside before she’s back to frantically rubbing her clit.

“Such a good little slut,” I rasp. “Taking Daddy’s fingers in both her holes.” I fuck her as she strokes herself, moaning and whimpering, pressing back as I push forward.

Harder. Faster...

“Please let me come, Daddy. I’m so fucking close.”

“You can come for me, baby.”

Tatum rocks back and forth, her whimpers stretching into moans. Her

pussy and ass clench around my fingers. “Oh God, Daddy... Don’t...stop...”

Her whole body shudders as she comes, face pressed to the blanket, muffling her cries of pleasure.

“Good girl,” I say, as she continues to twitch in the aftermath of her climax. “Such a good fucking girl.” I had every intention of waiting until we got home to finish what we started here, but my cock feels like it’s about to snap in half.

Glancing around to make sure we’re still alone, I withdraw from her body and work my dick free of my pants. At the sound of my zipper coming down, she looks over her shoulder.

“I can’t wait another second, baby. Daddy’s gotta come. Right fucking now.”

I start jacking my cock. She rolls onto her side to get a better view of me working my dick, back and forth, faster...tighter...

“Can I watch you come, Daddy?” she asks.

“Sure you can, baby. But don’t you dare close those thighs. Let Daddy see your pussy.”

She slides her panties all the way off, keeping one knee in the air and her gaze on my cock. Playing with her pussy and ass catapulted me more than halfway to the finish line; I can already feel my balls tightening.

“You want to see Daddy make a big mess?”

“Uh-huh.” She nods, refusing to tear her gaze from my hand for a second. As for me, I can’t get enough of the naked excitement on her face.

“Daddy’s gonna come all over your pussy, and then you’re gonna ride home with my cum in your panties.”

“Mm, yes please, Daddy, come all over me.” She bites her knuckle.

The moment I feel my orgasm building, I aim my dick between her thighs. Pleasure, hot and relentless, floods my shaft. I groan.

“Fuck...baby.”

Tatum gasps as my cock erupts, coating her already dripping cunt with even more slickness. I work every last drop out of my balls and then fall back onto my haunches, spent. Sated. Head empty. For just a moment, I forget about the lies I’ve told her and the secret I carry.

For one blissful minute, all that matters is how much I love Tatum, and how much she trusts me.

But the moment is short lived. I sense a change the instant we walk into Nina's apartment to return the picnic basket.

"Uh-huh," Nina says into the phone, waggling her fingers at us in greeting. "Sure. Yeah, of course, Gene. Whatever you need."

Gene Fitzroy. Tatum's father.

My mouth goes dry.

"Is that my dad?" Tatum asks, her eyes brightening. Seeing her so excited absolutely wrecks me. She skips over to the sofa where Nina sits and plops down on the empty cushion. I move hesitantly into the living room. Tatum gazes at Nina with wide eyes, but Nina holds up a finger.

"Sure, okay, yeah. I didn't expect... No, I *am* glad, Gene, I'm just... Sure. Okay. No, she's... Yeah." Tatum gestures for Nina to give her the phone, but Nina just shakes her head. "Okay Gene. We'll see you then. Mm, bye."

Nina hangs up.

"My dad didn't want to talk to me?" Tatum asks. The hurt in her voice is a punch to the gut.

"Oh, he's just busy sweetheart," Nina says, patting Tatum's cheek gently. "Actually, I have some news."

"News?" I say.

Nina casts a small smile my way. "It turns out that Gene is coming home tomorrow."

"Home?" Tatum's gaze widens. "Tomorrow?"

"That's right."

Fuck.

Tatum squeals with delight and throws her arms around Nina, who pats her back. "That's fantastic! What time can we pick him up?"

"He's being released at 10. It's a few hours' drive, so we'll have to leave bright and early."

"Is he staying here?" Tatum asks.

My already racing mind starts sprinting.

"No," Nina says. "For now he'll be staying in a halfway house, but we're going to drop him off there."

"This is just—" Tatum beams from ear to ear. "—the best news, you know?" She bounds over to me and grasps my hands. "Isn't this amazing, Lucas?"

"It's great." I manage to smile and nod.

“Be ready to go at six, okay?” Nina says.

“I’ll be ready at five.”

Tatum leads me by the hand up to her bedroom. I move in a daze, dumbstruck and panic-stricken. I have to *do* something. I can’t let Gene break her heart when she shows up at the prison all excited to see him, and he barely recognizes her.

I have to tell her.

I have to tell her *now*.

“Tatum,” I say, sinking down onto the edge of her bed as I watch her move like a whirlwind around the room.

“I want to dress up for tomorrow.” She tugs the blue dress off and then pulls on another dress, a darker one, more modest, with little red flowers all over it. “What do you think of this one?”

“Tatum, baby. I need to talk to you about something.”

“No good?” She turns to her closet to rifle through it to find something better.

“Tatum, it’s not about the dress. Please, just...sit down.”

She stops what she’s doing and looks at me, confusion written cleanly across her face.

“What is it? Lucas, you’re scaring me.”

I take a deep breath and survey her beautiful face, memorizing how she looks in this moment, the instant before I lose her. “I wrote the letters.”

She blinks. “What?”

“The ones from your father. I wrote them. That’s why you haven’t received any since I got out. That’s why—”

“I don’t understand,” she says. “I’ve been writing to my dad for four years.”

“I was your father’s cellmate. You sent him a birthday card four years ago. The one with the cheese grater and the school photo.”

She takes a step back. This is it, the beginning of the end of everything.

“You wrote those letters?”

“I did.” I hate the way she’s looking at me, like I’m someone she doesn’t know.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I thought you deserved a response.”

“So, you’re saying you stole his birthday card?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then how—”

“I picked it up off the floor. It was already opened. I picked it up, and I looked at you, and I thought, this girl deserves an apology, if nothing else. I thought, maybe I could do this one small thing. I could give her that. I shouldn’t have kept it going for so long, but...those letters became the only bright spots in my life at the time. You were the best part of the last four years, Tatum. My sunshine in that gray place, and I didn’t want to let it go...” I clear my throat and look away. “When I got out, I told myself that it was time to fess up. So I showed up at the salon...”

“You lied to me,” she hisses, hurt and betrayal coloring every line of her expression.

“Baby, I—”

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps. “Don’t you *dare* call me that.”

My heart shatters.

“Please, Tatum, you’ve gotta understand. I didn’t mean for it to happen this way. I didn’t mean to fall in love with you—” Her eyes widen at my words, her lip trembles. “—but I did. I fell in love with you. I love you, Tatum, and I know what I did was wrong, but I’m not sorry that I did it. I’m only sorry I lied to you.”

She looks like she wants to say something. But without saying a word, she marches over to the door and throws it wide.

“Get out.”

“Tatum—”

“I said, get out, Lucas!”

I rise slowly and make my way to the door, wishing I could take it all back. But I can’t. This was going to happen one day. Sooner or later, she was always going to learn that I’m a liar and a fraud. No amount of time served could ever make up for the harm I caused her.

As soon as I’m past the threshold, she slams the door. It’s no less than I deserve.

eight

TATUM

I WANT to beg Lucas to come back to me the second I slam the door. But I don't. I can't. I have too much self-respect for that.

How could he?

How *could* he?

Our entire relationship was built on a lie, and then he goes and tells me he *loves me*? That isn't love. That's manipulation at worst, and desperation at best. He just didn't want to lose me, and he was willing to say anything to gain my forgiveness.

I drop onto my bed and bury my face in my pillow and let out the kind of scream you only see in the movies. Guttural, visceral, and all-consuming. I let my pillow swallow it whole. I cry until my body is trembling from the force of my sobs, the tears soaking into my pillowcase. I cry until I'm weak, until I cry myself into a deep and fitful sleep.

But sleep like this doesn't bring comfort. I toss and turn, and when I'm not tossing and turning, I'm dreaming of Lucas and my father. I wonder if they talked about me while they were in prison, wonder if they laughed about how stupid and gullible I was.

When I wake, early the next morning, my eyes are red and puffy like I've been crying all night, and I think I might as well have been.

I shower and try to apply a nice face of makeup, but when I'm finished, I look like I'm trying too hard. I'm about to wash my face again and start over, until Nina pokes her head into my room to announce we should get going.

"What's the matter?" Nina asks.

"Nothing," I say quickly, grabbing my purse and sidling past her into the hall. She follows hot on my heels.

“Then why does your face look like that?”

“Like what?” I snap. She hesitates for a moment, and I decide to let her off the hook. “I’m fine, Aunt Nina. I’m just nervous about seeing my dad again.”

She pats my back and nods in understanding.

“You’ll feel better once we get the tunes going.”

We climb into her VW Bug and wait for the garage door to open. Before she backs down the driveway, Nina turns to me with a troubled expression.

“Tatum,” she says gently. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up, sweetheart.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I know you and your dad have been writing letters—” I cringe internally. “—but I don’t think that a person just...changes who they fundamentally are.”

“And who is he?” I ask. “Fundamentally?”

“He’s selfish, honey. He always has been. He’s not evil, he’s just a deeply selfish man.”

“If he’s so awful, then why are we driving all this way to help him?”

“Because he’s family, kiddo. For better or worse. And maybe I’m as hopeful as you are that I might be wrong.”

The drive is long and boring; we don’t talk much. By the time we reach the prison, the day is overcast and humid, the sky as grey as the concrete buildings that loom before us. Fences topped with razor wire line the exterior, and I try not to picture Lucas locked inside. He doesn’t belong in a place like this, no matter what the law says. Then I remind myself how he hurt and betrayed me, and I wonder if maybe he isn’t exactly the type of man who deserves to be in a place like this.

This is where they put the liars and thieves, and isn’t that what he is?

Nina and I climb out of the car, but we don’t have to go far to find my father, because there he is, standing in front of the entrance, wearing jeans and a tee shirt that hangs off his slim frame. I guess not everyone bothers to bulk up in prison. He carries his belongings in a clear plastic bag slung over one shoulder.

He approaches the car with heavy steps.

“Thanks for coming to get me,” he says to Nina.

“Well,” she pats him on the shoulder, “what are sisters for?”

He eyes me dubiously, and it takes a second before recognition lights in

his eyes.

“Tatum,” he says. I tell myself this isn’t the man I’ve been writing to. But a small, lonely part of me wants to believe what Lucas said isn’t true. I rush toward him and throw my arms around his neck. He pats me awkwardly on the back and gently pulls away. “It’s...uh, nice to see you, too.”

He climbs into the passenger seat of Nina’s bug and leaves me to crawl into the back through Nina’s car door.

We’re on the road again, and my dad doesn’t say anything for a long time. I have so many questions I want to ask him, about his life, his time in prison, whether or not he missed me, but also about Lucas. I want to know what he thinks about his former cellmate. And I want to know why my father would throw the birthday card I sent him on the floor, how he didn’t notice that his cellmate was stealing his letters and replying to them for *four years*.

But I don’t know where to start, so for a long stretch of road, I say nothing at all.

“Is anyone hungry?” Nina asks, after a while. My dad just grunts his response.

He’s probably not used to making conversation, I tell myself. It’s up to me to get the conversation going.

“I would have thought that you’d be super excited about your first meal on the outside,” I say. But my father doesn’t say anything. I guess he isn’t hungry.

Or he doesn’t care.

I fight back tears. A replay of last night’s hurt and betrayal threatens to come pouring out of my eyeballs. But there’s something else there, braided into the pain and sadness. It’s jagged, like broken glass, and suddenly I taste it. Anger. I’m angry about the fact that my dad isn’t saying anything, that he doesn’t have a million questions for his own daughter whom he hasn’t seen in eight years. I’ve idolized a version of this man—albeit a false version—and he doesn’t even want to know me.

“So,” Nina says, with a quick glance in the rearview. No doubt she can sense the anger I’m radiating from the backseat. “What kind of job did they set you up with, Gene?”

“Don’t know yet,” he grumbles. “Gotta meet with my parole officer on Tuesday and figure the rest out from there.”

And that’s it. That’s all the man says for another hour.

I simmer in the backseat like a forgotten soup pot. He doesn’t care about

me. I'm just a piece of trash he left on the floor. Not even a person.

The sad truth is that if Lucas hadn't responded to that card, I wouldn't have ever gotten anything from my father. It was Lucas who saw my photograph and thought, this kid deserves some kindness. Whereas my dad didn't think anything at all.

"You could ask *me* a question or two," I snap out of nowhere.

"Whaddya want me to ask?" my father says, with obvious annoyance.

"Oh, I dunno. How about, Tatum, how was it going from being a child to an adult without the presence of either parent? Or Tatum, what kind of work are you doing these days? Do you like it? Good for you. Or, what about, are you seeing anyone, Tatum? Are you happy? What kind of music do you like, what kind of food—"

"All foods, from the looks of it," he mumbles, and he's lucky there's a padded seat between us because I'm pissed enough to punch him.

"Don't be rude, Gene," Nina says firmly.

"Calm down, it was just a joke. Besides, she's the one jumping down my throat with all the questions. I haven't been out of prison for two hours and she's already giving me shit."

"Well," I say, "maybe you deserve to catch some shit. It's not like you were a great dad before you got arrested. You've been shitty my entire life. And by the way, the only joke in this car is the man sitting in front of me."

"Watch it now, girl. My old man used to tan my hide for less."

"Oh, so now you want to pretend like I owe you respect? Please. You sure as hell never cared about what you owed me as your daughter."

"I didn't choose to have you, that was on your bitch mother—"

"Gene," Nina hisses. "Stop that!"

"Well," I say, "I choose not to waste another second on you, Dad, because you *suck*."

"*I suck?*"

"Yes. You're a selfish, petty, oblivious little man who only cares about himself, and if I never see you again, it'll be too soon."

"Yeah, well, feeling's mutual, kid."

The bug lurches as Nina screeches to a halt on the shoulder of the freeway. She reaches across Gene and opens the passenger-side door.

"Get out," she says.

"The hell, Nina—"

"You heard me, Gene."

“How’m I s’posed to get where I’m going?”

“The halfway house is only three miles south of here, I’m sure you’ll manage.” She shifts the car into park, turns her hazards on, and crosses her arms in front of her, waiting.

“Come on, Nina. It’s not like I have a GPS. How am I gonna find it?”

“That sounds like your problem, Gene.”

“Jesus Christ...” He unbuckles his seatbelt. His boots crunch the gravel as he climbs out of the car. “I don’t need this shit. I don’t need either of you.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” I shoot back before he can slam the door.

Nina pulls onto the highway a few seconds later. I don’t look back.

My aunt drives for a few minutes until we’re well and truly rid of him, and then pulls into a gas station.

“Go ahead and climb back up front,” she says, and I do. As soon as I’m settled, the adrenaline I’ve been running on catches up to me.

I burst into tears.

“There, there, sweetheart.” Nina pulls me into an awkward side hug, her face pressed into the hair at the crown of my head. “Fuck ‘im. He’s a useless sonofabitch. I’m so proud of you for standing up for yourself.”

I cry and cry and realize that there’ve only ever been two people who loved me in my life. Not my absent mother, or my felon father. Just Nina, my aunt who never asked to be a mother but who did her best to fill the role, and Lucas. Lucas loved me more in the short time I’ve known him than either of my parents ever did.

This whole thing started with an act of kindness that grew into an act of love. He saw a little girl in need, and he reached out. He took an interest and encouraged her to study hard and follow her dreams. He gave me the thing I needed most in the world: someone who cared enough to listen.

I wipe my nose on the back of my hand. That’s when I see it: the emerald ring Lucas gave me.

“Nina,” I say, “I’ve made a terrible mistake. I need to get home right away.”

“You got it, kiddo,” she says, and floors it, no questions asked.

nine

LUCAS

I'M PACKING because it's the right thing to do, and the only thing I *can* do. I can't stay here and see Tatum every day and not touch her, not talk to her, not love her. But if I'm to respect her wishes, then I have to get as far away from her as possible.

I take everything I have that reminds me of Tatum: her letters, the photographs we took together, and okay, yes, a pair of her panties. I take these things, along with the few clothes and tools I own, and shove them into my duffel bag. As far as I'm concerned, Nina can rent this place out furnished, charge a little more for it than she might've been able to otherwise. Maybe that can be the small thing I leave behind, a little bit of furniture and some TLC on the unit to make it lovely and livable.

I clean out the fridge, getting rid of anything that might spoil. I'm about to take out the last bag of trash when I hear a knock at the door. For one second, I think maybe, maybe it's her. But I can't think like that anymore. It's over. She wants me gone.

But when I open the door, there she stands, mascara streaking down the slopes of her cheeks, and her eyes red and glassy. She's clearly been crying, but she's not crying anymore. She snuffles, but she holds her head high.

"Tatum?"

"We need to talk," she says. I step out of her way to let her in, closing the door gently behind her. She looks around and notices the few boxes, bags, and trash I've collected. "You were just going to leave?"

"I thought that's what you wanted," I say, defeated.

She turns to face me.

"I don't want you to go anywhere. I was angry when you told me about

the letters, but I realized..." She snuffles again and shakes her head. I note the sadness in her expression, and I suspect that Gene must have been an even bigger disappointment than I thought he'd be.

"Baby girl," I say, "how did things go with—"

"Terrible." Her lip trembles, and I can no longer keep my distance. We fly toward each other, arms open. I hold her tight and rock her gently until her shoulders stop shuddering and she finally catches her breath. "He hates me," she says.

"Shh, no he doesn't, baby," I whisper into her hair. "He just hates himself, and he has to take all that hate out on someone else. It's self-preservation. That doesn't excuse it, but I swear to you, no one could hate you, baby. Least of all your father."

I cradle her face in my hands and force her to look at me. And finally, amid all the tears and snot and sadness, she smiles, just a little.

"I realized something today," she says.

"What's that?"

"No one has ever loved me like you love me."

I press a kiss to her forehead. "I love you so, so much, Tatum."

"You know what else?" she continues. I brush her hair back from where it's matted to her damp cheeks.

"What, baby?"

"I love you, too."

I kiss her like I'll die without her, and I swear I might. She kisses me back with equal fervor. "I'm so sorry I lied to you, baby girl," I say between kisses. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I forgive you," she says, hugging me tight. "It's okay. I forgive you."

She glides her hands down my chest, sparking a fire inside me, and the desire to reclaim my territory.

We begin shedding clothes as we stumble together toward the bedroom, a tangle of limbs that can't get close enough. She falls onto the bed and pulls me down on top of her so that we're skin to skin, soul to soul.

She spreads her legs for me and whispers, "I need you, Daddy."

I brush the hair from her face.

"I need you, too, baby." I'm rock hard and ready, and so is she. I slide into her easily, burying myself as far as she can take me. I groan and brace myself above her, moving slowly at first, until she wraps her legs around me.

"Harder, Daddy," she says. "Fuck me like you'll never leave me."

And I do, because I won't. Not now, not ever. I slam into her, drawing delicious, animalistic sounds from her sweet mouth. She feels amazing, but I know I can go deeper. I adjust our position, hooking my hands beneath her knees and pressing the tops of her thighs to her abdomen, as I plow into her.

"You're so fucking gorgeous like this, baby girl. Spread wide for me, tits bouncing, completely at my mercy."

She wets her lips. "I love...uh...looking at you...while you fuck me."

Tatum yelps as I roll us over so that I'm on my back and she is on top of me. She teeters for a second, then steadies herself with both hands on my chest.

"Well," she says, "this is a different view."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," she says, running her hands over my abs. "I'm just not sure what to do now that I'm here."

"Move your hips, like this," I say, gripping her and showing her how. "Fuck, yeah. Just like that. Now you're riding Daddy."

She quickens her pace.

"Does it feel good?"

"It feels amazing." I take her breasts in my hands and gently pinch and strum her nipples. She whimpers, arching her back as she rides me.

"I love it when you tease my tits." She bounces on my cock, and fuck if it isn't the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"That's it, baby girl, just do whatever feels best for you."

She leans forward a little, grinding her clit against my pubic bone. "I want to feel you come inside me. I want you to fill me up until it's pouring out of me."

Listening to my baby girl talk dirty is what does me in. I can't hold back another second. My orgasm shoots out of me, and I pump her full it. Lost in passion, I pinch her nipples harder than I intend to. I feel her cunt tighten. She cries out, shaking with the force of her own climax, milking me dry.

She collapses on top of me, cum dripping from her pussy, down my balls, soaking the sheets beneath us. I hold her tight against me.

"You were amazing, baby." I kiss her temple. "Did you like being on top?"

"I loved the view," she murmurs. I run my hands across her back, savoring the softness of her skin. She sighs contentedly. "Swear we'll always be like this," she murmurs.

“Always be like what?” I squeeze her backside. “Satisfied?”

She smiles against my shoulder. “That...and happy.”

I press a kiss to Tatum’s forehead. “I swear to do whatever it takes to keep you smiling just like that.”

And I do. All night, every night, for the rest of our lives.

epilogue

TATUM

Five years later...

I SPREAD pesto mayo on the final slice of sourdough bread.

“Sweetie,” I say to Lila, my daughter, who just turned three. “Go get your papa and tell him lunch is ready.”

Lila darts from the kitchen screaming, “*Papaaaaaa, luuuunch!*” at the top of her lungs.

Something about the sound of his sister’s voice makes the baby kick from deep inside me. I pause, pressing a hand to my swollen belly, and smile. I still have three months to go until I’m no longer getting up to pee every five minutes.

I bring the sandwiches to the kitchen table, pausing to watch the sun stream in across the hardwood. Outside, in the backyard, is the playhouse that Lucas and some of his work buddies built for Lila.

Work has been great for Lucas these past few years. He’s been working for a contracting firm—Pope and Parkes, in downtown Knoxville—and he’s quickly become an integral part of the team. I love that he’s working for people who recognize what he brings to the table. They know about his past and choose to judge him on his skills and work ethic, not his time served.

After a moment, Lucas appears, a sheen of sweat on his forehead. I laugh as he sweeps Lila into his arms, pressing a kiss to her plump little cheek.

“Still fighting with the crib?” I ask. Lucas had every intention of building a crib from scratch, but when my assistant gifted us a perfectly nice lizard-themed crib from Ikea, I told him the time and effort he could spend building a crib would be better spent rubbing my feet and giving me orgasms.

“It’s a piece of Swiss garbage,” he grumbles.

“Garbage, garbage,” Lila echoes, as Lucas deposits her in her booster chair.

“Swedish,” I correct him playfully. “And I think it looks cute on the picture.”

“Well, I expect your assistant to know you better than that,” he says, taking his seat at the table. I’ve been promoted to full stylist at the salon, which made room for a new assistant, who has happily taken over the hair-washing and blow-drying for me. Contrary to what Lucas might think, she knows me very well—she knows that I don’t want my husband working himself to the bone when the baby will only spend a year in the crib. Besides, we still have the one he made for Lila; she basically chewed through it.

“Mommy, can I feed this to Marcellus?” Lila asks, peeling the lettuce off her sandwich. I laugh.

“Sure, kiddo,” I say, and Lila is up and out of her seat in an instant. I follow her over to Marcellus’ terrarium in the den and watch her slide her step stool over and expertly open the terrarium door. Marcellus gives her a dubious look. Everything changes when she presents the lettuce; he immediately begins to munch it.

“Let’s leave the lettuce and go wash our hands,” I say. I wait for Lila to close the terrarium and then lift Lila into my arms. After washing our hands in the kitchen sink, I deposit her back into her seat.

“Get over here,” Lucas says and tugs me onto his lap. He kisses me softly. “You’ve been on your feet too much today.”

“Nah,” I say, swatting at him. “Nina stopped by earlier and offered to watch Lila this morning while I took a long bath. It was lukewarm, but still relaxing.”

“Good.” He kisses me again. “I want you well rested for date night tonight.”

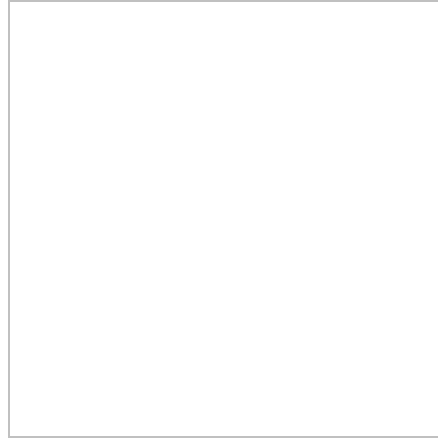
“Oh?” I grin. “What did you have in mind?”

“I thought we could have a picnic in the park.”

I blush, recalling the first time we picnicked in the park, and the dirty things we ended up doing to each other, right there, out in the open.

“I love that idea, Daddy,” I whisper, resting his hand on my belly. “I’ll be sure and save some room for you.”

Your next steamy daddy romance is here...



When a handsome stranger offers to take me in, I figure it'll be temporary. Growing up in foster care, I never dreamed I'd feel at home with an ex-cop twice my age. But Jonah's need to protect me goes beyond a warm bed. With him, I feel sweet. Soft. Precious. Like nothing bad can hurt me. Too bad the monsters lurking in my past have other plans.

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Read on for an excerpt from Run Baby Run...

Read an excerpt from *Run Baby Run*:

Jonah

I have just enough time to jump in the shower when I get home before my sister, Mary, calls to reaffirm tonight's plans.

"For the tenth time, Mare, yes, the room is ready." I set my phone to speaker and toss it on the bed, then focus on toweling off.

"I'm just making sure," Mary says. "Now, don't be surprised if Teagan doesn't respond to you at first. Let her get a feel for the place, but be straight about the ground rules. If she pushes back, be firm, but not too firm."

"Not too firm. Got it." I scrunch the water from my hair, then wrap the towel around my waist.

"I'm just saying, go easy on her. And try to come home around the same time over the next few days if you can. It'll give her a sense of structure."

"Is this the speech you give to all your prospective foster parents?"

"More or less," she says.

I put on a pair of boxers and snag a pair of jeans, then do a quick check in the bedroom mirror. I contemplate breaking out my trimmer. Hands down, the best thing about civilian life has been growing my hair out. On my head, for sure, but especially my beard.

"Mare, you told me she wasn't a kid."

"She's not a kid."

"Then I'm not going to treat her like one. If she can't be trusted to operate the microwave without supervision, she's gonna have to find a new arrangement." I grab a clean black tee shirt from my closet. "I thought you guys were heading over after work."

"We are, as soon as she gets here."

"She's late?"

"She'll be here," Mary says, but it comes out sounding like she's trying to convince herself.

I take advantage of the lull in conversation to get dressed. Figures the kid would take her sweet time now that she doesn't have to scramble. I busted enough girls like Teagan on the force to know all their cheap excuses before they spout 'em. If she thinks she can force the rest of us to bend to her

timetable, she's in for a rude awakening.

"Hey, Jonah... Try not to scare her, okay?"

I pause in the middle of pulling on my shirt. "Why the hell would I scare her?"

"I just mean, try to look harmless. As much as you can."

I have to laugh. At six-foot-four and almost three hundred pounds of muscle, I cut an intimidating silhouette. Don't think just because I was injured that I can't still kick ass and take names when the situation calls for it. I walk with a slight limp that's more pronounced when I'm barefoot, but I can run and jog in fierce bursts before the pain catches up. Regular workouts help prevent muscle tightness, so I make sure to get in weights and cardio most days of the week. My doctor says I'm in the best shape of my life.

"She's here," Mary says. "We'll be there soon, after we pick up the cake."

"What cake?" I ask, but she's already ended the call.

I head down the hall to the guestroom where Teagan will be staying. It's a great room with a queen-sized bed, a nice view of the backyard, and plenty of light during the day. The entire house is designed to impress. I often invite potential clients over to see it, to get a feel for the kind of work my firm's capable of.

I make sure all the lamps are in working order before turning to the tall bureau and its carefully placed bait—an expensive-looking crystal hummingbird statue.

Now, I'm not an idiot. I didn't leave a hunk of genuine crystal in a juvenile delinquent's bedroom on accident. Think of it as a sacrificial lamb with wings. Rather than wait for the kid to steal something I might not notice for a few weeks, I figured it'd be more efficient to place temptation well within reach. If she steals the damn thing, I'll know, and she'll be out on her ass faster than I can tell my sister, I told you so.

I reluctantly wait for Mary and the new addition to my household downstairs in the kitchen. When I hear the rumble of a car engine, I get up and open the front door. Mary climbs the steps with a store-bought birthday cake in her arms.

"Where is she?" I ask, taking the cake from her.

My sister glances back at the car. "Just give her a minute."

I bring the cake into the kitchen where I set it on the table. When I return, I'm stunned to find an angel in my foyer dressed in denim cutoffs and a white

tank top.

"Teagan, I'd like you to meet my brother, Jonah Parkes. Jonah, this is Teagan Moss."

I'm speechless. My sister had said the girl was pretty, but *pretty* doesn't even come close.

She's drop-dead fucking gorgeous.

Honey-blond hair frames her face and falls in loose waves around her shoulders. Her wide doll eyes are a deep chocolate brown, and I'm so fucking grateful that she refuses to meet my gaze, because it means I can stare at her without making her uncomfortable. She has the poutiest lips I've ever seen, and though it's the last place my mind has any right to go, I can't help picturing those soft pink lips stretched around my cock.

Forget firm. I'm already rock fucking hard for this girl.

"Good to meet you," I rasp, my voice thick.

Teagan nods, still refusing to look at me. It's for the best. I slide my hand into my pocket to pin the monster down. I'm a big guy with a dick to match, and the last thing I want to do is scare the living hell out of her.

"Why don't you show Teagan her new room while I get out some plates," Mary says.

"Sure," I say. "Follow me." I head for the staircase. When I glance back to make sure she's following, she's closer than I expect, close enough to reach out and pinch a lock of golden hair between my fingers if I wanted to—and goddamn, do I want to.

I want to do a hell of a lot more than that.

Teagan's eyes meet mine for the briefest of seconds, and a second is all it takes for me to come completely undone. All of my reservations about sharing my house with this girl dissolve into dust. Teagan isn't going anywhere. Not in a week, not in a million years. My home is hers now. My house, my arms, my bed—especially my bed.

Fuck, I'm already thinking of her as mine and I haven't even touched her yet.

She shadows me up the stairs. I turn into the guest room and step aside so Teagan can move past me. She sets her backpack on the bed and walks to the window. I study the curves of her ass and her gorgeous legs. Her shorts are so short that I can't stop thinking about licking a long, straight line from the inside of her knee all the way up her thigh.

"Bathroom's next door," I tell her, praying she mistakes the huskiness in

my voice for anything other than what it is: a hard lump of lust. “Towels are in the closet at the end of the hall. There’s all kinds of soap and shampoo in there, too.”

Teagan stares out the window. I’m willing to bet she’s spent her whole damn life perfecting that blank stare, reinforcing it brick by brick, a wall between herself and the world. But that wall might as well be made of glass for how well it hides the sad, scared little girl inside.

I want to reach behind those dark eyes and take that lost little girl in my arms, kiss away her worries and tell her she has nothing left to fear. I’m gonna make it my mission to learn everything I possibly can about what makes her smile. If she prefers Cheddar on her grilled cheese, I want to stock my fridge with full-sized wheels. If she’s afraid of the dark, I’ll saw through my fucking roof to build her a skylight, and fashion the walls and ceiling with glow-in-the-dark stars.

Is it too much too fast? Definitely, but who gives a fuck. Teagan needs someone to care for her just as much as I need to take care of her—with every hard, pulsing inch of my being.

That’s a hell of a lot of inches.

“Consider this house your home now,” I tell her. “You’re safe here.”

My eyes stalk her as she paces the perimeter of the room, her gaze gliding over every piece of décor. I’ve always considered myself a realist, but I know in my bones that she’s been brought here for a reason, and that reason has everything to do with me. She’s had a rough life, that much is clear. But that all ends today. Teagan’s never going to have to worry about finding a place to sleep or food to eat. She’ll never have to feel lost or cold or lonely.

And I swear to God, if any man tries to touch her, if he even so much as looks at her a second longer than I think is necessary, I’ll break his fucking neck.

She stops in front of the crystal hummingbird, her fingers hooked on the edge of the bureau. An hour ago, I would’ve assumed she was sizing up its value, but it’s obvious now that she’s simply admiring the bird’s beauty. Either way, it doesn’t matter, because from the moment she walked through the door, what’s mine became hers. She can’t steal what already belongs to her.

“Thank you,” she says. Her voice is soft as silk and a little scratchy, probably from lack of use.

I bet she sounds like an angel when she comes.

My cock flexes, leaking precum into my boxers at the thought of throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her to my bedroom like some kind of caveman. Even the slight pressure of my own hand against my shaft has my balls aching; I can think of at least three places they'd like to unload, all somewhere in the vicinity of the girl in front of me.

I've never reacted this intensely to a woman I've just met. The fact that I haven't dated in over three years could explain it, but I know it's more than that. It's Teagan. She arouses something in me, an all-consuming need to protect and defend.

She meets my gaze straight on for the first time. My resolve cracks like thin ice over deep water; one more step from either of us and we'll both go down.

There'll be no stopping me from ripping those little shorts off and putting my mouth on her.

I cage my tongue behind my teeth and remind myself that I can't just throw her on the bed and claim her. Not with my sister waiting downstairs with the birthday cake.

That reminds me: yesterday was Teagan's birthday. She's eighteen years old.

Thank the fucking Lord she didn't show up at my house two days ago.

"You're welcome," I tell her.

Walking away from her is like slowly ripping off a Band Aid and pulling out hair. Still, I force my feet to move in the direction of the open door, away from Teagan's tight body and angelic face.

At the last second, I glance back to tell her, "Happy birthday."

Her mouth twitches at the corners like she's trying to remember how to smile.

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