



Castle's Cards

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Description: Loving my billionaire boss should have been easy. But I had other things on my mind and he wasn't one of them.

My life is a roller coaster as I struggle to raise my kid sister, pay our mounting bills and deal with having our father in jail for murder. The last thing I need is to fall in love with a man old enough to be my dad.

Carter is all wrong for me, yet he is desperate for a future together and wants to claim me as his own.

When his hidden world and my own cravings collide, his vulnerability and raw sexuality consume me.

His strong arms, soft mouth, rigid abs, and rock hard manhood leave me wet and panting.

As the heat between us reaches a fever pitch, a surprising twist throws everything into chaos.

When I discover two little pink lines, I finally give in to my deepest feelings and admit that we must do whatever is necessary in order to be together.

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Chapter One

Carter

“Well, Castle, you gonna fold?”

The voice is nasally and irritating. I’ve learned to ignore the other players when it comes to making decisions about my play. They can’t psych me out if I’m not listening to them.

My heart pounds with anticipation as I sit in the dimly lit room. The air is thick with the scent of cigars and whiskey, the tension broken up only by the clinking of poker chips and the occasional scrape of a chair on the floor. The cards feel heavy in my hands, and cause a smile to try to surface. Given my experience in the poker tournament world, I manage to keep it from appearing on my face, retaining my impassive countenance.

My brother Court stands at the head of the table, his eyes scanning the room with a mix of authority and amusement, but I can’t tell if it’s because of the success of his club or my satisfied expression. He always manages to keep my life exciting, letting me hold these poker tournaments at his club. The stakes are high, the tension palpable, and I can’t help but feel a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“Well, brother, what do you think?” I ask him, shooting him a grin.

Court shakes his head.

“I think you’re too damn happy with yourself, Carter.”

“No such thing,” I tell him, letting out a small chuckle. I meet and raise the current bet and the other players in the hand fold their cards.

As the new cards are dealt, I study my opponents, trying to read their expressions for any signs of weakness. Among them is Victor, a burly man with a permanent scowl etched on his face. He’s been playing the poker circuit for almost as long as I have, and he’s good. Suspiciously good. Usually I hold back my thoughts, but tonight the air feels electric. I don’t want to keep them to myself.

"Hey, Victor," I say, a hint of mischief making itself evident in my tone. "You wouldn't happen to be cheating, would you?"

The room falls silent, all eyes turning towards us. Victor's face contorts with anger, his fists clenching at his sides. His round, puffy cheeks first turn red and then unsightly purple.

“You better watch your mouth, Castle, or you’re gonna lose a few teeth,” Victor says. The man to his right, the one with the nasally voice, looks cowed.

“I’d look better than you even if I didn’t have a single tooth left in my mouth.”

Without a word, the big man lunges across the table, spittle flying from his mouth as his fist connects with my jaw in a swift, decisive blow.

The impact sends me sprawling backward, my chair crashing to the floor. Pain shoots through my face, but I can't help but find the situation amusing. It’s just one of my talents. The rush of adrenaline that surges through me heightens my senses and makes me feel alive.

I chuckle, wiping the blood from my split lip with the back of my hand as I get up from where I'd fallen.

"Well, that's one way to spice things up." My voice is tinged with a mix of amusement and defiance.

"You're a little bastard." Victor sneers as he regards me.

"Little? Victor, I'm six foot two." I shake my head. "We can't all be too large to ride a common roller coaster, now can we?"

Court approaches, threads of anger and concern lighting up his face.

"You all right, Carter?"

I give him a reassuring smile, my eyes still fixed on Victor.

"I'm fine. Just a little love tap, that's all."

"Then shut up and stop taunting him."

Victor glares at me, his chest heaving with anger.

"You won't think this is funny when I shove your teeth down your throat."

"I probably would. It's all part of the game, isn't it, big guy? The thrill, the risk, the unexpected. It's what makes life interesting. But I don't suppose you'd understand that. That's why you cheat."

Victor's face contorts with rage, his fists clenching even tighter. He lunges at me again, but this time, I'm ready. I dodge his punch with a quick sidestep, my reflexes

honed by years of living on the edge.

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“I’m not cheating!” Victor roars.

The room erupts into chaos as the other players scramble to separate us. The air crackles with a mix of fear and excitement. I can't help but revel in the chaos, the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins like a drug.

My brother yanks me back.

“What the hell are you doing, Carter?”

“What does it look like?” I grin. “I’m about to kick this guy's ass.”

Victor springs toward me but is unable to break through the people separating us. I smirk at him and he snarls. I can’t help but laugh.

Two men lead Victor away, and as the commotion dies down, Court pulls me aside.

"Carter, you need to be careful." His voice is blended with brotherly love and annoyance. "Victor can be dangerous."

I shrug, my heart still pounding from the thrill of the fight.

"No, he has friends in high places. That doesn’t make him dangerous. Sometimes, you have to take risks, even if it means getting punched in the face. It's what makes life worth living."

"Did your risk pay off? There’s a difference between taking a risk and starting a fight

needlessly. I don't want to hear that you've been found in a ditch one day. You need to act less recklessly and, frankly, I have the reputation of the club and its other guests to consider. This is not the place for bar room brawls."

My brother has a way of making me feel so much younger than he is even though there's only a few years between us. Court has had such a different life than I have had, though. He doesn't understand.

I give my brother a wry grin, my adrenaline-fueled bravado still coursing through my veins.

"No promises here. Life's too short to play it safe."

"How are we related?" Court finally grins, the danger officially having passed. He points to my busted lip that throbs with pain. "You need to get that looked at."

"I'll put some ice on it if you have some."

"No, you won't. Cassie just hired someone with some medical experience. I think she insisted we needed someone to patch you up on poker nights."

I chuckle.

"Tell her to stop worrying about me. She's got her hands full with the twins."

"Just go see Addison. She's the new tourney hostess – so she actually works for you, seeing as how you put together the poker tournaments here. Oh, and you're welcome. I knew you'd put off hiring forever if I didn't step in. Now, I have to clean up the mess you made."

"Need a mop?" I envision the woman he's sending me to; a round and angry old

nurse with cards in one pocket and a bottle of Tylenol in the other.

Court rolls his eyes.

“She’s in the back, restocking the shelves while another girl is out on maternity leave.”

I blow out a breath as I watch my brother walk over to Victor, attempting to smooth things over with him. But by the way Victor tosses the cards across the table and stomps out the door, he won’t be coming back any time soon.

“You win some, you lose some,” I mutter.

Shreds of moonlight flood from the open windows, occasionally falling over me as I make my way to the back, my body protesting with pain. I push open the door gently.

“This area is for employees only,” a friendly yet stern voice calls out. She sounds a little young to be the grouchy old nurse I imagined.

“I have a backstage pass.”

“You have a...what?”

I hear footsteps as the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen in my life comes around the corner. Long, tanned legs come out of a short black skirt, a long red v-neck amplifying her modest bosom. A tumble of dark, shiny waves falls down her back, and her bright, pretty hazel eyes are intensified by a smatter of freckles spread across her heart-shaped face. She must be at least twenty years younger than me.

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“Wow. You’re the nurse?”

“I’m not a nurse.” Her brows pull together.

“Are you Addison?” I ask her, stepping a little closer. “The new poker hostess?”

She nods.

“Call me Addy. What happened to your lip?”

“You think this looks bad, you should see the other guy.” I smirk.

“You’re Mr. Castle’s brother, aren’t you?”

“I am. Carter Castle, at your disposal. Am I what you expected?” A smooth grin spreads across my face. She truly is beautiful.

“I suppose the fact that you have a split lip might in fact line up with Cassie’s description of you. How did she put it? ‘Can’t go a night without causing trouble.’”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Your bedside manner needs some work, sweetheart. Court isn’t going to let me back out there without some kind of patch job and I’m not ready to call it quits.”

“My experience goes as far as a first aid class I took last year.

“That’s it? That’s your medical expertise? Well, Cassie certainly has high standards, as evidenced by the fact that she married my brother.” The words are imbued with a sarcastic tone.

“Do you want my help or not?” Addy snaps and scrunches her nose. It’s oddly attractive on her. “Because otherwise I’d like to get back to work.”

“All right, darling, all right, you’re the boss. How do you want me?”

“What?”

Her cheeks pink up and she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I smirk inwardly at her embarrassment.

“Do you have a first aid kit or something?”

“No, I was planning to make a paste out of grass and cheap liquor.” She gestures for me to follow her as she turns and heads deeper into the store room.

“Patch me up, Dr. Quinn.” I follow her.

A small burst of laughter escapes her. The laugh sends a strange warmth over my body. I can’t help my eyes from sinking to her ass as she walks away. When she turns around she catches me. I give her a wink.

Addy rolls her eyes as she leads me out of the alternate store room exit. The hallway we’re in is familiar and it’s not long until we arrive at the little apartment above the club. It is just as I remembered it to be, though more furniture has been added. And bookshelves. It looks like someone turned it into a miniature library.

“Sit down in that chair over there,” Addy points.

I do as she tells me, sitting in one of the plush chairs that faces a TV. She digs around inside a small cabinet and makes a triumphant noise when she finds what she's looking for. She walks back over to me, first aid kit in her hands.

“Why are we in here?”

“We're in here because it's quiet. Now, lift your chin.”

Thin, warm fingers brush under my jaw and I watch Addy as she stands in front of me, almost between my legs. I want to pull her into my lap and feel her body against mine but I don't reach for her.

“How did you get hired? I didn't know Court was going to hire someone to work the tournaments – that was supposed to be my job since I'm the poker expert who brought the game into the club in the first place.”

Seeing her dismay, as if she thought I was criticizing her hire, I clarified. “Not that I have a problem with Court usurping my authority in the matter. I'm grateful that he, or Cassie, anyway, found you. You look like you will fit the bill quite well, and I am, if I do say so myself, a great boss,” I say, looking her up and down very appreciatively, definitely liking what I see.

“I went to school with Cassie a few years ago and she offered me the job,” Addy says with a shrug as her cheeks and chest pink up again as she feels my sexual gaze sweep over her.

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“Huh, you must be special, then.”

Once again, Addy ignores me, and I can't help but find it endearing. Most women are all over me and it's easy to charm their pants right off. She seems to want nothing to do with me. I love a challenge.

“Quit leering at me and behave yourself. Now, care to explain why you treat the poker table like a fight club?” Addy asks, pressing a cold pack against my cheek.

“Ow.” I take the ice pack from her, our hands brushing in the process. She pulls her hand away quickly. “I don't treat it like a fight club. I just like things to be exciting. Don't you like living on the edge?”

“Of what? My grave? No thanks. I'm good with being boring.”

Addy steps back, I'm assuming to admire her handiwork.

“I bet you're anything but boring. Beautiful women rarely are.” I smirk. Addy frowns and rolls her eyes.

“The girls here talk about you, you know. You have a reputation. And I do not ever, under any circumstances, fool around with the boss – just so you know – particularly one old enough to be my father.”

“Hey, I'm not that old. And just what is it the girls here say about me?”

Addy presses gentle fingers against my lip, swiping a balm across the crack there.

“They say you’re charming and that you leave a trail of broken hearts wherever you go. Apparently the trail is a very long one, too.”

“When I meet The One, that trail won’t matter.”

“How will you know when you meet The One if you treat all women the same?”

“Who says I treat them all the same?”

“Every woman I’ve talked to has the same story about you: Flirt, dinner, sex, never call again.”

“I don’t appreciate the oversimplification of my romantic life. There’s much more to it than that.”

“Sure there is.”

“Let me take you out sometime and you’ll see.” I let my hand rest on her hip. “I know a great steak place downtown.”

Addy grabs my hand and drops it from where it was resting, but the hint of a smile plays on her lips.

“I don’t think fraternizing with the boss would go over very well with Cassie.”

“Fraternizing is my middle name.”

“Your parents must have hated you.”

She sighs but I can tell I’m making progress, chipping away at her icy exterior. Something about her feels familiar, like I’ve met her before.

“I was the favorite son.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course it is. Just don’t ask my brothers.” A real laugh escapes her this time. It’s warm and vibrant, filling the small space with joy. “What about you? I’m sure your parents loved you.”

“Hmm...I don’t think Tom and Rhonda Hughes had a favorite child.” A sad expression spreads across her face. There’s clearly a story there. What is it?

“Addy Hughes, huh. That’s your name?”

“Yeah, why?” Addy raises her brows.

My eyes roll over her body again, appraising and liking her tall and willowy figure. She notices me do so but doesn’t say anything.

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“I feel like I know that name from somewhere.”

“It’s a common name. No doubt you’ve met a dozen women with the last name Hughes.”

“I know lots of women, but none of them like you,” I taunt her suggestively.

She smiles for a moment before looking away. She must feel the spark between us, too.

“You’re all set. You can go back to your bar brawl now.”

“I don’t know, I think I like it back in the shelves. Maybe I’ll stay for a while.”

“The only way you’re staying back here is if I’m putting you to work.”

I laugh as I follow her into the hallway. She turns off into the store room and I continue on to the club floor, the wheels in my mind turning.

Then the thought comes to me. Her father’s name: Tom Hughes.

The man who was sentenced to prison for life.

For murder.

Chapter Two

Addy

Great. This is exactly what I need on a Friday.

“A dead battery? Seriously,” I mutter out loud.

“Who are you talking to? You sound like a crazy person,” Izzy asks from behind me.

Aren’t little sisters a joy?

“I’m talking to whoever is responsible for my dead car battery.”

“So you are talking to yourself.” I narrow my eyes at her and she points to the car.

“You left your lights on. How am I supposed to get to school?”

“There’s this super cool thing that they invented. I think it’s called the bus?” I slam the door and sigh.

“The bus? It’s my senior year. Taking the bus would be social suicide.” Izzy crosses her arms and I sigh heavily.

“If you don’t like it, you can go and live with Mom in Nevada,” I snap.

Izzy pouts, looking so much like Dad that it’s jarring. Guilt flows through me.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. But there’s nothing I can do about the bus situation right now. I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

“Well, what are you going to do?” my little sister replies, shoving her backpack higher onto her shoulder. “You can’t walk all the way to work. It’s too far.”

I can't help but snort.

“Being the hostess of poker tournaments doesn't make me Princess Diana. Besides, I just started this week. Tonight is my first real tourney.”

“Exactly, they should send a car for you.” Izzy grins.

My mind, without my permission, jumps straight to Carter Castle and his gorgeouseverything. Thinking about him makes me feel light-headed and out of sorts. But I can't be involved with him. I get the feeling he'll lead me to trouble.

“All right, let's just get walking. You don't want to miss the school bus.” I bump her shoulder affectionately and laugh. “Actually, you probably do want to, but I'm not going to let you.”

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I lock the apartment door and we start down the sidewalk with Izzy chatting animatedly about whatever drama is happening between her friends.

She's the kind of person who talks and talks without needing an answer, so I'm free to let my thoughts wander to Carter. The man is too good looking to be real. All that dark, silver-struck hair and those summer-green eyes. I imagine the grass swaying in the breeze and the smell of a thunderstorm in the air, churning the sky into a swirl of emerald clouds.

"This is the stop," Izzy's voice breaks me out of my thoughts. "Hello? Earth to my uncool sister?"

Izzy snaps her fingers in front of my face.

"What?" I ask her, blinking. "Did you say something?"

"I'm going to school. Don't daydream your way into the street, big sister. I need you to pay for my club dues at the equestrian center."

"I have the best sister. It feels so good to know how much you care about me," I say sarcastically. The bus rolls up and opens its doors.

"I know you do. Have you talked to Mom?"

"No, and I don't plan to."

"Fair enough." Izzy gives me a sad grin before she climbs on the school bus and I

wave her off.

“Cut her some slack,” she calls through an open window as the bus drives away.

My chest feels heavy yet hollow when I think of my mother. It’s been at least a year since I’ve seen her in person. As I walk, the sound of a substantial engine revs as an expensive car pulls up beside me. It’s a gleaming 1967 Mustang with candy red paint. It’s a car that’s been designed to garner attention, and it’s doing the job.

“Women with legs like yours shouldn’t have to walk around town,” calls a familiar voice.

“How do you think I got these legs then?” I approach the Mustang.

Carter Castle leans out of the driver’s side window, his crooked grin shining. He lowers his sunglasses and looks me up and down. His shirt is unbuttoned just enough to see his dark chest hair. He looks like a rogue, reminiscent of a swashbuckling pirate, swindling people and making women swoon. The split lip has only healed slightly, and somehow it adds to his attractiveness.

“I know you’re too young to have a teenager. So what are you doing walking one to the bus stop?”

“My sister. Look, I really need to be getting to the club. I’m going to be late.”

“No, you’re not. Don’t be ridiculous. It’s 8:00 in the morning and your shift doesn’t start until 3:00. I’m sure as hell not letting you walk around Chicago on your own. Get in the car, Addy.”

“Are you a serial killer?” I ask him, raising an eyebrow. “This feels like a trap.”

Carter grins, shaking his head. “Would a serial killer buy you breakfast?”

“I can’t get breakfast, I have things to do today,” I respond even though I get in the car with him. The interior smells like him, the scent of leather and smoke wrapping around me.

“You can take time for breakfast and you know it,” he says, yawning.

I can’t believe that I’m in the car with a man I barely know, which is something I would never normally consider doing, but there’s something between Carter and me that makes me feel like doing things I normally wouldn’t. It’s like an invisible string between us that I noticed when we first met. And I don’t think it’s just because he’s good-looking and undeniably hot even if he is a lot older than I am.

“Fine,” I relent. “I suppose I am hungry.

“So, you don’t have a car?”

“I have a car. It’s just horrifically unreliable. The battery died this morning.”

“I’ll get a mechanic out for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can take care of it myself.”

“I’m sure you can, but why would you when I’m offering? After everything you’ve been through—”

I turn to look at him, confused.

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“Everything I’ve been through? What is that supposed to mean?”

Carter doesn’t say anything and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Nothing. There’s the diner.” He gets out and comes around the car.

I get out, accidentally bumping the door into him.

“Oh, sorry,” I mutter, a blush rising to my cheek. Carter smiles, seemingly amused.

“I was going to get that for you.”

“Thank you, but I’m more than capable of opening my own car door.”

“Well, Miss Independent, would you mind if I at least opened the door to the diner for you?” Carter grins as we approach the diner.

“That would be perfectly fine.”

Carter grabs the front door and holds it open.

As we walk into the bustling diner the smell of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon fills the air. My nerves are comforted by the sound of chatter and the clinking of plates.

He smiles and grabs my hand as he leads me to a booth in the corner. It surprises me when I slide into one side and he slides in next to me. I’ve never sat next to someone

in a booth before.

“Your lip looks a bit less awful than it did yesterday.” I stare at his mouth.

"Oh, thank you, Addy. It's rare that I receive such a nice compliment."

I let out a chuckle.

“What can I say? I aim to please.”

He laughs, a deep, melodic sound that sends shivers down my spine.

"If pleasing is your goal, I have other ways that I prefer it to be done." His eyes darken as they meet mine. I lick my lips and pick up the menu, busying myself looking at the food. "What's good here?"

Carter leans back, studying the menu with a thoughtful expression.

"Probably scrambled eggs and bacon with a side of toast."

I glance at the menu, searching it before I make up my mind.

"I'll have just a stack of buttermilk pancakes, I think. With extra syrup."

Carter raises an eyebrow, a mischievous grin playing on his lips.

"Extra syrup, huh? Are you trying to sweeten up?"

I laugh, a sound that bubbles up from deep within me.

"Maybe I am," I reply flirtatiously.

“No need to sweeten up. You’re sweet enough already and it makes me want to take care of you,” Carter gives me an easy smile and my heart flutters.

No one has ever wanted to take care of me before.

Growing up, the absence of my father affected me more than I could explain to anyone. He should have been there for me, but instead he was like a ghost, only spoken about behind closed doors and in whispered conversations.

I spent countless nights staring at the ceiling, wondering why he chose to walk away, leaving behind a shattered family. The questions would swirl in my mind, like a tempestuous storm, but the answers remained elusive, hidden in the depths of silence.

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His absence touched every part of my life. It was in the moments when I needed guidance, a steady hand to hold, that I felt his absence the most. With my mother being more concerned with herself than with me or Izzy, the milestones that should have been celebrated together became solitary victories, tinged with a bittersweet ache.

My father's absence is part of the reason why I resist falling in love. It left me with a lingering fear of abandonment, a constant worry that those I care about will also choose to leave. I'll never be hurt that way again.

But amidst the pain, there is also strength. With his leaving I learned to be resilient and rely on myself. I became independent and self-sufficient. The one everyone turns to in times of need.

Yet I would give everything to have my father with me.

But his absence doesn't define me. It is a part of my story, but it does not dictate my life. I am more than the void he left behind. I am everything that's happened since.

Carter and I continue to banter throughout breakfast, the conversation flowing effortlessly between us.

"Can I ask about why you have her? Your sister, I mean," Carter looks at me and I take a breath. Looks like the easy, fun conversation is over. He wants to know the heavy stuff.

"It's okay to ask. The story isn't fancy. Our mom decided to move to Nevada with

her new husband and Izzy wanted to finish out high school here. So she lives with me."

Carter's expression softens, his eyes filling with empathy.

"That can't be easy to deal with, raising a teenager on your own. How old is Izzy?"

I sigh as my gaze shifts to the window.

"She's seventeen. It's not easy trying to balance work and take care of her. But we manage well enough. We have our own little apartment, and I do everything I can to make sure she's happy. College is another story altogether. I don't even want to think about how I'll pay for it."

"You're doing an incredible job, Addy. I admire your strength and dedication. There aren't many people who would take on their sibling at your age."

I smile.

"Thank you, Carter. I appreciate you saying that."

The conversation is interrupted by the waitress bringing our food. We both dig into our food, and I'm pleasantly surprised by how tasty it is.

After we finish our breakfast, the waitress drops off the bill and Carter picks it up. I pull out my wallet and grab some bills.

"Whoa, whoa. This is my treat,' Carter says.

"I can pay for my portion."

"I'm sure you can. Consider it a thank you for patching me up yesterday." He slips the card in the bill folder and holds it up for the waitress.

Carter's phone buzzes in his pocket.

"Yeah?" Carter answers. He looks at his nails as the person on the other side of the call speaks. "Tell him that he can only come if he doesn't cheat. I'll be watching."

He grins as he hangs up the phone.

"Cheat?" I ask.

Carter laughs.

"Yeah. Victor, the guy who did this to me," Carter points to his lip. "Wants to join tonight's game."

"He was cheating?" It's surprising that Court would allow a cheater to participate in games at his club. Carter shrugs.

"That may have just been said to get under his skin."

I roll my eyes but can't stop the smiling from spreading across my face.

Carter is something else entirely.

Chapter Three

Carter

I'm sitting in a chair across from Court's desk, discussing Victor.

"I've told Victor that he can come back tonight. Do you think you can manage not to antagonize him for one night?" Court eyes me.

"He was cheating, Court, what was I supposed to do?" I ask, watching the cars pass by the window. "I don't know if today is the right day to let him back. It's Addy's first night working a tournament.

"What does it being Addy's first night have to do with anything? I'm trying to run a business here, and there's no proof of him cheating last night. The only person who saw anything is you, and considering how much trouble you caused last time you said someone was 'cheating' I'm not overly inclined to simply take your word for it."

Court looks at me, clearly remembering the problem we had with Rhys Barker.

"Whatever. So Rhys wasn't cheating. He was an asshole, anyway. But Victor is."

"It's not up to you to decide. If you continue to cause problems here I'll have to ban you, which is something I really don't want to do. So clean up your act. Can you do that?"

I cross my arms and make a face at him.

“Sure.”

I won't intentionally cause problems. Not on Addy's first night. She deserves this to go well since she's in charge of running the tourney.

The dimly lit room is filled with the hushed murmurs of anticipation as the high-stakes poker game commences. The weight of every card in my hand highlights their importance, each card the key to my victory or defeat. Addy, the woman who is capturing my heart, stands in the center of it all, determination on her face. She is the hostess of this poker tournament, and her presence alone adds an electric energy to the atmosphere.

As the game progresses, I find myself stealing glances at Addy whenever I can. Her radiant smile, and the way her eyes light up when she moves from table to table, it all mesmerizes me. All of the men here follow her every move and the soft swing of her hips and glimmering hair.

Even though I want to ignore them, I can't help watching the way she captures their attention. The way their eyes linger a little too long, their gazes filled with a mix of desire and curiosity. It's as if they can't resist the magnetic pull she exudes, drawing them in like moths to a flame. And I can't blame them, not really.

Addy is a force to be reckoned with, a woman who effortlessly commands attention wherever she goes. The way they watch her bothers me; there's something possessive in their eyes, a hunger that goes beyond mere attraction. It's as if they want to claim her, to possess her in every sense of the word. And it infuriates me because I want to be the one who claims her, who possesses her heart and soul.

I've watched all day as the men in the club try to impress her, vying for her attention with their flashy gestures and empty promises. They think they can win her over with material possessions and superficial charm.

I have more to offer than material things. I sense we already have a deep connection, genuine moments of vulnerability that she craves. These men don't impress her. I can tell from the frown on her face.

But still, I can't shake the feeling of unease when I see those other men looking at her. It's a constant battle between my desire to protect her and my fear of losing her before she's even mine. I want to shield her from their predatory gazes, to save her from the world that sees her as nothing more than an object of desire. Yet, I also know that she is more than capable of taking care of herself, of making her own choices.

It takes everything within me to remind myself that she is not an object to be won or possessed. She is a person, with her own thoughts, dreams, and desires. And if she chooses someone else, I have to respect that. It's not easy, though. The thought of her in someone else's arms, someone else's heart, is enough to make my blood boil.

I don't even have a right to feel that way. All I can do is hope that she knows what's best for herself. That she can see through the superficiality of these men, and find a person who truly understands and appreciates her. And if that person happens to be me, then I'll consider myself the luckiest man alive. But if it's not, then I'll have to find a way to accept it, to let go of my possessive desires and wish her nothing but happiness.

My attention is abruptly diverted as Victor enters the room. Addy smiles pleasantly, not knowing who Victor is. My mouth still aches from his punch, but my bravado from yesterday seems to be all dried up.

Now, I can only feel the strong need to keep Addy safe. Victor is a man who isn't afraid to lash out. The game continues, moving forward, and I'm watching Victor. With Addy here, I want to put some space between the two of them. Despite my telling Addy that Victor didn't cheat, I did catch him once. I didn't tell Court, even though I know I should have.

“Howdy, little lady. I’d like to join this game.” Victor grins at Addy, his mustache moving with every word.

“Of course. Name?”

“Victor Siegle.”

I watch Addy’s eyes alert, realizing who she’s talking to. She nods and writes his name down.

A few rounds are played, and I watch Addy’s eyes slide to Victor as she draws loser to the table at which he’s playing. She narrows her eyes at him and calls Cade over to his table.

“Stop play, please” she says to the dealer. All of the players look up at her.

“Mr.Siegle. Turn over your cards, please.”

“What? Why?” he asks, his tone becoming belligerent.

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“I saw you switch a card in your hand for a different one in your sleeve.”

“Are you accusing me of cheating?” Victor stands up, looming over Addy with intimidation. To her credit she doesn’t flinch.

“It’s not an accusation. It’s a fact. I saw it clear as day.”

“Listen, you little bitch. I don’t know what you think you saw, but I did not cheat!”

“Watch your mouth.” I stand up.

“Why don’t you watch yours, Castle? That busted lip needs some attention.”

“You need to leave the club, Mr. Siegel. You are no longer welcome here,” Addy says. Cade steps closer to the table to assist Victor’s exit if it becomes necessary.

Victor lunges towards her. Without a second thought, I leap from my seat, my fists clenched, and a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

"Get away from her!" My fist connects with Victor’s side. He turns, directing his attention away from Addy and toward me.

I charge towards him, my fists swinging furiously. They connect with Victor’s face, even as he brings his arms up to shield himself. My brother, Cade, being in charge of club security, moves in to break up our fight. I dodge his grip, relentless in my anger at Victor. Last night I had no reason to continue the fight. Tonight I’m driven by my desire to protect Addy.

I get in two or three punches before Cade can stop me and I find myself standing over a bloody Victor. His face is bruised and tears are flowing freely down his cheeks. My breathing is ragged as Addy reaches out and touches my arm lightly.

“Carter?” she whispers.

I reach out and touch her cheek, my hand trembling with a mixture of adrenaline and affection.

"I would do anything for you. Anything to keep you safe. I won't let anything happen to you."

“All right, get the hell out, Victor,” Court storms into the room. “Get out and don't come back. You are no longer welcome in the Castle Club.”

I lean against the edge of the bar, dizziness spreading over me from the adrenaline. The rest of the players start to leave the club but Victor sits up, wiping his face.

“Me leave?” Victor shouts, blood spraying from his mouth. “Is this a joke?! Your brother could have killed me!”

Court glances over to me, smoothing down his black suit. He adjusts his ring, letting out a sigh. When he looks back up, his eyes are steely.

“I am asking you as nicely as possible to leave Castle Club” my brother tells him. “You were caught cheating and that is never acceptable. Even if I was willing to turn a blind eye to that, you tried to attack my hostess, which is unforgivable. You can leave on your own or you can be escorted out by Cade.”

Court nods toward our brother. He's big and burly, someone that even a professional body builder would think twice about mixing it up with.

Victor turns his attention to Addy. The mention of my other brother makes him twitch.

“Whatever. Who wants to play at this shitty club anyway?” Victor turns and stumbles out the door, grumbling under his breath.

I grab Addy’s hand and lead her through a door labeled Employees Only. Once we’re alone I turn to her.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Are you okay?” I shoot back. “You’re the one he was lunging at.”

Addy shrugs.

“It’s not a big deal. He never touched me.”

We’re quiet for a moment, staring into each other's eyes.

“I know about your dad,” I say quietly.

Addy’s breath hitches as her eyes widen in surprise.

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“He did what he did to protect my mom,” she says, her voice going small.

“The man he killed was attacking your mother?” I whisper, pressing my forehead to hers.

She nods.

“He shot him. He doesn’t have any regrets. He told me.”

“Does your sister know?”

“She knows. I had to tell her. Izzy isn’t the kind of kid you can hide things from.”

“Your father was doing the right thing. I think I would have killed Victor if he had hurt you.”

“I don’t blame him for protecting my mom. I blame him for breaking up our family. My mom was never the same.”

“Addy.” My breath mingles with hers.

“Hmm?” Her little sound goes straight to my groin, making me feel a passion that completely ignites within me.

I can't help but find myself lost in thoughts, consumed by the idea of keeping her safe. Addy, the woman who has captured my heart, her very presence burns a fire within my being. It's as if the universe has conspired to bring us together, and now, I

am left with the overwhelming responsibility of protecting her.

My mouth presses against Addy's. There's a release within me, something that was waiting for this moment that simply unsnaps.

Her lips are soft and fit perfectly against mine. I press my body against hers and push my tongue into her mouth. The shadows flicker across her face as I kiss her neck and she lets out a soft, wanting sound. Her breasts strain against her shirt and I can't ignore the thought that I want to rip it away.

"Carter," she whispers, causing my heart to ignite.

Chapter Four

Addy

Carter's sprawling mansion sits at the crest of the hill. The giant white stones shine brightly in the moonlight, soft lighting coming from within.

"What do you think?" Carter asks from the driver seat.

"I think my sister is going to be pissed at me. She hates when I order take-out for her. She prefers that we eat at home together."

"She sounds like a handful."

"We're just close. She's been through a lot."

"You sure you don't want me to take you home?" Carter asks, looking at me with sincerity. Little birds flutter in my stomach. I shake my head.

“I’m sure. She’s seventeen; I don’t need to cater to her every whim.”

“Exactly, although my motives are purely selfish. I want nothing more than to spend this time with you.”

“I’ll have to go home first thing in the morning, though.”

I text Izzy, stating that I’ll be staying overnight with a friend and that Jorge, our next door neighbor, will be checking in on her.

“She’ll love the car, though. Our dad used to work on cars like this.”

“You both are very strong.” Carter glances over as we get out of the car and make our way up the cobblestone drive to the front door.

“We’re trying.”

Carter takes my hand and kisses it lightly.

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The house glows with golden warmth and it looks so much more approachable now that we're getting closer to it. With wings that fan out on each side and stones stacked to form high towers, it almost looks like a castle. I swallow hard as I look up at it.

The door opens immediately, and someone who must be a housekeeper or something answers the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Castle. Would you like a pot of coffee put on for you and your friend?"

"That sounds perfect, thank you," he tells the young woman easily, giving her a kind smile. I like this soft side of him. The one that treats people with kindness and doesn't start fights at poker clubs.

"Are we going to your room?" I ask and Carter glances back at me, grinning.

"I'll give you a tour later, I guess." Carter leads me up the dark wood stairs to the second floor.

Time seems to freeze for a moment as if I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop and realize that this is just a dream. But that probably won't happen, because I'm really with Carter Castle in his house. He protected me earlier and I want to show him how I feel. I want him to hold me through the night and I want his body molded to mine.

"Wow, this room is as big as my entire apartment," I breathe as Carter leads me into his room.

The ceilings are high, with a glass chandelier hanging from the center. The huge four-poster king bed is neatly made up with a velvet green comforter the same shade of green as Carter's eyes. His silver-touched hair glitters in the moonlight streaming from the window. Being here is so much better than being in that little alcove behind the club, but I would have been fine there, too. I want this man so badly that I don't even care where we are as long as we're together.

"Looks very comfortable," I murmur, heading for his bed. I splay out on the bed, looking at Carter seductively.

"It's too big for just me. And too cold."

Carter climbs in next to me. He reaches out, gently unbuttoning the silky shirt I'm wearing and tossing it to the floor.

He lets out a sharp breath and moves a hand onto my breast, squeezing softly through my bra. I know it doesn't make much sense. We hardly know each other, but I'm so tired of waiting -- I feel as if I have been waiting my whole life to be with Carter. Something has been building since the moment we met and I want to set it free between us. I know he feels it, too.

He presses a kiss to my ear and rubs his smooth thumb gently over my nipple, slow and soft at first, but then harder against my skin. I let out a small moan.

"Carter, please," I whisper and even I can hear the want in my own voice. "Please."

The rush and smoothness of fabric against bare skin makes me aware of the movement of his body as he slides his muscled arm from beneath my neck to tuck my dark hair behind my ear, clearing the way for his open-mouthed kisses that begin to feel more and more frantic. Being with him feels like getting air again after holding my breath for a long time. I need this man and he seems to need me just as much.

“You’re so damn beautiful.” Carter murmurs.

I feel myself growing more and more needy, and I ache for his fingers and whatever else he will give me. I feel him suck a mark into my shoulder and I gasp out loud.

With a bit of quick-moving and agile hands, Carter pulls my bra off, where I’m completely happy to let it just fall onto the expensive rug that waits on the polished floorboards. The small skirt I’m wearing is pulled tight against my legs and I want to take it off. My fingers tremble with my excitement as I try to pull down my black tights. Carter grins against my neck when he feels me trying, rubbing his hand over my hip. His hand smooths down my thigh, scraping the soft fabric of the sheer tights.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, bringing his hand under my skirt and tugging my tights down and away. His fingers brush against my lacy panties and he groans in my ear.

He rubs a hand over my belly and I shiver at the gentle press of his touch. I push my body against him once again and he groans, the deep growl of his voice making me feel hot and feverish all over. Carter slides his hand down my body to tuck it inside of my tight skirt, touching me gently and letting me move against his hand. I can’t help but moan at his touch. He uses his other hand to pull my panties down.

“Carter—” I start, but I’m cut off by a little whine of pleasure and surprise as he presses two fingers inside me.

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure what to do,” I tell him, a little embarrassed but too aroused to care very much at all. I have only ever been with one man, and it was clumsy and forgettable. We were young and inexperienced, which didn’t make for an enjoyable time for either of us. The pleasure building in my belly indicates that Carter is neither of those

things, and I don't know how to reciprocate.

"Don't worry. I'll show you everything you need to know. Just let me take care of you first," Carter's green eyes shine with excitement.

Carter pumps his fingers in and out gently, slick with my wet heat, curling his body against mine on the smooth, soft sheets. He is warm and heavy against me, holding me close to him.

With my other hand, I move to pull down my tight, black skirt, but Carter stops me with a gentle touch. I'm bare under the skirt and his fingers touch me. My modest breasts bounce gently as I move and he watches them, looking completely aroused.

"I want to have you with the skirt on," he murmurs in a low voice, rubbing a hand over my bare ass under the skirt. He squeezes and holds me like I belong to him completely.

I suck in a breath, overwhelmed and aching with want for this man. I'm addicted to him like he's a drug I can't get enough of. Every moment with him is like torture in the best possible sense.

Carter props himself up with one arm and seals his mouth over mine as he holds himself over me, swallowing my gasps and moans of pleasure until I can barely take it anymore. I press my head back against his strong shoulder, crying out in a wave of aching pleasure. He feels so strong and capable behind me, holding me close.

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“Oh, Carter, yes, yes” I cry out as he touches me, bringing me to my climax.

“Addy, baby,” he whispers and nudges my cheek with his nose before pressing his lips to my neck as his hard length presses into me.

“Carter,” I whisper, my breath catching in my throat as he pulls his fingers from inside me. I mourn the loss of them, wanting nothing but more of him touching me.

“What do you want?” Carter asks, running his lips along the skin of my neck and shoulder. He moves his hips against mine in an extremely amazing and distracting manner.

“I want you inside me,” I whisper. In one quick move, Carter pulls me up off of the bed and into his strong arms. His eyes blaze brightly and his skin is warm against mine, but he’s still wearing too many clothes.

Without another thought, I pop the button of his trousers, wrapping a hand around his cock and squeezing it gently. He sucks in a breath, running his hand through my dark hair and kissing me deeply before shoving his tongue in my mouth. Then Carter gently shoves me back onto the bed and pushes my little skirt up to my belly. The cool air from the room brushes against my warmth.

He buries his face between my thighs as if he belongs there. Licking and sucking on my sweet spot. I gasp when he lifts away, pushing his pants down his thighs before pushing his length inside of me. It throbs against my walls and I moan at the feeling.

“Addy,” he says sharply, his face changing as he buries himself deep inside of me.

I arch my body into his, my hips meeting his. Carter thrusts rhythmically, peppering my shoulder with kisses. I push my hips up to his with every thrust, matching his movements perfectly.

“I want you to come while I’m inside you,” he whispers in my ear. I let out a soft moan. “I want to feel it, baby.”

His words stir up the fire inside of me, the heat of my pleasure dripping from me. I can feel the heavy want building in my body until it explodes. The hot burn of pleasure overwhelms me enough to make sparks fly behind my eyes. It’s almost too much for me to take and I feel myself crying out. I’m too full of him and too happy to speak too much.

“Carter,” I can feel myself whimpering his name, clutching at his hip with my hand to keep him inside of me as the ache of wanting keeps pressing its way through me. He pushes into me and moans as I feel his own desire pour into me.

I never want this moment between us to end. I want to stay like this forever, skin-to-skin, as close as I can be to him. This wasn’t just sex to me, not just a release of sexual tension or a way to thank him for looking after me.

This was special. Even though I can’t articulate exactly why I’ve fallen so hard for Carter so fast, it would be silly to ignore that I have.

The high from my orgasm slowly begins to subside. Carter tucks me into his arms and I wonder which sensation I actually like more. Is it Carter behind me, warm at my back and loving, or him hovering over me like the most beautiful vision of something I never even imagined that I could have in this life? I turn around to face him and run my fingers over the tan, freckled planes of his wide, strong shoulders. In his arms is the only place I want to be, the place I feel safest.

When I look into his eyes, I see a home and a life that I can count on. I see a place for my sister and me to finally feel safe.

Izzy. I turn over and grab my phone from the bedside. There's a text from Jorge, confirming that Izzy is okay. She might be annoyed that I'm having him check up on her. I know she's going to say that she's not a baby and can take care of herself. And it's not that I think she can't. Truthfully, it's more for my own peace of mind.

When we lived with my mom, things were so stressful. Everything Mom worried about became my worry. I never got a break from seeing all of the bad in the world. But she did try her best.

Mom wanted to be sure we could overcome everything that life handed us, so she was hard on us. I had to do everything myself, and while I'm grateful to have that resilience, sometimes I wish she would have just been a regular mom. Someone who loved and cared for us unconditionally. It was hard cutting her out of my life, but my life has been nothing but better for it. I'm finally breathing fresh air.

"I hope you don't think I'm taking you home," Carter says, kissing the back of my neck. "You're staying right here tonight."

"I wasn't even dreaming of going home. I want nothing more than to stay here."

We turn over to cuddle together in the bed, sleepy and sated.

Chapter Five

Carter

Addy's little sister is staring at me like she wants to run me over.

I can see her through the window of the low-level apartment. I pull up in front of the brick building, my heart slow and steady in my chest. I had my driver take Addy home an hour or so ago, just so that her little sister wouldn't be too surprised if she was dropped off by me. As I step out of my shiny red car, I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I walk up to the door of the apartment and ring the doorbell, my palms sweaty with anticipation.

The door swings open. The teenager standing in front of me looks similar to Addy, except she's a blonde instead of a brunette and her nose is slightly more upturned. And she's scowling.

She looks at me with a skeptical expression, her arms crossed over her chest in her school pullover, jeans, and scuffed up riding boots. Why she doesn't like me, I'm unsure, although I can guess that it comes from a place of protectiveness for Addy. But I'm determined to win her over. She's important to Addy, which means that she is important to me.

I smile casually, the one that even grandmothers love.

"Hey, there. My name is Carter. What's yours?"

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“Izzy.” Izzy narrows her eyes. “You’re the one taking me to riding lessons, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“I don’t even know you.” She shakes her head.

“Well, maybe not yet, but you will. I work with your sister.” My tone is patient, far more patient than I usually am with people. But I want to make the best impression I can with her sister.

“What are your intentions with my sister?” she asks. I resist the urge to laugh, instead clearing my throat. Even though Izzy is just seventeen, she’s clearly wise beyond her years. Much like anyone who’s gone through a traumatic childhood. Probably like Addy was at that age.

"I really care about Addy," I reply honestly. "I want to get to know her better, spend time with her, and see where things go. I want to make her happy."

Izzy's expression softens but I can still see the caution in her eyes.

“You better treat my sister right. She’s an amazing person who deserves to be treated well.”

I nod, giving her a reassuring smile.

"I promise I will never intentionally hurt Addy. I only intend to make both her and your lives better."

Izzy studies me for a moment, her eyes searching mine for any signs of deception. Finally, she lets out a sigh and uncrosses her arms. A small win for me.

"Fine. But if you hurt her, you'll have to answer to me."

I smile gratefully, but inwardly I can't help but laugh. How intimidating can a seventeen year old be?

"Deal. I promise to do everything in my power to make your sister happy."

I hold out my hand. Izzy hesitates for a moment before shaking my hand, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"All right. But remember, I'm watching you. I'm always watching."

"You're not giving Carter any trouble are you, Iz?" Addy says, coming to the door as she pushes turquoise earrings through her ears.

"Of course not!" Izzy brightens, smiling up at her sister. I have to push down my laughter so as not to out her. She's a tricky one, I can tell.

"Better not." Addy shoots Izzy a look who only smiles angelically. "Come on in, Carter. I'm almost done getting ready."

Izzy steps aside and I walk into the apartment. It's small but homey, the white walls covered with pretty landscape paintings and a comfy looking couch pushed against the wall across from the modest television. Izzy hops on the couch and pulls out her cell phone, scrolling through some sort of social media.

I watch Addy as she breezes around the small apartment in her jeans and blouse, looking relaxed on her day off. She shoves her feet into sneakers and shakes out her

long, wavy dark hair before shooting me a smile and gesturing me toward her.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?” she asks me, already pulling two mugs out of the cabinet.

“I’m not allowed,” Izzy says from the couch. She sounds particularly annoyed about the fact. “I get too hyper.”

“I’ll take one, yeah,” I tell Addy. I want to come up behind her and wrap my arms around her, feeling her warm body against mine as I had the night before, but I don’t since I’m unsure how she feels about public displays of affection in front of her sister.

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

I take my coffee and sip it slowly, savoring the warm liquid as Addy does the same. It feels so easy, so domestic. It feels right, the two of us just sitting in a kitchen and drinking a cup of coffee. I’ve had something like this before, something warm and familiar, but I don’t let myself think about it. I don’t want to live in those memories.

Izzy walks through the kitchen door, slipping her phone into her pocket. She looks at me and smiles. I smile back.

“So you had sex with my sister.” Izzy looks at me pointedly.

My coffee sputters from my mouth and I look at Addy with wide eyes, wiping my chin.

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“Izzy!” Addy says, looking at her sister sharply. The teenager rolls her eyes.

“I’m seventeen, not seven.” Izzy looks up at me again. “Well?”

“That sounds like a conversation for you and your sister.”

“Izzy, do you have your riding gloves?” Addy asks, interrupting.

“In my pocket.”

“You know, we should probably get going. Horses are waiting,” I pipe up.

“What do you know about horses?” Izzy asks haughtily.

“Not much, if I’m being honest. I’ve had friends who ride horses and watched the occasional western but that’s about the extent of my knowledge.”

Izzy rolls her eyes again and leads the three of us out the door. As Addy passes me she mouths ‘sorry.’

As we head towards the car, I can't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. While I may not have won Izzy over completely, her not writing me off entirely is certainly a step in the right direction. I'm determined to prove to her that I'm worthy of Addy's love and trust.

“She likes you. I told her you protected me in the club.”

“That’s her liking me?” I can’t help the shock from spreading over my face as I watch Izzy slam the door as she gets into the Mustang. She rolls down the window and winks.

“She loves the car, too.”

Addy and I climb in to join her and start the drive to the equestrian center outside of the city. We pass by the Castle Club as we go, and Addy’s leg starts tapping as she stares. The club is open and we see people in expensive designer clothes go in and out. There’s no poker game until Sunday night, and Court is probably inside now, sitting in Castle’s Corner.

“Hey. It’s all right. Don’t worry about what happened between you and Victor last night. Just because you called him out on cheating, Court would never blame you for the fight, although next time you might want to call in Cade or Court instead of confronting the cheater yourself.”

“Court won’t fire me, right? We didn’t talk to him before we left.”

The look she gives me says everything: she needs this job to support her and Izzy, even though she won’t voice her concerns in front of her.

“Of course not. The poker tourneys have very little to do with Court, okay? We just utilize the club to hold them and Court gets a cut of the rake and the registration fees. You’ll always have a job if I have anything to say about it.”

After a few more minutes, we pull into the center, with the multiple arenas and horse barns set up all around. I was here once before to grab something for Court, but it seems even more impressive now to me. Izzy is buzzing with excitement.

“If someone is riding my horse, I swear I’m going to scream,” she says from the

back, impatient to get out. “Dragon is mine and no one else’s.”

“Cool name,” I comment as she hurries out of the car.

Izzy glances back at me, smiling a little, and then rushes to get to the horse barn.

“What did she mean? Why would someone else be riding her horse?”

Addy stares ahead, watching the riders go in and out of the barn.

“Because Dragon doesn’t belong to us, he belongs to the center and we rent time to ride him. He’s an expensive horse. I would never be able to afford to buy him.”

“I’ll buy him then. If she wants him, I mean.”

“What?” Addy stops, staring at me with her mouth hanging open. “No, Carter, I couldn’t let you do that.”

“Why not? Look, I’m not trying to be crass, but however much they want for him, it’s probably just pocket change for me.”

“You want to buy a horse for my sister?” Addy shakes her head. “Buying her approval won’t work, you know. She’ll be grateful, but it doesn’t mean she will immediately approve of you.”

I take my hands and look at Addy, my brow furrowing.

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“Whoa, I’m not trying to buy her approval. I just think if there’s something someone wants to make them happy, and I know I can give it to them, then that’s what I want to do. It would make Izzy happy, and by extension it would make you happy. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a big deal to me,” Addy says, her voice breaking.

She throws her arms around me and squeezes me tightly in her embrace. Then Addy presses her mouth to mine, unbothered about anyone seeing us.

“We should go see about your sister,” I say, clearing my throat. If I don’t shake the thoughts of her naked body against mine right now, I might not be able to.

Addy grins, kissing me again.

“She has to practice for an hour and exercise Dragon before she does anything else. We have an hour to kill.”

“Oh, is that right?” I ask her, grinning against her mouth.

“No one uses the English dressing room in the mornings,” Addy says. “Izzy told me they always use the Western one and it gets on her nerves.”

“Of course it does,” I answer, huffing out a laugh. “Lead the way then.”

The room is brightly lit by the windows outside, filling the space with sunshine, but Addy doesn’t seem to care. After locking the door behind us, she pulls down the thin

blinds and kisses me deeply. She lets me haul her up on one of the tables and she wraps her legs around my waist. Having a woman want me just as badly as I want her is intoxicating. We push horse tack aside from the table and our tongues dance a smooth, frantic rhythm. Addy reaches forward, making quick work of my jeans and shoving them down. I pop the button on her jeans with one hand and massage her breast with the other.

“I want you inside me right now,” Addy says, the words quick and honest.

She seems insistent, but I finger her quickly anyway, wanting to feel that wet heat on my fingers. She moans and I reach up, covering her mouth with my hand. The last thing we need is some hapless little equestrian barging into the room and getting traumatized. Addy sucks on my wet fingers and nibbles at my hand. The noises she makes vibrate against my palm like a heartbeat.

“You want this?” I tease, holding my cock in my hand and just barely nudging at her bare entrance with it.

“C’mon,” she begs me. “More!”

Without another thought, I’m inside of her, groaning myself at her tightness squeezing around me. She feels so perfect and so good. She’s an angel spread out below me, looking tan and sultry with her dark hair and those bright hazel eyes.

She yanks me into her again and I get the hint, beginning to thrust in and out as she comes up and bites down on my shoulder. The table is shaking under us and I just know someone is going to hear. I press into Addy and my rhythm takes on a life of its own – hard and insistent as I thrust in and out.

“Carter!” Addy cries out my name on the edge of a sweet moan, her whole body trembling as she finds her release.

I let go inside of her and my thrusts turn erratic, my body shaking as I come down.

Addy looks to the side before she laughs in my ear. “I’m glad we remembered to lock the door.”

“I can only hope my luck will be this good at the poker table on Sunday,” I tell her, grinning against her mouth as we kiss.

Addy smiles, her face pink and pretty.

“One can only hope. We better clean up and get back out there.”

We both suit back up and Addy frowns, muttering about the mess in her panties. We both leave the room and exit to the arena.

I stand at the edge of the arena, my eyes fixed on the exhilarating sight before me. The equestrian center buzzes with energy as Addy's sister, Izzy, prepares to barrel race with her copper and white paint horse.

“Is that Dragon?”

“The very one.”

The air crackles with anticipation, and I can't help but feel a surge of excitement coursing through my veins. I'm definitely buying Izzy her horse. Dragon, a powerful and agile creature, paws at the ground, eager to take on the challenge ahead. Dragon's coat glistens under the bright arena lights, a testament to the care and dedication Izzy has poured into his training and grooming. I watch in awe as she adjusts her grip on the reins, her focus unwavering. I can imagine that the thrill of the ride is similar to how I feel sitting at the poker table, on the edge of a winning hand.

Beside me stands Addy, her eyes filled with a mix of pride and concern. She told me as we were walking up about the risks involved in barrel racing, the split-second decisions and lightning-fast turns that can make or break a run. She told me how she worries about her sister as any parent would. But she also knows her sister's skill and determination. The unwavering support in her gaze would be obvious to anyone. As the announcer's voice booms through the speakers, signaling the start of the practice run, my heart pounds in my chest. The crowd falls silent, their collective breath held in anticipation. Izzy and her horse explode into action, thundering down the arena with a speed that takes my breath away.

The sound of hooves pounding against the dirt fills the air, creating a symphony of power and determination. Izzy leans into each turn, her body moving in perfect sync with her horse. It's a dance of trust and precision, a testament to the bond they share. Addy's hand finds mine, her grip tight with a mix of excitement and nervousness. I squeeze her hand, offering a silent reassurance.

We watch as Izzy and her horse navigate the barrels with a grace that seems almost otherworldly. The crowd erupts into cheers and applause, their admiration for the duo evident in their voices. Izzy crosses the finish line and the timer stops, a triumphant smile gracing her lips. The crowd roars with approval, their applause echoing through the arena. Izzy slows her horse to a gentle trot, her chest heaving with exertion. She dismounts, her face flushed with a mix of exhilaration and exhaustion.

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“That was awesome, Izzy!” Addy shouts as we storm down the steps.

Addy rushes forward, enveloping her sister in a tight embrace.

The pride in her eyes is undeniable, and I can't help but feel a surge of happiness for them both. The bond they share is beautiful, closer than most siblings are since Addy has taken on a parental role as opposed to a sibling one. I turn to Addy, my heart swelling with affection for both her and her sister. The woman I'm falling for is right here, sharing this incredible moment with me. I want to wrap my arms around her, to celebrate this victory together. But for now, I content myself with simply being in her presence, basking in the shared passion that brought us here. Dragon blows out his breath, reminiscent of the creature he's named after. I give him a little pat.

As the crowd begins to disperse, Izzy walks back to her friends to talk and then back over to us, a triumphant smile still lingering on her face. Addy's eyes light up as she embraces her sister once again, their laughter filling the air. I can't help but feel a surge of gratitude for being a part of this moment, for being welcomed into their world for this small moment of achievement.

I want to be a part of this little family and I want Addy to be mine. I want to be standing at her side as she experiences happiness and sadness and everything in between. I am exactly where I'm meant to be. This is the first real happiness I've felt since my first poker game. I want to tell Addy about everything. I want her to know.

“How was that?” Izzy says, grinning from ear to ear. “Wasn't he amazing?”

“Izzy, we need to tell you something. You're going to be so happy,” Addy grins.

“He belongs to you. At least he will, anyway.”

Izzy’s eyes light up.

“Are you serious right now? How?”

“Carter wants to buy him for you. Are you okay with that?”

Izzy instantly looks suspicious.

“Why? What do you want?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“No strings attached. He’s yours, no strings attached.”

Izzy grins from ear to ear.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Izzy takes Dragon toward the stable.

“You have no idea how much we appreciate this.”

“Anything for you Hughes women.”

I smile but I can’t ignore the tiny needles pushing through me. I can’t keep hiding this part of myself. Not forever.

Chapter Six

Addy

My mind is so muddled that I can barely focus on getting the poker tables set up. My eyes keep flitting to Carter sitting at the bar. I've been walking on cloud nine since that evening I spent at his house two weeks ago. Being with him has been so incredible, it almost feels like a dream.

There's a part of me that is terrified that I'm going to wake up any minute now in my bed, still working at that stupid taco shack on Fourth Street.

"Addy? Are you good?" One of the regular poker players, Horace, comes up and touches my shoulder lightly. He's an older man who's reminiscent of a grandparent. Not that I have much experience with grandparents. My mother doesn't speak to her parents and my dad's parents died when I was little.

"Yeah. Yes. Of course. I'm just zoning out a bit while I set up the room for tonight's game."

"I'll grab you some water. Maybe you're warm." Horace waddles up to the bar, leaning heavily on his wooden cane as he talks to the bartender. When he gestures my way, Carter looks over, smiling secretly at me before winking. I blush furiously before turning back to the cards in my hand.

"So, you're Carter's new girl, then?" an unfamiliar voice says. When I look in front of me I see one of the cocktail waitresses standing in front of me. She's wearing what's essentially a lacy bodysuit over tights, her boobs leaving little to the imagination. Part of me is jealous. I've always been tall and slender, with a small butt and small breasts. When I was in school kids would tease me by saying I was flatter than the walls.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Addy," I say cheerfully, purposely not answering her question. The woman smirks but sets her drink tray on the table, anyway.

“Thalia,” she says curtly. “Are you going to answer my question?”

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“I just don’t think I know you well enough to be discussing personal matters.” I shuffle the deck in my hand before putting it in the actual card shuffler and holding down the button. Thalia comes around the table and leans in to whisper in my ear.

“We all know it. One of the girls saw you and Carter leave the club together the other night.”

I turn to look Thalia in the eyes. There’s something I can’t read in them, like jealousy or annoyance.

“I don’t really see why that would be of any concern to you.”

Thalia sighs and shakes her head.

“I’m not trying to be mean. I’m trying to warn you.”

“Warn me about what? Carter?”

“Exactly. I’m sure you know about his reputation. But I don’t think you know what you’re getting into.”

“I’m old enough to handle my own relationships, but thank you.”

“Come on, don’t be like this. Nobody wants to get hurt.”

“What makes you think he’s going to hurt me?” I ask, whirling to look at her. She doesn’t flinch at my movement.

“Because that’s what Carter Castle does. He wines you and dines you, makes you feel special, buys you everything you want so he can see you ‘happy’ and then leaves you for the next best thing that walks in here with a pair of legs and tits.”

I swallow, staring at Thalia. While I don’t want to believe what she’s saying, that is exactly what has happened with Carter so far.

“I don’t want to discuss this with you.” My voice is shaky as I turn away from her. She lingers for a few more moments.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I let out a breath when she walks away, relieved to be out of her presence.

“Here you go, Addy.” Horace comes back and hands me a bottle of water. I’m grateful it’s a bottled one from behind the bar. Upon being hired I was instructed to never, ever accept a drink that I didn’t get from the bar myself.

I break the seal and take a gulp, eager to at least have something to wash down my nerves. When I bring the bottle back down I take a peek.

“Wow. Half the bottle. You really were thirsty, huh?” Horace grins before sitting down at the table.

“I must have been. Thank you for grabbing it.”

I get back to work, moving to the next table and shuffling the second deck. After a moment the table fills up with players preparing to start, and Carter coming over to join them.

He smiles at me but says nothing else, since we’re not supposed to reveal that we’re

dating. If the other patrons think that we're together, there would be suspicions about him cheating and that's something we don't want to deal with.

It works out fine today since I'm still reeling from what Thalia told me. I can't help but think about all the things that Carter has done so far. Buying Izzy's horse, buying groceries, helping fix my car. All things that he did because "he wanted to see me happy." Is it possible that all of these things have been done before, some even with women in this club?

I know he has a reputation as a womanizer around the club, but as far as I've heard from anyone else his main reputation has been in sleeping with women as opposed to actually dating them. But has he dated more than one woman in this club? And was Thalia one of them?

My eyes flit to her as she talks to another hostess down the way. Her curly blonde hair stops midway down her back, her curves accentuated by her skimpy outfit.

If he was with her, I can't imagine him choosing me over her. I know I'm pretty -- I've been told so by many men and women alike -- but Thalia is sexy. When I look back to the table Carter is looking at me curiously, glancing back at Thalia. Did he see us having a conversation?

I smile at him as other players gather around the table. The game starts, the dealer running the game efficiently as each player acts in turn. Chips move across the table in piles, toward the middle of the table when bet, and to the winner when the hand is complete.

Halfway through the tournament, the players pause for a brief break. Carter is pulled away by Cade to talk about something, so I head back to the break room to take a moment and gather myself mentally after what Thalia said. The break room is quiet as a couple of other hostesses come in and settle in opposite corners of the room.

Even though we all like each other well enough, this job is very socially exhausting and during breaks we simply tend to spend some quiet time on our own.

I take a sip from the water bottle that Horace brought me. The door to the break room opens and I watch a familiar woman walk in with a cardboard box full of stuff.

“Cassie?” I call out, my brows knitting together. She turns and grins at me, walking my way with the box. The other hostesses look up briefly before going back to their phones.

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“Addy! It’s been too long.”

She sets the box on a table as I get up. We hug before she sits down at the table across from me.

“How are the babies?” I grin at her. She looks happy, her cheeks flushed and eyes glowing.

“Oh, they’re so great. I never imagined being a mom would be this fulfilling – and exhausting, especially with twins. How’s Izzy?”

“She’s good. She still loves horses. What are you doing here? I thought you left the club.”

“Oh, I did.” Cassie gestures to the box she brought. “I’m just bringing some things in for Court. He’s planning an event for charity but left all the supplies at home.”

“Really? That’s amazing. I didn’t know he was planning a charity event.”

“He said that Carter gave him the idea. I don’t know too much about it, but it’s supposed to be in a month or two, I think.” Cassie looks over at me and smiles. “Do you like it here so far? It feels like we haven’t talked in forever.”

“It has been a while. I do like it here; I seriously owe you for getting me this job. I don’t know what I would do without it.”

Cassie takes my hand and squeezes it affectionately.

“Of course. I knew you would be a great fit.” Cassie looks at her phone. “Look, I have to get home. I told the sitter I wouldn’t be gone long. But do you want to get lunch sometime soon? I’ve missed spending time with my girlfriends; it feels like forever since I’ve done something with a friend.”

“I’d love that. I don’t get out much, either.”

“Perfect. I’ll text you, okay?”

We wave as she leaves the room. One of the other hostesses gets up, signaling that it’s time for us all to get back to work. I sigh and smooth my skirt before heading back out to the floor.

Carter invited me to come over tonight, but I declined. I’ve been spending a lot of nights at his house, but I still have Izzy at home and despite her being seventeen, I can’t just leave her alone all the time.

To his credit, he took the rejection well, simply nodding with understanding. At first I couldn’t stop thinking about how lucky I am to have someone so understanding and kind. But then ugly thoughts started to rear their heads, stemming from what Thalia told me.

The whole drive home I can’t stop asking myself if not going home with him would mean him changing his mind about me. Why would he choose me when I have responsibilities to a teenager and other, sexier women are obligation free to spend every night in his bed?

When I pull into the apartment parking lot, I notice something strange about our apartment. Izzy’s bedroom light is on.

Every time I’ve come home after a shift at work, Izzy has been asleep. As she should

be, since I don't get home until 2:00 in the morning. I turn off the car and go up to the apartment, leaning in towards the window.

Izzy's giggling sounds through, and I feel a sense of relief. She must be watching a movie.

At least that's what I think until I hear a male voice say something.

Fury rushes through me as I hurry to the door, my hands shaking as I quietly unlock the door and shut it, careful not to make too much noise. I tiptoe down the hall and stand outside of her room. There's more talking and giggling, but when I hear a kiss I can't stop myself from bursting through the door.

"What the hell are you doing, Isabella?" I shout as I open the door. Izzy's jaw drops as she sits up, holding her blanket up to cover her naked body. The boy next to her is staring at me with wide eyes, a look of shock on his face.

"Addy! I thought... I didn't know you would be home tonight."

"So you thought you could invite a boy over?" I ask, my gaze steely.

"I should probably go..." the boy says. He grabs his clothes and passes me in the doorway, shrugging his pants on as he leaves.

"What the hell are you thinking?"

"It's not a big deal," Izzy shrugs as she reaches for her shirt on the side of the bed.

"It's not a big deal? Are you serious? You could get pregnant!"

"We used a condom!"

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“Condoms aren’t one hundred percent effective! You’re not stupid so I don’t know why you’re doing this!”

Izzy stands up and stomps over to the door.

“I don’t see why it matters! It’s my life. I can do what I want!”

“You’re seventeen, Izzy. You can’t do what you want! What if you get pregnant? How are we going to support a baby? I can barely take care of us!”

Izzy lets out a huffy breath in exasperation.

“Carter will take care of us!”

I scoff and fold my arms over each other.

“That’s your solution? Carter will take care of everything so it doesn’t matter if you get pregnant? Carter isn’t the bank, you can’t expect him to bankroll your bad life choices. You shouldn’t be having sex at all!”

“You’re having sex! So why can’t I?”

“I’m an adult, Izzy!”

“But you can still get pregnant.”

“I’m on birth control.”

“So put me on birth control!” she shouts, a frown spreading across her face. I look away, willing myself not to strangle her.

“Just... go to bed. We’re going to talk about this some more in the morning.”

“Whatever.”

Izzy slams the door. I walk numbly to my room. This is the first time that Izzy and I have had a fight in a long time.

It’s bad that she thinks Carter will swoop in and save us from everything. Maybe I shouldn’t be letting him help us out so much. It’s clearly giving her unrealistic expectations.

Chapter Seven

Carter

I stride into the restaurant, my hands jammed in my pockets. The host nods at me and smiles.

“Mr. Castle. Your brother is waiting for you. This way.” The host leads the way to the corner booth that my brothers and I share each time we come here.

“Carter.” Court gestures for me to sit.

“Cade not coming?” I ask as I slide into the booth across from him. He shakes his head.

“No, something came up. Just you and me tonight. Unfortunately.” Court grins at his bad joke and I can’t help but let out a small laugh. “So how are things going with

Addy? Thanks for keeping things on the down low around the club, by the way. I can imagine that it's difficult, but..."

"I know, I know. It's better for the club. Trust me, I don't want any of the other guys thinking that I'm cheating, either. And I'm not." I throw a glance Court's way.

"Of course you aren't."

We sit quietly. I pretend to study the menu to fill the awkwardness.

"Are you going to answer my question?" Court asks.

"What question?" I look up. Our eyes meet and he raises a brow quizzically.

"How are things with Addy?"

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I blink. When did he ask that? Maybe I should pay more attention.

“They’re good. She’s an amazing woman, raising her little sister and doing her best. She’s hilarious, smart, and beautiful. Everything I could ever want in a woman.”

My answer is simplistic, but I’m unsure of what exactly he expects me to say.

Court nods thoughtfully.

"That's good to hear, Carter. I'm happy for you," he says, taking a sip of his drink. "But I have to ask, have you two talked about the future? Do you see a future with her?"

I feel my cheeks heat up with embarrassment. I haven't thought that far ahead.

"Honestly, Court, I don't know. I like her a lot, but I don't know what the future holds. We've only been seeing each other for a little while now.

“I suppose what I’m really asking is if you’ve talked to her about Elise yet.”

I freeze as memories of my wife flood my mind. Us cooking together in the kitchen. Her leaning over my shoulder as I worked on my IT stuff. The way her hair always smelled like strawberries and how much she wanted a baby.

My heart clenches with pain as specific memory surfaces.

Elise lying in a hospital bed, strapped to machines that beeped and whirred with the

technology needed to keep her alive. I sat in the chair next to her, holding her hand comfortingly.

I told myself that I was holding her hand because it would make her feel better when she woke up. But the truth was that holding her hand was comforting me. She slept so much in those final days, unable to muster up the energy to keep her eyes open for longer than twenty minutes at a time.

I'd been there for four hours when her eyes finally began to flutter. Her fingers twitched in my hands and when she turned her head, her face lit up when she saw me.

"Cart," she'd said, her voice soft with weakness. "You're here."

"I'm always here." And it was true. Donating so much money to the hospital meant that I was able to ignore the visiting hours constraints that many other people were forced to adhere to.

She smiled. I stood up and went over to her, gently caressing her cheek. Elise didn't have hair any more, the chemo had taken it all. That last week she looked nothing like the woman I had fallen in love with. She was a shell of her former self.

"I love you. I wish I didn't have to leave."

"I wish you didn't, either. This is the... the worst thing that could have happened to us."

A tear escapes but I don't wipe it.

"Don't be sad, baby. I know it's hard now, but as time passes things will get easier. There's something important I want you to know."

“Tell me.”

“I love you, and I’ll always love you. I know you’ll always love me, and for a while after I’m gone you’ll feel the need to prove that. But I don’t want you to miss out on the chance to be in love again. If you meet someone, whether it’s the day after I’m gone or ten years from now, I want you to take the chance you deserve to have.”

“Elise, don’t be ridiculous. I could never love someone else. You’re the woman I love and no one will ever be able to replace you.”

“They don’t have to. But if they make you smile and you start to get those butterflies for someone else, don’t feel bad. Pursue it. Give it your best shot. Our time together was short, and I’ve loved every second of it. I’ve loved every second of you. I don’t want your happiness to die with me.”

She’d fallen asleep again soon after that, only awake for about six or seven minutes that time. She was gone only two days later, leaving me a miserable sobbing mess for an entire year afterward.

“Cart? You okay?” Court’s concerned question breaks through my memory. I look up in surprise to see the waiter standing over us, a strange look on his face.

“Yes, sorry. I’ll have the trout with asparagus and your best cabernet.”

The waiter nods before taking out menus and sauntering off to undoubtedly tell the kitchen staff how strange one of the Castle brothers is being today.

“Where did you go just then?” Court asks.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do.”

“Well, I don’t,” I quip in annoyance. “And no, I haven’t told her about Elise yet. I will when I’m sure that we’re going the distance.”

We’re both quiet as the waitress brings us our food. I want nothing more than to get up from this table and go home but I don’t want to leave my brother here alone. We dig in, the silence palpable over the table when Court clears his throat.

“I hope you know I wasn’t trying to convince you to do anything you aren’t ready for. I just wanted to see how you were feeling and where your head is at with her, that’s all. So don’t feel pressured or upset with me.”

“I don’t,” my tone is curt, punctuating my words as a lie.

“Are you serious about Addy?”

“What? I -- Of course I am! I’m seriously falling for Addy.”

“Whoa, it’s okay, no need to get grouchy.”

“I’m not grouchy, Court. I’m just... it’s not easy, being in this situation. I really like Addy, and I can see myself with her. But at the same time, I don’t know how I can move on from Elise. It feels like I’m doing something wrong by seriously considering someone else.”

“I doubt Elise would feel that way.”

“I know she wouldn’t. She told me so herself, that she wanted me to be able to move on and be happy. But it’s not about whether she would be okay with it or not. It’s about whether I’m okay with it, and no matter how much I tell myself that it’s what Elise would have wanted me to do, I can’t move on without feeling some kind of guilt, as if I am betraying Elisa, whether that’s true or not.”

Court opens his mouth but I feel emotions bubbling up that I don’t want to have. I stand up and rush out of the restaurant, eager to get somewhere safe.

I walk around the room filled with my wife’s things. When she died, I left her room as it was for three years. After that, Court convinced me that I needed to remove her presence from my daily life to help me move on.

But getting rid of her completely wasn’t an option for me. I needed to keep something from her to make me feel okay again. Every now and again, when I feel particularly melancholy like now, I come into the room and slip my wedding ring back on, trying to forget her absence.

I sit down in the big comfy chair that she constantly monopolized, covered in so many blankets that I was convinced she’d give herself heatstroke one day. I chuckle at the memory of her bundled up completely, usually holding a mug of hot chocolate or a handful of her favorite candy.

Looking around, I think about how devastating it was to lose Elise. Those last moments in the hospital were the worst days of my life.

I’m just grateful I got to spend them with her. That was lucky, right? Having plenty of money made things better.

That’s what everyone seems to think, anyway. But it’s not true, and no one knows that better than I do. Because no matter how much money I seemed to throw at the

newest treatments and the best doctors, no amount of cash could save Elise from her fate.

Cervical cancer. The words that I still can't say without wanting to cry. Once it metastasized and spread to her lungs, the doctors said there was a good chance she wouldn't live through the year.

She didn't.

Every day I live with the guilt that nothing I did could save her -- no amount of money or research or medicine could bring her back.

Sometimes I wonder if things would have been different if she had gone to more check-ups, or if I had pushed her to go to the doctor more often. Elise hated going to the doctor.

I don't know why, really. We always had enough money to cover any medical issues that might arise, and she grew up in a wealthy family so having money wasn't new to her.

My suspicions tell me that Elise felt guilty about being able to go to the doctor any time she wanted to. She never seemed as happy or as comfortable as I am having so much money. Her family made their money by less than savory means, so maybe that's why. But she always seemed to resent it, pushing away the things she wanted in order to live a more sedate lifestyle. If I hadn't surprised her with the house, we would have ended up with something much more modest.

Elise was always giving to charity, too. I think she thought that if she gave enough money away, it would assuage her guilt for being in a better position than the rest of the world. No amount of giving seemed to help her, though.

In fact, the only time she seemed to feel better was after her diagnosis. Most people are devastated when they learn they have metastatic cancer, and rightly so. But when the doctor told her what was going on, Elise only seemed in some way relieved. Almost as if she somehow felt shedeservedto be seriously ill.

The last conversation we had was about how everyone is equal once they're dead. The bugs and the Earth don't discriminate for factors like money and social status.

There's a part of me that will always wonder if maybe Elise had an inkling that something was wrong well before we went to the doctor for testing. I'll never know if I'm right, but I can't stop myself from wondering if Elise purposely ignored her symptoms so that she wouldn't have to deal with hearing the bad news and dealing with the resultant consequences.

Sadness wells up inside of me to the degree that I have to take my wedding ring off and shut the door behind me. Being in Elise's room used to make me feel better.

But now I get no comfort being there.

Chapter Eight

Addy

“Come on, we don’t need to do this,” Izzy groans as I park outside the doctor’s office.

She pulls her hoodie up over her head and tugs on the strings so that her face is covered.

I grab the hoodie and gently stretch it until I can pull it back down. She frowns at me, a sulky expression on her face. I have a brief but fleeting urge to smack her. Teenagers. As much as I love my sister, she’s definitely not as grown up as she thinks she is. Sometimes I think maybe I attribute more maturity to her than is really there.

“If you’re going to be having sex, you will be a responsible woman about your sex life and talk to your doctor,” I say as I turn off the car. Izzy’s cheeks turn pink and she crosses her arms.

“I’m not getting out.”

Ha. She thinks she’s getting out of this one? She’ll have to try harder than that.

“That’s okay, they do car visits.”

“Addy, stop! You can’t force me to do this!” Izzy turns to me, anger flaring up in her eyes.

“No, but I can ground you. And make sure you’re never home alone again.” I shrug as if it would be no big deal.

Izzy rolls her eyes like the child she still is and scoffs.

“You can’t quit your job,” she says, the annoying tone she uses when she’s being a know-it-all seeping through her words.

“Who said anything about quitting my job? You know, the thing I love living at the Porterston apartments is that we have great neighbors. Jorge, Mrs.Sunderson... you know, they both adore you very much, and I’m sure they wouldn’t mind spending evenings with you. Mrs. Sunderson has gotten so lonely since her daughter moved to New Jersey...,” I raise a brow as Izzy meets my eyes directly, her expression challenging. She falters when the severity of my words is reflected in my face. Izzy sighs and opens the door.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

I lock the car as we make the way to the tiny clinic we’ve both been going to for the past five years. It’s the best one that accepts Medicaid, since I can’t afford to pay for health insurance for the both of us. It’s the same place that I go for my own birth control pills.

When we walk into the room, cold air rushes into our faces. The room is quiet despite the number of people sitting in the waiting room. It smells like bleach, the cleanliness of the place unquestionable.

“Oh, my God, we’re going to be here forever,” Izzy murmurs as she looks around.

“We are not. We have an appointment.” I lead Izzy up to the counter. After talking to the receptionist she instructs us to sit in the waiting room and fill out the appropriate

forms.

“What’s libido?” Izzy asks, twirling the pen in her hand as she reads the form. I blink and look at the clipboard she’s holding.

“What?”

Izzy points to the question and shows it to me.

Have you been experiencing changes in libido?the question reads. I shake my head. Can they not make a separate form for teenagers? How the hell are they supposed to be answering questions about their libido?

“Just leave that one blank,” I say, my tone clipped as my annoyance at the clinic heightens.

Izzy looks at me with uncertainty.

“But—”

“Blank,Izzy.”

Izzy sighs before she nods and finishes filling out the form in silence.

When she’s done with the pen she pulls out her phone and scrolls aimlessly while I look around the doctor's office. Various women sit, some with babies, some with husbands. And my sister has me.

I can’t imagine what would have happened if she was living with Mom. Mom barely paid attention to me when Dad was around -- I can’t imagine how much time she would have dedicated to Izzy now that she has a new husband.

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We wait while names are called into the exam rooms. Despite having an appointment, we still wait for an hour before a nurse comes out for us.

“Isabella Hughes?” she calls, looking around the room. Izzy jumps up and follows her into the back hallway. I trail behind them.

“Please step on the scale,” the nurse points with her pen. Izzy hops on and a number blinks across the screen which the nurse writes down. It feels like a million little tasks go by before we’re sitting in the tiny room, Izzy on the exam table.

“Addy? I’m nervous,” she whispers, looking at me.

“It’s okay, Iz. I’m here for you.”

Knocking sounds on the door before the doctor comes in, a smiling blonde with big, straight white teeth.

“Hello, Isabella. My name is Dr. Kirkpatrick. How can I help you today?” She sits across from Izzy.

Izzy looks at me nervously, but I give her a nod of encouragement.

“Well, I just started– I mean, I’ve been... I had sex!” Izzy blurts out, her cheeks turning pink. To Doctor Kirkpatrick’s credit, she handles it gracefully, simply nodding before addressing the situation.

“All right. Do you need a pregnancy test?”

“We used a condom. I just want to explore birth control options. So I can be safe.”

I nod proudly at Izzy.

“First, we’ll administer a pregnancy test to make sure that nothing has happened so far. Then we can talk about options. Do you know if you want the pill, the patch, or the shot?”

Izzy’s eyes widen and she looks at me. The doctor chuckles.

“Don’t worry, we will go over the pro’s and con’s of each one. Let’s get you to the bathroom and ready to go.”

Izzy follows the doctor out of the room.

“I’m really glad I’m not pregnant. You were starting to freak me out with all your ‘money’ and ‘baby’ talks,” Izzy says, tucking her hair behind her ears as we approach the stoplight in front of her school.

“How do you feel about being on the pill?”

I feel a little guilty about basically forcing her to get on birth control. But it’s not like she gave me a choice -- I couldn’t let her get pregnant.

“Honestly? I feel okay about it. It will be great for me and Nate, since we won’t have to worry about getting pregnant or anything like that.”

This statement piques my attention.

“Nate. Is he the boy that was at the apartment the other night?”

Izzy blushes furiously as we pull into the school parking lot.

“Um, yep. Nate.”

“Oh, okay. Nate. I’m sure he’s a nice boy, but I need to meet him before you spend any more time with him. So invite him over for dinner, say... Friday night?”

“You know, Addy, I think he might be busy...” Izzy stutters. I smile brightly.

“Well, if he has the time to sneak in on Wednesday then he definitely has time to come to dinner on Friday.”

“Whatever, fine!” Izzy opens the door and steps out.

“Oh, Izzy?” I call out, peeking at her through the window. I hear her sigh before she leans back into the car.

“Yeah?”

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“You still have to use condoms when you’re on the pill.”

I wink as Izzy slams the door.

“So embarrassing,” she mutters before walking away.

I laugh to myself, sitting in the parking lot until she gets into the building. Then I leave to join Cassie for lunch.

“You’re here!” Cassie giggles, standing to greet me with a hug. I wrap my arms around her, smiling at the twins in their high chairs.

“Of course I am! I wouldn’t miss our lunch plans for the world.” We sit in the booth of the familiar cafe that we spent a lot of time at in college. Cassie understands me -- we’re both from similar worlds. Worlds where we didn’t have a ton of money to throw away on houses and fancy cars. “Look at them! They’re so sweet.”

Cassie smiles at her babies.

“They are getting so big. I don’t want them to grow up.” Cassie makes a pouty face before chuckling.

“How are you? I’m glad we came out today.”

“Me, too. I’m doing okay.” I shake my head and look down at the menu. “Had to take Izzy to the doctor this morning.”

“Is she okay?” Cassie’s face spreads with concerns.

“Oh, she’s fine. I just came home from work the other night to find a boy in her room.”

Cassie’s jaw drops.

“No. You don’t think they were...” Cassie trails off.

“Judging by the way they were unclothed and under the covers, I definitely do.”

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe that! Although I guess she is seventeen. Don’t a lot of teenagers start being sexually active around that age?”

“According to the doctor, a little more than half. So I guess it depends on your definition of ‘a lot.’”

Before Cassie can respond the waitress comes over to take our orders. We get the same thing we always have -- a BLT for her and tomato basil caprese sandwich for me with two lemonades -- and Cassie gets a side of macaroni and cheese to split between the babies.

We’re both quiet after the waitress leaves until Cassie looks at me.

“How are things going with Carter?”

“You know, they’ve been great. But...”

“But?”

“Do you know Thalia?”

Cassie scrunches her nose.

“The cocktail waitress? I’m familiar with her.”

“Yeah. Well, the other night when we were working, she said something that made me concerned.”

“What did she say?”

“That I’m just the latest in a string of short-term relationships.” I pause before continuing. “I mean, she didn’t exactly say it. But she very heavily implied that. She said it’s Carter’s game to wine and dine a woman, give her everything she wants and then leave her in the dust.”

Cassie blinks with surprise before shaking her head.

“Oh, my goodness.”

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“Is there any truth to it? I know you probably don’t want to talk poorly about him, since he’s your brother-in-law. But I just hope that as your friend you would tell me the truth.”

I frown, trying to blink away tears. I didn’t expect to get so emotional over this, but now that I’m saying the words out loud, it feels like I’ve lost total control of a situation that only two weeks ago I just started.

“Addy, please -- we are very close friends. Please know that I would never let you get involved with him if I thought he was going to hurt you. Yes, it’s true that Carter has a reputation around the club. But he doesn’t break women’s hearts. He’s slept around, gotten involved with some waitresses. All I can say is that as far as I know, he’s never been involved with anyone at the club in the same way that he’s involved with you.”

“Thank you so much,” I say with relief. “You have no idea how much better that makes me feel.”

“From what Court has said to me, ever since Elise he’s had trouble really connecting with anyone. That’s why it’s so surprising that you and he became attached so quickly. Not surprising in a bad way -- surprising in a great way. Court said that he didn’t think Carter would ever move on.”

I pause as the waitress delivers our food. I take a couple bites of my sandwich while Cassie doles the mac and cheese out in front of the twins.

The thoughts race through my mind as I contemplate what Cassie said.

“Who’s Elise?” I ask as Cassie raises her sandwich to her mouth. She blinks and sucks in a breath, putting the sandwich down.

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry, Addy. I thought... I just figured he would have told you. But I guess it’s only been a few weeks. I shouldn’t have expected it so soon.”

I shake my head with annoyance.

“Will you please just tell me what you are talking about and who Elise is?”

Cassie sighs before nodding.

“Elise was his wife.”

All the air escapes me.

Carter was married.

Carter was married and he never told me.

Chapter Nine

Carter

I pull up outside of the Hughes’ apartments. Smiling, I step out of my car and grab the bouquet of flowers I bought for Addy. When I was at the florists, I realized that I didn’t actually know Addy’s favorite flower. Or if she even has one at all.

The florist recommended white roses, since they signify new beginnings or something. I was a little worried about the kind of message they might be sending, but the florist assured me that it wouldn’t be taken in any weird way.

Looking at the bouquet, I wonder how much of the florist's advice I should have taken. Taking a breath, I approach the front door and knock. Footsteps sound within the apartment before Izzy pulls open the door.

"Hi," she grins. Ever since I bought her favorite horse for her, she's been much more open and welcoming to me. Which was exactly how I hoped things would go afterwards. Not that I orchestrated it.

Not completely.

"Hey, Izzy. How's it going?"

"Great! Where are we going for dinner? I have two different outfits picked out but I need to know where we're going before I decide." Izzy looks at me from head to toe before taking a breath. "Never mind. It's obvious that we're going somewhere much fancier than I can dress for."

Izzy slumps to her room and I walk into the apartment after her, guilt filling me a little. Maybe I should have been more considerate of where I'm taking them. I was just so excited to take them somewhere very nice, knowing that neither of them will have been somewhere like L'Arbre, the distinguished French restaurant downtown.

The warm and comforting scent of chocolate chip cookies permeates the air in the apartment.

"Did someone bake cookies?" I call out, even though I'm not sure anyone can hear me. But the sound of footsteps in the hallway confirms that they can.

"Hi, I didn't know you were here," Addy smiles.

She's wearing a black dress that flares out at the waist. Her hair is pinned in a loose

bun, tendrils of artificially curled hair straggling out of the style. My heart speeds up simply at the sight of her. When she comes over and hugs me, I see the big bow attached to the back of her dress.

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“Wow, you look absolutely incredible. I’ve never laid eyes on anyone as beautiful as you, Addy.”

Her eyes flit down to the bouquet I’m holding.

“Did you bring me flowers?” A small smile plays on her lips. I hold out the bouquet of roses.

“Roses. I wasn’t sure of what your favorite flower was, but the florist recommended these.”

“They are beautiful.”

Addy scurries to the kitchen. I watch as she looks in a cabinet, shifting things around until she pulls out a large drink pitcher and begins to fill it with water.

She must sense me watching her because she turns around and blushes.

“I don’t have a vase,” she says apologetically. “I’ve never been given flowers before.”

Sadness tugs at my heart at her admission. I can’t believe no one has ever given her flowers. I’ll remember to bring a vase next time I give Addy flowers.

When she’s fluffed the flowers up so they fill the pitcher, she puts it in the kitchen window that faces the parking lot and smiles.

“They look lovely.”

“Not as lovely as you,” I murmur, stepping closer to her.

I pull her close, kissing her first on the lips and then lightly on the neck. She pushes me away and when I look at her, I raise my brows in surprise.

“Izzy’s here.”

I nod. Of course. She doesn’t want to get anything started when we’re about to go to dinner with Izzy. That makes sense. Doesn’t it?

“Let’s go!” Izzy shouts as she bounds down the hall. I laugh and take Addy’s hand, smiling at her before we leave out the door. There’s something off about her expression, though. Like she’s bothered about something that she isn’t saying.

“I can’t believe I actually ate duck eggs. And I liked them!” Izzy proclaims as the waiter delivers three dessert madeleine’s to our table.

I chuckle, squeezing Addy’s hand across the table. She’s been uncharacteristically quiet throughout this entire dinner. Instead, Izzy has been filling the silence, chattering incessantly about school, her friends, the food and everything in between.

“The lamb was still better,” I wink. Izzy grins at me.

“Whatever. It’s not a competition. Addy, did you like your halibut?” Izzy turns to her sister. If she’s noticed anything unusual about her behavior, she hasn’t said anything about it. Which is interesting, considering Izzy doesn’t seem like the type of kid who has a problem saying anything that’s on her mind.

“It was great. I don’t know if it was worth the price, though.”

Izzy reaches for her madeleine and looks at me suspiciously.

“What is this? It looks like a giant nut.”

I study the tiny cake on my plate. Dusted with powdered sugar, it does look a bit like a salt covered walnut. I chuckle and pick it up.

“Try it. I think you’ll find that it’s quite delicious.”

I take a bite, savoring the flavor. I watch as Izzy shoves the whole thing in her mouth and blinks in surprise before chewing it slowly. I laugh at the expression on her face.

“You don’t like it?”

“Texture’s weird,” Izzy says, tiny flecks of sponge cake landing on the table.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Izzy,” Addy chimes in absently.

Izzy swallows and narrows her eyes at Addy.

“Aren’t you going to eat yours?”

Addy picks up her madeleine.

“Of course.”

Addy proceeds to take the tiniest nibble known to man. She nods and puts it down.

“Very interesting.”

“She doesn’t like it.” Izzy looks at me. I shrug and smile.

“They’re not for everyone. Some people enjoy sponge cakes and other people aren’t big fans.”

“I like it!” Addy insists. “I’m just kind of stuffed from dinner. It was much more food than I was expecting.”

“That’s fair. Can we go home now?” Izzy asks. I laugh and get up to pay the bill. When I leave I see Addy in the corner of my eye lean across the table to say something to Izzy.

As much as I want to double back and ask what it is, I know that there are some things the sisters will want to keep private. I can’t expect to be in every part of Addy’s life right away.

When we pull up outside of their apartment, Izzy jumps out immediately, unlocking

the door and hurrying to her room. Addy and I take more of our time, walking slowly behind her.

“Did you enjoy dinner?” I ask. I watch her carefully when she responds. I don’t know what it is about Addy’s behavior tonight, but she just doesn’t seem like herself tonight. Usually she’s very bubbly and sarcastic, but that woman didn’t make an appearance today. Instead, she was reserved and maybe a little sad.

“I did. It was delicious. Thank you for inviting me and Izzy out to eat with you. That was very generous.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of leaving Izzy out.”

Addy turns to me, determination shining in her eyes.

“Can we talk? There’s something that has been on my mind and I don’t think I’ll feel better until it’s addressed.”

I blink, surprised at how straight forward she’s being. But I prefer it over her being coy and pretending like nothing is wrong. I nod and she leads me through the apartment, pushing open the door to her bedroom.

It’s different than I expected. Many women’s rooms are their places, decorated with things that they love or cozy and comforting.

Addy’s room is anything but. The simple white walls only hold a single painting on the wall across from the bed, a shot of the beach that would be more typical for a hotel than someone’s house.

The bedspread is a blue waffle knit, with plain white sheets covering the pillows. The only other piece of furniture in the room is a short white dresser under the picture.

Addy sits on her hotel-like bed, leaning against the headboard, and pats a spot next to her.

I close the door behind me and move to sit next to her. Once I'm comfortable she turns to look at me and smiles, but there's nothing joyful about the smile.

"What do you want to talk about?" I murmur. I lean in and brush my lips against hers. Addy kisses me back, her lips soft on mine before she pulls away.

"I don't really know how to bring any of this up. It's so awkward and honestly, I'm a little embarrassed that I feel so weird about it. But I know I won't be able to continue without having this conversation."

It takes everything in my power to keep my breathing in control. There's a part of me that wants to tell her to get to the point because she's causing me so much anxiety, but I know it's not right to push her further than she is comfortable with just because of the way I'm feeling.

"Go on," I encourage. Addy nods.

"Were you involved with Thalia? She said some things the other day that have made me feel extremely insecure. I thought that I could just ignore them and let it pass but I can't. I have to ask you about her."

I let out a shaky breath and chuckle before shaking my head.

"Thalia and I were... physical. But that was the extent of us."

"Are you sure? She implied that there was something more to it."

"Maybe that's the way she interpreted things. Thalia and I never did anything outside

of hooking up. It's unfortunate that she doesn't see things as they were but I think it's common in those sort of situations, for one person to be more interested than the other."

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“She said that you paid for things to make her happy.”

Why would she say that? Unless she was talking about...

“The only thing I ever paid for when I was with Thalia was a new bed frame. But it wasn’t to make her happy. It was because we broke hers and she needed a new one.”

My cheeks flush as I realize that Addy might get some unpleasant mental imagery from that. She seems unfazed as she continues.

“Okay. I understand.” Addy swallows. “Were you married?”

I freeze, staring at her in shock.

“How did you find out about that?”

“Cassie and I were having lunch the other day. She said that you had a wife before me. It just threw me off a bit because I thought we were close.”

“We are close.”

“Then why don’t I know about her?”

When I look into Addy’s eyes I can see the hurt I’ve caused by not being completely honest with her. I open my mouth to tell her more, to let out everything about Elise. But the words don’t come even as my mind churns. Disappointment spreads across her face before she looks down.

“Addy, I’m really sorry for not telling you. I wanted to tell you, I did.”

“Then why don’t you?”

When she looks back up at me, her eyes are filled with tears, threatening to spill over. My mouth dries and my breath is shaky when I speak.

“I can’t. I’m not ready. I’m sorry, but I can’t talk to you about that yet.” I stand up and frown. “I’m so sorry, Addy. I need to take some time for myself.”

Addy doesn’t say anything, and after a few moments of silence I make my way out of her room. When I pass Izzy’s room, I hear her quietly laughing at videos on her phone.

The juxtaposition of Izzy’s mood with Addy’s is too much. I need to go.

I leave the apartment and get in the car without looking back.

Chapter Ten

Addy

Itakeabreathand straighten my outfit in the mirror. I’ve been back at work for a few days, but luckily Carter hasn’t been playing for the past few evenings. Some of the other players are unsettled by this, given that Carter is as much a fixture at these poker tournaments as I now am.

When they ask where he is I simply shrug. After all, I’m just a measly hostess. Why would I know where he is?

The truth is that I haven’t heard from Carter at all since our dinner last week. Or

should I say, after that dinner. When I think back, maybe I should have spoken to Carter before he took Izzy and me to dinner. She's been talking about him non-stop, not seeming to notice that he hasn't been around as much.

It's not like Izzy to be so self absorbed. Most people would say that's typical teenage behavior, but for Izzy it's not. But I'm trying not to feel bothered by it. Izzy is young, and she's starting to get into her own life. Having a boyfriend, spending more time at the stables. I'm glad that she's starting to broaden her horizons.

Someone starts pounding furiously on the bathroom door.

"Can you hurry the fuck up? I need to pee!" One of the other hostesses shouts through the door. I wash my hands and leave. She mutters something about me being inconsiderate as she passes by. I ignore her and hurry down the hallway toward the poker room.

As I set up the tables in anticipation of the coming tournament, I look and meet a familiar pair of eyes. My breath catches and I freeze, the cards falling from my hands and spreading across the table. Carter nods at me before heading toward the table.

Panic builds within me. I'm not ready to face him, yet he's coming this way. Why did he think that work would be the most appropriate place to see me after not speaking to me for almost a whole week?

When Carter sits down he looks up at me. He opens his mouth but before he can say anything another player comes up and takes the seat next to him.

"Carter. I was surprised to see you weren't here the past few days. Thought maybe you were sick or something."

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Carter chuckles good naturedly, smiling at the man.

“Nah. My eyes needed a break -- sometimes I start to feel like a vampire or a bat, spending all my time here and rarely seeing the daylight.”

The two men chuckle and continue to set up. I let out a breath and gather the cards I dropped so I can shuffle them. After ten minutes of the two men chatting, more join the table, and before I know it, Court is announcing that the start of tonight’s tournament.

I’m busy working, making sure the players are all comfortable, have enough food and drink, refreshing their chip stacks with new buy-ins and generally ensuring that the tournament runs smoothly. When I move toward the break room hallway, Carter catches up to me, gently touching my arm to get my attention.

“Addy?”

I turn around and give him a small smile.

“Hi, Carter.”

“Can we talk tonight after you finish tonight? There’s so much I need to say to you.”

My mind is screaming at me to say no and continue walking. But it’s not what my heart wants. I won’t be walking away without hearing him out.

“I don’t know, Carter. Things have been really uncomfortable this week and Izzy has

school tomorrow...”

“Come on, Addy. All I’m asking for is a chance to explain myself. I was wrong not to tell you about Elise, but I want to redeem myself. I don’t want to lose you over this.”

I stare at him. He’s looking at me earnestly, his eyes full of emotion. Which I think is why I find myself nodding.

“Fine. Yeah. We can talk after work, outside the apartment.”

“You don’t want to talk here or at my house?” he asks quizzically. I sigh.

“Truthfully, I’d prefer talking anywhere but there. But I don’t fully trust Izzy after I found her with Nate at 2:00 in the morning. She may be on birth control now but that doesn’t mean that she’s responsible.”

It’s something that’s been weighing on me heavily. I don’t want to treat Izzy like a child. She is seventeen. But after that night when I found her in bed with Nate, my trust in her is severely tenuous. I think she can sense it, too. She’s been on her best behavior, but I’m still skeptical about leaving her on her own. She’d die if she knew that I had Jorge watching for anybody going up to the apartment.

“Okay. Yeah, I understand completely. I’ll follow you home after this? Well, not follow you. But I’m assuming you’ll want to take separate cars.”

“That’s okay,” I chuckle. “You can follow me.”

When we pull up in the apartment parking lot, I immediately hop out of my car and jump into Carter’s. He turns to me and sighs.

“I’m sorry, Addy.”

I raise my brows. It's a good start, but he's going to need to say a lot more than that for this to be a conversation.

"Let's just start at the beginning. Who were you married to? Are you divorced? Do you have kids?"

I look down at my hands. These are the questions that have been spinning around in my head since that evening. If I don't know that, then what else don't I know about him?

Carter shakes my head.

"No, I don't have kids. And I'm not divorced. Elise...she was my wife. We got married eight years ago."

"Are you still married to her?"

"No. She died."

I gasp, my eyes widening.

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry, Carter." He looks away and nods. His chest moves more quickly as his breathing increases. "Please. What happened?"

"It's a long story, really."

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“We have nothing but time.”

Carter nods and takes a deep breath. It feels like forever before he lets it out.

“Okay. I started dating Elise about ten years ago. She was helping me with run my IT company at the time.”

“You had an IT company?” My brows shoot up in surprise. There’s so much I don’t know about him. It’s embarrassing, now that I think about it. I’m practically in a relationship with a stranger.

“Yes. I sold it after she died.”

“Oh.”

“Two years after we met, Elise and I got married. She was my first true love. I’d been with women before but she was the most incredible person I’d ever met. We wanted kids so badly, but it didn’t happen for us. Two years after we got married, we discovered why.”

He pauses, and even though I feel like I should respond, say something comforting, I can’t bring myself to interrupt. “She was diagnosed with cervical cancer. By the time they discovered it, the cancer had already metastasized to her lungs.”

I gasp, covering my mouth with my hand. That’s horrifying. To not only discover the reason why they couldn’t have kids but also discover that it was too late for them to do anything about her cancer -- it’s horrifying.

“That’s horrible, Carter. I’m so sorry you went through that.”

He nods, and when he looks up at me, I can see the glassiness of his eyes, slick with potential tears.

“After her diagnosis, I did everything I could to try to save her. Chemotherapy, radiation, alternative treatments. Eventually she told me that she just wanted to spend what little time she had left with me. By that time there wasn’t much she could do. She passed away less than a year after the diagnosis.”

I feel a tear slide down my cheek and I wipe it away as my heart breaks for the hurt that Carter has endured. No one should ever have to go through the death of a spouse. I can’t believe how horrible I was to him because he didn’t want to talk about this.

I reach out and squeeze Carter’s hand.

“I’m so sorry for not giving you the chance you needed to speak about her. For making you feel like you had to tell me. After everything you went through... that’s the last thing you needed.”

“No. I’m sorry for not telling you, Addy. You weren’t horrible. You just didn’t know -- and how could you? I was so scared to open up. I’ve been pulling away from being with anyone for the past five years. Truthfully, I’ve been scared to move on. When I met you, I was exploding with all these conflicting feelings that I didn’t know how to deal with. Any time I thought about telling you, I became scared that I would lose you before we really got the chance to be anything.”

“You’re not going to lose me, Carter. I’m right here next to you.”

He leans in and kisses me softly. Then Carter yawns.

“Do you want to come in? We could both use the sleep,” I say, my eyes darting to the time. It’s 3:45 in the morning. We’ve been sitting out here for an hour and a half.

“Let’s do it.”

Carter takes the keys out and follows me into the apartment. I lead him into my plain bedroom and shut the door behind us. He takes off his clothes and gets into bed, climbing under the covers. I hold him close when I slide in next to him, gently stroking his neck.

Carter looks at me, his eyes meeting mine. The only sound in the room is the two of us breathing in sync. It feels like forever before Carter leans in, gently pressing his lips against mine.

The kisses become deeper, more passionate as he draws me closer, tangling his hands in my hair. I run my hands down his chest, feeling his sculpted ab muscles.

Carter’s hands float down my body, cradling me to him as his fingertips reach the edges of my underwear.

He pulls them down, and I kick them from my feet. My lips don’t leave his as my hands roam their way to his briefs, freeing his cock easily.

Carter groans, pulling me on top of him. He slides his tongue in my mouth as I position myself over him. I sink slowly down onto him, the tension in my body dissipating at the feeling.

We move together, his hips pushing up to meet mine. Nothing about this moment is rushed or intense.

Every sigh, grunt, and moan is met with a soft touch and his lips fluttering over mine.

Every time we've had sex before, it was fucking. It was quick, rushed, fueled by desire.

This time is different. Every thrust into me, every kiss I place on Carter's shoulder, is only driven by our love for each other.

Though we haven't spoken the words to each other, this moment is enough.

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As the heat begins to build in my belly I moan, grinding my hips into his. Carter groans before he releases his orgasm inside me. I reach my peak at the sensation of him pulsing and ejaculating inside me. We don't separate until we're both finished, and instead of collapsing onto him, I lay down next to him.

Carter pulls me close, kissing me deeply before tucking a strand of hair behind my ear before giving me a soft smile.

"I'm glad I told you, Addy. I feel closer to you than I have felt to anyone since Elise."

It should feel awkward that he's mentioning her name right after what we've just done. But my heart swells with love for him, appreciating that he'll mention her casually at all.

"I'm glad you told me, too."

"You mean the world to me."

When I look into his eyes, I see the truth behind his words. I know what he wants to say. I want to say it, too.

Carter's not ready, and I'm okay with that. After everything I've learned today, I'm realizing that we may have to take things more slowly than I thought.

Maybe it would bother someone else. But for me, being with Carter is enough.

Chapter Eleven

Carter

I flip down the driver's seat mirror to look at myself. The morning after I stayed at Addy's two days ago, she informed me about the dinner she was having so that she could meet Izzy's new boyfriend. At first I wasn't sure if I wanted to get involved in something like that, but after she insisted that she could use the buffer, I agreed.

Now I'm sitting in the car second-guessing myself. I just got Izzy to like me. The last thing I want is for this dinner to go poorly and make things tenser between me and Izzy, or even me and Addy.

Sighing, I close the mirror and get out of the car. I brought another bouquet of flowers. This time I chose pink roses and with a vase so she doesn't have to use the tea pitcher. When I walk up to the front door and knock, Addy answers. Which is surprising, because Izzy has always been the one who answers the door.

Leaning forward, I kiss Addy on the cheek and walk in.

"This is a lovely surprise."

"What is?" Addy asks, her eyes widening. I laugh at the expression.

"You answering the door. It's always been Izzy."

Addy chuckles and shakes her head.

"Right. She's still in her room getting ready. I guess things are different when it's her date. Come join me in the kitchen?" Addy's eyes finally flit down to the bouquet in my arms. Her eyes light up. "A vase!"

I laugh.

“I figured it would be smart to get you one. Considering all the flowers you're bound to be getting in the future.”

“Oh, really? And how many flowers will that be?”

I grin mischievously.

“I can't let you in on all my secrets.”

Addy rolls her eyes and takes the vase of roses from my arms. She sets them in the middle of the small wooden dining table that occupies the tiny dining space.

I watch as Addy adjusts flowers and fluffs the bouquet to her liking. When she's finally satisfied with the way it looks, she steps back and smiles.

“It's perfect.”

“I'm glad you like them.”

Addy smiles broadly before motioning for me to follow her into the kitchen.

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“What are you making?”

“Just a simple roast and potatoes. Nothing fancy.”

Addy puts on an oven mitt and pulls out the pan. The meat and potatoes sizzle in the roast’s juices. I catch a whiff of the roast smell and my stomach growls.

“That smells amazing, Addy. I didn’t know you were such a cook.”

“I’m not, really. My repertoire consists of this and spaghetti, basically.”

“She is not joking,” Izzy says from behind us. I turn around and smile. She’s wearing makeup, which I’ve never seen her do before. It’s clear she wants to impress this Nate character.

“Hey, you like both of those!” Addy shoots Izzy a look.

“I never said they weren’t good.” Izzy sticks her tongue out at Addy. Addy responds by wrinkling her nose and passing Izzy some silverware.

“Here. You can help out here and set the table.”

Izzy rolls her eyes and looks at me.

“See what I have to put up with?”

Izzy starts setting a fork and knife at each spot when the doorbell rings. I mosey over

to the door and open it wide.

The kid standing in front of me is tall and thin like a bean pole. His wavy brown hair sticks out from under his beanie, the hoodie and basketball shorts he's wearing swallowing him whole.

"You must be Nate," I say, trying not to judge him too harshly. Izzy put so much effort into looking her best tonight.

"Yeah. Is Izzy home?" Nate glances around me.

"She's setting the table. Come on in."

I step aside and Nate walks in, looking around. When he spots Izzy he looks visibly more at ease and grins.

"Hey, Iz."

"Nate!" Izzy eagerly puts the last fork on the table before rushing over and throwing her arms around Nate. He wraps one arm around her and grins. Addy comes out of the kitchen and gives the two of them a tight smile.

"Hello, Nate. It's nice to meet you. I'm Izzy's sister, Addy."

She holds her hand out to Nate. He stares at her until Izzy elbows him. He takes Addy's hand and smiles.

"Hi."

"I hope you like rump roast and potatoes."

Addy heads into the kitchen. I follow her into the kitchen where she's dishing portions onto plates.

I grab the two plates she has already dished and deliver them to the table. Izzy leads Nate to his seat next to her. I take my seat as Addy brings out our plates. When she sits we all look at each other.

"Well, dig in!" Addy announces. Nate nods and immediately takes a bite out of a piece of roast.

"This is amazing, Miss Hughes."

"Please, call me Addy."

"Well...okay," he nods. We continue eating in silence for a few moments.

"This really is delicious," I say. Addy smiles and Nate looks up.

“Are you her boyfriend?”

I look at Addy and smile.

“Yes. I’m Carter.”

“You look kind of familiar.”

Nate squints at me before a look of surprise spreads across his face.

“Wait! You’re Carter Castle. From Castle Technologies!” Nate’s face lights up.

“Dude. You’re a huge inspiration for me. Your article in Tech Today is what inspired me to go to California for college!”

Izzy looks between Nate and me with confusion on her face.

“Uh, sorry. You’re talking about this Carter? The one who spends his life playing poker at the Castle Club?” she asks. Nate shoots Izzy a look.

“That was me. I’m not involved in the tech field anymore, I’m afraid. I sold my company a few years ago.” I smile.

“How did you two meet?” Addy breaks in, undoubtedly impatient with the current conversation. This dinner is supposed to be about her meeting Nate.

Nate’s face flushes.

“It was about a month ago...”

“A month ago?” Addy asks. Izzy gives Nate the look of death but he either doesn’t notice or chooses not to acknowledge her.

“Yeah. She was dating my friend Joey, but we all went to a party together and it just turned out that Izzy and I clicked more than they did. Besides, Joey is a tool. He thinks baseball is the only thing that matters in the world.”

Nate rolls his eyes as Izzy’s face flushes. Addy’s jaw drops.

“What? Addy, you had a boyfriend before Nate?”

“She’s had a lot of boyfriends.” Nate shrugs. There’s something wrong with this kid. I can’t tell if he’s mad at Izzy and trying to get back at her or if he’s just another tech guy who’s incredibly socially inept.

Izzy pushes her chair back and storms to her room, slamming the door loudly behind her. Nate looks after her worriedly. Addy stands up and clears her throat.

“Maybe it’s best if we call it a night.”

“Is it my fault? I wasn’t trying to make her upset...” Nate starts but Addy shakes her head.

“No, it’s not your fault. It was nice meeting you, Nate.”

Addy walks down the hall and knocks on Izzy’s door.

Nate looks at me.

“My mom’s not coming to get me for another hour.”

My brows knit together.

“You don’t drive? How did you get here the night Izzy snuck you in?”

Nate’s face glows with embarrassment.

“Uh, my friend dropped me off. I was staying at his house when she texted me.”

I sigh and shake my head. Oh, Izzy. What the hell have you been getting yourself into?

“All right. I’ll take you home.”

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“Really?” His eyes sparkle as he shoots up out of the chair.

He follows me to the car, praising my taste in vehicles as we approach. When we get in he turns to me.

“This issocool. I can’t believe my girlfriend’s step-dad is Carter Castle!”

“I’m not married to Addy. But you might not have a girlfriend for much longer if you keep up that behavior.”

I gesture for him to put his address in the GPS. He obliges before looking at me and frowning.

“What do you mean?”

“You totally threw her to the wolves back there! Addy didn’t even know aboutyou. Now she just found out that Izzy’s been lying to her about a lot more than just being with you.”

“I wasn’t trying to get her in trouble. Izzy told me that she told Addy everything. I didn’t think she would mind me saying any of that stuff.”

Maybe Izzy isn’t as open and honest with anyone as she seems to be. It’s disappointing to come to this realization, but I know it’s not really any of my business. That’s between Addy and her little sister. I don’t have a role in any of this except to take Izzy’s clueless boyfriend home.

“So what do you like about Izzy?” I ask.

“She’s really cool. The coolest girl I’ve ever met. You know she races horses?”

“I did know that. She’s really good.”

“She’s awesome. Her riding videos are great. She’s hilarious, too. She’s pretty, obviously. Or maybe you don’t think about that, but everyone at school knows she is.” Nate shrugs. “She’s ridiculously smart, too. Easily the smartest person I’ve ever met, which is why I find it weird she doesn’t want to go to college.”

I nearly stop the car, I’m so surprised. Does Addy know that Izzy doesn’t plan to go to college?

No. I know she doesn’t. She’s mentioned more than once Izzy going to college, wondering how to pay for it, where she’ll go, if she’ll stay local. I don’t know what to do with this information now that I have it. It feels unfair to keep it from Addy, but at the same time, I can’t help but feel like this is something that needs to come directly from Izzy.

How can I be sure that Izzy is going to tell her? Obviously she’d have to at some point, since her not going to college would be a dead give-away. But Addy definitely deserves to know sooner rather than later.

“Did she say why she doesn’t want to go?”

“All she says is that she doesn’t need it. But it’s not like she has a career plan, so how would she know if she needs it or not?”

That’s a good point.

“Maybe she wants to ride horses. I guess you wouldn’t need a degree for that,” I point out. The thought bounces around my mind even more. It’s the only thing that makes sense, although I can’t imagine her making a profitable career of it.

Even if she wanted to be a jockey, which I doubt is her goal, she’s a little too tall to be one of the extremely well paid ones. She’s almost as tall as Addy, and Addy’s already pretty tall for a woman.

“That’s my house,” Nate points. I pull up outside the door and smile at him.

“It was nice meeting you, Nate.”

“You, too. Actually, do you think we could exchange numbers? I have so many questions about the tech industry that I would prefer answered by someone with experience instead of my guidance counselor.”

I hesitate. I’m not sure I want this kid blowing up my phone 24/7.

“How about I give you my email? That way I can answer questions with links and information that you can read up on, too.”

Nate nods, agreeing. I give him my email before he steps out of the car and jogs up to this house. It’s far nicer than the small apartment that Izzy and Addy live in.

Speaking of, should I go back to the apartment? Or go home and let Addy tell me when she’s ready to talk.

Probably the latter. I shoot off a quick text, letting Addy know to call me whenever she’s done talking to Izzy and that I’m heading back to my house.

Then I drop my phone in the cup holder and head home.

Chapter Twelve

Addy

“Why didn’t you tell me you were dating?” I ask when I step into her room.

Izzy looks down and hugs her pillow to her chest. There’re small streaks of tears running down her cheeks.

“It wasn’t a big deal. It’s not like I wanted to bring any of them home.”

“You didn’t... were you having sex with them?” I ask.

“Addy! I’m not a slut. Nate was my first,” Izzy frowns and I shake my head.

“Come on, Iz. Even if you did have sex with them, it wouldn’t make you a slut. I just wanted to make sure that we didn’t need to test you for anything else.”

I cross the room and sit next to Izzy on her bed.

“I guess I was just embarrassed. I’ve gone out with a lot of guys but none of them seemed right for me. They barely lasted two weeks. But I really like Nate. That’s why I snuck him in.” Addy frowns. “Well, I did like Nate. After that disaster of a dinner I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, come on. It wasn’t that bad.”

“He completely spilled the details of my dating life to the whole table.”

I snort and shake my head.

“Izzy, the whole table consisted of me and Carter. It’s not like he was yelling everything through a bullhorn in the school cafeteria.”

“What’s a bullhorn?” Izzy crinkles her nose. I sigh. It’s weird having a little sister who doesn’t always pick up on my references.

“It’s something that cheerleaders shout into so they can be heard. Or policemen at crowd scenes.” I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. “Maybe you should cut Nate some slack. I’m sure he wasn’t purposely trying to embarrass you. Unless he’s mean like that. Is he mean to you?”

I look at Izzy and she shakes her head.

“No.” Izzy sighs. “He’s never mean. He’s just a little awkward.”

“He does seem like he’s a bit goofy,” I respond. Izzy laughs.

“But I really like him. He’s so funny and smart.” Izzy sits up straighter. “Speaking of smart, did you know that Carter was in IT?”

“Yeah. He told me about it. It’s not really a part of his life anymore, though. Which I feel like you know. Since you’re such a smartie pants.”

I ruffle her hair. Izzy pushes my hand away and turns away.

“Don’t do that. Do you think I should call Nate?”

“If you want things to work out with him then you definitely should. I think we should plan another dinner night.”

Izzy grimaces.

“Don’t you think this was punishment enough?”

I can’t stop the guffaws from leaving me.

“You’re hilarious, Izzy. I’ll leave you to call your boyfriend.”

When I close the door behind me, I feel better about Izzy and Nate. Despite the dinner not going as planned, everything still seemed to work out in the long run. I like it when things work out that way.

After I drop Izzy off at school, I head over to Carter’s. His big mansion looms over the driveway as I pull up. Carter steps out of the front door as I get out of the car.

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“Hey, you,” I call out. Carter grins and walks toward me. When we meet we embrace in a comforting hug.

“I missed your company last night.”

“I missed yours, too. Thanks for taking Nate home. He wasn’t even on my mind when I chased Izzy down the hallway.”

Carter waves as if there’s nothing to worry about.

“You were concerned about the person who should be your first priority: your little sister. In my book, you did exactly what you should have done.”

I grin, threading my fingers through his.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“I thought we could do something fun. Like an escape room?”

My brows furrow.

“An escape room? Have you done one of those?”

“Of course. Haven’t you?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“You’re in for a real treat, then. They’re the best.”

“I’ll drive,” I sing song. Before Carter can protest I turn around and skip to my car, eager to be in control for once.

“The key is clearly in a book,” Carter says as he throws book after book off the shelves. None of them open at all; they’re fake.

“The riddle says ‘Words on paper which you can read. With this ztory you’ll hear a ding.’ And the word ‘story’ has a z at the beginning for some reason. What book has to do with a ding?” I ask.

“I don’t know. But there has to be something in here!”

As he continues throwing books around, I mosey off into the center of the room. The room we chose is a lounge/study sort of thing. We’re making some progress -- at least I think we are -- and if I’m not mistaken, this riddle will help us find the key we need.

The fake study is cozy and comfy, with a big brown couch pushed against the wall. A large green rug is folded up in front of it, indicative of the searching we’ve done. There’s a trap door under the rug but, right as we were about to open it, one of the employees came through the intercom and said that it was a part of a separate escape game.

My eyes land on the desk. I walk over, admiring the small gold lamp and antique typewriter.

Wait a second. A typewriter. I’ve never used one, but all the movies show that it makes a ding whenever you hit the ‘return’ to advance a line down the page.

I trace my fingers lightly against the keys of the keyboard. They’re smooth and cool,

made out of some sort of silver. I pull the riddle out of my pocket and read it over again. After staring at the note for a few seconds, I reach out and peck the 'z' key. There's the sound of metal dropping within the machine.

When I turn around Carter is still throwing books all over the floor.

"Carter. Look." I carefully lift the typewriter, which reveals a key sitting on the desk.

"We just had to lift the typewriter? That's easy."

"No. I pressed z."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because the riddle said 'ztory' instead of 'story'. It's the only thing that made sense."

Carter grins at me.

"How did I land such an intelligent woman? I would still be tearing into that bookcase if it weren't for you."

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My gaze shifts to the bookcase. There're only a couple rows of books left.

"I'm sure you would have gotten it eventually. You were beginning to run out of books."

Carter chuckles as I lead him to the door. I insert the final key and we cheer when it's a match. We've gone through two bogus keys already; we didn't need a third one.

The employees congratulate us and take our picture before we leave.

"That was a ton of fun!" I exclaim as soon as we leave the building.

"We didn't do as much teamwork as I would have liked, though."

I glance at Carter from the corner of my eye. He's been mentioning 'teamwork' and 'working together' for the last week. It almost feels like we're on a company retreat instead of leaving an escape room.

"Hard to do much teamwork when you're hurling classic first editions from the oak shelves."

"Those weren't real first editions. They were all empty books."

I laugh.

"So not the point."

“All right, all right. So it might be my fault. I accept that.” Carter grins and grabs my hand. “Want to grab drinks at my favorite place?”

“Where’s that?”

“Come on.”

“I love it here,” I say as I look over the rooftop. The view of the city is incredible -- all of the buildings standing tall and the clear water of Lake Michigan brushing up against the shores of the beach.

“Me, too. I used to come here all the time. It’s my favorite place to be.” Carter takes a sip of his wine. “How did your chat with Izzy go last night?”

“Better than I expected it to. She was embarrassed, but I don’t think she was mad.”

“What did you think of Nate?” he asks. The question catches me off guard even though I don’t know why. It’s as if I’m suspicious at the change of topic for some reason.

“He seemed okay. A little... I don’t know. Socially awkward is how Izzy put it.”

“So she already knows the way he is. That’s good. Maybe that’s why she was able to forgive more easily.”

“Probably. Izzy likes him, and that’s what really matters. I told her that I want to do a do-over dinner so that I can actually get to know him.”

Carter’s eyes brighten.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea.”

“Did you learn anything driving him home?”

“Yeah. He seems like a good kid. He’s really impressed with Izzy. Says she’s the coolest girl he’s ever met.” Carter pauses before continuing. “He wants to do tech in college.”

“That’s right. He mentioned California. What’s that have to do with tech?”

“Silicon Valley. Tech capital of the country. Best place to get a start up or new idea off the ground, especially if you want investors.”

I nod. Seems like the kid did his research, which is good. Maybe his good qualities will rub off on Izzy a little.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind I feel guilty. Izzy’s a great kid. I know she’s smart and talented. I guess I just wish she was more driven. That’s all she’s really missing.

“That’s great. He sounds like he has a great head on his shoulders.”

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Carter nods before smiling at me.

“What does Izzy want to go to school for? You’ve mentioned her going a few times but I don’t think we’ve ever actually talked about it.”

I smile, thinking about Izzy excitedly talking about college last year.

“It’s been a while since we last had a conversation about it, now that you’ve brought it up. But the last time we talked, she wanted to go into equine studies. Makes sense, right? She’s always loved horses. I can only imagine that with Dragon being hers, she’ll only want to study that more.”

At least I’d think so. But maybe she only wanted to do that because she thought it would be the only way for her to stay close to horses. Maybe now that she has Dragon she’ll want to do something else. Pursue different dreams.

“Maybe it’s about time for us to have the college talk again. She’s already taken her ACT but we haven’t talked about her college applications yet and it’s time to get started on them. Early admissions would be a good idea. The earlier she applies, the more likely she is to meet the scholarship deadlines. She’ll get plenty of grants through financial aid, since I don’t make a ton of money. But any little bit helps, especially if she wants to go somewhere far away for college. So, thanks for reminding me.”

I smile at Carter and raise my wine glass.

Carter looks relieved, even though I can’t for the life of me think of why that would

be. But maybe I'm reading into things.

My phone beeps, and when I check it, I realize it's getting close to the time that I need to pick Izzy up.

"I'll have to get Izzy pretty soon. Do you want to come with me?"

"Can I have my driver pick her up and we can all meet at my house?"

"Your house?" I raise my brows. Izzy hasn't been to his house yet. Not because I don't want her to.

Truthfully, I don't know what it is. Maybe there's a part of me that's worried Izzy will become unsatisfied with the lifestyle we live. Like she'll see Carter's mansion and wonder why we were dealt such an unfair hand in life.

I'm sure she's already asked those questions, but I've not had to field them yet.

"Yeah. We can play party games or something."

The way he smiles melts my heart and I can't stop myself from smiling back.

"Okay. Your place, then."

Chapter Thirteen

Carter

"Yeah, yeah, I don't want to hear your whining, little rich boy. Hand over the three hundred," Izzy says, holding out her hand for the colorful money. I look down at the stacks of bills in front of me. That will leave me with two dollars to my name. Talk

about shit luck.

“What about a trade? I’ll give you Vermont and fifty dollars?” I ask, holding up one of my properties. I don’t have a whole set yet, but I’m hoping I can convince Izzy to let me stay in the game.

“Do I look like a chump to you? Vermont’s only worth about a hundred dollars.”

“Yeah, but you already own Oriental. So all you’ll need is Connecticut.” My tone is more hopeful than I am.

“I don’t think so. How about... you give me Boardwalk and I’ll call the debt even.” Izzy leans back in the chair and smiles maliciously. My jaw drops and I look over at Addy, begging her to get Izzy to show me some mercy.

“Addy can’t save you,” Izzy quips. Addy looks at me and laughs.

“What do you expect me to do?” she asks.

“I don’t know! Talk some sense into the capitalist nightmare that you raised?”

Addy howls with laughter and Izzy grins before waving her hand in front of my face.

“Hello, the capitalist nightmare is over here. What will it be? Boardwalk or all your money?” Izzy raises a brow. I sigh and count out the bills before handing them to her. “Wow. You’re really saving Boardwalk like you’ll be able to buy Park Place if you land on it?”

“See? This is why I don’t play Monopoly with her. She gets mean,” Addy says, flipping another page in the magazine she picked up at the store. I chuckle and shake my head.

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“I’m confident I can get her back next turn.”

Izzy’s turn flies by and it’s back to me. If I can just roll a nine I’ll win all the cash in free parking. I shake the dice rigorously before holding them out to Addy.

“Blow on them for luck.”

Izzy snorts.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. There’s a reason she’s so bitter she won’t play with me,” Izzy smirks.

Addy narrows her eyes at her little sister before blowing on the dice. I roll them onto the table and get... a ten.

After landing on Kentucky Avenue the game is over. Since I owe Izzy more money than anything I have is worth. Izzy cackles as we pack the game up.

“I told you.”

“I still think you cheat,” Addy pops up.

“You don’t let me be banker or do properties. So how could I cheat?” Izzy asks Addy incredulously.

“I think you hide money up your sleeve.”

“You caught me. I carry Monopoly money everywhere on the off chance that I’ll play a game and need to beat someone.”

Izzy chuckles good naturedly. Addy leans forward and smiles at her sister.

“Carter and I were talking today about Nate and how he wants to go to school for tech. That’s really neat.”

Izzy beams.

“Isn’t it? He’s so smart. I’m lucky to have found someone smart like him.”

Addy smiles.

“Yeah. But I was wondering what your plans for college are. I know last time we talked about you going for equine studies but we haven’t talked in a while. If we want to get early admissions we need to start thinking about schools now.”

Izzy freezes as she puts the lid on the box. She licks her lips before turning to look at Addy.

“Right. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

Addy perks up, looking at Izzy with excitement.

“Have you already decided where you want to go?”

Izzy’s eyes flit to me as her face turns red with embarrassment. She looks down at her feet.

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just that...” Izzy sighs. “I don’t know if I want to go to college, Addy.”

Izzy looks up and meets Addy’s gaze. But it’s as if Addy is frozen from shock. She stares at Izzy, the only movement coming from her the rise and fall of her chest with every breath she takes and the blinking.

“Addy?” I ask, leaning in to touch her arm. She reacts, jumping before smiling at Izzy.

“Sorry, I think I was hallucinating. Did you say you don’t want to go to college?”

Addy smiles but it’s not a friendly smile. No, it’s the kind of smile a mother gives their child when they’re giving the kid a chance to rethink what they’ve said. Izzy doesn’t take that chance, though. Instead, she simply reiterates what she said previously.

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“Technically, I said I don’t know if I want to go to college.” Izzy shrugs before looking back up at Addy. Addy blinks.

“That’s funny. I don’t remember giving you a choice about attending college.”

Anger fills both of their faces. Izzy stands up and crosses her arms as she addresses her sister.

“Here’s something funnier: it’s not your choice if I go or not. I’ll be 18 by the time I graduate. You can’t force me to do something I don’t want to do.”

“But you used to want to. What the hell happened? One day you’re a kid with huge dreams and the next you just abandon them?” Addy stands up and focuses all of her anger on Izzy.

“I’m not abandoning anything!” Izzy’s voice raises. “It’s just a change of plans. You didn’t go to college. How can you try to force me to go?”

Addy laughs bitterly before shaking her head.

“You’re right. I didn’t go to college. And look at how well that’s worked out for me. I’m working as a tournament hostess in a club instead of doing what I actually wanted to do. We live in a shitty apartment that has mold and bad water pressure. Is this the kind of life you want to live? This is the future you want for yourself?”

“It’s not that bad!” Izzy shouts. “We’re happy and we have each other. We always have enough food and the things we really need.”

Addy groans with frustration before taking Izzy by the shoulders and shaking her lightly.

“Wake up, Iz. We’re on food stamps. I only allow us to take five minute showers because otherwise we can’t afford the water bill. We have to do our laundry at the laundromat and our car is always breaking down. We have each other, yes. But we could be so much happier, Izzy. You could be so much happier. College is the way that you can do that. Without a degree you’ll just be part-time at the equestrian center making \$10 an hour. That’s not a life. You won’t even be able to support yourself on that.”

“It’s \$12 an hour, and yeah, those things suck! But they’re not forever. I don’t want to go to school for equestrian science when I can start working at the center right away—”

“You can work at the center while you go to college!”

“Oh, my God, I’m so sick of school! I don’t need college. I’ll work my way up the ranks like Mrs. Martin did and become the center director.”

“Mrs. Martin’s husband is loaded! He’s a freaking hedge fund manager with all kinds of money to spend. Mrs. Martin didn’t need a degree to do anything with that kind of money at her disposal.”

“Nate will be rich one day and I won’t have to worry about it, either. He’ll take care of me!” Izzy shouts. Addy laughs out loud.

“God, get a grip. You’re not going to stay with him forever. He’s moving to California. He’ll end up meeting someone and you’ll be here, working at the equestrian center waiting for another man to save you.”

Izzy gasps before a tear slips down her cheek.

“I hate you!” she screams before turning and running to her room.

“That’s right! Run off to your room like the child you are!” Addy shouts down the hall as Izzy’s door slams. I look around, unsure of what to say to Addy at this moment.

Her chest is heaving with anger, her breathing ragged from the shouting. When she turns around her face is filled with tears. I hold my arms out and she collapses into them, wiping the wetness from her face. I walk over to the couch and we sit down, her head on my shoulder.

“I just want what’s best for her,” Addy whispers. “Why can’t she see that?”

I shrug, staring at the wall in front of me. There’s a brown stain on the roof- remnants of some sort of water damage from the apartment upstairs.

We stay like this for a long time, her head on my shoulder and us staring at the wall. I don’t know the words to say to comfort her. My family’s fights were never about these sorts of things. This is something about which I have no advice to give. After what feels like a lifetime Addy sits up straight.

I turn to look at her.

“You know, I understand you want Izzy to do what’s going to give her the best life. But Izzy will be an adult, and she’s going to be the one making those decisions. Of course you should offer guidance, but at the end of the day, it’s her choice what she does with her life.”

Addy stares at me before nodding.

“I know. I know it is. It’s just hard. I don’t want to see her making the same mistakes that I did. She has the opportunity to do so much better. Nate is a nice kid but I don’t want Izzy to base her future around someone who might not be there in the long run.”

I nod.

“I understand that. But to Izzy it probably seems like you’re telling her what to do with her life.”

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Addy sighs and stands up.

“You’re right. I was out of line. I need to apologize to her.”

I nod and stand up before pulling her into a hug.

“You’re an amazing sister and you’re doing the best you can. That’s all anyone can expect.”

Addy pulls away and kisses my cheek before going down the hall. I watch her take a deep breath before knocking on Izzy’s door.

“Izzy? I know you’re probably still angry, but can I please come in? It’s important,” Addy calls through the door when there’s no response. After more silence Addy shakes her head and opens the door. Then she screams. I dash to her side, peeking into the room.

“What?” I ask, turning to look at her. Her shrieks had me convinced that Izzy had tripped and cracked her head open.

“There’s no one here,” Addy whispers. I turn to look at the room again and realize she’s right. Izzy’s nowhere to be seen. But her room window is wide open, her sheer curtains blowing inward. “Where could she have gone?”

Addy steps into Izzy’s room and runs a hand through her hair. She’s on the verge of tears when she looks at me. I step in the room and pull Addy toward me, squeezing her tight.

“Don’t worry. We’ll find her, I promise.”

I stroke her hair and look around the room. Nothing seems particularly out of place; her bed is messy the way I would expect a teenager’s to be. A pile of clothes are on the floor by her open closet door.

“Can you think of anywhere she might have gone?” I ask, pulling away to look in Addy’s eyes.

“My best guess would be Nate’s. Except I have no idea where he lives.”

“I do. I dropped him off the other day.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the keys before giving Addy a small smile.

“We’ve got this.”

Chapter Fourteen

Addy

I’m staring out the window nervously instead of looking at Carter. For some reason, every time I look at him I feel silly for being so panicked. It’s not as if he’s done or said anything to make me feel that way. He’s just being so calm. It’s making me feel like I’m even more hysterical.

Every bone in my body regrets screaming at Izzy. She was right. She is going to be an adult. Of course going to college should be her choice. But what if she makes the wrong one? If she doesn’t go to college right after high school, then the chances that she’ll ever go are slim. I don’t want her to make a decision that will limit her future options.

If Izzy gets a degree, she doesn't have to use it for anything. She can still go to work at the equestrian center if that's what she wants to do. But she still has the option of getting a higher paying job. I tip my head against the window.

I can't keep projecting my fears onto Izzy. I think it would be a mistake for her to decline to attend college. But it's Izzy's mistake to make, not mine. I've already gone down that road and made my own choices. I can't dictate hers, too.

The changing scenery outside catches my attention. The strips of businesses turn into streets filled with huge white houses and perfectly manicured lawns.

"Is this Nate's neighborhood?" I ask, looking anxiously at every house. Of course they have money. I shouldn't have expected anything less.

"Yep."

"You have a great memory, you know that? I never would have remembered how to get there after going there only one time."

"Yep, I do. Plus, it's in the GPS history."

I look at Carter. He grins and winks at me.

I chuckle and look up at the sky.

Carter tips his head back and laughs as we pull into the driveway of a huge house. I take a deep breath before getting out of the car. Carter smiles and squeezes my hand reassuringly as we walk toward the house. The front door is decorated with a fresh wreath woven with vines and flowers. When I ring the doorbell, loud yapping echoes throughout the house. It feels like forever before the door opens.

The woman who answers the door is petite with bleached blond hair to her shoulders. She's wearing a comfy robe closed tight, a tiny dog held in one arm.

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“Can I help you?” she asks. The dog growls and she turns away so the dog can’t see us.

“We’re actually here to see Nate, if that’s okay,” I respond. The woman looks us up and down before her brows knit together.

“You two are a little old to be friends of Nate’s.” Nate’s mom is eyeing us suspiciously now. I chuckle awkwardly before shaking my head.

“No, sorry. My younger sister is dating Nate.”

“Oh, you’re Izzy’s sister?” Nate’s mom smiles. “She’s a very sweet girl. We love to watch her race at the equestrian center. Come on in. My name’s Joanna.”

She steps aside so we can enter the house. When she shuts the door behind us, the dog goes wild, barking and snarling so much that drool drips out of his mouth.

“Shush, Barry,” Joanna whispers to the dog before smiling at us. “I’ll let Nate know you’re here.”

She goes up the stairs as the dog continues to bark loudly. Carter glances at me and smiles.

“Noisy dog,” he whispers.

“I think he’s cute.”

The sound of someone stomping down the stairs cuts Carter off before he can respond. Nate looks surprised when he sees us. His brown hair is wild and frizzy atop his head, the pajama pants he's wearing stopping a little above his ankles like he grew unexpectedly.

"Oh, hey, guys. What are you doing here?"

I grimace.

"Addy and I had a fight earlier. When I went to her room to check on her she was gone. We thought she might have come here."

"Did you try calling her?" Nate asks like that wouldn't be the first thing I'd think of. I resist the urge to make a sarcastic remark and nod.

"Yes. Her phone is turned off."

"I haven't heard from her. I'll keep an eye out for her, though, and let you know if I hear from her."

We exchange numbers before Carter and I head back to the car. When I slide in the passenger seat my hand flies to my mouth. I nibble my nail to soothe my anxiety. Carter reaches over and gently pulls my hand away from my mouth.

"Don't worry, Addy. We'll find her. She couldn't have gone far without a car."

"Somebody doesn't need a car to go far in this city. She could have taken a taxi or a bus or even hitchhiked!" I throw my hands in the air and suck in a panicked breath. Oh, my God. What if she hitchhiked? She could be in a stranger's car halfway to Oregon by now.

Carter chuckles and squeezes my hand.

“Come on, Addy. Izzy’s got a good head on her shoulders. There’s no way she would get in the car with somebody she doesn’t know.” Carter shifts and looks up at the house in front of us. “She’s not here, so she must be somewhere else where she feels safe and comfortable. Do you know where she feels safest?”

As soon as the question leaves Carter’s mouth I realize where Izzy is.

“Of course. How could I be so stupid?” I mutter to myself.

I chuckle and shake my head before looking at Carter.

“I know where she is.”

“Where is she?”

“Riding her horse.”

When we pull up outside of the equestrian center fifteen minutes later, all the lights are off but one. I smile as I step out of the car and hear the sound of hooves hitting the dirt of the training ground. We’ve found her.

Carter steps out of the car and comes around to join me.

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“Ready to go grab her?” he asks, smiling. I smile back but shake my head.

“Thank you for helping me find her, but I need to talk to her one-on-one. This is my mess, and I want to fix it.”

Carter stares at me for a moment before nodding.

“Of course. I’ll be waiting out here for the two of you when you’re done.” Carter smiles and steps back into the car. I turn around and take a big breath. We found Izzy and she’s okay.

When I get to the training ground, Izzy is brushing Dragon’s mane.

“He looks great,” I say loudly. My voice echoes throughout the space. Izzy looks up and gives me a small smile.

“He’s the most beautiful horse in the world. I’m so lucky that Carter bought him for me.” The smile drops from Izzy’s face. “I know you want me to go to college. And I know it would be smart for me to. It’s just... I’d rather be here at the center. There’s nothing I love more than being here.”

As I approach, Dragon steps back. I step in front of Izzy and pull her into a hug. After a moment she reciprocates and wraps her arms around me. I stroke her hair for a moment before pulling away.

“Izzy, I was wrong for yelling at you. You’re right when you say it’s your decision. My opinion shouldn’t even come into it. I’ve already lived those years and made my

choices. It's not fair of me to push my thoughts and regrets onto you."

"Why didn't you go to college?"

I sigh and look at my feet.

"I didn't think I should because of money. It didn't seem like the right thing to do, but I was wrong. If I had gone to college, I would be in a much better situation than I am right now. We wouldn't struggle as much. There are so many nights that I lay in bed praying that there will be a reset button in front of me."

Izzy hugs me.

"I know you think you made a mistake, but I think everything has happened the way it's supposed to. If you had gone to college, we wouldn't live here and I never would have gone to this equestrian center. You wouldn't have met Carter and I wouldn't have Dragon."

I chuckle and shake my head.

"There's a lot more to life than a man who will buy you things. Don't get me wrong; Carter is great and very generous. I really like him and I'm glad that I met him. But if I had gone to college, I could have met him under different circumstances."

I take Izzy's hand and lead her to the seats by the stable. Dragon follows us, chuffing at the session cut short. "I want to apologize for what I said about Nate, too. I know you really like him, and I don't want to discredit that. But don't rely on a man to buy you things and make your dreams come true. You should go after them yourself."

Izzy sighs.

“I just said that to make you mad. I like Nate, but obviously we won’t still be together after he goes to California. He doesn’t plan on ever coming back, and I plan on staying here for the rest of my life. I want to take over the equestrian center.” Izzy smiles at her horse before turning to look at me. “I’ll apply to college. I won’t promise that I’ll go, but I’ll make sure I have the option if I want to.”

I smile and squeeze Izzy into a hug. She grunts before pushing me away.

“Jeez, you’re strangling me.”

My head tips back as I laugh.

“How did I get so lucky to end up with a sister like you?” I ask, tickling her side. She swats my hand away and crinkles her nose.

“I guess one of us had to be the lucky sister.” We both chuckle before standing up. “I’ll put Dragon away and meet you out front?”

“Sure. Carter is driving, and he’s waiting out front for us.”

Izzy stops and turns to me.

“I really like him for you,” she says, smiling.

“I like him for me, too.”

Izzy leads Dragon back into the stables as I walk toward the exit. Only the sound of the wind whistling through the empty sounds washes over me.

If it wasn’t for Carter, it would have taken me so much longer to find Izzy. I probably would have filed a police report. I would have looked here eventually, but definitely

not as soon as I did with his advice.

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When I exit the training ground door, Carter is parked right in front of the building. I smile as I approach the car and open the door. He looks over at me as I step in.

“Did the talk go okay?”

“It went great. Thank you so much for helping me find her. You really helped me keep a level head about the whole situation.” I reach over and squeeze his hand. Carter smiles and is about to say something when Izzy opens the back door.

“Hey, lovebirds,” she sing songs as she buckles her seatbelt.

“How’s Dragon doing?” Carter asks, turning to look at her. She beams.

“He’s amazing. I think we’ll be ready for the wide barrel race in a few weeks. He’s the best horse ever.” Izzy’s stomach growls. “Ugh, I’m starving. Can we go home?”

I laugh.

“You would be starving, considering you ran out before we could eat dinner.”

“Let’s stop somewhere and get something. Do you want JD burgers?” Carter asks, looking at the two of us. When my stomach growls he laughs and shakes his head. “Never mind, we’re going whether you say yes or not.”

Chapter Fifteen

Carter

My eyes flit across the room. Addy and I make eye contact as she works the tables at tonight's tournament. When I smile she looks down and blushes as if she's embarrassed to be caught looking at me. I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face.

It's not that I think it's amusing that she gets embarrassed easily. It's just sweet that she feels that way about me. Many women have fawned over me over the years, including women in this club. It isn't the same, though. When Addy looks at me, I can tell that she's seeing all of me -- not just the tough persona that I exude.

"Mr. Castle?" the dealer asks, looking at me expectantly. I look down at my cards, then at the spread on the table. Full house. When I look around the table at the other players, their expressions range from bored to impatient. I smile and push some chips toward the dealer.

"Raise."

The other players groan as they each throw in their hands. I resist the urge to chuckle as the dealer gives me the chips and looks at her watch.

"Okay, players. We're going to take a quick fifteen minute break and then resume."

As the dealer leaves, the other players disperse, some heading toward the restrooms and some going outside for a smoke. Court approaches me, smiling easily.

"Carter! Just the man I wanted to see."

"You've had the opportunity to see me all night."

Court brushes off my comment before sliding his arm around my shoulders and leading me to his office in the back. The office is luxurious, with a large leather chair

pushed behind the enormous oak desk. Court plops down in the leather chair before gesturing for me to sit down on the couch. I sigh and take a seat.

“This won’t take too long, right? I have a game to get back to and money to win.”

“Oh, please, Carter. I don’t see why you’re so concerned with the money. It’s not like you have a shortage of it.”

I don’t dignify him with a response, instead simply arching a brow. Court continues.

“All right, fine. Cassie and I have been talking about ways to boost club attendance and give back to the community.”

I lean back and cross my arms before smiling.

“Not a bad idea. I think the membership here would be pleased to see the Castle Club hosting a charity event. So what are you thinking? Poker Playing for Underprivileged Youths?”

Court shakes his head as his eyes soften and he smiles.

“No. Cassie suggested something a bit closer to home. It wasn’t obvious to me at first but after she said something I couldn’t get it out of my head. It’s like a light bulb turned on out of nowhere.”

“Closer to home...?” I mutter and rub my neck thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know what you’re talking about.”

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Court looks at me sympathetically before rifling through the papers on the desk in front of him. When he finds what he's looking for he passes it over to me. I look down at the paper.

The page is decorated cheerfully, with balloons and bubbly writing. Play Poker to Help Fight Cervical Cancer! the big bubble letters proclaim. I blink, unsure how to process the information in front of me. The event is scheduled for a month from now.

"Cervical cancer?" I whisper before looking up at Court. He nods.

"Of course. We figured that it would be better to do it for a cause close to home. That's why we want you to do promotional work for the event. If the public sees that this is a subject you care about, then we will likely have an amazing turnout. The publicity for the club will be great, too."

Seeds of annoyance sow within me. Publicity for the club?

"You want me to talk about my wife dying, something that has destroyed me emotionally, so that you can get more publicity for the club?" I can't stop the anger from seeping into my words. Court blinks and shakes his head.

"Carter, that's not what I meant. All I meant is that we'll have a better turnout if people see that this is personal for us..."

"No. It's not personal for us. It's personal for me. My wife died. Not yours. Not mom. And you want me to go blab about it on the radio and on television so that the club's image is improved. Do you realize how fucked up that is? How much that cheapens

my grief?”

I stand up indignantly, crumpling up the flier and tossing it back to my brother. “Count me out of your stupid charity. I don’t want anything to do with it or the club.”

I storm out of the office, slamming the door behind me. The sound of my anger is drowned out by the regular sounds of the club; glasses clinking and people laughing with loud music pumping behind us. I look around the room. No one seems to have noticed how angry I was when I left Court’s office. My eyes flit to the poker table where I’ve been seated. My seat is empty, everyone resuming play. But I’m not going to rejoin the game.

I’m not going to give this club my business when my brother expects me to exploit my wife and her death for his own gain. Anger tugs the sides of my mouth down again. I storm toward the exit.

On my way I glance at Addy who continues to work the room and make the players comfortable. Her eyes meet mine and then widen at my expression. The anger on my face must be especially evident. I don’t stop to say anything to her, though. The last thing I want is to lash out at her when she doesn’t deserve it.

When I get out of the club I make a beeline for my car and get in. But I don’t immediately drive away. Instead, I place my hands on the wheel and take deep breaths. It’s something that I used to do with Elise to calm down. She always knew exactly what to do or say when I was upset or angry.

“Elise? What should I do?” I ask out loud, tipping my head back against the seat in anguish. With the fading anger I’m coming to the realization that Court would obviously not see his request as exploiting Elise or her memory. “Send me a sign. Anything that tells me what to do next.”

A knock on my window causes me to jump. When I turn, Addy is leaning down and looking in at me. I smile with embarrassment. As much as I don't want to admit that her knocking scared me a just a bit, it would be silly to deny it.

"You want to roll down the window?" she smiles.

"I'll do you one better." I press the unlock button on the door. "Hop in."

"I still have half a shift to work, you know."

"Just for a chat."

Addy concedes and walks around the car to get in. When the door is closed she turns to look at me.

"So, what's wrong?" Addy asks.

"How do you know something is wrong?"

Addy wrinkles her brow and looks at me like I'm an idiot.

"Come on. You lookedpissedwalking out of there. How could I not know?"

I sigh and shake my head. My gaze goes to the front of the club where a few people are walking in.

"I just had a meeting with Court. He wants to do a benefit night to raise money for cervical cancer. He wants me to speak and do press for the benefit and talk about my wife."

When I turn to look at Addy, her expression is perplexed.

“Why is that a bad thing?”

“It just feels like I’m betraying her by using her memory to gain publicity for the club.” I shake my head. I know it sounds idiotic, but it doesn’t change the way I feel.

Addy smiles and caresses my cheek before responding.

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“I’ve never gone through anything like this and don’t have the experience of losing a spouse. But maybe the benefit would be a good thing. You obviously can’t undo the fact that your wife died. But I think raising money for people diagnosed with cancer would actually honor her memory.”

I nod but don’t look at her, so she continues. “You could name the benefit after her. Or better yet, create your own charity or foundation dedicated to her, with the first event being held here at the club. That way you can do more than just one event. It would then seem more like an honor to your wife and less like club advertising.”

I finally turn to look at her. Addy’s eyes are wide with earnest, and I can’t help but crack a smile in her presence.

“You know what? That’s a great idea, Addy. Thank you.”

Addy looks down at her phone before smiling at me.

“I’m glad I could help. I have to get going. My break is almost over and I have to pee.” Addy leans forward and plants a kiss on my cheek. “See you soon?”

“I’ll talk to you after your shift.”

I watch Addy get out of the car and sashay back into the club. My eyes linger on her hips as they sway with every step. It’s obvious to me now more than ever that Addy is so much more than the woman who has my heart. She’s the sign that Elise has been sending to me.

“Shh...,” Addy giggles between kisses as we make our way down the hall to her bedroom. The snores coming from Izzy’s room indicate that there is no way we’d end up waking her up.

I kiss Addy again as she opens the door to her room. We both crash inside and I close the door loudly behind me. Instead of making it to the bed, I bring Addy to the floor with me.

Starting at her lips I slowly begin kissing down her neck, stopping every so often to fiddle with the buttons on Addy’s black shirt. The lacy black bra she’s wearing underneath is revealed.

“Come on,” Addy whispers as she tears at the hem of my shirt. She lifts it up over my head and tosses it aside.

“Be patient,” I chuckle, pulling the bottom of her shirt from her leather shorts. I run my hands over the smooth skin of her stomach. I hook my fingers in the sides of her shorts and slowly pull them down her legs, revealing the seamless panties she’s wearing underneath. “Not matching?”

I arch an eyebrow as she leans up and fiddles with the button of my jeans. She pushes them down eagerly, looking up at me with lust.

“I didn’t know you’d be coming home with me today.”

After wiggling out of my jeans I toss them to the side and put my face between Addy’s thighs. I take her panties in my teeth and pull them down her legs, exposing her most intimate parts. I lean down and flick my tongue over her clit. Addy gasps and arches her back at the sensation.

This encourages me, and I move my tongue harder and faster against her most

sensitive little button. She moans as her thighs clamp against my head, holding my face in place above her. Addy continues to writhe as the movements become more rhythmic.

“Oh, my God,” Addy moans as an orgasm takes over her body. Her legs begin to quake as it passes through her, and it takes only a few moments before her thighs release me. I crawl forward immediately, position myself at her entrance and push in my hard cock before her pleasure can wear off. She cries out as I move into her warm wetness.

I shudder as her insides encompass me. I move slowly at first, relishing in the heat of the moment. When Addy rocks her hips up to meet mine impatiently, I pick up the speed. She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me in deeper.

“You feel incredible,” I whisper as I bury myself into her. I begin thrusting faster as she makes noises of pleasure in my ear. She hits her second orgasm, and when her cunt tightens around me I can’t stop my own pleasure from spilling inside of her. I collapse next to her and pull her close.

Chapter Sixteen

Addy

“Fold,” the cowboy sitting at the end of the table groans. Actually, I’m not certain he is a cowboy, but he always comes in wearing a classic hat and expensive cowboy boots, so that’s what I’ve taken to calling him. He doesn’t seem to mind the nickname, either.

“Mine again. Man, rough night for you guys,” the man who won the round pulls the chips toward him. He’s wearing a pair of bright green sunglasses and his hair is slicked back like an old school greaser’s. There’s something about him that I find

utterly off-putting, even if I can't put my finger on it.

"I still think you're cheating." The man next to him crosses his arms and grumbles. I don't intervene. I know the man isn't cheating, and it wouldn't be worth engaging with the two of them about it. I watch silently as the dealer continues to collect the table cards and place them into the shuffler. He deals out a fresh deck to the players.

The game continues, and when the Cowboy loses his last few chips he gets up and walks over to the bar, probably to nurse his ego with a couple shots of whiskey like he usually does. I'm just about to move to another table to observe the play when my eyes flit to the door opening at the front of the club.

I pause my walk as I see my sister walk in the door. Anger bubbles up inside of me. What the hell does she think she's doing? She's not old enough to be here. Is she trying to get me fired?

I glare at Izzy as she approaches and she rolls her eyes.

"I need to talk to you," she whispers.

"Can't you see that I'm working? You're still a minor and not supposed to be in the club!"

“This is seriously important, Addy.”

“Well, hello there, beautiful.” One of the men at the closest table leans in and leers at Izzy. I shove him back in his seat and scowl.

“She’s underage, you perv.”

“Jeez, I didn’t know,” the man quips as I drag Izzy into the back hallway past the ‘employees only’ sign.

“Am I supposed to be back here?” Izzy asks as I whirl around.

“No, you’re not. You’re not supposed to be in this building at all!” I stare daggers into her and she sighs before meeting my gaze with just as much intensity.

“I know that! But this is important! The landlord knocked on the door earlier.”

I frown and stand up straight.

“The landlord? Why? We already paid our rent this month.” I raise my finger to my mouth and begin to nibble anxiously on the nail. Izzy sighs and looks away.

“I know. It wasn’t about the rent. It was about something else. Something about the building being sold.”

Confusion washes over me.

“Wait, the building was sold? What do you mean?”

Izzy shrugs her shoulders.

“I don’t know. I don’t really understand what he meant by it.”

“Tell me exactly what he said, word for word.”

Izzy licks her lips and crosses her arm as she digs deep into her memory.

“He said... that the building was being sold and that he was sorry...? I don’t remember. There was a lot that he said.”

I sigh. She’s not going to remember exactly what he said. Clearly, I need to speak to him myself.

“Come on,” I gesture for her to follow me. We go back out the employee door and I approach the door to Court’s office before knocking on it. “Court?”

“It’s open,” he calls out from inside. I push open the door and walk in. When Izzy walks in behind me Court’s gaze flits to her. “Who’s this?”

“My little sister. I need to go home. I know this is unexpected, but there’s something wrong and I need to talk to my landlord immediately.”

Court regards me and nods.

“Okay, no worries.”

“Really?” I ask, surprise filling me. Court chuckles and nods his head.

“Of course. You’re a great worker and haven’t flaked on us yet. I find it highly unlikely that you’d be starting now.” Court points the pen he’s holding at Izzy. “As for you, I don’t want to see you in here again. Not until you’re 21, anyway.”

Izzy’s eyes widen with surprise. She nods before scrambling out of the office. I chuckle and thank Court again before following her out.

“Wait, how did you get here?” I ask Izzy as we walk out of the club.

“Nate dropped me off.”

“He was at the house again?” I blink in surprise as we get into my car. Izzy blushes.

“He just came over to help me study. We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

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I narrow my eyes at her. To Izzy's credit, she doesn't crack, although the blush does get deeper.

"Whatever." I sigh. "Let's get going."

The drive home is filled with Izzy's chatter about school and the homework she was working on with Nate. The more she talks, the less I believe her, but that's the last thing on my mind right now.

"Mr. Soren?" I knock on the door frantically. The light is on, so someone is in the office, but there's been no response. I hear something fall over behind the door before the knob starts shaking. I step back as the door opens, revealing our landlord.

His greasy hair is sticking up in every direction and some drool is dribbling down the side of his cheek and dripping onto his stained brown vest. Someone must have been napping. I resist the urge to shudder and paste a smile on my face.

"Hi, Mr. Soren. Sorry to bother you like this."

"Bother?" he questions before rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "No bother. Just unexpected. What can I do for you?"

He stomps back into his office, holding the door open for me. It smells musty inside, as if something wet spilled on the carpet and never completely dried. There's a small chair pushed into the corner that he waves at me to sit in. Instead I step forward, intent on not touching anything in his grimy office.

“Please, this will be quick. Izzy said you stopped by and said something about the building being sold. I just want to confirm that and also get a little more information and detail.”

Mr.Soren smiles and nods, revealing his deteriorating teeth.

“That’s right. Getting a great deal on this building, too. Way more than it’s worth at this point.”

“More than you’re making from the tenants on rent?” I ask. Mr.Soren grunts and chuckles.

“Of course. You probably know better than anyone that I have some of the cheapest rent in the city. That comes at a price. Or rather, lack of a price. One wrong move and I’d be losing money on this place.”

His chuckles turn into coughs. I wait until his fit is done to ask my question.

“Right. What does that mean to us? Is our rent going to be raised by the new owners?”

I hope our rent isn’t going to be raised. It’s already more than I can afford and if Mr.Soren is right about anything, it’s that this is the cheapest rent in the city. If our rent gets raised, I’m going to have to get a second job. Or move somewhere else. Or maybe even both.

Mr.Soren frowns and shakes his head.

“Sorry, no. There must be some sort of misunderstanding. They won’t be keeping the building. They’re knocking it down. The sale is finalized in two weeks. At which point you and your family will have to be moved out of here.”

I blink in surprise.

“What? Is this even legal?”

“Why wouldn’t it be legal? I’m selling the building. The new owners can do what they want with it.”

I suck in a breath and try to stop my tears from falling.

“Where are we supposed to live? What are we supposed to do? I can’t afford anywhere else.”

To Mr. Soren’s credit, he does appear to feel guilty about this realization. But he only shrugs.

“I’m really sorry. I wish there was something I could do. But I got a family to feed myself, you know. It would be silly of me to turn this offer down.”

Mr. Soren slides open a drawer and rifles through it before pulling out a crinkled packet of papers and passing them to me. “This here is information about public housing and housing assistance. It’s the best I can offer you at the moment.”

I look down at the papers of information that I already know everything about.

“I’ve already applied to all of these and been waitlisted. I have a kid sister that I have to worry about. We can’t be homeless and living on the streets.”

He grunts and curls his lip. He’s losing patience with me.

“Then go to a homeless shelter. It’s not the answer you want, but it’s the one I’ve got for you. The place is already undergoing final sale. So why don’t you skedaddle back

to your apartment and figure out what you and your sister are going to do?”

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Mr. Soren stands up and grabs his coat from the coat rack by the door. He looks at me expectantly. I turn and hesitate before grabbing the knob. I'll have to wash my hands as soon as I get home.

I step out of the office into the warm evening air. I look down the sidewalk at my door as Mr.Soren walks to his car. I take a deep breath and head to my apartment. As soon as I put the key in the lock the door swings open. Izzy is staring at me.

“Well? What did he say?”

I swallow and close the door behind me as I walk inside. As much as I want to protect her from all the horrible possibilities of the world, it's gotten to the point that I simply can't. So I sigh and look at her.

“We have to be out in two weeks. The new owners aren't taking over the apartment building. They're bulldozing it.”

Izzy's jaw drops.

“What? Are they allowed to do that?” The only thing I can do is nod. Izzy frowns before rushing toward me and wrapping me in a hug. “What are we going to do, Addy?”

I stare at the wall over her shoulder. I wish I had a good answer for her.

“I don't know.” I extricate myself from her grasp and smile. Then I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “But I'm going to figure it out. Don't you worry.”

I kiss her forehead before walking slowly to my room. I have to keep moving or else I'll collapse. Once I'm in my room I go numbly to the adjoining bathroom and turn on the shower. Then I peel off my clothes and climb inside, sitting on the ground while the falling water drowns out the sound of my tears.

Chapter Seventeen

Carter

"Hurryupinthere!" A man shouts from the other side of the door, pounding on it urgently. I turn off the faucet and shake the water from my hands. How many times do I have to tell Court that the club needs a multi-stall bathroom? It's obvious, and yet, here we remain with a single person bathroom. I mutter under my breath and pull the bathroom door open.

The man on the other side blanches and pulls his hand away from the door. He looks away bashfully.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Carter. I didn't... I wasn't..."

"Just shut up and go piss," I respond, side stepping the man easily. I can feel his eyes on me as I hurry back onto the crowded club floor. It's much more crowded than I expected it to be tonight. There's nothing in particular going on this evening. I take a quick look around before slinking into my brother's office. He looks up and grins when he sees me.

"What can I do for you today, Mr. Castle?" Court says in a high falsetto. I clap him on the shoulder and drop into the seat in front of him.

"I've given a lot of thought about what we discussed the other day, and I've decided that I want to do it."

Court's face brightens and he leans in.

"I'm so happy to hear you say that. This will be really great for everyone involved, I promise."

I hold my hand up and he stops speaking.

"That's not all. I talked to Addy about it. She's the one who told me it was a good idea. I'm going to start a charity in Elise's name. One that will help women pay for screening and treatment of cervical cancer. So I'm not going to speak as a representative of the club. I'll be speaking on behalf of the charity."

Court looks over me before nodding, a smile spreading across his face. He nods in approval.

"I think that's a great idea. What's the charity going to be called?"

I smile and look up at the silly painting of the dogs playing poker. The many conversations I've had with my lawyer helped influence the name of my charity. I knew I wouldn't be able to do this alone, which is why I've assembled an entire team dedicated to helping me start this charity.

"It's going to be called the Elise Castle Foundation for Women. I've been working with a lawyer to help set it up."

Court grins and stands up, holding his hand out for me to shake. I don't hesitate to stand up and shake his hand before pulling him into a hug.

"Thanks for the idea, man. I think that this cause is what's been missing in my life."

"Have you found someone for marketing yet?"

I shake my head.

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“All right, no problem. I’ll lend you the marketing specialist for the club. She’s excellent at what she does.” Court grabs a sheet of paper and starts writing down the details for me. I look down at my phone to check the time and realize that my table has already been back at play for ten minutes.

“I may have lost my spot by now.” Then I shrug and grin mischievously. “Oh, well. I’ll just have to see if Addy can find me a seat at another table.”

Court blinks and shakes his head.

“She didn’t tell you? She’s gone home.”

I frown. Why would she go home?

“Why?”

Court shrugs.

“Didn’t say why. Just said that it was an emergency. Her sister was here, too.”

“Izzy?”

“Yeah, the kid.”

I look down at my phone. If she left the club early then it must be for a good reason. I’m just surprised she wouldn’t say anything to me before she left. It must have been something really bad.

“I’m going to go check on her.”

“But you’re still in tonight’s tourney and have a ton of chips!” Court cries.

“Just hold them for me. I’ll be back if I can. Something is obviously wrong if she’s left like this. I can’t let her face it alone.”

Court studies me for a minute before nodding.

“I understand. Let me know if everything is all right and if there’s anything I can do to help.”

I nod and leave his office. On the way out I decide to pick up my chips and drop them at the bar.

“Drinks for everyone on me,” I nod to the bartender. Court probably won’t be happy about that. But I paid for the chips, and if I want to buy the entire club a round, he can’t complain about that. The money still goes to him.

When I pull up in front of Addy’s apartment all the lights are off. Addy’s room doesn’t face this direction, though, so hopefully she’s not gone to sleep yet. I grab my phone from the passenger seat and dial Addy’s number again. She hasn’t answered the past few times, but maybe this time she’ll pick up.

If she doesn’t I’ll just have to go to the door. After a few rings the call goes straight to voicemail. I sigh before getting out of the car. I approach the door slowly, for some reason feeling uneasy about the whole thing.

When I knock on Addy’s front door, I don’t hear anything inside. If their car wasn’t in the parking lot I wouldn’t even know they’re home. I’m about to knock again when I hear someone shuffling inside. The door unlocks and then opens, revealing Izzy.

“Hey, Izzy. Is Addy around?” I ask. When I focus on Izzy I realize how upset she is.

“Whoa. Are you okay?”

Izzy swallows before shaking her head.

“No. I’m not okay. Addy’s here, but I don’t know if she’ll want to talk to you. She’s really upset right now.”

A million theories run through my mind at this moment. It must be really bad. Did their dad die? Maybe their mom is coming back and taking Izzy against the wishes of both girls. Panic swells within me and I frown as I plead with Izzy.

“Please. I’m really worried about her.”

Izzy looks behind her down the hallway as if she expects Addy to come walking in at any moment. She sighs before looking at me and nodding.

“Okay. Wait here. Or... I guess you can wait in the living room.”

Izzy steps aside so I can come in and take a seat on the couch. There’s a blanket wrapped around the top, and I briefly wonder if Izzy was curled up on the couch before answering the door. If that’s the case, why’d it take so long for her to answer the door?

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She pads down the hall before I get the chance to ask, which is probably a good thing. The last thing I want to do is upset her right before talking to Addy. There's a knock down the hall and then the sound of a door opening before the two begin to murmur amongst themselves.

It feels like I'm waiting forever before someone sighs heavily and Addy comes out of the hallway. Izzy doesn't reappear, and when a door closes softly it's clear she's disappeared to her room.

As Addy approaches, I don't miss the wetness of her hair or the red rimming her eyes. She either took a shower and got soap in her eyes or has been crying a lot. I stand up and walk to her.

"Addy." I reach for her but she steps back, frowning.

"What are you doing here, Carter?" Her tone is almost accusatory. Confusion spreads within me. Is she angry at me? What could I have done to make her this upset? As far as I know everything has been business as usual between the two of us.

"I came to check on you. I was talking to Court about our charity idea when he told me that you'd left early and that Izzy was there. I knew if Izzy was there then it had to be something bad..."

Addy runs a hand through her hair and cuts me off.

"Yeah, it is something bad. It's really damn bad." She's angry, but I can't tell whether she's angry at me or just angry at the world in general.

“Tell me what’s going on and maybe I can help.”

“Unless you can stop my landlord from selling the building to people who are going to tear it down, then there’s nothing you can do.”

I blink. That’s what this is all about? I chuckle, causing Addy to look at me venomously. I swallow my laughter and shake my head.

“I’m not laughing at you. It’s just… Addy, I can fix this. I can offer him more money than the developers are.”

Addy shakes her head.

“It’s already been sold. The building is being torn down in two weeks. So I have to find a place for us to live in two weeks, and we already live in the cheapest building in the city. I’m going to have to get a second job and work even more hours just to make it work. I’m not going to be able to pay for food and I’m on a waiting list for every form of subsidized housing one could imagine. My life just became infinitely harder.”

She’s yelling by this point. Izzy must be able to hear her from her room, unless she has headphones on.

The fact that Addy isn’t worried about Izzy hearing any of this tells me all I need to know. She truly feels that this situation is so dire that she won’t even be able to hide it from her little sister.

“Addy. Take a deep breath. You don’t need to do any of that stuff. I promise I will help you figure this out.”

I wrap my arms around her, but she pushes me away, anger contorting her face.

“God! You don’t get it, do you?” Addy shakes her head. “You have money and nothing to worry about. You’ll never have to worry about not having housing or being able to feed yourself. You don’t have to wonder how you’re going to take your kid sister to school or put gas in your car. Or how on earth you’re going to sleep between jobs.”

Addy bursts into tears and shoves me gently.

“Addy, come on.”

“Please leave, Carter. Your life is perfect, and every time I think about you, all I can think about is how different we are. You’ll never understand me or what I have to do to make things work.”

“I will help you make things work! You don’t have to do this alone!” My voice is rising despite my efforts to keep my tone even. She’s so hysterical that she’s not listening to anything I’m saying.

“Get the hell out of my house!” Addy screams at the top of her lungs. When I look at her, I don’t recognize the woman I love. The person standing in front of me is panicked and scared in a way that I’ve never seen Addy before. I swallow and nod.

“Okay, I’ll leave. Just... call me, please. I don’t want you to go through this alone. You don’t have to. I’m here for you and Izzy, no matter what you need.”

I turn around and leave, letting the door shut quietly behind me. I listen at the door for a moment. To Addy’s credit, she doesn’t immediately collapse into tears. When I don’t hear any movement or sound for another minute I make my way back to the car.

I sit in the car, staring at Addy’s apartment. She’s trying to push me away, but I’m not going to let her. I’m going to do everything I can to help her and to make her life

easier.

My phone buzzes in my lap. A message from Court. Seeing his name starts an idea in my mind. Maybe there's something I can do to help -- and all it will need is some cooperation from Court.

Chapter Eighteen

Addy

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I hold my breath, waiting for Carter to leave before collapsing on the floor in tears.

Why did I react that way? None of this is Carter's fault. He didn't buy my building or offer my landlord so much money that they're going to tear down my home. So why did I react like he is?

I pull my knees to my chest. I know why I did. Because Carter represents everything that I want but don't have. He represents the easy life that Izzy and I don't have. It's not fair to blame him, though. He didn't ask for this. He even offered to help.

But I don't want to constantly be dragging him into my problems. This isn't a one-off circumstance or something that just popped up. Things like this will be constants throughout my entire life. Hopefully Izzy will be able to find herself in better circumstances after college.

"Addy?" I hear from behind me. Speaking of my sister. I take a deep breath and wipe my eyes before turning around and smiling.

"Hey, Iz. Sorry about that. I didn't mean for you to hear any of it." I try to smile, but it's wobbly and uncertain. Izzy rolls her eyes and sits on the floor next to me.

"Stop pretending like you're fine. I know you think I'm just a kid, but I'm almost an adult and I promise I can handle things right along with you. We're supposed to be a team, right?" Izzy leans forward and grabs my hand. "This is really stressing you out, and I think we should take a deep breath together."

I want to laugh and cry at the same time, but instead I take a breath with Izzy. After

we both exhale, she smiles.

“See? Isn’t that better?” Izzy leans in and hugs me. “Are you okay?”

“Not at all. This is about the worst thing that could happen to us. I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I admit, giving her a small smile. “And in only two weeks. I have barely any money saved up from my paychecks to put down a deposit on another place. I don’t want to take you to the homeless shelter while I earn the money.”

Izzy sits back against the wall and sighs.

“Yeah, this is a real pickle.” Izzy picks at her nails before looking up at me with determination. “But I know you’ll figure it out. You always do, Addy. You’re the smartest, coolest person I know. If anyone can do this, it’s you.”

I smile and ruffle her hair. She crinkles her nose and swats my hand away before making a face and rolling her eyes.

“When did you get so smart? You grew up on me faster than I could blink,” I say, pulling Izzy to me and hugging her. She chuckles before pulling away.

“It’s all because of you. Who knows how I would have turned out with someone else for a sister?” Izzy shudders. “Never mind, I don’t even want to think about that. Are you ready to eat some dinner? ‘Cause I’m starving.”

“Like Marvin?” I bump her playfully. Izzy sticks out her tongue and I laugh before standing up and smoothing my clothes. Then I wipe the tears from my face before smiling at my sister. “You want pasta? We still have some shells and a jar of alfredo sauce in the fridge.”

Izzy’s stomach growls in response.

“Does that answer your question?”

“Absolutely. You go get a shower and I’ll make dinner.”

Izzy gives me another hug before we part ways -- Izzy to her room and me to the kitchen. I get out the box of pasta, put water in a pot, add salt, and turn on the burner.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been so hard on Carter. I’ll have to apologize to him. But what am I going to do? Carter aside, I have much bigger problems at hand. Like what I’m going to do about Izzy. It’s obvious that I’m going to have to do something drastic and undesirable.

No matter what, Izzy can’t be in a homeless shelter with me. I’ve heard stories about the conditions of the one downtown, and she wouldn’t be safe there. Me staying there is one thing, but my 17 year old sister? Absolutely not happening.

There’s only one thing I can do about Izzy, the way I see it. I don’t like it, and she’s going to like it even less. But when you love someone you have to do what’s best for that person, which may not necessarily be the same thing as what she wants.

That’s why I have to call Mom tomorrow. I shudder and stir the pasta, eager to forget those thoughts. At least temporarily.

I look at my phone nervously, waiting for the response from my mother. I couldn’t face speaking to her on the phone -- I’m not ready for that yet. But I did send her an email explaining the situation this morning. I went to an interview as well.

To be honest, I’m not certain how it went. I was so nervous that I fumbled through a ton of questions. I wouldn’t hire me if I was the one doing the hiring. Even though it would be great if I could get the job at the bank. It would work easily with hosting the poker tournaments which are always in the evenings, and I would make decent

money. I'd be able to have a place within the month. I'd still have to be in the shelter longer than I'd like, but beggars can't be choosers.

My phone pings. When I pick it up, I see my mom's email address blink across the screen. My heart speeds up as I open the email. Relief floods through me when I read her response.

At that moment the front door opens and Izzy walks in. I lick my lips. I don't know how this conversation will go. We had a heart-to-heart last night, and she said she knew I would figure things out. But I'm sure she didn't mean like this.

"Hey," she mutters, glancing at me before kicking her shoes off.

"Hey. How was school?" I ask. I give her a nervous smile, causing Izzy to lift a brow.

“What’s wrong?”

I blink. How did she clock it that fast? I only said four words.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Everything is fine,” I say quickly. Too quickly. Izzy narrows her eyes at me and crosses her arm.

“I thought we already went over the fact that I’m not a baby and I can understand adult issues last night. So why are you hiding something from me?”

When I look into Izzy’s eyes, I consider fibbing again. But I can’t muster up the energy to lie to her a second time. That’s why I smile and sit down on the couch, patting the spot next to me. Izzy regards me suspiciously before sitting next to me, dropping her book bag between her feet.

“Izzy, you remember when you said that you believed I could figure things out?”

“Uh, yeah. If I didn’t remember that, then I’d recommend you evaluate me for memory loss,” she comments.

“Right. Well, I figured something out.”

Izzy perks up and grins.

“I knew it! What are we doing?”

“It’s less what we’re doing and more whatyou’re redoing.”

“What I’m doing...?” She smiles and shakes her head. “Oh, I get it. You want me to get an after school job. I can do that.”

“No!” I shake my head. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be abrupt. It’s just you’re not getting a job. You’re going back to live with Mom.”

The smile instantly drops from Izzy’s face and she stands up indignantly.

“What the fuck?” she says.

“Watch your language.” I stand up and put my hands on her shoulders. “I know it’s not ideal, but it’s the best option we have at the moment. You can’t stay in a homeless shelter. That’s unacceptable. Mom has a big house and room for you to stay with her.”

Izzy shakes her head and throws my hands off of her.

“I’m not going to live with Mom. I’d rather be homeless.”

“You don’t mean that, Izzy! It won’t be that bad. You...”

“‘Won’t be that bad?!’ I have a life. I have friends, a boyfriend, a horse. I’m not freaking leaving in the middle of my senior year of high school.” Izzy throws her hands up in exasperation.

“You’ll have those things there, too!”

“Mom isn’t going to pay to have Dragon stabled.”

“I’m not going to be able to afford to keep Dragon stabled, either. At least if you’re with mom then I can stay in the shelter and continue to pay for things like that so you

have something to come back to. You don't have to stay there."

"You know as well as I do that mom won't let me leave once I'm there. It was like pulling teeth getting her to let me stay with you the first time. Besides, I hate her husband. You can't make me go."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair.

"I don't want to force you, Izzy."

"Good."

"But I'm not going to let you be homeless. So if I have to tie you to the plane seat to make sure you get there, I will."

"Just ask Carter for help! I know he will. He bought Dragon. He'll buy us a house."

"I'm not going to ask Carter to buy us a house! Are you insane?"

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“Why not? He knows we need it. He won’t say no.”

I groan in frustration. Izzy looks at me expectantly.

“It’s not about him saying no. It’s wrong to ask him that. He is not my personal bank account that I can use to fund everything. He’s my boyfriend, and I’m not going to take advantage of that.”

Izzy huffs and storms down the hall.

“You’re just not willing to do everything it takes to make our lives better. If the roles were reversed and I had a rich boyfriend, you can bet I wouldn’t hesitate to ask him to help us get a house in this situation.”

“That’s not fair, Izzy. Do you have any idea what kind of position that would put us in? What if he said no? Then what?”

“But he wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that. Carter is a great guy and he cares about us. But life isn’t always simple. There are so many reasons why he might not want to buy us a house. A million reasons why I don’t want him to. What if he agreed and then we broke up? Then I’m on the hook for payments I can’t afford, we get foreclosed on and we’re back in the same situation, except worse because then we have that sort of default on my credit score.”

Izzy blinks and her eyes begin to tear up.

“God, you’re so negative all the time. We both know he wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Look, I know this sucks, but I’m trying to figure things out the best that I can,” I finally say. It’s clear that the line of conversation isn’t going anywhere, and it’s better to just leave it than to pursue something that will cause more stress than is necessary.

“Well, you better figure out what you are doing, because I’m not going to live with Mom.” Izzy slams her door shut, leaving me in the living room alone to figure out what to do.

Great. There goes that plan. She doesn’t understand the complexities of relationships, and I know that. But it’s hard not to blame her for the hardship we’re going to have to endure because she won’t go live with Mom.

It sucks, and I know living with Mom is hard. But it’s certainly not bad enough that being homeless is better than being there.

Ugh. I throw myself back against the couch and cover my eyes with my arm as I cry. Why can’t life just be easier?

Why must everything be so damn difficult?

Chapter Nineteen

Carter

Yesterday’s fight with Addy is still rattling me. After she threw me out, I went home, unwilling to face anybody at the club. Who knows what sort of fights I would have started because of the mood I was in.

I’ve called her three times today, but she hasn’t answered any of them. I can’t believe

she's this angry at me, especially considering that I didn't do anything but offer to help. But I'm trying not to hold it against her. One thing I've learned over the years is that people lash out when they're in a tough situation, even if it's not necessarily the way they would normally react.

When I pull up to the club I grimace. I don't want to play tonight. I don't really want to be around people at all. But I need to talk to Court. And maybe playing some cards will help take my mind off my troubles.

I get out of the car and stride to the front door. The second I step in, the smell of cigar smoke mixed with booze rush past me, like the door summoned the scent upon opening. I scan the room, but don't see Addy among the hosts working. I can't remember if she was supposed to work today, but if there was ever a reason to call into work, it would certainly be a situation like this.

Court walks into his office and I eagerly make my way across the room. I stick my foot into the door before it can close. Court turns around in surprise but an easy expression falls on his face as he sits down.

"Hey, Carter. What's up?"

"I desperately need to talk to you."

"About the charity event? I talked to Markita and she said she'd work with you on it."

My brows pull together as I step into the office. Court grabs a package of licorice strings from his desk drawer and drops one into his mouth as I respond.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"The marketing specialist for the club? Markita Newton? I asked if she'd be willing

to do marketing for the charity and she agreed.”

“Oh, right,” I say before nodding. “That’s great news, just not what’s on my mind at the moment. That’s actually not what I want to talk about.”

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“What do you want to talk about, then?” Court blinks. I sigh and sit across from him before letting the door close all the way. This is a sensitive topic, and I certainly don’t want anyone overhearing.

“It’s about Addy. We had a fight last night and now she won’t answer any of my phone calls.”

“What was the fight about?”

I swallow and shake my head.

“It’s Addy’s personal business and I don’t want to be spreading her business around. But she’s having a tough time. I offered to help and she didn’t take it very well. I think I offended her in some way, although I can’t imagine why she was offended.” I scratch my chin. I’m still completely perplexed on why my offer to help seemed to make her angry.

I’ve considered both the possibility that she was so angry that anything I said would have made her angry and the possibility that what I said sounded different coming out of my mouth than it did in my head.

“Well, it’s hard to give advice when I don’t have all the details, but I respect that you don’t want to spread your girlfriend’s personal business around. But if she was offended, then the only thing you can do is apologize. But don’t apologize if you don’t know what you’re doing it for; that only makes women even angrier. Trust me, I speak from experience.”

Court stares off before shuddering and refocusing his attention on me. “Just ask her what you did to offend her and then apologize for it. Express your feelings without taking over the conversation.”

“But she won’t even answer my phone calls.”

Court grimaces.

“Damn, man. What did you do to her?”

“I don’t know! How can I talk to her if she won’t even pick up the phone?”

“You’ll just have to go over there.”

“Wouldn’t that piss her off even more?”

“Of course it will, at first. That’s why you need to give her some time. Give it another day or so and then go over there. Tell her that you miss her and want to work things out together. Bring her flowers, too. Women love that. Bonus if it’s her favorite flower. What’s her favorite flower?”

I stare at Court blankly. Am I supposed to know her favorite flower by now? Is it a bad thing that I don’t?

“I don’t know.”

“All right, whatever. Roses are a good alternative. Every woman loves roses, even the ones who say they don’t.”

I nod and give my brother a small smile.

“Thanks, man. I think this is all actually good advice.”

Court snorts.

“Of course it is. I’m giving it. That means it’s automatically good advice.”

I roll my eyes before standing up.

“Yeah, sure it is,” I say as I stand up. “I’m going to go play some cards. Take my mind off of things.”

Court grins and I step out of the office. The club is busier than it was when I went in. Nearly all the tables are full, both in the card room and in the main open areas where the drinking and dining take place. I go to the chip counter to buy in before grabbing one of the last empty seats in the room.

“Evening, gentlemen.” I nod at the host. She smiles easily and shows me to my seat as the dealer begins to deal out the hand. The other men at the table nod in greeting, except for one scowling cowboy fellow in the back. Our eyes meet and he frowns.

“Just lost three grand,” he mutters in exasperation. I grimace in sympathy before looking at my cards. The dealer lays out the flop of three cards, and I resist the urge to groan out loud. Not a strong start for me. I don’t have a pair or any suited cards in my hand and the flop is a pair of queens and two hearts. Seat two bets \$100, seat three calls the bet, seat four raises and now the play is to me. I wonder if I should stay in to see what’s next or just fold.

“Carter?” a soft voice says from behind me. When I turn around and see Izzy my decision is made for me.

“Izzy? What are you doing here? Where’s Addy?”

“She’s at home. I need you to talk to her. Please don’t let her send me away. She wants me to go live with our mom until we figure things out and I can’t go there. I simply can’t.”

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“You gonna call or fold?” the man sitting next to me asks with annoyance.

“Uh, yeah, fold.” I muck my cards and pick up my chips, rising from the table. “What do you mean send you away?”

“You!” my brother's voice says from behind me. When I turn around he's pointing at Izzy with a frown. Izzy's eyes dart in every direction as she approaches. “I thought I told you to stay out of here.”

“Whoa, calm down, Court. It's Addy's sister.”

“I don't care who she is! She can't be in here. She's a minor. Do you know how much I could be fined if she were caught here?”

“I just need to talk to Carter. I'll leave in a second.”

“No, you'll leave right now.”

I shake my head in annoyance.

“Come on, Izzy.” I take her elbow softly and lead her out the doors. Once we're outside I turn to her. “Now start over.”

“You have to talk some sense into her. She's too proud to ask for your help, and since she can't figure out what else to do, she wants to send me to live with our mom. I can't live with Mom. She doesn't understand me, and she wouldn't pay to stable Dragon.”

I sigh and look away before running a hand through my hair.

“Izzy, I wish there was something I could do. But I already offered my help. She declined it.”

“Please, just try again! My sister’s already let me down. Don’t you do it, too.” Izzy batters her eyes at me, tears welling up in them. I sigh and unlock my car.

“Fine. I’ll try again. Does she know you’re here?”

The teen at least has the good sense to look embarrassed.

“No. She doesn’t even know I left.”

“Come on, then. I’ll give you a ride home.”

“Here we are,” I say without an ounce of cheer. Their apartment building looks ominous to me at this moment, but that’s probably only because I know the potential bad conversation that awaits me.

When I look around the parking lot it’s obvious that there are already fewer cars here than there were two days ago. Izzy gets out and notices me looking.

“People are already moving out. I guess they had more in savings than we do – or maybe just more options.” She turns to me and smiles.

“How much do you have in savings? I ask. It’s a nosy question, but that’s not even the reason I’m asking it. What I’m trying to do is buy myself some time to come up with what I’m going to say.

“Why are you asking me? I’m not the one with the bank account in the family.” Izzy

looks away. “But I doubt it’s much. There’s not much left over after bills and groceries and Dragon’s boarding.”

Guilt rushes through me.

“If I’d known buying Dragon would have come with an extra expense I would have put more thought into it.”

“Oh, no.” Izzy shakes her head. “The boarding fee has replaced the club fee. And it’s actually a little cheaper, so you’ve saved us about \$20 a month. Which doesn’t seem like much, but in a year you’ll have saved us \$240. Which is two electric bills.”

I blink and look at her.

“Did you just do that math in your head?”

“I’m pretty good at math.” Izzy shrugs before grinning at me mischievously. “So, I’ll climb in my window while you knock on the front door. Perfect distraction.”

I let out a short laugh and then shake my head.

“No way. If I’m here dropping you off, it will be better than if I just randomly show up trying to figure out a reason to talk to her. I need to be in her good graces as much as possible. Besides, if I can get her onboard with my plan, then she’ll be so excited she’ll forget all about grounding you.”

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Izzy looks at me skeptically before sighing.

“Fine. Whatever, you win.” She frowns. “What is your plan, anyway?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You don’t even know what you’re going to say, yet? You’ve had the whole car ride!”

“Hey, this isn’t an easy situation to navigate, you know. Your sister requires delicate handling.”

Izzy rolls her eyes. “Don’t I know it. But she’s not made of glass. Come on, you have until the front door to come up with something.”

We both get out of the car. Izzy walks faster than I do, apparently eager to get home. I’m less enthused. There’s a distinct possibility that Addy will get even more pissed off and throw me out again. And if that’s the case, then Izzy will be in more trouble than less. But what choice do I have? She came to the club begging me for help. I couldn’t turn her away.

The closer we get to the front door, the harder my heart thumps in my chest. Thoughts are flying through my mind at hyper speed, coming in and going out so quickly that I barely have the time to register each one. I steady my breathing so the thoughts slow, and by the time I approach the door I think I have something solidified.

Izzy and I look at each other. I see my hesitation reflected on her face.

“Ready?” she whispers, glancing to the door.

“As much as I’ll ever be,” I respond. Then she steps forward and presses the doorbell.

Chapter Twenty

Addy

The smell wafting through the kitchen from the pot on the stove makes my stomach rumble. When I was going through the cupboards and trying to decide what to make for dinner, I realized that we need to use the vegetables in the fridge. They won’t last much longer, and I’m not going to be able to have them in the shelter.

After Izzy stormed off to her room I went down to the landlord’s office in hopes that I could convince him to prorate the rent by one week. It wouldn’t be a big difference, but there’d be a little bit extra money in my pocket.

But of course he wasn’t there. The note he taped to the door said that we could reach him by phone anytime, but the three times I tried to call him went straight to voicemail. As much as I don’t want to be a Debbie-downer, it’s obvious to me that I’m not going to get a single cent from him.

“Izzy!” I call from the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready!”

I wait for her response but it doesn’t come. Her door doesn’t even open. She’s obviously still angry at me, and I can’t pretend that I don’t understand why. I just wish she knew that I didn’t come upon this decision lightly.

Living with Mom won’t be a cakewalk for her. I know that more than anyone. But

does she really think it will be worse than the alternatives? At least she'll have a home and a place to keep her things. I'll still pay for Dragon to be boarded down here. But yeah, it will suck for her to finish her senior year in a new place away from her friends and Nate.

But she can come back for the summer before college. Or if she doesn't want to go to college she can move back down here. I move the soup off the burner and pad out of the kitchen.

"Izzy!" I shout at the same time the doorbell rings. Who could that be?

My stomach puckers. What if it's my landlord, telling me that the sale moved up and we have to move out tomorrow? I take a deep breath and shake my head.

Get yourself together, Addy. That's not going to happen. I stride to the front door and lift my chin before opening it to reveal...

Carter and Izzy?

"Izzy? Why aren't you in your room?" I ask. Then the initial shock wears off as I realize what she did. Red hot anger creeps up my neck. "You snuck out again, didn't you?"

Izzy stomps inside.

"What was I supposed to do? I'm not going to lay in my room while you get ready to ship me off to Belgium!"

I can't stand this attitude. She's so dramatic. Was I this way when I was her age? God, I hope not.

“It’s not Belgium. It’s not even that far. Only a couple of hours by plane.” I glance up at Carter as guilt washes over me. This is the perfect time to apologize.

“She came to the club and begged me to convince you not to ship her off,” Carter says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

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“You went to the club?” I whip my gaze to Izzy. “Are you serious? Did you not hear what Court said yesterday? Are you trying to get me freaking fired from the only way I have to make money?”

A blush rushes over Izzy’s face as she shoots Carter a glare.

“Thanks a lot.”

“Don’t blame him for this! You may be a teenager but you’re still old enough to understand the consequences of your actions! You’re always talking about being an adult. So if you think you are one, then start acting like one!”

Izzy does another dramatic eye roll and stomps down the hallway.

“You better stay in your room this time or I’m going to nail that stupid window shut!”

“That’s a fire hazard!” she yells back.

“No one is going to care. They’re demolishing the building anyway, remember?!”

Izzy’s only response is her door slamming. I let out a breath and shake my head.

“What is wrong with her?”

“She’s just upset,” Carter says from the door. I jump. “Forget I was here?”

“No!” I exclaim. Then I blush and look away. “I didn’t forget. I just... Izzy was

occupying my attention.”

I look around awkwardly.

“Do you want some dinner?” I finally ask, stepping aside to let him in. He looks at me thoughtfully before nodding.

“Sounds great.” Carter raises his nose to the air and smells the scent of the soup coming from the kitchen. “Smells even better. What did you make?”

“Vegetable stew? I had a ton in the fridge and needed to get rid of some.”

“There’s no okra in it, right? I’m allergic.”

I blink in surprise. Okra?

“I didn’t even know people could be allergic to okra,” I quip.

“They can, and I am. Does that response mean that there’s okra in it?”

“No.” I chuckle and shake my head. “I can’t stand okra.”

Carter grins easily.

“See? We’re meant to be. I’m allergic and you hate it.”

I can’t stop the smile from spreading over my face as I shake my head. Even in the worst of times, Carter can manage to make me smile.

“Izzy!” I call down the hallway. “Dinner’s ready!”

There's no response. I hurry down the hall and press my ear to the door.

"I'm still in here, I just don't want to be around you!" Izzy shouts through the door. I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. I shouldn't laugh at her theatrics, but I can't help how entertaining they are -- teenagers.

When I walk back to the kitchen Carter follows me. I grab three bowls down from the cabinet but only fill two.

"Looks like Izzy won't be joining us tonight," I explain as I set the bowls down on the table. Carter brings the spoons, causing me to smile. I can't believe he remembers where the silverware is.

"That's okay. I actually wanted to talk to you about something." We both sit down at the table. To avoid the topic I immediately shove a spoonful of soup in my mouth.

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It's so hot that I immediately let it fall back out. Carter stares at me with an amused expression on his face. I grab a napkin from the center of the table and wipe at my face before clearing my throat.

"The soup is quite hot."

We both look at each other before erupting into giggles. What is it about this man that instantly puts me into a good mood?

"Duly noted." Carter sighs and grabs my hand. "Addy, I know this isn't an easy conversation to have, and you want to avoid it. But we need to talk about this. Izzy is so distraught about going to live with your mother that she walked all the way to the club."

"Shewalkedthere?" I ask, blinking. It's a long walk, and the neighborhoods you have to go through aren't the best. I'm going to kill that girl.

"Yes. It's clearly important to her that we find another alternative so she doesn't have to go there. So I think we should come up with a plan together so that she can stay here."

I groan with frustration before dropping my head in my hands.

"What do you think I've been doing?" I ask when I finally look up. "I don't want to send her to live with my mom. It's not like I'm some evil villain who wants to sentence her to a miserable senior year. But what else can I do? The building is getting sold. I can't get the last week of my rent prorated. And there is nothing -- and

I mean nothing -- I can afford within the next two weeks. I've exhausted all avenues of searching through rental assistance funds and housing plans. There's just nothing that's going to work. She doesn't know that there are things worse than living with Mom."

"I can't imagine how hard it must be," Carter says. The look of sympathy on his face doesn't make me feel better. My bottom lip wobbles as I fight tears.

"I went to check the shelter today," I whisper. "There's no availability. So we won't even be able to stay there at all. I'll be living out of the car before I can get a place, and who knows how long it will be until I can find something. She can't live out of a car. I won't do that to her."

The tears spill over without my permission. I turn away so that Carter can't see me cry. His chair creaks before he's kneeling beside me. He gently takes my chin and turns my face so that I'm looking at him. When our eyes meet he wipes my tears away and smiles.

"Addy, please don't cry. You don't have to live out of a car and you don't have to send Izzy away." He takes a breath before squeezing my hand. "Come live with me."

My eyebrows shoot up. I can't even summon the words to ask the many questions I have to that request. He shakes his head.

"Don't say no right away. Just listen. Izzy doesn't want to go. It's not just because your mom sucks or she won't get to see Nate. Izzy doesn't want to be away from you. You're special to her, more than you'll ever know. You're just doing what you think is best for her, and I know that. I think deep down that she knows that. But you don't have to make those sacrifices. You can stay with me for as long as you like. You can move in permanently or just stay until you can get your own place. Whatever makes you comfortable. But I couldn't live with myself if I let you tear yourself apart when

I'm here to help take care of you. Of you and Izzy."

I'm breathless. I don't even know what to say to him. This is everything I need, everything I want.

The past few days I've been splashing aimlessly in a violent river, unsure of how to get out. Now Carter's just stuck out a branch. I don't want to drown. I want to grab on, to let him pull me out of the river.

But what kind of precedent does that send? Am I giving in by letting him take care of this for me?

"Please?" Izzy says from behind me. I turn around, a look of shock on my face. I didn't even hear her door open, wasn't even aware that she had stepped out of her room. But there she is, standing in front of us with tear stained cheeks and a face begging me to accept Carter's offer.

"You're strong, Addy, and we all know that. But sometimes the strong thing to do is recognize when you need help. And we need help. I need help. Don't split us up just because of your pride. Take the help – please."

I stare at Izzy. Who is this young woman standing in front of me? I hardly even recognize her anymore. She's so grown, so mature for her age sometimes. She's so much smarter than I ever gave her credit for.

Most of all, though, she's right. Which is why I turn to Carter and smile.

"Okay. Yes. I accept. We will come stay with you. Just until we can get a place of our own."

"Yes!" Izzy squeals. She runs over and throws her arms around me. I hug her tightly.

It feels like hours before we part. “Mmm. Dinner smells great.”

Izzy goes into the kitchen to fill her bowl. I turn to Carter and smile.

“Thank you,” I whisper. Carter leans forward and plants a kiss on my lips.

“Any time and anything for you. Just say the words and I’ll hand you the world.” Carter kisses me again before sitting back in his seat. When Izzy comes to the table we start our meal, chattering about our days and our future.

Talking like a normal family.

Chapter Twenty-One

Carter

It’s only a couple days later that I’m standing in the apartment, packing away the pots and pans in Addy’s kitchen. Or what used to be her kitchen. After a lot of talking we decided it would be best for them to move now rather than to wait until the last minute. Addy put in for a couple days of paid leave at work, and of course she got them off. We made a game plan to have the apartment packed within a couple days.

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Izzy's started in her room, Addy in hers, and me in the kitchen. She doesn't really need all this stuff -- I have a chef and plenty of kitchen supplies, but I'm not going to approach that yet. We're still operating under the assumption that they are going to be leaving as soon as Addy finds a place. Izzy and I are secretly hoping that she'll give up at some point and just realize that being with me is where they belong.

I pull another red pot from under a cupboard, wrapping it in the paper before placing it into one of the moving boxes. We were able to get all this moving stuff with no extra charge thanks to my friend Andy who runs a moving company. It's pretty profitable, all things considering. If I wasn't throwing myself so deeply into the foundation, I might consider doing something like that.

"Hey, how's it going?" Addy pops her head into the kitchen. I grin and gesture to the box.

"Going smoothly, Captain. I think I'll have the whole kitchen packed in the next hour."

Addy smiles with relief.

"Thank you so much for helping. You have no idea how much you've taken off my shoulders by doing this."

I stand up and walk over, sliding my arms around her waist before pulling her to me.

"I can take even more off your shoulders. Maybe help you de-stress," I murmur before putting my lips on hers and moving my hands down to her ass and squeezing.

“Um, gag, puke, gross,” Izzy says from behind Addy. I look around her and see Izzy staring at us, her brows pulled together. Addy giggles and turns around.

“Whoops, sorry Iz.”

“I know we’re moving out, but this is still a communal area. So if you could save the PDA for your bedroom, that would be so cool.”

Addy and I both laugh as Izzy grabs a stack of packing paper and makes her way back to her room. My phone starts ringing, and when I fish it out of my pocket, the name Johnson flashes across the screen.

“Oh, I have to get this. It’s the guy for the benefit.” I walk out the front door and answer the phone. “Carter Castle speaking.”

“Hello, Mr. Castle. Your charity has been officially registered as a non-profit. I’ve been working with your brother to set up the benefit to be hosted at Castle’s Corner. I have a checklist in front of me but wanted your opinion about an idea an intern had.”

I smile. Joseph Johnson is easily the best contact that my brother has ever set me up with. He’s smart, straight forward, and humble. The perfect combination for someone to run a non-profit. I want to be very involved, but I need someone reliable and trustworthy for the day-to-day, and he’s the guy for the job.

“Go ahead.”

“There’s an oncology ward at the hospital downtown. If we partner with them, we could potentially get a couple of cervical cancer survivors to speak at the benefit. I think it would be moving and really help the foundation get a good start right out of the gate.”

I mull it over, wondering what Elise would want before responding.

“That’s perfect. Approve the idea and call up the hospital.”

“Excellent, Mr. Castle. I’ll call you with an update later.”

We hang up and I grin. Everything is running so smoothly, it’s almost uncanny. I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a part of me worrying about that fact – that things were running almosttoosmoothly.

The last time I felt this good about my life, we found out Elise had cancer. Life is much healthier with a regular flow of ups and downs as opposed to an enormous high followed by an extreme low.

“Everything okay?” Addy asks, leaning out of the open door. I smile and kiss her.

“Perfect. That was Joseph Johnson, the man that I hired for the charity. He had the excellent idea to partner with the oncology ward downtown.”

Addy squeezes my arm and smiles warmly.

“That’s wonderful. You know, I haven’t gotten to tell you yet how nice it is to see you excited about this. I can tell you’re passionate about it.”

“I am. It feels like for the first time since Elise passed I’m finally doing something important with my life.”

I kiss her again then follow her back into the apartment to help with the packing.

“Wow,” Izzy says, looking up at my home with wide eyes. “I can’t believe I’m going to live here.”

I chuckle and turn off the car before getting out. Addy and Izzy follow suit as my brother Cade hops out of the moving truck behind me.

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“Do you know where all of this is going yet?” Cade asks, gesturing to the moving truck. It only contains stuff for Izzy’s room and some essentials. Addy decided to store most of their other furniture, considering there wouldn’t be room for it here. I had one of the guest rooms cleaned and cleared for Izzy.

“Follow me.” I lead them into the house, unlocking the front door before stepping inside. It’s unnecessary for me to carry a key, honestly -- I always have someone working in the house -- but waiting around for someone to answer the door has always irked me. It’s much more efficient to do things this way. “Izzy, your room is on the first floor. It seemed easier to bring all your stuff in this way rather than trying to lug it up the stairs to a room closer to ours.”

“Sure. I bet it’s really so that I can’t hear you two doing it,” Izzy mutters.

“Izzy!” Addy glares at her sister. Izzy smirks and when I look behind me I can see Cade snickering silently.

They follow me down the hall. When I open the door to Izzy’s room her eyes widen to the size of saucers.

“Oh. My. God. Is that a king bed? My own bathroom?” Izzy zooms around the room, ooh’ing and aah’ing over every piece of furniture. I chuckle before turning to Addy. She’s watching Izzy and smiling -- a good sign. They’re both happy. “I’m going to need new bedding. Mine won’t fit a king bed.”

I shrug.

“No worries. We can go to the store later and you can pick out anything you like.”

“We can’t accept that. That’s too much.” Addy shoots me a look.

“I needed to redo this room anyway. We can just call it bedding for the room instead of bedding for Izzy. It will stay when you guys move out.”

Addy crosses her arms as I wink at Izzy.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you guys are plotting. We will not be living here forever,” Addy chastises. But from the look on her face I can tell that not even she believes that.

“Ready to unload?” Cade asks. Izzy nods and skips out of the room. Izzy follows him but stops at the door and narrows her eyes at the two of us.

“No sex in my room, you dirty people.” Then she continues on her way. I laugh as Addy’s face reddens.

“Brat.”

I wrap Addy in my arms and kiss her lips and then her neck.

“No sex in Izzy’s room. But what about the guest room down the hall? It’s closer than ours upstairs.”

Addy’s eyes roll over me lustfully before she licks her lips and nods. Then she takes my hand and leads me down the hall. We scurry into the guest room, and I lock the door behind us before leading Addy to the bed and gently pushing her to it.

She looks up at me, lust passing through her eyes. I lean forward and put my lips on

hers, the kisses sloppy and wet as I fumble with the zipper on her jeans. When I finally get a hold of it, I push her jeans down her legs. Addy kicks them to the floor as I begin kissing her chest.

I stop at the edge of Addy's tank top, peeling down the neckline to reveal her breasts.

"You're going to stretch it out," she giggles as I lick one of her nipples.

"I'll get you a new one," I murmur. I suckle Addy's nipple gently, firmly gripping her other breast in my hand and squeezing while I snake the other one to the area between her legs. The soft fabric moves easily under my finger as I rub her clit through the cloth. Addy lets out a sigh before I continue kissing down her stomach.

When I reach the edge of her panties, I take the edge of them in my mouth and gently tug them down her legs, exposing her to me. Once her panties are resting on the floor with her jeans, I position myself between her legs and pull her toward me.

I reach out and run my tongue over her slit before settling over her clit, taking it between my lips and sucking. Addy hisses and arches her back, letting me know exactly how much she's enjoying my mouth on her. In response, I flick my tongue harder and faster over her clit.

The moans coming from her cause my pants to grow tight and my cock to grow large, and after a few minutes I can't take it any longer. I stand up and unzip my pants, pushing them down to the floor along with my briefs, giving my cock its freedom. Then I grab Addy by the hips and turn her over so her belly's on the bed.

Addy makes a noise of surprise but backs into me anyway, encouraging me to continue.

"Grab that pillow," I point. Addy shoots me a look of confusion but does what I say,

handing it to me. I shove it under her hips.

“Wha’s that for?”

“Trust me, you’ll know soon enough.”

I spread her legs and position myself at her entrance. She wiggles in anticipation before I plunge in, pushing deep.

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“Oh, my God,” she calls out. She backs onto me more, taking me in deeper. “Is that the pillow?”

“Gets the perfect angle,” I murmur. I pull out and then thrust in again, faster than the first time. Addy cries out as I repeat the action, and then we fall into a perfect rhythm of me thrusting and her backing onto me, her moans getting louder the faster we go.

The heat starts to build in my loins, and I grip her hips and pound into her as hard as I can. Addy cries out as I push harder and harder, the slapping sound between us illustrating just how hard I’m moving.

“Carter, I– you– oh, God, I’m coming!” Addy squeals and then I feel her tighten on me. That’s all I need to reach my own orgasm.

“Addy!” I cry as the pleasure spills over and into Addy. I hold her hips to me as I pour into her. Once I’m finished we both collapse onto the guest room bed, our breaths ragged as we recover from our activities.

After a few minutes Addy turns to me and licks her lips.

“I don’t know what kind of black magic you were pulling with that pillow, but I like it. You were hitting angles that I didn’t even know existed.”

I smirk and pull her into my arms.

“As long as you felt good, that’s all I care about.”

“Know any other secrets?” Addy whispers as her hand snakes down to my dick.

“A lot, actually.”

Then I climb on top of her for round two.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Addy

We pull up in front of the high school and jump out. The chill weekend we had just had messed with my sleep schedule so much that I slept right through my 6:30 alarm. Since Izzy can't catch the bus from Carter's house, I now have to take her to school every day.

It's unfortunate that today she's going to be late, but I'm doing the best I can with what we have.

“Come on! I don't want to be later than I have to be!” Izzy turns to glare at me. I slam the car door and hurry after her. When we get to the glass doors I grab the handle to pull it open, but it doesn't budge. “The doors lock after 9:30.”

“Of course they do,” I grumble. I mosey over to the side and hit the big red button attached to the door. The speaker crackles before a nasally woman's voice comes over the speaker.

“What can I do for you?”

“Hi, I'm here to sign in Isabella Hughes.”

A buzzing sound comes from the speaker before the door makes a clicking sound.

Izzy grabs the handle and pulls, letting us both in. We shuffle into the office where I sign the clipboard on the desk while the administrator fills out a late slip for Izzy. The second it touches Izzy's hand she turns to hurry out the door.

"Have a great day!" I call after her. She gives me a half assed wave as she disappears down the hall. I smile at the admin who shrugs before I turn to leave.

"Miss Hughes?" a voice calls out after me just as my hands hit the door. I turn and see the principal smiling at me.

"Oh, hello, Mr. O'Shaugnessy. How are you this morning?"

"Very well. I'm glad to have caught you, actually. When I spoke to Isabella last Thursday, she mentioned the two of you were moving?" The questions in his beady eyes make me nervous. He's asking for more than just polite conversation, I know that much.

I paste a forced smile on my face and nod.

"Yes, that's correct. We moved over the weekend."

"I see. While you're here, why don't we go ahead and update the address?" The principal reaches into a filing cabinet behind the admin desk and pulls out a sheet of paper. When he hands it to me, the title jumps out: CHANGE OF ADDRESS FORM.

Smiling, I pick up a pen and begin filling it out. I don't have anywhere better to be, so I'm not technically being inconvenienced, but because I was expecting to jet in here and jet right back out, this entire interaction is getting on my nerves. After I've completed the entire page I hand it back to him, standing awkwardly as his eyes roll over the page. When O'Shaugnessy looks back at me, a grim smile fills his face.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” he says. I now resist the urge to roll my own eyes. All he did was look at a page -- did I make a mistake and now have to fill out a new form? It’d be annoying but I wouldn’t describe it as “bad news.”

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“Oh?”

“The address that you’ve moved to isn’t in our district. Unfortunately, that means I have to give you a notice of dismissal. If you haven’t moved back into district within two weeks, Isabella will no longer be able to attend school here.”

I blink. Move back into the district? Is this a joke?

“Are you serious? There’s only a few months left in the school year, and this is her senior year. You’re honestly telling me you can’t make an exception?”

“If I made an exception for one student, then I’d have to make an exception for all the students.”

I snort.

“Uh, no, you wouldn’t. If you treated all students the same, it would just be the rule. That’s why it’s called an exception.” I shake my head. “So I have to move back into the district just so she can continue here? Can’t I just fill out an out-of-district request?”

“Unfortunately all of our out-of-district request spots have been filled for this calendar school year.”

I take a deep breath and stare at Mr.O’Shaugnessy. The best course of action is to smile and nod, or else I’ll have to be dragged out of this office.

“Okay. Thanks.”

I turn and leave before he can deliver any more bad news.

The exchange is still on my mind when I walk out the front door for work a few hours later. I’m so distracted by it that I almost run smack into Carter on his way into the house. He smiles as he comes through the door, but concern etches across his face the second he sees my expression.

“Addy, what’s wrong?”

I consider lying, telling him that nothing is bothering me. But that wouldn’t be fruitful. And what kind of relationship is this if I won’t even be honest about the little things?

“While I was dropping Izzy off at school, the principal told me that because we no longer live in the district, Izzy can’t go to school there. She has two weeks left before we have to transfer her. She’s going to be devastated.”

Carter squeezes my arm sympathetically and kisses me on the forehead.

“I’m sorry, Addy. That really sucks. But there’s a great preparatory school only a few minutes from here. I’ll take care of everything to get Izzy enrolled. Take a little weight off your shoulders.”

Even though that solves the schooling problem, I know it won’t make Izzy feel better. But I still let out a small sigh of relief. Carter always has the answer for everything, which is one of the things I really love about him. I wonder if it comes with the territory of being older.

The older, the wiser is what they say, right?

“Thank you, Carter.”

“Anything for you and Izzy. I’ll let you head to work.”

I get up on my tiptoes and plant a juicy kiss on Carter’s lips. Then I wink before going out the door. I hear him groan as I leave, and I can’t help but giggle at the minimal amount of teasing I did. It takes almost no effort to get him going, and I love to rile him up. I think it makes it that much better, knowing we’ve been waiting for it all day.

Twenty minutes later, I pull up outside of work. I sigh and look at my reflection in the mirror. Not a hair out of place despite my stressful morning; I’m either incredibly talented at being presentable or super lucky.

As much as I enjoy my job, the morning I had is throwing me off so much that I want to turn around and drive right home. My stomach turns as I look up at the building in front of me. I take a few deep breaths before nodding to myself. This is my job, and I love it. There’s no reason to feel weird about going inside. Smiling, I flip the mirror up and get out of the car.

My heels click on the pavement and I tug down the tight red skirt I’m wearing. It’s a bit tighter than I remember it being, but I have been eating a lot better since Carter and I have gotten together.

Immediately upon stepping into the club, I’m overwhelmed by the sweet smell of smoke and drink syrups. I smile at another hostess before striding to the supply closet and grabbing a card shuffler and some packs of cards to distribute to the poker tables as well as some cleaning wipes before going to set up for tonight’s tournament.

I take a breath before opening the wipes, preparing for the grainy alcohol smell. Despite knowing the smell will be unpleasant, the scent wafting from the tub causes

my stomach to do flips.

Despite taking a few deep breaths, I'm not able to quell the nausea and instead have to run to the employee bathroom. The second I enter the small stall I throw myself to my knees in front of the porcelain throne and expel the remains of the granola bar in addition to whatever bile is in my stomach.

"Ugh," I groan out loud before flushing the toilet and sitting back, tipping my head against the wall. After a couple minutes someone knocks on the door. "Occupied!"

"Addy? Are you okay? You ran out of the game room so fast," Cassie's soft voice emanates through the door. I lean over and open the door so she can come in. Her eyes fall on me as she makes a noise of sympathy. "Yikes. Not feeling so hot?"

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“Yeah...I don’t know. Just one little incident, no big deal.”

Cassie frowns.

“If you’re not feeling well, maybe you should go home. There’s no reason for you to be hosting games when you’re fighting off a stomach bug.”

“No, seriously, I’m fine.” I wave off her concerns and stand, smoothing out my skirt.

“I don’t want to miss out on any work just because of...”

Another wave of nausea rolls through me, and before I can stop myself, I turn and throw up again in the toilet. I guess I shouldn’t have flushed the first time. After all of it is gone, I push down on the lever but don’t turn around.

“I’m so sorry, Cass. That was embarrassing.”

She touches my shoulder, but I still don’t look up at her.

“Seriously, it’s okay. You’re always here and I know you’re sick. It’s not like you’re going to go out partying if you leave now. If you’re throwing up, you need to go home and stay home.”

I take a breath before turning to look at her. Her face is full of nothing but sympathy. How did I get so lucky to work with an amazing friend? I smile and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Thank you. I promise I’ll make it up the time.”

She squeezes my arm affectionately before we file out of the restroom. Cassie goes through the door into the club room, but I turn and find the employee exit. I don't want to go back out there and see everyone.

The sun is bright as I get outside, and I take a breath of fresh air as I go to my car. When I pull down the mirror and look at myself, my reflection is disheveled, my hair mussed and my face pale. Guess throwing up didn't do much for my looks.

Sighing, I pull out of the parking lot and start the drive home. I go slower than I normally would in hopes that the fresh air will mitigate another vomiting episode. When my phone rings, I cringe.

Of course someone would call me now. I pull up to a stoplight and grab my phone. The number jumps out. I have to answer it.

"Hello?"

"This is Jon Sawyer of the Illinois Department of Corrections. I am looking for Addison Hughes."

"Speaking."

"Miss Hughes, normally I would start with pleasantries but I'm afraid it's best if I get straight to the point. During a routine doctor's appointment at the prison, it was discovered that your father has advanced lung cancer."

"Oh, my God. How will you be treating him?"

The line is so quiet that for a moment I wonder if I've lost service.

"Normally there would likely be some treatment options. But in this case, it's

extremely advanced. He probably only has about six months left.”

The rest of his words fall on deaf ears as I zone out. My father only has six months to live?

Someone behind me honks, and when I look up, the light has turned green. Then a wave of nausea hits me. I look at the phone, where the warden is still talking, then at the green light, then at the person behind me honking.

Then I open the door and throw up all of my feelings onto the pavement.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Carter

The parking lot is surprisingly full when I pull up to the club this evening. Monday's aren't usually this packed, but if memory serves, there's some sort of bottle service special on Mondays now.

It's smart marketing. If there's one thing my brother knows how to do, it's run a business. I find a spot near the back; I don't want any of these drunk assholes to hit my Porsche.

Once inside the main room, I scan the various tables for Addy. She's not among the hostesses on the floor, maybe she's in the VIP room. That's usually reserved for the most senior of the wait staff, but perhaps they asked Addy to fill in for someone.

“Carter! Need a drink? I've got a fresh bottle of Maker's Mark for an old fashioned,” the bartender calls out, winking at me as she gestures to the signature bottle with dripping red wax. I smile and wave but continue to the VIP room, not wanting to waste any time. I've barely seen Addy all day except for this morning when she came

back from dropping off Izzy, and I'm itching to get a glimpse of the beautiful woman who holds my heart.

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As I approach the room, the bouncer nods at me and moves the velvety red rope to allow me through. The moment I step through the threshold, all eyes in the room are on me. But none of them are Addy's. There're two tables of poker running as well as a roulette wheel.

"Hello, Mr. Castle," the hostess on the left says before turning back to the table she's serving. I nod at her before turning around and heading to Court's office. I stride in, pushing the door open without a second thought.

Court looks up from the document he's looking over with Cassie.

"Carter, have you ever considered knocking?"

"Why? Is there a possibility I would have walked in on you and Cassie necking?" I smirk. Cassie looks up at me with disbelief.

"Grow up," she mutters while picking up a pen and jotting something down on the paper.

"No, it's just polite. What do you want, anyway? If all the tables are full then you have to wait your turn like everyone else." Court looks back down at the paper as if dismissing me.

I lean down and cover the paper with my hand.

"Where's Addy? I know she's not on break and she's not on the floor."

Court looks up but Cassie is the one who answers.

“Addy’s at home. She came in earlier, but when she started to set up she got sick and started throwing up. So I sent her home. Where did you come from that you didn’t know?” Cassie pitches an eyebrow up in question.

I blink. I just came from home, which is how I know for a fact that Addy isn’t there. If she’s not at the club, and she’s not at home, then where is she? I look at Cassie and Court, who are now studying me closely.

There’s no way I can admit that Addy isn’t at home. That will make the fact that she went home sick look suspicious. I look down and chuckle, shaking my head.

“I just came from a meeting about the non-profit. I guess I didn’t think about the idea that she might be at home. Sorry for bursting in here and interrupting your... what are you doing?”

“Looking at details for the fundraising event. We’re thinking about getting food trucks here, so we’re reviewing all our options.”

“I personally think that barbecue food trucks are the best option. Most fitting for the event, you know?” Cassie chimes in, smiling at the two of us. I resist the urge to sigh out loud.

“Right. Everyone knows that nothing goes together better than cancer and pulled pork. I’m going to go check on Addy. See ya.”

Court calls after me as I leave the office, likely to chastise me for my nasty joke, but I don’t stop. Addy isn’t home, and I have to find her. She could be in trouble.

I hop in the car and floor it home, being mindful of other cars on the road as I click

Addy's name on my phone and call her several times. All five times I call it goes straight to voicemail.

"Shit," I mutter as I pull up to the house. Addy's car isn't in the driveway like it usually is, but maybe she parked in the garage. I rush to the front door, throwing it open. The house manager comes down the hall, a look of concern on her face.

"Mr.Castle? Is everything all right?"

She follows me as I hurry to the garage and throw open the door. Addy's car isn't in there, as I thought it might be.

"No. Have you seen Addy today?" I whirl around and give her a frantic glance. She shakes her head with urgency.

"Not since she left for work. What's wrong?"

I ignore her question and stride back out the front door, grabbing my phone out of my pocket. I shoot off a text to Izzy as I get back into my car, closing the door behind me. I can't take my eyes off the screen as I wait for her response.

What feels like a lifetime is only a minute and a half before Izzy responds, stating that she hasn't seen Addy since she dropped her off. A follow up text pings my phone, asking if everything is okay.

Guilt spills into me at the idea that I've worried Izzy. It wasn't my intention; I'm just so panicked about finding Addy that I didn't stop to think about how it might affect Izzy. I send a text, assuring her that everything is fine before pulling out of the driveway as I think through my next move.

My phone rings in the middle of a call with Richard Denson, the man who knows

how to find everything. Or in this case, anyone. When I pull the phone away to see whose interrupting potentially the most important call in the world, my house manager's name pops up across the screen.

“Hold on, Denseon. I'm getting another call.”

He makes a noise of affirmation as I switch to answering the house manager's call.

“Janet?”

“Mr. Castle, I’m calling to let you know that Miss Hughes has pulled into the driveway. You seemed worried earlier, which is why I thought I would let you know.”

I let out a breath of relief. She’s safe. I wish I’d known an hour ago, when I was driving to every location I’ve ever gone in the city with Addy. The equestrian center, the apartment, the diner, various restaurants all received visits from me in hopes of finding Addy. Obviously, the search yielded no results, which is why I ended up calling Denseon.

I hang up on Janet and let Denseon know that I don’t need him after all, that she’s been found.

Pulling in the driveway and seeing Addy’s car sitting out front fills me with a sense of relief that I didn’t know was possible. I let out a grateful sigh as I park next to her car.

When I get out, I realize that her car is still running. I lean down to look through the passenger window. Addy’s still sitting in the driver’s seat, staring at the wheel. A sinking feeling fills my stomach -- she looks absolutely bereft.

I tap on the window, causing Addy to jump and look over at me with wide eyes. Relief flickers over her face when her eyes meet mine. After she presses the unlock button on her door I get in the passenger seat and settle in.

“You can never go off the grid like that again. I drove all over the city looking for you.” I smile, but when she looks up at me her eyes are filled with tears. I grab her hand and gently rub circles with my thumb. “What’s wrong, Addy? You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Addy sighs as she looks down at her hands.

“I got sick at work today, so Cassie sent me home. On the way I got a phone call from the prison. It was about my dad. He’s... he’s dying, Carter. He has metastatic lung cancer. They’ve only given him six months to live, and even that is an ‘optimistic diagnosis.’ So I went to see him. And talk to the warden more in person. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

I grip her hand tight and squeeze, encouraging her to continue.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen my dad. We had a long talk about how much he’s missed out on and what I wish he’d been there for. I had forgotten how easy it was to talk to him. But he looks bad.” Addy shakes her head. “Really bad. He’s skinny, and my dad’s never been skinny. Not that he was ever overweight, really, but he was, you know. Bulky. Not anymore, though. I was under the impression that men get more muscular in prison, not less. It’s like the cancer is absorbing all the strength he has.”

A tear escapes down her cheek. I reach over and wipe it away, absorbing the news. We haven’t spoken much about her father, if at all. But it’s clear that she loves him. I open my mouth to respond but I’m interrupted by her phone ringing. When I look down I see it’s connected to the charging port in the car, the tiny battery bar in the top right corner flashing red.

“It died,” Addy says apologetically. She looks at the screen that is lighting up with Izzy’s name. “I have to go pick up Izzy from the equestrian center, as much as I’d love to sit here and talk about this more.”

I can't help but feel like that's sarcasm, although I can't tell for sure. I clear my throat and meet her eyes.

"I can get her."

Addy looks at me with surprise.

"Really?"

"Of course. We're a team, and you've obviously had a terrible day. There's no reason for you to go out and do more. I'll go get Izzy. You go inside, spend some time relaxing and decompressing from the day you've had."

Addy's eyes water as she throws her arms around me.

"God, thank you. I don't know what I would do without you."

She kisses me on the cheek and turns her car off, drifting inside as I get back into mine. Looks like I'm going out again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Addy

Isinkdeeperintothe steaming tub filled with bubbles, thoughts about the day I've had drifting in and out of my mind. I threw up three times at the prison, much to the chagrin of the guards.

One even stepped in and suggested that I head home, considering how sick I seemed to be. But after I gave him an earful about spending time with my dying dad he backed off, opting to get me a bucket so I didn't have to sprint to the bathroom and

go through security over and over again.

I close my eyes and sigh as I sink deeper into the tub. In a weird way, knowing that my dad is dying is almost like losing him all over again. It was devastating when he went to prison, knowing that I would be growing up without him.

At 14, I was old enough to understand the effect it would have on our lives in a way that 6 year old Izzy wasn't. Even as she got older, it was obvious how differently it impacted her compared to me. Mom rarely took us to visit, stating that a prison was no place for children. As right as she may have been, the truth is that she simply didn't want us to be there.

I sigh. It's not even just the day I've had anymore. It's the last week and a half. The stress of losing the apartment and moving, having to find a new school for Izzy, being sick, and now this. Everything is falling apart at the exactly the same time. Bad things are supposed to happen in three's, so why am I getting one thing extra?

The worst part is that I have no idea how I'm going to tell Izzy about Dad. She deserves to know. Sure, she doesn't have the relationship with Dad that I do. Izzy was just so young when he was sent to prison, she never had the chance to develop the closeness with him the way that I did. But his dying will affect her just the same.

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We last went to visit him a few months ago for his birthday. It's amazing how drastic the difference in his appearance is from then. He's much thinner, the angles of his face sharper and more clearly defined.

His skin looks sallow now, the dark circles under his eyes more predominant. He was exhausted, too. By the time I left, he was barely able to keep his eyes open.

I tip my head back against the cool porcelain edge of the tub and close my eyes as I remember the favorite memory I have of being with my dad.

"Wocky woad!" Four-year-old Izzy cries out as she points to the chocolate ice cream filled with marshmallows and nuts. Dad grins at her in his arms.

"That's what you want, Iz?" he asks enthusiastically. She nods and licks her lips as the teenager behind the counter rolls the scoop in the ice cream tub.

"One or two scoops?"

My dad looks at Izzy, raising his brow with a question.

"Hmmm." Izzy taps her chin thoughtfully. I roll my eyes as I walk along the counter, admiring the vast amount of flavors in the freezer. Despite coming here twice a month for the past four years, I always have trouble choosing. McFreezy's is our favorite place, and Dad always makes sure he has enough time to take us every other Saturday.

"Know what you're getting, sweetie?" Dad comes up next to me. I smile up at him

and note Izzy digging into her scoop with a spoon. Guess she went with just one this time. I look back into the glass and point at the pink and blue swirled tub of ice cream.

“Think I’m going to get cotton candy this time.”

“Great choice! Me, too.”

Dad ruffles my hair as the kid scoops two cones of cotton candy and hands them to us.

“Find us a table?” Dad asks as he moves toward the cash register. I waltz over to a table before grabbing a Back In Time page from the small stack on the table.

Dad comes over holding Izzy’s hand as they sit with us. I wait for them to get settled before fixing my dad with a challenging glance.

“1978. Vice President?”

“Hmmm.” Dad taps his chin, mimicking Izzy from earlier. “Mondale.”

I give him a thumbs up before moving onto the next category.

“Gallon of gas.”

“Wanna take a guess, Iz?” My dad looks down at my sister. Her mouth is already smeared with chocolate ice cream.

“Hmmm... ten dollars!” Izzy shouts, her eyes not leaving the melting ice cream in front of her. Her melting reminds me of mine. I take a bite, not caring how the cold hurts my front teeth just a little.

“Nope!” I make a loud buzzer noise like in the game shows. “Sixty-three cents.”

My dad swears before looking at us.

“Daddy said a bad word!” Izzy cries out.

“Yeah, I did. That’s a really good gas price, though.” My dad chuckles and I laugh right along with him.

The sound of the front door slamming closed brings me out of the memory. I have to blink a few times to completely disperse the ice cream parlor smell. It was so realistic that it’s almost jarring to come back to a bathtub filled with tepid water.

I shake my head before standing up and draining the tub. Carter and Izzy are laughing together downstairs, and I want in on the joke.

After toweling off and putting on some comfortable clothes, I slide on my fluffy slippers and slowly descend the stairs into the dining room. It’s weird living here after spending so much time in that tiny apartment. It feels bright in Carter’s house, whereas the apartment was dimly lit and dark all the time.

Carter and Izzy are sitting at the table, a few Totty Burger bags sitting between them. Izzy unwraps one, and the scent of the onion covered burger wafts through the kitchen. The second it reaches my nose, nausea knocks me cold.

I turn and sprint to the downstairs bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before the small amount of vomit leaves my mouth.

“Ugh.” I frown and flush the toilet before washing my hands and rinsing my mouth out. Once I feel a little better I rejoin the two in the kitchen. Izzy is enjoying her burger, unbothered by my reaction to the smell of it, but Carter is staring at me with a

look of concern.

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“Addy, are you okay? Cassie mentioned that you went home sick, but I put it in the back of my mind.”

I wave his concerns off as I sit next to them, trying not to breathe in the onion-y smell of the burgers.

“I’m fine. Just a stupid stomach bug. I’ve thrown up several times today.”

“Probably ‘cause you’re pregnant,” Izzy jokes, chuckling to herself.

“Ha ha. Very funny. I’m on birth control, so I couldn’t possibly be pregnant.” I’m diligent about taking my pill every morning – well, almost every single morning.

“You know what’s supposed to be really good for nausea?” Carter looks up from his phone.

“What?”

“Peppermint tea.”

I look over his shoulder and smile.

“Did you just google that for me?”

Carter shrugs, unbothered that I’ve discovered what he was looking at.

“Being sick sucks. I think I have peppermint tea in the cupboard. I’ll make you a

cup.”

He goes into the kitchen and returns a few minutes later with a steaming cup of tea and sets it in front of me. The smell of the peppermint soothes my nerves. I delicately pick up the mug with both hands and take a sip. It’s not sweet, but the peppermint flavor is strong enough that it doesn’t bother me.

“So, Izzy, how was school?” I ask between sips. She pops a fry in her mouth and looks up from her phone.

“Good. In my theater class we’re working on making set pieces for the school play. It’s called Once Upon a Mattress, like a funny princess and the pea sort of thing. Way better than the stuff our old theater director used to force us to put on, like Hamlet.”

“Hey! Hamlet is a classic,” I say, shooting her a look. Izzy snorts in response.

“Yeah, if classic is a euphemism for boring. I way prefer this one.”

“Do you like doing the set for it?” Carter asks. She shrugs.

“It’s all right. It’s just my semester elective, so I’m not too worried about what goes on in class. It’s better than memorizing monologues and stuff.” Izzy’s brows knit together and she looks at me. “What did Principal O’Shaugnessy want? Beth said that she saw you two talking in the office.”

I bite my lip and smirk as if the question isn’t making me one bit anxious.

“What was Beth doing out of class?”

“She’s an office helper first period.”

“Oh, right. Um...” I trail off and frown. It feels like a lifetime ago instead of just this morning. Grimacing, I meet Izzy’s eyes and sigh. “He was letting me know that our new address is no longer in district. You have two weeks until we have to find you a new school.”

Izzy stares at me, and she’s so still that for just a moment I wonder if time has stopped completely. Her phone beeps, refuting that theory.

“Are you serious? That’s bullshit!”

“Language!” I chastise, but Izzy continues as if I didn’t even say anything.

“It’s not fair! It’s my senior year, and I barely have any of it left. Why do I have to change schools?”

“I know it sucks, but unless we find a way to move back into the district, you’ll unfortunately have to go to—”

“So we’ll move back. Or say we’ll move back. Let’s just pick an address and put it there.”

“And what? Miss all the mail? What happens when that person who lives there complains to the school that they’re getting mail for a student who doesn’t live there?”

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Izzy makes a tsk'ing sound.

“We'll just swing by and grab our mail every day! No big deal.”

“Izzy,” I say, my tone low and even. “Mail fraud is a federal crime.”

“Ugh!” Izzy shouts before standing up and grabbing her phone. “No one cares how I feel! You suck!”

Izzy stomps out of the dining room. I frown and walk after her.

“This isn't about you, Izzy! I didn't choose to move! Our apartment building was shut down. There's nothing I can do about that!”

“That's your freaking tagline! ‘There's nothing I can do’ blah blah blah. You might as well tattoo it on your forehead!”

Izzy slams the door to her room, leaving me standing alone in the living room with my mouth hanging open.

Carter comes up behind me and wraps his arms around me.

“Hey, you okay?”

I shake my head.

“I'm fine. Just... what a little brat. How does she think this is my fault?” I let out a

breath. “No, that’s not fair. She’s just upset. And I understand. She’s been in that school district since kindergarten. All those kids... they’re the same ones she’s grown up with forever. I can’t imagine changing schools with only months left till graduation.”

Carter spins me and kisses my forehead.

“I’ll talk to her, okay? Why don’t you head upstairs and get in bed? An early night is just what you need between the sickness and the bad news.”

I lick my lips and nod, giving him a small smile.

“Thank you. I have no idea how I got so lucky with you.”

We hug and then I head upstairs, ready to sleep the day away and start anew.

I wasn’t lying about what I said to Carter, either. Whatever good thing I did in a past life to deserve Carter, I am so, so thankful for it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Carter

Itakeadeepbreath before stepping up to the teenager’s door. I’m not a parent, never really dealt with kids or teenagers in my life. But if I want to become a permanent fixture in Addy’s, I need to learn. I knock on the door, three sharp raps.

“Go away!” Izzy’s shout is muffled through the door. I sigh and knock again.

“It’s Carter.” No response. “Let’s go get some ice cream and talk. I can’t imagine how much that news sucks, but talking about it might make you feel better. And even

if it doesn't, you could just use me for the ice cream."

There's shuffling noises before the door swings open, revealing Izzy. She shoves her hands in her hoodie and glares at me with red rimmed eyes.

"I'm just using you for the ice cream," she states before walking toward the front door. I repress my chuckle and follow after her.

"Wanna take the Porsche?" I ask as we step outside.

"Duh."

I ignore her attitude and unlock the car. Once inside, we both buckle our seatbelts as I back out of the driveway. Izzy pulls out her phone, indicating to me that she doesn't want to talk at all.

Halfway to McFreezie's Ice Cream, though, her phone dies. She sighs and slips it in her pocket, turning to look out the window.

"Where are we going?"

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“McFreezie’s. Been there?”

“Our dad used to take us there.” Izzy turns to look at me. The mention of her dad fills me with nerves. That’s not what we’re supposed to be talking about, but I know she will find out eventually. Addy has to tell her. She can’t let their dad die in prison without saying anything.

I shake my head. I can’t be the one to tell her about that. This conversation needs to be only about the thing Izzy knows.

“It really sucks to have to change schools in the middle of the year, doesn’t it?” I ask. Izzy stares at me, as if her gaze can make me back down from the conversation. When it’s evident that I’m not going to let it drop, Izzy sighs and uncrosses her arms.

“What would you know about it?”

I laugh.

“A lot, actually. I got in trouble a lot in school. You have no idea how many private schools I bounced around in due to getting kicked out.”

“That’s different, though,” Izzy insists, sighing. “I didn’t do anything to deserve this. It’s like I’m being punished for being poor.”

I frown and focus on the road. As much as I don’t want to encourage that line of thinking, that’s kind of how it is.

“I know. It’s not fair, and you are being punished for something that you have no control over. But don’t take it out on Addy. It’s not her fault, either. Believe me, she doesn’t want this to happen any more than you do. Unfortunately, life is unfair that way, and these things happen.” I smile.

“Besides, you were about to be shipped across the country to live with your mom. At least going to a new school in Chicago you’ll still be able to see your friends. Across the country you’d have to settle for video chats and texting.”

Izzy smiles. “OK, so maybe you do have a point.”

“Yeah. So cut your sister some slack. She has a lot on her plate, especially with everything going on with your dad,” I say, then blink as I realize my mistake. Izzy whips around to look at me, her gaze sharp.

“What do you mean by that?”

“By what?” I reply breezily, trying to play it off. Izzy narrows her eyes.

“Everything going on with your dad.”

I wave as if it’s insignificant.

“I just mean how it affected her. You know, she was really close with your dad before he went to prison, and that situation added a lot of challenges to her life. It still affects her.”

How much of that is true, I’m unsure. But some of it is bound to be. Izzy stares at me, attempting to gauge whether or not I’m being honest. While she doesn’t seem completely certain she nods and directs her attention out the windshield.

We pull into the parking lot of McFreezie's, the giant neon ice cream cone on the front of the building lighting up against the night sky. Izzy grins and leans forward, my faux pas seemingly forgotten.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. I can’t wait to try some Rocky Road.”

“Hey, that’s my favorite, too.”

“Of course it is. It’s the best.”

Izzy unbuckles her seatbelt and hops out of the car. I follow her lead, ready to indulge in something sugary and delicious.

“The Elise Castle Foundation is the one, I’m sure of it. I mean, it’s straightforward about who it’s named for,” Joey says, pointing at the option on the screen to illustrate his point.

“I’m just worried that it’s too vague. People won’t know what it’s about,” Lewis shakes his head. My head swivels between the two men. We’ve been discussing the name for the foundation for the last half hour and haven’t gotten any closer to naming it than we were before the meeting started.

“What about the Elise Castle Foundation for Cancer Treatment?” I suggest. Lewis strokes his chin as Joey grins.

“That’s perfect! Best of both worlds.” Joey’s voice echoes through the empty room, bouncing off every wall.

“No...” Lewis starts. Joey groans and interrupts.

“Man, I’m starting to think that you just like being a contrarian.”

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“Will you shut up and listen? I’m just saying that the name makes it seem like it’s for general cancer treatment. This charity is specifically aimed to cervical cancer, right?”

Lewis looks at me and I nod. “Right. So just make it The Elise Castle Foundation for Cervical Cancer. It’s a small adjustment that illustrates a big difference.”

“I think it’s perfect.” I lean back and smile, thinking about how happy Elise would be about the work we’re doing. I have to hand it to Court -- as much as I hated his idea initially, it’s really snowballed into something good. It’s the perfect way to honor her memory.

She’d love this. Elise was always interested in what she could do to better the world. Her legacy being used to help people is the perfect solution. I’m actually rather ashamed that it took me this long to come up with it.

The front door opens, and the three of us turn to look as Addy walks in. Her cheeks pink up at the sight of company.

“Oh, hello,” she murmurs. Her eyes meet mine before floating over my friends. Then all the blood leaves her face and she hurries up the stairs, practically sprinting to the room. My brows knit together, and when I look at my friends, their expressions are equally confused.

“Is she okay?” Lewis asks, raising a brow.

“Let me go check on her,” I say apologetically. Then I follow up the stairs. When I get to the door I put my ear to it, trying to listen for any clues as to what happened

before stepping in. But there's nothing.

I open the door to see Addy sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at her hands.

"Addy? Are you okay?" My voice comes out soft as I shut the door behind me and sit next to her on the bed. She gives me a weak smile, and I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Oh, I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

I sigh and shake my head.

"Addy, be honest with me. That's the only way this is going to work."

Addy groans and falls back to the bed.

"I can't. Seriously. You are not going to like this."

"You're not getting off that easy."

After a few seconds of silence, Addy sits up.

"That guy down there..."

"Which one?"

"The tall one. Joey."

My heart sinks. What kind of confession is this going to be? I hate to admit that I'm nervous about what she's going to say, but I can't help the millions of thoughts running through my mind.

“Okay.”

“We dated a while ago. It didn’t work out. He...,” Addy takes a deep breath. “He hit me. I broke it off immediately and haven’t seen him since. Well, until now.”

Red colors my gaze the second she stops talking. I’m barely in control as I get up and fly down the stairs. I’m barely aware of Addy calling my name behind me. When I enter the living room, Joey and Lewis are laughing about something. Joey looks up just in time for my fist to connect with his cheek.

“What the hell, Castle?” Joey shouts. Lewis’ jaw drops almost to the floor, too stunned to speak.

I push Joey. He swats at my hand and frowns. He opens his mouth but my fist connects with his face again before he can get it out.

Joey flies to the floor with force. His head bumps against the shiny wood floor, but he’s still conscious when I grip the front of his shirt and lean down to him.

“You think it’s okay to hit women, huh?” I ask before laying another punch on him. Anger fills my gaze as I hit him again and again. I’m barely aware of Addy and Lewis saying something behind me.

“Stop!” Lewis shouts, grabbing me and pulling me away from him. My breathing is ragged as I come back to consciousness and look at Joey. His face is bloodied and he’s blubbering like a baby.

“If I ever hear that you’ve laid your hand on a woman again, it will be the last thing you do!” I shout. I snarl before toeing him. “Now get the fuck out of my house.”

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He backs away from me before getting up and running out the front door. The room is deathly quiet except for the sound of our breathing.

“Um, I’ll give you a call. We can discuss the foundation another day?” Lewis asks. I nod, unable to say anything else. Lewis leaves, closing the front door behind him.

The second it closes Addy runs up to me, taking my face in her hands and kissing me hard. I spin her around before gently setting her down. She smiles and gently caresses my face.

“I can’t believe you punched him for me,” Addy whispers. I smile and kiss her forehead.

“Seriously? I’d punch the entire world for you.”

Addy giggles and then licks her lips before looking up at me through her lashes. Then she sinks to her knees. She deftly unzips my pants, and when I look down our eyes meet.

Her eyes don’t leave mine as she pushes my pants to the ground, taking my briefs with them. My length springs out, and Addy smiles.

“Someone’s excited,” she murmurs, taking me in her hand. Addy begins stroking me, moving her hand along my dick. Then she takes the tip of my cock in her mouth.

“Addy,” I groan and tip my head back. I thread my hands in her hair as she bobs back and forth on me. She begins to move faster, and when she presses her tongue flat

against the bottom of my dick I gasp. “Oh, God.”

I can’t stop the pleasure from spilling out of me and into her mouth. Addy doesn’t even flinch, though, waiting until I’m finished before pulling away and swallowing. When she pulls off of me she stands up and and links her arms around my neck.

“I just wanted you to know how sexy I think it is that you’re willing to defend me like that.”

My breath hitches in my throat.

“Come on, then. Let’s go upstairs for a while.” My voice is raspy as I grab her hand. She pulls back and grins.

“Sorry, I have to go pick up Izzy. We will have to finish this later.”

Addy picks her keys up from the consol table and grins at me.

“You’re a devil woman!” I call after her as she strides out the front door. I pull up my pants and look around the living room.

I guess I better clean up.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Addy

“Ugh,” I groan and swallow again. The longer that we continue down the road, the more the nausea swells up. I’ve been trying to hide it, but with this last sound of discomfort Izzy looks at me.

“Are you okay?” she asks, a frown spreading across her face. I whip the car into an empty spot and throw the door open just as I begin to vomit. Izzy shrieks from the passenger seat. After I finish I spit one last time and wipe my mouth with the back of my sleeve. Looks like I’ll be changing when I get home. Gross.

I sit up and smile at Izzy.

“Sorry. I couldn’t hold it in.”

We pull back onto the road in silence, but I can feel my sister’s eyes on me.

“What?” I finally look at her when we reach a stop light.

“Are you sure you’re not pregnant?”

“I already told you -- I’m on birth control.”

“Even I know birth control isn’t one hundred percent – especially if you forget once or twice to take your pill. You should really take a test.”

I sigh as I pull into the parking lot of Westchester Preparatory Academy. Once I park I turn to her.

“When did you get so smart?”

Izzy sniffs as if offended.

“Um, I’ve always been smart. It’s not my fault that you don’t read the pamphlet for your own birth control pills.”

I laugh out loud and lean over to ruffle her hair.

“OK. OK. Whatever. I’ll take a test, okay? Are you happy now?”

“Happy isn’t the word I’d use. I’d probably say that I’m satisfied that you’re making smarter choices.”

“Cool!” I say sharply before smiling and leaning toward her. “Ready for your first day of school?” I ask. Izzy crinkles her nose and pushes my face away.

“Get your puke breath away from me.” She lets out a slow sigh and shrugs. “I guess I’m ready. Ready as I’ll ever be.”

I smile. She’s been taking this really well ever since she and Carter talked a few weeks ago. It was surprising when she started handling things more maturely, but I’m grateful. Which is why I grab her hand and squeeze.

“Hey, you’re handling this really well, you know.”

Izzy looks heavenward.

“As if I have a choice,” she says, but she smiles at me as she says it. We both look up

at the looming stone building. I don't blame her for not being excited. I wouldn't have wanted to go to this school at her age, either. But when I looked at the reviews, parents are saying that it's one of the best schools in Chicago.

The tuition costs more than I've made in my entire lifetime, but luckily Carter offered to cover it. I was hesitant at first, but I think that's only natural. He insisted, though, and pointed out that anywhere else would cost twice as much and not be as good. There's apparently no public school in this district, so our choices were either this one or Candlevayer two blocks down the road. And Candlevayer's reputation is less than stellar.

"Yeah, but you're being a super good sport about this." I grin and smooth her hair. She chuckles and shakes her head.

"Honestly, I'm freaking out about starting a new school, but it's only for a few months and then I'm graduating! That's all that matters, right?" She grins and I nod before pulling her into a hug. She turns her face away but lets me squeeze her.

"I am so proud of how mature you've become. How did I get so lucky with a sister like you?"

"You keep asking that. Have you ever considered that maybe I'm the lucky one?" We both look at each other and giggle.

"All right, you need to get going or you're going to be late. And it's never a good look to be late on the first day."

"Words to live by. See ya." Izzy gets out of the car and closes the door. For a split second I feel guilty as I watch her peers stare at her walking toward the front doors. Maybe I should have asked Carter to borrow the Porsche or something. Izzy turns and waves, and I immediately feel a little better.

If anyone can show these rich kids what cool really means, it'll be Izzy.

I pull out of the parking lot and hit the road. Luckily no more waves of nausea roll over me as I continue on my journey. When I hit the stoplight just before coming to our neighborhood, the corner store catches my eye. Before I can change my mind I swerve into the parking lot and head inside.

My feet take me where I need to go without much thought, and before I know it I'm standing in front of a shelf filled with tiny pink boxes. I swallow as I take in all my options: Instant Results! Four Tests in One! Electric Window! Early Detection!

I lick my lips, almost overwhelmed by all the options. Without thinking I grab a box and hurry to the self checkout, swiping my card and rushing to the car without the receipt.

When I reach the safety of the car I look down at the box I grabbed. Digital early result. I guess that's as good as anything else. I sigh and drive the rest of the way home in silence.

After getting home I head up to the bathroom, ready to take the test. I take a deep breath and set it on the counter of our bathroom. Just as I'm about to sit on the toilet, though, my phone rings with a call from the prison. I gladly answer it, welcoming the distraction.

After a long conversation with my dad (or as long as one facilitated by a prison could be, at least) I need to get ready for my lunch date with Carter. That's why I'm telling myself I didn't take the test, at least. The truth is that I'm nervous about taking it, so am putting it off for as long as I can, which is making me feel at least a bit better.

It's not that I don't want to have kids with Carter or be pregnant. In fact, when I really think about it, I would love both of those things. But I don't know how Carter

would feel. What if he thinks I'm trying to trap him? What if he's not ready?

We haven't really talked much about the future and there's no way of knowing how he'll take this. There are so many things we haven't talked about, serious things, and we're not yet at a point that I think I should be asking those sorts of questions.

"Addy?" Carter asks. I blink, coming out of my thoughts. I smile at him across from the table. He looks up at the waiter and I shake my head.

"Oh! I'm sorry. The fried chicken salad, please." The waiter smiles politely as I hand him the menu. Then I look at Carter. "How was your meeting with the lawyers?"

"Great! They've already registered the non-profit name and set up the tax information. Everything is really coming along."

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“I’m glad! I think it’s amazing what you’re doing. I’m sure Elise would be so proud of you and happy with what you’ve decided to do.”

“I know she would be. But I can’t take credit for the idea. Court is the one who truly put it in my head. This fundraising event will be the perfect way to kick off the foundation.”

The expression of pure excitement on his face makes me smile. Carter always looks happy, don’t get me wrong. But right now he looks... fulfilled, is the best word I can use to describe it.

“I can’t wait. It will be the perfect day.”

Carter searches my face, raising a brow as he studies me.

“All right, what’s wrong?”

I startle.

“What do you mean? Nothing’s wrong!”

“Come on, Addy. Give me a little credit. Something is obviously bothering you.”

I sigh and look away. As much as I know I need to, I can’t say anything about the pregnancy test waiting at home. Carter frowns and reaches across the table to squeeze my hand.

“Look, I know this thing with your dad is hard to deal with. I’m not even going to pretend to know what you could be feeling. But you can’t shut me out. I’m here for you, and I want to know everything that’s going through your mind.”

I blink and give him a weak smile before nodding. He’s assuming it’s about my dad and I’m not going to correct him, as much as I know that I should. I look down at my hands.

“Right. I know you’re right. It’s just. We’ve gone so long without him, but he’s always been there. Been available. Soon we won’t even have that. It’s just... I wish I had more time with him. Real time. Not just sitting across from him at a table in the prison visiting room.”

Carter pauses as the waiter puts our meals in front of us.

“You know, I was talking to my lawyer earlier about your dad’s situation.” My head snaps up as I look at him in alarm. “Look, maybe it wasn’t right. It’s your business, not mine. But he did give me some helpful information. He told me that sometimes in cases like this prisoners can be approved for a compassion care release. It’s not permanent, but for a day or two they can get out and spend time with their family. Maybe you should talk to the warden about that?”

I blink. Compassion care release? A huge grin spreads across my face.

“Oh, my God, you’re a genius!”

We finish our food and part ways -- him to do more work for the foundation and me to go to the prison.

“A compassionate care release?” the warden says, rubbing his chin as he stares at me. I look out the window behind him and sigh. Right after my visit with my dad I came

up to talk to the warden.

It wasn't easy to get him to see me. The receptionist and I went back and forth for fifteen minutes before the warden came out and told me to come in and stop harassing her.

I don't think it was harassment, though. If she has just let me in the first time I asked, I wouldn't have had to argue with her.

"Yes. His days are numbered, and we've gone so many years without him. My sister was six when he was sent to prison. She's spent the last eleven years not spending any time with him. Even just one day with him would be better than nothing." I take in a deep breath. "I just know that if we don't take advantage of everything there is to offer, I'll regret it. I'll regret not letting my sister spend time with him when he barely has any left."

The warden looks me over carefully, as if trying to decide if I'm telling the truth.

"Eleven years, huh? She's close to graduating."

"Yeah. She'll be going to college next year. I haven't... I haven't even told her yet. About Dad." I wipe away a stray tear. "I just don't know how. She'll be devastated. She cried for so long when he went away. She was so little she barely understood what was happening."

"My daughter's seventeen. Goes to Harrisford High. I couldn't imagine." The warden clears his throat. "If I was dying, I'd want to spend as much time as possible with her."

We stare at each other. I'm sure he thinks that's enough, but I need more. An actual confirmation.

“Warden?” I ask. He gives me a small smile.

“I can’t make promises; the decision isn’t truly up to me. But I will pass along the request to the Department of Corrections and give them my recommendation. He’s been a model prisoner during his time here. Hopefully, that will make them at least a little more lenient.”

I squeal and jump up.

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“You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that. Thank you!”

“No promises, like I said. But I’ll be in touch.”

After a few more thank you’s, I head to the car and start off in the direction of Izzy’s school. Looks like we have some things to talk about.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Carter

When I pull in the driveway later that afternoon I’m relieved to see that Addy and Izzy aren’t here yet. It’s not that I don’t want them here, but that I want time to decompress and wash away the seriousness of the day before we get together and talk about our respective days.

When I walk in the front door, the house is quiet except for the sound of the various domestic workers sweeping and cooking and making phone calls from all areas of the house. It’s strange how much noisier the house is just by gaining two more residents. It’s never quiet anymore like it used to be. Not that I’m complaining.

“Maybe I should shower,” I mutter to myself before lifting my arm and sniffing. I don’t stink, per se. But I’ve definitely smelled better. I take the steps two at a time, eager to get in the shower and finish before Addy gets home.

I throw my briefcase on our bed and hop into the en suite, turning the shower on to the hottest setting immediately. I peel off my shirt and turn to throw it on the counter

when something catches my eye.

My shirt falls from my hand as I grab the small pink box from the counter and read the front. Instant Response Pregnancy Test. I blink in surprise.

Addy thinks she's pregnant? But she's on birth control.

Maybe it failed. My heart skips a beat as a million thoughts runs through my head at once. We could have a baby?

I wipe away a tear as Elise immediately comes into my mind. We always wanted children together, but that obviously never came to fruition. A baby that's both me and Addy. I put down the pregnancy test and walk out of the room numbly.

It's not long before I find myself in my wife's room. I sit down in her favorite pink chair and smile.

"Elise. Addy could be pregnant." I let out a chuckle. "I know I shouldn't laugh. It's just shocking. I never thought...you know."

I shake my head and look toward a picture of her on the wall.

"I never thought I would fall in love again, much less have children one day. It's a shock. She's on birth control, but if it failed..." I smile. "Maybe it's a sign. Maybe it's meant to be."

A book on the shelf across the room draws my attention. I walk over and take the baby book from the shelf. The book is still blank, of course, but is something Elise bought the time she thought she was pregnant. The one time.

"I love Addy. I'm ready to start a life with her. I love you Elise, and I'm honoring

you with this foundation. But it's time for me to move forward and completely commit myself to my relationship with Addy."

I nod and stand up. That's the truth, completely out in the open. Maybe Elise is here, listening to what I say. Or maybe she's no longer present at all, resting peacefully in another world. Either way, it's finally time to leave the past behind.

Of course I'll always love Elise; she's the woman who taught me what love is in the first place. But my future is with Addy, and that includes getting married and having kids. I smile when I hear the front door open. Eager to speak to Addy, I hurry out of the room and down the hall, not worrying about shutting the door behind me. But my pace slows when I hear the front door slam. As I walk down the stairs I see a flash of Izzy's swingy ponytail disappear down the hall before hearing her bedroom door slam twice as loud as the front door did.

What was that about? Obviously they're fighting about something, but what?

I frown. Maybe Izzy had a really bad first day. That's not a reason to fight with Addy, but teenagers, I'm learning, are moody and unpredictable. She could be lashing out because of that.

The front door reopens as I take the rest of the stairs. As I step into the entryway, Addy comes through the door, an exhausted look on her face.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, shooting a look of concern toward Izzy's room.

"Did she slam the door really hard?" Addy says quietly. I chuckle and pull her into a hug. After a moment she wraps her arms around me and buries her face in my shoulder.

"What was the conversation about?" I ask. When Addy pulls back, tears are spilling

down her cheeks. “Whoa, hey, hey. Let’s have a seat, okay?”

I lead Addy to the couch and sit down, gently wiping away her tears with my thumb. She sniffs and pulls her knees to her chest before sighing.

“I don’t... can we just talk about something else for a second? Anything else?” Addy’s voice is dejected when she turns to me. I nod and thread my fingers through hers,

“Yeah. There actually is something that I want to say to you.” I take a deep breath and Addy tenses. I squeeze her hand to reassure her that it’s nothing bad. “I found your test in the bathroom.”

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Addy blinks. A weird expression spreads over her face, as if she is hearing about it for the first time.

“I am ready to raise a baby with you. I love you so, so much Addy.” Addy sucks in a breath, and I keep going before she can interrupt. “You mean everything to me, and there’s nothing I want more than to start a family with you.”

There’s a shuffling from behind me.

“Wow. You just don’t tell me anything at all, do you?” I turn around, surprise running through me. Izzy’s face is red with anger, her eyes filled with betrayal. My gaze immediately shoots to Addy. What didn’t she tell Izzy?

Addy sighs.

“Izzy had my phone in the car, picking out music for the drive home when a text came through from Cassie. Expressing condolences for our father’s cancer. I didn’t mean for her to find out that way.” Addy shakes her head and looks at Izzy. “I didn’t mean for you to find out that way.”

“You didn’t tell Izzy yet?” My brows shoot to my forehead. I’m not trying to judge Addy, but it’s hard to imagine not only dealing with the fact that her father is dying, but also having to tell her little sister about it. “Why didn’t you tell Izzy?”

“He knew?” Izzy’s shrill voice rises from behind me. When I look at her a tear rolls down her cheek. “He knew before I did? About our own...”

Izzy covers her mouth as another tear drifts down her cheek. Then she shakes her head.

“Does everyone know? Everyone in the entire world but me knew that our dad has cancer. Were you ever going to tell me? He only has six months to live! Would he have died before you said something?” Izzy is screaming now. Addy stands up indignantly.

“That’s enough, Izzy. I know I should have told you sooner. But it was hard, okay? You have no idea what it’s like to be in my position.”

“I know I would have told you as soon as I found out.”

“You can’t possibly know what you would have done. So don’t even say that.”

My head swivels between the sisters as they go back and forth with each other. It’s almost like watching a stage show and not knowing where to look: the action is everywhere, all at once.

“You’re always telling me that I’m so smart and I’m the best sister in the entire world,” Izzy says, tears rolling down her face in a steady stream. “But I’m actually a regular sister. I’m not special or great or anything like that. The only reason that you think that is because you are the shittiest sister in the world.”

Addy freezes, a look of shock pasting itself on her face.

“Whoa. Don’t talk to your sister like that.”

“I’ll say whatever I want. I am so sick of being such a good sport about everything, and she can’t even be open and honest with me like we’re supposed to be. Like good sisters are supposed to be. I’m out of here.”

Izzy hoists the small bag she's carrying over her shoulder before running to the front door and throwing it open. She doesn't look back as she slams the door behind her. Addy is still frozen when I reach out to touch her.

"Addy—"

She pulls away and runs to the door. I follow her as she throws it open.

"Izzy!" Addy shouts as she steps outside. I walk out just in time to see a car speeding away.

"Did she just get in that car?" I ask. Addy squeaks before turning to me and bursting into tears. "Don't worry. We'll find Izzy."

I stroke her hair as I look up in the direction of the car speeding away.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Addy

I shouldn't be mad at Carter. I know I shouldn't. He didn't know what he was doing or that he was making things worse. He was only trying to help.

Yet I'm still having trouble pushing down my annoyance. Did he have to reveal that he knew before Izzy? Sure, he was shocked I didn't tell her. Everyone would probably be shocked that I didn't tell her. I sigh and pull my phone out of my pocket, finding Nate's contact immediately and dialing.

If Izzy's with anyone, it will be him. I hope. Finding Izzy is my number one goal. It's the only way to keep my annoyance from spreading all over my body and taking over every emotion I have.

The phone rings for longer than I'd like before he picks up, but I take it as a good sign. Izzy might be telling him not to pick up the phone.

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“Hello?” There’s a confused tone in Nate’s voice that causes me to pause. Carter walks past me, keys in hand.

“Equestrian center,” he mouths. I nod and direct my attention back to the phone.

“Hi, Nate. It’s Addy. I was wondering if Izzy’s with you. I know she’s upset and she probably doesn’t want you to tell me but...”

“Oh, I thought you knew. Izzy and I aren’t dating anymore.”

There’s silence as I process what he’s just told me. I guess I’m not the only one hiding things.

“Sorry. I didn’t... thank you.”

I hang up before he can ask any other questions. My phone lights up, and when I look down I see it’s Carter.

“Hey. I sent a picture of the license plate from my security camera to my friend, and he was able to get an address for the car owner. I’m coming by to pick you up.”

“Oh, my God, thank you!” I hang up and grab my shoes before running out the front door. The five minute wait feels like five hours before Carter pulls up. I jump in and he speeds off. I don’t miss the similarity between the way we’re leaving and the way Izzy left earlier.

Ten minutes later, we pull up outside of what looks to be a bumping house party.

“Come on, Izzy,” I mutter under my breath. I know teenagers go to parties, and I’m sure Izzy’s been to plenty; I’m not an idiot. But this is not the place to be when she’s upset.

When I get out, Carter follows suit, hopping out of the car and following me. I approach a group of girls smoking on the lawn, choosing not to think about how they definitely aren’t old enough to be doing it.

“Hey, hi.” One of the girls looks at me. “Do any of you know Izzy? Have you seen her?”

The girl gives me a look and giggles to her friends. I ignore them and continue down the path before stepping foot into the house. Teenagers are everywhere, leaning against the walls drinking in groups. There’s a circle of kids smoking a bong in front of a TV blasting music. Only a few look up as I walk in, and if they notice that I’m not their age, they don’t seem to care. I approach a couple of girls in the corner. One looks up and raises her brow at me.

“Have you seen Izzy?” I ask. Carter’s voice floats somewhere behind me, asking another group the same question.

“Izzy...?” The girl responds, shaking her head.

“She went upstairs with Corey,” a guy on the couch says. I look over and nod before heading upstairs. There’s a line of kids waiting at one closed door that I instinctively know is the bathroom. I pass them and head to the door next to it, opening it. The room is empty. I back out and turn around to the door opposite. I put my ear to it. Giggling. This has to be it. I throw open the door and a girl shrieks.

“It’s the purple monster!” she cries out, pointing.

“She’s on acid. You’re not Mrs. Jones, are you?” the guy on the bed next to her asks sheepishly. I shake my head and close the door.

One room left. I don’t hesitate to storm in.

The two teens kissing on the bed pull away, and one of them is Izzy.

“Addy!” she cries out, her cheeks turning pink with embarrassment.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Izzy?” I shout. The guy backs away and runs past me out the door. I storm into the room and close the door behind me.

“God! I’m at a party, enjoying myself and letting off steam. Why can’t you let me?”

“I would love to! But you can’t disappear into a strange car and expect me not to look for you!” I sit down on the bed next to her. “I’m sorry for not telling you about Dad. I wanted to. I planned to. I just didn’t know how. It wasn’t easy.”

“You told everyone else.”

“Not everyone else, no. And it was easy to tell the people I did tell because it didn’t mean anything to them. You’re the only other person who knows exactly how it feels to hear that your father is dying.”

Izzy looks at me and sighs.

“I know. After the anger went away, I felt bad.” Izzy looks down at her hands. “It just makes me feel left out when so many other people seemed to know before me. And now I find out you’re pregnant. We used to tell each other everything and now it’s like you don’t tell me anything.”

I laugh and shake my head.

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“I’m not pregnant. Or, I don’t know if I am. Carter found the pregnancy test on our bathroom counter, but I haven’t taken it yet.” I bump her shoulder playfully. “Besides, you’re one to talk. When did you and Nate break up?”

“Last week. I think he likes someone else. I broke up with him, though.” Izzy looks at me. “You’re not the worst sister in the world. I’m sorry for saying you were. You’re a great sister.”

“So are you.” I ruffle her hair. “Let’s promise to not keep secrets anymore.”

“Deal.”

I lean over and hug Izzy, squeezing her tight. She giggles.

“You’re grounded, by the way,” I whisper.

“I know. I thought I might be.”

“What did you think, Dad?” I ask as we drive to the movie theater. The day after Izzy’s run away stunt, I got the call that Dad’s compassionate care release was approved for only one day, so I had to unground her.

“Can’t believe what passes for quality cinema these days.” Dad shakes his head and Izzy giggles. We started off our day by grabbing breakfast and heading to the movies together.

“You should have seen Beverly Hills Chihuahuas. You would have hated it. Although

the comedy wasn't as raunchy."

"Yeah, was that appropriate for you, Iz?" Dad asks.

Izzy sighs in exasperation.

"Dad! I'm seventeen."

"But you'll always be my baby girl."

I peek at him in the rearview mirror when we pull up to a stoplight. He somehow looks even thinner than he did only a few days ago. The cancer is consuming him faster than I can even register, and I hate it. He's disappearing before my eyes.

"You know where I'd really enjoy going?" Dad asks after coughing into his sleeve. The clothes he's wearing are not only dated by almost ten years but also several sizes too large for him now. We've been getting funny looks from people everywhere but to Dad's credit he doesn't even seem bothered. Although I guess he's probably not concerned with that sort of thing anymore.

"Where?" Izzy beams up at him. She's been ecstatic since we've picked him up, practically glued to his hip. I don't blame her. Part of me feels guilty, knowing that I got so much more time with him than she did. I shouldn't feel bad for being born first, but I can't help the way my brain is making me feel. Despite all that, I can't stop myself from piping up.

"I know where."

"Take a guess." Dad grins at me.

"McFreezie's."

“Ding ding ding. We have a winner.”

Dad smiles as I put on my blinker. The conversation continues as I take us to the ice cream parlor. It feels like only seconds pass before we arrive.

It’s weird, how when you want something to last forever, it goes by in the blink of an eye, but when you want things to hurry they seem to last a lifetime. What I wouldn’t give for this day with my dad to last a lifetime.

“Looks exactly the same,” Dad comments as we get out of the car.

The three of us pile into the shop and stride up to the counter. I admire the flavors but don’t bother looking at any. I already know what I’m getting.

“Welcome to McFreezie’s, where the ice cream is McFreezin’. What can I scoop for you today?” the worker asks enthusiastically.

“Two scoops of Cotton Candy,” I smile.

“Me, too,” dad says.

“Make that three,” Izzy pipes in. I blink in surprise. Dad is apparently equally as surprised because he turns to look at her.

“No Rocky Road?”

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“Nah. I want to see what all the Cotton Candy hype is about.” Izzy shrugs like it’s no big deal, but I can tell that it is. She wants to be closer to dad, and that includes eating his favorite ice cream.

After paying for the treats, the three of us settle at one of the tables. Izzy reaches over for the Back in Time sheet but dad holds up his hand to stop her.

“Hold on. There are a few things I want to say.” Dad scoops a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth. “Mmm. First of all, this is just as delicious as I remember.”

Izzy and I laugh.

“Second... I’m sorry for not being able to be a real part of your lives these past years. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about the two of you. I wish I had the words to express how important the two of you are to me. I hate that I have to go like this, but in a way, I’m happy. Because I’m able to spend this day on the outside with the two of you. And a day with my two favorite girls is all I could want.”

I wipe away a tear and smile. Izzy throws her arms around dad.

“It’s okay, dad. You don’t need to be sorry,” she whispers through the tears. “I just wish you could stay with us now.”

“I do, too. But this isn’t a prison break, and I have to go back.”

I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. He snuffles before shrugging.

“All right, all right. What year is it?”

Izzy reaches across the table and pulls the paper from its box.

“1996.”

My phone rings, and when I pull it out to silence it, I see it’s my doctor’s office.

“I have to take this. I’ll just be a second.” I step away from the table, leaving Izzy and Dad to talk. “Hello?”

“Hello, Miss Hughes. This is Laura Shepherd from Dr. Monroe’s office. I’m just calling to let you know that the results of your blood work are back and you are indeed pregnant. Congratulations.”

My face lights up.

“Thank you.”

After scheduling an appointment, I return to the table and smile.

“What’s the Cheshire grin for?” Dad asks.

“That was the doctor. I’m pregnant.”

“You’re...” Dad whispers before trailing off. Tears well up in his eyes. “Well, that’s just... I wish I was able to meet my future grandchild. But I guess knowing about him or her will have to be good enough for me.”

Izzy smiles at me before taking a breath.

“I have news, too.” Izzy grins. “I’m going to college. Illinois State is offering me a full ride.”

I gasp and cover my mouth. Dad smiles and wraps her in a hug.

“Both of my daughters are making me proud today. This is the best day of my life.”

Sitting across the table, watching Dad hug my nearly adult sister with tears in his eyes, the same thought runs through my mind.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Carter

“You’re sure this tie looks okay?” I ask for the third time as Addy straightens it. She smiles and kisses me.

“Carter, you look absolutely perfect.”

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I look out over the crowd as my brother taps the microphone in front of him. Despite knowing how popular the club is and how serious people are about cancer, I didn't expect quite so many people to be here.

It's even an optimistic turnout by Court's standards. When we were supervising the decorating this morning, he thought we would see maybe fifty people come out. This number is nearly triple that. Good thing we're set up with way more food and drink than we thought we'd need, although that's thanks to Cassie. It always pays to be prepared. At least that's what she told us when placing the orders with the caterers. Guess she was right.

"Here to tell you about the featured charity tonight is my brother, Carter Castle. Please give him a round of applause." Court steps aside and grins at me, holding out the mic. I take a breath and smile as I walk out and take it from him. The crowd applauds.

I look out at the million faces. Am I really ready to tell all these people about my wife? When I turn and see Addy's face, I realize that I am. More than ready.

"Good evening. My name is Carter Castle. When my brother approached me about doing a fundraiser for cancer, I was hesitant. But it sparked an idea in me. Instead of doing just one fundraiser, why not go a step further? Why not start an entire foundation dedicated to just that?" I pause and lick my lips.

"My late wife, Elise, was taken from me a number of years ago after a prolonged struggle with cervical cancer. Finding out that the woman I loved would be taken from me so young, and seemingly strong and fit, was like a body blow. Elise always

had dreams of doing something significant to give back to the community. That's why this foundation is named for her, and aimed at not just treating cervical cancer, but also providing the appropriate testing, screening, and education. One of the most meaningful things that we can do to combat cervical cancer is to vaccinate our youngsters against HPV. Proper screening and testing can also result in early detection and higher chances for recovery. The Elise Castle Foundation for Cervical Cancer is the way to do that. That being said, please enjoy yourselves this evening and don't forget that for every \$1,000 donated you get not only your playing chips, but also raffle tickets for prize baskets from local businesses. Have a good evening, everyone."

Applause bursts from the crowd when I step off the stage. Addy wraps me in her arms and kisses my cheeks.

"That was great, babe. You did an amazing job."

"You look amazing," I respond. I motion for her to spin and admire the snug black gown hugging her figure. She's not showing yet, and she looks absolutely stunning, every curve captured by the dark silhouette.

"All right, kids, keep it PG. There are minors here," Izzy cracks wise. The two of us chuckle as I look around.

"Come on. Let's play some poker."

I grip Addy's hand and squeeze. Part of it is to comfort her, but part of it is also in hopes that she'll stop that incessant foot tapping that's been going on for the last twenty minutes.

"Sorry. I'm just so nervous!" Addy smiles at me. It's been a few weeks since the fundraiser. We raised a ton of money, and Court said membership inquiries and club

attendance has been up so much since that they're considering expanding.

"Don't be sorry. Why are you nervous?"

"I don't know. I've never been pregnant before."

We both laugh. My eyes dart down to her stomach even though she's barely showing. She says that the "bump" we're seeing is just bloating, but I still prefer to think it's our baby.

"Addison Hughes," the nurse calls from the door.

"About time," she mutters before standing up. I follow her through the door and into one of the exam rooms. Addy lays down on the table while a tech spreads jelly on her stomach.

"This gel is the connector for the ultrasound wand. It's going to help us see your baby," he says. The man grabs a wand as the doctor walks in.

"Good afternoon, you two. My name is Dr Shaun Upton, and I'll be your obstetrician. Let's take a look at that baby, shall we?" He grabs the folder and sits down on the opposite side of the ultrasound tech. "I see you're eighteen weeks along. That's pretty far -- it's surprising that you only found out a month ago. We might be able to see the sex of the baby today."

We all look up at the screen. The tech says something under his breath that I can't understand.

The screen is confusing. If I'm honest, it looks like nothing more than white noise covering a black screen that's moving around. I wonder what kind of training these people get to look at the screens and see anything.

“There’s the heartbeat. Wait... it sounds like it’s two heartbeats,” the tech says. He looks up at the ultrasound machine and smiles. “Ah, yup. Looks like you got twins on your hands.”

“Two?” My jaw drops. Two babies? Addy’s expression mirrors mine. My mouth breaks out in a grin. “That’s amazing.”

“Looks like you have both a boy and a girl in there. I’m not sure how much you know about twins, but boy/girl twins are always fraternal, which means they’re two separate eggs fertilized by two separate sperm.”

The doctor looks at us with a serious expression. “Twin pregnancies are more likely than others to have problems, so we’ll be seeing you a bit more often than we would if you were having a singleton.”

Addy asks the doctor a couple of questions while the fact that we’re having twins continues to reverberate through my mind. I can’t wait to tell Court and Cassie since they have their own set of twins at home. I’ve never really thought about having twins of my own, but now that I know we are, I can’t help but think that I’m the luckiest man in the world.

“I’ll tell you a little secret about twins,” the doctor says as he escorts us out. “It’s always dependent on the mother. Addison, you are predisposed to drop more than one egg when you ovulate. That also means that you’re more likely to have twins in the future. So you may want to have a talk about your future family planning if you aren’t sure you want two or three sets of twins.”

The doctor claps me on the back and grins as Addy and I continue to the counter to check out.

“Twins! Congratulations!” The receptionist smiles. “Dr. Upton wants to see you back

in a month for your next appointment.”

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After the appointment is scheduled, I walk Addy to the parking lot. Before we get in the car, though, I spin her around and kiss her forehead.

“Twins,” I say as I pull away.

“Can you believe it?”

“Definitely. You’re a special woman. It only makes sense that you’d have a special womb.”

She rolls her eyes and tilts back her head.

“It’s not a special womb. I just can’t believe we’re going to have them. Delivery is not going to be fun.”

“Come on, that’s a long way off. Let’s get some ice cream to celebrate. We can tell Izzy the good news when we pick her up from school.”

“Oh, my God, she’s going to lose her mind. I can’t wait to tell Dad.”

“When’s your next visit with him?”

“Tomorrow. Izzy’s excited. They love to play Scrabble when we visit.”

The thought strikes me as funny when I imagine Izzy, Addy and Tom sitting around a metal table playing Scrabble like they’re visiting him in a senior care center instead of a prison visiting room. Funny how unexpectedly life turns out sometimes.

“I’d like to come and meet him. Who knows how much longer I have left to make introductions?”

Addy smiles up at me and squeezes my hand.

“I’d really love that. Now let’s go get some ice cream.”

We get in the car and buckle in before heading over to McFreezie’s. It’s become tradition to go there now. I don’t even have to ask what she’s getting anymore; the woman practically lives off of Cotton Candy. I have to keep a tub of it in the fridge at all times in case she gets a craving.

When I pull into the parking lot and we park the car, the lights of the McFreezie’s ice cream cone sign reflects in her eyes.

“I can’t wait to bring our kids here,” Addy whispers.

“Technically we already are.” My gaze darts to her stomach. Addy looks up at me and giggles.

“Shut up.”

Then we head into the ice cream parlor.

Epilogue

Addy

“Come on, just one more big push,” the doctor says from the bottom of the table.

“You said that an hour ago!” I screech, the sweat from my forehead dripping onto my

gown. The pain is unlike anything the birth classes prepared me for. I'm suing that teacher the second I get out of this hospital room.

"It's only been a few minutes since the first baby was delivered," Carter says from beside me. I turn to him and snarl.

"Shut up!" I yell. He has no idea what this kind of pain is.

"Big push!" the doctor says loudly. I bear down, pushing as hard as I can to get this baby out of me. "Come on, baby, come on. Look, look, there she is! We got her! Baby number two is clear."

A nurse hands me first the boy, then the girl. I look down at their tiny perfect faces. I don't care that they're slimy and covered in my blood. They're absolutely beautiful.

"Wow. These are our babies," I whisper. Carter leans forward and smiles.

"They're so cute. They look just like you."

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I smile up at him, my previous anger already forgotten.

“Can you believe they’re here? It feels like I’ve been waiting forever for them to arrive.”

“I know. I especially can’t believe they waited for your father’s wake to try to make their big appearance,” Carter says. We both chuckle as we stare down at them.

“Get Izzy.”

“Don’t you want us to clean them up?” a nurse asks. When I glare at her she looks away. Carter leaves to get Izzy and I stare down at the babies in my arms. My heart has never felt as full as it does at this moment. My life is truly perfect.

Carter and Izzy come back through the door. Izzy’s face lights up when she sees me holding the babies.

“Cute!” She walks around the doctors and leans in to look at the babies. “Why are they slimy?”

“They just came out of me, dork. Did you think they pop out wrapped in blankets?”

“Someone’s cranky,” Izzy mutters, looking up at Carter. He shrugs and they both direct their attention back at the twins. “Which one is which?”

“She,” I raise the baby in my right arm. “Is Mary Elise. And this little guy over here is Edward Thomas. Two perfect babies named after two of the most amazing people

we've ever had in our lives."

Carter squeezes my shoulder. We spent a lot of time agonizing over names and trying to figure out what to call the twins. It was important to us for their middle names to honor both Carter's late wife and my dad, but even more important for the twins to have their own first names so they can grow into their own identities.

"I can't wait to take them home," I whisper.

"I can't wait to raise them with you," Carter whispers back. He leans his head on mine and looks at the twins in wonder.

I know I've said this a lot, but this time I mean it.

This is the happiest moment of my life.