



# Just A Trip

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Trent:

Waking up in Vegas is not all it's cracked up to be. Before you ask, no, I didn't find myself married, simply kidnapped. By my brother. Let me repeat that. MY BROTHER KIDNAPPED ME.

Thankfully, the beautiful, albeit somewhat terrifying woman at the bar has agreed to let me ride to Phoenix with her. So I'll be out of Vegas and back home for the holiday in no time. As long as we don't end up in jail, or worse.

At least the woman who used to annoy me has turned into a decent travel companion.

Now if we can ever make it home.

Karli:

Being home for the holidays is overrated. Or at least my home.

So when the chance comes to attend someone else's holiday, I jump at the opportunity. I'm lonely, okay?

But traveling with Trent is more than I expected. As in, I did not expect these kinds of feelings. Not after only twenty-four hours together.

The trip is perfect, in a complete train wreck kind of way. But what happens when we get home?

Just A Trip is a sweet romantic comedy.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

## Chapter 1

Karli

This is easily the most fun I've ever had on Christmas. Chasing around scared little boys with needles? A hoot.

I'm kidding. They aren't boys, they are men, and I'm not chasing them around, only doing what I was told and pretending to be a tattoo artist. Emphasis on pretend. My equipment is nothing but a container of old sewing needles—some are quite big—and a bottle of fake ink I made with black food dye. But for some reason, the Bentley brothers are buying it.

"I don't think those needles are clean, Lennox," one of the brothers says. Trent, I believe. He's got a deeper voice than the other two, and he's also the only one with a beard. I like a man with a beard.

"Of course they are, right Karli?" Lennox looks down at me.

I raise a brow. "Are they supposed to be?"

"Yes, they are supposed to be!" A different brother yells.

"Fine," I grumble, picking up my stack of needles. "So picky." I turn away, biting back a smile at the hushed voices of Lennox's brothers pleading with her not to go through with it.

I drop the needles by the sink in the kitchen and turn on the water, letting it run over nothing.

“This is hilarious.” My best friend Juliet says, joining me by the sink, helping me “clean” the needles. “I can’t believe they really think you’re a tattoo artist.”

“I know. I might have to take up acting.” I chuckle. “What should I do next?”

She purses her lips. “How about the dishes?”

“Hey.” I nudge her with my hip. “I’ve gotten better.”

“I know, I know.” She looks over her shoulder into the living room. “You better get back in there before Lennox lets them off the hook.”

A couple of weeks ago Lennox’s brothers made a bet about her dating life. Understandably, she was annoyed. So, she pretended to be engaged to a guy she just met and when he “broke it off” last night, she guilted her brothers into getting tattoos with her and recruited me to help.

I’m always on board to help those in need. Maybe because I was that person.

I still am that person. Though what I lack is complicated.

I carry my container of needles back to the living room. “They’re as clean as they’ll ever be,” I declare.

Each one of the brothers turns pleading eyes on their sister like she alone has the power to save them from me.

“Michael wants to go first,” Lennox offers her oldest brother up as a sacrifice.

Michael begs Juliet to save him, but not even his fiancée grants him a compassionate thought as she cheers him on from the kitchen.

He sinks onto the chair. “At least it’s not a bat this time, right?” he says to me.

I glare at him. One time. He caught me sleepwalking one time but somehow finds a way to bring it up every time he’s at my apartment with Juliet.

I’m going to enjoy this.

Michael flinches as I wipe his skin with a sterile wipe. Then I take my time, digging through the container until I find the biggest needle in there.

How far do I have to go to sell this thing?Lennox never gave me a code word for when the charade was over.

Michael might be getting a very interesting “tattoo” today. I open my jar of “ink” and dab the needle inside. I bring the needle to Michael’s ankle.

He grips the armrests of the chair until his fingers turn white. “I’m only doing this because I love you, Len,” he says.

My hand freezes, the needle less than a millimeter away from his skin. What would it be like to have someone love you enough that they risk getting tetanus from a stranger to prove it?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I glance up at the brothers, all of them focused on their sister with love in their eyes. They may be ridiculous, but Lennox has no idea how lucky she is to have a family who cares about her. I'd kill for anything that resembled her family.

I clear the lump in my throat, but my hand holding the needle twitches and—

“Ow!” Michael yells, “That hurt.”

Oops.

Lennox gapes at me. “What are you doing? You can't give people real tattoos!”

“Chill. I just poked him with a pin,” I say, quickly dropping the needle to get lost in the stack.

“Wait, what's going on?” Michael asks, shooting out of the chair and away from me.

“That was payback,” Lennox says.

And my work here is done. I stand up and retrieve my supplies.

Each one of the brothers starts yelling at Lennox and I take the opportunity to silently slip away. Juliet is at the kitchen table eating a cinnamon roll and offers me one.

“Did you really poke Michael with a needle?” she asks.

“Accidentally.” I take the proffered cinnamon roll, recalling what happened. It was an

accident, but I never did clean the needles. “Do you think your fiancé is up to date on his vaccines?”

“Karli!”

“Kidding.” Mostly. There might have been blood. I take a bite of the heavenly confection, chewing slowly. “Better safe than sorry?”

“What if—” Juliet starts, but she’s cut off when Lennox comes sprinting into the kitchen, three brothers on her trail.

She barricades herself on one side of the island, but the one with the beard catches her and throws her over his shoulder.

“I’ve got her,” he says, chuckling as Lennox tries to tickle his sides.

Michael grabs something out of the fridge. And then, it’s a tangle of limbs and laughter as whipped cream flies through the air in every direction.

A glob lands on the table in front of me and I watch it melt on the wood surface. Is this something normal siblings do?

It almost looks...fun. How pathetic is it that I want to join in?

But the fight is over soon and then they are all cleaning off and apologizing to each other.

Ugh. That’s not normal. I take my cinnamon roll and go wandering around the house in search of a television. Juliet will want to stay a while, which is fine, I’ll just make myself at home.

## Chapter 2

Trent

Well, that's a new one. Lennox managed to pull one over on all of us.

I take a bite of my cinnamon roll and smile, recalling the horrified looks on my brothers' faces when Karli, a.k.a. the crazy lady, had pulled out pins the size of syringe needles. Wimps.

Okay, they weren't the only ones. I was terrified.

"I knew the whole time," my twin brother Sean says while scarfing down a cinnamon roll.

"You did not." I know him well enough to know he was as fooled as the rest of us. Calling his bluff is essential to our relationship. If I fail to do so, I end up with one eyebrow. Or in a chicken costume. Yes, both have happened.

"Okay, I didn't. But I knew there was something fishy about the engagement."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Obviously it was to make Grant jealous.”

“Do you think it worked?” Sean asks.

“I hope so.” It’s hard walking on eggshells around two people who clearly love each other but can’t seem to say the words out loud. But just in case, I texted Grant everything that happened this morning.

“Hey, you up for a game of pool? Loser gets bathroom duty at the shop next week.”

I raise a brow. “It’s your turn to clean the bathroom, isn’t it?”

“Play your cards right and it could be yours.” He grins and smacks my shoulder.

“Fine. But if I win you take my turn as well.”

“Deal.”

I’d planned on going to the shop for a bit to work on a job, but I guess it can wait. I polish off my cinnamon roll. “I need to grab something out of my old room first.”

Mom and Lennox are in the living room talking and I approach them, hugging Mom first.

“Do you mind if I steal the old monitor in my room? The one at the shop is acting up.”



“Not at all, honey,” Mom says. “No one’s used it since you left.”

“Thanks.” I turn to my sister, enveloping her in a hug as well. The holidays always make me more sentimental, but after watching Grant’s struggles this past month, I’m holding my loved ones extra close this year.

“I really am sorry,” I say again. I have a feeling I’ll be saying it many more times before I feel better about my actions. Note to younger boys: don’t bet on your sister’s dating life.

“It’s okay, Trent. I forgive you as long as you don’t make another bet about my personal life again,” Lennox says, hugging me back.

“Promise.” The last thing I want to do is hurt her, or any of my family. Which is why I leave out the real reason I need the extra monitor. It’s for a programming course I enrolled in without telling anyone. Not even my twin brother. If my family finds out, they’ll ask if I’m leaving the family business, and I haven’t decided yet. All I know is that I don’t want to let my dad and brothers down.

A single light from my old room illuminates the upstairs hallway. Grant must have left it on. He’s been staying here since his apartment burned down, but I thought he was sleeping in Michael’s room.

Why is the TV going?

I step through the doorway just as a hideous figure emerges on the TV screen. The timing is the only reason I jump.

The TV pauses. “Trent, right?”

This time I can’t blame my nerves on the TV. I turn to find the owner of the voice.

It's the crazy lady. Karli. She's in my old room. Sitting on my old bed. Watching my old TV.

Now I know how the three bears felt when Goldilocks infiltrated their home. Except, instead of kicking her out I kind of want to sit down and join her. I like scary movies and cuddling up with beautiful girls. Which she is. That much was evident the second she walked into the house earlier, but her beauty was semi-marred by the horror we were facing. Now that I'm out of danger I can fully appreciate her short, fierce brown hair and equally dark eyes. She's shorter than me, but not by much. Enough that if I hugged her, I could tuck her head under my chin—

I clear my throat. "Yes? Uh, what are you doing here?"

She shifts on the bed and pulls off her purple hoodie. Underneath she's wearing a plain black tank top. "Well, I was enjoying the quiet."

I frown. "You're the one who said hi to me."

"I said your name. I wasn't inviting conversation."

Women are so confusing. They're hot then cold, yes then no. No Katy Perry song has ever been so accurate.

"Well, sorry for..." I have no clue what I'm apologizing for. She tried to give my family tetanus, and now she's spread out on my bed like she owns the place. "Wait, why are you still here?"

She sinks into the pillows. "Juliet was my ride."

Juliet is going to be here all day, making out with Michael. Probably. Which means this...very confusing woman will be here, too.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“I can call you an Uber.”

Her head pops up, and she narrows her dark eyes at me. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

I was being kind. It’s Christmas time. Surely she doesn’t want to be stuck here with my crazy family.

Karli settles into the pillows again and folds her arms across her chest. “I’m staying right here. I rather like the Star Wars bedspread. It’s cute.”

Cute? My cheeks burn as she brushes her hand over Anakin’s giant head on the blanket. I thought my mom got rid of that thing years ago.

“Star Wars is a classic,” I grunt.

“Agreed.” She pulls the comforter up to her chin and grins. “Cozy.”

My ego is taking a massive hit right now. “You know, this is my house. My room.”

She cocks an intrigued brow. “You still live with your parents?”

Boom. Ego destroyed. “Wha-no!”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” she says, sitting up with a smirk. “I hear it’s all the rage these da—”

“I don’t live with my parents.” I scrub a hand over my beard. This entire conversation is confusing the heck out of me. It’s like I take one step forward and she pushes me two steps back. “Don’t you have your own home? I’ll gladly take you there.”

The smile slips from her face, but it returns so quickly I think I imagined it. “Sorry, but I don’t bring boys home until at least the fourth date.”

This is ridiculous.

“You know what? Do what you want.” I turn and unhook my monitor.

“Gee thanks, maybe I’ll stay for Christmas. I might even refer to your parents as Mom and Dad.” Her overconfidence is enough to make me fume. She can infiltrate my room all she wants, but not my family.

I stomp out of the room. That woman is insane. Good thing I’ll never have to see her again.

## Chapter 3

Trent

### ONEYEARANDELEVENMONTHS LATER

There’s a whirring in my head and my limbs feel like they’ve been cemented to the ground.

I crack an eye open, my vision blurry and wild. But I know this feeling, this seat, this music. Why am I in Sean’s car? Are we still in the take-out line at Pablo’s? No, we are moving. But where? And Why?

“Sean?” I croak. My voice is hoarse, my throat dry. I take the only cup in the middle console and down half of it.

“Oh hey, sleeping beauty. Nice of you to finally wake up.”

“What are you talking about?” My eyelids are heavy but I force them to stay open.

“You’ve been asleep for five hours.”

“What?” I sit straight up in my seat. I did wake up at five this morning to get homework done, but there’s no way I was tired enough to take a five-hour nap in his car. “What’s going on?” My gaze snaps to the darkness out my window. Where are the city lights? I blink, again and again, but there’s still nothing.

Something is wrong.

The last thing I remember is Sean telling me he got us tickets for a show in Vegas in two days. I immediately rejected his offer. It’s Thanksgiving in two days.

Then Sean had said, and I quote. “Oh yeah, I forgot. Nevermind.” That should have been my first clue something was up because one does not simply forget Thanksgiving.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

Then he said, “Hey, I was about to get some food. You in?” Naturally, I was hungry, so I agreed. But somewhere between the takeout line at Pablo’s and the car ride home, things turned fuzzy and then disappeared altogether.

I have a feeling I don’t want to know the answer to this question but I ask it anyway. “Sean, what did you do?”

He grins. “A little Benadryl in your soda.”

“Benadryl?” I yell. “You drugged me?”

And just like that, the hazy fog I’ve been in evaporates and one thing becomes very clear. I’ve been kidnapped.

By my own freaking brother.

This is extreme. Even for Sean.

I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the door handle. “Stop the car.”

“Dude. We are in the middle of a desert. And it’s dark out. Do you really need to pee that bad?”

The middle of the desert? No.

I pull out my phone and locate my GPS. The nearest town is... Boulder City? I zoom out. “You’re taking me to Vegas.” My words are slow, and each one ticks like a

countdown on a bomb. “After I explicitly told you I didn’t want to go.”

“Surprise!” He throws a hand in the air. “And see, I figured it out. We can call Mom and ask her to move Thanksgiving to Friday. It’s just a meal, right? We can eat it anytime.”

Wrong. Thanksgiving is a family event. That happens on Thursday. Always. Mom is not going to change that.

She’s going to be livid with both of us.

My nostrils flare. Not this time. I’ve taken the fall with him enough. I’m going home.

“You’re insane!” I yell. “Turn around now.”

“Oh, come on man. You’ll love it. After the show, we can go jump off the STRAT or whatever it is they do up there. We’ll make it fun like we always do.”

Yes, it’s true. I am often a willing participant in Sean’s wild escapades. Not anymore.

“Nope. I won’t do it.”

I can’t handle it anymore. I can’t live life according to his whims. I feel like I’m getting swallowed up by him. I once learned that sometimes one twin can consume the other while in the womb, but I never knew it could happen twenty-five years later.

“Come on, it will be fun, just the two of us,” he says.

“It’s always the two of us. Welivetogether.” Frustration pulses through my veins. I will strangle him. I will. I’m sorry, Mom, at least you will still have me.

“Yeah, but we hardly hang out anymore.”

I take a deep breath and let it out very slowly. I’m almost done with a computer programming degree nobody knows I’ve been taking for the last year, all while working 40-hour weeks at my family’s cabinet shop. So yeah, I’ve been busy. But we live and work together. We play basketball every week and have dinner with our family every Sunday. How much more of my life does he want?

“You could have asked me to get a beer or something.”

“I did.” He scratches the back of his neck. “I have. You always turn me down.”

“Because I’ve been busy.” I grit my teeth. He won’t make me feel bad for chasing a passion.

“Yeah? With what? Tell me.”

I...I can’t. I can’t bring myself to say the words out loud. That’s the problem with secrets, the longer you hold them in, the harder they are to let go of.

“I don’t know what you’ve been doing bro, but you’re stressing yourself out. I’m pretty sure you even have some gray hair behind your ears.”



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

My fingers comb through my hair, checking for the gray traitors. It's not like I can tell, though.

"It's called ambition. Maybe you should find some." I never talk to him like this. We've always been inseparable, but that old relationship is tearing at the seams. It has been for a while. I want more out of life than the next fun thing, but that's what Sean lives for.

He responds by turning the radio on and blaring a Christmas station. I turn it down, and he turns it right back up. The game continues until I grow up, because I'm the only one who ever does, and I slump in my seat, trying to tune out every cliché reference to Old St. Nick as the anger boils inside of me.

Lights pop up in the distance, and still, neither of us says another word. I do feel bad because he's right, I've put him off a lot lately. We used to go out every week, play video games after work, sometimes we'd even try to make dinner together. But we haven't done any of those things in...yeah. Months. But that's what happens when people grow up. For the last year, I've been working toward a new dream. One that's not connected to him.

And I feel bad I haven't told him. Maybe I didn't because I was afraid he would do something insane like kidnap me.

I squeeze the armrest until my fingers ache. I need something that's just mine. But he's still calling the shots in my life and I can't take it anymore.

Thirty minutes later, Sean parks in one of the hotels off the strip and turns off the

blasted radio. I launch myself out of the car and as far away from him as possible.

“Grab your stuff,” he says, popping the trunk.

“I didn’t bring stuff.”

“I packed for you.”

Great, that means he packed all the things in my drawers I don’t use.

“I don’t need it. I’m going home in the morning.”

“Suit yourself.” Sean shrugs. “You’re going to miss one heck of a show.”

“I highly doubt that. You got tickets to the one magic show in the world that’s not even magic.”

“Oh, come on, man. You love those guys and their ironic magic shows. They’re comedic gold.”

I stop inside the lobby entrance. “No, I don’t, I never liked them. I laughed at a few of the videos you sent me online because they are stupid. But I’m sick of following you around.” My fingers twitch.

“Don’t sell yourself short. Sometimes I follow you,” Sean says.

I glare at his quip. “I need some air,” I say, turning for the casino.

“You’re going in the wrong direction,” he hollers. “This air is crap.”

“I don’t care.” I stomp away.

“You’ll thank me later,” he says.

I’m sure that’s what all kidnappers say to their victims.

“I’ll text you the room number,” he calls one last time.

I won’t need it. I’m going home.

## Chapter 4

Karli

“Well, this has been lovely. Thanks again for having me over, Mom.” I clank my glass down on the empty bar.

“That was your mom?” the bartender asks, grabbing my cup to refill it.

He’s referring to the woman who wanted to “go out with her daughter for once,” and then proceeded to flirt with the first boy she laid eyes on. The answer is yes, unfortunately. And I mean boy. His twenty-first birthday must have been yesterday because he didn’t look a day older than that. Two minutes ago she ran off with him, leaving her only daughter all alone. At a casino bar. Not for the first time.

I was practically raised in a casino. We came here almost every night after Mom finished work. She would gamble while I watched from the side. She would find someone new and exciting to flirt with while I watched from the side. Sensing the pattern? Whenever she could, she left me with my grandma Helen. And I greatly preferred the grumpy old woman. She wasn’t a softie. But she loved me and she took care of me. More than my mom ever did.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Wasmy mom,” I say, leaning in my seat and feeling the fatigue of the day, of my mother. Not that she’s ever mothered me. I took care of her more than she did me.

For example, she left me with the tab tonight.

I shake my head and knock back the fresh drink—a bubbly club soda. When it comes to my mother, someone has to be thinking straight. Is it too much to ask to spend one holiday with her? Like, we are a family.

I guess we would have had to be a family at some point to pretend now. Why did I even come to Vegas? Error in judgment on my part.

I push my glass away. That’s it. I’m not sticking around to eat crappy Chinese take-out on Thanksgiving while she nurses a hangover and tells me all the ways that I, and the entire male population, have wronged her. I’m going home to my apartment, with roommates I barely know. Anything is better than here.

I pull out my wallet and sift through the cards. Which one has enough money on it to pay for Mom’s pricey margarita?

Someone slips into the seat beside me, bumping me with their shoulder.

“Excuse you.” I whirl on the stranger, my irritation bubbling to the top. It’s not their fault I’m angry with my mom. But that also doesn’t mean I’m going to stop.

The stranger mutters an apology of some kind, his head still down. Something about his deep tone dances on a memory but all I can make out is the beard.

“You know, it’s courteous to leave a seat between yourself and a stranger,” I say.

He picks up his giant body and scoots down a seat without a word.

“Happy?” he asks, turning his head toward me.

My breath catches. “Trent?”

Recognition flashes across his face along with a few other emotions I’m not fast enough to name. “Karli,” he says, then turns back to the bar.

I scoot into the seat I just encouraged him to vacate. “No ‘hello? How are you?’”

He looks down at my stool, then his eyes slowly rise to mine. The corner of his lips curl up. “You know, it’s courteous to leave a seat between yourself and a stranger.” He takes the glass the bartender offers him and takes a sip. I don’t remember him ordering anything.

“Good thing we’re not strangers,” I say. “I did sleep in your bed.”

He coughs, spitting and sputtering his drink down his chin.

I grab a napkin and hold it up for him.

“Thanks,” he grunts. He cleans up the bar, then picks up the glass and downs the rest of it. “What else can go wrong tonight?” he asks, more to himself than me. I answer anyway.

“Really?” I turn on my stool so I can fully face him. “You think you’ve had it rough? My mom dragged me here and ditched me for a man I strongly suspect was using a fake ID. I might get a stepdad who’s still in high school.”

His cheek twitches, and he rubs his hand over his jaw to hide his amusement.

“See!” I point at his smile.

He turns, and I’m suddenly captivated by his blue eyes. I’ve always loved the contrast of dark hair and light eyes. I’m all dark, body and soul. “My brother drugged and kidnapped me.” His voice, his expression, his eyes; they’re all completely serious.

I can’t help it. I laugh. The sound rumbles up my chest like a breath of fresh air, and after this night, it feels good. Really good.

I’m sure he’s going to get mad and tell me to stop laughing, but he joins in with a small chuckle. I would assume it’s his first for the night as well.

“I don’t know whether that’s the most messed up thing I’ve ever heard or plain hilarious.”

He shakes his head. “It’s messed up. Sean brought me here for some show I don’t even like, and he’s making me miss Thanksgiving with my family.”

My cheeks pinch. I forget normal people have normal things to do for Thanksgiving. Like being with family.

I face forward, drumming my wallet on the bar. “Do you guys do something big for the holiday?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Just eat,” he says, popping a peanut in his mouth. “We swim and watch movies. But the day after, my mom has declared French Toast Friday. She makes the most amazing French toast with all the toppings. I’m pretty sure she only does it so we will all help her put up the five million Christmas decorations she insists on every year. But it works.”

My heart aches. Their traditions are all so simple. But they are traditions, born out of love, continued out of love. I ache to be a part of something like that.

“That sounds fun.” I choke on the sudden lump in my throat.

“It is. If I can get back in time for it.”

An idea sparks to life, but I won’t give it wings to fly quite yet. “Won’t Sean be back in time?” It’s only Tuesday evening.

“He’s got this whole plan of taking over Vegas. I wouldn’t be surprised if he ends up married.” Trent shakes his head. “I don’t know. There are flights. Or maybe I’ll steal his car since he stole my body.”

I snort. I can’t imagine living with a brother who loved me so much that he kidnapped me. I’m not sure kidnapping qualifies as love, but there’s got to be something buried under the layers there.

“Or...” I click my tongue as if the idea just came to me. “I can drive you back.”

His brows furrow. “You’re going to Phoenix?”

“Yup.”

“Weren’t you here with your mom?”

“Yes. But I’m ready to leave.”

“And you would let me hitch a ride with you?” His eyes narrow, his doubt evident.

“On one condition.”

His brows lift, asking what?

“Bring me home for Thanksgiving.”

## Chapter 5

Trent

“What?” She wants to come to my house for Thanksgiving? Wouldn’t that be awkward for her? Then again, the last time I saw her was at my parents’ house, acting as if she owned the place. And if she’s bargaining to be invited to my home for Thanksgiving, she clearly doesn’t have a problem encroaching on people’s holidays. That still leaves a major unanswered question. “Why do you want to hang out with my family for Thanksgiving?”

I watch her brown eyes drop to the wallet in her hand, then back to me. “I’ve never really had the turkey and potatoes and, you know, the whole shebang.”

She’s never had a Thanksgiving meal? That thought sits like a sour candy in my throat.



“You really want to leave?” I know her mom ditched her, but surely there’s something they do together for the holiday.

“Yes.” She clamps her lips together with a grim nod.

“Okay,” I say. She may be slightly irritating, but with the little glimpse I’ve gotten of her family situation, I imagine she’s gone through a lot. Maybe I should give her the benefit of the doubt. Besides that, she’s incredibly beautiful. Not like I’d let her come over for that reason alone, but it certainly doesn’t hurt. I had to do a double take when I first saw her. Her hair is still short, barely brushing the top of her shoulders, and whatever makeup she’s wearing is making her dark eyes appear impossibly big and I can’t look away. Everyone else in this bar is wearing something gaudy or loud, but she’s wearing a simple sweater and leggings that puts them all to shame.

Her eyes light up before she turns, facing the bar again, and her short brown hair falls like a curtain in front of her face. “Okay,” she nods to no one in particular.

“I’ll pay for gas,” I offer.

She waves her hand. “It’s fine. I just filled up.” “So I’ll give you money.” I’m already reaching for my wallet.

“I won’t take it,” she says quickly. “I don’t accept charity.”

I get it, lots of people have a hard time accepting help.

“However...” She taps a finger to her lips and I drag my gaze away from the cupid's bow in her upper lip. “I will take answers to any questions I might have.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“What questions? Like, about me?”

“Yup.” She pops the ‘p’ at the end of the word.

I’d rather give her money. “Why?”

She shrugs. “I like learning about people.”

That sounds innocent enough. But this is the girl who tried to give Michael a tattoo with a sewing needle. “Can I reserve the right to decline questions I don’t want to answer?”

She raps her fingernails on the bar. “I’ll give you five no’s.”

I can work with that. “Alright.” I put my wallet away. My phone buzzes and I read the notification on the screen.

Sean: I’m in the casino. Where are you?

I need to get out of here before he finds me and gives me a guilt trip about abandoning him. After the harsh things I said to him, I might just cave. But for once in my life, I’m not going to give in first.

“Well, should we go?” I ask.

“Now?” Karli turns and blinks a couple of times. “It’s like ten at night.”

“I’ll drive. I slept the whole way here. I’ll be awake for days.”

“No can do. No one drives but me.”

“Okay,” I tap my knuckles on the bar. “Then when can we leave?”

“We can leave soon,” Karli says, scooting off her stool. “But I have to do something first.”

Hopefully, her thing doesn’t take too long. I want to be on the road, far away from here, from Sean, as soon as possible.

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I thought Karli was joking when she said she was going to break into her mom’s place until she started climbing the trellis outside a dilapidated apartment complex. The trellis and the complex appear like they could give out at any moment.

“This is not what I had in mind,” I whisper-yell up to her as she scales the rickety wooden railing. She’s moving pretty fast and all I can see is her backside. Not that I’m looking.

“It’s Vegas. Whatdido you have in mind?” She picks a broken piece of wood off and tosses it over her shoulder.

Valid argument. Right about now, I planned to be at home asleep. But look how that’s turned out for me. Helping a woman I barely know break and enter.

It’s necessary though, we need a vehicle if we are going to drive home so we took an Uber here to pick up her van.

Karli pulls herself to the second story and pushes on the window. It doesn't budge.

This was a bust.

But instead of coming down, Karli retrieves something from her back pocket and shimmies it under the window. Is she...? Great, she's breaking in.

I scrub a hand over my beard and pace along the crumbling sidewalk, my blood pressure escalating, along with my stress. I'm going to get arrested. In Vegas. I might have been safer had I stayed with Sean.

"Should I be concerned you know how to do this?" I ask, instead of saying what I really want to say, which is, 'Are you sure this is your mom's apartment, and can you possibly hurry?'

"My mom was very responsible growing up and locked us out all the time. I got really good at picking locks and stuff."

A man walks out of the building, lighting up a cigarette and coming to stand by me. He scans the building, his eyes coming to a rest on Karli.

"Uh..." I scratch my neck. This is bad. This is so bad. What can I possibly say right now to get out of this?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

My tongue freezes, and I wait for the man to say something. Maybe how he plans to call the cops, and how I'll be arrested and sent to jail and kicked out of my program with only two weeks left, but he's silent.

Karli finally gets the window open and wiggles inside.

"Well done," the man chuckles, then claps twice and walks past me, continuing down the sidewalk at a leisurely pace.

So, no cops? Or is he still going to call them? I don't trust this place.

"Karli?" My knee bounces as I watch the darkened window. Something crashes, and I grimace. "Hurry!"

"Catch!" she yells a split second before launching a black bag out the window. I sprint forward. The bag thuds into my chest with a clank. Ow. What does she have in here? Cans of beans?

She tosses out a pillow next, but it falls to the ground before I can get to it.

"Does this building have security cameras?"

"I don't know. Why don't you check?"

My stomach drops. I don't like that she doesn't know the answer to this question. That's usually the first thing thieves research before trespassing.

“Where is it?” Karli asks herself. Unless her mom is inside. Or someone else completely. I barely know Karli at all. She could have a hostage tied up in there or be robbing a poor family of their food storage.

Who is this woman I’ve connected myself to? Is she a secret psycho? I scratch my neck again, the irritated skin there burning with each scrape of my fingernails. What did I get myself into?

“Are you done yet?” I hiss. “I’d like to get out of here before the police show up.”

She pops her upper half out of the window and leans against the ledge like she’s got all the time in the world. “I had no idea you were such a scaredy cat, Bentley.”

I grit my teeth. “Just. Hurry.”

“Chill. I have to call my mom because I can’t find something.” She disappears inside, and I catch snippets of conversation between her and her mom.

“You have it? What...where?” Her voice goes quiet, and a few moments later, she slips through the window. She slips her body out, shuts the window, then treads slowly down the trellis.

The trellis creaks, and I drop the stuff in my arms and move beneath her, prepared to catch her when her crazy plan ends with her almost killing herself.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she calls over her shoulder.

“Save you from dying?”

She stops and peers down at me. “Actually, I think life is more exciting when you are constantly worried about life and death.”

“You have a very interesting life philosophy.” I muse.

The trellis creaks again and I step closer.

“Back away Bentley, I know you’re looking for an excuse to touch my butt.”

Is it my imagination or did she just shake her butt?

I shove my hands in my pockets and step away from the trellis. “Some men are decent human beings who want to help women without ulterior motives.”

“I’m joking.” She gives me a half smile over her shoulder. “I know you’re one of the good ones.”

Is she being sarcastic right now? Her knees are level with my head, and I turn away. She’s almost made it.

Something snaps and—

“Ahh!”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I turn in time to watch her drop into a patch of succulents.Oops.

“I take it back,” she groans. “You should have touched my butt.”

### Chapter 6

Trent

“How’s that life philosophy treating you right now?” I ask, leaning over Karli to check for obvious injuries. “Something about defying death?”

She smirks up from the ground. “What I mean is, I don’t let fear stop me from doing what I want to do. I’m not going to sit around and wait for someone else to give me permission to be me.”

That comment hits like a punch to the gut. That’s all I’ve been doing for the last year. “Well, we can’t all be like you,” I mutter.

She frowns at that. But I don’t feel like clarifying, so I grab both of her arms and haul her body up next to mine. Her legs tremble, and she clings to my shirt for balance.

“Whew.” Karli breathes. “What a chest.”

I arch a brow. “Did you just objectify me after getting mad at me for supposedly trying to objectify you?”

She spreads her fingers out on my chest and tilts her chin up. “I never said I was one of



the good ones.”

I choke on air.

Karli pats my chest again before pulling back. “I should warn you, I’m my mother’s daughter.”

She doesn’t seem pleased about that fact. And based on what she’s told me about her mother, I get why. But I don’t think she’s giving herself enough credit. Besides the breaking and entering she’s been mostly tolerable.

She heads for the parking lot in the back and I follow her wordlessly. But when I discover her trajectory, I pause mid-stride.

I am not riding in that thing for the next three hundred miles.

“Her name’s Bertha, you like her?” Karli asks.

I can’t say I do. Bertha is a bright orange, 1950s monstrosity that’s one part vintage Volkswagen van and two parts kidnapper wagon. The back windows are blacked out and there’s a single black door on the passenger side. We are bound to get pulled over just for driving a suspicious vehicle. But I have no other choice.

“She’s got her quirks, but she still runs great.”

“Quirks?” I nod to the passenger side mirror, currently being held up by a whole roll of duct tape. Even that appears to be failing. “Is that what we’re going with?”

“Shush!” Karli spins on me. “Don’t offend her, or she’ll get even.”

I raise a single brow. “I’m not afraid of inanimate objects.”

Karli pokes me in the chest. “You’re going to regret those words.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Don’t listen to him, Bertha. He’s just grumpy after being kidnapped by his brother.”  
Karli rubs the hood of the van, and for a moment, I almost expect Bertha to talk back.

I approach the passenger side cautiously. There are no less than fifty dents on this end. Am I safe with this woman?

I grab the door handle and yank. Nothing. I push on it, then pull, then yank.

“You gotta lift up,” Karli shouts from inside.

Yes, sure, that makes sense. I shove it again, lifting it up and out, and finally, the door opens with the creaks and moans of an entire graveyard.

I hop in, but the second my butt hits the seat I nearly bounce up into the ceiling.  
“What the—”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Fun, isn’t it?” Karli says, her words like a challenge.

I’m normally a positive-mindset kind of guy, but this van is testing my limits.

“A riot.” I force a smile and bounce a couple of times for emphasis. It doesn’t matter, none of it matters except getting home.

“You don’t get out much, do you?” Karli asks.

“I go out plenty.” I used to go out plenty. These days have been more about work and school. Not for the first time tonight, Sean’s accusations come back to me. As do my insulting rebuttals. I’ll apologize eventually. After he apologizes first.

“And judging by that grimace on your face, let me guess, you have a ‘riot’?” Karlie flips the key in the ignition and the van roars to life. Like actually roars. Then settles into a weird putting sound. This does not bode well.

“Are you sure this vehicle is safe?”

“One hundred percent,” Karli says.

She shifts the behemoth into reverse and sticks her tongue out the corner of her mouth as she watches the mirrors. It’s kind of cute the way she’s doing th—

She slams on the brakes. The van jolts and my bouncy chair flings me off its cushion and straight into Karli. My face hits her shoulder, but my body continues until I’m splayed across her lap like a helpless damsel in distress.

I freeze, my face pressed into her thighs, immobilized by the embarrassment. “What. Was. That?”

Karli doesn’t even try to control her laughter. “I saw a cat.”

I rip myself off her lap. A cat?

“This van is a safety hazard.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Have you seriously not learned your lesson about insulting Bertha?”

I straighten in my seat and make a point of pulling my seatbelt out wide, then clicking it. I tug on it a couple of times for good measure. Then I grip the dash with both hands. All I need is a helmet. “Ready for take-off.”

“Loving the positivity. But, we have to find my mom first.” Karli puts the van in drive and maneuvers out of the parking lot.

“I thought we were leaving.”

“Come on, you know you want to gamble a little.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

I feel like I’m taking a very risky gamble right now, being here with her. Being in this vehicle.

Karli flips on the blinker a millisecond before cutting in front of a Tesla and I grip the handlebar above my head.

“Thanksgiving is still two days away, we have plenty of time,” she says.

“I feel like I’ve seen a show like this. And guess what? They didn’t make it home until all the food was gone.”

“Your priorities have been noted. But my mom has something of mine, and I can’t leave without it.”

At this rate, I’m never going to make it home for Mom’s apple pie. But that’s surprisingly not my biggest concern right now. I’m more worried about what my family is going to think when I bring Karli with me. They will assume we are dating, and there’s no way I would date her. She’s reckless and pushy, and... I glance over, and she flashes me a mischievous smile.

...and that. Mischievous should be her middle name. With how little I know about her, maybe it is.

“What’s your middle name?” I blurt.

“Jane.”

Ugh, why does she have to have a normal, adorable middle name?

“Why? What’s yours?” she asks.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Sorry, we’re not that close.”

She gapes. “Really? That’s what you’re using your first no on?”

I suppose so. “Yep.”

“Fine. I’ll just guess then.” She purses her lips and studies me for far longer than she should while operating a moving vehicle. “Hobart.”

I rear back. “Hobart? That’s your first guess?”

She screws up her nose. “Not it? Darn, I was looking forward to calling you Hobie.”

I quirk a brow, amused by her humorous attempts, but don’t give her the satisfaction of answering.

“Adam, Kim, Leroy.”

My lips twitch but I ignore each one, counting the stop lights until we make it back to the strip.

“Fernando!”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Why won’t I just tell her my middle name? It’s not that embarrassing, but I like keeping her guessing when she’s doing so much of the same to me.

## Chapter 7

Karli

“I don’t think I’m dressed fancy enough,” Trent says as we walk toward the hotel STRAT casino.

“And you think I am? I just fell into cacti.”

“There weren’t any cacti.”

“Well... sharp pointy bushes.” I stop and turn my shoulders and head. “Actually, I might have ripped my pants.” I can’t see my complete backside, but leggings aren’t known to be reliable apparel when falling to one’s death. “Can you check?”

“You’re one confusing woman.” He shakes his head, but steps behind me, anyway.

“Well?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything. What pair of underwear am I potentially exposing? I guess it doesn’t matter if one of those killer bushes cut right through. I bite my lip, waiting. “Does it look okay?”

Trent grunts, then walks around me and continues forward without saying anything.

I hurry to catch up. “Am I fine?”

“That’s not the word I’d use.”

“Why Trent?” I grab his arm and force him to a stop. “Are you saying my butt looks good?”

He keeps his face forward. “I decline to answer.”

I like teasing him. I can do this for three hundred miles. “You only have three no’s left, by the way, and we haven’t even left.”

“I’m aware.”

A group of ladies break between us. Based on the pink tutus and mini veils I’d say they are out for a bachelorette party. One of the partygoers stops to ogle Trent. He pretends not to notice. That or he really didn’t notice. But with how little she’s wearing and how loud her assessment of him is, it’s impossible to miss.

Trent picks up his pace.

“Whoa, down boy,” I say speed walking to catch up. “They weren’t going to hurt you.”

“Yeah right,” he grunts, holding open the door for me. “She would have eaten me alive.”



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I chuckle. I like a man who isn't afraid to admit he's scared. We are all scared of something: abandonment, sharks, clowns. Those might just be mine. "You can wait in the van if you need to."

He frowns. "And let you wander through Vegas in the middle of the night by yourself? What kind of man does that?"

I'm caught off guard by his protectiveness. Has anyone ever worried about me? When I was little, my mom told me to man up when I was scared. Even my grandmother, the only one who truly cared about me, always told me to be brave. She didn't tolerate fear. Which may be how I acquired such a life philosophy.

"So your mom is here?" Trent asks, holding open the door to the casino for me.

I nod. "With her teenage boyfriend. I hope he brought his piggy bank."

"You know a teenage dad would make coming home for Christmas more fun," Trent says. "He might play Candyland with you. Maybe even Twister if you're good."

I stop walking. "Excuse me?"

He stops and turns around.

"Were you being sassy or funny?"

He raises his brows like he's not sure. "Funny?"

I beam. “I approve.”

He shakes his head and starts walking again, without knowing who he’s even searching for.

The lightness leaves my chest. I’m fresh out of humor where my mother is concerned. She took my grandmother’s gold bracelet. Again. And it hurts this time as much as it did years ago.

When my grandma found out how bad her heart was, she sold the rest of her jewelry and handed me a check to use for her burial. But she saved that one gold bracelet for me with the promise that it would bring me good luck. My mom has always been offended about that.

That must be why she took the bracelet tonight. I took it off to shower, and forgot to put it back on. At least that’s what I thought. But when I went to get my stuff, it wasn’t on the bathroom vanity where it should have been. I never saw my mom wearing it at the bar though, so she must have stowed it in her purse until she ditched me.

I check my phone again for a response from her. Nothing. Typical.

I know my mom’s preferred games, but I don’t know Ricky’s. Young kids are usually attracted to bright and shiny things, though, so I stick around the slots.

“Have you ever gambled?” I ask Trent.

“All the time.” He smirks. “But only with my brothers.”

“What’s the most you lost?”

He brushes against me to dodge a scantily clad woman balancing an assortment of drinks. “We don’t always wager with money.”

“Color me intrigued.”

We pass a few more slot machines before Trent finally answers. “I don’t lose often. I make sure I can win, or I don’t engage. Sean makes it easy because he doesn’t care what he has to do if he loses. He just enjoys the game.” His voice drops for a split second before he clears his throat and continues, “Anyway, one time, I had to wear chain mail to school all day.”

“That doesn’t sound all that bad.”

“In high school?” He raises a brow. “I was all over social media. But that wasn’t as bad as when my grandma saw me.”

“Your grandma?”

“She thought I’d been overtaken by a devil, and she made me come with her to some weird witch coven thing where they tried to cast spirits from me. At one point they threw all kinds of spices at me. I felt like Hansel getting ready to be tossed in the pot. To this day, garlic powder makes me gag.”

“Your grandma sounds like a hoot.”

“She’s kind of a mystery. You’ll see.”

I’ll see? It takes me a moment to realize I’ll be meeting his grandmother for Thanksgiving—a holiday I invited myself to. I should feel ashamed that I don’t have a place of my own, but the desire to be included is all I can think about. To be a part of a family.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

A family that doesn't need me, I remind myself. I swallow. I'm the one who wants them. But a family is a family. And I will chase that holiday dream all the way to Phoenix.

"My grandmother was rough around the edges, but she was the only one who loved me enough to care of me," I say, surprising myself with my honesty.

"Was?" Trent asks.

"She died seven years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks," I shrug, then laugh when I think about her last words. I wasn't raised a praying woman, but for her, I did pray. I prayed at her bedside, begging her not to leave me all alone with a woman who barely acknowledged my existence. After thirty minutes of my sobbing, she opened one eye and said, "Stop that nonsense."

I didn't. But she went anyway.

Trent and I walk in silence, weaving through the machines and drunk people. A group of rowdy men pass, and Trent scoots closer to me.

"Do you need protection, Princess?" I say.

He frowns. "I was protecting you."

I pat his bicep. He's got a very nice bicep. "If that's what you need to tell yourself. But don't worry, big guy, I've got yo—"

My body connects with something moments before my head does. The something moves, and I lose my balance. It's only as I'm going down that I realize what I've stumbled into. A giant cardboard cutout of a shirtless man advertising his spectacular dance moves. Or something of the like.

But before I can fully tackle the lifeless man, a strong arm latches onto my waist and spins me around and up into a just-as-gratifying chest.

My eyes find Trent's, his ocean-blue irises dancing in delight.

"You were saying?"

My lips part. Was I saying something? Oh, right, the protector thing.

I swallow, my gaze darting to his lips, then back to his eyes. "That was, um, a test. And you passed. Congratulations. I shall let you be my protector, for now."

"Shall?" He muses. "Did your van take us to the Dark Ages?"

My lips quirk up. "Well, we were discussing chain mail, and I have a follow-up question. Did you wear a shirt underneath it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he says and steps away, but his eyes linger on me like he's making sure I'm stable.

I'm not. I'm still disoriented from being in his arms, then out of them. But he must sense that I'm fine and walks away. He's already ten steps ahead and I have to run to catch up.

“Follow up to the follow-up question. Do you still have it?” I ask louder to be heard over the ringing machine to our left.

He doesn’t say anything but raises an amused brow.

“What does that mean?”

He shrugs.

“Trent.” I grab his arm and attempt to stop him. It’s futile. He’s dragging me with his ridiculous strength. “I need to know. If this is my last dying breath, I need to know if Trent Henry Bentley keeps chain mail in the back of his closet.”

He snorts. “One, you’re not dying. And two, that’s not my name.”

“And three? The chain mail?”

“No comment.”

His third no. He’s left me no choice. “Trentley—“

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Trentley?” His brows furrow. “Really?”

“Sir Trent Montgomery Bentley, do you pull out your chain mail on the weekends for secret rendezvous with your dragon-slaying girlfriend?”

He stops. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

I’m certainly not disappointed to hear that.

“Well, it just so happens that I have a Rapunzel dress tucked away in my closet, and maybe I’ll let you be my knight.”

“You really have a dress like that in your closet?” he asks, his lips twitching.

I wiggle my brows. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He shakes his head with a soft smile. “You’re nuts.”

I flinch. Ouch. I mean, on the money, but still. Kick me where it counts, man.

“What does your mom look like?” he asks before I can get a clarification on his earlier statement.

I glance in the restaurant behind Trent. “Well, when she left me a couple of hours ago, she was wearing a skintight silver dress with matching stiletto boots.”

“And you think she will look different now?” he asks, dumbfounded.

“You clearly do not know Gretchen Baker. It’s been three hours. She could have changed clothes at least three times, and her personality as well.”

“Well, don’t hold your punches, darling. Tell me how you really feel about me.”

This is unfortunate.

I whirl around, coming face to face with the woman who birthed me. “Hi, Mom.” I gather a slight satisfaction over the fact that she has changed.

“I was going to invite you and this nice young man for a drink. But maybe I’ll take him instead.” She shimmies up next to Trent, and my throat clenches.

“Sorry. He’s mine.” I grab his hand and tug him to me. Now he’s under my protection.

Mom rolls her eyes and flicks her hair. “Geez, I stole two boyfriends from you, and you act like I’m going to take them all.”

She didn’t say that. If there was a blackout in Vegas right now, I could power the entire city with my fury.

I clench Trent’s hand tighter. “Where’s my bracelet?”

“You mean the bracelet that should have been mine?” She wiggles her wrist and the gold jewelry dangles there.

I’m not getting into this now. I step toward her and seize her arm, unhooking the clasp.

“I ruined my body for you. The least you could do is give it to me.” She pouts.



And the least she could do is pretend to be a mother.

“I’m sorry my coming into this world was so awful for you. Most mothers willingly sacrifice their bodies and lives for their children, and still somehow love them.”

“Of course I love you,” she spits.

Yep. Felt the love. And the spittle. They feel about the same.

“But what does love matter? I’ve loved lots of men and each one ruined me just like you.”

And there it is. I don't know how she never figured out that the common denominator in all those relationships is her. Because she lacked the ability and desire to commit to anyone but herself.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I attach the bracelet around my own wrist, instantly feeling a little better. A little less alone. A little more loved. I never should have taken it off.

“Thanks for the warm memories, Mother. Always a pleasure.”

“Next time you come home don’t be such a sass.”

There won’t be a next time.

I turn and speed walk away. I’m not sure if Trent is following me or if he’s been snatched up by my mother. I can’t stay here anymore, letting her chip away at my heart.

A guy with a full beer comes stumbling toward me, and I jump out of the way.

“Karli! Wait!” Trent calls behind me.

“Run faster,” I holler. I have to get out of here. The road is calling my name.

I keep walking. The only sound I register is the buzzing in my head like a hundred angry bees are fighting, and I need them to stop.

I push out a door. The heat wave and the tears hit me at the same time.

My heartache hits my face drip by drip, pouring over.

“Karli.” Trent’s voice finds me once more. Softer this time. He doesn’t need to be

worried. I'm fine.

I swipe my cheeks. "Stupid Vegas rainstorms, only raining on me."

"Is that how those work?" he asks, his tone light and amused.

"Clearly," I sniff and turn around. "Well, I got what I needed. Ready to go?"

He frowns, not buying my forced contentment. "I can wait."

I know he doesn't want to wait. He wants to be home with a family who will no doubt miss him if he isn't sitting at their table for Thanksgiving. But the fact that he will wait for me fixes a tiny piece of what my mom broke. Tears choke me up, but I choke them right back. They are unnecessary.

"I'm great. Ready to drive."

"Okay."

## Chapter 8

Trent

I had thought, hoped really, Bertha would look better in the light. But the dim fluorescent bulbs in the parking garage aren't doing her any favors. She's still hideous. After witnessing Karli's interaction with her mom though, I have no room to complain. My mom isn't perfect, but never once has she treated me like I or any of my siblings were unwanted. What kind of person hurts their own children like that?

When I caught up to Karli outside, I saw the tear streaks she'd wiped from her cheeks. But she forced a smile onto her face and pretended she was fine like the

whole ordeal was nothing.

I wonder if there's anyone Karli can be vulnerable with. Maybe Juliet?

Karli turns on the van and revs her up. That or Bertha is complaining.

"I think that was grumpy old van speak for 'get off my porch'," I say.

"Hey, what did I say about speaking ill of Bertha? She doesn't like it."

"And what else does our very moody carriage despise?"

Karli purses her lips like she's fighting a grin. "Sarcasm. And Justin Timberlake."

I raise my brows, the corner of my lips tugging upward. "How ever will I survive three hundred miles without getting my sexy on?"

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I'm rewarded with a full-on smile from Karli and I find I quite enjoy it. Maybe this won't be the worst trip home.

Karli laughs. "Good thing Bertha and I both enjoy a good joke."

It's stupid to be happy about being the one to make her smile. But after witnessing her horrid mother, it's nice to see her lips lift in a grin.

I send Sean a text telling him I found a ride home.

His response is immediate.

Sean: What? Come on man. Don't leave.

I put my phone away without answering. He calls instead.

I ignore that as well.

"So, are you ready to dive into the questions or would you prefer an hour of me singing whatever song I feel like?" Karli asks as she merges onto the 515.

"Are those the only options?"

"Yes. Bertha's radio gave out years ago. And I have a terrible singing voice so choose wisely."

"I suppose it's questions then." I watch the passing billboards out the window, and

the lights of the city. I'm not sad to see them go. "First question—"

My phone rings again and I silence it.

Karli's eyes flick to my phone. "What's the deal with you and Sean? I get why you're mad at him, but it's more than the kidnapping right?"

I shift in my seat. "Don't you want to start with my favorite color or something?"

"Navy blue." She says matter-of-factly.

Lucky guess.

I'm tempted to decline this question as well, but for some reason, I don't. "Sean and I are best friends. It seems to be an unspoken rule when you're a twin, to be inseparable. And we always have been. Sean's the wild one, I'm the one who reins him in."

"And he pulls you out of your comfort zone?"

"Yeah," I admit. I used to be shy when I was little and never wanted to play with anyone but my brother. So Sean brought the friends to me, giving me courage one friend at a time. "It's stupid, but I feel like I don't exist outside of him. And I just want to find me."

"That doesn't sound stupid to me," Karli says.

Her validation is like aloe on the burn.

"I always thought I understood Sean better than anyone else, but then he goes and does this." I silence notifications on my phone and slip it into my pocket.

She glances over at me. “And it hurts because he doesn’t understand you?”

“I suppose so.” Are all the questions going to be this hard?

Silence fills the empty space between us.

“You work at the family business, right?” Karli asks, saving me from my thoughts.

“For now.”

“That sounded ominous.” She fiddles with something on the dash and Bertha responds with a weird clanking sound.

“This van makes our future look ominous.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

She laughs and punches the roof.

“Why do you do that?”

Karli tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Huh?”

“You’ve hit the roof a couple of times already.”

“Oh. I don’t...it’s something my grandma used to do. For good luck while driving. I didn’t realize I did it. Sorry. I’m kind of weird.”

I used to think she was weird. But not so much anymore. She’s just...human. Like the rest of us.

“So you’re quitting the family business?”

A sign for Henderson pops up and I watch it until it disappears from my view. “I’m almost done with a computer programming course.”

“And?”

“And... I haven’t told anyone. I didn’t want to tell them I was considering going out on my own.”

“Will they be upset?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like we were expected to work at the shop. We all did because



it was my dad's baby. But it's not my passion." Which makes me feel like a terrible person because it seems to be everyone else's passion.

"To you it's a duty."

I expel a loud breath. "Yeah."

"I know duty," she sighs.

I met her mom. I know she does.

"But you should chase your passion. I support you."

"Thanks," I say.

"So, question number four."

"You're definitely at number seven." I readjust on the seat but there doesn't seem to be a comfortable position. "How many questions do you get, by the way?"

She purses her lips. "A question a mile?"

"That's three hundred questions. I don't think you can come up with that many." And if she did manage to, that doesn't leave me room to ask any questions. I think that's exactly how she wants it.

"Watch me," she taunts.

This is going to be a long drive home.

Chapter 9

Karli

I'm tired. Which isn't ideal since I'm the one driving. I could ask Trent to drive, but control and I have a very strict relationship status. No one comes between us.

We've only been on the road for thirty minutes, which means we have... way too many minutes left. Time for another question. What else do I want to know about Trent? The short answer is everything. Juliet has told me a lot about the Bentley's but none of her descriptions of Trent did him justice. He's much more than just the quieter brother. He's sensitive and loves his family. I get a feeling he doesn't fight with Sean often and based on the way he keeps checking his phone, and then putting it away with a frown, I can tell it's eating at him. Based on what he's told me about Sean and his dreams, I think Trent does what he believes he should to make everyone happy, but has a hard time saying no when it won't make him happy.

I have the same problem saying no to my mother.

I yawn, then mentally pinch myself. Stay awake. Focus on the game.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Favorite song?” Is this question number thirty or thirty-one?

“Don’t have one.”

“Food?”

“Pasta. Every day.”

My brain is tired.

“Is that all you got?” He asks.

“Just gearing up for the good ones.” A sign appears for a rest stop. It’s one in the morning, but if we are going to be driving all night, I require snacks. And lots of them.

“Watch out!”

My eyes shoot to the road a split second before the pothole. I swerve to miss it and the tire grazes the edge with barely a thump.

Phew. My foot rests heavier on the gas. “I think I’m going to stop up there—”

Whoomp. The van hits what feels like a speed ramp and then we are airborne. My hands fly off the wheel. Bertha lands with a thud and a pop.

Trent is screaming and...I’m not screaming...anymore.

My heart pounds in my ears as I register that we are still on earth. Still alive.

“What just happened?”

I press on the gas and slowly maneuver us off the road. Sighing, I speak the words I hope aren't true. “I think we popped a tire.”

Trent drops his head against the headrest. “We are never going to make it home.”

“This isn't ideal,” I say, unclicking my seat belt. “But don't worry, I have a spare. We will be back on the road in a jiffy.”

I hop out and run around the van with my flashlight on. Yep. There's the flat. On Trent's side. Bertha's got a vendetta.

I locate the jack and the lug wrench and haul them to the passenger side.

Trent walks up as I'm getting down to insert the jack. “I'm sorry. I'm the one who offended Bertha. I'll change it.”

“No really,” I wave off his help. “I can do it.”

“I would be a jerk if I didn't help at least.”

Maybe I'm the jerk because I don't want his help. I've had lots of practice changing a tire on my own. Having him hover over me will only make things awkward.

“It's fine. Go put your feet up and rest.”

“I'm not doing that,” he practically growls.

That was... kind of sexy. "Can you do that again?"

"What?" he asks.

Well, now he's killed the moment.

"Karli, just let me do it," he says.

"No thank you. But," I sit back on my heels. "If you're so insistent. I suppose I can teach you how to change a tire."

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Teach me?” He raises a brow. “I know how to change a tire.”

I peer up at him. “Do you want to help or not?”

He takes a long breath. “Okay. Teach me then.”

“First, we need to get the van off the flat tire. We don’t want to ruin the rim,” I say, pumping up the jack.

“The rim. Right.” Trent nods.

“So we are going to pump the jack up like this.”

“Pump the jack.” He holds out two fingers like he’s counting the very tricky steps.

“Then we need the lug wrench.”

“The lug wrench.” He hands it to me.

“Are you going to repeat everything I say?”

He shrugs. “Are you going to allow me to do anything else?”

“Probably not,” I admit.

“Can I at least retrieve the spare?”

I suppose that's simple enough. "Fine. It's under the back of the van."

He gives me a grateful nod, then retreats to the back of the van.

I get the lug wrench onto the first lug nut and loosen it while Trent makes weird sounds in the back. The first three lug nuts are off before he speaks up.

"Uh, where did you say that spare was?"

"I have to do everything around here." I sigh dramatically as I walk to the back.

"Be my guest." He motions to the back of the van. He probably couldn't see it from his tall height.

I lay on the ground and scoot under the vehicle. Loose gravel digs into my back, but it's a small price to pay to be right. I shine my flashlight under the carriage.

Huh. It's not there. And now that I'm here, staring at the bottom of my very rusty vehicle, I remember. I used it three years ago and never replaced it.

I slide out and stand up, brushing off my backside. "Well, this was fun." I walk past the half-undone tire.

"What are you doing?" Trent follows me.

I open the driver's side door and pull the key out of the ignition. Then I grab the two sticks out from under the driver's seat and prop one up under the door handle. "Locking up the van."

He follows me to the passenger side where I do the same thing. Bertha's locks gave out sometime before the radio did.

“Why?”

“I don’t have a spare. And it’s too late to call for help. The nearest auto shop will be closed, so I’m going to call it a night.” I head to the back of the van.

“Wait,” Trent says. “There’s a rest stop a mile that way. Maybe we can make it.”

“On the damaged tire? Did you forget step number one? Don’t ruin the rim.”

He glances at the van, the worry in his eyes betraying that he already knows what’s coming. “So, then what?”



I pull open the back doors of the van and motion inside. “Come sleep with me.”

### Chapter 10

Karli

Trent’s wide eyes and gaping mouth are the first hints I said the wrong thing.

“That was not what I meant.” Clearly, I need that shut-eye more than I thought. “I mean I have a bed in here that I occasionally use for sleeping. Just sleeping. You can just sleep beside me.”

He doesn’t move. I’m not even sure he’s breathing.

Should I start looking for a refresh button or something?

“You carry a bed in your car?” he says slowly.

That’s not the question I predicted coming out of his mouth.

“It’s actually a very convenient way to travel.” I jut out my chin. “It’s a van, after all. People live in their vans all the time, they travel the world, and make social media accounts about it... it’s like a whole thing.”

His eyebrows furrow. “Do you live in your vehicle?”

“Uh, no?” Why did I say it like a question? I clearly have a place of residence.

I can sense another question forming between his scrunched brows, but I don't wait around for it.

"I'm not crazy." I hop into the van, then pick up the small travel pillow and fluff it a few times, but it's memory foam, so it only condenses more. Stupid pillow. I throw it on the bed. "I like knowing I always have a place to sleep, okay?" I clamp my lips shut as if I can pretend I didn't admit my worst fear to him.

Being homeless. Again.

He hops in behind me and pulls the door closed, shutting us in darkness. "Okay," he says, thankfully not pressing the issue.

I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight.

I shimmy around him to kick my shoes into the corner. He follows suit and the van rocks with our combined weight. It's eerily quiet, and much darker than I'd prefer in our current circumstance. Nothing screams "I promise I won't seduce you" quite like being alone in a dark van about to share a twin mattress.

This is my sanctuary. So why am I letting him in? This was a horrible idea. I seem to have a plethora of those lying around in my brain, waiting for the right time to be an inconvenience.

"Do you need a snack?" I ask, opening the tiny singular cupboard along the right wall. I peek at the picture hidden there and absently rub my thumb over the gold bracelet on my wrist.

"I'm good," Trent says.

I shut the cupboard. I'm too tired to consume sugar right now, anyway. How tragic.

“Okay, well, let’s just do it then.”

Trent coughs.

My cheeks burn and suddenly I’m grateful for the dark.

“I’m tired, okay. Please ignore me and sleep for a bit. Then I can take you home to your precious family.”

Did that sound bitter? That absolutely sounded bitter.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’m sorry. I... you know what, the front seat isn’t too bad. I can sleep up there.”

I try to step around him but miscalculate the distance between us and ram right into him instead. Trent grabs my waist, trying to keep us upright, but I have gravity on my side. And we both take Trent down.

Trent falls backwards and we both crash to the bed.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

He laughs, and because I'm splayed across him, I can feel every vibration of that laughter in my soul.

"I want to tease you about so many things right now," he wheezes.

"Well go on, give it your best shot." I should get off of him, but I'm surprisingly comfortable.

His laughter fades into the night. His eyes are so blue they are almost glowing in the crack of moonlight coming from the sunroof. "Are you trying to fall for me?" The rumble of his deep voice is the only sound for miles, and the words echo through my lonely, barren heart.

Me? Fall for him? Please. That's the last thing I'll do. Been there. Done that. Got the cheap tourist souvenir, and now I'm over it.

"Ha. Good joke."

I roll off him and plaster myself against the far wall of the van. "Well, goodnight."

I close my eyes and count to a hundred. A few times. Then finally drift to sleep.

## Chapter 11

Trent

Ignoring Karli is impossible. Especially when she makes cute little noises in her sleep,

somewhere between a snore and a sigh. She's got her hands tucked under her cheek and her nose is all scrunched up. More than once, I've considered pulling out my phone to snap a photo. Okay, I did take one. But only one. Fine. Two. I'm not a creeper, I'm... investing in my safety. We have a long drive ahead of us and I might need some blackmail later in case she tries to give me another tattoo or sell me out to a cartel... okay that was a stretch.

And I'm a creeper. I'll delete them.

Tomorrow.

It's been a while since I've been out, as my brother so kindly stated earlier this evening. But never once have I enjoyed a night quite like this one. I thought Karli and I would merely tolerate each other for the drive home, but the last few hours have been more exciting than my last...six months have been. Perhaps Sean was right. I've been hiding away for too long. I think I've been so driven trying to chase my dreams alone, that I forgot how to let other people in, how to live life. Now that I've had some space and time to think about it, I realize how dumb that was. My family loves me, they'd support me in anything. If I had told Sean what I was doing, maybe he wouldn't have kidnapped me tonight. And then I wouldn't have said awful things to him.

I scrub a hand down my face, the endless thoughts refusing to cease. The one that's most consuming though is Karli.

I'm attracted to her. I was two years ago, and I still am. When she laughs she makes my heart beat in a wild rhythm like it's getting ready to jump off the high dive. But she's still a mystery to me. I want to know more about her.

I slam my eyelids closed and regulate my breathing. It's been a long night, I should rest. But this bed is the least comfortable thing I've ever encountered. Yet I stay right

where I am, right where she is.

In a van. On the side of the road. I use my phone light to study everything around me: the tattered curtains in the already blacked out windows, the hideous floral carpet covering the interior walls. It looks like there used to be a row of cabinets along one wall, but all that's left is a single box. The skylight is pretty cool though. I don't remember the last time I took the time to enjoy the stars. But besides that, I can't imagine what compelled Karli to purchase this thing.

Karli shifts, and my whole body is aware of every point of contact she makes. She sighs, then flips an arm over my chest, her palm dropping right over my heart.

I can't breathe. She's... her arm... I... my brain is short-circuiting.

I have touched women before. And I've touched this particular one plenty of times tonight. So why does my heart rate feel like it's scaling the stratosphere at lightning speed?

I take a breath. But all I smell is her. She smells like flowers and summer, and suddenly I forget that I'm in the back of an old van, on the side of the highway. What is happening to me?

My brain can't even function. That should be the only sign I need that this isn't a good idea. We are so different. I know, opposites attract or whatever, but I've been stuck with Sean, my literal opposite from the womb. I need someone who isn't going to drive me nuts. And Karli definitely... used to irritate me. She's not so irritating anymore.

"You smell good," she mutters.

I tense.

I should be a gentleman and remove myself from this situation. From her.

Her hand crawls to my neck, and she sighs into my shoulder. “Hobie.”

My entire body turns into a pathetic pile of mush.

I suppose I can be “Hobie” for a minute. I’m going to have to be because I can’t move even if I wanted to.

Five minutes later, I find the strength to pull out my phone and text Sean. He asked where I was an hour ago, and told me he’d come get me. But that text went ignored as well.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

Me:Already on my way home.

I almost tack on a heartless ‘thanks for nothing’, but when Karli nuzzles into my side again, I realize that’s not the truth.

But I can’t admit that to Sean.

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Somehow, I fell asleep on the lumpy stack of towels—a.k.a. the bed—with Karli cuddled up beside me. I had a weird dream that Sean was kneeling on my stomach, holding me hostage.

But now I’m not sure it was a dream because it still feels like something is pressing down on my stomach making it hard to breathe.

My eyes flit open, taking their time adjusting to the dimness. It must be early morning. I reach for my stomach. There’s something there. It’s hard, and black, is this... a tire?

Why on earth is there a tire on my stomach? I shove the tire and it tumbles to the floor with a plunk. My lungs fill with oxygen and I sit up, dragging in a full breath as I try to make sense of what’s going on. Is this our tire?

Karli startles. “What happened?” She blinks rapidly and sits up like she forgot where she was.



“Oh nothing much, just sleeping with a tire on my stomach. Do you know anything about that?”

Even in the dim morning light, I can make out the color filling her cheeks. Her lips part but then she slams them shut. “So, um, I sleepwalk. I probably should have warned you of that last night.”

“You sleepwalk?” My eyes widen at her nonchalant excuse. “Karli, there’s a tire where there wasn’t last night. That’s more than just sleepwalking.” How did I not wake up to that?

She stands and when she does I catch sight of the black streaks covering her arms and sweater. This woman seriously took a tire off in her sleep? That adds a whole new meaning to the phrase, “I could do that in my sleep.” I have so many thoughts on her unconscious activities. We are next to an interstate, she could have walked in front of a car.

“Sometimes when I’m stressed about something before I go to bed I try to fix it in my sleep.” She pulls her hair up, twisting a tie around it so it stays in a knot on top of her head.

“That sounds...scary. And dangerous.” I’m curious where else she has ended up in her sleep, but also a little terrified to know.

“It’s fine. I promise,” she says. She tips the tire on its side and rolls it to the back doors. “I’ve never left my house or done anything this dramatic.”

This is more than a little dramatic. It’s so unsafe. She needs to get help or something. Is there a cure?

I grab my shoe and tug it on, pulling the laces so hard I’m worried they’ll snap. I

want to fight with her on this, but I hold my tongue because something tells me she won't appreciate my unwanted opinions.

Karli already has the tire out of the van and I jump down. "You didn't happen to get us a new tire while you were sleeping, did you?" I say, deciding to take the safer route and make light of the situation.

"Apparently not," she says, her gaze fixed on the empty axel. "That would have made things easier."

I pull out my phone and find what I'm searching for in less than two minutes. "Well, luckily there's an auto shop connected to a service station on this next exit. I'll walk down and get us a new tire."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Why don't you put your feet up and rest?" My lips twitch.

She scoffs. "Fat chance of that. I'm coming with you."

"Okay." I knew she wouldn't go for that, she wants to be in control, so I'll let her. I have practice in that area.

Karli grabs a few things from the van then we head out. Traffic is slow, practically nonexistent, but still no one stops to ask if they can help. We fall into silence as we walk. A silence that comes completely naturally to me, but judging by the way Karli is fidgeting and looking around, she's ready to burst. Or she has to pee.

"What is it?" I ask.

She tucks a stray piece of hair into her bun. "What is what?"

“There’s something on your mind, so spill it.”

“Just more questions. I don’t do well with quiet.”

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I step around a cactus. “Ask away.”

“Really? Okay, um...” she glances out at the desert. “Do you have any tattoos or piercings?”

I shove my hands in my pockets. “Possibly.”

“Possibly?” Her head flips in my direction. “You can’t just leave me hanging like that.”

I don’t respond.

“Trenton Liam Bentley, I must know.”

I roll my eyes at her dramatics. “Fine.” I kick up a rock. Then another one. The second one sends sand into my shoe.

“Well?” she hedges.

“I have one tattoo.”

“Seriously?” She stops walking to gape at me. Why is she doing that? Does she not think me capable of getting a tattoo after Lennox’s prank?

“Can I see it?” She claps her hands together with the kind of joy only a child could replicate. The exit is coming up, after that, we still have half a mile to walk, but sure, let’s stop and show her my tattoo.

I roll up my sleeve and turn my arm out, revealing one of the more embarrassing mistakes of my life. The intent was good, the execution, well, it never should have happened.

“L. I. A.? What does that mean?” Her eyes widen. “Ooh, please say it was an old girlfriend.”

“I wish.” I drop my sleeve. Her eyes sparkle as she waits for the story. It’s going to be a dud, though. “You remember when Lennox almost made us get tattoos because she was sick of us making bets?”

“How could I forget? That was the highlight of my Christmas. My mom promised she’d be around when I came home that year, but I wound up at an empty apartment because her recent fling had flown her to Cancun for the holiday.” Her nose scrunches and she plays with her bracelet. “I thought of you guys a lot that Christmas.” She pulls out the hair tie and shakes her hair free. “Anyway.”

Another comment about her mom. When it’s my turn to ask questions, that’s where I’m starting.

“Anyway... we made another bet at her wedding. It was more of a joke, though.” Kind of. “When she found out, she was livid. She told us we’d all have to get her daughter’s name tattooed on our arm if we ever wanted to meet our niece.”

“Savage,” Karli says, her eyes wide in appreciation. “Wait, didn’t she have a boy?”

“Yup. Mix-up at the ultrasound. And she didn’t even have the decency to keep the initials the same, so now I have this. And no good reason for it.”

She nudges my side. “Just that you’re a good brother.”

I squirm. “Sometimes.” Right now, I’m not. My brother probably thinks I hate him, which I never could. But I can’t seem to tell him that because I’m stuck in my head. Stuck in whatIwant, whatIneed. Is that selfish?

“So, what are you going to do?” Karli asks, poking my arm.

“I don’t know. Sean covered his up the next day. So did Michael. But I was...” How do I say ‘scared of going back under a needle’ without sounding like a huge baby? The entirety of the tattoo is barely an inch in length, but I nearly cried with every tiny poke.

“A pansy?” Karli supplies.

I should have stuck with mine. “I guess so.”

“Don’t be ashamed.” She rubs my bicep, I have a hunch she doesn’t want to let go. “You’re delicate, like a flower.”

“The compliment every man longs to hear.” I unintentionally flex. Okay, it was very intentional.

“Here.” She turns and lifts her hair off her neck. “Since you were so brave, I’ll show you one of mine.”

Oneof hers? How many does she have? I swallow. This seems like very important information, and I would like the answersnow.

She pulls the back of her shirt down a touch, enough for me to make out the three little butterflies dotting her skin. My fingers find the black ink by themselves.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

She catches her breath like I've burned her, but she doesn't pull away. Neither do I.

"So that's mine." Her voice falters as I run my fingertip over the wings of the top butterfly. She clears her throat and drops her hair without offering an explanation. I pull my hand out of her thick brown locks, but it's harder than it should be. It's like my hand has a mind of its own, wanting to touch Karli again, to get lost in her dark tresses.

She starts walking again, so I do too.

It's silent for only a few moments before she finds another question. "Do you want a big family? Like yours?"

I cough on the exhaust a diesel just doused us with, not on the question. "Uh, yeah I think. I haven't given it too much thought honestly, but I'd like what I had growing up. It was crazy, but it was never boring. I guess I can't imagine not having that."

"That sounds nice," she says wistfully.

"What about you?" I ask. She doesn't seem to have much of a family. Does she want one?

"A big family would be cool," she says, neither confirming nor denying my thoughts. "If I ever have kids, I want a few, so they'll always have someone in their corner."

I pick up a smooth black rock. "What about you?"

She turns my way, confusion written in her furrowed brows. “What about me?”

“Well, where are you going to be if not in your kid’s corner?” Does she think that if she has kids, she’ll be the same mother hers was? I’ve caught enough glimpses into Karli’s heart to know she’s much more than her “mother’s daughter.”

She scrunches her nose. “Well, of course I’ll be there. Just, you know...” Her voice trails off.

I toss the rock in the air.

“Okay, um, did you ever pee the bed as a kid?”

I trip over a sagebrush that wasn’t there moments before and crash into the dirt.

## Chapter 12

Karli

“Wouldyouholdstill?” I say as I wipe at the blood on the back of Trent’s arm.

“It stings,” he mutters.

That might be my fault. His arm has probably been clean for a while now, but I keep getting distracted by his flexed triceps as he grips the sink. Oh no. Another dot of blood.

“All clean.” I drop the wipe in the trash and pull out the box of band-aids we purchased a few minutes ago. I tear open the first band-aid and place it over the cut, gently smoothing the edges with my fingers. He shudders and then tries to cover up the involuntary motion with a yawn.



I open another band-aid and place it above the first.

“The cashier said the auto shop doesn’t open until nine, but there’s a diner across the street. We can grab some breakfast there,” Trent says, whether to distract himself from the tension in this tiny bathroom or to distract me, I’m not sure, because I was privy to the same conversation.

“Sounds good.” I open another bandage and place it just below the original one.

I can feel Trent’s gaze on me through the mirror. I want to look at him, see if I can figure out what’s going on behind those blue irises, but I’ve got a very important job to do.

I open another bandage and turn it horizontally next to the stack of band-aids. Then I do the same thing on the other side.

“Is it really that bad?” he asks, concerned for the first time since he tripped and fell into a sharp rock. “Do I need stitches?”

“Uh, no. It’s not.” My lips twitch. “I was trying to see how many I could get on before you stopped me.”

He twists his arm, examining the bandages covering half of his triceps muscle. “Was there even a need for one?”

Hardly. Once I got him cleaned up there was barely even a scratch left.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I shrug playfully. “You’ll have to keep them all. You don’t know which ones you need and which ones you don’t.”

“I look ridiculous,” he growls that sexy grumpy growl of his.

Now it’s my turn to shudder.

“I’ve always thought band-aids were the most underrated accessory.” I bite my bottom lip.

He presses away from the sink he’s been leaning against while he received necessary medical attention and turns around. His chest brushes mine but I don’t pull back.

“Perhaps you’d like some as well then?” he asks, his voice deep and tempting.

Yes please, I’ll take some of whatever he’s offering.

He grabs my hand holding the box of band-aids and my hand turns limp under his touch. He pulls a single band-aid out and opens it while keeping his eyes locked on mine with the sexiest smile I’ve ever seen.

Is it hot in this bathroom or is it just him?

He raises the band-aid, the back of his knuckles grazing my jaw as gentle as a kiss, and presses it right onto my lips.

“Trent!” I screech, but with the band-aid on my mouth it comes out like a garbled

“Pnnt.”

He’s already out the door.

I shake my head as warmth floods my chest. The whole “not falling for him thing” might actually be a problem.

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Stepping into the diner is like stepping back in time. To the fifties, I believe. I’m not all that familiar with the fashion and decor from each decade, but the checkered floor and cherry red leather booths combined with the pink and green walls feel very fifties.

The girl who seats us is wearing a pink poodle skirt and a white top. “Do you think I could pull off that look?” I ask Trent after she leaves.

He arches a brow. “What about my attire leads you to believe I could provide you with helpful fashion advice?”

I glance down at his navy-blue polo and cargo shorts. “You look fine to me.”

“Karli, you’re a beautiful woman, and you don’t need my opinion on a skirt. You’d be beautiful with or without one.” I’m caught off guard by his compliment, but my lips stretch wide as I wait.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he says quickly.

There it is.

“Trentley Bob, what would your mother say?”

The waitress approaches before Trent can offer a retort.

“Hi. How are you?” she says, her voice devoid of emotion. Well, that simply can’t do. Someone wearing a bright pink skirt must have some cheer to share.

“We are doing wonderful,” I say. “How are you? I love your earrings.”

She raises a brow and looks down at her pad. “What can I get you to drink? We have the best root beer in the west.” Her monotone sounds like a bad recording.

“I’ll have one,” I say. “But none for him. He’s driving.”

The waitress glares in response to my joke. It was pretty lame. I’ll give her that.

“I’ll have orange juice,” Trent says.

She hardly waits for him to finish before she rushes away from us. But she’s back one minute later, with the drinks and her notepad ready to take our order.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“I’ll have an omelet with all the toppings, and can I get a side of pancakes?” I ask, suddenly starving.

She writes it down but doesn’t say anything. Then Trent orders a breakfast sandwich. And once again she rushes away from the table. I’m starting to take it personally. Do I smell? After sleeping in my van it’s a very real possibility.

When the waitress is gone, I excuse myself to the bathroom. By the time I get back, our food is at the table. The waitress might not like me, but the service isn’t half bad.

I plop down across from Trent.

“Do you ever worry that the person who handled your food didn’t wash their hands after they went to the bathroom?”

Trent freezes, the breakfast sandwich halfway to his mouth. He puts it back on his plate. “Well, now I do.”

“I’m just saying, there are always those signs in the bathroom to remind employees to wash their hands. But for most people, that’s common knowledge before graduating preschool.”

Trent leans against the vinyl booth and crosses his arms over his chest. “It’s the weirdest thing. I used to be hungry.”

“Oh, I’m sure the food was cooked hot enough to burn any leftover germs.” I add loads of butter and syrup to my pancake, undeterred.

“You’re kind of evil, you know that?”

I smirk. “It’s one of my more desirable qualities.”

Trent grudgingly picks up his food again, but I can tell now he is only eating to curb the hunger. I suppose I could have saved my random bathroom thought for after the meal. What does he think of me? He called me beautiful, but was that one of those empty compliments you offer the person who’s taking you home? I mean, I put a tire on him while he was sleeping. He can’t think I’m anything short of nuts. He’s even said so once or twice.

“How’s your food?” Our waitress returns to smack her gum above our heads.

I cringe but cover it with a polite smile. “Lovely, thank you.”

“Here’s your check.” She drops the plastic tray down on the table and I stare at it. We’ve had our food for two minutes. Trent has barely taken a bite. She’s probably just excited to get home for the holiday.

“Do you have any fun plans for Thanksgiving?” I ask, not sure why except to be kind to the poor woman working the holiday shift. I know how that goes.

“Only getting smashed out drunk the second I get home. Do you need anything else?”

A less salty attitude would be nice. “Does that jukebox work?” I ask.

“Unfortunately,” she mutters before walking away.

I grin at Trent. “You know what we’re doing right?”

“Getting smashed out drunk the second we get home?” He says, his eyes twinkling.

“We are dancing.”

He blinks at me. Once. Then twice. “It’s eight-thirty in the morning. The people here are barely mobile right now, I don’t think they want us blasting music and getting in their way.”

Yeah, I noticed the older age group when we came in. No one is going to be joining us, but that’s just fine with me.

“So?”

“We should probably just eat and go.”

I purse my lips. “Say no.”

He frowns. “I did.”

“No.” I tap my fork on my plate. “You said all the words, except for no. So tell me no, and I won’t ask again.”

His eyebrows are so close together they almost touch. “Okay...no?”

## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I narrow my eyes. “Are you sure about that no?”

“Yes?”

“Okay.” Smirking, I hop out of the booth. I’ll let him out of this one. But I’m still turning on some music.

I take my time at the jukebox, flipping pages until a song catches my eye.

Endless Loveby Lionel Richie and Diana Ross.

“That’s a good one,” a man says to my left.

I jump, glancing over at the older man. He looks like he’s in his late seventies but is very put together in his plaid dress shirt and slacks. His white hair is gelled with a perfect swoosh up top. “My sweetheart and I always danced to that song,” he says, seeming lost in thought.

“Then it’s perfect.” I put in my money and select the song. “Why don’t you dance with her?”

“Oh.” The older man’s face goes red. He blinks but can’t seem to clear his watery eyes. “I wish I could. I wish I could.”

My heart plummets. “Oh, I’m...so sorry. I didn’t...would you like to dance with me?”



He blinks and a precious tear slips through the wrinkles below his eyes. “I would love that.”

I hold out a hand. “Well, come on.”

I grab his hands and together we sway while he tells me all about his late wife Kara who passed away six years ago. Every Wednesday before she died, they came here and ate waffles. And he still carries on that tradition. His voice breaks as he recounts her long fight with cancer, but life comes back to his eyes when he mentions that his two sons are bringing their families over for Thanksgiving.

The music continues long after it should and I look over to see Trent feeding the machine more money.

Finally, Ralph complains about his arthritis and says he needs to sit down.

“Thank you for letting me dance again,” he says with a kiss on my cheek. Then he shuffles back to his seat, alone.

He and I aren’t so different.

Maybe I’ll find myself back here on a random Wednesday morning and stop in to say hi.

“May I have this dance?”

I spin around to find Trent standing there, hand outstretched. “I thought you said no.” I hesitate only a moment before slipping my hand into his.

He pulls me into him, holding me much closer than Ralph did. “I realized I was wrong.”

“Were you jealous?” I tease.

“Maybe I just like the song.” He shifts his hand on my back, the movement stirring the scent of his cologne into the tiny space between us.

“I thought you didn’t have a favorite song,” I say, my voice coming out almost breathless.

“I do now.” His eyes are telling me things right now, but what exactly, I couldn’t say.

“Well, you’ll have to impress me, Ralph was quite the charmer.” “I believe it.” He spins me out, but a waiter walks by with a pile of pancakes and Trent yanks me back in.

I’m laughing as I face him again, but Trent’s expression is serious.

“Karli, what do your butterflies mean?” His voice is rougher than it was mere seconds ago.

It takes me a moment to remember I showed him that tattoo.

I swallow. Do I tell him? I’ve known him for less than twenty-four hours, yet I already know that if I confide this thing to him, he won’t belittle me like my mother would. I feel safe sharing this secret with him. But that doesn’t make it easy to do.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“When I was little, I wanted to fly.” My voice falters as his hand presses into the small of my back, drawing me closer. “The butterflies were a promise to myself that someday I’d let the past stop dragging me down so I could do just that.”

“And have you?”

I clear my throat. “I’m still working on it. Every time I think I’m figuring it out, my mom pulls me right back down. But not anymore. This time is for real.” I nod. “I’m going to fly.”

“You will,” he whispers. “You’re strong Karli.”

I sniff and break eye contact. “Thanks.”

He spins me out and around then pulls me into his chest. My hand is locked up in his, pressed against his heart. “You’re not your mom. I think when you have a family, not only will you fly, but everyone will because you’ll lift them all up.”

My heart hammers so hard against my ribs it hurts. Am I having a heart attack? Or is this what it feels like to fall for someone? “Trent?”

“Yes?”

“That was kind of cheesy.”

“I know.”

“I loved it.” I love all of it. This moment, this diner, this dance. When I’m alone again, this is the moment I’ll come back to in my heart. This is the moment I’ll forever feel.

## Chapter 13

Karli

The auto shop opened twenty minutes after nine. Much to Trent’s annoyance. I could tell by the way he kept checking the window every five seconds. I, on the other hand, sat motionless on the bench outside, too afraid to move. Breakfast did not agree with me. Perhaps it was because I let my eggs sit, therefore letting the germs grow, while I danced around a diner in the wee hours of the morning.

I’ve never claimed all my choices were good ones.

Instead of getting the tire myself, which is what I had planned, I ended up sequestering myself to the bathroom in the connected gas station.

Thirty minutes later, I still feel like garbage. And I think Trent is on to me. Thankfully, Cal, the owner of the auto shop, was nice enough to give us a ride back to the van with the tire, because I fear I never would have made it. The pain in my stomach has grown immensely. But now I need to pull it together and pretend that everything is fine.

I reach into the back of the truck for the tire, but Trent picks it up and saunters to the van like it weighs nothing.

“I can change it,” I say, hurrying after him, all while clutching my stomach.

“I know you can,” he says, dropping the tire near the empty axle.

I pick up the lug wrench but Trent swipes it from my hand.

“Hey, I’m doing it.” I grab hold of it just as he shifts the wrench behind him, pulling my arm around his back.

He looks down at me, his eyebrows hooding his eyes from the harsh sun, making his features more rugged.

“You know it’s okay to accept help sometimes.”

“Of course,” I stand up straight. “I’ll let you know when I need it.” I try to take the wrench, but he’s too strong and it doesn’t budge.

“You need help.”

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t tell me what I need.”

“Question,” he holds up a finger, his brows furrowed. “Which do you value more, honesty or humility?”

“Both obviously.” I chew on my lip.

“So if I ask if you feel okay, you’ll tell me the truth?” His eyes search mine and...I can’t lie.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

I cross my arms over my stomach as if that will stamp down the pains within. “Perhaps someone didn’t wash their hands.” Just the thought has me feeling more nauseous. “I’ll be fine soon.” Hopefully.

His eyes rove over my face, reading the words I’m not saying. “But you don’t feel good rightnow. I know you can change your own tire, but just because you can, doesn’t mean you have to. Please, let me do this for you.”

His sensitive words break down my resolve. I feel awful, and all he’s asking for is to help. Why can’t I just accept it?

The nausea flares up again. The last thing my aching body wants to do is kneel on the rocky ground and change that tire. “Fine.” I hold my head a little higher. “Since I already did the first half, I suppose you can finish.”

He smirks. “Thank you for allowing me this pleasure.”

I can’t bring myself to go inside the van and be completely useless, so I open the passenger door and sit on the edge in the shade, watching him work. It’s a distraction I very much need right now.

Fifteen minutes later, Trent is crouched over the tire, dripping in sweat, but not once has he removed his shirt to get more comfortable. Call me stupid, but I thought that’s how all attractive men worked on cars. No? Sigh. I got my phone out for nothing.

Trent tightens the last lug nut on the spare tire and hops up. He struts toward me and I attempt to shove my phone into my pocket, but I move too fast and it slips from my

fingers.

Trent is quick to rescue my phone from the dirt. He looks up, his blue eyes intent on mine. “Why is your camera app open?”

He saw that?

I stand, wobbling slightly. “The, uh, landscape is breathtaking.”

He glances over his shoulder at quite possibly the worst view I’ve ever seen. There’s nothing but desert. And a single toilet propped up by a cactus.

Now that I think about it, I had to pee last night before I fell asleep, but I was fine this morning. I really hope I didn’t sleep pee in that thing.

“Is that my butt?” He lifts the phone closer to his face.

“Is it?” I know exactly what he’s seeing. The tiny photo in the corner of the screen that I “accidentally” took of him about ten minutes ago. That doesn’t mean I have to admit it.

He looks at me, his eyes flashing. “It’s fine. I have some of you, too.”

“What?” This time, my surprise is genuine. And so is my intrigue, maybe also some fear. Did he catch me sleep-peeing? “Show me.”

“We’ll see.” He holds out his hand, offering the phone to me, but there’s something else in his eyes. A hidden meaning there, begging to be explored.

I reach for the phone, trying to conceal my blush when he doesn’t pull away, allowing his fingers to linger on mine. It’s just a touch. How sick am I?

## Chapter 14

Trent

“Ontheroadagain,” Karli says as she delicately scoots herself into the driver’s seat one inch at a time. It’s utterly painful to watch. She still doesn’t feel good, I wish she’d just admit it and let me do more for her. But it felt significant that she let me help with the tire at all.

Once she’s settled she relaxes into the seat and takes a long breath.

“Think we can make it this time?” I ask.

“Boy, you better knock on wood.” She puts the key in the ignition and turns.

Nothing.

I groan. Audibly or silently, I’m not sure at this point. This trip is not going to plan at all. Not that we had a plan other than driving home. It shouldn’t be that hard.

“That’s weird,” Karli says. “What?”

“My gas gauge says empty. But I filled it up before we left Vegas.”

This time my groan is very much audible. And annoyed. With Bertha. She’s out to get me.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“The gauge is probably just broken,” Karli says.

If only it were that simple. I jump out of the van, the frustration rising inside me.

There are footprints around the gas tank that don’t look like either of ours and, yep. Some spilled gas on the dirt.

When did this happen? While we were gone? While we were asleep? While Karli was sleepwalking last night? I pick up a rock and chuck it as far as I can. It makes a “plink” as it hits the stupid toilet. That’s it. A freaking plink. I throw another one then force myself to take a deep breath and calm down.

I hop in the passenger seat, but Karli isn’t in the front seat anymore.

“Trent?” Karli asks from the back.

I throw open the curtain to find her in the fetal position on the bed.

“Were you expecting someone else, because apparently we had a visitor.”

She lifts a single, unamused brow at my clipped tone. “What?”

“Someone siphoned the gas while we were gone. Or asleep. Or while you were wandering around last night unconscious. And you’re lucky they didn’t try to kidnap you. Do you have any idea how dangerous sleeping in your vehicle is?” I’ve tried, but I can’t keep the frustration from seeping into my voice.

She cannot stay in this van anymore. I won't let her.

"Safer than sleeping on the street," she tosses back.

My heart stops. "I thought you had an apartment." If she's homeless, that changes everything. She said she likes knowing she'll always have a place to sleep, so that means at one point she didn't. My thoughts trip and stumble over that information, not wanting to accept the harsh reality. Is she—?

"I do," she snaps and hauls herself off the bed. "But I like the van. Sorry to disappoint you, Dad."

My frown deepens, so does my worry. Why isn't she taking this seriously? "Karli, you know it isn't safe. Someone could break a window, cut your break line, push your van into a lake." Probably not the most likely scenarios, but I need her to understand the potential risks. Big and small.

"As you witnessed last night, all homes have windows that can easily be opened. Cars are left parked on the street for someone to vandalize and, as long as I don't park near a lake, I think I'll survive." There's a strong defiance in her words and eyes. I've crossed a line. But I'll keep crossing it until she's safe. I know she's not mine to protect, but my heart doesn't care about that logic.

"You can't—"

"Stop." She holds up a hand. "You don't get to march into my life and judge me." Her brown eyes fling arrows into mine.

"That's not what I'm doing."

"Really? Because all I hear is how stupid I am. You sound like my mother." She

hitches a thumb over her shoulder. “She’s only forty-five minutes that way, perhaps you’d like to go back for her if you find my company so lacking.”

The words die on my tongue. I would never treat her like her mother did...but I did come blazing in trying to protect a woman who has been protecting herself all her life. I could have handled it much better.

“Karli, I’m sorry I didn’t mean—”

“I’ve got a spare gas can back here,” she cuts me off, clearly done with the conversation, and possibly with me. There goes the lightness, the teasing, the flirting, all of which existed between us less than an hour ago.

I jump out of the van and pull open the back door.

Karli hops out, but when she hits the dirt she nearly collapses. If I’d been a better man, I would have noticed how green she looked before now. I would have stopped yelling at her. But instead, I went for it headlong.

“Karli?” I grab her shoulders before she falls. But she shakes me off.

“I’m fine.”

She hoists a rusty old can out of the back and tries to balance it on her hip while lifting it high enough to pour. She’s going to topple over under the weight of it.

“May I help?” I approach cautiously.

“No, you may not.”

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Okay then.”

“Don’t sass me,” she snaps.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I pinch my lips closed. Which is how they will stay for the foreseeable future.

Way to screw everything up.

Karli manages to get the gas in the tank and then slams the tank lid closed.

She shoves the empty can into the back of the van. “Anything else you would like to yell at me before we go?”

“Karli, I didn’t—”

Her eyes bulge, and she clamps a hand over her mouth before sprinting away. She falls to her hands and knees on the desert floor and then proceeds to lose her breakfast.

I’m a jerk.

## Chapter 15

Karli

I’m dying. Not only do I have food poisoning, but we’ve been stuck in construction

closures for twenty minutes with no end in sight.

Which is terribly inconvenient because I decided to sentence Trent to the silent treatment.

I'm overreacting. I tend to do that when I'm being mansplained to.

I know sleeping in a van isn't the safest idea there ever was. But I don't need Trent, the man who barely knows me, telling me what to do. After Thursday, he will be out of my life again, which means his little protective display back there was completely unnecessary.

I think I'm torturing myself with the silence more than him, though, because he seems like he'd be perfectly content to never say another word for the rest of his life.

I, on the other hand, feel like I'm going to explode. With words...and more. It's maddening. Every tiny sound Bertha makes feels deafening. Has she always been this annoying?

I'd play music on my phone, but I forgot to charge it, and now it's slowly sucking life out of Bertha attempting to charge.

There's nothing. Nothing but silence and tension. And the fatigue threatening to claim me at any moment. I wish it would have taken me twenty minutes ago when Trent first started driving. But instead, it's taking its time and.... I. Can't. Stand. This.

"I don't have a dad," I blurt.

Trent slowly looks over at me, a teasing glint in his eye. "I hate to break it to you, but that's not how biology works."

I bite back a smile. Most people wouldn't appreciate a joke at a time like this, but I live for the sass, the snark, the laughter, all of it. Because if I'm joking, then I'm not worried about what's really wrong in my life. Like all of it.

"I mean, my mom doesn't know who my dad is. Or at least that's what she claims. I think she does, but the deadbeat man refused to take me off her hands or give her money. So she's trying to hurt me the way he hurt her."

"Oh." Trent removes a hand from the steering wheel and rubs his jaw. "That's...a lot."

I cringe. It is a lot. I'm a lot for a regular person.

"What I was getting at is that I'm used to watching out for myself, so I don't do well at taking protective advice from others. None of my mom's marriages lasted, but the one thing all the good-for-nothing men had in common was that they didn't hesitate to come in and try to tell us what to do. Because they were men they felt they had the right to boss us helpless women around."

It's quiet. For at least two very slow miles. Honestly, it could be far less, or far more. The seconds are weighted and heavy. Forget talking. I should have stuck with the silent treatment.

"Karli, I've never thought of you as helpless. I know how strong you are. I got worried and spoke out of turn," he says. "So please, feel free to ignore me from now on. Especially if I stick my foot in my mouth."

I nod once, content with his apology. "Permission to ignore. Got it." A soft smile finds me.

Neither one of us speaks for a few minutes, but I'm surprised when Trent breaks the

silence.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“I think the reason I haven’t told anyone about my dream to be a programmer is because I’m scared that if I branch out, I won’t succeed on my own. I’ve always had someone by me to compare myself to and a guaranteed path to follow. But I don’t know what this path looks like.”

I hold my breath, waiting for him to say more. It’s like he exploded, too.

“I get that. I still don’t know what I want to be.”

He raises a brow. “You don’t?”

“Nope. I graduated with a degree in hospitality management, but I currently work as a waitress. And I hate it. I think I want to work at an old folks’ home.”

Trent chuckles. “Are you going to offer them fake tattoos or rides in your creeper van?”

The mood shifts, so fully it’s like walking out of an igloo in the North Pole and finding yourself in Arizona.

I slap my forehead. “I didn’t even think to add those to the resume.”

“You probably shouldn’t.”

“Hey now, just because you’re a baby and couldn’t handle getting poked by a needle.” I arch a brow.



“It wasn’t the needle; it was the person wielding it,” he says.

“I’m offended. I thought I put on a good act.”

He nods. “You were every convincing.”

It’s quiet again, but this time there’s a silence, a stillness, a peace. Now I can fall asleep.

“What’s your favorite movie?” he asks.

Or not. I twist in my seat to face him, curling my legs up to my chest. “I like all kinds. But I mostly watch scary movies around the holidays.”

Trent’s eyes dart from the road to me. “Because nothing says Christmas like a bunch of helpless people being chased by monsters and demons?”

I chuckle, my insides warming when his deep laugh joins mine. “Well, it’s better than sitting around moping about being alone.”

His smile turns sad and I face forward again, hating the pity.

He clears his throat. “So what do you watch when you’re happy?”

That’s a tricky question. It takes me two minutes to come up with a few options. “A Walk to Remember, Me Before You, Titanic...”

“Those aren’t happy movies.” He’s quiet for a moment. “So you like romance, but you don’t like a happy ending?”

My head swivels in his direction. “Um, one that was way too intuitive, and two,

you've watched all those movies?"

He's got one hand on the wheel, the other on the console between us. He looks completely at ease, and wow is it sexy.

"I'm well versed, alright?"

Oh, I know. I've been learning this and trying very hard not to fall for it for the last eighteen hours.

"You didn't answer my question," he says.

I peel my eyes away from him. My stomach pinches, feeling unsettled suddenly.  
"You've met my mother."

"So because it never worked out for her, you don't think it will work out for you?"

"No." That's not what I'm saying, not what I believe, right? "It feels, I don't know, mystical? To believe that two people can really be happy together forever? Even my grandma was divorced and never had a good thing to say about my grandpa."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“That sounds like a vicious cycle of Baker women.”

My stomach turns over again with the truth in his words. Unfortunately, he’s right. It is a vicious cycle, and I don’t want to be stuck in it.

“Cycles are hard to break,” I mutter.

“But not impossible. The question is whether you’re willing to try.”

I don’t want to read into his words. I don’t want to get my hopes up when I know how it ends.

Stupid. He literally said to try.

That’s something my mother never did. She never gave anything a good try. She held on while it was easy but released the rope the second things got hard. I want a romance, but more than anything, I want that happily ever after.

“I think I’ll introduce you to some new movies.” He winks and shoots me a grin that’s downright lethal.

My pulse kicks up a notch. “You are going to suggest romance movies to me?”

“Hey, I have a sister. I know some good ones.”

I’m sure he does. “Okay, impress me, romance connoisseur. What should I watch?”

“Well, I can’t just tell you, what would be the fun in that? I’ll have to show you.”

Show me? As in...a date?

That would be...my stomach lurches. My chest constricts.Uh oh.I thought this was over. “Stop the car!” I scream.

Trent slides out of the traffic and barely makes it to the shoulder before the contents of my stomach spill over.

## Chapter 16

Trent

Karlihaspukedonthe side of the road twice now and each time it killed me to see her in so much agony. The second time she threw up she fell back into the passenger seat like she was physically spent. The life was gone from her eyes and her skin was devoid of color.

I asked if she was okay and she said she felt much better. But I didn’t believe her. I got her a fresh water bottle and watched her sip a quarter of it before I dared get back onto the road.

The second I started driving, she fell asleep in the passenger seat. So I ditched the road in favor of the closest town and stopped at the store for the necessities. Sprite, three different kinds of Gatorade, saltines, and a fuzzy blanket. I’m not sure what the fuss is about the fuzzy blankets, but my sister Lennox swears by them.

I considered carrying Karli to the back of the van and letting her sleep while I drove, but I didn’t like that idea. What if she walked right out of the van in her sleep? She deserves a bed that doesn’t feel like a sack of potatoes. And a bathroom at her

convenience.

So I got a hotel room. And now I'll pray she doesn't think I have ulterior motives when she wakes up.

I park in front of the hotel, then leave the van running while I grab a room key. Karli's still out when I get back, so I pick her up.

But because I'm not Superman, I stumble and bang her head into the van door. She doesn't even stir. Not even when I hit her feet into the walls while carrying her through the hotel. I promise I'm not trying to abuse her. Romance movies have this part all wrong. It is not as easy in real life to carry a completely unconscious woman and a bag full of groceries through narrow hallways. In hindsight, I could have gone back for the groceries, but it's too late now. I hit the edge of a rug and nearly drop Karli. But she doesn't flinch. Thank goodness this woman sleeps like the dead.

I get quite a few interested looks, especially from the ladies at the front desk but I offer them a smile so they'll know I'm not a serial killer. Or is that making me seem like more of a serial killer? Oh well.

I manage to unlock the door without dropping her and get into the room without hitting her head again. I lay her on one side of the bed, fold down the covers on the other side, then carry her around.

She stirs as I pull her shoes off. "This is the best Thanksgiving ever," she says, before rolling over and cuddling into the pillows.

Considering the events of the day, I shudder to think what past holidays have been like for her.

I spread out the groceries on the nightstand then drape the fuzzy blanket over her. I

stand above her for a moment, ensuring she's comfortable before I take a seat on the hard sofa. I'll check my email, and work on a few things while she sleeps. That way I'll be here if she needs me.

I read Sean's last two messages saying that he's sorry for kidnapping me, and can I please just forgive him already because he can't handle the silence?

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

My thumb hovers over the call button, but I can't seem to click it. I know I need to talk to him and work it out, and I will. But it's been nice to have a break and some space between us.

My eyes unconsciously flick to Karli. Funny. All I could think about two days ago was getting out of the family business and tackling my dreams. But I've barely thought about the programming course since finding her. I never should have kept my dreams to myself. If this trip has taught me anything, it's that I shouldn't take my family for granted.

I flip back to my email, and when I run out of messages I watch a few episodes of Stranger Things. But two hours later, my eyelids are heavy and my back is breaking on this brick called a couch. I stand and stretch. I don't think Karli would mind if I lay on the bed with her. We've shared a bed once before. It won't be awkward this time.

I gently lay down on the other side of the bed on top of the covers then roll to my side and allow myself to take her in. She's breathtaking. I can't believe I didn't realize how incredible she was the first time I met her.

Something about a crazy lady with sharp objects tends to frighten a man. Or just me. But now, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to take my eyes off of her.

I watch her sleep, not in a stalkerish way. Okay, is there any other way to watch someone sleep? I've never had the desire to watch someone sleep before, so I guess when it comes to Karli, I am a stalker. I want everything for her. I want her to be happy, to have a family she never had growing up. Because I care for her.

I groan and face the ceiling.

No, no, no. How did I let this happen? This was only supposed to be a ride home. No feelings were supposed to develop.

I'm never going to hear the end of it from my brothers, Grant, or Lennox when they find out because they will find out. One look at my face when I bring her home for Thanksgiving and they'll know.

The bed shifts beneath me and I glance over.

"Agh!" I scream. Karli is sitting bolt upright in the bed. Her eyes wide open, unmoving.

"Karli?" I whisper, in case she's possessed, and I've awoken a demon.

She jumps out of the bed and frantically runs around the room.

"Whoa, Karli, what's going on?"

"I need my toothbrush."

"Uh, okay."

"It's in my bag. Where's my bag?"

I follow her in another circle around the room. "In the van, I think."

"I need to get it." She heads for the door.

"Wait, wait, I'll get it. Just wait here," I stop her.



She walks to the bed and settles on the edge. “Hurry,” she says. “I need to kiss someone.”

Someone? She better mean me.

She’s sleepwalking again. I’m not about to take advantage of her in this state, but I’m struck by the realization that if she kissed me, I wouldn’t hold back. Because I want to kiss her as badly as dream Karli wants to kiss hopefully me.

I rush out to the van, hesitant to leave her alone for long. I search the back and the front before I find anything resembling what might be her bag. Ah, there. I grab it and stand up too tall, ramming my head into the ceiling.

Stupid van.

I give the wall of the van an extra punch out of spite. Something flutters out of the small cabinet and I pick it up. It’s a picture of a young Karli, maybe eleven, with an older woman, sitting on a porch swing and smiling. The woman looks so similar to Karli’s mother but older, kinder. That must be her grandma. The one that took care of her because her mom didn’t. The one that kept her safe, much like Bertha. Bertha may be fifty percent psycho, but to Karli, she’s family.

Ugh. “Sorry Bertha.”

Great, now I’m apologizing to a van. I’m losing my mind.

By the time I return with her bag, Karli is under the covers, fast asleep.

So much for that kiss.

### Chapter 17

Karli

I feel like I'm cuddled in a cloud. It's not as soft, but it's a million times better. I'm sailing above the earth and I'm never coming down. It's warmer up here than I thought, and firm, but also cozy.

Why is my cloud snoring?

My eyes fly open. There's a face. And a body beneath me.

Trent? What's happening?

I pull away slowly and take in my surroundings. This is not my van. This is...a hotel room. Why are we in a hotel room? My stomach growls as I try to piece it all together.

I got sick. Then I fell asleep. And now I'm here. I roll to my side and freeze when I see what's on the nightstand. Just about every drink an ailing person might need, crackers, the TV remote and a room key. And...the blanket? Definitely not hotel-grade stuff. This is fuzzy heaven.

Trent did this for me?

No one has ever taken care of me like this. My fingers find the familiar gold chain around my wrist and it's like I can hear my grandma saying, 'That's how you know

he's a good one.'

Heisgood. Too good. But Bakers don't get good ones. We get washed-up leftovers, the runts of the litter, the burnt ends. We don't get people who stay and take care of us when we're ill. Who rents a hotel room so I don't have to be sick in a moving vehicle. This is all too much.

I pick up a Gatorade and sip it slowly. It's just Trent, sweet, helpful, protective Trent. He would do this for anyone.

For some reason the thought of him doing all this for another girl though turns my insides into a flaming ball of fire. I'm jealous of my own imagination.

After the Gatorade is gone and I've eaten approximately four saltines, I slide off the bed and locate my mini Go Bag that he was sweet enough to bring in for me.

A memory hesitantly pops up in my mind. I asked him to get it. The details are hazy, but I can say with confidence it was something embarrassing.

Ugh. Why must I be so strange awake and asleep?

I locate my toothpaste and a pair of clean clothes. But no toothbrush. Must have left that behind. Maybe there's a convenience store around here.

It's nearly dinner time, and my depleted stomach is starving. Instead of hopping in the shower like I really want to, I go in search of keys. I'll get us some food, as a thank you. The poor guy is clearly as exhausted as I was. It's the least I can do.

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I find my way out of the hotel and head for the only giant van in the parking lot. But

then I catch sight of a strip mall across the street. Perfect.

Putting the keys in my pocket, I head for the stores.

The food options are Mexican and pizza. Not exactly what I want to put in my stomach hours after puking, but it is what it is. I place an order for a pizza, half with all the toppings, and half as plain as it gets. The cashier gives me a ticket then tells me the wait time and I head to the souvenir store next door.

There are all the classics. Mini flasks, mini shot glasses, mini lighters, but...wait a minute. Why are there Las Vegas shirts here? Aren't we in Arizona?

A woman steps up next to me at the small rack of Vegas memorabilia. "Excuse me," I say to her. "Where are we?"

She narrows her eyes. "In a store?"

"No, I mean this city? What is it called?"

She blinks, her gaze darting left and right before she clasps my hand. "Dear child, have you been abducted?"

"What? Oh, no. I just fell asleep while we were driving."

She drops my hand and takes a step away, making a sking sound. "I suggest you pay more attention before you go scaring an old woman. We are in Boulder City."

What? That doesn't make sense. He went backward? We are still in Nevada? I guess it makes sense since it's the only city for miles, but why would Trent do that for me? I know how bad he wants to get home. But instead, he made our trip longer.

## Page 38

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

The back of my eyes burn. I'm not sure what to do with this kind of information. This kind of care.

I turn away from the keepsakes and wander toward a rack of shirts. I need an answer to all my questions. But I'm afraid to ask. Because whatever is happening between us is starting to feel much too real and I don't know how to do real.

I blink rapidly, looking around but not really seeing anything. I'm overwhelmed by all the colors and options.

How do I pay him back for this?

I'll get him a change of clothes too. I'm sure he'd appreciate that.

A shirt catches my eye on the far wall. It's the typical Vegas motif, but at the top, it says "Just Married, in Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada."

My breathing regulates, and a smile finds me once more. I do owe him. After all, it's the least I can do.

## Chapter 18

Karli

The room is dark when I crack open the door. Trent must still be asleep. I kick off my shoes and drop the pizza on the mini-fridge. My stomach grumbles, but I'm not about to pass up the opportunity for a hot shower.

I carry the bag with the shirts toward the bathroom and open the door.

Steam hits my face.

In the back of my mind, I know what's wrong with this scenario. But the actionable part of my brain fails to react the way it should. Because Trent is standing there, like a freaking god amidst the swirling white clouds of steam, dressed in only a towel. Water droplets he neglected to dry off run down his chest and drip into the crevice between his abs. Because as many as he has, there's definitely a crevice.

He's moving toward me, and that's when I realize this must be a dream, because surely real Trent would have had some things to say by now. There's also no other reason for why he would be practically floating toward me.

Since this is only a dream, it would be a crime not to indulge. I raise my hands to his chest. It's warm and damp from the shower. I spread out my fingers against his skin, relishing the feel of the taut muscles beneath. So this is what's behind all that protectiveness.

"Karli?" That sounded so real.

My right hand roves down his chest until my fingers brush his six-pack.

Dream Trent lets out a shaky breath.

"Karli," he says again, his voice deeper than normal. It's so dang sexy.

I flatten my palm against his stomach then push my hand back up his chest.

His chest rumbles and he grabs my wrist and spins me around, pinning me against the wall. The jolt to the wall is what I needed to snap out of my dream-like state.

This is... this is real. I'm the one who entered the bathroom and got all weird.

Why hasn't he pushed me away?

"Trent?" I whisper. Now that I know this isn't a dream, I'm not so confident with my actions.

I'm acting like my mother. Taking what I want without a care about who I hurt.

I won't do that to Trent. I won't play with his heart until it's no longer fun then toss it away. I don't trust myself.

His head dips down, his hungry gaze searching mine. My heart beats wildly in my chest, telling me to go for it like I do everything else. But this is different. Trent is different.

"I haven't brushed my teeth since I threw up," I blurt. Nice, Karli. Way to ruin the moment.

He pulls back, but only a few inches. "I don't care."

"Well, I do. Hygiene is important and so is you know, um modesty. So let's get you dressed."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

He lifts a brow but says nothing as I grab the bag I discarded on the bathroom floor because apparently, I dragged it in with me when I lost my mind. “And it just so happens that I got you a shirt, you know, as a thank you.” I locate the shirt and walk back to him. I hold out the neck of the shirt and when he doesn’t move to take the shirt, slip it on over his head for him. “Do I have to dress you myself?”

The corner of his lips curl. “If you want me to wear a pink shirt then yes.”

“Fine. Challenge accepted.” But he’s not making it easy. In fact, he’s flexing just to prevent me from getting his arm in. I’m not complaining all that much about having to grapple with his bicep. Necessary sacrifice. “Could you be less strong?” I mutter, pulling his arm.

“I think you’re enjoying this as much as I am.”

My face heats. It’s all the steam. The shower is off but somehow it’s only been getting hotter in here.

“Eh, muscles are overrated.” I fake a yawn.

“That’s not what your hands were saying.”

I roll my eyes. “Your muscles are adequate, alright?”

“Only adequate? I’m happy to allow you further time to inspect.” He reaches for the bottom of the shirt I just got on him.



“That won’t be necessary. You’re beautiful okay.” I push his hands back down and smile at his chest. “Real men wear pink.” I scoot in front of him before he can catch sight of his reflection in the mirror.

He chuckles. “I’ll be sure to let the rest of the male population know.”

“Good. Now grab your clothes and go change out there. I’m going to shower and then we can go.”

He frowns. “You want to drive right now? It’s almost dark.”

“Perfect. No one will be on the road.” Then I can try to outrun these feelings for him before I end up hurting him.

He reaches past me for his clothes, temporarily pinning me against the bathroom counter and I suck in a breath.

He lifts a brow. “Do you feel okay?”

“I feel great. I even got some pizza. Enjoy!” I avoid his probing gaze and shove him out of the bathroom and shut the door.

I never even said thank you.

## Chapter 19

Trent

I’m getting some very mixed vibes from Karli. First, she gropes me, then she pushes me away before I can kiss her. I’m trying not to take it personally, and that she is worried about germs. But I’d really like to take a page out of her book and ask some follow-

up questions. Like when can I kiss her and will she kiss me back?

The shower turns on. I grab the pizza off the microwave and plant myself in the farthest corner of the room. I flip on the TV and turn the volume as loud as it can go so no thoughts wander back in that direction while I eat. I certainly don't want to know what she looks like in just a towel—

It's not working. I drop the pizza and grab my room key, I'll let the front desk know we won't be staying the night.

A couple passes me in the hall and they both smile and nod. I do the same. Holidays tend to bring out the best in people.

There's not a line at reception, but the two clerks behind the desk are engaged in some very loud gossip regarding their friend Brielle.

Poor Brielle should get some new friends.

I stand by the desk and wait. But neither girl acknowledges my presence.

I rub my arm and find another band-aid. I thought I got them all off. How many did she put on me while I clung to that sink with a death grip so I wouldn't do something stupid and kiss her?

“Uh-hmm,” I clear my throat.

One of the girls notices me and she grins and slides behind the counter. “Hello, how may I be of service to you?” She runs her teeth along her bottom lip.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

The other girl elbows her out of the way. “Shh, Libby, he’s obviously married.”

Obviously.Wait.What?

I shake my head. “Look, we’ve changed our minds on the room, we won’t be staying the night after all.”

The other woman nods but Libby gives me an eerie smile. “I could have saved you the heartbreak, Vegas weddings never last.”

Vegas weddings? What is happening right now?

I choose not to respond to that odd statement and turn away from the desk.

My body locks up as soon as I spot him. Sean?

“There you are.” Sean grins.

What is he doing here? More importantly, “How did you find me?”

“Technology makes these things incredibly easy.” Sean gives the girls behind the desk a wave and I’m pretty sure one of them calls dibs.

“You tracked my phone?” I growl.

“I came to take you back with me. You clearly haven’t made it far. And you’re wearing pink...wait, what’s that? Why does your shirt say you’re married?”

“Huh?”

I glance down. The blood rushes to my face. So that’s why Karli was being weird about me looking in the mirror. I’m going to kill her. Or kiss her, depending on how this goes.

“Yep. I got married. In Vegas. You were right, Vegas is a hoot. I hope you find someone as wonderful as I did.”

“Okay, we both know you’re lying. You probably just picked it up at a gift shop or had to borrow it from someone. You can get new clothes at the hotel. I got us tickets for this awesome—”

“Stop.” I turn and stalk away from him, but he follows me. I whirl on him. “You know, I felt bad about the way I treated you. I almost called you earlier to apologize, but you just don’t get it, do you? The world doesn’t bend to your will. And neither do I. I’m not your little sidekick anymore.”

He scoffs, hiding behind his classic smirk. “I never said you were little.”

He’s still not taking me seriously. He doesn’t take anything seriously, and I quit trying. “Sean, I need a break. From you.”

The agony in his eyes is palpable. It’s like I can feel it in my own heart. Of all the things I could have said to him, this is the worst.

But I can’t take it back because it’s the truth. I love my brother, but right now I need some space. “I’ll see you at home in a few days. Have fun.”

He presses his lips into a line. “Okay, fine. Have it your way. You’re going to miss out.”

I couldn't care less. I have never felt more like myself than I have with Karli. I'd be missing out on so much more if I left her.

"I hear you need a sidekick." Libby approaches Sean. "Lucky for you, my shift just ended and I'm loads of fun."

Sean smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "You got the job."

I shake my head as I watch him leave with a woman he doesn't even know. What will it take to make him finally wake up?

I can't be his sidekick anymore; I also can't be his conscience.

I head back to the room, turning off my location on the way so he can't track me down again.

I open the door just as Karli steps out of the bathroom in a shirt that matches mine, and leggings, a flowery scent drifting out behind her. My mind conjures up images of pushing her up against a wall again and running my lips along her smooth cheek.

"Did you eat?" she asks, wringing her hair out.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“Yep.” Not enough. I’m starting to hallucinate. “Thanks for the shirt by the way, I’ll have to find a way to repay you.”

She bites her bottom lip. “I’d like to see you try.”

### Chapter 20

Karli

“Are you sure you’re fine to drive?” Trent asks as we walk to the van.

“I am. But,” I grab his arm and stop walking. “I never said thank you for everything you did for me. The hotel room, the drinks, the blanket,” which I’m keeping in the front seat with me because I now love this thing. “I’ve never been taken care of like that by anyone and I feel wholly inadequate to repay you for your kindness.”

“Then it’s a good thing kindness doesn’t ask for a reward.” He smiles down at me. I should have kissed those lips. I spent every moment of my lukewarm shower regretting not kissing him. Would that have counted as a proper thank you?

I turn away, unsure what to say without implicating my thoughts.

The driver’s seat beckons to me and when I settle into the torn leather seat a feeling of warmth washes over me.

I pull the visor down to glance at the other picture of my grandmother and me that I keep in my van. This one was when I was only six. She’d let me try on her fanciest

jewelry and wear it out to ice cream. Little did I know all the “fancy” jewelry was all fake. All except the bracelet I still wear today. It didn’t matter, it was the best day pretending with her. And this has been the best holiday I’ve had in years. I’d like to believe my grandma orchestrated it for me. The good parts anyway.

I flip up the visor as Trent hops in, then put the van in reverse and pull out of the parking lot.

What if I accidentally take the scenic route instead? That gives me another forty minutes with Trent.

No. I speed up and follow the road out of town. Back in the hotel room, I promised myself I wouldn’t be my mother. Trent wants to go home. I’ll take him home and we will both enjoy the holiday. Then I’ll put some necessary distance between us. Right after the turkey and potatoes.

“What are you thinking about?” Trent asks.

I tuck my hair behind my ear. “Huh?”

“You had a crease down the middle of your forehead. You looked like you were deep in thought there.”

I swallow. “Oh, you know, thinking about getting you home.”

He arches a brow. “Tell me more.”

I roll my eyes. “Stop reading into the things that come out of my mouth.”

He rubs his jaw and mumbles something that sounds like, “Believe me, it’s really hard not to focus on your mouth.”

My face burns.

I've read books before—fine, I've watched movies before—where people are thrown together for a period, and they fall in love because it's practically forced upon them.

But this isn't some romantic comedy, and that's not going to happen. People don't fall in love in a day. Pulling back is in everyone's best interest.

The sun is fully gone now. It's only four, but the sun has begun its descent in the sky. Everything is calm and quiet.

"Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon?" Trent asks.

"Surprisingly, no." It would be so easy to stop, but I never do.

"You'll have to add it to your next road trip itinerary."

I laugh. "It's cute you think I'd ever follow any kind of itinerary. Let me guess, you make plans for everything?"

"Not everything." He shrugs. "But I do like having a plan."

"My van is my plan," I whisper. My backup plan.



“What do you mean?”

I clamp my lips together. That wasn't supposed to come out. But he's done so much for me. And he's suffered for mine and Bertha's sake. I feel like he's earned it.

“My mom and I were homeless once.” My voice is quiet. I watch the mile markers tick by, giving them more focus than I should. “She used to spend all our money out on the town looking for a new man. Grandma took care of us and never let us fall behind on the rent money, but six months after she passed, Mom forgot, and we had nothing left. She tried to steal my bracelet multiple times and pawn it for money.” I swallow the lump in my throat. I ended up hiding it in my bra for a month to keep it safe. “We went back and forth, sleeping in a park or a shelter for a couple of weeks.”

A shudder overtakes my body and I try hard to suppress it, but it doesn't work. Trent tugs on my fingers, one by one, easing the death grip I have on the middle console. He slips his fingers through mine, rubbing his thumb along the sensitive skin on my wrist, brushing my bracelet as he does. It gives me the courage to finish the story.

“She left me alone in the park one night. A man asked me my name, just my name. But I knew what happened on the streets. I freaked out and just ran. I ran all night. I've never been more afraid in my life.” I can still feel the terror from that night, of never knowing when or where or if I'd ever be safe again.

A few months later I found Juliet and we became friends. Every time the landlord threatened to evict my mother after that I had a plan. I kept a Go Bag and knew the way to Juliet's house no matter where my mom dragged me across the city. Juliet became my safety until her parents split up and her mom moved to Phoenix at the end

of her senior year. As soon as I could after graduation, I followed her there.

Trent squeezes my hand and I realize I've been lost in my thoughts.

I clear my throat. "When I moved out, I promised myself I'd never be in such a vulnerable position again. I bought Bertha the first chance I could, so if I ever turned into my mother, at least I'd never be homeless."

Darkness has fallen, taking over the van, as well as my memories. I don't like to relive the past. I like to bravely tackle the present while simultaneously praying I don't destroy my future.

"No child should ever have to experience that. Your mother should have cared more about protecting you than her own whims. I'm sorry you were the only one you could ever depend on. But if there's one thing you never have to worry about, it's turning into her. You are selfless and kind, the woman your mom should have been."

I'm crying. I'm not sure when it started.

"You will never be her," he says again.

I want to believe every word coming out of his mouth. Screw it, I do. I believe him. Trent has never been anything but honest with me. He's not saying this to make me happy or comfort me. He's telling the truth. But accepting that is going to take time.

We don't talk for a long while. We just hold hands, allowing the silence to speak for us mile after mile.

I have no idea how long we've been sitting like this when Trent leans forward, his posture rigid. "What was that?"

“What was what?” I glance in the rearview mirror. Did I pass something important?

“There was a weird noise. There. Did you hear it?” He pulls his hand away, forcing me to pay attention to whatever it is he’s hearing.

I wait, listening. Kathunk. Kathunk.

I’m sure it’s nothing. “I probably hit something. Once a squirrel got stuck in the wheel well. It rode with me for miles. I thought it was dead, but when I went to poke it, it jumped out. Nearly gave me a heart attack, but he was fine.”

Trent blinks in response to my rambling. “This doesn’t sound like an animal. It sounds like the engine.”

Psh. “This is Bertha we are talking about. Her engine will last longer than mine.”

These catastrophic words are punctuated with a deafening boom. Smoke seeps in from the vents.

“Get off the road!” Trent shouts.

I roll down my window instead. “It’s fine. We can ride it out. She does this sometimes.”

“Karli.” He grabs my arm, and I catch the panic in his eyes. “This is not me being an overprotective jerk. You need to pull over.”

“So dramatic,” I murmur, but the sliver of worry growing in my stomach causes me to flick on my blinker and maneuver to the side of the road.

The second we come to a complete stop, Trent is out of the van.

Someone's a little nervous Nellie.

I expect him to go to the hood, but instead, he rounds the van and throws open my door.

“Why are you sitting there? Get out!”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“You think I know what’s wrong with the engine?”

Trent scrubs a hand over his beard in frustration. It’s quite sexy, actually. I should make it a habit to frustrate him more.

He leans over my lap and unclicks my seat belt. I’m momentarily disabled. He fixes that by yanking me out of the driver’s seat.

“Hey!” I squeal as he hauls me over his shoulder.

“Your van is on fire, Karli!”

“No, that’s smoke. Fire is orange.” Why am I spouting off nonsense right now?

He sets me down on the far side away from the passing cars, then rushes back to the van. I follow him because that’s what most oblivious people do in these kinds of situations.

“Stay over there,” he barks. He gets the hood up and—

“Fire!” I screech! I stumble backward, my foot hits a rock and I trip, crashing to the ground on my butt.

Trent is doing something. I’m not sure what. He’s waving his hands around like a cheerleader. Wait, he’s trying to get the fire out. Don’t cars, like blow up if they catch on fire?

Oh, my gosh. He's going to get blown up.

"Trent!" I scream, staggering to my feet. "Get away!"

Trent sees me getting closer and abandons the vehicle. He rushes toward me, trapping me against his chest as he drags us into the desert, and away from my van. His skin is warm against the cool night, and I cling to him.

"I'm sorry, I can't save it," he whispers into my hair.

I have no words. My van, my source of peace and safety for the last five years, is literally going up in smoke. I'm dumbfounded as I stand there, wrapped in his arms and trying to process what's happening while waiting for the impending explosion.

Seconds pass, but the van doesn't explode like I've seen in so many action movies. It slowly burns, one section at a time. The engine, the cab, the back. My skin is ice cold, I think my heart stopped when the fire claimed a piece of it. I can't move. My hands are wrapped up in Trent's shirt. I'm shaking and I can't stop.

"Karli? Are you okay?" Trent whispers, making no move to release me.

I watch my van, still waiting for the explosion that seems to fit with my life right now. I'm utterly heartbroken. But the only words coming to my head don't reveal that. "I told you not to offend her."

A soft chuckle rumbles through his chest and the feel of it against my own lightens the heaviness inside me.

"I've got to appreciate her going out in a dramatic flair." I'm not sure why my mouth is still moving. It's like it can't stop. Is that a symptom of shock?

“It might have been the gas. How old do you think that gas can was?”

I try to think. “A couple years, maybe.”

“That could have been it,” he says, tucking my head under his chin. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

I’m so glad you’re safe. Those five words puncture my heart. His protectiveness wasn’t misguided, it was genuine. That’s...new. My brain is on overload trying to process the loss of my van and my developing feelings for Trent.

A small “poof” of an explosion signifies the end of Bertha.

“I’m sorry, Karli,” he says, reminding me of everything I lost. And just like that, the shock wanes.

Tears spill down my cheeks and I sob into his shirt. I’m getting tired of these personal rain storms.

When his shirt is soaked, he gently lifts my head, cupping each cheek, catching the river of tears in his palms.

“I’ll buy you a new van,” he whispers.

More tears fall.

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am*

“A good one. With actual locks and—”

I kiss him.

I don't mean for it to be a little peck. I meant exactly this. His lips, mine, intertwined so fully they may never part again. I kiss him with urgency, like if I don't, he might go up in flames as well. He kisses me back with the same intensity, tangling his fingers in my hair and angling my chin up so he can deepen the kiss.

His kiss is rough and gentle at the same time. Each brush of our lips is like a question. Yes or No? The answer is always yes. Always more.

“Are you guys in need of some help?”

Trent jerks away, abandoning my lips in their moment of need. Dang him.

“Yes!” Trent approaches the man who has stopped to help, leaving me feeling cold again.

I turn, studying the horizon while trying to get a grip on my emotions. I could chalk that frantic kiss up to the adrenaline of nearly dying, but that's not what it was for me. And I don't think it was for him, either.

## Chapter 21

Trent



A single-cab truck is only fun if you're on a first date and looking to snuggle up to a cute girl. It's less ideal if you're a six-foot man, in the hump seat, cozied up to a man you just met.

I wasn't about to let Karli take the middle seat, seeing as how the truck is a stick, and I'm currently straddling it between my legs because all of Karli's possessions we managed to save are taking up the legroom on her side.

Awkward is the understatement of the year.

Karli has barely said two words since we got in the truck. Though I strongly suspect she's simply trying not to laugh at the situation.

"Where are you two lovebirds from?" The middle-aged man, Chuck, is at least friendly. After he inspected our van and helped us salvage what we could, he told us he could give us a lift to Kingman, the closest city with a rental car company. We agreed because there were no other options, and we didn't want to make him go out of his way for us.

"Phoenix," I answer for both of us.

"I had a girl in Phoenix, years ago. She was a fiery little thing. She keyed my car when I called things off."

"When did you call things off?" Karli asks.

"The day before the weddin'." he drawls.

"I hate to say it, but she might have been justified," Karli chuckles.

"I know." The man snickers and reaches between my legs to grab the Dr. Pepper he's

been nursing the whole drive.

Can he just finish it already?

“I miss that car more than that woman. She was a classic.”

Karli takes over the conversation and asks him all about his family, his home, his horses, and his health. By the time we pull up to a rental company, I know everything there is to know about Chuck, including his geographic tongue, which he showed us, multiple times. It was uh...interesting and slightly repulsive.

Apparently, a geographic tongue is a real medical condition. To think I could have lived the rest of my life without getting up close and personal with one.

“Thank you so much, Chuck. Give my love to your sister.” Karli hugs him goodbye.

“He has a sister?” I ask as Chuck’s truck pulls away from the curb. I must have missed that piece of information when I was worried that his tongue issues were contagious and trying not to touch him or his drink in any way.

“He also has a geographic tongue, did you get that part?” Karli smirks.

“Loud and clear,” I cringe. “He nearly licked my eye when we went over that pothole.”

Karli cackles. “Oh, poor Chuck.”

Yes, poor Chuck.

“Let’s go get a car before they close.” I walk toward the building, but Karli doesn’t follow.

“About that.” She chews on her bottom lip, and I’m reminded of that brief taste I got of it earlier. I’m eager to get another. “I don’t really have the money for a ren—”

I hold a hand up to stop her. “I’m paying for it.”

“But I can’t let—”

“You can,” I say. But behind those words, I’m saying so much more. You can let me help. You can let me in. I won’t hurt you or take advantage of you. But I don’t say any of that out loud. Because saying so won’t make her believe it. I have to prove that.

“I’m paying for it,” I say, lacing my hand through hers, and pulling open the doors. “I’m the one who begged you to take me home and forced you to leave in the middle of the night. I feel partially responsible for killing Bertha.”

“First of all, you didn’t force me, and second...” She tugs me to a stop. “I’d like to see you beg. I bet it would be very enjoyable.”

Warmth climbs up my cheeks. I want to beg her right now for another kiss. But I won’t. At least not right here.

“Well, stick around then,” I say, the rough timbre of my voice giving away the exact thoughts in my head.

She bites her bottom lip and my gaze gets stuck there. But she pushes me forward.

There’s a significant line for this late at night, and I find the end of it while Karli talks to everyone around us. This woman has no boundaries. And I can’t help but be impressed by it. Sean is the most outgoing person I know, but Karli could put him to shame in that department. I think she’s already made a new bestie with the old lady in front of us, who is currently sharing her “world-famous chocolate chip cookie recipe.”

“Do I get any of these cookies?” I ask when the lady is called up next.

“No. Neither do I. It appears she air-dropped her shopping list instead.” Karli’s nose screws up as she reads the list. “Duct tape, bleach, an urn?”

I chuckle. “You may have befriended a murderer.”

Karli’s face pales as she watches her new friend. The woman turns, casting us a grin the size of a clown’s, and Karli startles.

The old woman hobbles over and wraps Karli in a hug—one she doesn’t return. “I got the last van. And it’s four-wheel-drive,” the woman squeals before releasing Karli and waving goodbye.

Now I’m a tad worried.

“You alright?” I ask, trying and failing to hide my amusement.

Karli blinks and then shakes her head. “Yeah, I’m going to find a restroom.”

The guy at the front desk motions me forward, and Karli disappears. She doesn't return.

I'm about to worry when I catch sight of her out the front windows talking to another stranger. Didn't she learn her lesson from the last one?

This woman is carrying a bedroll and a single duffel bag. Her clothes are dirty, and she looks worse for the wear, but the smile on her face is broad as Karli chats with her. It's clear now why Karli talks to strangers. Despite the fact that she was once homeless. It's like she can sense the people that need a friend, need a family because she needs it too. And though she may only be passing through their life, she gives them what she can while she can.

"Sign here," the man says.

I flip around and scan through the documents, noting the date when I'll have to return the car once we're in Phoenix.

"You sure you want this one?" he asks. "I have at least two more cars left."

"We definitely want this one."

He shakes his head. "Okay. But I'm not sure it's been driven in a couple of years. So take care of her." He slides the keys across the desk, and I scoop them up.

"Thank you!"

"Best of luck."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

What does that mean? Whatever. I turn around and head for the front doors in time to see Karli slip the woman some cash. The woman thanks her and scurries off.

I study Karli's hopeful gaze as she watches the woman go. Less than two hours ago, she watched her van go up in smoke, yet she continues to give her smiles, conversation, and money to everyone she meets. And she has no idea how desirable all those qualities are to me. I don't stand a chance of resisting her. I'm a goner.

"And you were worried you'd turn into your mother."

She blinks and tips her chin up, the smile on her face hopeful. "I'm not so worried anymore."

"Good. Come on." I grab her hand again because I'm learning I have an addiction to all things Karli. "Are you ready to meet your new car? For the next five days, at least."

"Trent?" Her tone holds an appropriate amount of caution. Rightly so. "What did you do?"

"Meet Big Bertha's child, Baby Bertha." I stop in front of the bright orange Volkswagen Bug. It's not vintage like her van, but it's close.

"Oh, my..." Karli covers her mouth with her free hand and laughs. "She's perfect. Can I drive?"

"Of course." I drop the keys in her hand, and she squeals before rushing to the

driver's side. Then she stops and studies the keys in her hand.

"Actually, I want you to."

I lift a brow. "Really?"

She frowns at the car like she can't believe she's saying this herself. Can't believe she's forfeiting control over something in her life. "Yeah. I'm tired. Also, I'm a little afraid I'll kill her too."

I round the car and pull her into a hug. "You did not kill Bertha. It was her time to go."

She scoffs. "Cars aren't people, Trent."

"But for you she kind of was."

She shakes her head, clearly still struggling with the loss. "You just drive." She hands the keys back to me and steps out of my arms.

"Okay." I'll do whatever she wants.

I open the door and squeeze myself into the driver's seat. Like literally squeeze. This car is tiny. No wonder the guy said good luck.

## Chapter 22

Trent

Karlifellasleepexactlytwo minutes after we got in the car, with her head lolling to the side in a way I thought only toddlers could manage. It shouldn't be cute, but it is and

I can't keep my eyes from finding her every twenty seconds.

I've been doing this semi-distracted driving thing for a while now, and it's only gotten worse since she leaned over the console and onto my shoulder a minute ago. My foot eases off the gas a touch until I'm five miles below the speed limit. My family's Thanksgiving meal is still nineteen hours away. I have plenty of time to go slow.

I breathe her in, the flowery scent making me lightheaded in the best way possible.

Thirty minutes later, my arm is dead asleep. I glance at the clock. It's ten p.m. and I'm more tired than I'd like to admit after taking nearly a three-hour nap in the hotel earlier today. Was that really only today? I feel like time slows down with Karli like I've lived years beside her instead of only hours.

I stifle a yawn. I don't want to wake her. I'll be fine, as long as I can get some feeling to return to my arm. I squeeze my bicep and relax it a few times, but it doesn't make a difference.

The car behind me honks, and I jump. Karli's head slips off my arm, and she flies up. "What happened?"

I gently press on the gas. "Some idiot was going too slow," I mutter, checking the rearview mirror.

"Trent?"

"Yes."

"Were you that idiot?"



## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

I cough. “Yes.”

She laughs and sits straight in the seat. “How long was I out?”

“Forty-five minutes.”

“That’s it?” she frowns.

“Sorry, I was trying not to wake you, but I lost feeling in my arm.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m kind of a snuggler.”

I know. I’ve had no objections so far. Except for the dead arm thing. “You know that’s how worms communicate. By snuggling.”

She bursts out laughing, and there goes my heart again, beating like a wild animal.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Dead.”

“You’re a weird person.”

I flinch. Not exactly the compliment I’d like from the girl I’m falling for.

“I love weird people.”

I don't miss the word love in there, I also don't miss how general she made it sound. Like she loves everyone who says weird things. That's the entire human population.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"There was more construction on the forty, so we had to take a detour."

"Okay, so where are we?" She fixes her gaze out the window like she can determine our location by the shadows of cacti and Joshua trees.

A sign comes into view just then. "Lake Havasu city it would seem."

She looks at me for a long moment, then a smile finds her lips. "Excuse me sir, but did you just stray from our very strict itinerary?"

I roll my eyes. Clearly, there's never been an itinerary of any kind, but if there was, I would stray from it for her.

"It's a detour," I correct her. "We might even save time."

"Ah." She nods, but she doesn't believe me.

I wouldn't believe me either. Even if there hadn't been construction, I would have taken the long way home in order to spend more of these perfect moments with her. With just the two of us. I don't want to share her with my family, with Juliet. I want her all to myself.

The Lake Havasu bridge comes into view, the lights twinkling and reflecting on the water. When I typed in the detour, an interesting landmark popped up. Siri found me an instructional video on the history behind the bridge, and now that I've seen it in person I've decided to make an additional detour.

“Have you ever been to the London Bridge?” I ask, slowing down and sliding into an open parking space.

“Well, I’ve never been to London so…”

“Good thing someone brought London to us,” I say before hopping out of the car.

“What?” she asks, not waiting for me to get to her door.

I grab her hand and casually walk with her down the boardwalk.

“In 1962, the London bridge was sinking, so some guy bought part of it and shipped it here, brick by brick. So, darling”—I channel my best British accent and lead her up the bridge—“welcome to London.” For the record, all my knowledge on the subject comes from a random dude on YouTube. But I like the story so I’m keeping it.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

Her eyes are wide as we walk side by side.

“That had to have taken forever,” she says. “Why couldn’t he buy new bricks? That would have made it just as beautiful.”

I think for a moment, listening to the soft thump of our footsteps across the bridge.

“Yeah, but going down to Home Depot to purchase bricks is far less romantic than battling dangerous voyages across the ocean.”

“Oh,” she glances up at me. “Is romance what you were going for here?”

“Clearly.” I chuckle. “Thanks for finally catching on.”

“I guess it is kind of romantic.” She exhales. “He gave the bricks new hope. They couldn’t hold up under the pressure, so he created a new dream so they’d always serve a purpose.”

I clear my throat. “Exactly what I was going to say next.”

She squeezes my hand. “I’m sure.”

I pull her to a stop next to the dip in the wall. She places both hands on the bricks like she’s trying to siphon from them the strength they carried across continents. But she’s already got it all. The perseverance, the beauty. I hope she knows that.

Wisps of dark hair billow softly behind her. She’s breathtaking. The view could be

the most beautiful one to ever grace the earth, and I'd still choose to look at her.

I step behind her, resting my hands on the wall beside hers.

She takes the invitation and leans back into my chest. I drop my hands from the wall and circle them around her waist. I'm completely lost in her. In the soft skin of her cheek on mine, and the sweet smell that's both intoxicating and frustrating, because I want to drink it in but know that will never be enough.

I don't have to drive any further. This is home right here.

"Karli?"

"Hmm."

"Will you go on a date with me? When we get back to Phoenix?"

She's silent for a moment, so silent the horn from the yacht below nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

"Is this not a date?"

My whole body relaxes. "It could be, but I didn't ask first." I drop a delicate kiss on her neck.

"How dare you break the rules of propriety," she snickers.

I kiss her neck again. "I'll break all the rules for you," I murmur into the soft skin above her collarbone.

She leans her head back, granting me further access to her neck.

I trail kisses up every inch of skin I can find. I brush the hair over her other shoulder, and she shivers as I work on the other side.

“Trent...”

I grab her hips and spin her around in my arms. I need her lips now. “Yes?”

“I’d love to go on a date with you. But only if you wear chain mail.”

“Who says I have it?” I totally have it.

“Something tells me it will show up.” She tiptoes her fingers up my chest, my chin, and stops at my lips. “And I want to know your middle name.”

“Sorry, we’re not close enough for that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“I think I can change that.”

She sure does when she kisses me like there’s no one around. There isn’t. Which means we don’t have to stop.

So we don’t. For a very long time.

Only when another ship blows a horn do we pull apart. I hold her hand all the way back to the car and kiss her again at her door, and again in the car. I’m hungry for her. This trip isn’t enough. I want all her hours, all of her days. I want her.

And I have a sneaking suspicion I’m very near to falling in love with her.

She yawns in the middle of our kiss and I pull back with a laugh. “Tired?”

“A little.” She blushes and I love the glimpse into a more vulnerable side of her. “I just need snacks.”

“Snacks it is.” I start the car.

I locate a convenience store, only realizing how tired I really am when the bright lights hit my eyes. It doesn’t seem to bother Karli. She practically skips around the store gathering unhealthy snacks. Nothing with sugar is safe.

The cashier rings us up, and Karli spots a row of quarter machines toward the back exit.

She extends two dollars to the cashier and asks for change.

“Do you need a bouncy ball?” I tease.

“Just go to the car. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I chuckle but do so anyway.

Two minutes later, I’m leaning against the hood of the bug, gazing at the stars when she walks out.

“Did you get the ring that will turn your finger green or seven Skittles?”

“Haha. Neither, actually. Roll up your sleeve.”

I frown and don’t move. So she grabs my arm instead.

I let her take it because I have no willpower when it comes to her. She turns my arm to reveal my tattoo, then pulls a temporary tattoo out of a cardboard sleeve. She holds it up, twisting it until nearly all the previous letters are covered.

“A butterfly. Were the unicorns gone?”

She tosses another tattoo sleeve at me. I open it and laugh at the pig with wings. “I’ll stick with the butterfly.”

“Good choice. Hold it right there.”

I do as I’m told, and she grabs her water from the car. She twists off the cap and drops some onto her fingers, then gently dabs it over the paper until it’s wet then presses it into my skin, leaving her hand there for longer than the recommended



twenty seconds. I'm sure she can feel my pulse beating out of control. If she turned her head an inch to her right I'd be able to kiss her. But she doesn't, so I watch her instead.

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

All too soon she pulls her hand away. But my eyes have never left her. She can tattoo me all she wants. With these, not a real needle.

"Perfect," she whispers, running the tip of her fingers along it.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Now we match," she says before releasing my arm.

I snatch the hem of her shirt, and her breath catches. "In more ways than one."

I'm not talking about the silly shirts or the tattoos. I mean her. She's my match.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Are you tired?” she asks, yawning again.

I shrug. “I could go for a little nap.”

“Same. But let’s be quick about it. We can’t miss Thanksgiving.”

I grin. “Your priorities have been noted.”

“Also, I’ll drive the rest of the way.”

“Your wish is my command.” I’m a sucker, a fool. I’m way over the top. And I don’t even care.

### Chapter 23

Karli

After sleeping for nearly four hours in a cramped car in a rest stop parking lot, I woke up more excited than a kid on Christmas. I sped out of Lake Havasu City like the cops were on our tail. Trent woke up ten minutes later when I started belting Christmas songs. I would have sung Thanksgiving songs, but all that came to mind was the theme song from *Jaws*. Trent didn’t quite appreciate my offbeat tunes, but he smiled and held my hand anyway as we watched the sun come up together.

He only lasted an hour before he fell asleep again. I knew he was trying to resist it, but no number of questions he or I asked the other could keep him awake.

I feel bad I made him waste all that money on a hotel room we only stayed in for six hours. And I keep thinking if I hadn't insisted on leaving the perfectly good hotel room maybe Bertha would still be alive. Maybe I jinxed her.

Will that jinx follow me to the Bentleys? Will I be ruining their holiday by wanting to be a part of it? Up until ten hours ago, I wasn't concerned. But now there's more at stake. More of my heart. Trent has gotten me to open up and be vulnerable. If he rejects me now, it will haunt me forever. On all those nights I'm alone and he's with his family who loves him.

"Where are we?"

I jump at Trent's voice and steady my shaky hands on the steering wheel.

"You scared me."

"Sorry." He sits up with a moan. His back cracks so loud I cringe. "Ugh, Baby Bertha was not built for men over six feet."

"Hey, no talking bad about baby Bertha, there's no telling what she might do to enact revenge for her mother."

He puts his hands up in the air and bows to Baby Bertha. "I'm so sorry, forgive me oh small one."

I shake my head. "We are almost there."

"Really? That went fast."

"I'm starting to understand why Sean drugged you. It's quicker to travel while you're unconscious."

“Hey,” he growls, and good news, his grumpy growl is even sexier in the morning. He steals my hand and brings it to his lips, pressing a series of kisses to it.

I giggle with each scratch of his beard and have to pull away before I accidentally kill us.

“Are you excited?” Trent asks.

I glance in the rearview mirror before merging into another lane. “What do I need to know before I go?”

He gives me a quick rundown on the family, not much is new since Juliet often relays funny stories to me. But I try to remember everything possible so I don’t screw anything up.

“I think everyone’s favorite part of the holidays is swapping funny stories,” Trent says.

Something tugs on my heart with the knowledge that I get to be a part of that. To witness a happy family firsthand. “Good to know. I’ll keep some of yours in my back pocket.”

“They are going to love you.” He stares at me, and I can feel the warmth of his gaze on the side of my face. I want to turn and lock eyes with him, but...I’m driving.

“You don’t know that.” I flip on the blinker, then switch lanes.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“I do.” He puts a hand on my knee. “Because they’ll know how much I like you.”

Whew. It’s getting hot in here. I flip on the AC, only to give myself something to do.

“What’s your favorite pie?”

He pulls his hand away. “Uh, apple. Yours?”

“I’ve never had a pie I liked.”

“Well, then you’ve never tried my mom’s,” he says.

I already want a piece of every pie available.

It’s quiet again. I don’t want it to be. I don’t want this trip to end, but it has to. Reality is calling.

He breaks the silence to tell me which exit to take and as we slow down and slide into Phoenix traffic, the silence grows louder.

“Oh, take that left,” Trent says.

I barely get my blinker on in time to make the turn. From there, Trent keeps up a steady stream of directions until we reach the suburbs. I only came here a few times with Juliet and it’s been a while. I don’t remember all the houses being so big. Or maybe the houses seem bigger because for the first time in my life, I’m actually nervous. I never feared fitting in before because I always pretended I did. But it’s

getting harder to be satisfied with only a fantasy.

“That one up on the left,” he says.

We pass the gazebo where Michael tried to surprise Juliet but ended up getting attacked instead, and I smile at the memory. Good thing they worked that out and are now living a very happy married life.

“Karli?” Trent says.

“Yeah?” I almost drive right past the house but slam on my brakes at the last moment and pull to the curb.

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s perfect.” I face him with a broad smile. I finally get a Thanksgiving.

## Chapter 24

Trent

Homesweethome. Is it just me, or has my parents’ house gotten smaller? Has the white stucco always had that pink tint to it?

Karli and I get out of the car, then I lead her around the side of the house.

She’s biting her lip and tugging at the hem of her shirt. Is she nervous? I’ve never seen her like this. She’s Karli, brave and wild, and doesn’t care what people think of her.

I reach for her hand, and she lets me take it, but it doesn’t feel very willing. “Are you

sure you're okay?" I ask again.

"Yeah, of course, just excited."

"To be here with me, or just for Thanksgiving?" I ask. I can't help but hedge a little.

"Both of course." She grins. "I think I'm going to win at this whole family thing."

"There's no winning in family." I laugh.

She bumps me with her hip. "You know what I mean, it's going to be fun to play pretend."

"But it's not pretend." I squeeze her hand hard enough that she looks over at me.

"You know that right?"

I mean the feelings. I mean the hope of having her for more than just Thanksgiving. I mean everything. Nothing here is pretend.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Duh,” she rolls her eyes, completely missing my meaning.

I punch in the garage code and let us in through the mud room.

My mom and grandma are in the kitchen arguing about whether stuffing is a Thanksgiving necessity. My mom insists it is but my grandma is calling her old school. It’s good to be home.

“For the record, I’m pro stuffing,” Karli whispers.

“Hey Mom,” I say, pulling Karli into the kitchen behind me. “You got two more for the stuffing.”

“Oh! Trent!” Mom wipes her hand on a towel before rushing over to us. She eyes our clasped hands but simply smiles at Karli. “It’s good to see you again, dear.”

She turns to me. “I’ve been trying to call you since yesterday. I thought you’d be over last night to play football, but Sean wasn’t here either. He said he’s in Vegas. Is that where you were, too?”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Sorry, my phone died. And yes. I was in Vegas. Sean kidnapped me. But I found Karli, and we rode back together.”

“What—”

“Did you say kidnapped?” Lennox pops into the kitchen. Michael is right behind her. Both of their eyes nearly jump out of their heads when they see me and Karli together



and it's humorous to watch them try to close their gaping mouths.

Mom grabs my arm. "What happened?"

I peek over at Karli who appears enthralled by all the attention on us. I'm glad she's not overwhelmed.

"Trent?" Mom asks.

Oh, right, she wanted an explanation. I rub my jaw, taking in her worried expression. I'm not sure she's ever worn anything else while raising three boys.

"Sean wanted to go to a stupid magic show and I didn't, so he drugged me with Benadryl and took me against my will."

Mom's face turns the color of the red garland she usually wraps around the Christmas tree and she squeezes my arm so hard she cuts off blood flow.

"I'm going to kill him. Mark Bentley, get in here!" She releases the death grip on my arm and I rub the spot.

"What?" Dad says, already stepping into the room.

"Did you hear what your son did?"

"Which one?"

"Which one do you think?" Mom rushes to his side, she's got her phone out, no doubt halfway to calling Sean. "Can we still ground him?" she fumes.

Michael and Lennox, on the other hand, are clutching their stomachs and laughing.

“That is hilarious,” Michael wheezes.

“Yes, yes. So funny. Ha ha,” I mutter.

Lennox stops and comes forward, wrapping me in a hug. And this is why I love her more than my brothers.

“I’m sorry, Trent. Are you okay? It must have been truly horrific, did he torture you?” She laughs as I gently shove her back. But her eyes remain glued to my chest.

She holds up a hand. “I retract that question and exchange it for a better one. You’re married?”

Her shrill yell cuts through the entire house. Next thing I know Juliet and Grant are in the kitchen as well and my grandma has perked up from where she was trying to toss the stuffing in the trash can.

“Who’s married?” Mom asks, her eyes wide in alarm like she just found out someone’s dying.

“Them!” Lennox says, pointing at my shirt.

Oh. Right. Forgot I had that on still.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“I only joked about getting married in Vegas, but Trent actually did it.” Lennox claps her hands and is practically bouncing on her toes.

She’s really enjoying this.

“Man, if anyone was going to get married in Vegas, my money was totally on Sean,” Michael says.

Mom walks back over to us and there’s something in her eyes. Excitement? Or is it terror?

Karli squeezes my hand. I know without looking at her that she will take care of this.

“Mom?” Karli releases my hand and opens her arms wide, engulfing my mom in a hug.

Nothow I thought she was going to take care of this.

“Dad?” she beams and hugs my dad as well, who looks as shocked as I feel.

“She’s kidding,” I say quickly when I recover the use of my tongue. This woman never ceases to surprise me.

“Hey, grandma.” Karli continues on to my grandma. “Trent tells me you know some witches.” She gives my grandma a hug too and the old woman lets her. My grandma hardly ever hugs anyone.

Everyone stares. Karli is winning this family thing.

“I do,” Grandma squeezes Karli’s arm. “You just reminded me of something very important.” She releases Karli and toddles away. Before Karli can make it further in her introductions and hugs, Juliet grabs her and pulls her from the room.

Lennox whirls on me. “Tell us everything.”

“Okay, um, we aren’t married, but I do like her. A lot. There. That’s everything.” There was no point in denying my feelings, they have eyes. And I’m done hiding.

“Trent?” Mom raises her brows, and I understand her look immediately. She can see right through me and she knows I’m leaving things out. There are so many things I want to say about Karli, about how much she means to me, how incredible she is, how I think I’m falling in love, which is crazy.

“Karli’s staying for dinner,” I say because I can’t deny the fact that I want Karli in our family. But it’s much too soon to say so out loud.

“Okay,” Mom says, readily accepting the addition to our festivities. “She can have Sean’s seat since he can’t be bothered to return home. I swear, when I see that boy, we are going to have words.” She huffs off, muttering all the things she has in store for him.

“He’s in so much trouble,” Lennox whispers. “Just like the good old days.”

## Chapter 25

Karli

“Okay, tell me everything,” Juliet says. She locked us in the theater room and all I’ve

got to say is, if I knew this house had a theater, I wouldn't have commandeered Trent's old room two years ago. Stranger Things on this big screen? Shivers.

I plop down on a couch. "Really, there's not much to tell. Trent needed a ride and I offered one."

Her eyes go wide. "You and him? In Bertha? Together? Please tell me there were fireworks happening the whole way home and now you're in love and you're going to be my future sister-in-law."

I frown. That was a wee bit dramatic. "No fireworks. Just fire. Bertha bit the dust."

"What?" she yells and I'm glad she's locked us in a soundproof room. "Karli, I'm so sorry. I know how much she meant to you."

I shrug like it's no big deal, but I'm not quite over it yet. Trent was right. Bertha was family. She was my home. A loss like that is not easily replaced. "How did that happen?" Juliet asks.

"Someone siphoned the gas while we were stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire. And the gas I had must have been ba—"

"Excuse me? Go back. You were stranded on the side of the road? You could have been abducted. Or worse!" I forgot that she feels the same way about the van that Trent does. I think she just listens to too many true crime podcasts.

"Clearly, we are fine and weren't turned into skin suits along Interstate 93."

"Thank heavens you made it back in one piece. And now you're here," she says and sinks onto the couch, studying me. "Why is that? Not that I'm complaining, but I know how you like to hide from Thanksgiving with a stockpile of scary shows."

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Trent invited me.” I shrug. Lies.

“Because he likes you?”

I shrug again but my face burns, betraying me.

“You like him too? There were fireworks! Did you kiss?”

Juliet is the only other person on this earth, besides Trent now, who seems to see more than I care to let on. “Yes, we did. I like him too. But don’t get your hopes up. I’m just here for the day.”

She picks up a piece of hair and twirls it around her finger. “Then what?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured that part out yet.” I haven’t. I want this more than anything. I’m already loving every minute here, but there’s a little thought floating around in my head, constantly reminding me that I don’t deserve this. I haven’t earned it, and I can’t just take it. This is nice while it lasts but what happens after dinner? What happens next year?

I shake my head, erasing the depressing thoughts. I’m going to have the best Thanksgiving ever, and then next year I’ll have the memories.

That’s all I can ask for.

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The Bentleys are hilarious. Growing up, my only companion was the television. So I'd watch shows and dream about being part of the fictional family, but no sitcom could ever portray this.

After Juliet and I came up from the basement, we found all the men engaged in a high-stakes pool game while their grandma offered correction, and the occasional curse from the side.

The stakes? A whole apple pie. I'm not sure why.

Juliet and Lennox were rolling their eyes at their husbands, but the men played like their lives depended on it. In the end, Trent emerged victorious, and I had to wonder if it was all a setup to impress me. I didn't care and pretended like he'd won the Superbowl anyway and kissed him until the room disappeared. Well, the room was still there but the people sure made themselves scarce.

Next up was swimming. I didn't bring a suit but Lennox had some old ones here and let me borrow one. I picked the only one that fit. A bright pink bikini with a flamingo print.

Trent is already in the pool but emerges when I step outside. He looks as wild as I do. His swim trunks feature bananas with sunglasses.

His eyes rake over every inch of my skin, his brows raising in an appreciative way. He's wet, but I don't mind at all as he wraps me against him. My fingers trace up the ridges of his chest.

"I like your bananas."

"I'm partial to the flamingos." Trent wiggles his brows.

“For the record. I don’t usually wear birds.”

“And I don’t usually wear fruit. But here we are.”

I love this moment. I love watching him with his family, I love watching him come undone around me. I’m falling for this man. And that wasn’t a part of the deal. That complicates things.

I step out of his grasp. “Is the water cold?”

“It’s not too bad,” he says. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep you warm.”

And he does. He doesn’t release me the whole time we are in the pool. Not until the volleyball game between him and his brothers gets too aggressive.

I finally manage to wiggle out of his grasp and join the other women in the lounge chairs beside the pool who called it quits thirty minutes ago.

I wrap up in a towel and sit down by Lennox. Baby Emmett reaches for me and it takes me by surprise. Why would a child want me? But something inside me yearns for him as well, and without meaning to, my arms stretch for him in return.

He grins and jabbars as Lennox releases him to me. He’s got his dad’s beautiful tan skin and dark curly hair, a direct contrast to the bright blue eyes he got from his mother. He’s the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen.

I settle him onto my lap but he turns and tries to grab my face so I play peek-a-boo with him instead, holding his chunky baby fingers in front of my eyes. He giggles every time I pull them away and say “boo”.

I don’t remember the last time I held a baby. I certainly don’t remember the last time



I was able to play with one like this.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

The back of my eyes sting. What is wrong with me? He's a baby like any other.

I glance back to the basketball game now happening in the pool between Trent, Michael, and Grant. But Trent has stopped playing, his focus solely on me. There's a warmth in his eyes I'd like to dive into.

Michael pummels him from the left and he goes down.

Emmett cries. As much as I want to hold him forever, my expertise is limited in this department.

Lennox takes him back and gently sways in her chair until his cries stop. It's so natural on her. I wonder if my mother ever did that, or if she let me cry until I realized no one was coming and stopped.

What kind of mom will I be?

"I'm exhausted." Lennox yawns. "Emmett decided to wake us up every hour last night. I bet Trent didn't let you get much sleep either."

"What?" I choke out. I make eye contact with Juliet over Lennox's head but she only pumps her eyebrows. So unhelpful.

"Oh." Lennox shakes her head. "Not like that. Ew. You guys just got here early so you must have been busy last night." She shakes her head again. "Sorry, I have mom brain. Yesterday I offered to make Grant his protein shake but I put Emmett's formula in it instead."

Both Juliet and I laugh.

“Did he try it?” Juliet asks.

“Yep. He didn’t even bat an eye. He just kissed me on the cheek and told me to go take a nap,” Lennox says, getting choked up. “He’s such a good man. And I’m still a blubbering mess ten months after having a baby.”

“You’re perfectly normal.” Juliet comforts her.

Lennox rubs her nose and looks back at me. “I’m glad Trent found you in Vegas. You make him happy.”

My pulse slows. I do? He seemed happy before. Without me. “We’re not dating or anything,” I say.

“Well, he’s clearly in love with you,” Lennox says.

She has no solid proof of that. But my heart tries to leap out of my chest, anyway. “People don’t fall in love in two days,” I say.

“It only took me a second to fall in love with him,” she whispers, kissing her son’s head.

Isn’t that how it works though? One moment you don’t know if you’re in love, the next you are. The love was growing all along, the only difference was that you admitted it to yourself.

“Oh, I put some clothes for you in my old room,” Lennox says. “You can shower and warm up as well.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.” I peel my partially frozen body off the pool chair and walk back to the house.

Folded neatly on her bed is a maroon sweater and white jeans. It’s the perfect Thanksgiving outfit.

I brush out my hair, studying myself in the mirror. I’ve never seen that smile on my face before. But I know it can’t stay.

## Chapter 26

Trent

If I didn’t know better, I’d think Karli was only here for my family and not me.

Maybe that’s the problem. I don’t know better. I shouldn’t be questioning her motives after witnessing her mother’s, well, motherlessness. Karli clearly wants people in her life. But does she want me? She’s so happy here, and I pray I’m part of the reason for it.

I just need to find a moment alone with her to ask.

But it’s been next to impossible. She’s spoken to every member of my family at length, asking questions much like she did with me on the way home.

Is it stupid I’m jealous about that?

Yes. Yes, it is.

I didn't even know my parents had been playing pickleball together every night for the last two months until Karli told me she volunteered me to play with them. And apparently, Lennox is still dealing with some postpartum anxiety, but I never would have guessed.

Karli has a way of discovering things about people they never would share with a stranger, and I find myself in awe of her. She's better at being part of my family than I am.

"This is incredible," Karli says, holding up a forkful of green bean casserole. Judging by the full dish, no one else has given it a chance. "And the rolls, the turkey, everything. Amazing."

"Why, thank you, Karli." Mom beams.

"Hey, I mashed the potatoes all by myself," Dad pipes in.

"Needs more salt." Grandma harumphs.

"Dad!" Lennox screeches. "What are you doing to my baby?"

All eyes fall on my dad who is holding a spoonful of mashed potatoes to Emmett's mouth. There's already a glob of potatoes on the baby's nose and he's eagerly smacking his lips for more.

Dad pulls the spoon away with a guilty expression. "I'm just letting him smell it."

"We haven't given him potatoes yet. What if he's allergic?" Lennox says.

Dad raises an amused brow. "To potatoes?"

"To the additives, like milk and butter."

"Don't worry, I won't give him pie until Christmas," Dad says.

"Dad!" Lennox protests, but Dad winks, and the rebuttal dies on her tongue. Grant gives her arm a reassuring squeeze and she leans into him, clearly exhausted.

"I know what I'm doing," Dad says. "You all turned out just fine."

"You realize we are three for four right now, dear?" Mom teases.

"That's still a C average," Dad chuckles.

I find Karli's leg under the table and squeeze. When she glances at me, her smile is as wide as mine.

"Las Vegas is only five hours away," Grandma says suddenly. "What'd you do for two days?"

Leave it to Grandma to bring up an awkward topic at the table.

"A lot of kissing," Karli responds immediately.

My grandma looks thoroughly enthralled, but my mom doesn't.

“She’s kidding,” I say.

“Oh right.” Karli winks at me. “Trent also learned how to break into houses and how to change a tire. He insisted he knew but I could tell he needed me to walk him through it.”

I purse my lips, fighting embarrassment and amusement. “Which she managed to do in her sleep.” I wink at her, keeping the details of her midnight escapades just between the two of us, for now.

Karli retaliates by embarrassing me with every mishap she can recall from our journey, which is quite frankly a lot. She must have been hoarding them, waiting for me to give her an opportunity to release them. After she finishes humiliating me, she regales my family with tales of her roommates and hilarious conversations overheard in the restaurant where she works, though I notice she leaves her mother and her childhood out of the mix completely. The entire family is in stitches for the rest of the meal.

By the time Mom brings the pie out, my cheeks hurt from smiling, but my heart feels like it could burst. Every holiday with my family is great, but this one tops the charts. How did we laugh without Karli? How did we survive without Karli?

How did I?

Karli studies the pie, watching everyone else pick a piece first before approaching the spread herself. But once she’s got the knife in her hand, she can’t seem to choose and nearly cuts a piece of every single pie before deciding on the apple pie. My favorite.

## Page 57

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

She sits down and I take the knife and proceed to cut a small sliver of all eight pies and load them onto my plate.

Then while she's talking to Juliet, I switch her plate with mine.

Karli turns back with her fork and freezes. The smile she rewards me with is pure gold.

"Now you'll know which one is your favorite," I whisper.

"I already do." Her eyes bore into mine but she doesn't say anything more. She tries each and every pie, a smile lighting her face with each one.

Someone turns on a holiday show, I'm not sure what it is, nor do I care. I only want to sit on the couch and hold Karli.

But Grant and Lennox look ready to topple over as they make Emmett's bottle so I take the baby from them, for safety reasons of course.

Karli's eyes light up when I bring Emmett near and she snuggles into my side, gently brushing a fingertip over his hand as he drinks his bottle. His eyelids flutter closed and Karli sighs into my shoulder, draping a hand on my arm.

For a split second, I see my future. I might not have been sure what I wanted out of life when she asked me on the side of that dusty highway, but now I am. Everything I want starts with family. It starts with Karli.



The movie ends too soon and Grant takes his baby back, saying something about him never sleeping tonight.

“Hey everyone, don’t forget about French Toast Friday,” Mom says.

“I could never forget,” I say, rubbing my still-full stomach. Tomorrow there will be plenty of room.

“Karli,” my mom addresses her, “will you be back tomorrow?”

“Oh, I don’t want to impose,” Karli says.

“Says the woman who invited herself to Thanksgiving.” I chuckle under my breath.

Her body grows stiff under my arm.

“You could never impose. We will see you tomorrow,” Mom says matter-of-factly.

Karli nods. But the second my mom turns away, her smile droops. That’s the first time all night. Is she overwhelmed? My family can be a lot and I’m sure she’s tired.

But this is what she wanted. Right?

## Chapter 27

Karli

Myheartisbreaking.I can feel it, tearing itself to shreds piece by piece. Why did he have to say that? I was doing so good at pretending. But I can’t fake it anymore. I don’t want to.

It's time for me to put an end to the charade. I'm old enough and independent enough to stop butting into people's lives without their consent. I don't want to be an imposter anymore. I want to belong, for real.

I know, Trent didn't say those words exactly, but I can't continue to force myself on him. He says he wants to date me, and maybe we will date, for a time. But it won't be the same. Our trip home was like we were stuck in a snow globe. No, it wasn't beautiful, but it was only the two of us, and now his family wrapped up in nothing but holiday bliss. But that protective bubble is about to shatter and the rest of the world will come crashing in. Trent will realize I'm not as amazing as he thinks and find someone who doesn't irritate him so much and I'll...buy a new van?

No. I don't need it anymore. I won't end up like my mother because I'm not her. I'm my own person who can make difficult decisions.

The first one being that I need to let Trent go.

Forced proximity, or whatever, is all this has been. It would be impossible not to feel anything for a man I nearly died with. But time has a way of making those traumatic experiences dim, and soon we will both forget these feelings and move on. The sooner the better.

Which is why I won't be back tomorrow.

It's nearly ten, but I feel like my clock is about to strike midnight anyway. My carriage is turning into a pumpkin, it's time for me to leave this fairytale and move on.

I yawn and release Trent's hand. "Hey, I think I'm going to head home. I'm exhausted."

## Page 58

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

He inspects my face as if searching for tired lines and signs of exhaustion. I can guarantee they are all there.

He stands up with me. “Okay. You’ll be back tomorrow, right?”

I force a smile and nod.

He leans down to drop a kiss on my lips but I turn in time for it to graze my cheek, covering the slip-up with a yawn.

“Let me walk you out,” he says, grabbing my hand again.

I don’t want him to walk me out. Every moment I spend with him feels harder than the last as I fight the tears to keep them at bay. But I say okay anyway.

He’s silent while we walk. I am too. I’m not sure what to say, so I keep yawning. Not that I have to pretend anymore. I’m one hundred percent exhausted.

“Did you have a good day?” he asks.

This time I don’t have to force a smile. “I did. Best Thanksgiving ever.”

“Agreed,” he murmurs.

It’s quiet again. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“Of course, I’m just tired...and overwhelmed. I’m never around that many people.”

That part is true, but the first part isn't. I could never get overwhelmed by his family. I adore them too much. I love his grandma's wild stories, which probably aren't true. I love the way his parents are still so in love and still tease each other. Grant and Lennox, Michael and Juliet, I want to be part of it all. I want to be part of their family.

"They can be a lot," Trent says.

We reach Baby Bertha. I think he's going to say something or kiss me again, but instead, he pulls my knuckles to his lips and kisses them. "Goodnight Karli."

"Goodnight," I yawn again.

He drops my hand without asking for more, and I slide into the car.

I barely have the car away from the curb before the tears fall. I can't look back at him.

I hate that somehow he was intuitive enough to know I couldn't handle a kiss right now. I hate that he's perfect and I'm pulling away. I hate that my mom made me this way.

My mom.

My hand shakes around my phone as I pull it out and click on her name. Surprisingly, it only rings three times before she answers.

"Karli? Where did you go? We are supposed to have Thanksgiving together tomorrow." In the background, I hear coins being fed into a slot machine.

My heart floods my body with extra heat. "It's today."

“What’s today?”

“Thanksgiving. It was today. It already happened. You missed it.”

“What are you talking about? I’m sure it’s tomorrow. Are you bringing Chinese again? You know you should really lay off the fried shrimp, it’s starting to go to your hips. You should get salmon instead. It’s supposed to keep you younger. That’s what I’ve been eating for every meal for the last week.”

I grip the steering wheel, the tears making it hard to see straight. “No. I’m not coming. Because it’s over. And because I already spent a wonderful Thanksgiving with a wonderful family.”

She’s quiet.

I can’t stop the tears now, so I pull off the road and bury my head in my hands.

“Are you trying to make me feel bad?” she hisses.

“No. Because not everything is about you Mom. Why can’t you understand that?”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“What? Like I could give you a whole family? I’m sorry your deadbeat father didn’t stick around but it’s not my fault.”

I lean back against the headrest, choking on a sob. “I didn’t need the whole family, I just needed someone. I needed a mom. Why couldn’t you just give me that?”

“Because I didn’t want to be a mother!” she yells.

It’s eerily silent. My heart shatters all over again. The truth she has never spoken is finally free.

“Well, I’m releasing you of your duty.” I say, with more strength than I have right now.

“I was only nineteen—”

“Mom, I’m done. I’m sorry you never found joy in motherhood. If you ever feel like being a part of my life, you can visit me. I won’t be coming back.”

I hang up the phone before she says something that makes me feel even worse.

Everything hurts. I’m officially alone.

And I don’t like it one bit.

Trent

Something was off with Karli before she left. I could tell by her forced smiles and the way she pulled back. Karli doesn't pull back. She leads the charge.

So where did I go wrong?

I've been a male long enough to know we are usually the ones at fault. But I also have no clue what I did.

What was my life like three days ago? I suppose I should thank Sean for his hand in this, but I'm not over the whole kidnapping thing, so I think I'll still let him sweat it out first. Maybe by next Thanksgiving. But in the meantime, I still have to live and work with him.

Work. I completely forgot about what I needed to do.

I walk back into the house and find my dad and Michael alone in the kitchen. Just the people I needed to see.

"Hey guys, can I talk to you for a minute?"

My dad polishes off the last bite of his pie. If I'm counting correctly that's his third piece, so my mom is not going to be happy.

"Sure, son. What's up?"

I glance at Michael. He will be taking over the business eventually, which means this will affect him as well since I do a lot of office work.

I take a seat on the barstool across from my dad. "I don't want to work at the business

anymore.”

Dad’s face is impassive. For a full minute, there’s nothing but silence. Have I offended him?

“About time,” Dad says.

The air whooshes from my lungs. “What?”

“I know it isn’t your passion. So will you finally tell me what is?”

No more hiding. I don’t need anyone’s permission to chase my dreams. And so what if I fail? I’ll only regret never trying.

“Computer programming.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Michael says. He doesn’t appear to be upset either.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“It will be a shame to lose you, but you have to follow your dreams,” Dad says.

I agree. Right now, those dreams look exactly like the girl I just watched drive away. If my future has anything to do with her, which I pray it does, I’ll be one happy man. “You’re really not mad?” I ask.

“Son, when I started the business there was nothing driving me but my own passion. When push came to shove, I stuck with the business because I wanted to. Otherwise, I would have given it up years ago. When you find something like that, you don’t stop choosing it.”

I know he’s still talking about careers, but my brain is taking me back to Karli. I’ll choose her, over and over again through every up and down.

We talk for another ten minutes about a timeline and me training a new employee to do my job until my mom orders everyone to stop the “shop talk” and play a game. But I opt out because I’m physically and mentally exhausted. The only thing my brain has energy for is Karli.

Why did she leave like that?

I give my mom a hug and head upstairs, my feet dragging up each step. I’m too tired to go to my apartment. I also don’t have a vehicle to drive there.

“Wait,” Lennox calls, catching up to me.

Am I getting slower or is she getting faster?

I don't turn. "What?"

"I don't know what happened with Karli earlier, but she seemed kind of upset."

"Lots of things, her car caught on fire, her mom's the worst, she puked on the freeway, and she sleepwalks."

Lennox blinks. "Okay...that's a lot to unpack. But I mean, she seemed upset with you. Tonight."

"Was it that obvious?" I thought I'd been the only one to pick up on it.

Lennox hugs her arms around herself. "She looked heartbroken down there when she rejected your kiss."

I didn't make that part up.

I reach the top step and stop. I don't know what to do. I need to lie down. I need to chase after Karli to see what's wrong. But I can't do anything. I'm frozen in place.

Lennox must recognize the indecision on my face. "Hey, you can figure it out tomorrow. I'm sure everything's fine."

I'm not so sure.

I trudge into my old room, half asleep before I even hit the pillow. The last thing I register before I drift to sleep is everyone yelling Sean's name. But that must be wrong because he's in Vegas.

Chapter 29

Trent

In my dreams, I see Karli. I see our trip. I watch the last forty-eight hours like it's on a big screen, and I'm the only one in the theater. I laugh when she laughs, and cry when she does. I hold her and kiss her. We dance and we fall in love.

In my dreams, I see exactly where I went wrong. But in my dreams, I can't fix it.

In my dreams, I feel warm air rush over my face. And I smell something. It's not pleasant. That's not what Karli smells like.

"Trent."

Karli. Is she here?

"Trent, wake up."

That's not Karli's voice.

I open my eyes to find not one annoying sibling hovering over me, but two of them.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Ahh.” I jump up, narrowly avoiding a facial collision with Michael. “What is wrong with you people?”

“Just making sure you’re alive,” Lennox says.

“If I wasn’t, Michael’s awful breath would have woken me from the dead.”

He grins and pats my chest. “I forgot how grumpy you are in the morning. Or is it the trauma from being taken?”

“Why are you here?” I sit up and push the covers off.

“Dude, it’s ten o’clock, Mom sent us in to wake you,” Michael says.

Ten? I was more exhausted than I thought.

Lennox yawns. “I’d kill to sleep through the night.”

I try to stand up, but Michael pushes against me.

“That’s not why we are here, though,” Lennox says.

“Well, I’d be concerned if you thought you needed two people to wake me up. Unless you weren’t expecting to find me alive.”

Michael chuckles, and Lennox hits him in the chest.

“We are here because Karli isn’t,” Lennox says.

My brain is slow to process this new information. She promised she would be here. But now that I think about it, she never said those words. She was upset about something before she left. In my dream. What was it?

I scrub a hand over my face.

“So what are you going to do?” Lennox asks.

I wish I knew. I can’t drive over to her apartment even if I wanted to. I don’t know where it is. I could call her but... somehow we never exchanged numbers over the course of the last two days. Juliet would have it, but a text or call just isn’t enough.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Do you love her?” Lennox asks.

My heart pounds into my ribcage. I rip off my shirt instead of answering.

“More important question,” Michael interrupts. “Have you seen her sleepwalk? Super freaky.”

I frown. “How do you know about that?”

Lennox shoves Michael away with a ‘not helping’ look.

“We already know you love her. We could see it the second you came in with her.” Lennox follows me into the bathroom. She better leave soon if she doesn’t want to be traumatized.

“I care for her, yes. But maybe she doesn’t feel the same.” It hurts saying that out loud, even though I know it’s not true. She feels what I’m feeling, but she’s denying it. She’s afraid of becoming her mom. She told me that herself. But there’s more than that.

“Oh, she definitely feels the same,” Lennox says.

I turn on the hot water in the shower.

“So, what are you going to do?” Lennox asks, again. Doesn’t she have somewhere else to be? Last time I checked, babies need attention.

“Shower.” I push Lennox out of the bathroom. “Thanks for waking me. I still didn’t need both of you up here.”

“But we need to come up with a plan,” she hollers.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Give me a minute.” Please. I need to think, not be told what to do. As much as I love Lennox and her “help” I have to fix this myself.

The water burns, but I don’t bother adjusting it.

Yesterday was perfect. Karli was so happy, I was so happy, she didn’t seem nervous around my family at all, she was living her best life. That was what she had wanted. She invited herself to dinner in exchange for taking me home. So why isn’t she here for more? Why didn’t she come back for me?

The water turns cold as I stand there.

She wants to belong to a family. But I did a crappy job of showing her it was more than just a bargain we made. I even went so far as to tease her for inviting herself.

Stupid.

That’s where I went wrong. Amongst many other things, I’m sure. I didn’t show her where she fit. And that’s with me.

I shut off the water and hop out, then hurry to dry off and head into the room, throwing open drawers and searching for clothes that might fit.

I find an old high school hoodie and throw it on.

Wait, I run to the closet, digging around in the back. There it is. I grab it and rush downstairs.

I hope this works.

## Chapter 30

Karli

I purposely didn't set an alarm, hoping I'd sleep right through the Bentley's French Toast Friday and the pain that accompanied missing it.

But as luck would have it, I woke up at exactly 8:05, giving me plenty of time to make it over to the Bentleys. I regret getting the week off to visit my mother as now I have nothing to distract myself besides my ironic Thanksgiving shows.

For breakfast, I went in search of ice cream. We didn't have any, which is why I'm currently eating peach yogurt and graham crackers. It's not half bad. I can almost pretend I've discovered a newer, healthier ice cream shake.

Almost.

I turned my phone off when I got home last night, and now it's sitting face up on the edge of the couch mocking me with its pitch-black surface.

Nobody wants you.

And it's your fault because you shut everyone out.

Stupid phone. No one wants you either.

All I want to do is turn it on and see if Juliet has given my number to Trent and now he's desperately calling, proclaiming his love and begging me to come back.



No. Stop. I drag my eyes away from the phone and attach it to the TV screen. It's the pivotal moment where the girl being haunted by her past has now been snatched up by the demon who is going to kill her. He reaches for her nec—

Ding!The doorbell rings. I jump and launch my yogurt in the air.

Orange gloop shoots into the sky before immediately sloshing back down on me.

I screech as it covers my hair, my pants, my shirt. Ice cream would never betray me like this.

“Karli? Are you okay?”

I freeze.

Trent? I don't have time to run and change. Might as well let him see me at my worst. As if he hasn't seen me at my worst a dozen times already. Would it be so unfair for him to see me at my best for once?

I pull open the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“Whoa. Um...” Trent falters at the sight of me.

“What?” I say, blinking my yogurt-covered eyelashes up at him. “Did I take your breath away?”

He shakes his head, then finds my eyes somewhere under the mess. “Always.”

My heart flutters like it belongs to an adolescent.

Trent steps forward and lifts his hand to my face. He swipes his thumb over my cheek, and then examines it. He sniffs it, then plops his whole thumb in his mouth. And...why is it that sexy?

“Yogurt?” He raises his brows. “Do I dare ask what happened?”

“I was watching Stranger Things! When you rang the doorbell, it scared me!” I shoot back.

“Which season?”

“Four.”

He’s about to ask more when his forehead scrunches. “So you weren’t coming over?”

Oh. Shoot. “Trent, it’s...” I swallow. “I can’t...”

“What on earth happened in here?”

I jump at the newcomer's extremely familiar voice.

"Juliet?" I back away from Trent. "What are you doing here?"

"He didn't know where you lived, so I had to play chauffeur." She pushes past me into the apartment, studying the ceiling and the floor. "Karli, what did you do?"

Trent looks frustrated by the interruption, but he steps inside and closes the door behind him, giving me a reassuring smile, a promise that he's not going to leave until we finish our discussion.

He grabs my hand and gives it a quick squeeze. "You go get cleaned up and I'll take care of the yogurt on the couch. And the ceiling."

"No, that's..." far more than he bargained for here. I'm far more than he bargained for.

"Great idea," Juliet says and pushes me toward the bathroom. I love my best friend, but I kind of want her to leave. "I'll get you some clothes."

"Okay," I say, only because the yogurt is cold and uncomfortable, and I need all the help I can get to make it through my conversation with Trent without falling apart.

I turn on the water and strip off my clothes. The water feels like heaven, but I don't take the time to enjoy it. Trent is out there, and I won't make him wait. He has a family to get back to.

I scrub off as fast as I can and am wrapping up in a towel as Juliet comes in with my clothes.

"Impeccable timing, showing up when you did," I mutter as I take the offered clothes. "He didn't know where you lived? Admit it, you came to meddle."

She shrugs. “What? He didn’t.”

“You could have given him the address.”

“I couldn't remember it.”

“Up until six months ago, you lived here too.”

“I was waiting outside, and it sounded like you were about to reject him, so I intervened before you could.” She pulls at a strand of her long brown hair and twists it around her finger.

“I was not going to reject him.” Maybe. Possibly not. Fine, there was a good chance that is exactly what was going to happen.

“I know because I did the same thing to Michael.” She squeezes my arm. “So, I came in to remind you how amazing you are and that you deserve good things, too. Your mom has taken a lot from you, don’t let her take any more.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“I know.” Believing it is another matter. “I freaked out a little, but I know. It’s just, he has a huge family who loves him. I’m not even sure how to be a part of something like that. Long-term anyway.”

“Were we at the same house last night? Everyone loved you. And that’s not going to change. That’s the thing about family. About the Bentleys. They’ll give you more love than you’ve ever known before. And you don’t have to do anything to earn it.”

“That sounds way too good to be true.”

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s also annoying. I don’t know how many times Michael’s grandma has asked when I’m going to have a baby, we’ve been married for like six months, but that family is everything I always dreamed of. What you dreamed of, too.”

I don’t question how she knows that. We’ve been best friends long enough. I only hope I can actually be a part of Trent’s family.

“Get dressed and go talk.” Juliet drops the clothes on the counter and walks out. A moment later, she yells. “Trent, what are you doing up there? You’re going to fall off that stool and die.”

“I’m fine.” He growls that sexy growl thing and tingles race down my spine.

My hair is fresh and clean but I have no desire to do it. I brush it out then apply some mascara before leaving the bathroom.

The apartment is quiet when I emerge, Juliet is gone, and Trent is... where is he?

I search the living room, then peek into the kitchen. A pair of long legs poke out from under the sink. Something clangs and he mutters a curse.

I tiptoe over to him. "How's it looking, Gerald?"

He jerks and based on the sound that follows, bumps his head into a pipe.

"Sorry." I cover my laugh.

"My mom told you?" He scoots himself out.

"Yes, and I had to try very hard not to laugh. But I suppose now I get to call you Gerry."

"No way."

I purse my lips. "Is that what you're going to use your final no on? You don't get anymore."

"I don't plan on saying no to you ever again," he whispers.

My heart beats faster. What does that mean? What can it mean?

Trent stands up and flips on the faucet.

The water actually drains.

"Hey, you fixed it!"

He turns, folding his arms and leaning a hip against the counter, his lips twitching. “It wasn’t as hard as changing a tire, but I can fix some things.”

“Good to know.” I tease.

He grins. His lips look so perfect sitting there waiting for me. I take a moment to study him. I’ve never considered I might have a type before, but now I know, he’s it. If things don’t work out between us, I’ll be ruined for every other guy because, for a split second in my life, I was his. And it was perfect. Perfectly imperfect.

“I’m sorry.” I blurt.

“Stop.” He pushes away from the counter and grabs my hand. “Don’t apologize for anything. I know why you didn’t come back.”

“Trent I—”

“I’m sorry about what I said. I’ll be honest, for a minute last night I wondered if maybe you were so happy because of my family, not me.” His admission breaks my heart a little because I can see how he might have believed that.

“I do love your family,” I whisper. “But only because of you. It was a dream to be a part of it, but I couldn’t pretend anymore that it didn’t hurt. Because I’ve wanted that forever, but it’s not really mine.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“It could be.” He lifts a hand to my face and raises my chin. “Karli, I know you haven’t had people stick around to show you how important you are, but no one will include you and love you better than my family. Better than me.”

My heart stops. Did he just say what I think he did? “I’ve never had someone care for me long-term. I’m not sure how to accept or believe it.”

He brushes a strand of hair behind my ear. “If you ever doubt, let me remind you. You fit.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “You say that now, after our long, traumatic journey together. But the shock of it will wear off and you’ll get sick of me—”

“I’m not like your mom.” He stops me. “I’m not going anywhere, Karli.” He pulls my hand up and places it on his chest, offering me his heart. “About fifty miles into our journey home, I stopped caring about when we’d make it back because I found another place I enjoy being. Right by your side.”

A sob erupts, and I cover my mouth. I can’t hold back the tears anymore, and I let each one of them go free, allowing them to carry my old fears away with them.

“You belong with me.”

How long have I waited for someone to say all those words to me? For someone to make me believe them.

“Okay.” I don’t have any more words, but he doesn’t require them. He knows I’m



still afraid. He can hear the words I'm too scared to speak. But he knows I'll give him my best try. Because I'm in love with him.

Just for kicks, I'll save that piece of info for later.

He releases my hand and walks around the kitchen like he's searching for something. "I have one more thing I planned to use to convince you to come, but since you're so willing, I guess I don't need to—"

"Oh no, I need more convincing." I plop down on a kitchen chair and cross my arms. "What is it? Do you have another tattoo?"

He grins and pulls off his hoodie.

Oh. My. "Trent Gerald Bentley!" I screech and launch myself off the chair and right into his chain-mail-clad chest.

"No shirt." I grin.

"No shirt," he chuckles. "And this is only the second most embarrassing day of my life."

"Aw, will this help?" I reach up on my toes and place a gentle kiss on his jaw, his beard tickling my lips.

He smirks. "A little."

"Maybe this then?" I press a soft, lingering kiss to his lips and he dives into the kiss I've been longing for all morning. I kiss him back, tangling my fingers up in the chain mail to pull him closer.

So that's what it's for.

His hands slide up my back, cradling my head for a moment before getting lost in my hair. His kiss is fire. The burning, searing, explosive kind that makes my knees weak and my mind go blank.

I'm instantly lost in him, but I didn't realize I had to be lost to be found.

"We are going to be late—oh!" Juliet breaks through the bliss. "What the? Trent, what are you wearing?"

Trent pulls away and turns a glare on Juliet I've never seen before. "You say one word of this to my brother, and I will never speak to you again."

Juliet grins, then zips her lips.

That's not going to work unless she invests in a padlock. She's so telling Michael the second they are alone.

"Your mom has called three times. Are you guys ready? Or do you need five more minutes for whatever this is?" Juliet snorts.

"I could go for five more minutes," I say.

Juliet retreats back out the door.

"I'm going to need more than five minutes," Trent says, kissing the sensitive part below my jaw.

“Wanna go back to Vegas?”

He pumps his brows. “Can we?”

I grin and turn my lips to his. ”Not yet.”

Epilogue

Karli

CHRISTMASDAY

“Is your family going to kill us?” My hands tremble, and I squeeze them together.

“What? No. My mom’s going to love it.” Trent kisses my cheek, the rough brush of his beard making me lightheaded in the most perfect way.

“Most people surprise their loved ones with puppies on Christmas, or new iPhones, or something. Not this.”

He pumps his eyebrows. “Yeah, this is way better.”

I’m doubtful, but I’m also in love and reason went out the window a month ago. Even if my mother came in here screaming and yelling—which she won’t because she hasn’t reached out—I’d still be doing this. The excitement bubbles up in my chest.

“You look gorgeous, by the way.” Trent snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me

in for a kiss. Thousands of little chains tinkle under his shirt.

“Trent Gerald Bentley! You’re not wearing that!”

“Yes, I am.”

“But I didn’t wear my princess dress.” I laugh.

“What are you talking about? You are the definition of a princess.” He spins me around, my short ivory dress twirling around me. The delicate sequin flowers catch the light at the bottom of the skirt. There are long lace sleeves with matching sequin flowers running up the arm and a big cut-out in the back.

Trent’s hands both find that spot, and each graze of his fingers sets off mini fireworks in my chest.

“Ready to be my queen?” He murmurs.

Commitment like this used to terrify me, but now it invigorates me because after years of searching, I’ve finally found my place.

“Let’s do this thing.”

It’s Christmas Day. We spent the morning with Trent’s family. Now, we are getting married. Only, no one knows but Sean. Now that I’m thinking about it, that also might mean that everyone knows. Over the last month, he and Trent have worked things out. I don’t know the specifics, I didn’t ask, but apparently, there was a mud pit involved. Boys. Thankfully it worked and they are closer than ever, and we have him to thank for us getting together, so he took an online certification and will be marrying us right before family dinner. Which is happening in ten minutes.

Trent pulls out his phone and texts Sean. A moment later, his phone buzzes with a response. “He says we’re good to go.”

Butterflies take off in my chest and Trent pulls me in again. “Any last concerns?”

“Only one.” I run my fingers up his neck, then into the hair behind his ear. “Who gets to drive the van?” Trent claims he didn’t like Bertha, but a couple of weeks ago he discovered Vanstagram and became obsessed with the tiny corner of the internet dedicated to van life. This morning he surprised me with the keys to a fully refurbished van. Honestly, I’m not sure who was more giddy about it, me or him. Our new van is a light, happy yellow. Her name is Betty, and she will go far. Or at least to the West Coast for our honeymoon.

“I’ll defer to my queen.”

“Good answer.”

A song starts playing through the house and I take a deep breath. Time to marry the man I love. I’m not scared, far from it. I’ve never been so happy.

We creep out of the room and down the stairs.

“Sean, stop playing with my speakers,” Trent’s mom says. “We are about to eat dinner.”

We hit the last step and Sean beams at us. “Actually, we are about to have a wedding.”

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

“What?” Trent’s mom whirls around with wide eyes. Everyone else is mimicking her expression perfectly. “Right now? But I’m not ready!” She frantically combs through her hair with her fingers then straightens her already straight shirt.

“Good thing you’re not the one getting married then, huh, Mom?” Trent teases.

“Oh, Trent.” She embraces him. “Are we really doing this right now? You don’t want to wait a little while and throw a big party with lots of people?”

“Definitely not,” Trent says quickly.

Tears stream down her cheeks.

I knew it. She’s upset with us. She’s going to object to this union an—

“I’m so happy,” she says, fanning her cheeks.

Oh, those are happy tears. The tension eases from my shoulders. I should have known, but I’m still learning about his family. Not everyone answers questions as easily as Trent does.

“Are you for real right now?” Juliet grabs my shoulders.

“Dead serious.” I beam.

“Eek!” she squeals. “This is the best day ever.”

“What about our wedding?” Michael asks, slipping his arm around his wife’s waist.

Her eyes fill with heart emojis, and she leans into him. “Okay, second best.”

“Come on everyone,” Sean calls. “These two have to get on the road soon.”

Everyone gathers in the sitting room. Trent is standing next to the Christmas tree with Sean, waiting for me. Since I don’t have a father to walk me down the makeshift aisle, Mr. Bentley graciously offers his arm. I take it. I’ve always wanted a family; now I have more than I ever could have dreamed.

Marrying a man I started dating a month ago may be reckless, but I think I found something my mom never managed to. True love and a commitment to always be there for one another, no matter what. And should I ever hear from her again, I plan to prove that those two things are possible. Even for Baker women like us.

Endless Loveturns on, and everyone looks confused; everyone but Trent who has the biggest smile I’ve ever seen.

This is the right decision. For me.

“Whoa, slow down. I’m an old man.” Mr. Bentley chuckles.

“Sorry.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Just excited.”

He squeezes my hand that rests on the crook of his arm. “That’s all I need to hear. But I want you to know, even though I’m his dad, if he hurts you I will kick his butt.”

My heart swells with the love I’ve discovered in this family.

“He won’t,” I whisper.

My walk to Trent is quick, and then I'm handed off to him.

"Dearly beloved," Sean starts, but Trent shoves him. "Sorry, sorry." Sean laughs. "I was warned not to say or do anything I wasn't supposed to. But I have to say one thing. Karli, there's no one I'd rather share my best friend with than you."

I feel honored and completely incapable of expressing what those words mean to me. So I only nod.

"Alright, now to the mumbo jumbo—sorry. The vows." Sean motions to Trent to begin and Trent takes my other hand.

"Karli, I thought I knew what I wanted out of life until you came along. Then I realized nothing else mattered unless I had you. That road trip will always be my favorite adventure, but I can't wait to see what else lies along our journey. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth. Because you're my home."

I cup his cheek. "Careful," I whisper. "Your eyes are leaking."

"Don't let it rain only on me." He grins, taking my hand and pulling it into his chest.



*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

I swallow and focus on the steady rhythm of his heart. “Trent, you have filled every empty hole inside me with love, something I didn’t think possible. You gave me a family, a home, you gave me safety.”

There are tears and sniffles from everyone in the room. And now me as well.

“Come on, babe, keep it together.” I sniff and wipe at my own eyes.

“I guess we know who’s the stronger one,” Sean says and gets another elbow to the ribs. “Oof.”

“I told you once that life is more exciting when you’re straddling life and death. But it’s more than that.” I squeeze his hands. “The best moments in life are when you’re faced with fear, but you choose to be brave.”

“Thanks for being brave enough to choose me,” Trent whispers, his thumb rubbing circles between my grandmother’s bracelet and my wrist.

We exchange rings, simple matching gold bands. Trent wanted to buy me something bigger, but I said no. Because the ring doesn’t prove his love, he does. And he has. He will. We both will.

“Trent, do you promise to love and cherish, and take care of Karli for as long as you live?”

“I do.”

“And Karli are you sure you want to be stuck with this big obnoxious man foreve—”

“We already know I do.” I cut him off before Trent can with another elbow to his stomach. “Just say the words.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Cheers fill the room, but they disappear when Trent kisses me.

I’ve always been on my own. Now I’ll never be alone again. I have all I need. Right choice indeed.

The End

Keep reading for a sneak peek of the next book:

Bonus Chapter

Sean

THANKSGIVINGEVENING

It’s quiet as I let myself into my parents’ home. The poor family must have missed me terribly. The holiday wasn’t the same. Good thing I came home early so I could spend some of the day with them. It was a brutal sacrifice, though, because I got stuck in road construction for two hours and it’s almost eleven o’clock now.

Trent was right. The magic show wasn’t worth it. And Libby? That girl was a psycho. We never made it out of the hotel parking lot. She tried to steal my wallet. So I gave her a pat on the head and told her to find someone else to bother. I missed my family, however weird that seems. Or maybe Trent’s words cut deep. He said I’m selfish.

And fine, I suppose I can be a tad selfish, but I do love my family and I genuinely thought he and I would have a good time in Vegas. But it sucked without him. I didn't even hit the clubs or casinos. I stayed in the room and kept hoping he'd come back. Pathetic, I know.

It was stupid to bring him against his will, but I missed my brother. He's been off lately. More withdrawn and reserved. He's been keeping something from me, I can tell. I thought this trip would force him to talk about it since we haven't hung out in what feels like forever, and now Michael and Grant are both married. Everyone's dropping like rocks. But at least I still have Trent. Which is why I wanted to do something fun, to forget that everyone's moving on with their lives. Except me.

But somehow, kidnapping him didn't even work. I rub the back of my neck. He might actually hate me this time. I'm losing my edge.

I'll apologize, things will get better, and we'll be fine. We always are.

There's a chorus of laughter and I can't help the smile that finds me. Family is all that matters. I've done a terrible job of showing that, but I'll be better. I promise.

"Twenty bucks says Trent falls first," Michael says.

So Trent made it home? That would have been nice to know instead of worrying for the last twenty-four hours. But what is Michael talking about? Why would Trent fall for anyone?

"Fifty says he already did." Grant chimes in.

"She's a sweet girl, it was nice to have a full table," Mom says.

Full table? But I wasn't here. Who replaced me?

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:30 am*

I step into the dining room. “Hey everyone, I’m here.”

The laughter fades like someone blew it out as quick as the flame on a candle.

Every eye turns on me, and every single one of them looks angry. Exceptionally so. Even my mother. Scratch that. Especially my mother. Uh oh.

“Sean Francis Bentley!” my mother roars.

I flinch at the awful middle name. I haven’t heard my name spoken like that since...well, for at least a couple of months.

“You kidnapped your brother?”

Oh, right. That.

Emmett cries and I use that as an escape. “Inside voices, you’re upsetting the baby.”

The rage in my mom’s eyes flames like wildfires. I’ve been on the receiving end of those flames many times. But this time I’m positive I’ll be burned.

She runs at me.

I’ve been chased by my siblings, but never my mother. The shock keeps me in place and that’s the only reason she’s able to grab me. Which she does. She snatches my arm and hauls me out of the room and straight to the office.

“Whoa. Mom, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. I know it was dumb.”

She slams the door behind us and it echoes through the house.

Then she turns. Her face is doing some weird creepy smile thing.

“Why are you smiling like that?” That’s even more terrifying than her angry face.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“Oh, that was just for show. I’m very mad at you and you will be making it up to your brother, of course, but… Trent is in love.”

I whirl back, thrown by this entire night. Am I in trouble or not? Can I still get in trouble as an adult? “What?”

“Trent brought home a girl and they are perfect together. And as stupid as you were—”

“Don’t hold your punches, Mom.” Why is she blaming Trent being in love on me? I’d never let him do something that stupid.

Wait, was Trent serious? Did he really get married in Vegas? Without me?

Is it getting harder to breathe in here?

“As I was saying, as stupid as you were—”

“Thanks for repeating.”

“You made it happen and with time, he will see that. For now, I have to be on his side. But let’s just say you finally gave your brother a good Christmas gift.”

Harsh. I thought I was an excellent gift-giver.

But I'm stillsoconfused. "I don't understand. Trent is married?"

"No, not yet, but he is in love! Isn't that wonderful?"

Another one bites the dust. "Superb." I can't believe I did this to myself.

I should have stayed in Vegas.