



# Triplet Babies for the CEO

**Author:** *Summer James*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** When you end up knocked up by your new boss—with TRIPLETS...

Keeping things professional is easier said than done.

I was just a small-town girl with a messy past.

Now, I'm the personal assistant to the city's most brooding billionaire bachelor.

Brody Thorne...He commands every room with one sharp glance.

And when his smoldering gaze hits me, my stomach flips.

Fast forward to late nights at the office, where the printer is not the only thing getting jammed.

This single dad is twice my age with a heart kept under lock and key.

Before we call the locksmith, I must prove I belong at his company.

But Brody's dominant side is in full gear—he's hell-bent on making me his.

Except I have a secret growing inside me.

Three secrets, to be exact. And they're all his.

Triplet Babies for the CEO is a captivating age-gap, billionaire boss, surprise triplet pregnancy romance. It's a standalone novel by Summer James. No cheating or cliffhangers. And an irresistible happily-ever-after.

**Total Pages (Source):** 65

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:04 am*

## Prologue

Tasha

There's a smell I don't recognize as I push our creaky front door open.

A perfume, heady and musky, definitely not mine. The smell halts the thought that had just been tumbling through my mind.

Maybe Patrick and I can actually have a nice night together, eat leftovers, watch a movie... something normal, something nice.

It's early for me to be home, but the restaurant was slow for a Thursday night, so I got to leave before closing, a rare treat for me.

When I step inside, however, the air feels wrong, like I've walked into someone else's home.

Then I see them.

They're kissing?

I see the girl first, her dark hair spilling across the cushions, her eyes flashing blue, bright and sharp, even in the dim light. Then I notice Patrick's bare back, his muscles flexing as he shifts, dipping down over her.

She's all smooth curves and pale skin. A black lace top and a red skirt are tangled at

her feet.

I don't realize I'm screaming until the sound rips from my throat, and she scrambles up in an instant, grabbing at her clothes to cover herself. She clutches them to her chest as she stumbles past me, nearly tripping over her unbuckled heels.

She's halfway out the door, flashing me one last startled, guilty look before she bolts around the corner, slamming the door behind her.

I look in horror at Patrick, who just sits up, smirking, like he's the one who caught me doing something wrong. "Tasha, calm down. You're acting crazy." His voice is lazy, almost bored, and I hate it.

I hate him.

"You're insane," I spit, wishing I could turn my words into real venom. "You're a complete narcissist, just like Jasmine said."

He narrows his eyes, a sneer crossing his gorgeous, devilish lips. I can't stand to look at him anymore, I'm so thoroughly disgusted by him. "Three years, Patrick, three years down the fucking drain!" I shout, turning and heading straight to the bedroom.

He follows, uttering a volley of moronic words as I yank open drawers, grabbing anything that's mine. Jeans, T-shirts, socks, bras, I'm stuffing them all into my old duffel bag, not caring how wrinkled they get.

"Babe, come on, it's not what it looks like. You're overreacting. You're always overreacting. Leaving now would be a huge mistake, you know that. You know you can't survive without me."

I whirl around, my hands shaking as I shove my toothbrush and skincare supplies into

the suitcase. “A mistake? You’re fucking unbelievable, Patrick. If this is the way you’re going to treat me, why would I stay?”

He steps closer, hands out like he’s trying to calm a wild animal. “Because you love me. And I love you, that’s why.”

I almost laugh, but it comes out as more of a choking sound. “Love? You call this love? I literally walked in on you fucking another woman, and you’re trying to tell me I’m overreacting?” My voice is a tirade of anger and hurt feelings.

I feel myself on the verge of slapping him across his lying-ass face, and the thought makes me hurry to remove myself from the situation entirely.

I can feel my heart cracking open. The tears are threatening to pour down my cheeks, but I won’t let him see me cry, not yet. He’s still talking as I grab my phone charger off the nightstand, stuff it into my bag, and zip it shut. Still, he tries to say all the right words, but I’m done listening to his bullshit.

I sling the bag over my shoulder, swipe at my cheeks, and push past him.

“Tasha, please, baby, don’t...” he starts, fake tears welling in his eyes, but I’m already out the door, my anger the only thing keeping me moving.

Jasmine’s voice echoes in my head, loud and clear, the way they always do. when she’s right, “I never thought Patrick was good for you.” I think back to how angry I was when she first told me that but now—now I see it.

I stumble down the stairs, dragging my suitcase behind me as the bag thuds against my leg. Opening the apartment’s entrance, my vision blurs as a deluge of tears finally breaks loose, but I can still see the taillights glowing in the parking lot as I press the button on my key fob.

I hurry to the same beat-up car that's carried me through every moment of my life, good and bad.

I pull out my phone from my pocket, my shaking hands nearly dropping it. I hit Jasmine's name, her picture smiling up at me, and hold my breath as it rings.

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“Tasha? What’s up, girl?” she answers, bright and cheerful, the way she always is.

The second I try to speak, the tears come again, harder than the first time. “Jaz,” I choke, saliva stringing through my words, “he was cheating on me. Patrick was with...that bitch Stephanie from the restaurant.”

There’s a long pause on the other end, and then Jasmine’s voice changes, low and dangerous. “He didwhat?”

I can’t stop crying, every word tumbling out of me like I’m trying to purge the whole relationship in a wave of emotion. I cover my mouth in a coughing fit, trying to stop the water pouring out of my eyes from drowning me. “You were right, I just...I didn’t want to see it. I’m so stupid. I should have known!”

“Tasha, listen honey, you are not stupid. You hear me? You’re coming over right now, okay? We’re going to figure this out. You’re not staying there tonight!”

I nod, at her words, already opening my car door and shoving my bag into the passenger seat. “I’m on my way.”

My car struggles to start, the engine sputtering like it’s giving up, just like I want to do right now. It takes three tries before it roars to life, and I shakily pull out of the lot, heading toward Jasmine’s apartment.

The car’s headlights blur before me. Everything is smeared with tears and heartache, but I keep driving.

There's nowhere else to go. Jasmine's the only person I have now.

I'm completely numb by the time I reach Jasmine's building, having gone through at least three cycles of pulling myself together and falling apart in just the short drive here. The dark shape of Jasmine's Art Deco apartment building rising up before me in the dark gives me strange vibes. I notice a flickering streetlight casting weird shadows over the parking lot.

I park and just sit there, my hands still gripping the wheel. I can't move.

The ache in my chest feels like it's splitting me in two, and for a moment, all I can think about is how I should have seen this coming—I should have listened to Jasmine. I just wanted so badly for it to work. I wanted to believe that Patrick was different than everyone said he was, that he could be the one thing that didn't fall apart on me.

Tears forming in my eyes again, I finally let go of the wheel, grab my suitcase, and climb out of the car.

The night air is cool, brushing against my tear-streaked cheeks, I drag my suitcase across the gravel, its wheels rattling and catching on every little pebble.

My crying jag has wound down again and I've fallen silent. All that's left is a slow, steady leaking of tears down my face that I can't seem to stop.

Jasmine's waiting by her door on the third floor, her mousey-brown hair pulled back, face lit up by the overhead light. The second she sees me, she's running to me, arms open, and I collapse into her, the dam breaking all over again.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, collapsing into a shaking mess. "I should've listened to you!"

“You don’t have to be sorry for anything,” she murmurs, holding me tight. “He’s the one who should be sorry, not you. He’s a fucking asshole, Tasha. He never deserved you.”

I want to believe what she’s saying, but I can’t stop wallowing in my hurt feelings, even as she leads me inside her apartment, shutting the door behind us.

Jasmine’s apartment smells like lavender and sage. It’s a tiny studio, barely big enough for one person, but it’s warm and cozy, cluttered with mismatched cushions, macramé wall hangings, and plants spilling out of ceramic pots.

Colorful dreamcatchers dangle in front of the windows, swaying slightly as we walk in, and there’s a small table tucked in the corner with a pile of tarot cards and crystals scattered across it. Her queen-sized bed is pushed against the wall, a colorful quilt draped over it, and in the middle of the room, her pull-out couch is already opened up, blankets and pillows piled on top like she’s been expecting me all along.

She guides me to the bed, her hand still firm on my arm, like she’s scared I’ll fall apart if she lets go.

“Sit,” she says, her voice gentle, and I do, sinking onto the pull-out. She returns in a minute, pressing a warm cup of chamomile tea into my hands. I stare at the steam curling up, taking in the soft scent as I try to calm down, but my mind keeps circling back to what I walked in on.

“Tell me what happened from the beginning.”

“He didn’t even...he didn’t even look surprised to see me. And she was just lying there under him,” I whisper, my voice barely holding steady, “on the couch, half naked, like she belonged there.”



“Ugh, whore,” Jasmine says, her face darkening, her lips thinning. “Tasha, you cannot let this affect your self-esteem. You’re beautiful, and you’re more than enough. Patrick’s a dickhead who never deserved a sweet, caring girl like you.”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do.” I manage a small, shaky smile, but it doesn’t last.

“For the next few weeks, stay here,” she says, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “At least until you can get your feet under you. And hey, I’m still going to Vegas soon. Come with me. We’ll find jobs before we go, and then, who knows? It’s a fresh start, a chance to get out of this windy, sad suburb of Chicago.”

“I don’t know, Jaz...that’s a big move.” I hesitate, my mind too tangled to think straight.

“Well, think about it. And tomorrow, I’ll come with you to get your stuff from the apartment.” Jasmine doesn’t push. She just nods and squeezes my hand.

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“Thank you,” I murmur, leaning into her as she wraps me in a hug. I exhale, a little of the weight lifting off my chest.

Jasmine orders Chinese food, and I’m pretty sure she convinced the delivery guy to throw in extra egg rolls, because there’s just so much food when we pull it all out.

We eat straight from the cartons, the sweet-and-sour sauce dripping onto our fingers, watching reruns of *I Love Lucy* and then flipping to some true-crime documentary about a serial killer in the ‘90s.

We spend the rest of the night sprawled on the couch, surrounded by takeout boxes and half-empty glasses of wine. I barely register what’s happening on the screen, but it’s something to keep my mind from spiraling, and for that, I’m grateful.

I’m still wide awake, staring at my phone, doom-scrolling through my social media, when I realize Jasmine fell asleep halfway through an episode, curled up on her bed, snoring softly.

Everyone else’s lives look perfect and polished online, like the kind of life I thought I had with Patrick. I come across a picture of an old friend from high school, smiling in her wedding dress, hand in hand with her new husband, captioned with some cheesy line about love being worth the wait, and I scroll past it quickly.

Still, the ache in my chest doesn’t go away. I turn my phone over, pressing it against my forehead, as silent tears fall from my eyes.

I feel like someone’s dumped out a puzzle and I have no idea how to put the pieces

back together. My whole life has been torn up and scattered thanks to the careless actions of a man who I thought was in love with me.

I lie there, trying not to drown in the feeling of everything slipping away, the room dark except for the soft glow of the TV.

The social media app blinks out as I close it, my phone screen going dark. I stare at the ceiling, which is covered in shadows cast from the television, replaying Jasmine's words in my head. A fresh start. She makes it sound so easy, like it's just a matter of just picking up and leaving.

Maybe that's exactly what I need...to stop trying to fit my life back together and just start over somewhere new.

I pull my phone out again, closing social media and opening a few job apps, scrolling through listings, one after another. I keep skimming the same old things: waitress, retail associate, barista.

I'm so tired of doing these same jobs.

Then I see it: a basic receptionist job in the city, at a place called Thorne and Thorne. The job description is vague, but I don't care, I'm not picky.

Answering phones, handling paperwork, greeting clients, scheduling meetings; all of that sounds better than spending another shift smiling at strangers and hoping they'll tip me more than a couple of bucks.

I save the listing in my favorites and keep scrolling, but nothing else catches my eye. It's just that one, shining out from the screen, a tiny glimmer of hope for something different and new.

It's not Vegas, but it's a step in a new direction.

Still, I can't help but think of Jasmine's voice, light and hopeful, talking about getting out of this sad suburb, about something new. I stare at the job posting a little longer before finally tapping on the button to apply, my hands shaking a bit.

But what if I can't even do this? What if nothing changes?

The résumé I pull up on my phone is embarrassingly thin, and I know it. I cringe as I review it.

I spend the next hour adding everything I can think of, trying to stretch out each bullet point to its fullest potential. Every bit of customer service experience: every coffee I've poured, every dish I've cleared, every smile I've forced, it all gets beefed up and polished until it sounds like I've been running a five-star establishment instead of hustling for tips.

But the nerves creep in again, and I start thinking back to when I was eighteen years old and fresh out of high school. I remember telling my parents I wanted to go to college, that I'd saved up some money, that I wanted to study marketing or communications or something to get me out of the trailer we were all crammed inside.

My dad had laughed, not in a mean way, but like he thought it was a joke.

"With a face like that, what makes you think you need to learn anything?" he chided, reaching over to pinch my cheek, like I was still five years old. My mom just nodded along, not saying anything to encourage me.

I swallow hard, blink back tears, and hit "submit" on the application before I can chicken out.

My parents talked me out of my dreams back then, but no one can talk me out of following them now.

I'm going to prove that I can do more than just smile and be pretty.

## Chapter One

Brody

I step out of the truck, the crunch of gravel under my boots barely audible over the hum of traffic in the surrounding streets.

## Page 4

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The sun's out, but the sky is heavy with clouds, and there's a chill in the August air that hints at fall creeping closer.

I pull my hard hat over my head, adjusting it as I glance around the cleared lot. It's hard to believe that in a few months, this space will be home to a forty-story skyscraper. It's our latest project, and one of the biggest we've ever taken on.

Josh is already out, unrolling the blueprints on the hood of the truck, his brows furrowed in concentration.

I see a lot of myself in him: the focus, the way he sets his jaw when he's deep in thought. I taught him everything I know, but he's got a knack for this business that goes beyond just following orders.

"Steel delivery's set for next week," Josh says, tapping a section of the blueprint with his finger. "But I'm thinking we should double-check the supplier's estimate. The last thing we need is a delay because of a shortage."

I nod, scanning the documents in front of me, following along with his train of thought. "Agreed. And make sure the rebar's good quality, not that cheap crap they tried to send us last time. I'll handle the permits; you focus on coordinating with the crew."

We're surrounded by stacks of construction materials, everything from pipes to bags of cement, and a few excavators rumble nearby, preparing the ground. It's a mess now, but I can already envision it—the clean lines, steel and glass gleaming in the sunlight, another landmark for the city.

As we go over the logistics, Josh's face lights up with a grin. "Hey, did I tell you? Gemma got the book deal she was after."

I glance up from the blueprint, and I can feel my eyebrows raise. "The children's book? The one she's been working on for a year?"

He nods, excitement spreading across his tanned face, and I can't help but chuckle, shaking my head. "Well, I'll be damned. That's impressive. She's got some serious talent, your Gemma. You picked a good wife, you know that? Bright, young, talented, beautiful. You're lucky, son. Don't take her for granted."

Josh's expression softens. He's twenty-three years old, but he still looks boyish. "I know, Dad. I really do. And it means a lot, hearing you say that."

He's quiet for a moment, and then he adds, "You know, you could be just as lucky if you got out there and dated."

The suggestion catches me off-guard, but I can see he's serious, his sky-blue eyes steady as he looks at me. I almost laugh at the idea of me, in my late forties, starting over in the dating world. But there's a warmth in Josh's gaze, the kind that says he's not just poking fun, he's hoping for something more for me.

"Not everyone's as smooth as you, kid." I brush his words off, giving him a crooked smile.

He rolls his eyes, but there's a glint of amusement brewing beneath the surface. "Maybe not. But it doesn't hurt to try."

I let out a laugh, waving my hand dismissively in the air. "No woman wants this old piece of leather," I joke, but I can tell from the way Josh's expression shifts that he's not buying it.

“In all seriousness, son, I don’t want the stress. Running this company is a twenty-four-seven gig, and I don’t think a woman would deal with the hours a construction CEO puts in. Besides, it’s not like there are many good women out there to begin with. What makes you think I’d find one at this late date?”

Josh crosses his arms, leaning back against the truck. “Dad, you sound like a grumpy old man set in his ways.”

“I am a grumpy old man set in my ways.”

He snorts. “Seriously, though, Dad. It’s a shame you think that. You’re smart, successful...hell, you’re not bad-looking for a guy your age. You’ve got a lot to offer.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Not bad-looking, huh? Thanks, kid. That’s a real confidence boost.”

Josh grins, but there’s still that note of sincerity under the teasing. “I’m just saying, don’t count yourself out. Gemma always says there’s someone for everyone, you know? It’d be nice to see you happy. And who knows, maybe you’d be surprised.”

“Maybe,” I reply, “but it’s not like I’ve got a lot of time to figure that out.”

Letting a silence fall between us, I glance down at the blueprints again.

He’s got a point, but life’s not that simple.

Nothing is ever simple.

Josh shakes his head, a small, knowing smile tugging at the left corner of his mouth. “If you say so.”



We spend the next hour or so reviewing more documents before we both go our separate ways for the day.

I steer my truck onto the highway, the city lights fading behind me as I head west, out toward the countryside. The sun's already dipped below the skyline, leaving the sky streaked with deep purples and navy blues. It's that in-between hour where the world seems to hold its breath.

Out here, away from the city, it's quieter, darker. The headlights cut through the growing shadows, illuminating the open road ahead.

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As I drive, the scenery shifts from concrete and steel, to fields and pastures stretching out on either side of the road. Cornstalks, tall and golden, sway gently in the wind, and further out, I can see rows of soybeans, their leaves rustling like whispers.

The landscape is flat and endless, just the way I like it. No skyscrapers, no crowded streets; just open space and the occasional farmstead lit up like a beacon in the distance. It's a long drive, but I don't mind. It gives me time to think, to let the day roll off my shoulders.

By the time I pull up to my place, it's pitch black except for the soft glow of the barn lights.

My sprawling property is quiet, the perfect kind of quiet, and I park the truck next to the old wooden fence where the cows are grazing.

Hopping out, I grab a bucket of feed and make my way to the pasture. The cows lift their heads, lumbering over as I pour the grain out for them, the familiar sounds of snuffling and lowing filling the night. I pet each of them, giving each one my undivided attention to show them I care about them.

People don't realize it, but cows are very affectionate farm animals. Once they're fed and penned up in the red barn, I head toward the house, the crunch of gravel under my boots the only noise as I walk across the grassy yard.

My house feels cool and still when I step inside, my boots echoing on the tile floor as I drop my work bag by the door. My stomach rumbles with an insistent growl, but there's one last thing I need to check on before I can call it a night.

I make my way through the hallway to the back of the house, where the sunroom doubles as a makeshift nursery. The second I push the door open, I'm greeted by a happy, wagging tail and a pair of bright, eager eyes.

Penny, my Australian shepherd, looks up at me from her spot in the corner, and I feel my heart swell at the sight of her. Her ears are pinned back, and her tongue is flicking out in quick, excited licks as I crouch down beside her, my hands melting into her soft, luscious fur.

She's surrounded by a pile of squirming, tiny pups—six of them total. They've got her same speckled coat, all covered with patches of white and gray and flecks of black. They're all jostling for space, tumbling over each other in their clumsy, wobbly way.

They're all bundled up in a kiddie pool I'd lined with blankets and towels, a safe haven to keep them corralled until they get big enough to take over the entire sunroom.

Penny looks tired, but proud as she licks a few of her little brood of babies.

"Hey, girl," I murmur, rubbing her head, and she nudges my hand with her cold nose, grateful for the attention.

I give the pups a quick pat, letting them sniff at my fingers and yawn widely, before I urge Penny to go eat, guiding her toward her food and water bowls. She gently trots over, lapping up water and taking some nibbles of dry kibble before I open the back door to let her out for a bathroom break.

She's got a doggie door that leads to the fenced-in yard, but I figure she'll appreciate the chance for a quick run under the bright stars.

After Penny's had her fill of fresh air, I lead her back inside and watch as she curls up with her babies, licking and sniffing them all one by one.

I head for the kitchen, my stomach reminding me again that I haven't eaten since lunch. Tacos it is, quick, easy, and just enough to take the edge off of my rumbling stomach.

I pull out the ingredients, laying them on the counter: wheat tortillas, onions, peppers, cheese, ground beef, and taco seasoning. The hiss and sizzle of the pan fills the kitchen as I chop up the onions and peppers, their sharp, tangy scent filling the air.

While the veggies cook down, I grab my phone, scrolling through emails with one hand, while flipping the beef in the pan with the other. Most of it's the usual: updates from Josh, contractor requests, a couple of proposals I need to review.

But then I see a notification from HR, and my thumb pauses over the screen.

The applications for the new receptionist role.

I tap it open, scrolling through the list of names and resumes that have come in.

I'm halfway through a bland cover letter when one application catches my eye: Tasha Daniels. I open her file, skimming through the details.

She's young, with a standard resume, mostly customer service. I scroll down to her picture and blink. She's striking, in a way that makes you stop and take a second look. Light, caramel brown hair, clover-colored eyes, a smile that's a little shy but bright enough to catch your attention.

I stir the beef and vegetable mixture, dumping a decent amount of seasoning into the pan, followed by a few tablespoons of water. I'm trying not to think too much about

how a receptionist doesn't typically look like they belong on a magazine cover.

I find myself studying Tasha's resume longer than I meant to as I'm plating up my tacos.

This girl should be on the cover of Sports Illustrated, not in an office answering phones.

She's young, sure, but there's something about the way she's presented herself that doesn't just catch my interest, but holds it.

A lot of service industry work, mostly waitressing.

Waitressing is not exactly the kind of experience you'd expect for a receptionist, but then again, there's something to be said about the skills that the job demands. Handling demanding customers face to face, staying on your feet for long shifts, balancing orders and requests without missing a beat; hell, that's more multitasking than some of my project managers handle on a good day.

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I weigh the options, still cutting the vegetables, thinking about what I'm really looking for in this position: someone who can handle chaos, keep things running smoothly, and do it all with a smile and a chipper attitude.

I know from experience that waitresses have a certain kind of poise and work ethic that you can't just teach.

Still, I can't help but hesitate, wondering if bringing in an inexperienced beauty will be more of a distraction than a solution.

The last thing I need is a bunch of contractors getting distracted every time they walk by the front desk.

There's something intriguing about her, I can't lie. Maybe she's just trying to get out of that waitress rut. I can't fault her for that.

I sit down at the small table in the corner of my kitchen, locking my phone screen and digging into my tacos.

I'll reach out to her tomorrow, set up an interview. Maybe she's got more to her than meets the eye.

She could be exactly what I'm looking for.

## Chapter Two

Tasha

I feel completely ridiculous pulling up to the Thorne and Thorne office in my beat-up car, the engine sputtering like it might just give out any second. It nearly stalls out as I ease into the parking lot, and I have to give it a little extra gas to keep it from dying right there.

The car shudders to a stop, and I sit there for a moment, gripping the steering wheel, trying to calm my nerves and pull myself together.

This feels like a bad joke, like I'm about to walk into a king's palace wearing a potato sack for a dress.

Grabbing my purse, I dig around until I find my debit card. As I pay for the parking I wince at how much it costs. City parking always feels like such a rip-off, but today it feels especially cruel.

I glance up at the skyscrapers that tower over me, and I can't help but feel like I've stepped into a different world, all sharp edges and polished surfaces.

I feel like I'm just a tiny mouse scurrying through a maze of gleaming silver and glass.

Chicago always feels like this when I visit, like it's about to swallow me whole.

There's a rhythm to the city: the honking cars, the chatter of people on their phones, the rush of feet across the pavement.

It's a rhythm I never quite find my step in.

Back home, in the suburbs, things are slower, quieter. Here in the city, I can barely hear myself think. I had to park three blocks away just to find a spot, and now I'm trying not to think about the walk ahead of me in these stupid heels that Jasmine

convinced me to wear.

I start walking, the rhythmic click-clack of my heels on the pavement sounding louder than it should. I'm not used to shoes like these. My feet ache already, and I've barely made it half a block. I usually wear the same non-slip, OSHA-regulated shoes I've had for years when I go to work. They've carried me through countless shifts.

These heels make me feel like a baby deer trying to figure out how to walk, all wobbly and fresh.

As I pass by a law office with shiny, reflective windows, I catch a glimpse of myself and almost wish I hadn't.

The pencil skirt I borrowed from Jasmine looks a little too tight and a little too short. Jasmine's five inches shorter than me, and it shows. I keep tugging the hem down, hoping it'll magically stretch a bit longer, but it just snaps right back, hugging my thighs like it belongs there.

I keep walking, but I'm hyper-aware of how out of place I look. I'm just some girl in a too-tight skirt and heels I can't really walk in, trying not to stumble, while the people passing by me all look like they belong here, with their perfectly tailored suits and sleek briefcases.

This isn't going to work out. You're not going to be good enough for this job. You're just a waitress. What do you know about answering phones in a fancy office?

I stop for a moment, staring at my reflection, and I can't help the thoughts that start bombarding me. I imagine what it would be like to just turn around, head back to my car, and drive back to Jasmine's place.

I can already picture her opening the door, her face soft with pity as I admit defeat.



“This was a terrible idea. I don’t belong in the city.”

And Jasmine, bless her heart, would give me a hug, and maybe we’d heat up our leftovers and watch bad TV until I could forget how stupid I felt.

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I glance around, watching the people striding past me with purpose, their phones pressed to their ears, their expressions confident and sure.

They don't even notice I'm here. They don't see me.

I bet they've all done this hundreds of times. They've all just walked into places like Thorne and Thorne without even thinking twice. And here I am, practically shaking in my heels, like I'm about to step onto a stage in front of a thousand people.

I take a deep breath, but it doesn't help. My heart still feels like it's going to beat right out of my chest.

I'm going to end up like my mom.

Then, clearly, as if she's standing right next to me, I hear Jasmine's voice in my head. "You are more than enough."

It's the same words she said to me the night I found out about Patrick, when I thought my entire world was crumbling.

I straighten up, shoulders back, and take another deep breath.

I can do this.

Brushing my hands over my skirt, smoothing the wrinkles out, I force myself to keep walking.

When I finally reach the Thorne and Thorne building, I'm struck by how sleek and sophisticated it looks for a construction firm.

The entrance is framed by massive, raw stone pillars, like something out of an architecture magazine, and the glass doors are outlined in a smooth, shiny platinum. It looks strong, solid, and immovable, like a mountain.

I stop for a moment, staring at the logo etched into the glass: two large, intersecting T's that create a simple square shape. It's simple, elegant, and somehow intimidating. I wonder if this is how all the clients feel when they walk in.

I place my hand on the cold door handle, my reflection ghosting over the logo, and pull it open.

This is it.

Stepping inside, my heels clicking against the polished marble flooring, the first thing I notice is that there's no one at the reception desk.

All I see is an empty chair and a neat row of polished silver pens lined up like soldiers, their metallic sheen glimmering under the soft, recessed lighting. It looks as if someone tidied up and then disappeared, the chair pointed to the left.

I pause, glancing around, trying to make sense of things. I'm not sure what to do. Should I try to find someone or should I just wait here? I take a few hesitant steps forward, feeling a little like I've just wandered into a dream.

Poor girls like you don't get office jobs at nice places like this.

A subtle scent of cedar mingles with a faint floral aroma in the air, making the atmosphere feel oddly welcoming. The clicking of my heels echoes off the vaulted

ceilings of the lobby.

I'm so hyper-aware of them in this moment, and with each step, I grow increasingly aware of how tight and short this skirt is.

The lobby is luxurious, more than I had imagined last night laying on Jasmine's pull-out sofa bed. It's got these sleek, dark leather chairs arranged in a perfect row, each one looking like it's never been sat in.

I catch my reflection in the polished marble floor below me. The flooring, like everything else in this place, is shining brilliantly in the morning sunlight. I admire the dark veins swirling through the white stone, giving it a cold, clean, and expensive look.

I look outside the large windows, stopping to keep the sound of my heels from echoing in the spacious lobby.

A large, abstract sculpture in the middle of the room, formed from some kind of twisted metal, catches the light in a way that's mesmerizing. It looks like it probably cost more than my car.

Though, that's honestly not saying much now that I think about it.

The walls surrounding me are lined with dark wood paneling, smooth and sophisticated, showcasing the space's dominant grandeur. My eyes trail upward and see a stunning chandelier hanging above me, its crystalline pendants catching the light and throwing tiny rainbows across the room.

Those don't look like the chandeliers at Home Depot. No, those look like real crystals.

The warm glow from the fixture bathes the lobby in a soft light, enhancing the rich colors of the decor. I've never been anywhere like this before, and I can't help but feel like I'm way, way out of my league.

Everything about this place screams money—money and power. I'm overwhelmed to the point that it makes my stomach twist with nerves.

## Page 8

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I smooth my hands down my skirt, trying to keep them from shaking, or worse, sweating. My head whips back and forth for a second, terrified that someone's witnessing me verging on a panic attack.

I should just go. I shouldn't be here, this is obviously not the job for me.

The thought is repetitive, like the blinking glow of a lighthouse on the shore during a storm.

I step toward the door when I hear a man's voice behind me.

"Hey, are you here for the interview?"

I turn and see a guy standing there with short blonde hair and a relaxed, easy smile. He's probably about my age. He's got this casual confidence about him, like he belongs here, like he's used to places like this. I also can't help but notice how good-looking he is, and my eyes fall to his left hand, where I spot a gleaming wedding ring reflecting in the sun.

Figures, he's too gorgeous to be single.

"Uh, yeah," I say sheepishly, trying to quiet the nerves that have bubbled up from standing around aimlessly. "My name is Tasha Daniels. I'm here about the receptionist position. I was told to arrive at nine."

"Great. I'm Josh, by the way." He extends a hand and we shake.

I feel a smile stretch across my lips. “Nice to meet you, Josh.”

“Follow me,” he says, gesturing with his left hand for me to come with him. Relief washes over me as we walk, and I laugh at myself, realizing that I was a mere half second from losing this chance.

Even if I don’t feel like I belong here, I still need to give it my all.

Then if they don’t want me, it’s their loss.

Not me throwing away an opportunity.

I fall in step beside him, grateful that someone knows what’s going on, even if I don’t. Walking together across the lobby, past that imposing sculpture, he leads me to the glossy, golden elevator. He touches the black button, an upward carrot illuminated in gold.

The doors open instantly. He gestures with his hand, and as we step inside. Suddenly, I’m surrounded by marble and mirrors that gleam under the soft overhead light. Everything here enhances the modern aesthetic of the office.

He leans against the wall and glances at me, like he’s sizing me up. “Sorry there wasn’t anyone at the reception desk to greet you. That’s not the way we want to present ourselves to a potential new employee. My dad’s running the interviews up in his office. Our temporary receptionist must have walked away.”

I blink, surprised.

His dad?

It takes a moment for it all to click, and then I realize Josh must be Brody Thorne’s

son.

I try to act normal, but it's like my stomach does a flip. I nod at him, smiling again. I don't want to convey that I didn't know that he and his father ran this business together. It's not a good look to go into a job interview with zero understanding of the company.

The elevator dings, and we step out onto a floor that's all glass walls and sleek surfaces. Sunlight pours in through expansive windows, illuminating the open space and creating a breathtaking view of the city skyline.

And then I see him: Brody Thorne.

He's standing by his office door, looking down at something on his phone. I thought Josh was handsome, but his dad...his dad is even more striking.

He has broad shoulders, golden hair with a hint of silver that adds to his rugged charm, and sharp, maple eyes that glitter gold in the light.

My eyes trail to his left hand beneath his phone.

No wedding ring in sight.

Don't mess this up, Tasha. You can do this if you try your best.

I pull back, straightening my posture, trying to look more confident than I actually feel.

I can't afford to fuck this up, even if the only distraction I'm suffering from is how gorgeous my new bosses will be and whether they're single or not.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:04 am*

I need this job.

I can't work at the restaurant with my ex after what happened. I can't hope to have my own apartment if I keep waitressing.

I need to do this for me.

I need a change.

I've got this.

### Chapter Three

Brody

The moment Tasha Daniels walks into my office, I'm caught off guard.

I wasn't expecting her to be, well, this stunning.

And I don't mean in that polished, overdone way that most of the women I see around here are. She's got this realness and an immediate warmth about her. Her hair falls in loose caramel waves around her shoulders, shimmering in the ambient light of the office, while her skin is a soft, sun-kissed shade that radiates vitality.

She stops behind Josh, and I flick my gaze directly onto her, noticing her vibrant jade eyes. They're this cool, steely green, like a misty forest, but if you look closely, you catch tiny flecks of shimmering gold and even sky blue in them.

I don't know how I'm going to manage to get through this interview, I'm lost in this woman. This isn't like me.

I pull my eyes back to my phone, trying not to stare at her shapely, toned legs. That skirt...it's obvious it's not tailored for her, and I can't help but wonder if she's aware of what business casual means, but I try not to jump to any conclusions before the interview has begun.

I'll just have to make sure I keep my eyes on her face. I should focus on her eyes so that I don't seem creepy.

Already, I can tell I'm going to break that loose promise I just tried to make with myself.

I'm not sure why, but something about her reminds me of being a kid— of summers running wild outside in the warm breeze, listening to the frogs and crickets sing in the night air, not caring about anything but catching fireflies and staying out until the sun disappeared.

I haven't felt that way in...hell, years. A decade or more, probably.

I do my best to shake the thought off because I'm here to interview her, not admire her. I step forward, pocketing my phone and holding my hand out toward hers.

I see she isn't wearing a wedding ring, and I wonder how a gorgeous girl like her hasn't been scooped up already.

Focus.

"So, Tasha, tell me a little about yourself," I say, attempting to keep my tone steady and flat. I can't go into this interview falling all over myself already.

“Um, well,” she begins, and it’s clear off the bat that she’s nervous, but there’s also this genuine energy behind her words. “I’ve been working as a waitress, but I’m looking to switch careers. I’ve always been business-minded. I help the restaurant with supply orders and, obviously, working with the public in a restaurant gives you lots of customer service experience.”

She laughs awkwardly at the end of the sentence, which makes me laugh as well because I know what she’s saying between the lines: “I can handle assholes”.

I can tell already that she’s really here to give this everything she’s got, even if she’s a little unsure of herself.

It’s a refreshing change from the college graduates with rich parents who come in here and barely want to communicate during their interview because they think their last name, or the name of the overpriced school they attended, is going to guarantee them a job.

I can’t help but smile just a little. She’s a breath of fresh air compared to the suits I’m used to dealing with.

As the questions continue, I can see her eyes flitting around the room, taking in all of the details of my office, and I start to feel a little nervous about her opinion—something that surprises me deeply.

My office, I hope, feels like a blend of sophistication and industrial elegance. A large conference table made of reclaimed wood dominates the room, its surface smooth and glossy, reflecting the contemporary pendant lights hanging above it.

The walls are adorned with framed blueprints and photographs of past construction projects, each one showcasing a different architectural marvel, and the scent of polished wood and fresh paint lingers in the air.

We go through the usual questions, and I quickly realize something: the reception desk isn't where she belongs at all.

It's too...static, mundane.

Tasha's got too much life in her, too much spark to be stuck answering phones all day. It would be a waste of her talents to have her slogging away pushing papers and making appointments.

She's capable of more than that.

I lean back in my chair, considering her for a moment. "You're applying for the receptionist position," I say, watching her nod. "But I'm going to be honest, I think you'd be wasted there."

Her brow furrows gently, and she looks a bit thrown off, but she doesn't say anything. A flash of nervous energy ripples across her face, and I realize she thinks the worst.

But what I'm offering is better than a desk job.

"I need an assistant—someone who can keep up with my schedule, handle logistics and appointments, and isn't afraid to get her hands dirty because I don't just sit behind a desk, like hardly ever. I'm out on job sites, working with the crew, making sure things are running smoothly. That's part of the deal. If you take this job, you're going to be out there with me, a lot."

I half expect her to walk out right then. Being the assistant to the CEO is a lot different than being a receptionist. Waitressing and shadowing a construction CEO aren't exactly in the same ballpark, either, and most people would rather stay in the

air conditioning than stand around a construction site all day.

But, to my surprise, she doesn't even flinch at the offer.

In fact, she seems downright gleeful.

"You mean, I'd get to see the projects up close?!" she asks, a little too enthusiastically. There's a sincere note of curiosity in her voice.

It catches me off guard. She actually sounds interested.

Most women would rather talk about designer bags or celebrities...not construction equipment and architecture.

"Yeah," I say, nodding, slightly confused. "You'd be right there, seeing how things come together from the ground up. It's a lot of hard work, but..." I trail off, watching her expression.

Tasha's practically glowing, like this is the best thing she's heard all day.

Is this girl for real? Did someone put magic mushrooms in my coffee and I'm just hallucinating her right now?

"Okay," she says, her voice firmer now, her head nodding. "I'm up for it."

"Really?" I ask, shocked. Generally, I try not to let my face show surprise but this...this is downright amusing. I'm surprised at how ecstatic this girl in a too-tight skirt is about getting a pair of steel-toed boots on. "If you're sure, the position as my assistant is yours."

I reach out my hand tentatively.

Instead of running out the door, she takes it, her soft hand gripping mine with a touch that's firm but warm.

The moment our hands touch, there's this tiny spark, nothing dramatic, just a little jolt that makes my stomach tingle.

I tell myself it's just the nerves everyone gets when they meet new people, but when she pulls her hand away, I can't help but notice how my skin still tingles.

I also can't help but notice the desire I feel to touch her again...

Snapping out of those thoughts, I get up and gesture for her to follow me. "Let me show you around the office. Come this way."

As we walk, I'm very aware of her in that skirt. It's so tight, and I'm not complaining, but it's definitely not practical for the kind of work she's signed up for.

When we stop in front of one of the conference rooms, I glance over at her. "Do you have some more practical clothes? You can't be running around a job site in a skirt."

"Yeah, I do. I just...this skirt was borrowed on short notice." Her cheeks are flushed a rosy pink, and she looks down, obviously embarrassed.

I raise an eyebrow, smirking. "I can tell," I say.

She goes even redder, a deep burgundy coloring her high cheekbones.

I have to hide the smile I feel internally when I see her reaction to my words.

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I like putting her on edge.

I like it for all the wrong reasons, though.

What I would say, if she wasn't my new employee, is that her skirt is doing ridiculous things to her cute ass, and I probably need to stop noticing that if this arrangement is going to work.

And that worries me.

I don't know if this can work because of how hot she is.

But how do I say that without facing a harassment charge?

After we finish the tour, she heads toward the elevator, promising to be back at eight sharp tomorrow.

"Six," I correct her.

"What?"

"You'll be here at six. That's when I start work each day."

"Oh, six it is," she mumbles, and I can tell that's one thing about the job she didn't expect.

As I watch her leave, I just stand there for a moment, staring at the closed elevator



doors, wondering what the hell I just got myself into.

I've hired a lot of people over the years, but this feels different.

It feels different because I'm not sure why I picked her.

She's young and definitely doesn't have the background I usually go for.

But still, there's something about her, something that makes me think she'll surprise me in ways I can't begin to imagine.

Or, maybe I can imagine them.

And again, I am flooded with worry over this situation.

"So, did you find someone for the receptionist job?" Josh asks, catching me just as I'm about to reach my office, and I shake my head.

"Nope. Hired an assistant instead."

He looks at me, his eyes widened a little in surprise, then a slow smile spreads across his face. "That girl who was just here?" he asks, tilting his head toward the elevator's doors.

"Dad, do you think she can do it? That's not an entry-level position. She was only a waitress before..."

"I know," I say, feeling a bit defensive. "But she's eager, and I think she will do a good job. She's got potential. She hasn't been molded by some other CEO yet, either, she'll pick all of this up quickly because it's her first assistant job."

“Sure, Dad. Whatever you say.” Josh just laughs, shaking his head before he winks at me, like he knows something I don’t, and it makes my skin prickle.

His last words though, they stop me dead in my tracks.

“Maybe think about why you hired her, huh?” he says to me.

I roll my eyes, uttering a dismissive laugh and brushing off his comment, but it sticks with me as I head back to my office.

It’s ridiculous.

I’m just giving an eager, smart young lady a chance to prove herself.

Even if she is incredibly beautiful.

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That's not why I hired her...is it?

### Chapter Four

Tasha

The alarm on my phone starts blaring at five a.m., and I'm out of bed in a flash, noticing that the sun hasn't even risen outside yet when I enter the bathroom.

Despite my stomach feeling like twelve snakes tangled together, a jumbled mess of nerves and excitement, I'm not about to be late on my first day.

I yawn. Opening my suitcase, I pull out a pair of jeans and a tank top and throw a flannel over it. Jasmine loaned me the flannel. She said it'd make me look like I belonged there.

Sitting on the open sofa bed I lace up my brand-new steel-toed boots, the ones I splurged on last night after getting the job.

They're stiff and uncomfortable, but they make me feel like I can take on anything, and I hope to break them in over time.

The drive to the site is quiet, with barely any cars on the road and the sky slowly lightening into shades of gray and pink as ripples of orange break over the eastern horizon.

When I get to the Thorne and Thorne job site I was told to arrive at, the place is

already buzzing, workers milling around in hard hats, trucks pulling in, and the deep scent of fresh earth and concrete in the air.

I spend what feels like hours watching demonstrations on how to spot hazards, how to lift things properly, and how to use a fire extinguisher, just in case.

I fill out a mountain of orientation paperwork, and by the time I'm done, I'm convinced I'm never going to see the actual site itself.

But then, finally, I'm out of the stuffy room in the temporary building, squinting at the bright morning sun and stepping onto the job site. I look around, taking in the noise, the energy.

It's like a whole different world. And honestly? It's fun. I'm used to being on my feet all day as a waitress, and I never really thought getting a desk job was right for me. I just didn't know there were jobs like this out there to go after.

Mr. Thorne's words float through my mind. "Because I don't just sit behind a desk, like hardly ever. I'm always out on job sites."

I can't help but steal a few glances at Brody as we start working on tasks together. He's got this rugged, no-nonsense look to him, and I'm not gonna lie, he's hot.

He's not just hot, though. Hot almost feels like an understatement. It's more like he's way hotter than any boss has the right to be.

But he's also sharp. He knows his stuff inside out, and from the way the crews talk about him, it's clear they respect him.

It's all very cool, even if it makes me feel a little out of my depth sometimes. Any time I have those doubts about myself though, I just remind myself that all jobs feel

this way when you're new. In a year or two, I'll be doing this with my eyes closed.

At one point, muttering something about needing the right kind of screwdriver, I see him sorting through a toolbox. He's rummaging through different compartments, and I step in, picking out a Phillips head from the pile.

"You mean this one?" I ask, holding it out.

"Yeah, that's it. How'd you know which one?" He raises an eyebrow, looking a little surprised.

"Growing up broke, I had to learn how to fix my own things. Couldn't afford to pay someone to do it or to buy new things very often." I shrug, a small smile tugging at my lips.

"That's handy," he says, giving me a grin. "Might have to put you to use more often."

He nods like he's impressed, and I feel a little thrill at that.

I laugh gently, but inside, I'm glowing like a giant star.

There's something so satisfying about proving I'm not just some clueless girl.

Maybe I can actually be good at this...

The rest of my first day is a whirlwind. First, we drive around from one job site to another, checking on progress, talking to the foremen, making sure everyone has what they need.

I get introduced to multiple crews, each a group of guys with rough hands and even rougher jokes. They look me up and down with morbid curiosity when Brody

introduces me, their expressions steeped in doubt.

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One of them, a thick, burly guy named Dave, smirks at me with a condescending glance. “Think you can lift just one bag of cement, sweetheart?” he asks, nodding at a fifty-pound bag on the ground. There’s a challenge in his brown eyes, and I know he’s expecting me to shake my head and back down.

I’m not about to give him the satisfaction, though.

And I never back down.

So, I walk over, bend my knees into a squat position, and hoist the bag up before walking it over and dropping it at Dave’s big feet.

It’s heavier than I expected, but I keep my face steady, not letting it show. “You mean like that?” I ask, my voice light and airy.

There’s a moment of silence before Dave breaks out into a cheesy grin. “All right, I see you,” he says, tipping his hard hat at me.

The other guys chuckle and murmur amongst themselves, and I can tell I’ve earned a little bit of respect.

I feel Brody’s electric gaze on me, and I see there’s an amused glint in his eye.

The day goes on like that: me trying to prove I can handle whatever they throw at me, and them testing me.

To be honest though, in a way, it feels more like they’re welcoming me into the fold

than trying to push me out. Like by having me do these menial tasks, I'm proving my weight in their world.

Construction is dangerous and tough, I kind of get that they have to vet me to some degree to make sure I'm not going to sit and sulk on the ground because I chipped a nail.

There are a few moments throughout the day when things feel like they could get...steamy. Like when Brody leans over to point out something on a blueprint, and his thick arm brushes against me, or when we're walking side by side and our hands almost touch.

I know to keep it professional, but I can't ignore the way my heart skips a beat whenever he looks at me like I've surprised or pleased him.

The sun is low on the horizon by the time we're driving back to the office from the last site, bathing everything around us in a warm, orange glow.

The truck is quiet, the radio playing softly, and Brody glances over at me. I feel a surge of excitement every time his warm, maple-colored eyes turn to me.

"So," he says, his voice casual and smooth, "what do you want to do with your life, Tasha? I mean, long term."

I pause, mulling over the question. In all fairness, I wasn't expecting it, and now I feel on the spot to say something impressive or lofty. Instead, I find myself answering honestly.

"I want to get out of this loop my parents have always been in," I say, staring out the window. "I really want to go to college. I don't want to be stuck, you know? Working dead-end jobs, married to someone I'm just...settling for. I don't want any of that."



He nods, understanding crossing his gorgeous face. His eyes still look down the road, but I can see him listening to me. “Sounds like you’ve thought a lot about it.”

“I have,” I admit. “I just need to figure out how to make it happen. And what exactly I want to go for. Something where I can make some real money, though. Finance, accounting...I dunno...something that I can give the life I never had to my future children.”

There’s this thoughtful look on Brody’s face but he doesn’t say anything, and it makes me wonder what he’s thinking.

“I can’t help with all of that,” Brody finally says, glancing over at me as he drives. A smile stretches across his face. “But if college is something you want, the company has programs that can help. We support employees who want to get their degrees.”

I blink a few times, trying to process what he’s saying.

For a second, I don’t believe it.

But he just keeps looking at me with this steady, sincere expression, and my chest suddenly feels like it’s going to burst, like a balloon someone keeps pumping air into.

College has always been this hazy, impossible dream: something other people get to do, not me. But now, hearing him say that, it feels like there’s this door slowly creaking open.

It feels like I might actually be able to step through it and follow my heart.

“Seriously?” I ask, my voice a little breathless. My eyes stare at him with anticipation.

“Seriously,” he says, nodding. An amused smile curls in the corner of his perfect lips.  
“If you’re interested, we can talk more about it.”

“Yeah, I’m interested.” I can’t help the huge grin spreading across my face as I reply, trying not to sound too eager but failing miserably.

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When we pull into the office parking lot, he doesn't turn the engine off right away.

Instead, he looks over at me, his dark eyes catching the last bit of light from the sunset. "How about we grab some dinner instead of heading straight home?" he says, and I feel a flutter in my stomach.

"Yeah, okay," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, even though my nerves are exploding within me. I'm excited and nervous. I'm suddenly very aware of how close we are in the truck, the way his voice gets a little softer when he talks to me, the way his eyes keep looking over my body.

The drive to the bar is more relaxed, and there's this flirty banter between us. I feel like I'm laughing at every little joke he makes, even the dumb ones. I know I probably look like some silly schoolgirl with the way I keep giggling, and it's starting to annoy me a little.

I shouldn't be acting like this, no matter how hot he is.

I mean, come on, this is my boss.

But then he looks into my eyes again, and there's this spark. It's like he knows exactly what I'm thinking, and it sends a little jolt right down my spine each time.

I can feel the warmth on my cheeks as we pull up to the diner and bar. I'm trying to look out the window and convince myself to relax, but our chemistry is palpable.

We're outside one of those classic Midwestern dive bars, complete with a flickering

neon sign that reads, “Dale’s”, and a gravel parking lot dotted with pickup trucks and motorcycles. There’s nothing fancy about it, but it’s got that warm, familiar look.

Brody parks, and we walk inside together, the gravel crunching under our boots. I steal another quick glance at him. He’s got this casual, confident way about him. Even his walk drips with confidence.

It’s like he fits in everywhere, and I suddenly feel a little giddy just being there with him. Again, I have to remind myself to keep my cool. I catch myself smiling and look away at the setting sun, trying to act relaxed, but it’s no use.

“Hope this place isn’t too nice for you,” he jokes, and I laugh, smacking him gently with the back of my hand.

Every time I think I’ve got a handle on the way he makes me feel, he makes me laugh again and throws me off completely.

Inside, the bar is warm and a little noisy, with a soft, low hum of classic country music playing in the background. The walls are decorated with old saloon-style wood paneling. There’s also a pair of longhorn horns, faded pictures of bull riders, and license plates from every state mounted all over the place.

There’s a big wooden mantle over the bar with vintage whiskey bottles lined up like trophies, and the lighting is dim, giving everything a kind of golden, crystalline glow.

It smells like fried food, beer, and wood polish. It’s all comforting and familiar despite me not having been here ever.

We grab two stools at the bar, and I’m acutely aware of how close we are, our shoulders almost touching. Brody notices it, too, his eyes flicking down to my shoulder, but he gives me a warm smile that makes me suddenly feel very hot.

The bartender, a bearded guy who looks like he could swing a sledgehammer all day, nods at Brody in recognition. “The usual, whiskey neat? And for you, miss?” he asks, and Brody nods before looking over at me.

“I’ll have a rum and coke,” I say, and I reach for my purse to pull out my card, but Brody stops me with a hand on mine.

“I’ve got it,” he says, his voice firm but gentle. “This is a celebration, right? Your first day. I can’t have you pay. You’re my new employee.”

I hesitate, pushing my card back into my wallet, feeling a mix of gratitude and a little discomfort. Still, I let him pay, and when the drinks come, I lift mine up, giving him a small smile. “To new beginnings, I guess,” I say, and he clinks his glass against mine gently.

We start talking, and I’m surprised at how easy it is to slip into conversation with him. He tells me about bringing up Josh as a single dad when Josh’s mom and he split up. He says how he’s proud to be running the company with his son, and I can tell there’s a lot of love there.

It makes him seem more...human, somehow.

Like he’s not just my boss.

We order food, and it’s nothing fancy, just burgers and fries, but it smells amazing when it arrives, all greasy and perfect. It’s just the kind of meal you need after a long day of hard work.

The first bite I take is better than I expected, and I’m surprised. It’s probably one of the best things I’ve tasted in weeks.

“This burger is really good,” I say, wiping my mouth with a napkin.

“Oh yeah,” Brody comments. “There’s a reason I brought you here. Getting my hands on one of these was the main reason,” he jokes.

“Was that your only reason?” I ask, feeling my eyes search his face, and the smirk that comes over his lips nearly brings me to my knees.

Uh oh.

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We keep talking, and it's like the conversation keeps slipping deeper, without either of us really trying. I ask him about his life. He's careful about what he says, but not totally closed off.

He talks about growing up in the construction business, marrying a girl from the same town, having Josh.

"We grew apart," he says, and there's this kind of resignation in his voice, like he's used to explaining it that way. "We wanted different things, I guess. She moved on. She never really wanted kids, and I focused on Josh and the business."

It's clear he doesn't usually share much about himself, but still, I'm enraptured by him. I want to know everything about him.

I ask him what he wants in the future, and he pauses, like he's not sure how to answer.

"I'm not unhappy," he finally says, and it sounds almost like a question.

"There's nothing you feel that you're missing?"

"Well, I mean, I'm not going to act like I live a perfect life. I just...you know, haven't figured everything out yet."

We finish our drinks, and he pays. We head back out to the truck. The night air is cool, and there's this quiet that settles over us as we walk.

I'm still thinking about what he said, about not being unhappy, when I suddenly stumble over a crack in the pavement. Before I can catch myself, Brody's hands shoot out, steadying me.

His hands wrapped around my waist. He's caught me before I fell, and our eyes meet before he lets me go.

"Easy there," he murmurs, but there's this charged moment like we're both waiting for something to happen.

And then it does.

He leans down and kisses me, soft and slow, like he's been thinking about it all night.

I can't think, can't breathe. I can only feel the warmth of his lips against mine and his hand firm on my arm, holding me steady.

As much as I want to stop him—he's my boss, after all—I realize in this moment, that I don't want to push him away.

I want to give him more.

## Chapter Five

Brody

I pull back from the kiss, getting a hold of myself, my heart racing and my mind in chaos.

"Tasha, I..." I begin to apologize, but the words tumble out awkwardly.



Before I can even finish, she jumps up toward me again, standing on her tip-toes so she can kiss me back.

That second kiss ignites something primal inside me, and from the look in her eyes as she pulls away, I can tell she wants this as much as I do.

I can't resist any longer, not now that I know she wants it, too.

I pull her against me, my hands gliding along the curves of her hips and ass. She feels so small, so soft and warm, like the flame of a candle brought to life in the shape of one of the most beautiful women I've ever set eyes on.

I'm overwhelmed by the sensation of her body pressing against mine. The feeling of her breasts snug against me as we kiss makes me want to bend her over my truck right here, right now.

It's been a long time since I felt this kind of connection with anyone, body and mind, and I'm both exhilarated and terrified.

Still, I'm not going to let whatever this is pass me by.

"Would you like to come back to my place?" I ask, our foreheads touching. I'm taking in the scent of her as we rock back and forth a little. My voice is low, laced with a mix of vulnerability and desire, and I can feel her hesitation lingering in the air.

When she nods, her eyes sparkling with excitement, I can't help the smile that breaks across my face.

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“Yeah,” she says, her voice airy and light, and the sound sends another wave of heat rushing through me. I take her hand, and we walk back to the truck, anticipation buzzing between us.

As we drive to my place, the tension is electric. Tasha bites her lip, a soft laugh escaping her, and I can see the excitement dancing in her eyes.

I can’t help but let my hand slide between her legs, feeling the warmth radiating off her skin.

“Wow, this is quite the adventure,” she teases, her voice light but filled with a hint of nerves. I take in the sight of her cheeks, which are pink both from the drink and the kiss. I chuckle, feeling my pulse quicken with each glance in her direction.

“Just wait,” I say, unable to hide my grin. “It gets better.”

Turning the radio down, I let the silence wrap around us, punctuated only by the sound of the engine and our breathing. Her hand finds my thigh, resting there tentatively at first, but soon it’s stroking, her fingers brushing against me with a growing confidence that sends my mind spiraling.

Her voice is a soft whisper as she leans in closer. “You’re not at all what I had expected,” she says.

“Is that a good thing or...?” I reply, stealing a glance at her, and my heart races at the way she’s looking at me. Her eyes are filled with curiosity mixed with desire.

“Definitely a good thing. I like surprises,” she answers, her eyes glimmering in the twilight. The air between us thickens with lust and excitement, and with every passing moment, I can feel the chemistry growing.

I navigate the road with one hand, the other lingering over her thigh, savoring the warmth of her, knowing that whatever happens next will change everything.

I pull into my driveway, pushing the car into park, and it only takes one look at her before we’re wrapped up in each other again, our lips locked over in a passionate kiss. Our hands are everywhere, trying to find skin to touch and enjoy.

“Quick, let’s go inside.”

We manage to slide past Dana, my housekeeper, though I doubt she would’ve made a fuss. I bee-line it to my bedroom, her small hand tucked into mine. I’m so nervous I feel like it’s the first night I’ve ever been with a girl—like I’m a kid on his first date.

I take her into my arms, shutting the door behind me before flinging her on the bed. I pull the zipper of my Carhartt coat down, tossing it on the chair in the corner before peeling off my flannel. She squeals as I jump on the bed, planting myself on top of her and taking her lips into my own.

A sly smile comes over Tasha’s face as she thrusts herself up and onto her knees. She presses me up and gestures for me to get off the bed.

Confused, I do as she says. I stand before her as she rips my pants off of my body and takes me into her mouth. A gasp leaves my lips as I feel hers around my cock. The warmth and moisture of her mouth sends pangs of pleasure through my entire body, and I waver a little as I stand over her.

Her delicate hands wrap around my dick as she takes all of me into her mouth. My

knees buckle, my hands sweeping through the thick locks of her hair as I felt my hips slowly start to gyrate toward her.

Tasha's hands fall to my hip bones as she gently rocks me back and forth, showing me the rhythm that she wants me to use. I can only stand a few more thrusts before I pull myself from her, lifting her to her feet.

"You're going to make me finish before we've even started," I purr, bending her back over the bed. I take in the gorgeous view of her long, toned legs, splitting apart to reveal to me her most sensitive and secret of places.

I can't help myself. I bury my face deep into her pussy. I hear her cry out in ecstasy as I eat her from behind, my hands reaching for her hips and pulling her straight back to my face.

I dip two fingers into her welcoming heat, and she keens a little. "Oh my God," she murmurs, her fingers gripping the bedspread. "That's amazing."

Gliding against her soft skin, I feel the wetness of her folds drip along my fingers as they circle her clit. Slowly, I begin to make small, circular motions against the sensitive little bud of flesh. She gasps as I quicken my pace, her hips jamming against me. I can tell she's trying to push my fingers inside of her.

"Please," she whispers. "I want you inside of me."

"There's no rush," I say to her, continuing my efforts to please her.

I suck her clit into my mouth, and she gasps, arching her back. I can feel a fine tremor in her thighs, and I step back before guiding her to flip around and lay back on the bed.

She opens her arms to me, inviting me to come to her. I smile as I climb onto the bed, but I don't fall into her arms. Instead, I lick her pussy over and over again, suckling on her clit at the top of each pass.

Her eyes roll into the back of her head and she shudders beneath my hands. I press her more firmly onto the mattress, increasing the tempo of my efforts.

"Brody!" she gasps, her knees closing against me, but I pry them wide open. I ravage her with my lips and tongue, licking and sucking every millimeter of her.

"Come for me, baby," I whisper to her, and as if I can command her orgasm, she shatters, crying my name over and over as she shakes and trembles.

"Good girl," I tell her, rising over her. I look down at her beautiful face, taking in her flushed cheeks and her glade-green eyes. She's too beautiful for me, too young, and I feel a pang of worry.

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“Tasha,” I say to her, “are you sure that you...”

She silences me by pressing a finger to my lips and canting her hips up, nudging her wetness against my raging erection.

“Fuck me, Brody,” she pleads. “Please.”

Her legs splay apart even more, and my hands fall to her inner thighs as I push myself inside of her. She’s so tight that I almost come just from pressing into her the first time, but I hold back, panting.

Her delicious, perky breasts are skimming my chest as I start to move, and I love the little ripples of pleasure I can feel fanning out from her pussy as she rises to meet each of my thrusts.

I can’t remember sex ever feeling like this. It’s like I’m dying and being reborn, like the pleasure is both too much and not enough all at once.

I start moving faster, spurred on by the increasing tempo of her cries and the pressure of her hips against mine.

She lifts up to capture my lips in an open-mouthed kiss, and our tongues tangle together as I thrust harder and harder within her, chasing my release.

“God, you’re so big and perfect,” she murmurs to me between nipping kisses.

Her words are my undoing, and I shout as I spill inside of her, shaking and trembling,

just barely able to hold myself up off her beautiful body.

As I start to cum, she follows me over the edge, uttering a long, loud cry, her body arching off the bed so hard that her breasts press flat against me. I can feel the racing of her heart and hear her shaky, short breathing as the pleasure has its way with her.

I roll to the side, taking her with me, cradling her head on my bicep as we catch our breath together.

My dick is still inside her, and I feel it already stirring again. I can't remember the last time I was able to go two rounds in such a short timeframe, and I wouldn't blame her if she didn't want to do so tonight.

"Already?" she giggles, clenching her inner muscles a little. My dick leaps to life eagerly.

"Apparently," I say to her.

"Here," she says, pulling away from me and turning her back toward my front. "I like it like this."

"Happy to oblige," I tell her, pressing a kiss to the juncture of her neck and her shoulder.

She lifts her leg, hooking it back over my hip, and I nudge my cock up into place, just dipping between the lips of her pussy. She presses back toward me, and I slowly slide into her.

"Oh God, oh God," she gasps as I fill her completely. I reach around and grab one of her breasts, squeezing it as I start pumping within her again.

She's even tighter from this angle if that's even possible. Her cute little ass is snuggled against my thighs. I slide my hand away from her breast down her lean, toned belly, to grip her hip and hold her in place as I start to press into her more urgently.

"Fuck me harder," she pleads, lifting her leg higher.

I oblige, pressing her down onto my cock as I give in to the devil in my mind telling me to lose myself in her, to think just of me and not of her.

Thankfully, this seems to be exactly what she wants, and her cries of pleasure get louder as I ram into her welcoming heat over and over again.

"Come for me again, baby," I say to her, letting go of her hip and stroking her clit gently.

"I'm...Oh God, Brody...I'm going to come!" she gasps moments before her orgasm washes over her.

I feel the heat of her release flood over my dick, and I hold her steady as she snaps and shakes with the force of sheer pleasure. I allow myself two more hard thrusts into her sweet little pussy before I surrender to the ecstasy threatening to sweep me away yet again.

"We made a mess of your bed," she pants with a little laugh, leaning back against me.

"All my fault," I tell her. "Besides, that's what it's for."

"Oh?" she teases me, twisting around in my arms to kiss me. "I thought it was for sleeping."



“That too,” I say. “Come on, let’s shower and get some sleep. Six o’clock comes earlier than you think.”

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I reluctantly pull out of her, and offer her a hand to get out of bed.

I don't know what the repercussions of tonight will be, and at the moment, I don't really care.

All I know is that I have just enjoyed the best sex of my life with the most beautiful woman I've ever invited into my bed. The world feels pretty great, and I don't want to think about anything else but the little bubble of happiness that I'm floating in.

### Chapter Six

Tasha

The tension between Brody and I is palpable as we've been working alongside each other all day on site.

Every time I glance at him, a warmth spreads through me, a fire igniting deep within me, bringing back memories of our night together.

I think of the way he just naturally pulled me into his arms, our laughter blending into something deeper as we shared that kiss under the soft glow of the bar sign. I can still feel the rush of excitement, the way he made me feel...like I was the only girl in the entire world.

He had dropped me off at home to change in the early hours of the morning. We both drove in to work separately to avoid drawing any suspicion from the rest of the staff, but it's hard not to think about the spark that's been ignited between us.

Now, back in the office, it feels like we're playing a game of hide-and-seek, trying to keep our secret alive between the two of us while surrounded by coworkers who remain blissfully unaware of our connection.

I steal glances at him when I think he's not looking, but most of the time, he's already looking at me when I do so. His warm, amber eyes hold a hint of mischief, and I can't help but wonder if he's thinking the same things I am.

I ache for the intimacy we shared, to feel the heat of his body against mine. It's a challenge to focus on the tasks at hand when all I want is to close the distance between us, to feel his warmth envelop me again, if only for a moment in private.

Brody, a document gripped in his strong hand, strides over to my desk, and my heart skips a beat at the sight. He leans closer to me, our arms brushing together as he points out a detail on the page. The smell of his cologne and the warmth of his skin sends a shiver through me, and for a moment, I'm lost in him.

I lean in just a little, feeling my shoulder leaning against him, savoring the closeness, the way our bodies seem to align perfectly, as if they were meant to be together.

But then, reality crashes back in, and I catch myself, suddenly aware of how inappropriate this feels in the bright light of the office.

I pull away from him slightly, creating some space that feels both necessary and painful. I glance up at him, and I can see it in his eyes: an unspoken understanding, a hint of longing that mirrors my own.

He's just as affected as I am, if not more, and I can't help but feel a rush of excitement mixed with anxiety.

It's clear we're both trying to maintain a professional facade in front of the others

milling about, both trying to play it cool. Still, my mind is racing, filled with thoughts of how much I crave his touch.

I want to feel the way his fingers grazed my skin, I want the feeling of him pushing himself inside of me. I fight the urge to reach out and close the gap between us, knowing we have to keep our secret safe, at least for now.

Before I can second-guess myself, Brody suddenly takes my hand, his grip warm and steady, and guides me away from my desk.

“C’mon,” he says.

My heart races with the thrilling, nervous energy that is bubbling inside me as he leads me toward his office. The way he glances around, ensuring no one is watching, sends a rush of excitement through me.

I can’t help but giggle softly. I feel like we are a couple of teenagers sneaking away from the prying eyes of the world.

We move quickly but quietly, dodging coworkers and navigating the bustling office space, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body. The anticipation of what’s about to happen makes every step feel electric.

His fingers intertwine with mine, and it feels so right, so utterly natural. I try not to glance at him, worried someone will see the lust written all over me for this gorgeous man. His expression is a mix of playful mischief and desire, and it makes my stomach flutter.

We reach the office door, and he hesitates for just a moment, before pushing it open and pulling me inside, shutting the door behind us with a soft click. The room is lit only by the light streaming from the windows, a stark contrast to the brightness of the

fluorescents.

It feels like our own little world now, cut off from the rest of the company.

He turns, clicking on a radio, classic 70's rock filling the space. Before I can even take in my surroundings, he closes the distance between us, his lips crashing onto mine.

The kiss is urgent and passionate, igniting all those hidden feelings I've been trying to keep in check. I melt against him, forgetting everything else. I'm lost in the thrill of this moment, in this secret we're sharing.

His kisses, supple and smooth, melt me, and soon, my hands are peeling his shirt up, running along the rigid lines of his abs. His touch, his smell, everything about him arouses me.

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I feel his hands slide beneath my chunky-knit sweater, his fingertips playing with my nipples and making me moan out loud.

“Oh, you have no idea how sweet you taste. I knew I couldn’t work with you all day without getting another taste of you...”

Brody sighs in my ear, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine and making me gush for him. His strong hands grip my hips, I feel his fingertips gently dig into my bones, pressing me against him.

His hands slide beneath my thighs, lifting me up on his desk. He lays me across it, pulling my sweater off over my head and looking down at me.

His head dives down, trailing kisses along my stomach, lower and lower, slower and slower. I feel his mouth tug at the top of my jeans.

Oh, my...right here in the site office?

My lips purse and I feel myself blushing. I pull my hands over my eyes, feeling embarrassment take hold of me.

“You shouldn’t feel embarrassed,” he says, pulling down my pants and exposing me to the air. “You’re far more beautiful than any other woman I’ve ever been with. Every inch of you.”

Holy. Fuck.

“Th-thank you,” I manage to sputter out, feeling myself still rigid under his gaze.

He lowers to his knees, and suddenly, I feel his tongue, wet and warm, glide against me. I moan, arching my back, before he claps his hand over my mouth, shaking his head.

“I can’t do this if you’re going to beloud,” he whispers.

I nod obediently.

My hips press upward towards his face with each glide of his tongue as he keeps sucking and licking. His tongue flicks my clit again and again before thrusting into me.

My hand falls to the back of his head, pressing him in deeper, begging him for more, as I groan into his hand.

His lips pull away, only to be replaced with his dominant, aggressive fingers, and I respond, bucking my hips against him as he glides his fingers across me and then inside of me. I cry into his hand with each motion, and he stands, leaning over me.

“My, you’re all ready for me, aren’t you?” he whispers, and I hear the faint sound of his zipper being pulled down.

My mouth drops as I see the size of him, marveling at it for a second time.

He’s the biggest I’ve ever seen in my entire life, and I have to keep myself from gasping. I don’t know if it was the darkness of his bedroom last night, but seeing him in daylight now...I don’t know how I managed to take all of it.

And yet, I’m dripping at the thought of doing it again.

His hands grasp my hips, pulling me down toward him as my legs rise instinctively. I feel him slide the head against my wetness before pressing deep, gliding inside of me. I gasp, my hands reach for him. His left hand covers my mouth again, and his right hand laces into my own.

It only takes a few motions to bring me to the edge, my back arching as I inch myself down as far as possible. He's so sexy thrusting against me, his abs peeking through his unbuttoned flannel.

I wrap my legs around him, and by the sudden look in his eyes, I can tell that he likes that I want this.

"Please," I beg. "Make me come again, make me gush all over you here, in the work trailer. I want you to mark me as yours."

There is a fiery look that comes into his eyes when I tell him this, and he pounds against me so hard I'm worried we're going to collapse the desk.

He lifts his knee onto the edge, gaining more leverage. My hands wrap around his back, feeling his muscles rippling with each movement. The tide of pleasure races over me, and I feel myself orgasm again and again, quivering as I clench around him.

My reaction sparks something inside of him, and suddenly he lifts me up, his throbbing cock still inside of me. He presses me against a bare wall, thrusting up into me.

I have never had a boss who I liked so much.

Still, all jokes aside, as he comes inside of me with a muffled moan, I feel a melting collage of emotions for him.



He allows me to slide down his body with a gentle laugh. Our eyes meet, his perfect brown gaze warm as he looks up at me from staring down at my bare breasts, and I laugh, too.

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“Well,” he whispers with a laugh. “We have to get back to work.”

A few short hours pass after our stolen moment, and the site hums with activity as everyone works busily to move the necessary equipment onto the bare plot of land in Chicago. I’m still buzzing from the thrill of being close to Brody, but now I’m focused on my new role, eager to prove myself.

Suddenly, the door swings open, and in walks Gemma, Josh’s wife. She has this infectious energy about her, and when she spots me, her bright topaz-blue eyes light up. She strides over, her raven hair bouncing as she approaches with a big smile.

“Tasha! It’s so good to see you!” she exclaims, pulling me into a quick hug. “I’ve been hearing all about you from Josh. We’re so happy to have you here!”

She turns her attention to Brody. “Look who finally showed up to work!” Gemma teases, hands on her hips. “What are you doing, Brody? Did you forget your schedule again?” I can’t help but chuckle at the familiar dynamic between them.

He rolls his eyes, a smirk playing on his lips. “Scheduled for weeks, huh? I thought you meant weeks in a ‘when I feel like it’ kind of way,” he replies with mocking tone, but a sly smile stretches across his lips.

The lips that had just been pressed to my pussy a few hours ago.

“Maybe Tasha can help manage you,” Gemma shoots back, her laughter filling the air. “She’s your new assistant, after all.”

Brody chuckles, shaking his head. “I doubt Tasha wants to take on the job of babysitting me.”

Gemma teases, nudging him playfully. “Oh, come on! You know you’d love it if someone kept you in line.”

I smile at their banter, feeling like I’m witnessing a friendly sibling rivalry.

When the laughter settles, Gemma turns her attention back to me. “So, Tasha, I hear you want to start college?”

“Yes, I do,” I reply, my excitement bubbling to the surface. “I’ve always wanted to go, but it just never felt possible until now.”

Gemma’s beautiful grin widens, and I see genuine enthusiasm in her eyes. “That’s amazing! You know, I manage the college aspect of the business to help out our employees. We have programs set up to support education, and I can get you all set up with everything you need.”

“Really? That would be incredible! I didn’t know that was an option.”

“Absolutely!” Gemma says, her energy infectious. “I’ll make sure you have everything you need to get started. You deserve this, Tasha.”

“Thank you! Seriously, I really appreciate it,” I say, feeling a rush of gratitude. As she shares more about the programs, I can’t help but feel hopeful about the future, especially now that I have the chance to make something of myself.

Gemma’s office back at the corporate building is warm and inviting, decorated with colorful art and motivational quotes that feel like they’re encouraging me to chase my dreams. I sink into a plush chair opposite her desk, excitement bubbling in my chest.

“I totally get it,” Gemma says, leaning back in her chair, her bright blue eyes sparkling with understanding. “When I was your age, I wanted to break the cycle, too. I grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other’s business. It was suffocating.”

Her words resonate with me deeply. I’ve always felt trapped by my upbringing, my parents’ struggles hanging over me like a dark cloud. “You really did it, though,” I reply, a smile creeping across my face. “You left, and now you’re here.”

Gemma nods, her dark hair catching the light. “It wasn’t easy, but it was worth it. You have to believe that you can do the same. You have a chance to create a future that’s all yours.”

I feel hope settling over me like a warm blanket. For the first time, I can see a path forward, a path filled with possibilities. College, a career, a life that doesn’t feel like running in place. I’m ready to take that leap.

My phone buzzes on the table, breaking the moment.

I glance at the screen, my stomach dropping when I see Jasmine’s name. I swipe to answer, my heart racing.

“Tasha! You need to come home now!” Jasmine’s voice is frantic with a mix of urgency and excitement. “I’m packing up my stuff. I’m leaving for Vegas early! You have to help me.”

“Wait, what?” My mind races. “Why are you leaving so suddenly? Can’t you wait?”

“No! I got a call back about a position and they want me to start ASAP, and I can’t even take all my stuff with me. Just get here, okay? Please!”

I look at Gemma, who raises an eyebrow in concern. “Everything okay?”

I nod, but it feels like I’m lying. “Jasmine, my best friend I’ve been crashing with is moving to Vegas. She wants me to help her pack. She offered to have me come with her but...”

Gemma’s expression changes. “Tasha, you have to think about what this means. You’ve got to decide which path you want. Do you want to build roots here, or are you ready to run off to a new city?”

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Her words hit me hard. The idea of running away from my problems is tempting, but what would I leave behind?

My heart races, torn between friendship and the potential for something more with Brody.

The idea of banking on anything with my hot boss who I have been having a fling with feels childish and stupid. Still, that glimmer of hope shines brightly, despite how hard I am working to put it out of mind.

“I just...I don’t know,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Gemma nods and smiles at me gently. “Big decisions. Think about it. There’s no rush on our end.”

“Thanks,” I say quietly, my head spinning.

Do I stay here and build a new life for myself, or do I go with my best friend to a city I’ve never been to without a job or any idea of what I want to do with myself?

## Chapter Seven

Brody

It’s late and the cool autumn air is flowing through the house. My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter, the loud rumble against the marble top pulling me from my thoughts.

Tasha has been texting me on and off all night, asking for my advice on whether she should go to Vegas with Jasmine.

I've been reminding her that it's a decision she has to make for herself, but I can't help the worry that knots my stomach.

Then my phone rings.

"Tasha?" I answer immediately. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have anywhere to stay starting tomorrow," she admits in a shaky voice. "Jasmine is leaving and following her for a place to crash is literally the only reason I would go to Vegas with her. I don't know what to do."

A wave of relief washes over me, but I quickly temper it with caution.

I want her to stay, but the last thing I can do is say that outright.

Also, I don't want to influence her selfishly. I want her to pursue what she wants.

"Tasha, you need to think about what's best for you. I can't make that decision."

"I just wish I had a solid place to go," she says, and I can hear the uncertainty in her voice. "When my ex...well, without going into all of that, let's just say I wasn't prepared to move out when I did."

After a moment of contemplation, I blurt out, "You can stay in the other wing of my house for now. It'll give you time to save up and figure things out."

The silence stretches between us, and I wonder if I've taken a step too far.

Then she breathes out a soft, “Really? Thank you! I...”

“Just get your things sorted. We’ll talk more tomorrow,” I say, cutting her off before I let myself get too caught up in the excitement of having her close.

After hanging up, I lean against the counter, rubbing my eyes with my hands. My mind races. I can’t believe I just offered her a place to stay.

What have I gotten myself into?

Sure, I’m relieved she’s not running off to Vegas, but now what? I’m responsible for her well-being now.

The thought of coming home to Tasha every night makes me smile despite my reservations. I picture her here, sitting across from me, brightening up my space with her energy and laughter.

The idea is intoxicating.

But then, reality hits me.



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What if this arrangement raises eyebrows? My reputation as CEO is important, and I've worked too hard to gain respect in my industry.

Having a young assistant living with me could raise some serious questions.

I think of my family and friends. Their judgment might break my heart.

Yet, despite the risks, I can't deny that Tasha is the best thing that's happened to me in years. She brings a youthful spark into my otherwise serious existence. Her laughter, her passion...everything about her is refreshing, like rain on a hot summer day.

It's been so long since I've felt this way, and it makes me question if I'm really ready to give up on what we have just for the sake of appearances.

As I stand in my kitchen, staring into the distance, I weigh the pros and cons of Tasha living with me. On one hand, there's the age gap. I'm pushing fifty, while she's in her twenties.

What could we possibly have in common aside from the job I hired her to do? Will I come off as a creep?

And then there's the obvious issue of her being my employee. If anyone finds out about her living with me, it could lead to whispers and rumors that could jeopardize both of our careers.

Yet, looking at it from another angle, having her around could be just what I need.

Tasha challenges me, pushes me to think outside the box. With her, I find myself smiling more often.

I can't remember the last time I felt so alive. It's invigorating to have someone in my life who isn't tied to my past or my responsibilities. But can I really keep this professional while we are living together? What if my feelings grow even stronger?

Trying to suppress the stirrings of attraction that rise at the very thought of her being nearby all the time, I shake my head.

This arrangement could lead to trouble, but the thought of losing her, of her leaving to chase a new life in Vegas, feels worse. She's become a part of my daily routine, and the idea of her not being around at all stings more than I expected.

I head to the kitchen, where Dana is wiping down the counters. She's a sweet woman with bright white hair and an infectious smile. With my thoughts swirling, I decide to take action on the things I can put in motion.

"Dana, I need you to get the spare bedroom ready for a guest who might be staying for a while," I say, trying to sound casual.

She lifts an eyebrow, surprised. A smile spreads across her face. "Oh really? Who's moving in?"

"Tasha Daniels," I reply, mentally bracing for her reaction.

Dana's eyes light up, and she nods. "That's your newest hire, right? The waitress turned assistant? Well, it'll be nice to have some female company for once. You know, someone to balance out all that testosterone in this house."

I chuckle, feeling heat creep up my neck. "It's not like that, Dana. She just needs a

place to stay for now.”

“Sure, sure,” she says coyly, clearly not convinced. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Brody. I get it. I’ll let you off the hook if I see any late-night guests in your wing of the house.”

I roll my eyes, but deep down, I feel excited trepidation about this new arrangement. As Dana starts gathering fresh linens, I can’t shake the feeling that my life is about to get a lot more interesting.

Lying in bed that night, staring up at the ceiling, I imagine the look on Tasha’s face as I fucked her on my desk today.

I think of the sound of her voice muffled by my hand over her mouth, the way my name sounded on her lips.

This might be one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.

Or the worst.

## Chapter Eight

Tasha

The headlights of my old car slice through the murky night.

The city is still shrouded in darkness as I navigate the quiet streets. I couldn’t sleep at all, my mind swirling with thoughts of Brody’s offer to live in his guest wing.

The idea of sharing space with him sends a deep flutter of excitement and deep anxiety through me.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:04 am*

Every time I close my eyes, I see Brody's chiseled features, the strong lines of his jaw, and those burning amber eyes that seem to pierce right through me.

It's a heady mix of admiration and disbelief, and I can't help but smile at the very thought of him.

Am I really going to be living in the same house as him? Will we be fucking every night, maybe not even able to go to work the next day?

I can barely contain the butterflies dancing in my chest at the thought of laying in his bed for hours, letting him worship me, and I feel a warmth creeping up my cheeks just imagining what it might be like.

I pull into the office parking garage, grateful that my car hasn't stalled out yet. It rumbles a little but keeps going, a true miracle for this beat-up old thing. I throw it in park, stepping out and taking a moment to collect myself before heading inside.

"Just give me a few months until I have enough to replace you, okay?" I mutter to the car, patting the hood affectionately. "Then you can go to the great junkyard in the sky. Or in rural Illinois at least."

With a sigh, I shake off the nerves and step into the fluorescent glow of the office, ready to tackle the day ahead. The workday drags on, a whirlwind of tasks and phone calls that leaves my head spinning.

Normally we are at the job site, but today is one of those mundane office days, and boy, am I happy I don't have to sit behind a desk all week long.

I'm buried under a mountain of paperwork and emails, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Brody's offer.

How is this even possible? I just started this job, and now I'm going to be living with my boss?

The nerves flutter in my stomach like a thousand little butterflies, and I can't seem to shake them off.

Every time I catch a glimpse of him walking past, my heart races. A fleeting smile, a soft laugh, even just a wink from him is enough to soak my panties and make my heart race.

But the idea of moving my things from Jasmine's apartment to his place is daunting and fills me with a mild dread. It's not just about packing up clothes and books; it's the reality of intertwining my life with his, however casually.

Roommates. We'd be like roommates.

I try to focus on the task at hand, but my mind wanders to how it will feel to be in his space, to share meals, and maybe even share late-night conversations.

I won't even contemplate my other questions about the more intimate things we might do. I need to be able to work without dissolving into a puddle of constant arousal.

Around midday, Brody walks over, his expression serious but kind. "Hey, Tasha. Do you need to grab your stuff from Jasmine's place? I can meet you after work, and we can head to my house together after you get your stuff," he says.

"Sounds great," I say, giving him a meek smile and walking away. Being in the

corporate office today, I want to establish some space between us, even if my entire body is dying for his touch.

Later, when I take a break, I pull out my phone and see he's sent me a text with his address. My eyes widen as a massive mansion pops up when I search the address.

Is this really what his place looked like that night? It must have been really dark...or I was really distracted.

I can't believe it. Brody lives in a stunning home on a sprawling ranch. The reality of my new life hits me hard, and I can't help but feel a thrill at the thought of being part of his world.

As I drive to Jasmine's apartment at the end of the day, tears already prick at the corners of my eyes. I can't believe this is actually happening. Pulling into the parking lot, I take a deep breath, steeling myself before stepping out of the car.

The autumn chill in the air matches the weight in my chest.

I open the front door to find her living room mostly empty, the remnants of her life scattered around: boxes labeled with scribbled words, furniture ready to be picked up by new owners.

It all hits me hard, like a brick to the face.

"Jasmine," I whisper, stepping inside, my arms are already outstretched for a hug.

She stands in the center of the room, looking just as lost as I feel.

Without thinking, I rush to her, and we hug tightly, the world outside fading away. In this moment, it's just us, two best friends clinging to each other as we acknowledge

the reality of our separation.

“Will you come visit me in Vegas?” Jasmine asks, pulling back slightly to look into my eyes.

“Of course!” I say, forcing a smile, though my heart aches.

## Page 24

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“What about the holidays? Are you coming back to visit?” I ask, needing that reassurance.

“Definitely. I’ll be back!” she replies, a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

I grab my packed bags, the weight of my belongings a reminder of the change ahead. We walk out together, closing the door on this chapter of our lives.

Wiping away the tears that have escaped, I drive back to the office, trying to focus on the road ahead.

I have to meet Brody at the office, and somehow, I need to pull it together before I get there.

As I pull into the parking lot, I spot Brody in his truck, and the moment our eyes meet, he flashes me a wink. My cheeks heat up, and I can’t help but smile back as I park my old car next to his.

After a quick adjustment of my hair in the rearview mirror, I take a deep breath and follow him out of the lot.

We hit the road, and the scenery starts to shift dramatically.

The towering skyscrapers of the city fade into the distance, replaced by the wide, open spaces of rural Illinois.

A sense of freedom washes over me as I follow Brody’s truck down the highway,



flanked by endless fields stretching toward the horizon. The sun hangs low in the sky, casting a warm goldenlight that spills over everything, giving the landscape a dreamy glow.

Sprawling fields of corn stand tall on either side, their hardened, tan stalks swaying gently in the evening breeze, while clusters of spent wildflowers punctuate the rows with splashes of dull color.

I catch glimpses of grazing cows, their silhouettes framed against the vibrant orange and pink sky, and I can smell the faint, sweet scent of hay mingling with the crisp evening air.

Quaint farmhouses nestle among sprawling pastures, white picket fences framing gardens bursting with fading flowers. It's so picturesque.

A rusty red barn appears in the distance, its weathered wood telling stories of hard work and tradition. The peacefulness of the countryside envelops me, a welcome contrast to the hectic pace of the city.

Dimming sunlight filters through the branches of trees along the road, creating dappled patterns on the ground. We take a sudden turn onto a winding country road, bordered by trees that arch overhead, their leaves rustling softly in the wind.

I steal glances at Brody's truck as we navigate the curves, my heart racing at the thought of being in his world all the time. The butterflies return as I imagine my new life with him, this unexpected journey unfolding before me amidst the beauty of rural Illinois.

As I follow Brody, my heart races with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. My little beater car, with its faded paint and numerous dings, feels like a clumsy companion trailing behind the impressive vehicle.

I try to keep my focus on the road ahead, but my thoughts keep drifting back to what lies at the end of this drive.

When we finally arrive, I pull up to his home, a stunning mansion that seems to stretch endlessly toward the sky. The sprawling property is surrounded by manicured lawns, vibrant flower beds bursting with color, and towering trees that stand like sentinels guarding the place.

My mouth falls open as I take in the grandeur of it all.

I shake my head, looking at Brody as I get out of my car.

“I don’t remember it being this big.”

He laughs. I shouldn’t be surprised; he’s the CEO of a successful construction company, after all.

The house is easily the nicest I’ve ever seen, its elegant façade is adorned with intricate brickwork and large windows that reflect the golden glow of the setting sun. A spacious porch wraps around the front, inviting and warm, with rockers that look perfect for sipping coffee on a lazy morning.

But then a wave of insecurity crashes over me; my upbringing isn’t something that I’ve kept exclusively hidden, but I come from a world that people might call "trailer trash".

My childhood was filled with cramped spaces and the smell of grease from takeout dinners, not expansive kitchens and well-decorated living rooms.

The sheer opulence of Brody’s home feels overwhelming to me in this moment, and I can’t help but wonder if I truly belong here.

“Come on,” Brody says to me, coming to help me with my bags. “I bet Dana has dinner ready.”

I drift after him toward the house, still feeling a bit like an imposter and wondering if I made the right choice.

I'm immediately embraced by a cozy, sophisticated charm as I step inside Brody's rustic cabin-style mansion. A massive stone fireplace dominates the far wall, its flames flickering softly, casting a golden glow across the room.

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The expansive living room boasts high, vaulted ceilings made of exposed beams, and the walls are adorned with rich, dark wood paneling that radiates warmth.

Through the large windows, I can see the breathtaking view of the valley beyond. The sun is setting, painting the sky in brilliant shades of orange, pink, and purple, while the rolling hills are cloaked in a soft, golden hue.

It's a picturesque scene that feels almost like a painting, and for a moment, I'm captivated by the beauty of it all. Overhead, pendant lights with a rustic flair hang from the beams, illuminating the space with a warm, inviting light.

The scent of something delicious wafts through the air, drawing me toward the kitchen. Dana greets me with a warm smile, her bright eyes sparkling with kindness.

"Welcome, Tasha!" she beams, her smile making the space feel even more inviting. "Brody told me to expect you. Come on in!"

As we step into the kitchen, my eyes widen at the sight of a beautifully arranged dinner spread out on the large dining room table.

I lean in closer, curiosity piqued. "Is this cream of rice and bread-wrapped steak?"

Brody chuckles from across the table, a hint of amusement dancing in his amber eyes. "Well, in a restaurant, they'd call it Beef Wellington and risotto."

"Ah, got it. Gordon Ramsay style," I say as I eye what I imagine is a perfectly baked Beef Wellington, with its flaky golden crust glistening under the soft lights.

I don't think anyone will be yelling about it being 'fucking raw' tonight.

On the contrary, I can almost taste the buttery pastry that encases the tender beef, and the rich aroma of herbs and roasted garlic fills the air. My mouth is watering.

The risotto also looks creamy and inviting, sprinkled with vibrant green parsley that adds a pop of color.

I feel my cheeks heat with a mix of embarrassment and amusement, but as I look around, I realize no one else seems bothered by my ignorance.

Their warm smiles and genuine laughter envelop me, making me feel more at home.

It's a far cry from my upbringing, and the warmth of this moment fills me with an intense sense of belonging I never knew I was missing.

## Chapter Nine

Brody

Dana leads Tasha to her wing, and I can't help but smile as she steps into her room.

The space is bathed in warm, natural light from the setting sun that is filtering through the large bay window, casting gentle shadows on the soft beige walls.

Tasha's verdant eyes widen as she takes in the perfect blend of elegant, modern chic décor: a plush, cream-colored rug underfoot, a king-sized bed dressed in crisp white linens, and a statement piece of artwork featuring vibrant hues of blue and gold that brings life to the room.

She drops her bags on the polished hardwood floor and leaps onto the bed, her

laughter bubbling up as she bounces slightly before melting into the luxurious mattress. The fabric is so soft, it cradles her like a cloud.

“It’s amazing! Easily the best bed I’ve ever laid on,” she exclaims, burying her face into the fluffy pillows that look like they were plucked straight from a magazine spread.

Dana smiles warmly, her eyes twinkling with motherly affection, “Brody bought everything brand new for you.”

I feel a sudden reddening of my cheeks at the admission. I don’t want her to think I spent a bunch of cash on her, but I also wasn’t going to invite her to stay with me and not have the room be perfect for her needs.

The shock on Tasha's face is obvious, her expression slowly shifting from disbelief to genuine gratitude. I can almost hear the thoughts stirring in her mind.

It’s clear that no one’s ever bought her new things as an adult. I can see the shadow of her past creeping in. She grew up in a world where second-hand was the norm.

“Wow,” she whispers, looking around as if the room might vanish if she blinks. I wish I could assure her that this is her space now and she deserves every bit of it.

I knock on the door, and Tasha looks up. “Hey, I need to check on the animals. Want to come with me?”

We head down the hall together, and I can’t help but notice how effortlessly she fits into this world. Her smile widens, and she bounces up and down as she walks, the excitement radiating off her like sunshine breaking through rain clouds.

The moment we step outside, she’s greeted by a whirlwind of energy: puppies darting

around, their tails wagging furiously in the cool evening breeze.

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The barn stands nearby, its rustic red exterior and white trim glowing in the golden hour light, while the puppies scurry over the grassy expanse, yapping in delight. Watching Tasha kneel down to play with them fills me with warmth.

“Oh, my God! Puppies! You never told me you had puppies!” Her laughter fills the air as a couple of the pups climb over her, each one begging for all the attention.

She leans back, her hair cascading like a waterfall over the grass, and I can see her true self emerging: joyful, carefree, and genuine.

“I always thought I wanted to be a veterinarian,” she says, her voice softening as she cradles a wriggling puppy, its gray fur shining in the dimming light. “But, you know, that’s not for people like me.”

“Why didn’t you go for it?” I ask, genuinely curious.

For a moment, her smile falters, and a shadow passes over her features, dimming the sunlight around us. I lean closer, demanding to know what she means, an urgency creeping into my tone. “What do you mean ‘people like you’?”

Her gaze drops, and her fingers absently stroke the soft fur of the puppy in her arms, the sadness pooling in her eyes like a storm cloud ready to burst. “I grew up poor, Brody. College was basically a fairy tale. The idea of taking out student loans...it always talked me out of it.”

I can’t bear the thought of her feeling trapped, believing her dreams are out of reach. There’s a heaviness in her voice that pulls at my heartstrings.



Tasha gazes down, lost in thought, the weight of her past hanging heavy in the air between us like a thick fog. The puppies continue to frolic around us, their playful antics a welcome distraction, but I can see that Tasha's heart is elsewhere.

"How about we do something fun?" I suggest, trying to lighten the mood. "Come with me, and I'll show you something special."

Her eyes flicker with interest as I lead her toward the hill behind the barn, the grass swaying gently in the evening breeze. "What's up here?" she asks, her curiosity piqued like a flower reaching for the sun.

"The view from the top is something else. Plus, there's a treehouse," I reply, my heart racing at the thought of sharing this hidden gem. This piece of childhood that I haven't shared with any other woman besides Josh's mom twenty years ago.

We climb the hill together, and I can feel the excitement building between us with every step.

When we reach the treehouse, nostalgia washes over me like a comforting blanket.

It's old and weathered, the wood a deep mahogany that has aged gracefully, yet it still holds memories of countless summers spent in childhood bliss. The warm hues of the sunset paint the sky in shades of orange and pink, casting a magical glow over the landscape.

"Here we are," I say, gesturing to the rickety ladder leading up to the small wooden structure.

As Tasha steps inside, her eyes widen with awe, a smile breaking across her face. "This is incredible," she breathes, her voice barely above a whisper. I can see the weight of her worries lifting, even if just for a moment, and I feel a surge of

happiness at being able to share this part of my life with her.

The wood creaks beneath our weight, and I can feel the excitement of entering a secret world. Inside, the space feels tight but inviting, with sunlight streaming through the small windows, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. Old drawings from my childhood adorn the walls, faded yet vibrant, telling stories of laughter and adventure.

As we settle into the treehouse, Tasha moves to the window, her gaze drawn upward to the expansive night sky. The crisp autumn air carries the earthy scent of fallen leaves, and I can almost hear the gentle rustle of nature settling down for the night.

The stars twinkle like scattered diamonds on a velvet canvas, each one a distant world waiting to be discovered. Beyond the branches of the ancient oak tree, the city skyline glimmers in the distance, its lights twinkling like a constellation of their own. Skyscrapers stretch toward the heavens, their glass facades reflecting the brilliance of the stars above.

Tasha's breath catches in her throat, and I watch as wonder dances in her eyes. "It's beautiful," she whispers, and I can feel her appreciation wrap around me like a warm embrace.

Without thinking, I lean closer, and she turns to me, a look of gratitude flooding her features. She wraps her arms around me, pulling me into a tight hug.

I feel her warmth seep into my skin, her heart beating steadily against my chest. Her body is soft yet strong, and as I wrap my arms around her, I'm struck by the contrast between her delicate frame and the powerful muscles that lie beneath my own jacket.

"Thank you for supporting me when I needed help," she murmurs, her voice muffled against my shoulder.

I hold her a little tighter, inhaling the sweet, earthy scent of her hair mingled with the crispness of the night. “I don’t mind helping someone who needs a hand. Don’t ever discount yourself or your talents, Tasha. You have so much to offer,” I reply, my voice low and steady.

Bathed in the glow of the stars and with a view of the sprawl of my property below us, I feel something deeper grow between us.

It’s a connection forged in the warmth of this night and the promise of new beginnings.

## Chapter Ten

Tasha

For a moment, everything else disappears as his soft lips are against mine.

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The cool air brushes against our skin as the two of us are alone, sitting inside the treehouse.

When I stumbled the first night and he caught me, it was like everything aligned. There was no way for him to plan this in advance.

His hand still steady on my arm, he leans in and kisses me again, more passionate this time, as if he's feeling the way my lips form against his with a silent invitation.

I hesitate for a second, shock and lust running through me together.

This is so bad. He's my hot boss!

This is amazing. He's my hot boss!

Lust takes over as I tilt my head, my lips parting as I kiss him back with careful eagerness. He slides his hand to the small of my back, pulling me closer, and I feel his body relax against mine.

It hits me how natural this feels, like this is where we're meant to be.

Still, I know I shouldn't be doing this. He's my boss, and he's so much older and established with a son who's basically my age!

There's a softness to his touch, a warmth that cuts through all the doubts swirling in my head. When his fingers graze the side of my face, tracing along my jaw, I can't seem to care about anything else.

I pull back slightly, just enough to look into his eyes, our sighs mixing in the space between us. His gaze is strong, hinting at a strength and a spark of something tender and hopeful.

And damn, if it doesn't make me want to kiss him all over again.

My hands fall to his belt, and I unbuckle it before unbuttoning his jeans. I feel him hard as a rock already, and my hand wraps eagerly around his hot, throbbing cock. He sighs, a daring look crossing his face as he licks his lower lip.

I dip my head down, gently kissing him at first, and then licking him. My tongue glides against his shaft like the side of a popsicle before I take him into my mouth entirely.

"Yes, that's my good girl," he sighs, taking a fist full of my loose hair into his hand. He watches as I bob on his cock, and I note that he doesn't apply any pressure, letting me take control.

My hands fall to his thighs, and I hold myself up, increasing the speed before taking him deep into my throat, twisting my head slightly as I rise before taking it all in again with each pass. I feel him begin to hum with pleasure.

"Not yet," he sighs, pulling me up gently, and I smile.

"Am I too much for you sometimes?" I ask, pulling my pants off and climbing on top of him. I can tell my forwardness is catching him off guard, but he's not backing down from it.

On the contrary, I think it's awakening something more inside of him.

"No," he whispers, leaning up, but I take my hand, pressing him back until he's lying

flat again.

“No, I’m on top this time. I want to ride you.”

His smirk makes me shiver instantly, but I breathe in deeply, staring down at his handsome face in the moonlight. I pull my top off, and he reaches up instinctually, putting his hands on my bare breasts.

My head falls back, my hair cascading down my back, and I sigh.

“God, I love the sounds you make,” he whispers to me, and I feel myself pulsing at his words.

His hips jolt upward and he suddenly slides inside of me. I feel the walls of my pussy grip him tight, and his hands fall to my waist, gripping me like a lifeline in a storm.

“Oh, God, Brody,” I say, my voice trailing off with a small sigh. “You’re going to make me come.”

“Do it,” he urges. “I want you to come right here on my cock,” he whispers, his voice cutting through the air like a knife, and I feel him vibrate and pulsate against me. My cries carry through the night air as he thrusts over and over.

There’s something freeing about knowing that no one can hear us or walk in on us here. Even though the treehouse is small, we just fit inside of it, creating a little bubble of warmth and joy between us as we move as one.

He’s so big that I’m having to balance myself against his chest so that I can ride him without being in pain. My hair slithers over my shoulders and frames my face, tickling against my forearms.

He reaches up and presses my hair out of my face as he allows me to set the pace.  
“Sorry I’m so big,” he chuckles.

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I chuckle at this. “No, you’re not,” I retort, pressing down a little harder over him and gasping.

“Okay, maybe I’m not,” he manages to say between strokes. “But I don’t like hurting you.”

“I’m made of tough stuff,” I assure him, leaning back and realizing that I can take him all the way to the root at this angle.

“Fuck, that’s good,” Brody gasps as I place my hands behind me on his strong thighs for leverage.

I speed up, chasing the pleasure that’s coiling inside of me tightly. His hands come forward to hold onto my thighs, and the extra stability allows me to grind down onto him harder at the bottom of each stroke.

“Oh my God,” I pant, seeing stars as the orgasm rushes toward me.

“Come for me, baby,” Brody says to me, his rough voice like a plea.

I come so hard that I have to dig my nails into his thighs for purchase. My body feels like it might break from the force of the pleasure singing in my veins.

In a distant way, I hear Brody praising me, but the rushing of endorphins and nearly painful pleasure makes it impossible for me to understand his words.

“Brody,” I murmur languidly as I slump forward again. He catches me and presses a



kiss to my lips before pulling me against his chest and starting to move again.

He pumps inside of me a few more times and then comes with a shout that echoes around the tiny space. I feel the heat of him inside of me and smile. I love being marked by him, claimed by him.

We eventually climb out of the treehouse, snickering and laughing as we head back inside. I start to move toward my room, but he shakes his head and tugs me toward his wing of the house.

We shower, helping one another get cleaned up, then tumble into his huge bed. He snugs me up against his body, his large hand curving over my hip.

Even as I am wrapped in his perfect arms, I can't help but wonder if this isn't the biggest mistake I'm making in my life.

What if all of this blows up in your face? First, you fuck your boss at your job and now you're living with him? Are you insane? What happens if this doesn't work out between you two? What happens if everyone finds out what you're doing and decides to ruin your reputation in one of the biggest cities in the country?

"Tasha," he whispers, cradling me against him.

"Yeah?" I ask, breaking out of my thoughts.

"I'm happy to have you here."

"You don't know what that means to me," I whisper.

An hour later I still can't sleep. The room is huge, way bigger than my old apartment. Every detail is immaculate, from the crisp white sheets to the sleek furniture to the

heavy curtains that block out almost all the light.

It's like I've stepped into another world, one I don't quite belong in. I felt much more at home in the rickety old treehouse.

The pillows smell like his cologne, clean and woodsy, and it makes my heart skip a beat because I still can't believe I'm here, in his bed, in his house.

But that's the problem, isn't it? I'm here, but I'm not sure I should be.

I don't feel equal to this life, to Brody, to the CEO of a major corporation.

I'm just a girl from a rundown little town who barely has enough to scrape by, and now I'm in the bed of a CEO.

I keep thinking about how easy it would be for him to realize that I'm not cut out for this, that I don't fit. Maybe he's already figuring that out.

I don't know if I can keep up with the fancy houses, the high-stakes meetings, and the polished people who look at me like I'm a stray that wandered in.

He gave me a chance. Maybe if I can just prove that I'm more than some naive, small-town girl, he'll keep me around.

If I'm the best assistant he's ever had, maybe he'll see me as more than just a temporary help. What if I could make a life here, with him, and finally escape everything I've been running from?

I shift closer to him, carefully sifting my fingers through his hair, feeling the softness of it. His breathing is slow and steady, and I can't help but let myself imagine what it would be like if this was my life, if I could wake up next to him every morning and

know that I was where I was meant to be.

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I want to try to fit into his world, to be someone who could stand beside him and not look out of place. I want to figure out how to make myself a part of this, not just as his assistant, but as someone he could care about, someone he'd want around for more than just business.

It feels stupid to even think it, but I can't help myself. I'm scared I'll mess it up, that he'll wake up and see right through me, but I can't stop wanting it.

I look over at him, taking in the way his features soften in the dark, the way his hair falls across his forehead. He's so handsome, and when he's like this, he doesn't look like the powerful CEO everyone respects.

He just looks like a man—a kind, generous man who let me into his life, who offered me a chance. I've never had anyone do that for me before, not like this.

If he knew what I was thinking, would he laugh? Would he send me packing? Or would he smile and tell me I was silly for worrying so much?

I reach out, tracing my fingers lightly down his cheek, careful not to wake him.

I wish I could believe that I belong here, that I could have a future with someone like him. But even if I can't see it coming true, I'm going to try. I want a life that's more like this: warm and secure, not the cold, uncertain struggle I left behind.

If there's even the slightest chance that I can find that with Brody, I'm going to do everything I can to make sure I don't lose it.

## Chapter Eleven

Brody

Things at Thorne and Thorne Construction are in full throttle by mid-November.

The unmistakable crispness of fall turning to winter bites at the air, the sharp edge of cold mingling with the constant hum of machinery as we close in on the final stages of three major projects.

The rhythmic sounds of power tools, the low rumble of delivery trucks backing into position, and the melodic clang of metal and stone echo through the work site. They serve as a relentless backdrop to our efforts.

Josh and I have been stretched thin with all of our projects, keeping every moving part in sync, trying to ensure that each project wraps up on time, and ideally, under budget.

Our biggest undertaking has been the Crosswinds Shopping Center in the suburbs, a massive \$12.3 million development. With permits, multiple suppliers, and a team of subcontractors working simultaneously on interiors and exteriors, it's been an intricate job from the start.

Finally, we're at the finishing stages.

I can see teams working on everything from laying the final tiles to installing custom lighting fixtures. The air around the site smells of fresh paint and newly cut wood. The numbers look promising, and that's something to look forward to as the holiday season rolls in.

We're counting on a solid profit from this project, and the city developers have hinted

at a substantial bonus if we deliver by the first of December.

Then there's the Madison High renovation, a \$4.5 million contract dedicated to overhauling the sports facilities. It's a complex job with tight deadlines and high expectations from the school district.

I've put Josh in charge of managing the suppliers for this one. He's one of the only people I can trust to execute it properly.

He's been coordinating with concrete vendors, steel suppliers, and specialty companies for sports flooring. I can see him getting more comfortable in his role. He's learning the art of balancing quality with budget, and every time he updates me on his progress, I find myself impressed with what he says.

It's so satisfying watching him handle something this big on his own, seeing him take charge.

The Madison High job is a critical piece of our fall portfolio, and Josh's success with it will be a key step in his growth as a leader within the company.

Finally, we're working on a smaller, but still prestigious project downtown, the historic Haverly Hotel. Balancing modern updates with the preservation of the original architecture, we are transforming the building into luxury suites. It has been a delicate task.

The building is steeped in local history, and keeping those classic touches intact requires a level of finesse and care from our crew. There's an elegance to the design: ornate moldings, antique fixtures, stained glass accents, all which demand attention to detail.

If we hit our incentive markers for this project, it could bring in another \$3 million.

That's not even mentioning the reputation boost from working on such a notable landmark.

It's a very busy season, and the pressure's on while we're closing out late-fall projects while still prepping bids for winter contracts.

My days have been long and rough, and normally I'd be feeling every bit of that exhaustion settle into my bones, but lately, it's not just the work that's keeping me up.

My late nights with Tasha linger in my mind, and I'd be lying if I said it's only deadlines and deliverables wearing me down. She's been a warm presence in my life.

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She somehow understands me in ways I didn't think were possible. She's like this surprising constant that I didn't realize I needed.

At the office, she's been indispensable; there's a newfound calm in the way things run now that she's here. No more scrambling to remember meetings or catching mistakes in vendor contracts at the last minute.

Her attention to detail frees me up to focus on the bigger picture. She has it all covered and the way she anticipates needs, manages schedules, and even smooths out small conflicts within the team is seamless.

I feel more aware of the little things that used to pass me by and more grounded with her around.

In the past, I'd always prided myself on being a hands-on boss, someone respected by my staff, but maybe a bit too focused on getting things done over everything else.

But lately, I've started noticing things I never did before.

Tasha has this effect of slowing me down, of making me more mindful of the people around me.

I'm learning to listen better, to appreciate the nuances in the work and the relationships that keep this company running smoothly.

She's made me a better manager and maybe, even in some ways, a better man.



Work has always been my first priority. I've never had much time or energy to think beyond the walls of Thorne and Thorne.

But now, with Tasha in my life, I'm starting to understand the value of more than just project deadlines and profit margins.

The balance she's brought to my life has been something I never saw coming.

There's a richness in these small, quiet moments, a sense of fulfillment that goes beyond anything money or career achievements could bring.

With her, I feel a comfort I haven't felt in years: a rare, grounding kind of peace that reminds me I'm more than just a CEO.

These thoughts float through my mind as I'm on my way home from the office, watching the sun dip low on the horizon, casting that rich, orange glow across the fields.

Tasha hasn't been feeling well the past two days, and she's been working from home today.

I find myself wondering if Dana has put something light together for dinner that Tasha might feel up to eating. Dinner will probably be soup if I had to guess.

Dana's got an eye for knowing what everyone needs before they even ask. It's a talent that I admire.

I can't help but feel a bit of pride as I pull into the long gravel drive that winds up to the ranch. With the mansion centered in a way that overlooks both the lake and the rolling pastureland, the ranch sprawls over hundreds of acres.

It's quiet out here, peaceful in a way the office never is, and it makes me appreciate this life I've built even more.

I head over to the big red barn in the back after parking. We keep a small herd of cattle, mostly a hobby, but it feels good to be close to the land and the animals. Inside, I check on their feed, making sure everything's stocked up for the night.

The cattle are quiet, some already settling down for the evening, and there's a soft breeze stirring through the open barn doors, sending the smell of hay into my nose.

Standing here, surrounded by the quiet sounds of the animals and the hum of the evening, it feels like a different world from the work site chaos and the boardroom.

Soon, I'll be back inside, checking on Tasha, and that thought alone makes me want to wrap things up here and head in.

As I walk into the house, my gut tightens, and I stop, listening, trying to pinpoint where the distraught noise is coming from.

Immediately, I notice the soft, uneven sound of someone crying.

Checking the living room, I then head down the hall, finally moving toward the den. It isn't until I step into the kitchen that I find Tasha slumped over the kitchen table, face buried in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

She's sitting in front of her laptop, a notepad filled with scribbled notes beside her, and I can tell she's been at this for hours.

The sight hits me hard, like a punch to the chest, and all I want to do is make this better for her. I cross the room quietly without thinking, pulling a chair up beside her, reaching a hand out to gently touch her shoulder.

“Hey,” I say softly, brushing a stray hair from her face as she lifts her head, eyes red and watery. “Tash, what’s wrong, babe?”

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Pressing her lips together as if trying to keep herself from falling apart completely, she sighs heavily. I pull her into my arms, holding her close, letting her lean into me.

“It’s all right, I’m here. Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out,” I murmur, my voice low, just for her ears.

She pulls back just enough to look at me, her expression a mixture of frustration and sadness.

All I want to do is fix whatever’s hurting her so deeply right now.

Tasha takes a deep breath, staring at the laptop screen like it’s her worst enemy, her smooth brow furrowed in the white light. “I...I can’t figure this out, Brody,” she says, her voice trembling with frustration.

“This coursework...these assignments...I thought I’d be able to handle it, but everything just seems so far over my head. It’s like I’m not smart enough to do this.”

Her voice breaks, and she wipes at a tear on her cheek, embarrassed. “I just feel...like an imposter. Like I’m not cut out for this college stuff. I don’t belong here, not with you, not with any of this.”

The way her shoulders slump under the weight of her doubt, the way her words shake from her lips, it just kills me. This is Tasha: strong, determined, unstoppable, optimistic, at least in my eyes.

Right now, though, she looks so small, so unsure, and I can see how desperately she’s

trying to live up to the standards she's set for herself.

I reach out, taking her hands in my own, squeezing gently.

"Hey," I say softly, brushing my thumb over her knuckles. "You don't have to do this alone, Tasha. This is hard. It's normal to struggle, everyone goes through that, no matter how smart they are. You're smart, you're capable, and you're more than enough. You've got this."

Tasha doesn't say anything for a moment and just shakes her head, biting her lip as if holding back another wave of emotions.

Looking over it all, I see it's some kind of introductory business course with terms and concepts that are probably completely new to her. I can feel how badly she wants to believe me, and so pulling a chair beside her, I lean in, taking a closer look at the page that's been giving her trouble.

"All right, let's go over this together," I suggest, keeping my voice steady and calm. "Let's look at the assignment. Sometimes these things look overwhelming until you break them down piece by piece."

I watch as she nods gently, tentatively following along as I go over the basics. She asks questions now and then, and after a while, I can see her start to relax, some of the tension easing from her shoulders.

"See?" I say, smiling as she finally gets a tricky part figured out. "You're already getting the hang of it."

But still, she lets out a heavy sigh, slumping back in her chair. I watch her, worried, not wanting to push her.

“I don’t know, Brody,” she murmurs, defeated. “I still feel like I’m failing.”

I can tell she’s more tired than anything, her frustration clouding her ability to think clearly.

Tasha’s got a fire, but right now, she looks too worn down to access it.

“Tasha, if you’re not feeling better tomorrow, or maybe in a day or two, you should go see someone. It could be an infection. You might need antibiotics.”

She nods, half-listening, and I sit with her for another hour, helping her slowly work through more of the assignment.

It’s then that Dana pokes her head in, letting us know that dinner is ready.

She gives me a sheepish look, muttering something about freshening up as she slips away from the kitchen. I chuckle, patting my stomach. “I’m going to start eating. I’m too hungry to wait!” I call after her, hoping the warm meal might do us both some good.

Dana’s made one of her classics: hearty chicken and rice soup with soft, golden biscuits fresh from the oven. The first spoonful warms me all the way through, and I realize just how much I needed this meal tonight.

The broth is rich and savory, with chunks of tender chicken, diced carrots, and celery mixed in with fluffy rice, just the way my mother used to make it. Each bite of the biscuit, buttery and crumbly, takes me right back to childhood, to cold nights and warm meals around the kitchen table.

Still, as I savor the comfort of the soup, I notice that Tasha still hasn’t returned.

I glance down the hall, the quiet lingering. I can only imagine how much weight she's carrying right now, trying to balance work, college, and her own high expectations.

Part of me wants to check on her, but I give her her space, hoping a little time alone might help her gather herself.

Still, I can't shake off my worry. She's strong. I've seen that firsthand. But even the strongest people need a hand sometimes.

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I finish my soup slowly, hoping she'll return soon, if only to let me know she's okay. But I'm alone, and once I'm done with dinner, I rinse out my bowl in the sink, glancing down the hall one last time.

Tasha's bedroom door is still closed, no sign of movement, and a flicker of worry nags at me.

I walk back into the kitchen, noticing her laptop still open on the table, her notes scattered around it in a pile. She's been pouring herself into these assignments, but I know the pressure is getting to her.

I take a seat in front of her laptop, scanning her notes. She's trying hard, but some of it's a mess, jumbled thoughts, and half-finished ideas, proof of how lost she feels right now.

The urge to help pulls me in as I find myself reaching for a pen. Flipping open her textbook, I begin going through the chapters, making notes for her to follow along with. I jot down key points, definitions, anything that might make this easier when she's ready to tackle it again.

Tasha's fighting so hard to make this work, and it makes me admire her even more.

I glance down the hall again, looking at her closed door, wondering if she's resting or just hiding from her own frustration.

She's a firecracker, determined and driven, but tonight, she looked so...fragile, like she's carrying the world on her shoulders.



I write notes for nearly an hour, filling a couple of pages with clear, organized notes, and when I'm done, I leave them on top of her laptop, hoping it'll help her find her footing.

## Chapter Twelve

Tasha

The shrill blaring chime of my phone startles me awake, its light piercing through the early morning darkness, reminding me that I'm supposed to be up and moving.

But the second I crack my eyes open, a wave of nausea crashes over me, sudden and fierce.

My stomach twists and turns, and I clamp a hand over my mouth, barely having a moment to brace myself before I'm scrambling out of bed.

The room blurs as I dash toward the connected bathroom, the coolness of the floor under my bare feet a small mercy as I push the door open and drop to my knees, barely reaching the toilet in time.

Gripping the edges of the porcelain, I squeeze my eyes shut as my stomach convulses, heaving until there's nothing left but an awful burning in my throat and a sour taste in my mouth.

I press my forehead against the smooth, cold surface of the toilet tank, breathing through the nausea as it finally begins to subside.

The bathroom light feels harsh and bright, cutting through my foggy vision, and I can't decide if the light is making my head pound harder or helping me stay grounded. I take in a shaky breath, my forehead now damp with a cold sheen of sweat

that feels clammy against my flushed skin.

My muscles are like jelly, and all I want to do is to curl up under warm blankets and shut out the world.

I don't have time for this, I have too much to do today.

Forcing myself to stand, I catch sight of my reflection in the bathroom mirror, a grimace forming along my lips. My hair's tangled, my eyes shadowed and tired, while there's a paleness to my face that makes me look like I've seen a ghost.

With a deep breath, I turn on the faucet and splash cold water over my face, trying to wash away the dizziness that lingers. The water feels refreshing against my feverish skin, but it's not enough to shake the lingering queasiness.

Slowly, I make my way back to my bedroom and sink down onto the edge of the bed. My phone is still glowing on the nightstand, and I reach for it, pulling up my messages to send Brody a quick text.

My fingers hover over the screen, guilt tugging at me as I type out a message.

>>Brody, I'm really sick. I'm so sorry, but I can't make it in this morning.

The words feel heavy as I stare at them, feeling like I'm letting him down. I hate calling in sick. I'd rather push through and make that money, but this sickness is kicking my butt.

Still, Brody's been so understanding, so supportive, and here I am, missing work at a crucial time. But there's no way I can face a full day at the office like this.

With a sigh, I hit send and slump back against the pillows, the cool sheets soothing

against my skin as I close my eyes, hoping the nausea will fade.

I lie there for a while, eyes closed, the room quiet except for the soft hum of the heater kicking on. My phone chimes loudly, but before I can reach for it, there's a light knock on my door, gentle but firm.

I manage a faint "Come in," and when the door opens, Brody steps inside, looking calm and steady as always.

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He has my laptop tucked under his one arm and a small stack of papers in the other, and his presence fills the room with a comforting warmth.

Stepping closer and setting my laptop and notes on the bedside table, he gives me a warm smile. “Here,” he says, his voice soft and soothing. “I made some notes to help with your assignments. If you’re feeling up to it later, just text me, and I’ll let you know where I’ll be.”

His thoughtfulness catches me off guard, but I manage a weak smile, my heart swelling with gratitude. “Thank you. Really, you didn’t have to do this.”

My voice sounds small, but I mean every word; his kindness, his willingness to help, have become a lifeline I hadn’t expected.

“Just focus on resting,” he says, his eyes meeting mine with a soft warmth. He reaches out, giving my hand a gentle squeeze that sends a calming warmth through me before he steps back, leaving me with a soft smile before he quietly closes the door.

Alone again.

I pull my laptop onto my lap and open it, the screen glowing with the carefully organized notes he’s made. Each page is simplified, broken down in a way that’s easy to understand, and as I scan his handwriting, I can see the effort he’s put into making sure I’d grasp each concept.

My throat tightens, and despite the nausea still lingering in my stomach, I try to focus

on the work he's laid out for me, grateful for the small comfort of his thoughtfulness.

After a few minutes, I feel my phone buzz with a new text. I glance down and see a message from Jasmine, a familiar pang of homesickness tugging at my heart as I read her words.

>>Hey, girl! How's the new gig? Miss you.

I close my eyes for a moment, remembering our last conversation and how she'd encouraged me to go for this new life, this chance to build something for myself. I shoot her a quick reply, my fingers trembling slightly.

>>Miss you too! Things are...good. Can I call?

Waiting for her response, I lean back, letting my head rest against the pillows. Her reply comes almost instantly, and Jasmine's familiar voice fills the room before I know it, the familiar warm and lively tone, like a comforting blanket on a cold day.

"Tash, you sound awful! What's going on? Are you sick or something?"

I laugh, weak and airy, and it sounds more like a cough. "Yeah, I've been down for about twenty-four hours now. I don't know if it's a bug, something I ate. I just can't shake it."

"Aww, that sounds miserable! You need some soup and a cozy bed," she says, her voice soft with sympathy. "So, where are you staying? You got a tiny apartment over there or what?"

I hesitate before answering, glancing around the spacious, warmly decorated room that's worlds away from any apartment I could've afforded.

My fingers twist the edge of the blanket, feeling the plush fabric beneath them as I grapple with how to answer. “Actually, I’m, um...well, I’m staying with my boss.”

There’s a pause on the other end, followed by Jasmine’s sudden burst of laughter, incredulous and delighted. “No way! You mean that CEO guy you told me about? Mr. Suit and Tie?”

“Yes, that guy,” I say, giggling with her, though my cheeks are burning with embarrassment.

“After he hired me, he offered me a room at his place until I found something of my own. It’s...it’s huge, Jasmine. I feel like I’m living in a magazine. The house has everything: multiple fireplaces, a library, a sunroom. I couldn’t say no.”

“I mean, who could?” Jasmine practically squeals with joy. “This is wild, Tash! Next thing you’ll tell me, is that you’re his personal chef or something. What’s it like living in a place like that?”

I nervously laugh again, feeling a mixture of excitement and anxiety fluttering in my stomach. “Oh, it’s crazier than that, trust me.”

I want to tell her more, but I can feel the exhaustion creeping in, and my head’s pounding from the relentless nausea that’s refused to leave. Still, her voice gives me the strength to keep talking, just for a little while.

Jasmine’s voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper, as if someone else could overhear. “All right, spill! You’re living with him, this gorgeous CEO with a giant mansion. Tasha, come on, there’s gotta be more to it than that!”

I hesitate, biting my lip with an awkward pause. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and for a moment, I feel that thrill of sharing a secret, the one only a best friend can

understand.

“Okay, well...there is more,” I say, lowering my voice as if the walls have ears.  
“We’ve, um...we’ve been seeing each other, Jas. Sleeping together.”

There’s silence on her end for a heartbeat, and then she gasps, “Oh my God, Tasha! Are you serious? What happened to the sweet, innocent Tasha who wouldn’t dare cross any lines? Girl, I’m shocked! Are you even for real?”

“It just...happened. He’s nothing like I thought he’d be. He’s thoughtful, kind, and...he takes care of me in ways I didn’t know I needed. Even today, he left me notes for my school assignments when he saw how sick I was.”

Jasmine squeals again. “So, he’s like, actually doting on you? You’re living with him, working with him, sleeping with him...you’re a total romantic cliché!”

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“Stop it!” I say, laughing and rolling my eyes. “But...yeah. He’s been amazing to me. It’s strange, but he makes me feel...important. Like I actually matter.”

Jasmine’s laughter quiets, her tone shifting into something softer, more serious. “Well, I’m happy for you, Tash. But...are you sure about all of this? You sound pretty far gone, girl.”

“Yeah,” I murmur, exhaling slowly, nerves fluttering in my stomach. “I know I’m in deep. It all just happened so fast, you know? But I can’t imagine pulling away from it now.”

“Okay, real talk: how long has this been going on?”

I think back, realizing it’s only been a few weeks, though it feels like a lifetime of changes have happened since then. “Not that long, really. Just...a few weeks, maybe? But it feels like so much more.”

“All right, but let me ask you something,” she says gently. There’s a careful pause, and her voice drops to a tone I know means she’s about to hit me with something heavy. “Have you...had your period recently?”

I blink, the question hitting me like a cold splash of water to the face. “I mean, I...it should come soon, I think.” My voice wavers with fear as I try to brush it off, but a sliver of doubt creeps in, tingling at the edges of my mind. “I haven’t been keeping track that closely. My schedule’s been crazy.”

“Tasha,” she says firmly, her tone sharpened with a serious edge, “think about it.



When was the last time you actually had it?”

The weight of her words sinks in as I start mentally counting back the days. I’ve been so caught up in everything, this new job, new life, Brody, that I haven’t paid attention to something as basic as my cycle.

My heartbeat quickens, and I feel a cold sweat prickling at the back of my neck as realization dawns. It’s been too long.

“Oh God, Jaz,” I whisper, pressing a hand to my mouth. “What if...?”

There’s a silent pause, then Jasmine’s voice, calm and steady. “All right, don’t panic. Just go get a test, okay? A couple, actually. Find out for sure. Don’t let this eat you alive when you’re not even certain yet. And call me the minute you know.”

After I hang up with Jasmine, I notice my hands trembling as I grab my keys and head out the door, desperate to get to the store. My mind spins with every possibility, every “what if”, and the nausea in my stomach only intensifies with each step.

When I reach my car, I slide into the seat and try to steady my breathing, but the second I turn the key in the ignition, my old car lets out a sputtering groan and dies completely.

I try again, pressing the gas pedal, whispering a desperate prayer to get it to start, but each attempt brings the same result: a lifeless, stubborn silence.

Frustration boils up, and before I know it, I’m hitting the steering wheel with the heel of my hand, letting out a choked, helpless scream.

“Of all days, why now?” I mutter, slumping back in the seat. Tears form in my eyes, but I can’t just sit here, drowning in this storm of fear and what-ifs. I need to know,

and I need to know now.

Taking a shaky breath, I remember there's one more option. Brody's daughter-in-law, Gemma, gave me her number "just in case".

This definitely qualifies for me, even if she didn't really mean just in case. I thought I might be pregnant with her father-in-law. I scroll through my contacts, my hands still trembling, and hit her number. It only rings twice before she picks up, her voice warm and chipper as usual.

"Hey, Tasha!" she says, her tone bright. "Everything all right?"

"Hi, Gemma...sorry to bother you, but my car won't start," I say, forcing my voice to stay calm. "I just...I really need a quick ride to the store. Do you think you could help?"

"Of course! I'll be there in fifteen minutes," she replies without hesitation, her kindness easing the tension just a bit.

Gemma pulls up in no time, true to her word, and ushers me into the car with a friendly smile and a reassuring pat on the hand. The drive feels both endless and too fast, every thought tumbling over itself in my mind.

I stare out the window as my heart pounds, watching the world pass by, knowing that soon enough, everything in my life could change.

## Chapter Thirteen

Tasha

Driving through town, Gemma's gaze keeps flicking over to me, her eyes glinting

with curiosity.

“So...you look a little pale. What’s going on, Tasha?” she asks, her tone light but with that sharp edge of concern that tells me she’s noticed more than I’d like her to.

She’s perceptive, maybe a little too perceptive for me to dodge her questions forever.

“Oh, I’m all right,” I say, trying to sound casual, though my laugh comes out strained.

“Just one of those days where you wake up feeling off. Not really sure why.”

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The trees are ablaze in fiery reds, deep golds, and rich oranges, their colors spilling across the road as if a painter had taken a brush to the entire landscape. I turn my gaze out the window, hoping the sight of the autumn leaves will calm the tangled mess of nerves in my chest.

The beauty of it is overwhelming, like a living postcard, but even the peaceful scenery can't loosen the knot of anxiety inside me.

The golden sunlight filters through the canopy, casting warm, dappled patterns across the road, the light shifting and dancing. I try to focus on those patterns, to let them soothe me, but my mind is elsewhere, racing over everything.

The possibility of being pregnant, of carrying Brody's baby, the nerves and fear of it all, sit in my chest like a strange, bittersweet weight, tugging at feelings I can't even name.

Then there's Gemma, sitting just a few feet away, unknowingly bringing me closer to the tests that could confirm everything I've been fearing and hoping for all at once.

The whole situation feels surreal, heavy with irony and tangled emotions. A pang of guilt sharpens inside me, and I shift uncomfortably, trying not to fidget as Gemma hums along to the radio, lost in the music and seemingly oblivious to the storm inside me.

Still, every now and then, she glances over with a little smile, a quick look of reassurance, and I force myself to smile back, hoping it hides everything I'm feeling.

Please, Gemma, just keep the questions to yourself.

Finally, we pull up to the drugstore, and the building looks like something out of an old movie. It's the kind of place where everyone knows each other, where shoppers exchange friendly nods and shopkeepers chat with regulars.

Small, tidy flower boxes filled with marigolds and mums sit beneath the windows, while a red and white striped awning shades the entrance.

The small-town charm feels simultaneously comforting and suffocating, as though every set of eyes inside already knows why I'm here.

We step inside as the faint scent of lavender and floor polish fills the air, mixed with the soft hum of conversation from a few patrons scattered about.

Gemma glances down one aisle and grins, gesturing toward the beauty section. "I'll be over here for a bit," she says with a wink, making a beeline for the shelves lined with lipsticks and mascara.

I nod, grateful for the space, and offer a quick smile in return, my mind already racing as I turn and head toward the back of the store.

Each step toward the women's health section feels like it takes a small eternity, my footsteps echoing in the quiet.

When I reach the aisle, I stop, staring at the shelves before me, taking in the entire display of pregnancy tests, rows upon rows of boxes in shades of pink and blue, some boasting accuracy down to the hour, others promising "early results".

My heart races as I scan the options, feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices. I realize with a jolt that I have no idea which one to choose. I've never been

in this position before.

Back when I was with my ex, we were always careful—meticulously careful.

This moment had never crossed my mind.

But with Brody...it's like everything was different from the start.

There was a trust, a closeness. Something that made me let my guard down, maybe even recklessly.

It wasn't just attraction—it was a sense of safety, of wanting to let go of every wall I'd ever put up.

Maybe, in some deep, unspoken way, I let caution slip away.

As I take a shaky breath in, I grab the first box my hand lands on, clutching it tightly.

My fingers curl around the edges, as though holding it will somehow ground me, even as my mind continues to spin.

In this moment, I wish more than anything that I could fade into the shelves, disappear until this is all over.

I keep my head down as I make my way to the front, avoiding eye contact with anyone who might give me a knowing look. The floor tiles pass in a blur, and my grip tightens around the boxes in my hands, as if holding onto them will somehow anchor me in this moment.

Walking toward the counter, I feel every muscle in my body tighten. I am praying for a quick escape. If I can just get to the register, pay, and tuck the bag discreetly under

my arm, maybe I can get through this unnoticed.

My heart hammers so hard in my chest that I feel it in my throat, and my hands grip the pregnancy test boxes so tightly that the edges dig into my palms.

I steal a quick glance over my shoulder, half-expecting to see Gemma coming around the corner, and brace myself for what I might say if she does.

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It's just a precaution. It doesn't mean anything yet. Right?

Not looking where I'm going, I round the corner to the counter and nearly collide with her.

I stop short, and the world slows down as I see Gemma's eyes widen, looking from me to the boxes in my hands.

The boxes nearly slip from my fingers, and my heart races so fast I can barely breathe.

My breath catches, and for a split second, I feel like I might drop everything, like I might crumble on the spot.

"Oh, uh..." I stammer, my cheeks burning as though I've been caught red-handed. "I didn't see you there."

Gemma's gaze immediately flicks down to the items in my hands and lingers for a split second, her eyes widening in surprise before snapping back up to meet mine.

Her expression is unreadable, caught somewhere between curiosity and shock, and my mind races for something to explain why I'm standing here with pregnancy tests clutched in my hands.

Gemma raises an eyebrow, but her expression stays coolly neutral, though I can tell questions are dancing behind her blue eyes.



I swallow hard, trying to keep my cool as I sidestep her, my movements clumsy, and hurry toward the cashier before she can say anything.

My stomach feels like it's in knots as I place the tests on the counter, watching the cashier ring me up without even looking at me. I practically throw my card at him, mumbling a hasty "thanks" as I take the small bag and tuck it under my arm, hoping it's enough to hide what's inside.

As I turn back, I can feel Gemma's topaz gaze burning into me, the weight of her unspoken questions heavy in the air between us.

She doesn't comment, nor does she question me, and for that, I'm grateful.

But, instead, the silence that stretches as we walk back to the car feels louder than any words. I fight to keep my expression calm under her silent scrutiny, though my mind is spinning.

Once we're both back in her car, Gemma wastes no time. She doesn't even start the engine, just turns to me, her gaze piercing, her voice as blunt as a hammer. "So, if you're pregnant...is it Brody's?"

Her directness hits me like a slap, and I feel all the air leave my lungs. I open my mouth, searching for words, but nothing comes out right away. "Yeah...it would have to be."

My voice sounds small, almost like it belongs to someone else, and I feel the weight of what I've just admitted to settling over me, thick and suffocating.

For a moment, Gemma says nothing. The silence fills every corner of the car, stretching out heavy and tense.

I can feel my face flush, shame and worry flooding me.

Finally, unable to take it anymore, I blurt out, “I know what you must be thinking. You probably think I’m just after his money or something...that I’m trying to trap him, but it’s not like that. I swear.”

My voice trembles softly, and I feel the tears I’ve been holding back start to prick at the corners of my eyes. I look down quickly, twisting my fingers together in my lap, too ashamed to meet her gaze.

I want to tell her that I never planned this, that I never wanted to end up in a situation that would make people question my intentions, but the words stick in my throat, tangled up with everything else I can’t quite say.

Gemma sighs, her gaze softening. “Tasha...” she says quietly, reaching for my hand, but her tone is kind, not accusing.

My shoulders shake as the sobs come, silent but fierce, years of worry and doubt and fear bubbling to the surface, all spilling out in front of the last person I want to see me fall apart.

The gentleness in her voice undoes me, and before I can stop it, the tears spill over. I turn away, staring out the window as I try to gather myself, but the weight of everything is just too much.

I can’t bear to look at her, can’t stand the thought of seeing pity in her eyes. She must think I’m just another silly, naive girl who’s let herself get in way over her head—and maybe she’s right. I feel like a fool, like every worst fear I’ve ever had is coming true.

I think of my mother who was a teen mom, and I cringe. I wanted so much not to do

this. I wanted to get my life together, have a career, travel, get married—all before I had kids. And yet, here I am, the same kind of screw-up as my whole family had always been.

The thoughts echo in my mind, cruel and taunting, and I bite down on my lip to keep the sobs from spilling over, though I'm losing that battle fast.

What will Brody think? What will everyone think?

Just when I think I can't handle another moment, Gemma reaches over and squeezes my hand. Her touch is firm, grounding, and when she speaks, her voice is soft, laced with unexpected kindness.

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“Look, Tasha,” she says, her words cutting through my turmoil. “Whatever happens, it’s going to be okay. I mean it.”

Compassion. I turn to her, startled, and for the first time, I see something in her eyes that I hadn’t expected. She doesn’t look at me with judgment or disappointment, only concern, and something in me eases just a little.

I’m caught off guard by her support. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely,” she says firmly. It’s a relief to know she’s not looking at me like some kind of gold digger, just someone in over her head and trying to keep it together. “But...let’s keep this between us for now, okay? Until you’re ready and know what you want to do.”

I nod, feeling a bit of the tension ease from my shoulders.

The leaves outside flash by, each a blur of orange and crimson, but they barely register as I lose myself in anxious thoughts.

The trip back to Brody’s ranch is long and silent, Gemma focused on the road while my mind spirals with what-ifs.

What will I do if the test is positive?

How do I even tell Brody something like this?

A nauseous feeling lingers in the pit of my stomach, far worse now than when I first

woke up.

I press my hand against my stomach, as though that will somehow calm the sick, twisting feeling gnawing at me.

The reality is settling in hard and fast.

Everything I've worked for, all my dreams, everything I thought I knew about my future...everything could change entirely because of the results on a stupid plastic stick—because of a stupid mistake.

Stepping inside Brody's house feels surreal, the familiar warmth of the space almost mocking the storm brewing inside me. I slip my shoes off and take light, careful steps across the polished wooden floor, not wanting to alert Dana or Brody if he's come back home.

My heart thuds in my chest, a drumbeat of panic. I know if either of them sees me now, they'll ask questions, and I don't have any answers yet.

I finally make it to my bedroom, closing the door gently behind me before letting out a shaky breath. The weight of it all crashes over me, and I let myself sink onto the bed, burying my face in my hands as a few sobs escape. But I can't fall apart now. I need to know.

I get up, grabbing the bag with the tests, and make my way to the bathroom. Everything feels surreal as I unwrap the first test, my fingers fumbling with the plastic.

I follow the instructions, feeling awkward and vulnerable as I do, wondering how it's come to this moment of suspense with my entire life on the line.

Setting the first test down, I stare at it with wide, unblinking eyes, watching as the seconds stretch into an eternity.

Then, like a punch to the gut, the result appears: pregnant.

A heavy weight drops in my chest, but I take another test, needing confirmation.

It's positive as well.

Each time I try again, the answer doesn't change, as all five tests line up with the same finality: I'm actually pregnant.

I get myself together, pulling my hoodie back on before cracking open the door. Gemma startles me, standing right there at the threshold, her expression soft and searching. She steps inside, closing the door quietly behind her without a word.

"I swore I'd never end up like this. I'm making the same mistakes my mom made, Gemma. I'll be a failure...just like her."

The moment we're alone, the floodgates open, and I'm sobbing, barely able to get the words out.

Gemma moves closer, her hand rubbing gentle circles on my back as I choke on the memories of my mom.

"I don't know how to do this," I whisper. "My mom never...she never cared. I was just there, you know? Another thing she had to take care of when she felt like it."

The weight of it all presses down on me: the years of neglect, the missed birthdays, the feeling that I was just genuinely unwanted.

“What if I can’t be a good mom?” I ask, my voice barely audible. “What if I don’t know how to be there for a kid? No one was ever there for me.”

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She hugs me, her arms strong and grounding. “Tasha,” Gemma murmurs, “you’re not your mom. You care enough to worry about this, which already makes you different. But you have to believe that you’re different. You have to believe that you can be better, do better.”

Despite her words, the fear still lingers, dark and heavy.

What if I’m just destined to repeat the cycle?

Pulling back slightly, she looks me straight in the eyes. “You have to tell Brody,” she says softly, her voice firm. “He’ll be there for you, Tasha. I know he will. This isn’t something you have to face alone.”

Shaking my head, the thoughts are far overwhelming. “Please, Gemma, don’t say anything yet. I...I need time to think,” I plead. The idea of bringing this news to Brody fills me with dread.

What if he just sees me as...irresponsible, another mistake?

“He hired me to help organize his life, not mess it up.”

A pang of guilt ripples through me as Gemma studies me, her expression a mix of compassion and worry. “Tasha, he cares about you. This isn’t some passing fling for him.”

But the fear is lodged too deep.



“I’ve only ever been good at screwing things up, Gemma. Everyone in my family just makes the same mistakes over and over. It’s like we can’t escape.”

I can’t keep the bitterness from my voice, the anger at how small and trapped I feel.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” I add, my hands shaking. “I was finally going somewhere...finally doing something different. And now?”

Gemma sighs heavily, her hand resting on my arm. “I get that this is terrifying, but you have a choice. You have Brody, and you have me, too. You’re not alone here.”

Despite her reassurance, the doubt remains.

Am I capable of being better?

Or am I just going to end up living the very life I was trying so hard to leave behind?

## Chapter Fourteen

Brody

I’m struck by how empty it feels without Tasha bustling around as I walk into the quiet house.

Usually, I’d hear her laughter echoing from the kitchen or her soft humming as she worked, her voice filling each space with life.

There’s a stillness here that I hadn’t noticed before, a kind of hollow quiet that settles in the corners of each room, stretching into the hallway.

I hadn’t realized how much I’d gotten used to having her here: her energy, her smile,

the way she brings a sense of ease and warmth that seems to seep into the walls themselves.

Work has been a constant grind without her at my side, and I feel the absence of her presence keenly. Just her small glances and easy smiles throughout the day had become a kind of anchor for me.

Tasha made even the toughest days feel lighter. Now, knowing she's still under the weather, I feel an ache to do something for her, something that shows her she's not just another part of my day.

Dropping my keys on the counter, I make my way to the kitchen, grabbing a bowl and ladling some of Dana's chicken and rice soup, rich and aromatic, into it. The steam wafts up, and I can almost imagine the way Tasha's face will light up at the simple gesture.

I balance the bowl on a tray, making my way upstairs, each step mindful and quiet. I knock softly on her door, pushing it open just a crack, and there she is—curled up in bed, her hair spilling over the pillow like strands of silk.

She's tired, but when she sees me, a gentle smile spreads across her face, soft and warm. It's the kind of smile that feels like home.

"You're too good to me," she murmurs, sitting up slowly as I place the tray in front of her. Her jade green eyes meet mine, and they're full of that quiet, genuine gratitude that's like a balm to something deep inside me I hadn't realized needed healing.

"Just taking care of you, darlin'," I reply, my tone casual, though the way she looks at me is melting every wall I've built up over the years. I lean down and kiss her on the head.

I don't even know if she realizes how much of an impact that small, grateful look has on me, but I can feel it, settling in my chest, making everything feel right for once.

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Tasha thanks me again, her voice so soft it's like she's speaking to a part of me that's rarely touched, and I shake my head, brushing off her gratitude as I take a seat by her side.

"You don't have to thank me," I say, watching as she dips her spoon into the soup, her eyes lighting up as she tastes it. She hums with approval, that little spark in her expression enough to make me feel like I'm exactly where I want to be.

After she takes a few bites, we settle in together, and I flick on the TV, finding an old cowboy movie just starting.

She snickers, her lips curving in amusement, and I can't resist a grin.

"Hey, don't knock the classics," I tease, nudging her playfully. "These guys had style."

"Oh, style?" she retorts, raising an eyebrow, smirking in a way that makes my heart skip. "I don't see you riding around with spurs and a lasso, Mr. Thorne."

"Give me a horse, and I'll show you how it's done." I wink, playing along, and her laugh fills the room, warm and infectious.

It's like every worry from the day melts away, and all that matters is this moment, her laughter, the light in her eyes that makes me feel like a young man again, full of possibility.

The banter flows easily between us, comfortable and natural. By the time we finish

the soup and set the empty bowls aside, I find myself reaching out to her, almost without thinking.

“Your feet must be killing you after the past week,” I say, motioning to her. “Let me help you out a bit.”

A pink blush rises on her cheeks, but she doesn’t protest, extending her feet toward me with a small, trusting smile. I take her small foot in my hand, gently working my thumbs into the arch, feeling the tension melt under my fingers.

Her toenails are painted a soft pink, a sweet detail that only adds to the feeling blossoming in my chest.

“Oh, you’re good at that,” she sighs seductively, leaning back with her eyes half-closed, her body relaxing completely under my touch. I keep working my hands over her tired feet, letting the silence settle around us, glad to be here, to be the one taking care of her in these simple, quiet ways.

She stirs after a while, opening her eyes and looking almost sheepish. “I still have a pile of homework to get through,” she admits, sighing. “Guess my little break’s over.”

“Mind if I hang around while you work? Maybe I can help you out,” I say, not wanting the night to end just yet.

Tasha nods with a small smile, and I pull up a chair beside her as she sets up her laptop and notebook on her lap.

“Accounting work, huh?” I ask, scanning her notes and textbook, chuckling as I spot the pages on adjusting entries and balance sheets. “All right, what part are you stuck on?”

Tasha frowns, her lips pouting gently, pointing to the section that's been giving her trouble. "This stuff just doesn't stick in my brain," she says, a little frustration seeping into her voice.

I go over a few key ideas, guiding her through examples, watching her closely as she listens intently, nodding along, biting her lip in that adorable way she does when she's really concentrating.

"That's it," I say, pointing to her notes where she got it right. "See? It's all about balance, keeping everything equal."

A light sparks in her eyes as she scribbles down her answers. "I think it's finally making sense," she says, giving me a smile that could light up the whole room.

Knowing I'm helping her feels like I'm finally giving back something real, something that matters.

We work through a few more problems, and as she starts to get it, a quiet pride fills me, watching her succeed in something she'd been so unsure about.

Tasha's stronger and smarter than she knows, and being here to witness it is something I wouldn't trade for anything.

Eventually, her head begins to droop, her pencil slipping from her fingers.

"Tasha," I whisper softly, nudging her shoulder. Her eyes flutter open, barely holding on, and I can't help but smile. She's half-asleep already, and with a gentle hand, I coax her to lie back, pulling the covers over her as she drifts off.

I slide into bed beside her, wrapping her into my arms, holding her close as her breathing deepens, her body warm and soft against mine.

Tasha nestles against me instinctively, her hair spilling over the pillow in a russet halo. As I breathe her in, the comforting scent of her fills me with a peace I haven't felt in a long time.

Pressing a soft kiss to her cheek, I feel her lean back into me with a small sigh. I'm overwhelmed by a sense of belonging while I'm holding her like this. It's a warmth that goes beyond anything physical.

I let my hand rest on her shoulder, brushing a strand of hair from her face, pulling her closer, feeling the steady rise and fall of her chest, the rhythm that soothes something deep within me.

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In the quiet, with her in my arms, the world falls away, leaving only this: her trust, her warmth, and a peace I never expected.

I press another kiss to her hair, letting the quiet moment wrap around us like a promise, holding her close as sleep begins to pull me under, content in a way I hadn't thought possible.

Slowly, I kiss her, her eyes fluttering open gently with each kiss. She sighs gently, waking up again, a smile crossing her soft lips.

"You woke me up," she sighs, stretching and thrusting her ass straight against my crotch.

"You're waking me up," I moan, pressing myself against her.

My hands fall to the waistband of her sweats, and she kisses me over and over, thrusting herself toward me.

For a moment, I'm worried about catching whatever she's got.

But on the other hand, I'm in awe of her and I can't say no to what I've started.

My fingers slide beneath the edge of her sweats, slipping them down, exposing her perfectly shaped ass to the night air. My hand slides across her, feeling her warm skin and the way she stiffens under my touch.

I pull myself out, my thick, hot cock throbbing in the dark. I press myself against her,



feeling the wetness between her legs and listening to her sighs.

“Are you too sick for me to have sex with you?”

“No, I want it,” she sighs, grinding her wet pussy against me. “Please.”

My grip on her tightens as I hold her still, pressing myself inside of her.

“Brody,” she gasps softly, gripping my hand that’s on her hip in tight fingers. She cants her hips back, giving me more access and more room to move, and I oblige.

I slide my hand up her body and squeeze her breast, teasing the nipple as I pull slowly all the way back out of her, only to thrust back in.

“You feel amazing,” I say to her on a moan as her walls squeeze me, milking away at my cock greedily.

“Not as good as you,” she whispers before crying out as I press all the way home inside of her with a sharp thrust.

She tries to push me to go faster, but I shake my head a little and slide my hand down to press her lower body back against me.

I keep up my slow, relentless pace, feeling my body coiling tighter and tighter. She’s pleading, begging, bargaining with me, but I just keep pressing in and out, in and out, with a steady rhythm.

“Brody,” she gasps, squirming in my arms. “Please. Please make me come.”

“As you wish,” I murmur to her, slithering my fingers down her body and finding her clit. I sweep my fingers over it a few times, and she rewards me by coming apart with

a high scream, her pussy fluttering around me, a gush of moisture accompanying her release.

“Oh lord, Tasha. God, you’re good to me,” I rasp out, pumping into her two more times and then shuddering with a violent release that curls my toes.

I try my best to pull out in time, but admittedly, I’m out of practice. Besides, we’ve never worried about protection even once. She has to be on the pill. She would say something if she wasn’t.

“Thank you for being here,” she says to me, twisting around to face me and pressing her face against my chest.

“Thank you for letting me be here for you,” I say back, squeezing her tightly.

I try not to think about what might happen if she doesn’t want to stay with me. Hell, I don’t even know how to ask her to stay with me. I don’t even know what that would look like, if I’m honest.

I decide I’m too tired to try and figure this all out tonight.

Instead of worrying about our situation, I just cuddle her back against me and allow sleep to claim me.

## Chapter Fifteen

Tasha

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:05 am*

Slipping carefully from beneath the covers, I manage to make it out of bed before the nausea hits, hoping that I can get to the bathroom before my stomach betrays me.

Each quiet, quick step feels like it's taking more energy than it should, but I move slowly, trying not to wake Brody. The room is dim, with a plum-colored, soft pre-dawn glow filtering in through the curtains, casting everything in a cool lavender light.

The cold marble counter soothes my fingertips, grounding me as I fight the nausea rolling up within me. I make it to the bathroom and close the door as silently as I can, then lean against the sink, letting out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

Turning on the water, waiting for it to get warm, I focus on the rhythmic sound of it splashing against the tiles. Steam begins to fill the bathroom, curling and twisting in the soft light.

My hand lingers over my stomach, offering a faint, useless comfort to myself.

The weight of my discomfort presses down on me, growing heavier with each quiet, gasping breath I take.

Each second feels stretched out, as if even time itself knows I'm holding something enormous inside, something that Brody doesn't know about yet.

The warm water cascades over me when I finally step into the shower, melting some of the tension I've carried since yesterday.

The scent of Brody's body wash mingles with the steam, filling the space with his scent, and for a moment, I'm struck by the overwhelming contradiction of it all; this beautiful, comforting moment, tainted by the heavy secret weighing on my chest.

For a moment, I close my eyes, letting the water soothe the worst of the queasiness, leaning against the shower wall to steady myself.

Then, the faint creak of the bedroom floorboards breaks the silence and my heart skips.

Brody's awake, his footsteps drawing closer.

I can picture him, ruffled and sleepy, moving toward the bathroom with that natural ease of his, and my stomach twists, but this time from nerves. I adjust the temperature, trying to steady my breathing.

Maybe he'll just say good morning and go get ready for work. I try to look casual, closing my eyes and focusing on the warm water that streams down on me, as though I don't have a monumental secret to hide.

But then I hear the door open, and I sense him near me before he even speaks.

Brody's shadow appears on the other side of the glass, and a moment later, he slides the shower door open just enough to peek in.

"Good morning, beautiful," he murmurs with a sleepy grin, leaning in to kiss me. His lips brush my forehead, and I feel the familiar warmth that always makes my heart skip a beat.

He smells of fresh linen, and for a moment, I feel like everything's normal, that it's just the two of us here, enjoying an easy morning together.

“Morning,” I say, hoping he doesn’t notice the hint of unease in my weak voice.

Brody leans in a little closer, his voice low as he murmurs something about last night, a playful glint in his eyes. His fingertips trail along my arm, and I do my best to smile back, nodding as if I’m relaxed. But inside, the guilt is like a knot twisting tighter, pulling me in two directions.

I know that any moment, he’ll head off to his end of the house, and this morning will fade into our routine, but I can’t shake the feeling of dread.

This isn’t a routine morning and hiding it from him makes my heart ache.

I muster a quick smile as he finally steps back, talking about going to get dressed, and the moment he steps back I exhale slowly, the tension flooding out of me in a rush. The weight of everything, the thrill, the guilt, the fear—they’re all simmering under the surface.

I press my hands to my stomach, thinking to myself, just act natural, Tasha.

“Last night was...well, let’s just say I didn’t want it to end.” His eyes dance, teasing as he leans back a little, surveying me again with an affectionate smile.

I chuckle, trying to keep my face from betraying the waves of worry beneath the surface. “Good morning to you, too,” I manage to say, hiding my nervousness behind a smile.

I reach for his hand, squeezing it lightly, hoping he doesn’t notice the slight tremor in my fingers.

“I’ll let you finish up,” he says, pressing another kiss to my forehead before stepping back. “Just didn’t want you to get lonely in here.”

He winks, the picture of ease, before he saunters out of the bathroom to his end of the house.

The warmth of his words lingers even as he leaves, but guilt follows just as quickly.

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I feel like I'm hiding something huge from him, this looming truth that will change everything. For now, though, I focus on keeping my cool and getting through the morning without letting on that anything's amiss.

I finish rinsing off and step out of the shower, trying to focus on my routine, hoping it'll help steady me for the day ahead.

I dry off quickly, wrap myself in a towel, and reach for my phone.

I see a text from Gemma.

>>Did you tell him yet?

I take a deep breath, then type back a quick reply.

>>No, not yet.

My fingers hover over the screen as I try to think of something reassuring, but I have nothing to say.

Instead, I place my phone on the vanity counter and start putting on my makeup, trying to focus on looking put together for the office.

As I'm applying my mascara, focusing on each careful stroke, I catch a reflection of movement in the mirror.

Brody's standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with that easy, confident

stance of his, watching me with a soft smile. His gaze is warm and steady, and it feels like he's taking in every small detail of me in this moment, like he's content just to be here.

There's something almost magnetic about his presence, and for a moment, I can feel the tension start to melt away, as if just looking at him is enough to remind me that I'm not in this alone. At least, that's what I want to believe.

"You about ready to head out?" he asks, but there's that hint of amusement in his eyes that always makes me feel like I'm the only one in the room.

The way he looks at me, it's like he knows every corner of my mind, every little flicker of my heart, and still, he stays.

"Almost," I say, steadying my hand with the mascara wand, even though my heart's pounding. "Just the finishing touches."

I force a small smile, watching his reflection as he tilts his head, observing me with that familiar grin.

He doesn't look away, his gaze so warm it almost makes me feel safe—like I can handle anything today. I turn away, trying to catch my breath.

For a moment, the air hums with a quiet, unspoken energy, and I feel my nerves settle, just enough for me to think that maybe, just maybe, I can get through today without letting my emotions unravel completely.

Then, my phone buzzes on the counter, breaking the stillness between us.

The screen lights up, Gemma's name glowing brightly, and a single word flashes in the notification banner, "pregnant".



The letters seem to shout, filling the room, and I feel my chest tighten. The word is so big, so obvious, and I barely manage to glance away before Brody catches sight of it too.

Brody laughs, his eyes lighting up as he straightens. “Gemma’s pregnant?” He’s genuinely thrilled, his whole face lighting up.

There’s a joy in his voice, pure and unfiltered, that catches me off guard. “That’s wonderful! I bet she’ll be an amazing mom.” His grin spreads wider, and he looks like he’s picturing it all: Gemma, her baby, the new life that’ll come with it.

I blink, thrown completely off balance, my mind scrambling to keep up. “Um...yeah. Isn’t that exciting?” My voice sounds thin, the words shaky.

I try to laugh along, but there’s a pressure building inside me, like a balloon that could burst at any second. I can feel the tension creeping back, my heartbeat racing faster with every second I stand there, my resolve slipping through my fingers.

He nods, still beaming, and I can’t help but wonder how that expression will change when he realizes it’s not Gemma’s news he’s celebrating.

There’s no way I can keep hiding it now.

That it’s my pregnancy she’s talking about.

It’s like the truth is a tornado, and I’m standing right in its path.

I take a deep breath, letting the smile drop from my face, and square my shoulders, turning to face him fully. My hands feel ice-cold, and I grip the counter, grounding myself as I look him in the eye, forcing my voice out, even though it’s barely more than a whisper.

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“Actually, Brody...” I say, the words catching in my throat, “It’s...it’s not Gemma. I’m...I’m the one who’s pregnant.”

The silence that follows is deafening.

His face goes completely still, the warmth in his expression dissolving into something unreadable, his gaze fixed on me like he’s trying to process what I just said.

There’s no joy there now, just an immobile, frozen shock.

The silence wraps around me like a fog, thick and suffocating, and I feel my heart splintering, one painful crack at a time with each second he doesn’t respond.

It’s all too much.

I can’t stand here and watch his expression change, see whatever’s hiding behind that unreadable look come to the surface.

My breath catches, and before I know what I’m doing, I snatch up my phone, my hands trembling as I turn away from him, slipping out of the bathroom as fast as I can.

My footsteps echo in the hallway, and I practically run, the walls around me blurring as I rush to the front door.

The moment I step outside, the fresh air hits me like a slap, but it’s not enough to ease the panic gripping my chest.

I stumble to my car, fumbling with the keys, my fingers shaking so badly it takes two tries before I finally manage to unlock the door. I slide into the driver's seat, my hands gripping the wheel as I struggle to catch my breath, my mind racing in a thousand directions.

Tears prick my eyes and spill over as I wind my way through the quiet morning streets, grateful to have a working car again and that there's no one around to see me falling apart.

Even in this fucked up headspace, I can't help but feel grateful to Brody for having someone look at my car.

The drive to work feels like an endless, aching stretch, and I'm barely holding it together.

Brody's reaction keeps replaying in my mind. He'd looked stunned, paralyzed almost, and not in the good way I'd been secretly, desperately hoping for.

I'd watched his expression change, the warm excitement he'd had for Gemma draining away the moment he realized I was the one carrying a baby.

Brody had been so genuinely thrilled when he thought he was going to be a grandpa.

How easily that joy shifted to...whatever that unreadable look was.

It hurts so much that it's physically painful, like there's a weight pressing down on my chest.

A part of me had thought, maybe, that he'd be just as excited for me. I wipe a stray tear as I steer onto the winding back roads that snake their way into town, choosing the long route just to give myself more time to pull it together.

Outside the window, autumn colors blur by, rich reds and golds muted by the morning mist. Normally, I'd love this view. It's calming, grounding.

But today, even the trees and rolling hills seem somber, like they're sharing my heartbreak.

My stomach twists with fear and nerves, and I have no idea if it's from the pregnancy or just my gut-wrenching sadness.

## Chapter Sixteen

Brody

I wander through my job sites, trying to focus on the conversations swirling around me, but everything feels hazy. I'm here, but it's like I'm not.

My mind is stuck on her and the million questions that keep spinning through my head.

Tasha is avoiding me, dodging glances, staying out of my path, and it gnaws at me like nothing else.

Today's one of our busiest days of the quarter. There are projects in every direction: site supervisors rushing by with updates, architects calling to verify last-minute changes, and a half-dozen contracts on my desk waiting for review.

I'm supposed to be making decisions about material orders, reviewing bids for upcoming projects, and checking in with Josh on the new high-rise in the Loop.

None of it's sticking, though.

An email from a contractor detailing supply delays sits open on my computer screen, and I read the same paragraph three times without actually processing a word.

I stare blankly at a blueprint for the new office complex, and the lines of text swim in front of me. I manage a few perfunctory nods and grunts as my project manager updates me on safety regulations and some zoning changes, but all I can think about is how I need to find Tasha, how I need to talk to her and make this right.

I glance down at my watch, a sense of dread building within me.

I can't go on like this, half here and half somewhere else. I need to see her. Now.

It's later in the day when I finally spot her at one of our newer, empty job sites.

She's finishing up some measurements, her hands steady, her focus intense, but when she sees me approach, there's a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. I step forward, careful not to crowd her, not to spook her into walking away.

"Don't run off, Tasha," I say softly, holding her gaze. "Please, just...just talk to me."

Her expression shifts suddenly, she's trying to be brave, but I can see the fear lingering there. It tears at me.

"Whatever happens," I tell her, my voice steady but laced with a nervous edge, "I'm here. I'll help with the baby. You're not alone in this."

Saying the words aloud makes it all feel more real, more terrifying, but also more right. This is my child, too.

“I’ll be there for you. For both of you,” I continue, my chest tightening as I realize just how monumental this promise really is.

My hands clench slightly as I let out a shaky breath.

I’m scared. Hell, I’m terrified!

Becoming a father again at this point in my life is something I never saw coming.

But I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I want to do the right thing.

I won’t leave her to face this alone. “I don’t know what this looks like for us,” I add, my voice faltering, “but I want you to know you’ll have my support, no matter what.

Tasha’s eyes fill with tears, and she nibbles her lip, struggling to keep them at bay. “Brody, I was just...I was just getting my life together,” she chokes out, her voice breaking. “And now...now this.”

She lets the words fall, and each one feels like a punch to my chest. Hearing her refer to our child as “this” stings in a way I hadn’t expected.

It’s a cold realization, slicing through my resolve and making my heart ache.

I try to keep my face neutral, but the memories rush in, unbidden and raw.

I remember the way things with my ex had slowly unraveled, the distance growing over time until there was nothing left between us but formality and obligations.

And as I stand here, I can't ignore the gnawing doubt, that maybe trying to make this work with Tasha is a mistake, that maybe it isn't reasonable. She's a young woman, close to Josh's age, with her whole life ahead of her.

She should be out there enjoying herself, not bound to a life she never planned. Guilt tightens in my chest as I look at her, feeling a profound sadness for both of us.

She deserves a fresh start, a future free from the complications I've unknowingly added to her life.

My heart sinks as I realize how much of this weight she's been carrying alone, and I can't help but wonder if I'm the reason she feels trapped, like her life's spiraling out of her control.

I reach out and pull her into a hug, wrapping her tightly in my arms. "Everything's going to be okay, Tasha," I murmur against her hair, trying to keep my voice steady, trying to believe the words myself.

Tasha feels so small, so vulnerable, and I tighten my grip, wishing I could take away every ounce of her fear and uncertainty. She pulls back slightly, looking around at the job site... looking at the building plans for the house that will go here, her eyes misty.

"I always imagined one day being able to afford a house like this," she whispers, her voice wavering. "All on my own, because I was a success. I wanted to make something of myself, Brody. I wanted to prove I was more than where I came from."

I feel a sudden pang of sadness hearing her say this, knowing just how much of herself she's poured into her dreams, how far she's come despite the odds.

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“Tasha,” I say, cupping her cheek, my voice soft but firm, “you already are a success. Look at you, you’re working, going to college, handling more responsibility than most people twice your age. Everyone around you sees it. Hell, I see it every day.”

Her bright eyes search mine, and I can see the hint of doubt, the flicker of hope, and it kills me that she can’t see herself the way I do.

“You’re an amazing woman, Tasha. And whatever you choose, whether it’s this life, or another, you’ve got people who believe in you. And you’ve got me.”

“I’m scared,” she whispers to me.

“I know,” I tell her, rocking her back and forth.

“I don’t feel good,” she says to me. “The morning sickness...” Her voice trails off and I lean back to look down at her.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s call it a day and head back home. I’ll drive. We can get your car tomorrow.”

She nods and lets me take her by the hand and lead her to my truck. I help her get into the passenger seat, and then I climb in myself and start driving.

We aren’t that far from the exit to head out of the city, but she falls asleep almost right away, frowning in her sleep.

I want to wipe the frown off her face when I glance over at her as I drive. The thing



is, I have no idea what comes next. Do we get married? Does she even want to have me involved with the baby? Is she going to even keep it?

That last thought turns my stomach and I close my eyes briefly before turning down the lane toward my driveway. I won't think about that now.

When we stop in front of the house, she stirs a little, blinking at me sleepily. "We're here?"

"Yes," I tell her, coming around to her side and lifting her out of the truck. I carry her in my arms to my bedroom and help her slip out of her work clothing.

"Do you want a bath?" I ask her, and she nods silently.

I get the bath filled up and help her to climb in, then go to the kitchen to get her some food and a bottle of water.

When I come back, she's washed her hair, but it seems that she's fallen asleep again, her head leaning against the soft padded headrest in my fancy tub.

"All done?" I ask her. "I brought you some food."

"Okay," she says dreamily. "Thank you."

I wrap her up in my bathrobe, which is huge on her, and then bring her into my bedroom. I turn on the fireplace and sit her down in front of it, putting the tray of food on the end table next to her.

I watch her pick at her food like a sleepwalker for a while. Finally, she turns to look at me.

“I don’t think I can eat any more,” she says to me.

“Let’s get you in bed,” I agree, pulling her to her feet and slipping her out of the bathrobe. “Do you want pajamas?”

She shakes her head, curling up in a ball. “I just want you,” she says to me, looking over her shoulder invitingly.

I sigh. I should let her rest, but I give in to temptation and slide under the covers with her. Her body is so warm that I feel a prickle of sweat tingle over my skin.

“I want you,” she breathes to me, flipping around and slipping under the covers.

Soon I feel her lips wrapping around my cock, stroking back and forth, bringing me out of my sleepy state and into full arousal. Her hands wrap around my hips, one cupping my ass cheek as she bobs back and forth, back and forth, making my toes curl and sending my eyes rolling in the back of my head.

I tangle my hand gently in her hair, tugging lightly. She sighs, which makes my cock lift with pleasure, and I feel my hips gently rock toward her, mimicking her motions, and she moans again.

Her hand is between her legs, whipping back and forth, a small, wet, sloshing sound coming from her busy hand.

“Here, let me,” I say, placing my finger beneath her tiny chin and lifting her face up toward me. I crawl on top of her, kissing up her perfect feet, across her angular ankles, which are trim and beautiful.

I lift her left leg in the air, my lips trailing along the inside, past her knee, past her mid-thigh. I watch her head tilt back, an impatient huff in her sighs.

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My lips stop at the apex of her thigh, millimeters away from her luscious, dripping pussy. My tongue drags along the crease, back and forth, setting her body on edge as her back arches, a perfect bow over the horizon of the bed.

“Please, keep going,” she sighs.

“Who said I was going to stop?” I ask, my hand falling between her legs, gently peeling between her lower lips and landing on her small clit. I rub against it, slowly at first, and then faster, watching as her chest rises and falls with each swift movement.

Tasha rises up, taking me into a passionate kiss before she falls back to my waist and takes my dick into her mouth. I feel myself bump the back of her throat, my hands fall to the back of her head in a swift, smooth motion.

I flip her on her back, laying on top of her, pushing myself between her legs. Tasha sighs, our lips meeting again in a languorous kiss, our tongues caressing over one another.

Her soft hands run over my chest before she runs them through my hair. I shift her hips forward as I press into her, a deep groan leaving my lips as her pussy invites me in.

She feels so good inside, juicy and tight, throbbing with each stroke I deliver. I pound myself against her, and I feel her nails digging into my back as she comes on me again and again, soaking the both of us and the bed.

We don't stop, though, and we continue, over and over, not a care for anyone hearing

or coming across us.

In this moment, there is only us.

Tasha climbs on top of me, her soft tits bouncing in my face while she leans down and starts kissing me, her lips smothering me with an intoxicating presence that I crave.

I kiss her back, allowing my lips to say what my words can't, and I feel as if I'm the luckiest man alive at this moment. Tasha sighs, her body shivering down upon me, her shaking hands wrapped around my shoulder caps as I pump my cock faster inside of her.

Just let me make you feel better.

Her hands grip me as I give her everything I have.

## Chapter Seventeen

Tasha

I can't help but feel a bit out of my depth agreeing to this family dinner.

But I couldn't exactly say no when Gemma offered to lend me an outfit, her face lighting up as she dug through her closet.

The dress she picked for me, a deep wine-colored sheath that hugs my figure in a way I'm not used to, is gorgeous. The fabric is soft and rich, like liquid velvet against my skin, and when I slipped it on, it fit as if it were made for me.

Looking in the mirror, I barely recognize myself. My caramel hair falls in loose

waves around my shoulders, and Gemma even insisted on a touch of makeup, which makes my eyes seem brighter and more defined.

It's as if I'm stepping into a version of myself I've only dreamed about.

On the drive over to the restaurant, the city lights twinkle against the deepening night, casting a warm glow over everything.

Brody sneaks longing glances at me from time to time, his gaze lingering.

"You look amazing," he says softly, his voice filled with admiration that sends a flush of warmth up my cheeks.

Even though I feel completely out of place, his words settle me, and I manage a smile in return, feeling a little more confident with him beside me. Still, the confidence vanishes the moment we step into *Ristorante Fioritura*.

The restaurant is like something out of a magazine. The walls are painted in muted, earthy hues that remind me of an old Tuscan villa, with deep burgundy and olive tones, and there's a faint scent of rosemary and garlic drifting through the air, mingling with the aromas of freshly baked bread.

Soft, golden light filters through hand-blown glass chandeliers that dangle from an intricately carved ceiling, casting a warm glow that makes everything feel intimate and luxurious.

As we walk deeper inside, I notice the shelves along the walls, stacked with wine bottles that bear labels with names on them that I can't pronounce. Each shelf is woven with greenery, delicate ivy and lavender spilling down like a natural tapestry.

The tables are dressed in crisp white linens, each place setting adorned with a sprig of

fresh rosemary tucked beside the polished silverware. It's beautiful, almost intimidatingly so.

I glance down at the menu, the elegant Italian script looping and swirling in ways that make my head spin.

Dishes like risotto al tartufo bianco and ossobuco alla Fiorentina leap off the page, sounding luxurious and completely foreign.

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I don't even know what half of it means.

Brody must sense my hesitation, because he gives my hand a gentle squeeze, grounding me. "Don't worry," he murmurs, smiling warmly. "I'll help you navigate it."

His reassurance melts some of my tension, and I follow him to the table, where Josh and Gemma are already seated, looking relaxed and entirely at home.

To my relief, dinner goes far better than I'd feared and thought it might.

Josh, who's always seemed a bit distant, starts to relax, his initial stiffness softening as he loosens up around his father and wife. He and Gemma laugh easily, trading stories and jokes with Brody, and eventually, I find myself drawn into the conversation, too.

They share anecdotes from their lives: like the time Josh accidentally hit a mailbox with his first car, or when Gemma managed to cook an entire meal using only a toaster after the oven broke.

My plate holds a delicate portion of risotto al tartufo, each grain perfectly creamy, the dish flecked with shavings of fragrant white truffle. I take small bites, savoring the richness, though I'm careful not to eat too much, trying to keep the queasiness at bay.

Thankfully, no one comments on my light appetite, allowing me the space to enjoy the food at my own pace. The flavors are exquisite, the truffle earthy and aromatic, mingling with the creamy pasta in a way that feels both indulgent and comforting.

As the evening wears on, I start to feel a warmth building inside me, something I haven't felt in a long time. I think it's a sense of belonging.

Josh and Gemma's banter is easy and familiar, the kind that comes from years of shared memories and small, unspoken understandings.

Brody, seated beside me, watches his son and daughter-in-law with a prideful, gentle smile that tugs at my heart.

I can see the love in his eyes, the satisfaction of seeing his family happy, and for a moment, I feel like I'm part of it, like I've stepped into something real and beautiful.

The ease between them is contagious, and soon I feel myself relaxing, feeling lighter, almost as if this could be my world too.

I laugh at their stories, my own nerves dissolving, and find myself joining in, sharing little snippets about my life back home, though I keep the rougher stories tucked away.

I catch Gemma's eye across the table, and she gives me a warm, knowing smile. It's a look that tells me she's glad I'm here, that she wants me here.

My heart flutters, and for the first time, I dare to imagine that maybe—just maybe—this could be a place where I could belong.

The clinking of glasses, the restaurant hum around us, the soft murmur of conversations, and the warmth of the candlelight giving everything a soft, inviting glow that makes me feel almost sleepy.

I sit back, taking it all in, the sounds, the scents, the laughter, wondering, quietly if this is what family is supposed to feel like. Is family supposed to be about warmth,



love, and acceptance?

For a moment, I allow myself to believe that maybe I could be part of this, that maybe I could fit here in Brody's life. He offers the kind of stability I always dreamed of but never really believed I'd find.

Excusing myself to go to the bathroom, I navigate my way through the maze of tables, feeling more at ease than I did when I first walked in.

After splashing some water on my face and reapplying a bit of lipstick, I make my way back to the dining area.

As I round the corner, I catch sight of Brody and Josh standing at the bar.

My name drifts over, faint but unmistakable, and I stop, my heart thudding as I realize they're talking about me.

Brody has a glass in his hand, swirling the amber liquid as he talks to his son, who's listening intently.

A part of me wants to turn back, but something holds me in place. I linger near a large potted plant, half-hidden, watching them through the glow of bottles stacked behind the bar.

I sense an underlying tension in the air that makes me nervous.

I shift from foot to foot, my nerves mounting as I hear my name again, swallowing hard and telling myself I shouldn't be listening in, but I'm frozen, unable to pull myself away.

From where I stand, I can just barely make out Brody's words, his tone low and

cautious. “I know she’s too young for me, Josh...I’m aware of that.” His voice is tinged with an uncharacteristic vulnerability, and I feel my throat tighten. “And now...well, there are complications involved.”

Josh nods slowly, his face thoughtful. He places a hand on his dad’s shoulder. “Look, Dad, if you’re feeling like this is getting too complicated, maybe we can help. Gemma loves Tasha, and she’s already talking about her staying with us if she needs a place. You know we’d be happy to help.”

The words hit me like a punch to the nose.

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Gemma's been so kind to me, but the idea of her taking me in like a lost puppy twists something painful inside me.

Just when I think I can't take any more, Josh leans in, his expression softening as he says, "Besides, there's more news. Gemma just found out she's pregnant."

I feel my pulse spike as Brody's face lights up, a broad grin spreading across his face as he claps Josh on the back. "Son, that's amazing news!" he says, his voice booming with pride.

"I'm going to be a granddad." There's a warmth in his expression that I've never seen—pure and undiluted joy, and it makes something inside me crack.

Tears cloud my eyes, and I clutch the fabric of my borrowed dress, trying to hold myself together. My mind races, and I feel foolish, standing here on the outside looking in, realizing just how much I've been hoping for something I can't ever have.

What was I thinking, imagining myself fitting into this picture-perfect family?

Despite the hurt boiling up in my chest, I stay a little longer, lingering just out of sight, feeling every word from their conversation like the twist of a knife.

The sight of Brody laughing, his face lighting up with joy and ease, brings an overwhelming wave of bitterness and heartbreak with it.

I grit my teeth, feeling the weight of it all press down on me.

Here he is, wealthy, secure, his life all planned out and falling neatly into place. But for me, this pregnancy has become nothing more than a “complication” to him, a wrench thrown into the perfect gears of his well-oiled life.

I’m “too young”, I’m some extra weight he has to figure out how to carry.

This realization strikes me, sharp and unyielding, and something in me hardens.

I can’t stay here another moment.

Turning on my heel, I leave the restaurant, slipping through the door without a word to anyone, the hurt and anger pulsing in every step I take. It’s like I’m finally seeing things for what they are.

My heart pounds as I make my way to the street to call an uber, but my mind is made up—I know what I need to do.

The drive back to Brody’s house is a blur. The Uber speeds along the dark, empty streets, and the glow of the streetlights only sharpens the ache in my chest.

By the time we pull up to the driveway, the house looms dark and quiet, a world away from the laughter and comfort I thought it might offer me.

Inside, I head straight to my room and grab my suitcase. The anger has faded, leaving behind a cold resolve. I toss in my few belongings: clothes, books, the little things that had started to make this place feel like home.

I leave Gemma’s dress on the bed, neatly folded, with a small thank-you note on top.

She’s been nothing but kind to me, and I don’t want her thinking I’ve run off without a word. Even if she didn’t keep my promise.

I pause, looking around the room one last time. Memories flash through my mind: moments of laughter, shared looks, stolen glances that once felt like promises.

But standing here, I feel a hollow emptiness.

I know now where I stand with Brody.

I'm a chapter he didn't plan for, a detour he can't fully commit to, and it's time I accept that. There's nothing more here for me.

With a deep breath, I grab the suitcase handle and close the door behind me, leaving this room, and Brody, behind.

As I walk through the house toward the front door, I feel my resolve strengthen.

This is what I should have done from the start. I should've gone with my bestie and found my footing on my own terms. Vegas. Jasmine.

Somewhere new, somewhere away from Brody's complicated life.

Before I leave, I stop by the little area near the kitchen where Penny usually lounges. Her puppies are now old enough to be adopted out, and they're a fluffy bundle of excitement, stumbling around and playing.

Penny's calm eyes meet mine, and she trots over, nuzzling my leg before licking my face as if she senses my sadness. I gently crouch down, scratching behind her ears as my vision blurs with tears.

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“I’m going to miss you, Penny,” I murmur, choking up as she leans into my hand. “And...I wish things could’ve worked out with your daddy.”

My tears fall as Penny licks my cheek, her warm, gentle presence soothing me in a way that makes it even harder to leave.

For a second, I feel like I might break. This isn’t what I wanted. This isn’t how it was supposed to end.

But I know I can’t stay. I give Penny one last scratch behind her ears, wipe my tears, and stand up, grabbing my suitcase and walking out the door, leaving Penny and everything else behind.

The drive to the nearest hotel feels surreal, like I’m moving through some hazy in-between space where my body is on autopilot, but my mind is spiraling.

The road stretches out in front of me, dark and empty, save for the occasional streetlamp casting pools of cold, artificial light on the pavement.

As I drive, a hollow feeling settles in my chest, filling me up with a kind of numb sadness. It’s as if the weight I’ve been carrying for weeks has lifted, only to be replaced by something heavier—an emptiness that feels vast and overwhelming.

I keep my eyes on the road, but my mind is racing, replaying everything from tonight, every word I overheard at the restaurant, every flicker of excitement on Brody’s face when he thought of Gemma’s pregnancy.

That happiness, that warmth...it was everything I'd hoped he'd feel for me, for us.

Finally, the neon sign of the hotel comes into view, casting a dull, flickering light across the parking lot. I pull in, park, and just sit there for a moment, staring at the building's faded facade.

The silence inside the car is thick, almost oppressive, pressing down on me as I gather the strength to go inside.

Once I'm in my room, I toss my bag onto the bed, the mattress creaking beneath the weight, and sink down beside it, feeling the exhaustion settle into my bones.

My hands shake as I pull out my phone and dial Jasmine's number. She picks up almost immediately, her voice as bright and warm as always, bringing a familiar comfort I've been craving all night.

"Hey, Tasha! What's up?"

The sound of her voice undoes me, and before I know it, I'm sobbing, each breath hitching painfully as I try to get the words out. "Jasmine...I'm pregnant. I should have told you sooner."

Her voice softens instantly, worry replacing the cheerfulness. "Oh, Tasha...hey, hey, it's okay. Just breathe, okay? Take it slow, girl. I had a feeling."

My voice wobbles, and fresh tears blur my vision. The memory of Brody's face, his voice, is sharp in my mind, every word laced with that detached practicality.

He was right there, just inches away from me, but it felt like a chasm had opened between us. I draw in a shaky breath, trying to steady myself, but the words tumble out in a rush.

“I overheard Brody talking to his son tonight. He was talking about me like...like I was some mistake he made or a complication he has to deal with.”

Jasmine’s voice is quiet, steady, a lifeline in the storm raging inside me. “Are you sure, Tasha? I mean, people say things in passing, without thinking...”

“Yes, Jasmine. I heard every word. His son even offered to let me stay with them—like I’m some stray they’re taking in. And Gemma’s pregnant, too. Brody was thrilled, clapping Josh on the back, congratulating him.”

My voice cracks, and the pain sharpens, raw and cutting. “But for me...I’m just... something to deal with. A burden.”

I press a hand to my stomach, feeling the weight of what’s happening, the realization that this isn’t just about me and Brody. There’s someone else involved now—someone innocent and unknowing, and I’m the only one they have.

“Oh, Tasha,” Jasmine murmurs, her voice breaking with empathy. “You don’t need that. You deserve better. Come here. Come to Vegas. We’ll figure this out together. You’ll have me. We’ll work it out.”

“I’ll be there in the morning.” I nod, wiping my eyes even though she can’t see me. My voice is steadier now, resolute.

The pain is still there, gnawing at me, but her words give me a new sense of direction. And in that moment, with Jasmine’s promise of support, I feel a small flicker of hope, a fragile yet determined ember of the old fire within me pushing me forward.

I look around, taking in the plain walls, the soft hum of the air conditioning, the faint scent of old carpet.



The room is silent again after I hang up, but this time, the quiet feels different, more bearable.

It's not home, not by a long shot, but for tonight, it's a place to breathe, to gather my strength for what lies ahead.

I stare up at the ceiling, lying on the bed, letting my thoughts drift to Vegas, to Jasmine's welcoming smile, the way she always knows just what to say.

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As I close my eyes, the weight in my chest eases just a little, replaced by a fragile, tentative resolve.

The road ahead might be filled with uncertainty, but for the first time tonight, I feel like I'm moving in the right direction.

### Chapter Eighteen

Brody

I can't help but pace my office like a caged animal, fists clenched, jaw tight. My gaze darts to the phone on my desk for the hundredth time, but it's silent: no missed calls, no messages.

Tasha's gone, just like that.

She left in the dead of night, leaving nothing behind but that damn letter for Gemma and the borrowed dress folded neatly on her bed.

How could she walk away so easily? How could she leave without even giving me a chance to explain, to make things right?

I can't get the image out of my mind: me walking back to the table with Josh after our conversation, the three of us waiting for her to return from the bathroom.

But she never came back.

I've called her God knows how many times.

Gemma called too, trying to help.

Still, nothing.

The hostess confirmed she left, a soft look of pity in her eyes when she realized who we were asking about.

"She seemed upset," she had told me.

Last night, sleep was out of the question.

I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, replaying every word, every look, wondering where it all went wrong.

I can't stop thinking about her, about us.

We hadn't even had a proper conversation about the baby yet.

Hell, we were barely starting to figure out what we were when she just...vanished.

I keep dialing her number, every ring that goes unanswered fraying my nerves apart even further. The thought of her alone, somewhere out there, pregnant and scared...it eats me alive.

I feel like a complete failure. I've tried to handle things the way I thought was best, but now I'm realizing I've been blind, oblivious to how lost she must've felt.

I'm supposed to have my shit together. I'm supposed to be the reliable one. But I can't fix this if she won't even let me in.

Worry twists in my gut, clawing at me from the inside out.

Every hour that passes without a word from her feels like a ticking time bomb waiting to blow up in our faces.

I've been through plenty of storms in my life: divorce, business downturns, crises that would've broken lesser men.

Nothing has ever made me feel this out of control, this desperate.

The day drags by in a haze of monotony; meetings, emails, phone calls, but it's all just white noise.

I drown myself in work, hoping it'll dull the edge of my thoughts, but nothing stops Tasha's disappearance from ringing in my mind.

This office feels cold and sterile, lifeless without her presence.

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Tasha was more than just my assistant; she was the steadiness to my chaos, the person who kept me grounded when everything else spun out of control.

Now that she's gone, it's like I'm operating on autopilot without a guidance system.

I miss her sharp wit, the way she'd roll her eyes when I was being an ass, the sound of her laugh that would sneak out even when she tried to hide it. I miss her.

My desk is covered with paperwork, piles of folders, and contracts I should've reviewed hours ago, but I can't focus on anything.

All I can think about is Tasha, the way her eyes would light up when she was passionate about something. The way she'd look at me, like maybe, just maybe, I could be the man she needed.

If she could just bring herself to trust me.

My phone's chime breaks through my thoughts, and I scramble to grab it, my heart pounding.

Finally, a message.

It's from Tasha.

>>You can stop calling. I'm gone. Move on with your life.

The words hit me like a punch to the jaw.

I'm reeling, my fingers shaking as I type back, desperate for more than just that.

>>Where are you? Just tell me where you are.

>>Vegas.

>>Where in Vegas?

And then nothing.

Josh barges into my office, the door swinging open without so much as a knock. "Dad, let's get lunch," he says, a bright smile plastered on his face.

I'm staring at my phone, willing it to light up again, but it stays dark. There are no more messages coming through.

"Not today, Josh. I've got too much on my plate."

"Come on, Dad. You need a break. Let's just get some air. It'll do you good."

Finally, I relent, pushing back from my desk with a heavy sigh.

"Fine, but let's make it quick."

The cold air bites at my face as we step outside. The city feels darker today, the wind cutting through my coat, every breath stinging like I'm inhaling ice.

Holiday decorations hang in the windows of shops, twinkling lights, and sales signs screaming that Christmas is just around the corner. The streets are lined with bare trees, their branches skeletal against the overcast sky.

We walk toward a small sandwich shop we like to frequent, a deep silence hanging between us. I catch glimpses of families bustling past, the excitement of the holidays in the air.

For me, it's all hollow. Tasha's absence is a void I can't fill. The thought of having Christmas without her...I realize now just how much I was beginning to rely on her emotionally.

Stepping into the warmth of the shop, the smell of fresh bread and coffee hits me, but it only reminds me of everything I've lost.

The place hasn't changed in years. I smile down at the same black-and-white checkered floors, scuffed from the boots of construction workers who come in for a quick bite. The walls are adorned with framed photos of old Chicago: the skyline in sepia, workers balanced precariously on steel beams, smiling in the face of danger.

There's sports memorabilia everywhere—old Blackhawks jerseys, Cubs pennants, and a signed Michael Jordan poster fading in the corner.

Josh starts chatting about something, probably work, maybe Gemma, but I'm not listening.

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*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:05 am*

All I can think about is the text, the way she shut me out.

The woman I love is slipping through my fingers, and I have no idea how to stop it.

She's slipping away with my baby across the country.

We step up to the counter, where a bored-looking cashier waits, scribbling something on a notepad.

Josh orders his usual Italian sub, loaded with hot peppers, and I mumble something about a roast beef sandwich with horseradish.

The decadent smell of sizzling meat and fresh bread fills the air, but my appetite is nonexistent.

Finding a small booth by the window, the cracked vinyl seats creak under our weight as we sit down. I lean back against the cool surface of the bench, staring out at the cold, bustling street, trying to shake off the knot of tension in my chest.

The girl who brings our sandwiches is young, probably a college student working weekends, and she flashes a quick smile, setting down our food and drinks. I can barely muster a nod in return. My mind is still stuck on Tasha, replaying the words from her text over and over.

Josh takes a big bite of his sandwich, chewing thoughtfully before leaning back. "Okay, Dad, what's going on? You've been a mess ever since last night. Is this about Tasha?"



I try to sidestep him, shrugging it off. “It’s nothing, just work stress,” I mutter, but Josh isn’t buying it.

He’s got that look on his face, the same one he used to get as a kid when he was about to call me out on my bullshit.

“Come on, Dad, I know you better than that. You’re not this worked up over zoning permits.”

I take a deep breath, the words heavy on my tongue. “Tasha’s pregnant, Josh,” I finally admit, the confession hanging in the air between us. “She’s pregnant...and she ran off to Vegas. She left last night.”

The shock on his face is immediate, Josh’s eyes widen, and he sets his sandwich down, wiping his hands like he’s trying to make sense of what he just heard. “Wait, what? She’s pregnant? And she just left?”

“Yeah, exactly,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I’m a complete idiot. I didn’t see how scared she was, didn’t realize how much pressure she must’ve been under.”

Josh leans forward, his blonde brow furrowed. “So, what are you going to do now?” he asks.

Shaking my head, letting out a bitter laugh. “I don’t know what the hell to do, Josh! She won’t answer my calls. I’ve screwed this up so badly, I wouldn’t blame her if she never wanted to see me again. I think she might have heard us at the bar last night.”

I run a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of my failure pressing down on my shoulders.

“You can’t just let her go, Dad.” Josh doesn’t let up. “You need to do what you didn’t do when Mom left. You need to go after her.”

I scoff, shaking my head dismissively. “That’s some idea, Josh. This isn’t a movie. She’s made up her mind. She’s scared, she’s hurt, and I’m the reason why.”

Josh slams his palm on the table, causing the silverware to rattle. “Dad, Tasha is terrified. She’s convinced you don’t want anything to do with her or the baby, and instead of sticking around to hear that rejection, she’s trying to protect herself by leaving.”

He leans in closer, eyes burning into mine. “Do you want her to leave?”

I stare at him, my throat tightening. “No,” I say hoarsely. “No, I don’t.”

Swallowing hard, feeling the words I’ve been too afraid to say rising up, unstoppable. “Josh, I love her. Not just the idea of her or the fact that she’s having my baby. I’m in love with her, all of her. She’s...she’s the best damn thing to ever happen to me, after you.”

Josh’s face softens. “Then you’ve got to go after her, Dad. You can’t just sit here wallowing in regret.”

Suddenly, it’s like something inside me snaps into place, and I push back from the table, the realization hitting me with the force of a freight train.

“I have to go get her right now,” I say, my voice filled with a clarity I haven’t felt in days. “I can’t let her walk away thinking she’s a mistake.”

Josh grins, leaning back in his seat. “That’s the spirit. Don’t let her slip through your fingers, Dad. You’ll regret it forever if you do. Don’t worry, I’ll handle things for you

while you're gone.”

I stand up, my half-eaten sandwich forgotten on the table as I rush to open the door. My heart is pounding, a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins as I hustle down the cold street.

Tasha is out there, somewhere, thinking she's all alone. But I'm not giving up on us.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 5:05 am*

Not now. Not ever.

### Chapter Nineteen

Tasha

The plane touches down with a soft bump, and I let out a deep sigh. As I step off the plane, the heat of the desert wraps around me like a blanket.

I walk through the airport quickly. Outside, near the pickup lanes, the desert air is warm and dry. It's such a stark difference from the biting cold of Chicago.

I roll my suitcase out to the curb, scanning the sea of people's faces, when I hear a familiar voice call my name.

"Tasha!" Jasmine waves frantically at me, her bright smile a beacon in the chaos. I run toward her, and the moment we embrace, it's like the weight of the last few days starts to lift.

"God, I've missed you," she says, squeezing me tight in her thin arms.

I blink back tears, overwhelmed with relief to see my best friend. "I missed you too, Jaz."

We hop into her car, and she drives down to The Strip. I can't help but marvel at the scene before me. Neon lights flash in every color imaginable and towering buildings with their extravagant facades reach for the sky.

The desert stretches out beyond the glitz and rocky mountains surround the valley. Its vastness is a stark contrast to the bustling city.

We finally pull into her apartment complex and Jasmine shows me around her place. It's a cozy two-bedroom with an office she says doubles as a guest room.

"I've got a bed set up for you," she says. "Stay as long as you need."

Later, as I lie in the unfamiliar bed, staring at the ceiling, I place a gentle hand over my belly.

Am I doing the right thing?

The question lingers, heavy and unanswered, until I drift into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, I wake up to Jasmine shaking my shoulder gently. "Rise and shine, new mom. We've got a doctor's appointment to get to."

"What!? How did you get me an appointment so fast?"

"I worked some magic connection, hun," she says with a wink.

It's my first doctor's appointment, and I feel a mixture of nerves and excitement as we drive to the clinic. It's a feeling that doesn't resolve as we enter and sit down.

Jasmine squeezes my hand reassuringly as we sit in the waiting room, her presence like an anchor in a storm.

When the nurse calls my name, I'm taken into a small, sterile room.

The doctor, a kind-looking woman with silver hair, introduces herself. "We're going

to do an ultrasound today just to check on things,” she explains with a warm smile.

I lie back against the table, the cold gel making me shiver as it touches my skin. Jasmine holds my hand softly, and I focus on her comforting presence as the doctor moves the receiver across my belly.

The dark screen flickers to life, showing the hazy image of what’s inside me.

“Okay, let’s take a look here...” the doctor murmurs, her eyes widening slightly. “Oh, wow. Congratulations, Mom. You’ve got not one, not two, but three little ones in there.”

My heart stops. I nearly leap from the table.

“Three?” I gasp, staring at the screen. The tiny shapes dance on the monitor, three little heartbeats flickering together. Dread and excitement twist together inside me like a tornado. I can barely breathe.

“Oh my God...I don’t...I don’t know how to handle this.”

Jasmine squeezes my hand, her eyes wide with amazement. “You’ve got this, Tash,” she whispers, but all I can feel is panic.

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We leave the doctor's office, the world around me spinning like I'm on some sick carnival ride.

Triplets. I'm having triplets.

I clutch the ultrasound photos in my trembling hands, my mind racing a mile a minute.

How am I supposed to handle three babies on my own?

As soon as we're outside, I collapse onto a bench, my breaths coming out in shallow gasps. Jasmine quickly wraps an arm around me, pulling me close.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," she soothes, rubbing my back. "Breathe, Tasha. Just breathe. It's going to be okay!"

Tears spill over, and I bury my face in my hands. "I can't do this, Jaz. I'm so scared. How am I supposed to take care of three babies? I can't even take care of myself right now."

Jasmine's voice is steady. "You don't have to do this alone. Brody needs to know. He deserves to know."

I shake my head with assurance, my throat tightening. "No, Jasmine. He's already got his perfect life. I'm not going to mess that up for him. He said I was a complication. Well, I'm making things simpler for him by leaving."

“But, Tasha... he’s their father,” she presses. “He has a right to be involved, to help. He has a duty to take care of them, at least financially.”

I look away, unable to face her. “I can’t, Jasmine. Not right now. It’s too much. I just... I can’t now.”

She pulls me into a tight hug, her breath warm against my ear. “Okay, okay. We’ll figure it out. But you don’t have to decide everything today.”

The drive back to Jasmine’s apartment feels surreal, like I’m trapped in a dream I can’t wake up from.

The city zooms past us in a blur of neon lights and billboards advertising everything from casinos to quickie weddings. I was excited to be here yesterday, but now it feels like the rug has been pulled out from under me.

Swinging between fear and the faintest flicker of hope, my thoughts are a tangled mess.

“I’ve got to work a double tonight,” Jasmine says as we pull up to her place. “I’ll be back late, so don’t wait up. Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge.”

She pauses, glancing at me with concern. “And hey, my credit cards on the counter. Get yourself something good to eat. Just don’t go over a hundred, okay?”

“Thanks, Jaz.” I force a small smile, nodding as she grabs her keys and rushes out the door. The apartment is quiet again, the silence pressing in on me.

As soon as the door clicks shut, all the strength I’ve been holding onto crumbles. It’s like the floor has fallen out from under me, and I’m free-falling into a dark abyss.



I drop to my knees, sobs ripping out of me in harsh, uneven gasps. The reality of it all slams into me: the pregnancy, the triplets, the fact that I'm alone in this.

"What am I going to do?" I whisper to the empty room. I clutch my stomach, feeling the swell that's barely there. Tears, hot and relentless, stream down my face.

For the first time ever, I truly feel the weight of my decision to leave Brody behind.

And I'm not so sure it was the right one.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my phone trembling in my hand as I call my mom.

I don't know why I'm doing this. Maybe I'm desperate for some kind of support, for someone to tell me it's going to be okay.

But the moment her voice crackles through the line, I regret calling her at all.

"Pregnant?" she spits, her voice dripping with disdain. "Let me guess, you slept with your rich boss to get knocked up on purpose. You're a gold digger."

My heart twists painfully, but I swallow back the tears. I don't even try to argue, there's no point.

This is the woman who never believed in me, who's always assumed the worst.

"Thanks for nothing, Mom," I manage to choke out before hanging up. I stare at the phone, my vision blurred with unshed tears.

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What did I expect? A warm, supportive pep talk? I know better than to hope for that.

I press my hand to my belly, feeling the tiny flutter beneath. “I promise, I’ll never be like her,” I whisper fiercely. “You’ll never feel unloved, not for one single second.”

Resolution washes over me. My children won’t grow up with the same bitterness, the same coldness that I experienced. They deserve better, and I’m going to give it to them.

Hours pass, the apartment eerily quiet except for the ticking of a clock.

I’m curled up on the couch, trying to figure out my next move, when my phone rings. It’s Jasmine.

“Tasha! My boss just told me they’re looking for another bartender at the club. You interested?” Her voice is filled with excitement.

I’m paralyzed for a moment. I can’t even imagine myself bartending in a nightclub, all swollen with triplets.

But what choice do I have? I need a job. My savings won’t last long, and I refuse to go crawling back to Brody for money.

“I don’t know, Jaz,” I start, my voice wavering. “I’m a mess right now.”

Jasmine doesn’t let me spiral. “No, don’t do that to yourself. Look, it’s decent money, and you’re in Vegas now. You’re doing this for your babies. You’ve got to do

whatever it takes.”

I take a deep breath, the reality of my situation setting in. I made this choice. I came here to stand on my own two feet, to start fresh. “All right,” I say finally, straightening my shoulders. “I’ll meet with him. I’ll do it.”

“Perfect!” Jasmine yelps. “He can see you in an hour. I’ll text you the address.”

I catch a cab to the club, nervously scrolling through cocktail recipes on my phone, trying to memorize the basics. The Stripwhizzes by, all flashing lights and glitz, a chaotic assault on the senses.

The cab pulls up to a massive, glittering resort that towers over the street, the marquee flashing with images of shows, slot machines, and half-naked dancers.

Stepping out, my heart pounding, I walk through the resort into the dark, pulsing nightclub. The thumping bass vibrates through my chest as I navigate the maze of velvet ropes and slip past the line of patrons waiting to get in.

The manager, a large, burly guy with a buzz cut and a tight black shirt, greets me in his office. The room is dimly lit, the scent of expensive cologne thick in the air.

He’s clearly all business, asking rapid-fire questions about my bartending experience, and somehow, I manage to keep up.

“All right, I like you,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “You’re hired. Come back tomorrow night for orientation.”

He tosses me a uniform: tight black shorts and a low-cut tank top.

I stare at it, wondering how the hell it’s going to fit when I’m seven months pregnant.

Jasmine finds me as I leave the manager's office, her smile wide. "Congrats, girl! Let's get you home."

The drive back to Jasmine's apartment is filled with a heavy silence. I can see the worry etched on her face, but she's trying to play it cool for my sake.

I stare out the window, watching the neon lights blur past. Finally, I break the silence, my voice cracking. "I should've come with you in the first place, Jasmine. Maybe if I had, none of this would've happened."

Jasmine scoffs, shaking her head. "Tasha, are you crazy? Do you know how many women would kill to sleep with someone who looks like Brody Thorne? You got lucky."

I let out a bitter laugh, wiping away the tears that won't stop falling. "Yeah, I'm real lucky. Pregnant with triplets and completely alone."

"Listen to me." Jasmine pulls the car over and turns to face me, her eyes fierce. "You're not alone. I'm here, okay? And those babies in your belly? They're a blessing, Tasha. They're going to be so special. You just have to see it."

I'm not quite ready to believe her, but she grabs my hand and squeezes it. "Everything happens for a reason," she says softly. "We're all here for a purpose. Those babies, they've got a purpose, Tasha. Maybe you don't see it now, but you will."

Her words, as corny as they are, seep into my heart.

For the first time in days, I feel a tiny flicker of hope.

I don't know what the future holds, but maybe, just maybe, there's a reason for all of

this.

### Chapter Twenty

Brody

Tasha refuses to pick up her damn phone, and I've had enough.

The waiting, the wondering, it's driving me insane.

I stare at my packed schedule for the next week, meetings, site visits, contract negotiations. All of it seems irrelevant right now.

I completely clear my calendar with a few swift taps, delegating the rest to Josh.

It's time to take matters into my own hands.

I keep replaying that conversation with Josh at the bar, the careless way I spoke about Tasha, like she was some complication I had to manage.

What if she had overheard that?

My chest tightens with regret.

How could I have been so stupid?

If she heard any part of that conversation, no wonder she ran.

I grab my phone, my fingers flying as I book the best suite I can find on The Strip.

It's the Presidential Suite. It offers luxury, privacy, everything to make this right. My ticket for the next flight to Vegas is booked in a heartbeat.

I don't even bother packing a bag.

All I need is to find her, talk to her, make her understand.

Tasha needs to know that I'm not letting her go. Not like this.

The drive to O'Hare is a quick blur. My mind races faster than the car slipping through traffic.

I shoot off a quick message to Dana, asking her to take care of Penny and the cattle while I'm gone. I pull into the airport's secure parking garage, parking the car and rushing toward the terminal.

I just make it through security and boarding with seconds to spare, collapsing into my seat, my heart still pounding from the sprint.

As the plane takes off, I pull out my phone and start scrolling through social media, searching for Jasmine's profile – Jazzmyn is her handle.

Her posts are a mix of bright lights, skimpy costumes, and behind-the-scenes shots of life as a dancer in Vegas and the realization sinks in: this is where Tasha is hiding.

Jasmine's profile is filled with tags and check-ins at nightclubs and bars that dot the strip. I can picture Tasha, working behind the bar or serving drinks, trying to blend into the shadows of this city.

My gut churns. I've got to find her.

Vegas is a big place, but if Jasmine's working in one of these clubs, Tasha can't be too far away. The flight is just over two hours, but it feels like an eternity sitting there stewing and as soon as we touch down, I'm the first one off the plane.

I make a beeline to the car rental counter where they've got a luxury sports car already waiting for me. The engine growls to life as I pull out of the airport garage, the thrill of horsepower beneath my hands a small comfort to the turmoil in my chest.

Vegas unfolds before me like a glittering illusion, the skyline a mix of neon signs and gaudy billboards.

The Strip is chaos, crowded with tourists, flashing lights, and traffic jams.

But none of that matters to me. I just need to find Tasha.

Revving the engine, I weave through traffic, my eyes darting between the road and the map on my phone. Everywhere I look, there's temptation: casinos, clubs, strip joints.

I can't help but wonder if this is the kind of life Tasha's thrown herself into, trying to make a fresh start, and I tighten my grip on the wheel, determination hardening into steel.



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She won't slip away from me again.

I stop at club after club, searching for any sign of Jasmine, but every place I walk into is a dead end. Each time, the bouncers shake their heads or give me blank stares, and I'm starting to wonder if this is all a fool's errand, when I finally reach a dingy little club on Fremont Street.

I stride up to the bouncer, showing him Jasmine's social media profile. He squints at the picture but shakes his head and waves his hand. "You got any idea how many Jasmynes work in this town?"

Frustration bubbles up, but I manage to keep my cool, gritting my teeth. "I'm looking for this Jasmine. Goes by Jazzmyn on social media."

The bouncer's eyes flicker with recognition. "Yeah, actually, I do know her. She dances at The Oasis Club."

Relief and dread swirl together in my gut. I've finally got a lead. "The Oasis Club," I repeat, trying to sound casual even as my heart pounds in my chest.

"Yeah," he confirms, pointing down the street. "It's not too far from here. It's one of the nicer places, if you can get past the line."

I thank him and turn back to the car, adrenaline pumping. I'm close now. Tasha is somewhere in this city, and I'm not leaving until I bring her back.

I check into my hotel suite, and it's like walking into a palace. The room is

brehtaking, opulent yet refined.

Floor-to-ceiling windows wrap around the space, offering a stunning 360-degree view of the city below as Vegas sprawls out beneath me, a sea of lights glittering against the darkening afternoon sky.

The suite itself is a masterpiece of luxury. Polished Italian leather couches curve elegantly around a low marble coffee table, their deep, rich scent filling the air. The walls are adorned with intricate frescoes, and towering marble pillars frame the entryway to the bedroom.

In the center of the room, a grand chandelier casts a soft, golden glow, making everything look as if it's bathed in sunlight.

I wander into the bathroom, where a claw-foot tub sits by a window overlooking the city. The tiles are a mosaic of blues and golds, reflecting the lights of Vegas in a kaleidoscope of color and splendor.

I run a hand over the cool marble counter, trying to steady myself for a moment.

It's only four in the afternoon, but I feel like the night can't come fast enough.

I've got hours to kill before the dancers and bartenders emerge for their shifts, and every second feels like an eternity. I sit down on the leather couch, my thoughts racing.

I'll find Tasha, no matter what it takes. She's scared, she's hurt, but I won't let that be the end of our story.

I've made mistakes, but I'm not about to let her slip through my fingers without a fight.

Turning the plan over in my mind, I'm fine-tuning it like one of my construction projects. The club is my entry point.

If Tasha's not there, Jasmine will be. She won't get away without telling me where Tasha is hiding.

I'll talk to Tasha, convince her that running away isn't the answer. I need to make her see that we can face this together, that she doesn't have to do it alone.

The years I raised Josh by myself, the sleepless nights, and all the sacrifices flicker through my mind.

I did it all without a second thought, but it was lonely, so damn lonely. I won't let history repeat itself.

The thought of losing Tasha, of never knowing the child she's carrying, twists my stomach into knots.

I can't let that happen. This isn't just about me anymore.

It's about her, about our family.

I have to show her that I'm all in, that I can't imagine a future without her in it.

Reaching into my pocket, my fingers closing around the small velvet box. I flip it open, revealing the ring inside.

It's simple yet elegant: a solitaire diamond, classic and timeless. As I stare at it, a smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

Maybe this is rash, maybe it's crazy, but I can't think of any other way to show her

just how serious I am. This ring is more than just a gesture. It's a promise.

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A promise that I'll be there, no matter how messy things get, no matter how scared we both are. I'm not just here for the baby—I'm here for her. For us.

The ring glitters under the chandelier's soft light, the facets catching the glow and reflecting it back in a thousand little sparks. I never thought I'd be here, ready to propose to someone again.

But with Tasha, it's different. She's different. She's not just some woman I got involved with by accident. She's everything I never knew I needed.

I close the box and slip it back into my pocket, a surge of determination filling me.

Tonight, I'm going to find my Tasha.

I'm going to tell her that I love her, that I want her by my side, not just as the mother of my child, but as my partner.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Tasha

It's only my fourth shift at The Oasis, but it already feels like I've been doing this forever.

I step into the back room, the harsh fluorescent lights flickering above me as I make my way to the rows of beat-up metal lockers.

My feet are already aching, and the night hasn't even started yet.

Opening my locker, I toss in my purse and quickly change into the uniform. The tight, low-cut tank top hugs the swells of my breasts and the black shorts ride a little too high for comfort.

As I tie my frilly apron around my waist, that familiar queasiness hits me again.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath to calm my stomach.

Glancing down at my belly, I smooth my hand over it.

Is it just my imagination, or am I starting to show already?

It feels impossible. It's too early, isn't it?

But then again, I am carrying three babies.

Shaking my head, I try to brush the thought away. I don't have time to worry about that right now. I've got bills to pay, and this job is the only thing keeping me afloat.

I slam my locker shut, steeling myself for yet another long night.

I can do this, I tell myself. I have to.

I step out onto the casino floor, bombarded by the sounds of clinking glasses, slot machines, and laughter.

The Oasis is a world unto itself, a wild attempt to recreate the beaches of Jamaica inside the heart of Vegas's desert.

Huge faux palm trees are scattered around, their green plastic fronds swaying in the breeze from ceiling fans.

The walls are painted with vivid murals of beaches at sunset and crashing waves. The warm, orange-colored overhead lights add to the effect.

The air is thick with the scent of coconut and rum, mingling with the tang of spilled beer.

Tiki torches cast a soft glow over the bar area, where bartenders are already whipping up a colorful array of tropical cocktails in giant glass goblets.

Everything is designed to make patrons forget they're in the middle of the desert. It's all meant to trick them into thinking they've been whisked away to a tropical paradise.

I plaster on a smile as I approach my first table, a group of eight guys, already halfway through a pitcher of something neon-colored.

"Hey there, gentlemen! What can I get started for you tonight?" I ask, my voice bright and cheerful.

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They laugh and joke as I take their orders, most of them opting for the bar's signature drink, the "Oasis Punch".

One of them tries to make a joke about getting "extra punch" if I bring it myself, and I force a laugh, scribbling their orders down on my notepad.

Just as I'm about to walk away from the table, one of the men, a guy in a red Hawaiian shirt with graying hair, slides his hand across my ass. The sudden touch makes my skin crawl, but I force myself to keep that bright, fake smile plastered on my face.

"Hey, sweetheart," he says, his voice low and sleazy. "If you're a good girl, maybe we'll leave you a big tip tonight."

He winks, his eyes lingering on my chest in a way that makes my stomach turn.

I want to tell him off, to throw his drink in his face, but instead, I swallow down the anger. I've learned that confronting these kinds of guys doesn't help—it just cuts into my tips.

I pull away from him, taking a step back, my smile never faltering.

"I'll see what I can do," I say lightly, turning on my heel before he can say anything else.

As I walk away, my hands are shaking, and I feel a surge of anger mixed with disgust. This job may pay the bills, but it comes with a cost; one that's wearing me



down a little more every day.

I punch the order into the computer, my fingers tapping a little harder than necessary.

Stephanie, one of the other waitresses, sidles up next to me, her bright pink lipstick and blonde hair making her look like she stepped out of a 90s music video.

“Everything okay?” she asks, chewing her gum with a loud snap.

I sigh, rolling my eyes. “Table six, the guy in the red shirt. Got a little too handsy,” I mutter under my breath.

Stephanie lets out a sympathetic groan. “Ugh, I know the type. They think just because they’re spending money, they can treat us like we’re part of the menu.”

She smirks, giving me a nudge with her hip. “You want me to keep an eye on them while you take a quick break?”

I nod, grateful for the momentary reprieve. “Thanks, Steph. I just need to run to the bathroom.”

“Take your time,” she says with a wink. “I got this.”

I head toward the back hallway, my mind racing. As much as I want to trust Stephanie, I know she’s not exactly the most reliable coworker.

I wouldn’t put it past her to get distracted or wander off, leaving the table unattended. But right now, I can’t worry about that.

I need a minute to catch my breath, to stop the nauseous churning in my stomach before I end up puking in the middle of the casino floor.

I try to shake off the feeling that everything's spiraling out of control, but it's getting harder to convince myself that I'm holding it all together, especially when I see the creep from my table staring at me as I walk away.

I push through the bathroom door, grateful to find that it's a single-person arrangement. The fluorescent light flickers as I step inside, the harsh white tiles almost too bright against the dingy walls.

It's small but clean enough. There's a toilet, a sink, and a mirror with a crack running through it. I turn to shut the door behind me, needing just a few moments to breathe, to pull myself together before I head back out.

But as I turn, my heart leaps into my throat. Standing in the doorway, blocking my only exit, is the guy from table six, the one in the red Hawaiian shirt.

"Hey there, sweetheart," he slurs, his breath heavy with the stench of alcohol.

Panic shoots through me like a lightning bolt. My instincts scream at me to run, but there's nowhere to go. I open my mouth to scream, but before I can make a sound, his hand clamps over my lips, muffling the noise.

I try to pull away, my hands flailing, but he's too strong. He shoves me backward, slamming the door shut behind him with a loud thud that seems to echo in the tiny space. The sound of the lock clicking into place makes my blood run cold.

My heart races, pounding so hard it feels like it's about to burst out of my chest. I struggle against him, but his grip is iron-tight, his fingers digging painfully into my face.

Fear consumes me, a cold sweat breaking out on my skin. Oh God, someone help me!

Just as I'm about to scream again, the door behind me explodes open with a deafening crash, the lock splintering from the wood frame.

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The sudden rush of air hits my face, and the pressure of the man's hand on my mouth vanishes. I stumble forward, gasping for breath, my pulse thundering in my ears.

Before I can even process what's happening, I hear a furious roar.

I whirl around to see Brody –Brody –charging into the tiny bathroom like an unstoppable force. His thick fist connects with the guy's jaw with a sickening crunch, the impact sending the creep flying across the floor.

The man crumples against the tiles, groaning, blood already trickling from his nose.

Brody's eyes are ablaze, wild with fury as he stands over the man, fists clenched like he's ready to strike again.

But then his gaze falls to me, and the rage in his expression melts into concern, desperation, and fear.

"Tasha...are you okay?" he asks, his voice shaky.

I try to nod, but the adrenaline, the shock, the exhaustion: all of it hits me like a tidal wave. My vision blurs, the edges of the room turning fuzzy and dark.

The nausea I've been holding back all day surges, but there's no strength left in me to fight it.

"Brody..." I whisper, reaching out for him, but my knees give way.

The world tilts, and the last thing I see are Brody's arms reaching out to catch me as everything goes black.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Brody

I'm sitting beside Tasha with her small hand resting in mine as the nurse dims the lights and prepares the ultrasound machine.

The beeping monitors and soft hum of the hospital room fade into the background as I focus on her. She still looks stunned, her eyes darting to mine like she's not quite sure if I'm really here.

I give her hand a gentle squeeze, and she squeezes back. Relief floods through me. I was terrified I wouldn't find her in time.

The man who attacked her is behind bars now, thanks to the LVPD. But every time I think about it, rage simmers just below the surface.

If I had arrived even a minute later...

The nurse walks in with a warm smile. "All right, let's take a look at how everything's going," she says, snapping on a pair of gloves. "Any pain or bleeding?"

Tasha shakes her head. "No, nothing like that."

"Good," the nurse replies, applying the ultrasound gel to Tasha's belly. I keep my eyes glued to the monitor as the wand moves over her skin, revealing the grainy image of our babies.

“Everything looks perfect,” the nurse says with a smile. “And here they are, all three of them.”

I blink, my heart swelling with joy.

Triplets.

I glance over at Tasha, my eyes stinging.

“Three babies,” I murmur, my voice breaking. Tasha looks back at me, her eyes shimmering, and before I know it, we’re both tearing up.

Tasha smiles through her desire to cry, but it quickly fades into a grimace. She looks down at her slightly rounded belly, her fingers brushing over it.

“I’m going to have terrible stretch marks,” she mutters under her breath.

I frown, taken aback. “Why are you worried about that?” I ask softly. “You’re carrying our children. You’re beautiful, Tasha.”

Her eyes flicker with doubt, and she lets out a shaky breath. “Brody, I don’t think you understand,” she says, her voice breaking. “You didn’t even seem excited when you found out about the pregnancy. And now, three kids? That’s more than anyone would have bargained for.”

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I tighten my grip on her hand, leaning closer. “Tasha, of course I’m excited,” I say, but she shakes her head.

“You’re almost fifty, Brody,” she says, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I’m nearly half your age. You’ve already raised a son. You don’t want to be tied down again, especially not to someone like me.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the face.

“Tasha, that’s not true,” I protest, but she looks away, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“I don’t see how this can work,” she says quietly. “You and me...it’s just too complicated.”

I swallow hard, a sinking feeling in my stomach. “Tasha...did you overhear me at the bar that night?” I ask, dreading the answer.

She nods slowly, her eyes cast downward. “I heard you talking to Josh...you said I was too young, that there were complications...” Her voice trails off, and she wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “I thought...I thought you didn’t want me.”

I lean forward, my heart breaking for her. “Tasha, I was confused back then. Yes, I was unsure about everything, but that doesn’t mean I wanted you gone. I didn’t mean for you to overhear any of that. I was just...processing. But I never had any intention of sending you away.”

She turns her head, finally meeting my gaze, and I see the fear and doubt that’s been

haunting her.

“You have to believe me,” I continue. “You brought light into my life, Tasha. Every day I got to see you at work, every night you were in my house...it made me happier than I’ve been in years. I don’t want it to end.”

Her lip trembles, and I reach up to wipe away a stray tear. “I was an idiot for not saying it sooner, for letting you have doubts.”

Tasha looks at me, still uncertain, her eyes searching mine. “But how can I trust that this isn’t just...a temporary feeling? That once the babies are here, you won’t change your mind?”

I shake my head, a bittersweet smile forming.

“God, you’re stubborn,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her softly. Her lips are hesitant at first, but then they soften undermine in a tentative surrender. When we pull back, I press my forehead to hers, our breaths mingling.

“Tasha, I love you,” I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I love everything about you. And that terrifies me. I’m not used to giving up control, to making space in my life for someone else, but you...you make me want to do it. You make me want to be better, to step up in all the ways you need me to.”

Her eyes widen as I reach into my pocket, my fingers closing around the small velvet box. I pull it out and hold it between us, the diamond catching the soft light of the hospital room.

“Tasha, I don’t want to lose you. I want to be with you—really be with you. I want us to be a family. This ring...it’s not just a promise. It’s a commitment to you, to our babies, to everything we can be together.”



Her eyes fill with tears again, but this time, they're different. This time, she's smiling while she cries.

She reaches out, her fingers brushing against mine as I open the box, revealing the ring that represents everything I've been too scared to admit until now.

The room feels like it's holding its breath, the air thick with anticipation. As I open the ring box, the soft glint of the diamond catches the light. I can hear my heart pounding, each beat echoing in my ears.

Just then, the nurse, a cheerful, round woman who's been quietly watching us, lets out a delighted yelp.

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaims, a hand over her chest. Without missing a beat, she hurries to the corner of the room, grabbing Tasha's phone from the counter. "This moment needs to be captured," she says with a warm smile, giving Tasha a conspiratorial wink as she starts recording.

I turn my focus back to Tasha, who's staring at me with wide, tear-filled eyes. "I love you, Tasha," I say, my voice raw and unsteady. "Now and always. I want to be by your side through everything—through the good, the bad, and all the chaos we're bound to face. Will you marry me?"

For a second, it's like the world stops turning. I hold my breath, waiting, praying that this moment is real and that she'll say yes.

Tasha bursts into tears, her shoulders shaking as she nods furiously. "Yes! Yes, of course! I love you, Brody!" she cries, her voice choked with emotion.

In an instant, she's in my arms, her lips crashing against mine in a desperate, joyful kiss. I hold her close, my heart nearly bursting with relief and happiness.

When we finally pull back, I take her trembling hand and slip the ring onto her finger. The diamond is huge, glittering like a star, and Tasha stares down at it with a mix of shock and awe. She turns her hand this way and that, the light catching every facet of the stone.

“I can’t believe this,” she whispers, her voice still thick with tears. “It’s...it’s beautiful.”

She looks up at me, her eyes filled with so much emotion that it nearly knocks the breath out of me.

I cup her face, wiping away the tears that continue to spill down her cheeks. “You deserve the world, Tasha,” I murmur. “And I promise, I’m going to do everything I can to give it to you.”

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The nurse beams from the corner, still recording on Tasha's phone. "Congratulations, you two!" she says, her voice thick with genuine warmth. "This is going to be quite the story for those little ones to hear someday."

As I look at Tasha, with the diamond ring gleaming on her finger and the light of happiness in her eyes, I feel more complete than I've ever been. We're about to take on the world together—me, Tasha, and our three little miracles.

I've never been more ready.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Tasha

I stare at my reflection in the ornate mirror of the hotel suite, barely recognizing the woman looking back at me.

The white dress I'm wearing is simple yet elegant, hugging my curves in all the right places.

It's nothing too fancy, but it's perfect for today. Jasmine really outdid herself. My caramel hair falls in soft waves, and it's pinned back with delicate clips that shimmer when I turn my head. She spent nearly an hour making sure every strand was in place.

I can't believe it's only been two days since Brody proposed in that hospital room.

When he first suggested that we get married right away, in Vegas of all places, I

almost laughed. I told him no, it sounded too rushed, too trashy.

But he looked at me with those earnest eyes and insisted it wasn't about the glitz. It was about us, starting our life together on our terms.

"Fine," I'd said, relenting, "but only if Elvis isn't the one marrying us."

Brody had laughed, kissing me on the forehead. "Deal."

And here I am now, butterflies in my stomach, wondering if I made the right choice. But as I glance down at the diamond sparkling on my finger, I know I wouldn't want it any other way.

The past few days have been a whirlwind. Josh and Gemma drove down from Chicago, and Jasmine, of course, agreed to be my maid of honor without a second thought. I didn't bother inviting my own family.

Why would I? They've never been there for me, and I don't need their disapproval hanging over what should be the happiest day of my life.

Jasmine is buzzing around the room now, checking my veil, fluffing out the hem of my dress, and making sure I have everything I need. She's a ball of energy, practically glowing with excitement.

"Okay, Tash, we've got the bouquet, the rings, and the tissues, because you know you're going to cry," she teases, giving me a playful wink.

I smile at her, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. "Jaz, are you sure this isn't crazy?" I ask, my voice soft and unsure.

Jasmine pauses, her eyes locking onto mine. "Are you sure this is what you want?" she

asks seriously.

“When Brody came and saved me from that man...I knew,” I say, my voice steady with newfound confidence. “He’s the love of my life. He gives me something I’ve never had before: security and love. I hope I can give that back to him.”

Jasmine’s eyes soften, and she hugs me tightly. “You already do, Tash. More than you know.”

The drive to the chapel is surprisingly quiet, the Vegas skyline fading behind us as we head to a small church just on the outskirts of town.

I half expected one of those cheesy, neon-lit chapels with Elvis impersonators and a drive-thru window, but this... this is something entirely different.

The chapel itself looks like it’s been plucked straight out of a storybook. It’s quaint and charming, with ivy creeping up the old brick walls and delicate white roses lining the cobblestone path to the entrance.

As soon as we step out of the car, the scent of fresh flowers fills the air, heady and sweet. I breathe it in, feeling my nerves begin to settle.

Jasmine looks around in awe. “This place is gorgeous. Did you know it was going to look like this?” she asks, her eyes wide as she takes it all in.

“No, I didn’t,” I admit, a smile tugging at my lips. “But I love it.”

As we enter, Gemma rounds the corner with a beaming smile. “Come on, bride-to-be,” she says, taking my arm. “Let’s get you to the makeup room for the final touches.”

I follow her, feeling a little lighter with each step. The atmosphere here is magical, and for the first time today, I feel truly excited.

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Gemma and I step into the cozy dressing room filled with soft lighting and bouquets of flowers. She turns to me, her eyes sparkling. “I heard the news: triplets! I’m so excited for you,” she says, rubbing her own small baby bump.

I place my hand over my belly, feeling a surge of warmth and happiness. “Yeah, it’s still sinking in,” I admit with a laugh. “But it’s kind of amazing, isn’t it?”

Gemma nods, her eyes shining with joy. “We’re going to be pregnant together! Our kids will grow up so close. I can’t wait.”

I can’t help but smile at the thought. For so long, I’d felt alone in the world, like I didn’t belong anywhere. But here I am, surrounded by people who care about me, people who are about to become my family.

Gemma places her hand on my shoulder, looking at me with genuine affection. “You make Brody a better man, you know that? I’ve never seen him so happy, so at peace. You’re exactly what he needed, and I’m so happy to call you family.”

Jasmine, who’s been watching from the side, sniffles and dabs at her eyes with a tissue. “Oh my God, you’re going to make me cry before we even get to the ceremony!” she laughs.

I reach out and squeeze both of their hands. “You guys have no idea how much this means to me. Brody’s family...it’s everything I never had. And now, it’s mine too.”

Tears well up in my eyes, but they’re tears of joy. For once in my life, I finally feel like I’ve found my place.

The door opens, and a tall, distinguished man with a kind smile steps inside. “Hello, ladies,” the officiant says, his voice warm and welcoming. “I just wanted to let you know that the last of the floral arrangements and crystal glasses are being set up as we speak. Everything will be ready in about ten minutes.”

I blink, taken aback. “Wait... floral arrangements? Crystal glasses?” I had expected something simple, maybe just a few chairs and an arch, but this sounds like an actual dream wedding.

The officiant nods with a smile. “Yes, Brody wanted to make sure everything was perfect. He’s quite the romantic, isn’t he?”

Jasmine nudges me with her elbow, grinning. “See? I told you he’s a keeper.”

Gemma laughs softly, leaning in. “He hired a whole team to make it happen. I helped him with some of the calls, but all the ideas were his. He wanted this to be completely stress-free for you.”

My heart swells. I had no idea Brody could be this thoughtful. I can hardly believe he pulled all of this together on such short notice. I feel a lump in my throat as I realize just how much effort he’s put into making today perfect.

“Let’s get you married, Tasha,” Jasmine says, her voice full of excitement as she hugs me. The butterflies in my stomach turn to joy.

The music starts out as a soft, lilting tune from a violin that fills the air with elegance. Jasmine and Gemma walk down the aisle ahead of me, their dresses fluttering as they move gracefully away from me.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself before I step out.



The scene before me takes my breath away. A magnificent crystal chandelier adorned with cascading white wisteria and ivy hangs above the center of the room, sparkling as it catches the last rays of the setting sun.

The aisle is draped in a champagne-colored runner, sprinkled with white rose petals that seem to glow in the soft candlelight. Gorgeous floral arrangements burst from every corner, and candle sconces of varying heights line the empty pews, casting a warm, intimate glow.

I swallow hard, my eyes stinging with tears. This is more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. And there, at the end of the aisle, stands Brody. He's waiting for me, looking impossibly handsome in a black tuxedo.

His smile is bright, his eyes soft as they meet mine. The look on his face tells me everything I need to know: I've made the right decision.

With each step I take, I feel like I'm walking into a dream, a future I never thought I could have.

The officiant welcomes everyone and begins the ceremony, his voice strong yet soothing. "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Brody and Tasha," he says, smiling warmly at us. "Today, we celebrate love, commitment, and the beginning of a beautiful journey together."

When it's time for our vows, Brody takes my hands in his, his thumbs gently brushing over my knuckles.

"Tasha, from the moment I met you, my life changed. You brought light and laughter where there was only darkness. You've taught me that love doesn't have to be perfect to be real. I promise to be by your side, to support you, and to love you, no matter what life throws our way."

My tears spill over as I begin my own vows, my voice shaky but full of emotion. “Brody, you’ve given me things I never thought I would find: safety, security, and unconditional love. You believed in me when I couldn’t believe in myself. I promise to cherish you, to be your partner, and to love you through every joy and challenge we face.”

The officiant smiles. “With these vows and by the exchange of these rings, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Brody, you may kiss your bride.”

Brody leans in, his hands cupping my face, and when our lips meet, it feels like everything in the world has finally fallen into place.

I’ve never been happier in my entire life.

As we drive away in Brody’s rental Corvette, the wind whipping through my hair, I can’t stop grinning. The bouquet of white roses is still clutched in my lap, and I can’t stop staring at the sparkling ring on my finger.

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It feels like I'm living in a fairy tale.

Brody glances over at me, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours, Mrs. Thorne?"

I laugh, still giddy from everything that just happened. "I was just thinking...do you want to play some slots? You can't get married in Vegas and not hit the casino at least once."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I'm not much of a gambling man, Tasha."

I raise an eyebrow, giving him a playful look. "Oh, really? Because you definitely took a gamble on me."

He laughs, his deep, warm chuckle making my heart flutter. "All right, you've convinced me. Let's go see if our luck holds up."

Hand in hand, we walk through the glittering lights of The Strip, ready to take on whatever comes next. Because no matter where we are, as long as I'm with Brody, I know I've already hit the jackpot.

Epilogue

Brody

It's been just a little over a year and a half since our sudden Vegas wedding, and life has changed in ways I never could have imagined.

The babies are almost eight months old now, and our lives have turned into a constant blur of diapers, sleepless nights, and baby giggles.

I stand in the nursery, holding little Forrest against my chest as he fusses softly. He's the hardest to get to sleep, but something about me holding him makes him calm down, and I can't describe what that feels like.

It was the same for Josh too, but raising Josh as a single dad was a cakewalk compared to three on two.

I'm thankful to have been a father before. I don't know how I would've handled the learning curve as anewparent.

Tasha took to it like a natural, and most of the time, I'm just in awe of her as a mother.

She's the best mother I've ever seen, and I'm so proud she's the mother of my children.

The winter wind howls outside, but in here, it's warm and peaceful.

I glance over at Tasha, standing in front of the mirror, frowning at her reflection. She's wearing one of my old flannel shirts, the brown and green pattern complimenting her coloring. Her hair up in a messy bun, and she's absolutely beautiful.

Still, I can see the worry lines on her face as she pulls at her shirt, fretting over imaginary stretch marks that I can barely even see.

"Tasha, stop picking at yourself," I tell her as I bounce Forest gently in my arms. "You're gorgeous, stretchmarks or not."

With a half-hearted smile, she turns to me, her eyes still clouded with self-doubt. The lines on her brow flicker in the orange light of the fire.

“I just don’t feel like myself anymore,” she murmurs.

I approach her, pressing a kiss to her soft cheek. “Well, I think you’re perfect,” I say, my voice low and sincere.

I glance down at the matching bassinets where our two little girls, Rose and Lily, are finally sleeping.

Seeing their tiny faces fills me with a pride I never knew was possible. Rose has an adorable pink unicorn onesie on, while her sister is dressed in purple floral.

Tasha finally stops fussing in front of the mirror and walks over to where I’m placing Forrest in his blue bassinet, kissing his little forehead. There’s something so grounding about moments like this. It’s just us, our babies, and the quiet hum of the ranch around us.

Tasha stands close beside me, watching our son drift off to sleep. She sighs as she picks up a thick textbook from the side table next to the crib.

The steely determination in her eyes is something I’ve always admired, even more so now that she’s balancing motherhood with her studies.

She’s back in college part-time, filled with determination to finish her Business degree.

“Time to hit the books?” I ask.

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She groans lightly, rolling her eyes with annoyance. “Yeah. I need to get a couple of chapters in before they all wake up again.”

I chuckle softly, turning off the nursery light as we slip out of the room, closing the door quietly behind us.

Tasha heads to our bedroom, settling onto the bed with her textbook, but I’ve got other plans.

I walk over, leaning against the doorway, watching her. “Hey.”

She looks up, confused, but there’s a playful hint in her gaze. “Hey?”

“I was just wondering if you’d let me interrupt your study session,” I say eagerly.

I lean down before she can respond, kissing her with an intensity that makes her book slip from her grasp and fall to the floor. Her hands sweep across my chest, lighting a fire within me that burns red-hot. My hands slide beneath her thighs.

I lift her up into my arms and kiss her over and over again as her sweet-smelling hair tickles my face. The feel of her body in my hands, the sound of her sighs as I nibble against her neck, it drives me wild.

I flop her on the bed gently, climbing on top of her and pulling her shirt up greedily. My lips fall to her nipples, caressing and licking against her. She sighs as I trail further down, grazing my teeth against her prickled skin.

“That tickles,” she sighs.

“Oh,” I murmur. “What about this?”

My hand slides between her thighs, rubbing against her with my fingers. She arches her back, moaning suddenly before burying her face into a pillow.

“You don’t want to wake the kids, do you?” I hiss, playfully looking up at her.

She looks back at me, her dreamy eyes half open, shaking her head.

“Shhh,” I whisper, driving my face in between her legs.

She’s as quiet as she can be, but I can still hear her muffled groans through the pillow, hot and heavy as I slide my tongue across her wet folds. Her hand falls to the back of my head, and I dive deeper into her, sucking against every inch of her.

Pulling myself up, I allow myself to lean on top of her. Tasha opens her legs around me, her delicate hands falling to the waistband of my sweatpants.

I feel myself flop forward as she pulls them down, and suddenly her hands are against my ass, pulling me into her. I moan, feeling her take control as she grinds against me from below, and I feel myself shudder from the sheer pleasure until I can’t take it any longer.

Tasha’s laughter is like music in our bedroom. I pull her closer, feeling her melt against me, her worries forgotten for now. “What do you say?” I murmur against her lips. “You want to practice making more kids?”

Her fingers run through my hair, she lets out a breathy giggle. “Hmm...maybe,” she teases, her voice a soft whisper as she looks me straight in the eyes. “But only if the next batch isn’t triplets.”

I laugh, pulling her close against me. The warmth of her body feels like home, the kind of home I never knew I was missing until she came into my life.

We lie there, wrapped up in each other, her head resting on my chest as the pale moonlight cascades through the window. The sound of the wind outside and the crackling of the fireplace fills the room, making everything feel perfect, serene.

“Do you ever think about how different our lives were a year ago?” Tasha asks softly, tracing circles on my chest. “About, everything that happened?”

“All the time,” I admit, my arms tightening around her. “I never imagined this would be my life back then, to have three babies and a beautiful wife. You’re everything I never knew I could have.”

Tasha looks up at me, her amber eyes shining with love. “I’m so glad you came after me, Brody.”

I kiss her gently, licking against her full lips.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” I whisper against her mouth. “Because there’s nothing I want more than this, than us.”

She smiles her angelic smile, snuggling deeper into my arms.

Wrapped in the warmth of each other and the life we’ve built together, we drift off to sleep.

The end.

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