



Hot Stepbrother Daddy (Yes, Daddy #51)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Adam

I haven't been able to get the woman from a year ago out of my mind. It was supposed to be a one-night stand, but when we touched, it was clear to us both that our connection was something different. Laurie wrapped me around her finger in one f**king night, and then left in a flurry of blond hair, leaving me wanting her even more now that she was gone.

I never expected the next time I'd see her would be at my father's honeymoon send-off.

Or that she'd be introduced to me as my new stepsister.

But when it comes to Laurie Cartwright, labels are meaningless. All I want is her. Will I be able to hold myself back?

Laurie

I've only ever been with one man, Adam Lawson, but after I gave him my virginity during a one-night stand, the connection I felt and the lies I wove sent me running.

And I regretted it every second since. How can I miss someone so much I barely know?

Seeing him again should have been a dream until my mother introduced him as the son of her new husband. I've spent my whole life working toward a singular goal, but now I want Adam, too. Desperately. But how the hell am I supposed to be with him when he's my stepbrother?

****Can they resist the magnetic pull between them, or will they risk it all for a love that defies the odds?***

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LAURIE

I have a hard time recognizing the woman staring back at me when I stand in front of the mirror, holding up one of my dress choices and turning to see all the angles. I look more like my mother than I ever have before, but in the right light, I still look so much younger than I feel.

Twenty-five is such a milestone for most people, but my birthday passed three weeks ago with little fanfare—at least in my mind. My mom and her then-fiancé Craig threw a huge party for me, and I attended, plastering on a smile and pretending that everything was fantastic.

In reality, I'm feeling sort of lost right now, just like I was then. I've been staying with Mom in my childhood home, an enormous old-money estate, since a few weeks before my birthday party. It was time to change my life, but it still seemed wrong for that change to begin in the room I'd grown up in.

When I focus back on my reflection and the room around me, it shows a young woman still holding onto the echoes of her teenage years—soft pink walls, fairy lights dangling around the window like something out of a dream I don't quite belong to anymore. A giant cork-board with magazine clippings about trendy outfits, cityscapes, and some tacky inspirational quotes still hangs above my desk.

Tonight, I'm determined to change all that, to step out of the shadow of the teenager I used to be and the college graduate who didn't quite make it. I've just gotten back

from New York, where my fashion dreams crumbled in front of my eyes, and if anything, this house—this space—is my chance to start afresh.

I drop the dress onto the bed and rub my hands over my face. There's no room for the old version of me anymore, and it makes me feel a little guilty. Having this beautiful home, this welcoming place to fall back on, is a blessing that so many people my age would kill for. So why do I feel so off-kilter?

Maybe some time alone will help. It's hard not to feel like a kid when Mom hovers around every corner. My mom and my brand new stepdad are leaving for a year-long trip tomorrow, and I'll have the house all to myself. I should be feeling free, liberated even, but all I can think about is what a mess I've made of things. A job in fashion was supposed to be the start of something great, something that would define me, but instead, it just highlighted everything I wasn't—good enough, bold enough, or savvy enough to make it in a city like New York. So, I came home. To this house. To Charleston. The last place I expected to be.

But feeling sorry for myself isn't going to get me ready for the evening. I dig through my suitcase, pulling out a few dresses, each one more formal than the last. My mom and stepdad are hosting a dinner tonight, a little farewell get-together for all their friends before they leave.

It's also when I'm supposed to meet Craig's son, who has been too busy with work to make any single event they've held so far, wedding included. I'm supposed to look like I have my life together. Like the twenty-five-year-old adult who's seen the world and is ready to tackle whatever comes next. I want to impress, even though I can't shake the feeling that everyone will be watching me with pity and concern.

Finally, forcing myself to make a decision, I grab a deep blue satin dress, simple and elegant. Tonight, I'll be Laurie Cartwright. Not the failed fashion designer, not the daughter who couldn't quite live up to expectations. Just me. Ready for the next

step—at least, that’s the story I’m going to tell when I step out of this room.

I glance at the clock. I have about an hour before I need to join everyone downstairs. I take a breath, then pull the dress over my head. It fits perfectly, hugging my curves just right, the deep blue color bringing out my intensely blue eyes and shimmering, frosty blond hair. I frown a little at my complexion—growing up in Charleston, I had always maintained a perfect tan, but New York had washed out more than just my motivation. I’m pale, but Charleston, with its humidity and endless sunshine, will fix that in no time.

There’s a sense of finality as I stand back and examine myself. No more childhood bedrooms. No more false starts.

Forty-five minutes later, with a fresh coat of makeup, I suck in a breath, push my shoulders back, and give myself a final nod of approval. "You’ve got this, Laurie," I say to no one, trying to convince myself. I turn, heels clicking softly on the floor as I head for the stairs.

The estate is enormous and old, but the good kind of old. Mom had put plenty of modern touches on the inside, but outside it looked just as classical as ever, with the perfectly manicured front lawn and huge pool in the back. Inside, all of the polished wood and brass fixtures are gleaming, and from the top of the stairs, I can see the tiny rainbows being cast from the crystal chandelier hanging above the main floor.

It’s all so familiar that it helps relax me some. This is my home, and I’m an adult, damn it. I don’t need to worry about what anyone thinks of me or my misguided career.

I take one step, and then another. I can hear the party in full swing, a cocktail hour before dinner, and I’m already imagining what sort of drink I’m going to have. This won’t be so bad. I’m a professional at these kinds of things.

Nothing can shake me, nothing can trip me up, until—oh, fuck. There's no way in hell that's him.

The broad-shouldered, trim-waisted man turns around slowly. Oh I remembered so well hating that way he holds himself. Standing across the room, looking impossibly out of place yet perfectly at ease, is Adam Lawson.

Adam Lawson, with whom I had my first and only one-night stand ever. Adam Lawson, whom I left high and dry afterwards.

My eyes lock onto him before I even register the shock that has my heart racing, my stomach twisting. He's wearing a tailored navy suit, the kind that makes a man look like he belongs on the cover of GQ. Dark, messy hair just the way I remember it. I swear I can still feel his lips on mine, his hands pressing me closer, pulling me into him like he couldn't get enough. That night, the one I can't stop thinking about. The one we never spoke about again.

Hell, we never spoke again at all, let alone about the time we shared in bed. I made sure of it.

I freeze. He's here. In my parents' house. After a year of pretending that night never happened, here he is, staring at me like he hasn't been living rent-free in my head for the last twelve months.

I don't know what to do, so I just keep moving, keep moving. If I can get to the bottom of the stairs, I can flee out the back door before he gets to me. But I misstep, my heel catching on the edge of the last step.

And I almost fall.

I let out a quick gasp, panic surging through me as I lurch forward, arms flailing for

balance. The world tilts. But just as I'm sure I'm about to eat shit in front of everyone, a small but surprisingly strong hand catches my arm, pulling me upright. I look over to see my mother, her familiar grin snapping me out of my panic.

"Careful there, sweetie. You're not as young as you used to be," she teases, steadying me.

I blink, still dazed from the shock of nearly falling and the impact of Adam's presence in the room. "I'm fine, Mom, just—" I can feel her humor turning to concern, but my mind is still scrambled from what I just saw. "I'm fine," I repeat, more firmly this time.

"You sure? Don't want to make a scene before dinner, do we?" She's still smiling, but it's brittle.

"I'm good," I promise her, giving her a grin that I hope is convincing. I'm the spitting image of my mom, except she's two inches shorter and her bright blond hair has a few streaks of gray that she meticulously has covered at the salon. I start to step away, leaving her behind, desperate to know if I really saw Adam.

For a second, I can't find him in the crowd. But then I catch sight of him, and I quickly avert my eyes, trying not to be too obvious. Of course, he's staring right at me, and my efforts of trying to be discreet are pointless. His eyes, forest green and calculating, narrow slightly as if he can read my thoughts from across the room.

Trying not to do my best deer-in-the-headlights impression, I duck my head and try to fade back into the crowd. I know I can't avoid him for the entire night, but I just need a damn second to catch my breath and collect my thoughts.

Unfortunately, my mother has other plans. Before I can bolt, I feel her hand on my elbow, Craig beside her. "Not so fast, sweetie. We need to introduce you to Adam!"

“I—wait, what?” My eyes snap back to Adam Lawson. “Why?”

Craig laughs. Tall with a lined but handsome face and salt-and-pepper hair, Craig has been good to my mother so far. He was also wealthy and from old money, so we knew he wasn't trying to use her, but I could count on one hand how many times I'd spoken to the man. “We figured you'd want to meet your stepbrother finally.”

The words take a second to work into my brain, but when they hit, I feel my ankles starting to go weak, and it's all I can do not to tip over in my heels. A wave of cold hits me, from my fingertips to my toes.

“Adam! Come over here!” My mother's voice is warm and inviting, so strange considering I'm in a living nightmare right now.

Stepbrother , the word rings in my skull over and over, stepbrother, stepbrother.

Every fiber of me is aware of him, aware of that pull that's still there, despite the time and distance. Despite the fact that I've done everything I can to forget the way he kissed me, the way he made me feel, and the way I vanished from his life.

And now he's walking towards us. Any inkling of hope I had left that maybe there was another Adam nearby disappears.

I don't know how I'm supposed to act. I glance at Mom and Craig, who are both smiling like this is just a casual dinner party. Like my world isn't going up in flames right now. Just act normal, I tell myself. Just act like you don't know him. Like he's some guy you've never slept with before.

But the second Adam steps closer, his presence hits me like a wave. His cologne—a mix of woody and citrus, comforting and dangerous—makes my heart race before my brain even catches up. His eyes meet mine briefly, and it's as if everything around

us fades into the background, leaving just the two of us standing in the quietest kind of silence.

"Laurie, darling, this is Adam, Craig's son," my mom says, her voice too bright. I know she wants us to get along, but little does she know we've already gotten to know each other very, very well.

She doesn't know how much I wish I could forget Adam Lawson.

I nod, forcing a smile. "Hello." I try to keep my voice steady, like I'm not remembering every moment that Adam touched my body and made me cry out in pleasure.

Adam's expression doesn't change, but there's a flicker in his eyes—something that's definitely not as chill as he's pretending. The way he looks at me like he's searching for something—answers, maybe. Or maybe he's just as stunned as I am by the fact that we're standing here, pretending to be strangers. I don't know which of us is more unsettled by the fact that our past isn't in the past.

I haven't even begun to process the fact that he's technically my stepbrother now. The idea is so insane that it makes me want to dissolve into hysterics.

"Nice to meet you, Laurie," Adam says, his voice smooth, his gaze lingering on my mouth just a moment too long. His smile is tight, but his eyes...they give him away. God, no. He's holding onto the secret between us, like there's an unspoken understanding passing between us, one that only the two of us share.

I extend my hand, even though my body feels like it's caught in a web of heat and tension. "Nice to meet you, too." I try to sound normal, like I've never thought about him every time I saw someone with dark hair or a sharp jawline or a laugh that could melt a room.

All hopes of normal fly out the window when his hand touches mine. The feeling of his skin, warm against mine, hits me with a flash of heat that has me aching between my legs, my nipples pebbling beneath the satin dress before I even realize what's happening. I know he's affected too by the way his pupils blow wide as he sucks in a shocked breath, taking a moment too long to let go of me.

He still wants me. Holy shit. Even after I ghosted him? Now he's here in my house, not just because he's some random acquaintance but because he's my fucking stepbrother. That's a line I can't cross.

"Well, I'm going to go and mingle..." I try to make it sound lighthearted, like I'm not secretly devastated by the fact that Adam is completely off-limits now. I need some space away from him, and I need it now.

"Now wait just one moment, dear." Mom grabs my elbow again. "I wanted to talk to you about the time I'm going to be gone. I know you've never really stayed in the house alone, so we figured since you're family now, Adam can stay in the house with you!"

"Wait a m—" Adam sputters.

"Uh, what?" I snap, shock rolling through me. "No way! We, uh, just met!"

"Adam already agreed when I asked him last week," Craig chimes in as if this were some brilliant stroke of genius. "It's the best thing for you, Laurie. You know, with us being gone for so long and all. It's a big house, I bet you won't even run into each other all that often. Adam can keep an eye on things, make sure you're okay."

What in the hell is happening?

Adam, for his part, looks just as stunned as I feel. His mouth opens slightly, then

shuts.

“But I can handle it,” I protest quickly, my voice shaky as I try to fight the rising panic inside me. “I don’t need someone to babysit me. I’m perfectly fine on my own.”

Mom shakes her head, blond bob flying. “Laurie, it’s for your safety.”

“Mom, please . I’ve lived on my own for years at this point.”

“This is the best option, sweetheart,” my mom says, her voice soft and understanding, but there’s no room for argument in her tone.

A million arguments form in my head, but they die in my throat before I can speak them. When Mom has made up her mind, there is no changing it, especially in the middle of a dinner party. I need to count my losses and maybe try again later.

Adam, who is still silent, clearly isn’t going to help us escape this personal hell. So I guess that leaves it up to me.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my shaking hands. “Okay,” I whisper, though it feels like the word is getting caught in my throat like I’m choking on it. “Okay.”

Adam doesn’t say anything. He just nods slowly, his jaw tight, his expression unreadable.

And in that moment, I realize that the next year is going to be nothing like what I expected.

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ADAM

I should have known that my night was about to be fucked as soon as I saw Laurie descend those stairs. I'm a perceptive man most of the time, but for some damn reason, whenever Laurie is around, my brain stops functioning correctly.

Seeing her here, unprepared, was bad enough. But then my fucking Dad and his new wife, Melanie, informed us that she wasn't just an inconvenient attendee of the dinner party. She's Melanie's daughter.

My fucking stepsister.

Now I'm positive I'm in hell.

My words failed me completely at the news, but luckily Laurie kept her composure enough that Dad and Melanie didn't catch on that we knew each other already. There wasn't any real reprieve, though, because after the second bombshell that we'd be living together for a year, it was time for dinner. And of course, Laurie was seated directly across from me.

She's beautiful, of course, looking every bit the woman I remembered—only more polished, more alluring. She's wearing a dark blue dress that clings to her tits, hips, and ass so well that I have to force myself not to ogle her. Her hair is loosely waved, and she looks so effortlessly put together that it's hard to believe we were both just given the biggest shock of our lives.

Then there's the fact that no matter where we are, no matter what bullshit titles her mom and my dad put on us, everything in me wants to reach across the table, grab her wrist, pull her close, and kiss the hell out of her.

That knowledge is eating me alive.

But Laurie, it seems, is just fine. She gives me a polite, friendly smile as the staff sets our plates down, and she barely even stutters over her words as the conversation goes on.

As the main course gets served, Dad clears his throat.

"So, Laurie," he begins, and she stiffens. "Tell us, what's new?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," she admits. "I decided to take a break and move home."

Her eyes flick over to me, then back to my father, who's nodding as he cuts into his steak. "I remember hearing about that, of course. Your mother was a little sad, I think, about how it didn't work out. What happened, exactly? If you don't mind my asking."

"No, I don't mind. And, well, the truth is that the job market in the fashion industry is brutal, and I simply didn't make the cut."

At first, I'm impressed by her no-nonsense honesty, but when I consider her words again, I frown. Fashion industry? I'd already come to the conclusion that Laurie wasn't a damn bartender like she told me in the past. So she works in fashion, huh? Looking at her, it makes perfect sense.

"Oh, no. What a shame," my father murmurs.

"That's all right. I'll find a way," Laurie says, lifting her glass in a toast.

"That's a positive way to look at things. Very impressive, young lady." Dad smiles and turns to his wife. "You've raised a strong woman here, Mel."

"Thank you, honey. Though she was always a headstrong little thing." She glances over at Laurie with a fond smile, and Laurie just laughs, but she still can't quite hide the tightness in her expression.

By the time dessert is being brought out, I take a single bite of the crepe cake and excuse myself. I'm desperate to get some air, desperate to be done with the charade of being strangers that Laurie and I are forced to subject ourselves to.

I head outside, the cooler evening air bringing a small sense of relief to my overheated body. My thoughts are a mess. Laurie, the party, my dad. I'm still not entirely sure how this happened.

I wander aimlessly through the gardens, not wanting to go back inside just yet. It's quiet and peaceful out here, and the farther I get from the house, the easier it is for me to think clearly.

Then I see her.

She's standing on the stone pathway leading to the garden, her silhouette bathed in the soft glow of the moon. She's got her arms wrapped around herself, lost in her own thoughts. If I turn around right now, she'll never know I was here.

But as I've proven to myself time and time again, I'm a fool.

I step forward, my boots crunching on the gravel. Laurie turns when she hears me, and for a moment, neither of us says anything. We're standing there, just staring at

each other, the air between us so thick with unsaid words that it's suffocating.

"Adam," she says softly, almost like she's surprised to see me here. Her voice is low, tentative, but curious.

I have to clear my throat before I can speak. "Laurie. You're...outside," I say, stupidly.

I'm mentally kicking myself, but it surprises a laugh out of Laurie. "Sure am. So are you, I noticed. I just needed some air. Tonight has been...a lot."

"Yeah, it sure fucking has."

The silence stretches, and I can feel the pull between us again, that invisible thread connecting us that's never truly snapped. I can't stand it any longer. "Laurie, why did you disappear after that night? After we—" I can't even say it.

She tenses, arms crossing over her chest, and I can see her guard go up instantly. "After we fucked?"

Now it's my turn to be shocked. "Yeah. After we fucked."

Laurie shrugs one shoulder, and I immediately know she's about to close down. She's been avoiding this for a year, and I have no idea why I thought she'd open up now.

"I don't want to talk about it. It doesn't matter now anyway, right? Our parents?—"

I flinch, stomach turning. "I know. But don't say it, please. Fuck. I haven't even processed that yet."

"Yeah. Me either. God, it's so messed up," Laurie whispers, her eyes going distant.

I nod, stepping closer to her. Close enough to reach out and touch her. I could do it, but I don't. Instead, I just stare at her, my eyes lingering on the way her breasts push against the silky fabric of her dress, the curve of her hips.

I shouldn't be thinking about her this way, but it's like I can't help myself.

"How did this even happen, Adam?"

She's looking away now, out across the darkened lawn. The question seems like a simple one, but the answer is impossible. There are so many variables, so many little choices that could have altered the course of the last year.

"Hell if I know, Laurie. But I want to know why you left?—"

She cuts me off, her gaze finally meeting mine with an intensity that makes my chest ache. "I lied, okay?" Her voice shakes just slightly, and I almost don't hear her. But she continues, like she has to get it out. "I told you I was a bartender in town, but I wasn't. I didn't want you to know who I really was. The Cartwright heiress. I didn't want you to treat me any differently."

She had an entire life that I was ignorant about until tonight. The girl who has been haunting my dreams isn't who I thought she was at all. How much of herself did she hide?

"I went back to New York the next day," she continues, almost like she's speaking to herself now. "I was only in town for Mom's birthday, and I had a job waiting for me there. I didn't...I couldn't do this. I couldn't stay here with you."

"So you lied about who you are." It's a statement, not a question, but she answers me anyway.

“Yes. I lied. But it wasn’t about you. It was about me. And it’s not something I want to talk about. Okay?”

There’s a sharpness to her words now, and I realize this is the most honest she’s been with me. She’s hiding behind walls, just like I am. And I get it. I understand it more than she knows. I want to reach out to touch her, to comfort her, but her body language is still closed off.

Instead, I take a step back. “Okay. But you should know, I looked for you, Laurie. I didn’t just forget you.”

Laurie's expression shifts, her surprise shining through for less than a second. Then she's shuttered again. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't even look at me.

I take a steadying breath. “So,” I say, trying to keep my tone light, “are we going to talk about how this is actually going to work? You and me living in the same house for a year?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Her voice is sharp, clipped, like she’s already figured this out in her head. “You stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours. Simple.”

Simple. Right. I can’t stop the dry laugh that escapes me. “Yeah, that’s a great plan. I’m sure avoiding each other completely in a house we’re both stuck in will go real smoothly.”

Her eyes narrow, and for a second, I see the fire behind them—the same fire that drew me to her in the first place. “It’ll work fine as long as you don’t make it weird,” she shoots back. “Just...do your thing, and I’ll do mine. Problem solved.”

Another laugh bursts out of me. "Ha! You think this isn't already weird? Come the fuck on, Laurie, we spent an entire night?—"

"Don't." She cuts me off again, her voice low and full of warning. "Don't bring that up."

I run a hand over my face, biting back my frustration. She's got this way of shutting things down, of building walls so fast it makes my head spin. But I can't just let it go. "Christ, woman. I'm not bringing it up to make things harder. I just think we should figure out how to handle this before it blows up in our faces."

"There's nothing to handle, Adam. You don't want to be here, and neither do I, but we've both been overruled by our parents." She shivers. "Ugh. Saying it out loud makes me want to puke. Listen. Let's just stay out of each other's way and get through the year without making it a big deal."

"Fine," I bite the word out. "We'll stay out of each other's way. If that's what you want."

She nods, chin held high like she's won some kind of battle. Too bad for her that I can see through the ruse. Laurie knows, deep down, that this battle hasn't even gotten started yet.

"Good," she says, her voice a little too firm. "Glad we're on the same page."

That the idea of ignoring Laurie for a year is about as realistic as pretending I haven't thought about her every day since we hooked up. But if she needs to lie to herself to get through the day, then that's her call. I'm not following her made-up rules, though. There's still a hell of a lot more I want to know about this woman.

I take a step back, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep from doing something stupid, like kissing her thoroughly enough that she forgets all of her previous arguments. "Guess we'll just...make it work, then."

“Yep,” she says, turning away, her tone clipped again. “See you around.”

I can't help but watch her walk away, perfectly steady even in her heels, dress swaying around her perfect, heart-shaped ass. Fuck! This is going to be hell. A full year of pretending she doesn't make my pulse race, pretending I'm not still haunted by the feel of her lips on mine, pretending I'm okay with this ridiculous arrangement.

I shake my head, muttering under my breath, “Yeah, we're definitely lying to ourselves.”

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LAURIE

After my pep talk before dinner about embracing my fully adult self, I've never felt more like a petulant teenager than I did busting into my room and throwing myself down on the bed.

I want to throw a fucking fit. I want to scream until the windows shatter. Except none of that will help change the mess I've stumbled into.

Letting out a huff, I roll over and stare at the ceiling. The pastel walls creep into my peripheral vision, but it doesn't bother me like it did before. Teenage angst seems appropriate considering the circumstances.

I fell for a guy I had a one-night stand with, ghosted him the next morning, and now he's not only staying in my house with me, he's technically my fucking stepbrother. Gross.

Oh, and did I mention he took my virginity that night?

Grabbing a fluffy pillow, I scream into it, unable to hold it in any longer. This is it, my last night in this house without Adam Lawson for an entire year. Just thinking about it makes me want to clench my teeth.

Why couldn't Mom have just hired a security company if she was so worried? A year of Adam and me coexisting like polite strangers? Impossible. The man might as well

have moved into my personal space bubble and set up camp. The nerve of it.

After I've screamed my heart out, I sit up and kick my heels off, one flying to hit the wall while the other clatters to the floor. My arches ache as I stand, shimmying out of the dress and letting the expensive fabric pool at my feet, and throw on my sleep clothes, a soft cotton tank, and matching shorts. I don't plan on leaving the room tonight, if ever, so it doesn't matter what I wear. I just want to be comfortable.

I try to force my mind onto anything else but Adam—movies, upcoming concerts, my social life—but none of it seems to stick. Not with the image of him so recently in my mind. As I wash my face, I consider how good he looked, how polished and well, hot . It made me want to make him messy in all sorts of ways that are now totally forbidden.

But what exactly makes them forbidden?

When I think of the word forbidden , I think of being told I can't do something. But the only person telling me I can't pursue Adam is myself. He didn't say anything about us being off limits, although he was clearly as freaked out by the stepsibling thing as I was.

But then I remember how pissed he was when he confronted me about running away. The hurt in his eyes, the way he seemed desperate to know why I left. The simple truth was that I was a coward. Falling for someone like Adam flew in the face of everything I was trying to accomplish moving to New York to pursue fashion.

I had no idea how much he would haunt me. How much I would think about his kisses, his hands on my skin, how he filled me up so well.

Ugh! I hate it. I hate him. I hate myself for running away.

Now I'm stuck with him for the foreseeable future, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Frustrated and wrung out, I brush my hair and teeth and climb into bed. I let out a long breath, trying to let the tension go, but it follows me into sleep. And before I know it, I'm dreaming.

I fell into the memory, and it was like I was experiencing it all over again.

It started in the brewery where my friend, Elise, had taken me for my last night in town. I was in Charleston for my mother's birthday the previous day, but had gotten the last-minute invitation from Elise that morning. I was due to be on a plane back in the morning and hadn't planned to be out all that late, but time had gotten away from me.

Elise and I were with a group of friends and acquaintances, and I lost track of her when I spotted another large group at the other end of the bar, all dressed in business suits and clearly celebrating something.

And then I see him, standing at the back of the group, his tall frame almost towering over everyone else. He looks at ease, smiling and laughing, but for some reason, he stands out like a beacon. And when he catches my eye across the crowded bar, something in my chest seizes up.

The connection is instant, and I watch his smile fall and get replaced by something much more serious. With black, perfectly cut hair, a dark shadow of stubble on his jaw, and evergreen eyes, he was the sexiest man at the bar by far. But that shouldn't have mattered to me.

I swore off men when I moved to New York to try and get my fashion career off the ground, wanting to focus on my work and nothing more. It was how I ended up a

twenty-four year-old virgin at the time, and why I was so thrown off by how strongly I was drawn to Adam.

Then, to my shock, he pushes through the crowd to reach me.

My heart is racing when he makes it to my side, even hotter and more intimidating now that he's up close. But there's something else about him, too, an easygoing nature beneath the professional veneer.

And he only has eyes for me.

"Do I know you?" he asks, waving the bartender down. "I feel like I know you, but I also feel like I'd remember if I'd met the most beautiful woman in the world before."

I laugh. "I believe we're strangers."

"Well..." He accepts two glasses full of amber liquid on rocks from the bartender, handing me one. "Let's change that. I'm Adam, and that is some of the unreasonably expensive scotch I bought a bottle of to share tonight. We're celebrating."

"Laurie," I answer, taking the glass. "And what are we celebrating?"

"My father is finally preparing to retire, and he's splitting ownership of the company between my brother and me."

I raise an eyebrow. "Well, congratulations, then."

Adam raises his glass to mine, smiling. "To new beginnings."

The glasses clink, and the rich taste of scotch slides across my tongue. The liquor burns, but I swallow it down, feeling the warmth in my belly almost instantly.

"So" —he leans against the bar next to me, looking out at the crowd— "you're from around here?"

I consider lying—most people around here recognize me as the Cartwright heiress—but he hasn't noticed yet. I decide to play it by ear. "Born and raised. What about you?"

He shakes his head. "Moved here a few years back when my dad opened a new branch of the company."

"And what do you do?"

"Investments." He shrugs. "The kind of stuff that makes people happy they have money."

I snort. "I bet."

Adam turns back to face me, his eyes raking over me in a way that makes my cheeks heat. "You know, I was having a pretty good night before, but now you've made it better. Before I continue, though, are you here with a boyfriend, or...?"

I look over my shoulder to see Elise arm-in-arm with one of her friends, and while it would make a hell of a lot more sense to just tell the truth and introduce Adam to my group, a big part of me wants to keep him to myself. I want to slip this special moment into my pocket where no one else can see. "No, actually. I work at the bar down the road, but stopped in here to get a drink before heading home. No one wants to drink where they work, you know?"

His smile broadens, his green eyes lighting up. "Great. Then maybe you'll join me for a drink in a more private setting?"

It's like I'm floating outside of myself watching this happen. Like I've slipped into someone else's body. I don't normally flirt like this, don't usually let things get this far. But there's something about Adam that makes me feel brave, reckless. He makes me want to throw caution to the wind and live, if only for tonight.

So, I accept.

The next thing I know, we're in his hotel room, kissing like our lives depend on it. And Adam kisses me like he means it, like he wants to be with me more than anything. His hands are in my hair, holding me steady as he devours me with his mouth, and my heart pounds.

This is what I've been missing all these years. The passion, the spark that comes from being with someone who knows their way around a woman's body.

Adam is thorough and unrelenting. We kiss until my lips are bruised and tingling, until I'm aching and breathless. It's not until my shirt is halfway off that I freeze, suddenly self-conscious.

He notices right away, letting me go so I can pull it back into place. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, shaking my head. "It's nothing."

But Adam isn't letting me off the hook that easily. He reaches out and strokes his fingers down my cheek. "Laurie, it's not nothing. If you don't want to do this, just tell me and we'll stop."

My face burns with embarrassment, but I force the words out. "No, it's not that. It's just...I'm a virgin."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but his expression softens a second later. "You

didn't mention that before."

I bite my lip. "I didn't want to scare you off."

"Scare me off?" He chuckles. "Laurie, you could never scare me off. But I don't want to do anything you're not ready for."

I'm torn. I want this, want Adam, but the reality of my situation has brought everything into focus. This will be my first time. It should be with someone I know better than just one night, but that ship has sailed. And somehow it feels like I've known this man for years, not hours. There's something between us, something special.

So, I decide to trust it.

"I'm ready," I whisper. "I want this."

Adam smiles, and I know I made the right choice. "Then come here."

He pulls me back into his arms, kissing me again, and this time I relax into it. Everything about him is perfect—his lips, his hands, his scent. He smells like rich cologne and some undefinable essence that's all his own. It's intoxicating, and I find myself pressing closer, desperate for more. I want to sink into him, feel him all around me.

When his hands slip beneath my shirt, I don't flinch away. Instead, I lift my arms and let him take it off. He kisses a trail from my mouth down to my chest, unclasping my bra and tossing it aside. I'm bare before him, and his eyes are wide with hunger as he takes me in.

"Laurie," he breathes, "you're beautiful."

And then his mouth is on me, and it's everything I imagined and more. His tongue circles my nipple, sending sparks of pleasure through me, and I arch into his touch. His hands cup my breasts, squeezing and kneading, and it feels so good that I never want him to stop.

But then his mouth moves lower, his tongue tracing patterns over my skin as he makes his way down my body. I gasp when he reaches the waistband of my jeans, his fingers working deftly to pop the button and slide the zipper down. He pulls them down my hips slowly, his eyes fixed on mine.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

I nod, unable to form words.

He presses a kiss to my hip, then slides my jeans all the way off, leaving me in just my panties. He kisses his way back up my thigh, his touch feather-light and teasing. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he pauses, looking up at me with a wicked smile on his face.

"I can't wait to taste you."

His words have wetness flooding my pussy instantly. Oh my God, no one has ever spoken to me like that!

He presses his mouth against the damp fabric of my panties, and I moan. The sensation is unlike anything I've ever felt before, and I can't help but rock my hips against him. He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me, and then he tugs my panties aside and licks me in one long stroke.

I cry out, my hands flying to his hair. With nothing between my flesh and his tongue, the sensation is almost too much. He keeps going, his tongue circling my clit over

and over again. The pressure inside me builds, and I'm quickly approaching the edge. I'm primed and ready to blow, almost vibrating with how turned on I am. He wraps his lips around my clit and sucks, sending me hurtling over the edge.

My orgasm crashes through me, and I cry out his name. "Adam, Adam, Adam!"

My knees buckle, but he holds me up, licking me through it. When I finally come back down, he kisses his way back up my body, wrapping his arms around me and lowering me to the bed with a gentleness that makes my heart ache.

I'm still quivering as he undresses in front of me, taking off the suit slowly and methodically, revealing his incredible body.

I watch with rapt attention as he strips off his shirt, revealing broad shoulders and chiseled abs. His chest is covered in a light dusting of dark hair, and I can't resist leaning forward and running my fingers through it. He shivers at my touch, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Like what you see?"

I nod, feeling emboldened. "You're gorgeous."

The pants go next, leaving him in just a pair of black boxer briefs that leave little to the imagination. I can see the outline of his hard length straining against the fabric, and it makes my mouth go dry. All of that is supposed to fit inside me? I should be nervous, but seeing his cock outline has my pussy aching with emptiness. I want him to fill me so badly.

He palms himself through the fabric, and then he's pulling them down, cock jumping out, hard as a steel bar. While he steps out of the briefs, Adam takes his length in his hand and strokes himself, looking me over like I'm some sort of feast.

And then he's crawling on top of me, his weight pressing me into the mattress. It should be terrifying, but I've never felt safer. His mouth finds mine again, and he kisses me slowly, reverently. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer, desperate for more contact. He reaches down and lines himself up with my entrance, pausing for a moment to look into my eyes.

"Are you sure?"

I nod, running my hands up his muscular arms. "I'm so sure. I think I'll die on the spot if you turn me down now."

Adam's expression is equal parts joy and possession. He's thrilled to be allowed to fuck me, to be my first, I can see it in his eyes.

With that, he pushes inside me, slowly but surely, and I gasp with each inch. There's a sharp pinch that lasts less than a second, and then it's gone. The stretch is almost too much, but the pain quickly gives way to pleasure.

He moves slowly, giving me time to adjust, and then he's fully seated inside me, our hips bumping together. He stays there for a moment, pressing his forehead to my shoulder as he fights for control. He's letting me get used to the feeling, and once I start to grind against him, savoring the fullness, he starts to move.

The world narrows down to the points where our bodies are joined—the feeling of him inside me, the heat of his skin against mine, the taste of his lips. I cling to him, lost in the sensation of being filled by him, the feeling of being connected in the most intimate way.

We move together, our bodies in perfect sync, and I can feel another orgasm building inside me. He kisses me hungrily, his hips rocking into me with increasing urgency. I meet him thrust for thrust, my nails digging into his back. I tighten my legs around

him, and Adam pushes forward, changing the angle and hitting my G-spot with perfect accuracy, making my eyes roll back in my head. It's the most incredible thing I've ever felt.

Adam doesn't let up, and it's his perfect rhythm that brings me to the edge a second time. I come with a cry, clenching tightly around him, and he follows me into bliss, emptying himself inside me with a groan. We collapse, still wrapped up in each other, and I cling to him, never wanting this moment to end.

But eventually, we have to separate, and the reality of the situation comes crashing back. What we just shared was beautiful, but it was also fleeting. I knew before we ever started that there was no future for us, and I'd made peace with it. But now, lying here in his arms, it's harder than ever to accept.

I know it's silly, but I can't help but feel like we were meant to find each other. Like there's something between us that was always supposed to happen. It's a foolish thought, but I can't shake it.

Even in the afterglow, he's perfect, ordering us room service and feeding me French fries with his fingers once it arrives. I have to consciously remember my fake identity as a bartender, but it's hard when he's so easy to talk to, so eager to learn about me. I find myself trailing off onto subjects like fashion magazines before correcting the course and being more vague. I can't tell him anything real, and I hate that.

But eventually, the late night catches up with us, and I find myself drifting off in his arms. He holds me close, his warmth seeping into my bones, and I sleep better than I have in years.

Then I wake up the next morning, and I panic.

It hits me all at once that I slept with a stranger and told him something personal

about my life. I've never done anything like this before, and the thought of how stupid I'd been has me scrambling for my clothes.

"Laurie?" Adam sits up, his voice still thick with sleep. "What are you doing?"

I yank on my jeans, not meeting his eye. "I have to go. I'm sorry."

He frowns, reaching out to take my hand. "Hey, slow down. It's okay."

I shake my head, my heart racing. "No, it's not. I shouldn't have done this. I'm sorry."

He gets up, pulling on his boxer briefs before standing in front of me, his hands on my shoulders. "Laurie, it's okay. Whatever you're worried about, it's okay. I had an amazing time with you last night."

But I'm already shaking my head. "No, I'm sorry. I have to go."

And I do. I rush out the door, leaving him standing there, looking confused and hurt. It kills me, but I don't know what else to do. The tears hit as soon as I burst out of the hotel, and the feeling of them hot and wet on my cheeks, combined with the misery of leaving him behind, is what finally wakes me up.

I gasp, shooting up in bed, holding my comforter to my chest as I take in my darkened bedroom. With shaking fingers, I reach up and feel the wetness of real tears on my cheeks. It's so much worse knowing that he's right down the hall. I could go to him and ease this pain in seconds, but now it's wrong. Taboo. Forbidden. He's the last man I should want.

Yet, as I try to fall back asleep, praying I don't dream of him again, a plan starts to form in my mind. What if I ignore the red flags and pursue him anyway? Just to get it out of my system. I hold onto that spot of brightness, that possibility, as I finally

manage to doze off.

* * *

It's 8 a.m. and reality is here, loud and unwelcome. I've got 364 more mornings ahead with Adam Lawson just a few doors away, and the dream about our night together is so tangible I can almost feel the echo of his fingers on my skin.

I consider languishing in bed for the rest of the day, but the smell of coffee and the fact that my mother is leaving for an entire year in less than an hour are enough to get me moving. I consider changing, making myself more presentable, but if Adam is going to be here for an entire year, then he better get used to both glamour Laurie and loungewear Laurie.

I shuffle down the stairs, hair thrown in a messy bun, and my mood already done for. It lifts a smidgen when I see that it's just Mom and Craig, dressed in their jet-setting best, in the kitchen. I tell Mom goodbye, doing my best to act totally fine and not like I'm teetering on the edge of a mental breakdown.

I'm halfway through the goodbyes when a tall figure walks around the corner to join us, and I'm right back to being pissed off all over again. Wearing a simple white T-shirt and dark jeans that shouldn't look so good on him, his duffle bag slung over one shoulder, Adam looks a thousand times more prepared for the day than I do. His hair is tousled, like he just ran a hand through it, and his face is set in that unreadable expression of his—cool, collected, and maddeningly handsome.

The temperature in the room drops into the negatives, or at least it feels that way to me, but Mom still bustles over and wraps me in her arms, oblivious to the tension. "Laurie, honey, be careful, okay? And don't worry, Adam will look after the house and you."

I should be more taken aback, but at this point, I've come to terms with Adam staying, as much as I hate it. "Mom, again, I'm a grown woman."

Mom sighs. "I know, honey. But you're still my little girl, and I'm still allowed to worry."

Adam makes a small noise of disbelief behind me, and I spin around, narrowing my eyes at him. "Something you wanna say?"

He opens his mouth to answer, but Craig steps between us, clearing his throat loudly. "Well, we'd better be going. The pilot's waiting."

"Goodbye, honey. We love you," Mom calls, pulling me in for one last hug.

"Love you too," I murmur, hugging her back, then turning to Craig and giving him a somewhat awkward hug as well.

Satisfied, Craig nods, and they head out the door, leaving me alone with Adam. For a minute, we just stand there, not saying anything, not moving. For one second—one tiny, traitorous second—I imagine closing the distance between us and kissing him again. Just because I could. Our parents would be gone. No one would ever know. The thought feels like a bolt of lightning through my system, shocking and almost stupid in how real it is.

I have to close my eyes to dispel the idea. The enormous old house suddenly feels a whole lot smaller now that it's just the two of us.

"Well," Adam says after a beat, dropping his bag near the stairs, "this is?—"

"Don't," I cut him off, spinning to face him. "Don't say 'this is weird' or 'this is awkward' or whatever polite thing you were about to say. I don't want to hear it."

His lips twitch, like he's fighting a smile. "Noted."

Neither of us says anything more for a long moment, but I can feel his eyes on me as I fill my mug and grab an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. I hate how aware I am of him, how nice his muscled arms looked crossed over his chest, the dark stubble on his jaw, his impossibly green eyes.

The mug shakes in my hand. I need to get away from him. Now.

"This has been great," I snap, turning on my heel and heading for the stairs. "I'll be in my room. Don't burn my house down."

"Didn't plan on it!" he calls after me, amused.

I'm almost running with how fast I want to put distance between us, but it's like his warm, spicy scent follows me. The second I'm in my bedroom, I slam the door harder than I mean to, and the sounds echo through the house.

But at least I'm alone, away from Adam.

I lean back against the door and let out a shaky breath, pressing a hand to my chest. My heart is pounding, way faster than it should be. There's some thought forming in my mind, some idea I know is nothing but trouble. Still, I can't shake it completely.

I keep thinking about how I could do the opposite of what Adam expects. I could flirt, come onto him, press every button he has. It's so wrong, but I feel cheated. I never got the chance to explore the thing between us, and even if it's my fault, I still can't stop wanting to turn back time. Or, since that's impossible, use this time we have alone to see just how our connection really goes.

Your connection as lovers? Too bad he's your stepbrother.

But there is zero blood between us, and we're just two single people with real chemistry and a perfect opportunity to act on it. Feeling better and determined to see if he feels the same, I'm already counting the hours until I see him again.

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4

ADAM

Living under the same roof as Laurie Cartwright is a special kind of hell.

It's been three days, and I already feel like I'm losing my mind. I haven't shared space with anyone in years, and now all of a sudden I'm supposed to coexist with her. The woman I was so sure I connected with on some otherworldly level before she bolted from my hotel room. The same woman who has been haunting me ever since.

And let me tell you, Laurie is everywhere. I'm positive there has never been a more radiant, alluring creature, and it's just my fucking luck that she's totally off-limits to me now.

Yesterday, for example, I went out back to check the pool filter and there she was—stretched out on one of the lounge chairs in a tiny white bikini that should be illegal.

Then she spotted me, one brow quirking like she knew exactly what I'd been staring at. "Didn't know the pool guy made house calls this early," she teased, her voice all sweet and smug.

I turned around and went right back inside, filter be damned.

She's making me come apart at the seams. I've jerked off thinking about her so many times that I shouldn't be able to get hard for a year, yet every time she moves a

muscle, my cock stands at attention in seconds.

And the worst part is, Laurie doesn't even seem to notice. She's just living. Painting her nails on the back porch, wandering around in those tiny pajama shorts she wears at night, sprawled across the couch sketching with her iPad.

Meanwhile, I'm losing sleep, losing focus, losing my fucking mind. If I don't get a handle on this obsession, I'm going to do something stupid, I just know it.

By day five, something shifts in Laurie again. Gone is the casual breeziness she's been treating me with up until this point, and now she's sticking herself in my orbit like she belongs there. Even when I'm doing something as simple as watching soccer, she's there, radiant with her hair down and not a shred of makeup on, offering me a sweating glass of sweet tea like a peace offering.

I accept it warily. "You like soccer?"

"Not really," she admits, sitting on the opposite side of the couch. "But I figured I'd give it a try. Got to expand my horizons, right? Try new things, make risky decisions."

Her voice is light, but when she turns her gaze on me, lids low and eyes heated, I'm hit with such a wave of desire that I'm dumbfounded. She stays there for the entire game, asking the occasional question and making it damn near impossible to pay the match any attention.

As the match wraps up, she stands, announcing that she's going to bed, but not before stopping next to me. She leans over, her hand brushing my shoulder and her voice low and soft in my ear. "Did you ever play soccer?"

For one wild second, I almost turn my head to kiss her, but I clench my jaw. "No."

"Too bad," she sighs, standing up straight again. "That would have been fun to watch."

She's doing all of this on purpose. She has to be. No woman on the planet can be this seductive by accident.

* * *

I hear the crash first, and then Laurie's yelp coming from upstairs.

I practically vault over the back of the couch to rush up the stairs. When I throw open her door, heart hammering in my chest, I find her next to a toppled-over step ladder, paintbrush in hand.

"I'm okay," she says, her voice breathless. "I slipped off the first step and knocked it over."

Christ. She's just painting, that's all. She's not hurt.

One wall is finished, a rich, golden hue that glows under the lights. The rest of the walls are pale pink, decorated with awards, pictures, posters, and other teenage treasures.

"What is this?"

She blinks, a little color staining her cheeks as she gestures to the finished wall. "Just...something I thought would look nice."

"It does," I say, stepping closer. "But why?"

She shrugs, picking at the dried paint on her brush. "If I'm going to be an adult living

with my mom, I at least want to be an adult with an adult room. Not...this."

She waves her hand around the space, and I know what she means. It was a typical teenager's room, a shrine to her youth. All the things that had once been important to her were on display, but now she's different. A woman, not a little girl.

Laurie looks self-conscious for the first time since I'd met her, and I hate it. "It's a good color. Really." And then, despite my better judgment, I add, "Do you want me to do the edges for you, so you don't have to get on the ladder again?"

She gives me a surprised look. "Really?"

"I'm already up here. Might as well."

The work is simple, but the company is something else. I feel her eyes on me the entire time and the electricity sparking from where her fingers brush mine as she hands me brushes and cups of paint.

"I think you should paint your room like this," she says, watching me climb down the ladder, "You could use a little color."

"I'm not painting my room gold," I snort.

"Gold is too bold," she agrees. "But maybe a nice muted yellow? With gray sheets and some houseplants to bring in a little green..." She trails off before her expression becomes completely earnest. "But anyway. Thank you, Adam, for helping me. I really appreciate it."

"Sure," I say, trying to keep my tone light.

Laurie's tone goes teasing. "You know, you're the only man I've ever had in here."

I'm buried under a barrage of questions I want to ask her, but I manage to push most of them down. I know that Laurie was a virgin the night we slept together, but she's never had anyone in her room? She's fucking stunning. But I can't say that, so instead I just motion to the massive amounts of cheerleading awards hung on the walls.

"I'm surprised you didn't have some cliché football-playing boyfriend."

Laurie looks offended. "Uh, no! I took cheerleading so seriously. You don't win awards by dating football players. You win awards by practicing."

She sounds so prim and proper, and I laugh. "So you're saying you didn't date?"

She looks away. "I didn't have time for boys, okay? Plus, my dad ditching my mom as soon as he found out she was pregnant didn't exactly make me in any hurry to find love."

I cringe. Fuck. I'm going to hell. There's no doubt about that, but I can't stop myself from pushing forward, getting closer, wanting to know more about her. "None of them were good enough for you?"

She slaps her hands on the bed, annoyed. "That wasn't it! I did well at school, and I dedicated my free time to cheer. That's all." Relaxing once more, she looks me over from head to toe, and I swear I can feel her eyes like a physical touch. "You're...you know, in good shape. I bet you played a sport seriously, too."

My obsession with her is broken for a beat, and a familiar feeling of awkwardness creeps in. "Ah, no. Not really."

"Come on." Laurie is like a bloodhound on a scent. She knows I'm hiding something, and she isn't going to let me get away with it. "Spill it."

I consider just leaving the room, but something about the way she's looking at me makes me feel ... lighter. It's my desire to see her smile that has me telling her, "I was actually in choir."

She blinks, eyes wide. "Oh!"

"Yeah." I scrub a hand down my face. "I was a baritone, and I took it seriously."

"Why did you stop?"

I'm already fighting back a grin. "I was just too talented. It wasn't fair to the other kids."

Her lips part and then she bursts into laughter, throwing herself back on her bed. I join in, surprised at how nice it feels to just laugh with her.

She sits up after a moment, looking more relaxed than I've seen her since she got here. "Thanks for sharing with me."

And there it is again—that crackle of heat between us that makes me want to kiss her. Makes me want to pull her against me and feel her body pressed to mine. But I can't, so instead I say, "It really was a tragedy, how wasted I was."

"I just don't know if I believe you. How about you sing me something?"

I shake my head. "Hell, no. Unless...you do something for me first."

Laurie's expression wavers between amused and hesitant, but she takes the bait. "Okay, sure."

"All right, Cartwright," I say, leaning against the edge of her desk with my arms

crossed. "If you were such a hotshot cheerleader, let's see it. Show me what you've got."

Laurie arches one perfectly shaped brow. "You think I won't?"

I smirk, trying to keep my cool. "I know you won't. No way you'll risk embarrassing yourself like that."

She narrows her eyes at me, the glint of determination in them unmistakable. "You're on, Lawson."

Before I can backpedal or reconsider, Laurie steps into the middle of the room. With an exaggerated stretch, she raises her arms above her head. Then, to my absolute shock, she launches into a cheer with flawless precision.

"Two bits, four bits, six bits, a dollar! All for the team, stand up and holler!"

She claps, spins, and finishes with a toe touch that leaves me speechless. The movement is fluid, confident, and completely unexpected, and the matching crop top and bike shorts she's wearing show me all sorts of delicious skin.

When she lands, her hair falls around her shoulders like a golden halo, her cheeks flushed from the exertion. I blink, trying not to let my jaw drop. Hot as hell doesn't even cover it. I'm so hard I could fuck through steel, and I lean forward in an attempt to hide it.

Laurie grins, clearly reveling in my stunned silence. "What's the matter, Adam? Cat got your tongue?"

I recover quickly. "Not bad. A little rusty, but not bad."

She laughs, shaking her head. "Fair is fair, though. Your turn, Mister choir boy."

Damn. I walked right into that one.

"Fine," I say, straightening up. "But don't blame me if this blows your mind."

Laurie perches on the edge of her bed, crossing her arms and watching. I rake a hand through my hair and rack my brain for something, anything, I can still remember. Finally, it comes to me. Clearing my throat, I launch into a shaky rendition of "Seasons of Love" from Rent.

Laurie's face immediately splits into a grin, and by the second line, she's laughing so hard she's clutching her sides. I ham it up even more, throwing in dramatic gestures and a heartfelt vibrato until she's gasping for air.

"You're terrible!" she manages between giggles.

I stop mid-verse, pretending to be offended. "Terrible? That was Broadway-worthy!"

Laurie shakes her head. "Oh, Mister. No, it wasn't."

I laugh, sitting on the bed next to her, before I can second-guess myself. "I should have known you were an elitist."

She's still laughing, and before I know it, so am I. But then the laughter fades, and the air shifts. I turn my head to find Laurie already looking at me, her blue eyes soft and searching. The space between us feels electric, charged with something neither of us is willing to name. Her lips are parted just slightly, and I swear I can feel the pull of them, like gravity.

Then she's moving, leaning in, scooting closer until our legs touch. This is it. I'm sure

of it. She's going to kiss me?—

But just as I start to close the distance, she pulls away abruptly, breaking the spell.

“Whew!” Laurie says, scooting away from me and running a hand through her hair.
“That was...fun.”

For a second, I consider just letting her go. It's what I should do. It's the only decision I can make that will keep the distance between us. But again, Laurie and the lack of self-control I have when I'm around her make me a fool.

As she goes to stand, I grab her wrist. "Wait."

Her eyes go wide, and I almost laugh out loud. She's been pushing herself into my space for days, and now that I'm finally giving in, she's about to chicken out. My Laurie talks a big game, but freezes when she wins.

But that's okay. I can be bold enough for both of us.

"What?"

In one smooth motion, I pull her down and into my lap.

She gasps, her hands coming to rest on my shoulders for balance. She's frozen, wide-eyed, and surprised. I wonder what she's thinking, if she's considering pulling away, or if she's going to finally give in to what we both want.

"Adam—"

"Tell me you haven't been trying to get a reaction out of me for days. Come on, Laurie, tell me you haven't been waiting for me to break."

I watch as she swallows. "I, well ... yeah, I was, but..."

She's still not pulling away, she's still sitting in my lap, her hands warm and solid against my shoulders. "But what, Laurie?"

Her hands tighten against me. "I guess I didn't plan past this point, and now I don't know what to do."

It's hard to keep hold of my sanity with Laurie so close, but I manage. "Well, let's see. We could just sit here." I thrust up until she could feel my erection. "Or we could do something else."

She sucks in a breath, her nails digging into my skin through my shirt. "Like what?"

"Do you trust me?"

She meets my gaze, and I see the truth there. "Yes."

I'm already pushing my luck, but I can't help myself. I lean forward, bringing my lips to her ear and nipping at her earlobe. Laurie gasps, her hips shifting against mine. "Let me show you what you've been missing."

I hold my breath, waiting for her answer. Waiting for her to run again. But she doesn't.

She nods.

Then I'm kissing her, pouring all of the want and furious need I've been feeling into it. Laurie groans into my mouth, her hands going under my shirt and stroking over my bare chest. Her touch is like fire, and I want to burn.

I've never wanted anything or anyone this badly in my life. But even now, even with Laurie in my lap and her tongue in my mouth, I'm wary. Because no matter how good she feels, I can't risk fucking this up.

The decision to make her come and then give her time to think is easy. I've been stroking my cock to the memory of eating her pussy for a year now, and I want to show her that I'm more than willing to put in the work.

I flip our positions, letting her sit on the edge of the bed while I go to my knees on the carpeted floor. She's breathing hard, eyes glassy as she looks down at me. "What are you doing?"

I tug at her shorts, pulling them down her legs and tossing them aside. "I'm going to make you come," I say simply.

"But what about you?" she protests, but happily lifts her hips for me to pull her panties off, throwing them aside with her shorts.

A thought is pounding in my head, a word I'm dying to hear from her lips, but it might be too much, too fast. "All I want is to make you feel good, baby."

Laurie threads her fingers through my hair and holds me back from my prize between her legs. "You're holding back. What is it?"

I lick my lips, knowing I'm about to make a stupid mistake, but we've gotten this far. If Laurie wants me, it's got to be all of me. "I want something from you, Laurie, but it's not just to fuck you. Which, believe me, I really want to fuck you. But when we're like this" —I rest my hands on her knees, moving them slowly upwards— "I want you to call me Daddy."

Her eyes go wide, and she freezes. I'm braced for rejection, but instead, I see the flush

spread across her cheeks. Her expression isn't one of concern but of surprise and...intrigue? "Yeah? Why?"

"Because I'm going to take care of you, Laurie. Fuck, I've held back, but I take care of what is mine. And if we're crossing this line, you're going to be mine."

She swallows hard, her gaze dropping to where my hands still rest against her knees. Slowly, she spreads them, giving me access to what I crave. "I think I can do that...Daddy."

I groan, my cock so hard it aches. I want to fuck her so bad, but this first time will have to be different. So instead of taking off my pants, I press a kiss to her knee, dragging my lips higher until I can nuzzle at the crease of her thigh. I take a second to look at her beautiful pussy, her swollen clit peeking out and begging to be kissed.

I slip my tongue between her lips, dragging it slowly up and over her clit. I love the sounds she makes, love how sensitive she is. I wonder if I'll ever get tired of the way she smells, the way she tastes, the way she feels.

She's already wet and hot, her hips bucking toward my mouth as I start to suckle the swollen nub. "God, Daddy. More, please."

I don't make her beg. I'm too desperate for her to draw things out. I want her to know what it means to be mine. Want to make her come so hard she'll never want another man but me.

I slip two fingers into her pussy, curling them upward until I find that spot that makes her cry out. Her legs shake, her grip on my hair painful as she tries to get closer. "Oh God, oh God. Please don't stop, please?—"

I pull back for a moment, looking up at her. "Not stopping, baby. Just come for

Daddy."

She nods, one hand in my hair and the other braced behind her. I stroke her from the inside with my fingers, alternating between licking and sucking at her clit and savoring the taste of her on my tongue. I can feel her thighs quivering, and I move my hand upwards to push her shirt up, exposing her perfect tits so I can pinch her rosy nipples.

That's all it takes. She comes apart with a wail, her hips bucking against my mouth, riding my tongue until she's done. When she finally slumps backwards, spent, I pull back, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Laurie is flushed and panting, her eyes closed. There's never been a more beautiful sight.

I watch her for a moment, then push myself up onto my feet. I can't help but smile down at her as she recovers, enjoying the look of bliss on her face. I wish I could stay and hold her, but I need to give her some space.

And I'd be lying if I said I don't need a moment, too. It'd be all too easy to crawl into the bed with her and fuck her until she's screaming in pleasure, but one step at a time. My cock is hard as steel, but I'm a grown fucking man. I can wait.

"Laurie," I start, before I lose my grip on my self-control. "I'm going for a run, okay? I'll see you when I get back."

She pushes herself up, still shaky. "You won't stay?"

"We both need some time, I think." I drag my hand through my hair. "This isn't simple."

"I guess you're right," she says, looking away.

"It doesn't change anything. We'll talk when I get back." I grab my discarded shirt off the floor and tug it on as I head for the door. "Have a good afternoon, baby. I'll see you soon."

"Yeah," Laurie murmurs, still not meeting my gaze. "You too."

I step into the hall, shutting the door behind me. My mind is reeling as I try to make sense of what just happened.

Laurie is a woman I've obsessed over for months, but now, she's also my stepsister. And I just ate her pussy.

The thing is, there is a hell of a lot more I want to do to her. I just have to make sure she's on the same page with me about how messy this can possibly get.

I should have been better, should have resisted more, but now that I've had a taste of Laurie Cartwright, I've fallen right back into full-blown addiction.

5

LAURIE

As soon as Adam closes the bedroom door, I bolt up, grabbing my panties and fleeing to the bathroom. I slam the bathroom door behind me and lean against it, pressing my hands to my cheeks in a vain attempt to cool down.

What is wrong with me?

I glance at my reflection in the mirror, stomach sinking when I see how sexed up I look. My hair's a little mussed, my cheeks are flushed, and my eyes are bright with...something. Frustration? Embarrassment? Lust? Probably all three.

The muscles in my lower stomach are still jumping from the hard-as-hell orgasm Adam just gave me. But it's not just the orgasm making me spiral, or the way he handled me. It's the look in his eyes. The heat and hunger there wasn't something I imagined. And when he said, "I take care of what is mine."

Fuck.

That's what made me come. Not just the physical things he did, but the fact that I wanted him to take care of me in every possible way. Even calling him Daddy was hot as hell. He seemed so serious, so totally focused on my pleasure and nothing else.

And then he left. Telling me we both needed time to think. He's not wrong. Things are all tangled up with our situation. My mom, his dad. Ugh. It's all so weird when I

think too hard about it.

I jump when my phone buzzes on the bathroom counter, and I lunge for it, desperate for a distraction. It's a call from Elise, my old friend. I answer immediately, hoping her dramatics will drown out my own inner chaos.

"Laurie!" Elise's voice is bright and bubbly as always. "I'm throwing a party tonight at the Sullivan house. You have to come."

The Sullivan house is her parents' estate, but from the gossip I picked up from my mother, her parents have been spending most of their time in Hawaii these days. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion! It's summer, and it's Friday. That's reason enough to celebrate."

I bite my lip, hesitating. Adam said we'd talk when he got back. But I can't deny that I'm hurt. He ran off and left me after something so intense. Even if his reason made sense, it still sucks.

I'm taking too long to answer, so Elise continues, "Please tell me you're not still hiding out in that giant house like some kind of recluse. You need to get out, have some fun. Forget whatever—or whoever—is bugging you."

"Fine. What's the dress code?"

"Something fabulous, of course. You've got two hours. Be there or be square!"

I hang up and toss my phone onto the counter, staring at myself in the mirror again. Elise is right. I need to get out of this house, away from Adam, away from my stupid, swirling thoughts.

But as I head back into my room to find something to wear, I can't stop wishing I'd been just a little braver back on the bed. Maybe if I pulled him off the floor so he covered me with his hot, hard body...

I shake my head again. "Nope, nope, nope, nope. Not going there."

Still, as I pull out a black dress that hugs every curve just right, I can't help but wonder if Adam will notice when I slip out tonight or if he'll even care.

An hour later, I zip up the black dress, the smooth fabric leaving little to the imagination. I turn side to side in the mirror, fluffing my bright blond hair over one shoulder. My dark blue eyes stand out, framed by just enough eyeliner to make them pop, and my lips, painted a deep red, curve in a satisfied smile.

Objectively, I look good. But no matter what outfit, hair, or makeup I have on, I feel hollow, almost. Like all this is for show, a shiny shell to distract from what's actually going on inside.

Which is a whole hell of a lot of feeling for Adam Lawson, the only man I've ever wanted.

And my stepbrother. Dammit.

Elise and Adam are both right. I really need to get out of this damned house and get some space.

The click of my heels echoes through the empty house as I descend the stairs and head towards the marble foyer. I have no idea if Adam is even home, and as much as I want to go looking, I've sworn to myself that I won't. Tonight is about getting him out of my mind, at least for a time. I can't do that in the same bedroom where he ate me out, or sitting in the living room with him watching soccer, just a few feet away.

I need to do some living to clear my head, and I almost make it to the front door when I hear his voice, low and oh-so-close behind me. "Where do you think you're going?"

He sounds curious, but there's a distinct unhappiness beneath it. I whirl around, startled, and find Adam standing at the base of the stairs, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes sweep over me, and I swear they widen for a split second before narrowing into something sharp and possessive.

Oh, it would be so easy to saunter up to him and loop my arms around his neck. Instead, I tell him the truth, even as heat flares in my cheeks. "Out."

"Like that?" he asks, gesturing vaguely to my dress.

I don't like the accusation in his tone. If he wanted to be possessive, he shouldn't have made me come and then taken off. "Exactly like this. Why?"

He strides closer, and my pulse kicks up. His eyes are burning now, like he's barely holding himself together. "Laurie," he says, his voice low, "you can't just walk out dressed like that without telling me where you're going."

"And why not?" I challenge, planting a hand on my hip. "Last I checked, you're not my keeper."

"I'm supposed to be keeping you safe."

I cross my arms, feigning boredom. "Well, I hate to break it to you, Adam, but I don't need a babysitter."

For a moment, he just stares at me, the air between us like a live wire. Then he steps even closer, his height and presence towering over me. "Where are you going?" he asks again, his voice quieter this time but no less firm.

This new side of him is throwing me off in all the worst ways. It should be purely annoying, but I find that I want him to be possessive. I want him to take care of me, but I can't let him know that. At least not until he admits that he wants this to be more than just sex.

I roll my eyes, trying to mask the way my heart is racing. “Fine,” I say. “I’ll tell you if it gets you off my back. I’m going to Elise’s party at the Sullivan house. Satisfied?”

Adam’s jaw clenches, and I can see the muscle there ticking like he’s grinding his teeth. But finally, he steps aside, leaving just enough room for me to squeeze by.

“Have fun,” he says, his tone flat.

I move toward the door, but as I pass him, my shoulder brushes his chest, and the heat of him radiates through the thin fabric of my dress. Part of me hopes he'll grab me, insist that I stay close, maybe even kiss me hard, but he doesn't.

I don't look back as I step outside, but I feel his gaze on me the entire way to my car. And as much as I hate to admit it, I really, really like it.

* * *

Elise's estate is all sweeping lawns and glowing lanterns, the sound of the party in the backyard filtering to the front. I park and take a moment to collect myself, smoothing my dress and fluffing my hair. The hollow feeling from earlier is still there, but I force a smile onto my lips. This is what I need—people, music, distraction. Anything to push Adam and his ridiculous, sort of hot possessiveness out of my mind.

I head around the side of the house, the lights and sounds growing louder as I go. There are people everywhere, most with wine glasses and snifters in hand as they chat or dance. A few of them turn and wave, and I wave back, but I don't stop to talk

to anyone. At least not yet.

I scan the crowd, looking for Elise, and spot her near the bar, surrounded by a group of people I don't recognize. Elise is radiant as always, her red hair swept up in a chic bun, her champagne glass sparkling in the light.

“Laurie!” she squeals, waving me over. “You look amazing!”

“So do you,” I reply, leaning in for a quick hug.

“Come on, let me introduce you to some people. They're dying to meet you.”

I let her lead me to her circle, and she starts rattling off names I'll never remember. There's Olivia, who's recently returned from Paris, and James, whose family owns a large amount of the waterfront property in Charleston. Then there's Danny.

Danny is tall, tan, and has the kind of easy smile that's probably charmed half the women here. He's wearing a white linen shirt unbuttoned just enough to show off his sculpted chest, and his dark blond hair curls artfully around his temples.

“Laurie, this is Danny,” Elise says, her voice conspiratorial in the way she always uses when she's matchmaking.

“Pleasure to meet you, Laurie,” Danny says, his voice smooth, but there's a trace of oiliness to it. Like he's more slick than charming. He takes my hand, holding it just a second longer than necessary, his eyes lingering on mine.

Okay, I think, this is where a normal single 25-year-old would flirt. Except ... I don't want to. In fact, the idea makes me feel disgusted.

I smile, but it feels mechanical. Every time I try to muster up the energy to toss my

hair or laugh at something he says, my mind drifts elsewhere. To a certain brooding man back at the house. To the way Adam's jaw tightened when he saw me tonight. The way I yearned for him to grab me, to put his mouth on mine and give me a reason to stay home.

“So, Laurie,” Danny says, stepping closer, his smile widening. “Elise tells me you're back in town for a while. How long are you staying?”

“A year,” I say automatically, taking a sip of my champagne to avoid saying more.

His smile doesn't waver. “Good. That's plenty of time for me to convince you to stay longer.”

I blink at him, caught off guard by his confidence. Normally, I'd laugh, maybe play along. But all I manage is a polite smile.

“Excuse me,” I murmur, stepping back. “I need to grab another drink.”

As I walk away, I feel Danny's eyes on me, but I don't look back. I make my way to the bar, trying to shake the feeling that's settled over me like a fog.

What's wrong with me? Isn't this what I wanted, a distraction?

I don't get a refill, but instead get a glass of water and lean against a high-top table. Olivia makes her way over without Elise, but she frowns when she spots me. Apparently, I'm wearing my emotions on my face more than I intend.

“You okay, Laurie?”

“Yeah,” I say, forcing a smile. “Just a little tired.”

I'm about to excuse myself entirely when I feel someone at my side. I don't need to look to know who it is. Danny's cologne gives him away—too heavy and too sharp. It makes me want to sneeze.

“There you are,” Danny says, flashing his perfect smile as he steps closer. “I was wondering where you'd disappeared to.”

“Just catching up with some friends,” I say lightly, hoping he'll get the hint.

But Danny doesn't take hints, apparently. He shifts closer, invading my personal space. “Well, I was hoping we could continue our conversation from earlier. You seem like someone who knows how to have a good time, and I'd hate to waste the chance to get to know you better.”

I glance at Olivia, hoping she'll intervene, but she just raises her brows and steps back, leaving me to fend for myself. Dammit, where is Elise?

“Actually, I was just about to?—”

“Laurie,” a deep voice interrupts, cutting through Danny's smooth chatter like a blade.

My heart stops and then leaps in excitement. I turn, and there he is.

Adam.

He's standing just behind Danny, towering over him, his eyes locked on mine beneath his heavy brows. His presence sucks all the air out of space around us, quiets all the other noise that was overwhelming just minutes ago.

Adam is gorgeous, of course, wearing a fitted button-down and jeans, looking

entirely out of place at the stuffy party but commanding attention all the same.

“Who’s this?” Danny sneers, looking over his shoulder.

“I’m Adam,” he says simply, barely giving Danny an ounce of attention. “Laurie, we need to talk.”

"Uh, man, I'm talking to her right now."

Adam finally looks fully at Danny, as if he hadn't even really noticed him until just now. Annoyance flickers over his face. "This doesn't involve you. Walk away."

Woah. This is a totally new Adam. Just as magnetic, just as handsome, but with an edge that has heat rushing over me.

Danny looks like he’s about to argue, but something in Adam’s expression makes him think twice. He mutters something under his breath and walks off, shooting me one last look before disappearing into the crowd.

“Seriously, Adam?” I hiss, my face flushing as I realize we’ve drawn the attention of a few nearby partygoers. “What are you even doing here?”

Now that Danny is gone, his voice isn't as harsh. "Can we talk? In private?"

I can feel my cheeks burning, and I know I don’t have much choice if I want to avoid becoming the night’s main gossip. “Fine,” I snap, grabbing his arm and dragging him toward the house.

We pass through the arched doorway into a quieter part of the building, where the noise of the party fades into a dull hum. I stop near a closed door, crossing my arms and glaring at him.

“Okay, Adam. You’ve got me alone. What the hell is this about?”

Adam is silent, but I swear I can hear his desire, feel it on my skin. I cross my arms tighter over my chest, trying to ignore the way my pulse quickens under his gaze.

“Well? You dragged me away from the party. What do you want, Adam?”

His lips part, but no words come out. He looks frustrated, like he’s caught in some kind of internal battle. His hand raises slightly, then drops back to his side. “Laurie, I?—”

But he doesn’t finish. Instead, he takes a step closer, so close I can feel the warmth radiating off him. His expression shifts, softening but growing more determined at the same time. I open my mouth to ask what he’s doing, but before I can, he mutters, “To hell with it,” and cups my face in his hands.

Then he kisses me.

The shock of it sends a jolt through me, but I don’t pull away. His lips are firm and sure, and they taste faintly of mint. My body reacts before my mind catches up, melting into him as his hands slide into my hair. I grab onto his shoulders, anchoring myself as the kiss deepens, his touch igniting something in me, the same fire he started just hours earlier.

It's more than just lust. I know it is. But once more, Adam's kiss makes it nearly impossible to think.

This is what I needed. Not a party, not a distraction. This. Adam. His lips on mine. Just him. Just us.

Someone laughs loudly, too close for comfort, and I jump away from Adam as reality crashes back in. I'm breathless, my hands still gripping his biceps. "Adam, what

happened to needing time to think?"

"Turns out I didn't need as much time as I thought."

"Then why didn't you stop me from leaving in the first place?"

Adam curses under his breath. "I'm trying to play this cool, okay? But I'm tired of pretending that I don't want to take you home right now and spend the rest of the night kissing every inch of your body. Not just tonight, either, Laurie."

My heart squeezes in my chest, "What about my mom? Your dad?"

"They're adults. They'll have to understand."

"What if they don't?"

"Then we'll deal with it."

It's all so intense that I can feel a headache coming on. I can read between the lines. He's talking about a lot more than just sleeping together, but we're also painfully aware of the bomb it will set off in our family. Suddenly, it feels like I can't breathe.

"I...Adam, I need a second. I need a second to breathe."

I don't wait for him to respond. I turn and walk quickly back down the hallway, chest tight. The air outside is cool against my flushed skin as I step out onto the front porch, pulling my car keys from my bag with shaky hands. I don't even know where I want to go, just away from here.

I'm halfway to my car when I hear someone call my name.

“Laurie!”

I turn and groan inwardly when I see Danny leaning against the railing, a confident smirk plastered across his face.

I don't have the patience for this. "Goodbye, Danny," I say flatly, sidestepping him.

Of course, he steps in front of me to block my path. "Aw, come on. Don't be like that. We were having a good time, weren't we?"

"No," I snap, annoyance boiling over.

“Why so cold all of a sudden?” he asks, his tone shifting to something harder, less playful. “You’re too gorgeous to be this uptight, you know?”

Before I can tell him to get lost, there’s a shadow behind him, and suddenly Adam is there, his expression thunderous. Oh shit.

“She said to leave her alone,” Adam growls, his voice low and dangerous. "Get the fuck out of here. This is the only chance I'm going to give you."

Danny makes the stupid mistake of sizing Adam up. "What's the deal, man? You her bodyguard or something?"

"Something like that." Adam takes a step forward. "Get the fuck out of here. Again."

Danny laughs, but it's shaky, the bravado all but gone. "Relax, big guy. We were just talking. Plenty of pretty girls in there. Let me have this one."

Adam doesn't give him a chance to say more. With one swift motion, his fist connects with Danny's jaw, sending him stumbling backward. I gasp, but Adam

doesn't even flinch, his eyes fixed on Danny. Danny swears, clutching his face, but makes an attempt to strike back.

Adam dodges easily, throwing another punch and landing it square in his gut. Danny groans and stumbles back, crashing into the bushes next to the house.

"I told you to leave her the hell alone," Adam says coolly, watching the other man stagger to his feet and flee. "Don't let me catch you around her again."

Adam turns away without waiting for a response, stepping toward me, his eyes full of concern. "You okay?" he asks, shaking out his punching hand.

I nod, my emotions all over the place. I should be mad, but I'm secretly thrilled. He stood up for me without a second thought. My pussy throbs, but I try to keep my wits about me. "I didn't need you to do that."

"I know," he admits, "But I couldn't just stand there and do nothing. Not when he was talking about my girl like that."

Another thrill rushes straight between my legs, and I clench them, just to ease the ache. I glance around, realizing we've made a spectacle of ourselves. "We should probably go. I think we've made enough of a scene for one night."

Adam nods and releases me. I feel the loss of his touch immediately. He glances toward my car. "You shouldn't be driving tonight."

"I'm not drunk," I protest.

"I know. But your hands are shaking. Let me drive. I'll bring you back for your car tomorrow."

"Fine," I sigh, handing him the keys, hating that he's right. The keys jingle erratically in my unsteady hands.

I climb into the passenger seat of his SUV and click my seat belt into place. Adam gets in beside me and starts the engine, the low rumble vibrating through me. He puts the car into gear and pulls away from the curb.

The drive back to the house is quiet, but it isn't an awkward silence. It's the kind of comfortable silence that comes from knowing someone intimately, from having shared something profound. The silence of two people who know that once they're back home, all bets are off.

The night isn't over. Far from it.

* * *

When we pull back in, the intense energy of earlier has somewhat faded. I keep looking at Adam's red knuckles, the knowledge that he was ready to fight for me making me fall even harder for him. I know from experience just how gentle and patient he can be as a lover, but now seeing this other side of him, wow is all I can say.

Adam gets out of the car and walks around to the passenger door, opening it for me before I have a chance. He offers me his hand, and I take it, letting him help me out of the SUV. When I stand, I tilt my head back to look up at him, and neither of us says anything for a long moment.

Then Adam takes my hand and pulls me towards the side of the house. "Come on. I have an idea."

I follow, already confused, but willing to see what he has in mind. We clear the side

of the house, and he leads me toward the pool. I begin to see the vision when he reaches for the buttons of his shirt.

He tosses it onto a chair beside the pool before moving onto his jeans, kicking off his shoes. When he's down to just his briefs, he walks to the edge of the pool, giving me a good view of his ass before sliding those off as well.

Adam looks at me over his shoulder, smirking, before he dives in. The water ripples around him as he surfaces, his eyes finding mine. "Your turn," he says, grinning.

My hands reach for my dress, but then I stop. This isn't the hot, lust-driven mess from earlier. This is something different. Something better.

Adam waits patiently, his arms resting along the side of the pool. He looks so perfect there, like some kind of modern-day Adonis.

I walk forward, my bare feet making almost no sound on the concrete. The water laps at my toes as I pause at the edge of the pool, looking down at Adam. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I'm not sure if it's from nerves or excitement. Maybe both.

Adam's gaze burns into mine as I slowly reach for the zipper of my dress. I step out of my dress, leaving it on the ground beside the pool. I feel like the most beautiful woman on the planet, watching Adam's lust-blown expression as I unhook my bra and let it slide down my arms.

"Don't stop now," Adam rumbles, "or I might die on the spot."

The smile that tugs at my lips is one of pure affection. "So demanding,"

"Yeah? Well I'm demanding to see you naked right fucking now."

I step out of my panties and kick them aside. Then I take a breath and jump into the pool. The cool water envelopes me, and when I surface, I wipe the water from my eyes and find Adam in front of me.

He can reach the bottom, but I'm on my tiptoes until Adam slides his hands over my legs and coaxes me to wrap them around him. He palms my ass, telling me, "You're a vision, Laurie."

"I'm happy you think so."

Adam chuckles and leans in for a kiss. Our lips meet, and it's like something explodes between us. It's like the dam has burst, and all the passion and desire and need we've been holding back come flooding out.

"I hated that you left earlier," I pant against his mouth, feeling his erection brushing my ass. "I wanted you to stay."

Adam sucks at a spot behind my ear that has me shivering. "You make it hard to think, Laurie."

"Then stop thinking." I let my arms slip from around his neck, floating backward in the water while still anchored with my legs around his waist. Adam is locked on to my tits, nipples hard from the water, and he reaches up to cup them. He strokes my nipples with his thumbs, making me squirm, before pulling me towards him just enough to suck one peak into his mouth.

I moan, gripping the back of his head, and he hums appreciatively. He moves from one nipple to the other, sucking and nibbling until I'm a writhing mess.

"Adam," I groan.

His hands slide down my sides, teasing along my ribs until he reaches the spot just below my navel. He looks up at me through hooded eyes. "Laurie?"

"Touch me," I beg. "Please."

He doesn't need to be told twice. His hand slides down between my thighs, stroking me slowly, finding my clit with his thumb and rubbing small circles over it. My eyes flutter shut, and my head drops back as he pleasures me, his fingers working their magic.

But there's still something missing. I feel so empty inside, my pussy aching to be filled. "Adam," I pant. "I want you inside me."

Swearing, he moves to cup my ass with both hands, pulling me back just enough to position me over his cock, but before pushing forward, he rests his forehead on mine. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Adam." I put all of my wants, all of my intentions, into my voice. "Fuck me."

He growls, "Fucking hell." He adjusts his grip on my ass and thrusts forward, filling me in one swift movement. I cry out, the pleasure so intense it almost hurts. He holds me against him for a moment, letting me adjust to the sensation, before he starts moving.

His cock feels amazing, stretching me wide, filling me completely. I cling to him as he fucks me, thrusting deep but smooth, like he's savoring every stroke.

"Daddy," I gasp. "Oh my God."

He groans, "You feel so fucking good, Laurie. So fucking good."

We move together, the water sloshing around us as we chase our pleasure. Adam takes a few steps forward, carrying me easily, until we're against the wall of the pool. "Hold on to the edge," he commands, and I obey, gripping the cold stone for support.

"Yes, Daddy," I manage before his mouth is on mine, swallowing my moans as he starts thrusting again. The angle is even better now, and soon I'm on the edge of release.

"Adam," I gasp against his lips. "I'm close."

"Come for me, baby," he murmurs. "Come for Daddy."

"Just...a little more..."

He reaches down between us, finding my clit with his thumb. "Come for me."

"Ooh, Daddy!" I cry out, my orgasm hitting me like a thunderclap. I screw my eyes shut, burying my face in his shoulder as I ride the wave of pleasure, my body shaking with the intensity.

Adam doesn't stop, though, keeping up the pace, the muscles in his stomach tensing as he gets close to exploding. He buries himself in me again and again, groaning with each stroke, until finally he stiffens and comes deep inside me.

"Laurie," he gasps, holding me close as we come down from our highs. I let go of the pool wall and wrap my arms around his neck, resting my cheek against his shoulder. The water laps gently around us, the only sound aside from our breathing.

"Wow," I finally manage, still dazed from my orgasm.

Adam chuckles, "Yeah, wow." He leans back, cupping my cheek in one hand and

staring at me in awe. " My little.....you're amazing, you know that?"

I smile, satisfied. "So are you.....Daddy!"

We stay like that for a few minutes, just holding each other, before Adam sighs. "As much as I'd love to stay here all night, we should probably get out before we catch a cold."

"Okay," I say reluctantly. "But I want to cuddle in bed, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Oh, baby girl." He laughs, sweeping me into his arms and carrying me effortlessly out of the shallow end. "We're going to do a lot more than cuddle, just you wait."

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6

ADAM

I stay true to my promise.

After a long shower where she went to her knees and took my cock between her full, kiss-reddened lips, I carried Laurie back to bed and showed her all that she'd missed over the last year.

After it was done, I'm exhausted, and we manage to sneak in a little less than three hours of sleep before the day is on us once more.

She's even more tired than I am, barely able to keep her eyes open as I slide from the bed, heading downstairs to make breakfast for her. I'm at the stove, humming to myself, when I hear someone clear their throat behind me.

I turn around and come face to face with my father.

Oh fuck.

"Dad," I sputter. "Why are you back already?"

His expression is thunderous. "Melanie got food poisoning, and we just came home to recover for a few days before heading back out." He takes a step towards me, but I haven't been afraid of my father in decades, so I stand my ground. "Imagine our surprise when I helped Melanie to bed and heard you and Laurie in her bedroom?"

"Dad..."

"I don't even know where to begin!" He slams his hand down on the countertop.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Not long," I say, which is the truth.

"That's not an answer," he snaps. "She's your damned stepsister?—"

"The hell she is!" I bite out. "Laurie and I met a year ago, okay? We'd slept together months before you and Melanie got married?—"

"You what?!" He looks ready to explode. "Are you fucking kidding me, Adam?"

"We didn't reconnect until you had the bright idea to make me stay in this house with her!" I growl.

"Why in the hell didn't you say something?"

"Because you just married her mom!"

Dad opens his mouth to say something more, but then I hear a small voice from the stairs. "Adam?"

We both turn to see Laurie standing on the landing, wearing one of my t-shirts and nothing else. She's looking back and forth between us, and has gone pale from shock.

"C-Craig...Hi. Uh, is Mom...?"

"She's upstairs." He tries to school his tone now that it's Laurie he's speaking to, but he doesn't do a very good job of it. "And before you ask, yes, she knows."

Laurie pales even more. "Shit."

"I'd say," he replies, "whatever this is, it stops now."

"No."

Dad turns back to me, teeth clenched. "No? You don't get to tell me no, Adam, not after I trust you with the company and with Laurie, and now I catch you trying to blow my new marriage to shreds. Get the hell out."

"No, fuck that. Laurie and I are adults and?—"

"Adam, please." It's another voice this time—Melanie, at the top of the stairs, a robe wrapped around her. She's blanched from illness, and her eyes are red as if she's been crying. "This is hard enough. Please get out of my house."

I expect Laurie to back me up like I did for her, but when I turn to her, she's rushing up the stairs to her sick mother's side. Melanie flinches away at first, and I can see Laurie's heart break.

The harsh reality of everything starts to filter through. Shit. What have I done to this family?

"I'm sorry, Mom," Laurie pleads, this time putting her arms around Melanie. "It was an accident..."

An accident?

"Please just leave." Melanie's voice is hoarse, and I wonder how long she's been crying. "Adam, please."

"Fucking fine. I'll come back for my things?—"

"Don't bother," my dad says. "Just go. I'll send it all to your place in a company car."

I look at Laurie, expecting some kind of emotion from her, but she doesn't meet my eyes. She's holding onto her mother, her eyes downcast, and I know there's nothing more to be said.

So I turn and head out the door. And the door slams shut behind me.

* * *

A week passes. Then two.

Before I know it, it's been an entire month since I was thrown out of the Cartwright estate. I've been back in my oceanside condo, where I've thrown myself into work to try and drown out the memories of Laurie and the precious little time we had together.

It didn't take me long to come to the hilariously sad conclusion that I was in love with her. I'd fallen for her that very first night, and all the rest of the time had just been me coming to terms with it.

Now I can admit it to myself, and she's gone.

Dad let me know that they were postponing their honeymoon until Melanie was fully better, but I know that it probably has a lot to do with the scandal that has now rocked their brand-new marriage. All because of me.

Me and Laurie, but I have trouble blaming her. Even though she was trying to get a reaction out of me for days, we both knew it was inevitable that we'd come back

together. And I'm not ashamed to admit it.

He also let me know that they were paying for a year's rent in New York for Laurie, so she could give her fashion career another shot. I could read between the lines, though. They just wanted her far away from me.

I still love her, even though she hasn't tried to reach out to me in the last month.

It's a Sunday afternoon when I finally decide to leave the office. The only reason I even make it out of the building is because my assistant practically kicks me out and then threatens to tell my father if I don't take a break.

He knows exactly what buttons to push, the little shit.

Still, the fresh air is nice, and the day is warm enough that I'm able to enjoy the walk back to my condo. Maybe I'll get takeout or order delivery tonight. My fridge has been empty for a few weeks now.

But as soon as I'm close enough, I can see someone sitting on my steps. It's a woman, and she's wearing a big floppy hat, her legs crossed as she looks at something on her phone.

"Can I help you?" I ask, and she jumps, nearly dropping her phone.

"Shit, Adam!" She pulls her hat off, letting her white-blond hair tumble around her shoulders. "You scared the crap out of me."

"Laurie?" I blink several times, sure that I'm dreaming. "What are you doing here?"

She stands up, taking a couple of steps towards me. "I came to talk to you." We stand there in silence for a long moment until Laurie speaks again. "Do you think we can

do this inside? Before one of the neighbors calls the cops? I've been waiting out here for over an hour."

This shakes me out of my shock. I laugh and walk up the stairs, unlocking the door and holding it open for her. She walks past me, and I catch a whiff of her shampoo, sending memories flooding back. But I force myself to shut the door and lead her into the living room.

"This place is great," she says, looking around. "This is where we should have been spending our time. Maybe?—"

"Maybe we wouldn't have gotten caught fucking by our parents?" I cross my arms, leaning back against the door. Laurie's mouth falls open at my words. "Listen, Laurie, what in the hell are you doing here? I thought you moved to New York a week ago."

I see her ball her fists, and when she looks up at me, there's a haze of tears in her eyes. "Fuck New York."

"Excuse me?"

"New York was a mistake." She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "It's too expensive, and my apartment is so small that I can barely breathe, and it's just so fast-paced, and I've been miserable, Adam. And you haven't even tried to call me since you left, so maybe you're fine without me. I mean, I guess I never thought..."

She trails off, wiping at her eyes again. I take a step towards her, but she holds up a hand.

"I'm sorry," she says, sniffing. "This wasn't how I wanted this to go." She takes a deep breath, then lets it out slowly.

"It's okay," I say, because I'm still reeling from seeing her here in my home. "I'm just confused about why you're here."

Laurie squares her shoulders. "I came to tell you that I love you."

The entire world skids to a halt. "What?"

"I'm in love with you, Adam, and I think you might love me, too. And I just couldn't keep going with my life like this. With us apart. Because it hurts so much, and it's been hurting ever since you left."

She's in my arms in an instant, and I turn her around, her back against the door as I kiss her, pouring all of the emotions of the past month into it. Laurie wraps her legs around me like it's the most natural thing in the world, her hands in my hair, her body pressed to mine as our tongues tangle desperately.

When we finally break apart, she's panting and looking up at me with a mixture of lust and adoration that makes my heart ache. "Adam...?"

"I love you," I tell her. "I love you so much, Laurie, and I'm sorry it took me so long to tell you."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. We wasted so much time."

The thought is wild and out of control, but every time I've second-guessed myself or waited too long with Laurie, I've regretted it.

I guess we're destined to move at the speed of light, and that's fine with me.

"Marry me," I tell her between kisses. "Marry me, Laurie, and to hell with what anyone else thinks."

She stares at me, her mouth hanging open. "What? Really?"

"Really," I say. "I love you. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. So marry me."

"Yes!" She kisses me again, harder than before, and I can feel her smiling against my lips. "Yes, yes, yes, I'll marry you!"

Feeling high with emotion, I carry her to my bedroom and lay her on the mattress. We shed our clothes as fast as humanly possible, desperate to feel skin on skin. Laurie wraps herself around me as soon as I climb on top of her, kissing me over and over again as if she can't bear to be apart from me.

I feel the same way.

I slip two fingers between her thighs, stroking her until she's wet and panting beneath me. Then I flip her onto her stomach, my hands massaging the perfect globes of her ass while I pepper kisses along her spine.

"How adventurous are you feeling?" I ask, nipping at the side of her neck and making her shiver.

"Mmm...depends on what kind of adventure you had in mind."

Instead of telling her, I let my fingers slip between her asscheeks to caress the tight knot of muscle there, feeling her jump in surprise.

"Oh! That! Well...ah..." Laurie is tense at first, but as I continue my gentle strokes, she warms up to the sensation. "You can...keep going."

"I won't hurt you," I promise her, "but you have to relax for me, okay?"

She nods, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "Okay."

"Good girl." I find the bottle of lube on my nightstand and use it to coat my index finger. I'm going to take my time with this, ease her into the feeling. Once my finger is coated, I press against the tight ring of muscle. Laurie tenses up at first, but then she takes another deep breath and forces herself to relax. Slowly, so slowly, my finger sinks into her.

"Oh wow," she breathes. "That feels good."

"It's about to get better." I withdraw my finger just enough to add another generous helping of lube before I slowly ease it in alongside the first one. Laurie whimpers, her hands fisted in the sheets. "You're doing so good, baby."

"Yeah?" Her voice is high and breathless.

"Yeah." I move my fingers, slowly stretching her open, preparing her for something much larger. "So good."

After a few minutes, Laurie is rocking back against my fingers, her moans muffled by the pillow. I'm about to ask her if she's ready when she turns her head to look at me. "Please, Daddy."

I groan. "Fuck." I pull my fingers out slowly and apply more lube. "Anything for you, baby,"

I coax her onto her hands and knees, and it's slow going at first, the head of my cock barely penetrating her. But slowly, Laurie relaxes, pushing back against me restlessly until I give her more. Finally, I sink into her, bottoming out and groaning at the tight heat that envelops me.

"Holy shit," Laurie pants. "That's...holy shit."

I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her upright so that she's kneeling, her back pressed to my chest. My fingers find her clit, rubbing circles over it while I fuck her slowly, slowly. "How does it feel?" I whisper, licking the shell of her ear.

"Oh God," she moans. "So full, so good. Don't stop!"

I increase the pace of my thrusts, fucking her harder while I toy with her clit. "Come for me, baby," I whisper. "I want to feel you come around my cock."

"Yes, Daddy, " she gasps, her entire body shaking. I turn her face to kiss her, swallowing her moans and fucking her until she's shattering in my hands. Laurie comes hard, her back channel bearing down hard on my cock.

It's almost too much. "Laurie, fuck!"

"Come in me, Daddy. Fill me up."

That's all it takes, and I'm coming hard, holding her close to me as we both ride out our orgasms. After a moment, I lay her down on the mattress and spoon her, pressing soft kisses to her shoulders while we catch our breath.

"That," Laurie finally manages to say, a smile in her voice, "was a hell of a proposal."

"I'll do it right," I promise. "With the ring, down on one knee, all of it. I just couldn't go another second without knowing you're mine."

"I believe you. Plus, it's not like we've done anything the normal way." She snuggles back into me, and I'm already thinking about the next way I can have her. "I love you, Adam."

"I love you, too, future wife." I turn her head just enough to kiss her sweet mouth.

"Rest up. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

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EPILOGUE

LAURIE

One Year Later

S ometimes, it's almost impossible for me to believe it's been a year since everything changed. I glance at the warm, wrapped little bundle in my arms, its tiny, barely visible face filling me with an unexplainable love.

Our daughter, Emily, is only a month old, and she's stolen both of our hearts. But now, sitting in the driveway of the Cartwright house, I'm wondering if she can not only steal the hearts of her grandparents but heal the rift between them and us as well.

I shift in the seat, glancing at the house. The same house where Adam and I fell in love. The same house that, a year ago, I never imagined I'd walk into with a baby.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves buzzing in my stomach. "Adam," I murmur, my voice quiet and full of doubt. "What if they don't accept us? What if ... what if they can't get past everything?"

He takes my hand, his touch calming me in ways only he can. "Then we'll give them more time. I sure as hell won't beg, Laurie, but we have time."

I swallow, tears pricking at my eyes as I nod. He's right. They didn't come to our wedding, and we didn't bother telling them about the birth, but somehow my mom found out she was a grandma and extended an olive branch in the form of this dinner

tonight. "It's just...I don't know. This feels big."

"It is. But we've got Emily, and they'll be too busy falling in love to worry about anything else."

I laugh softly, glancing down at Emily, who's fast asleep, a little sigh escaping her lips. She's already so loved, so perfect. If they can't see that, I don't know what to do.

"Let's do this," I say, my voice finally steady.

We walk toward the front door, side by side. My pulse goes fluttery again, but Adam's hand on my lower back is a quiet reassurance that I can handle whatever comes.

We reach the door, and I'm surprised when it swings open before we even have the chance to knock. My mother stands there, her face lighting up with pure joy as her eyes land on the tiny bundle in my arms. Her expression softens, tears welling up almost instantly.

"Laurie!" she exclaims, her voice choked with emotion. "Oh my God, look at you, and look at this precious little angel!"

She pulls me into a tight embrace, kissing my cheek and then immediately turning her attention to the baby. "This is my granddaughter? My first grandchild?"

I can't help but smile as she leans down to gently stroke Emily's face. I'm overwhelmed by how much I've missed her.

My mother continues to fawn over Emily, and I see Craig standing in the hallway behind Mom, his arms folded but a smile tugging at his lips.

He steps forward, offering a hesitant but genuine smile. "Laurie, Adam," he says, his voice warm, though there's still a hint of uncertainty. "It's good to see you both. All three of you now! We, ah, have a lot to catch up on. Come in. Please." Then his voice goes tight like he's choking up. "We've missed you."

As we all gather in the living room, Emily cooing in my arms, I glance over at Adam. He smiles at me, his eyes full of tenderness, and I know, deep in my heart, that everything will be okay.

We've made it. Together.

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ADAM

Ten Years Later

I've learned to stay out of my wife's way when she's working, and now is no different. Except tonight, there is a new sort of buzz radiating off Laurie. She's about to take the next step in her career, and she's practically vibrating with nerves.

A major fashion show and her pieces are front and center.

Our two daughters, ten-year-old Emily and five-year-old Ava, are with our parents. They're both fiery and determined like their mother, and while it's odd to experience something so big without them, this is their mother's moment.

I'm so fucking proud of my wife. Her designs have come so far, her reputation even further. The woman I fell in love with all those years ago has become a force of nature.

She's adjusting a piece of one of her dresses, her brow furrowed in concentration, and she looks absolutely radiant. But when she turns to me, ready for the final check before heading out to the runway, my smile falters slightly.

Laurie's not wearing the dress she designed for herself. She's in something modest, simple, black, understated. Something about it feels off, like it's not the woman who's about to take over the runway, not the woman who's spent years building her brand.

“Hey,” I say, stepping toward her. “Why aren’t you wearing the dress you designed for yourself? The one you were so excited about?”

She hesitates, looking down at her outfit, a quiet sigh escaping her lips. “I just don’t feel like I look the same as I did ten years ago, Adam. After two kids, the late nights working, the stress. This body is not the same. I’m not the same.”

I feel a knot twist in my stomach. “Laurie, are you serious?” I step forward, lifting her chin gently, forcing her to look at me. “You’re more beautiful than you’ve ever been. You always have been. You were stunning back then, and you’re stunning now.”

She looks into my eyes, searching for something, maybe the reassurance she needs.

“You’ve given me two beautiful daughters, Laurie. You’ve built a life we both love. You’re the strongest, most amazing woman I know, and you’re mine.”

Her eyes soften, a tear glistening at the corner of her eye, but she quickly blinks it away, a small smile starting to pull at the corner of her mouth. “You always know how to make me feel like I can do anything.”

Laurie takes a deep breath, the tension in her shoulders easing just slightly as she looks back at the outfit she chose, still resting on the dress form. A moment passes, and then she nods. “You’re right. I’m not letting anything hold me back.”

When she comes back out of the dressing room, I barely recognize her at first. The dress she’s wearing is exactly what I knew she could pull off—bold, elegant, and full of the kind of energy she’s always exuded. It hugs her body just right, and her confidence is soaring.

My Laurie. Fuck, how did I get so lucky?

“How do I look?”

“You look perfect.” I can’t stop myself from grabbing her, growling in her ear, “These curves drive me fucking crazy, you know that?”

She giggles, and it’s exactly the same as when we first met. She smirks, giving me a playful wink as she heads toward the door. “Ready to go show the world?”

"Always."

It's been a wild ride, and I wouldn't change a second of it.

The End

Thanks for reading!