







# Incandescent (Whispering Falls #1)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Carter spent the first thirty-one years of his life wondering if love truly was a myth.

But then he looked at his parents, and he knew that it wasn't.

Love just hadn't found its way to him yet.

Therefore, he would be patient.

He just didn't know that being patient really meant never freaking happening.

Because one night, in his parents' home, he fell head over heels for her.

Someone much younger than him.

Someone who had her whole life ahead of her.

And he wouldn't crush her wings.

Harlee made a promise to her best friend in kindergarten.

She wouldn't fall for one of her brothers.

However, she hadn't known at the time what one of the brothers was going to mean to her.

He was going to be everything.

And she was going to pull his head out of his ass and make him see reason.

Or so she thought.

But then tragedy strikes

Will Carter fight his way back to her?

Will she keep being his light in the darkness?

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Six Years Ago

Pulling up to the school, I sat back in my seat and stretched my back. I loved what I did, but my body paid the price for it. Damn. That was a long rotation.

The bell had just rung, and I sat there in the car rider line as dozens among dozens of kids exited the door.

I had texted my little sister, Talia, that I was picking her up.

Every time I came home from a rotation, I took her out to get an ice cream. It didn't matter that she was turning eighteen soon and I had just turned thirty-one.

Out of my other four siblings, she was the one I was closest to. The age gap between us didn't matter. Even though our parents were done after they had me, Ethan, Garrick, and Alec. Talia was a surprise baby who had shown up ten years later.

I didn't know which one got the operation done, but we all knew that they had made sure that no more kids could be possible.

I smiled at thinking about how that conversation more than likely played out.

And I had an inkling of how it did.

Mom had said how things were going to go, and that was that.

I felt a smile form on my lips; at the same time, I saw Talia walk out of the school with her arm woven with someone else's arm.

I felt my eyes narrow; that better not be a boy.

No. No fucking way.

As my eyes scanned along the arm, that was too slender to be a boy's, I felt my body relax... however... my body suddenly grew tight.

Because the face atop a body, I refused to let my mind take in... it felt as though the entire world shifted into slow motion.

A breeze flew by, picking up a few of her blonde strands. I'd never been more grateful for my windows being down, as she threw her head back and laughed, than I was right then in that very moment.

Her laughter sounded like Christmas bells. Soft. Melodic.

And I wouldn't know it, not until three months later, but sitting in that cab in my truck in front of the school, my forever had been right in front of me ever since she was five years old.

Three Months Later

I had pushed my truck to the max to get here on time.

Tonight was Talia's prom.

And it just so happened to be someone else's prom as well.

Therefore, I wanted to be there to give whatever punk was taking her a good talking to.

Same as my brothers.

Our mother had thought we were bat shit crazy when we told her of our plan, but we all heard her murmur, “I raised them right.”

I had just walked into my parents’ house, fist bumped with my brothers, hugged my dad, and then my mom, and heard it.

Heels clicking down the hallway, and now, well, I’ve got to really take her in.

Because last week, we had helped celebrate her eighteenth birthday.

Harlee Belle wore a black dress that hugged her figure in all the right places. The neckline I had learned from my mother and sister was called a sweetheart neckline.

The fabric caught the light just right, shimmering.

Her long, blonde hair was curled in soft waves down her back, with one side pinned back.

The makeup she had on was soft and supple, enhancing her features, and thankfully, not taking away from them. Something I fucking loved.

“Fucking gorgeous,” I whispered.

Everyone was talking to Harlee, so thankfully, no one heard me.

I watched as her eyes shifted to the side, glancing at me, and like I always did, I

winked at her, just to see that soft smile form on her face.

Then, at the sound of heels once again, it took all I had to tear my eyes from Harlee and look at Talia as she came walking down the hallway.

She had chosen a soft purple dress, and the color, along with her mahogany locks, looked beautiful.

Harlee had moved by that time and was standing at my side, which was why I leaned down and whispered, “Anyone gets fresh with you, tell them I’ll kick their ass.” I told her.

She looked up at me, smiled, and winked.

I shook my head, then did something I’ve been dying to do, but not really knowing it, bent my neck, and pressed a kiss atop her hair.

Lingering there for just a moment, inhaling a scent of strawberries and vanilla.

“Okay, okay, I love all of you, but time’s a wastin’,” Talia said as she wrapped her arm through Harlee’s.

I let out a breath as I realized that I didn’t have to beat the brakes off of anyone because they were each other’s date.

And I realized as I stood there leaning on the front porch railing as I watched her climb into the back of Garrick’s fully restored matte black 1967 Dodge Charger, there would never be another woman for me.

But she would never be mine.

Because I sure as shit didn't deserve her.

Harlee

Must not fall for best friend's older brother.

Must not fall for best friend's older brother.

I repeated that statement in my head for the next six freaking long as hell years.

But no matter what I told myself, it just didn't work.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Curmudgeon Text Thread

Ethan – SOS

Me – Fuck. Me. What?

Garrick – What he said.

Talia – What they said.

Alec – First time I'm saying this. What they said.

Ethan – What the fuck do I do?

Ethan – \*Green goop all over his white sheets on his king-sized bed\*

Me – Are you fucking kidding me?

Garrick – I just threw up.

Talia – Go jump in the lake?

Alec – I just ate cereal. brB.

Ethan – Grow the fuck up!

Ethan – Melanie has the shits!!

Me – Take her to the Emergency Room.... Ain't normal.

Garrick – Give her a fucking bath. Then throw your sheets away. Buy a new mattress.

Garrick – Correction. Burn said mattress.

Talia – Oh, for heaven's sakes. Just call Mom.

Ethan – She told me if I called her for something stupid again, she was going to ream my ass.

Me – Nah. I told her to do that.

Ethan – Are you serious?

Me – Who the hell calls their Mom because they can't find a matching sock?

Ethan – Hey, I had a long fucking night.

Talia – So didn't need to know that.

Garrick silenced notifications.

Me – I'm about to do that too. Call. MOM.

Daddy-Kins that would have been the booth along the far back wall closest to the back window.

The booth I currently occupied was christened as the Griggs booth. The entire town

knew it.

And it was comical when we all showed up, and a tourist and his family were occupying it. The family was offered free slices of pie to move. You would be stupid to turn down Darla's pie. Well, in my mind, it was really hers . Even though Darla taught her how to make it.

But as for my favorite booth, again, that would be because of her .

If I thought for even a nanosecond that I was good enough for her, I'd tell the whole family that we had another booth.

But alas, self-deprecation and all that was a fucking thing.

And speaking of, as to why this was the best diner in three counties, Harlee, Talia's best friend, came by, winked, and sat down with a glass of Coke filled to the brim with little ice cubes.

I winked back, "Thanks, Harlee Belle."

I had just taken a sip of my Coke, catching a few ice cubes and loving the little crunch I got when I bit into them, when I heard it.

My head lifted, my eyes scanned, and I latched onto the fucker who just said, "Damn. Catch the legs on that one."

Blue polo, khaki shorts, tennis shoes... tourist.

My eyes moved to where the man was looking, and when I saw it was at Harlee, my jaw clenched.

Harlee no doubt heard what the man said, caught my eyes, and rolled her own.

I shook my head, then lifted my brow.

She knew what I was silently asking.

If she wanted me to get up, walk over there, and slam his face into the top of the table.

Because it sure as fuck wasn't the first time. And when it came to her, it wouldn't be last.

She grinned, then shook her head.

I was half tempted to blow a raspberry at her. Instead, I lifted my chin, but I was ready and on standby.

I sat there watching the street while still keeping an eye on that guy as Harlee Belle came back to me, and smiled, "You want your usual?"

I grinned as I looked up at her.

Her long blonde hair was pulled up into a messy knot. The same as it always was while she was working at the diner.

The very first time she worked a shift here to help her parents, who owned the place, customers were pulling long strands of blonde hair from their pies.

To say she had been embarrassed was an understatement.

Everyone still gives her shit for it, but it was hilarious.

And as I took in her shining mossy-oak-colored eyes, I saw the twinkle in them.

She was no doubt thinking the same thing.

I winked up at her and asked, “Who cooked my usual?”

She smirked, “My dad.”

I grinned, “And who cooked my second usual?”

Yes, I was asking as if she didn’t know what it was.

She chuckled, “My mom.”

I paused for a beat, and then I asked, “And who cooked my favorite?”

And just like it always did, her cheeks tinted pink.

Fuck. Me.

She giggled, trying to hide it, but it was there, all the same.

“I did,” she said softly.

I winked, “Then you know what I want.”

She spun around then and headed to place my order.

And yeah, I watched her go.

Those long-tanned legs, those thighs that had that jiggle, that rounded ass that would

overfill my big hands, but I was here for it.

To say I wasn't an ass man would make me a fucking liar.

And here I sat, four months from turning thirty-eight years old, and she had just turned twenty-four. I was too goddamned old for her.

But man, do I wish that weren't the fucking case.

I shouldn't be having these thoughts about Harlee Belle.

See what I mean... I wasn't good enough for this girl.

Even though I wasn't good enough for her, the motherfucker who just whistled in her direction in the blue polo, khaki shorts, tennis shoes, sure as fuck wasn't good enough to lick the bottom of her sneakers.

With that single thought on my mind, I braced my hands on top of the table and stood.

Then I casually walked over to where he was sitting and, without thought, I tagged the fork and slammed it into his hand, getting low, using my big body to block out anyone from seeing what I was doing.

In a low tone I reserved for pieces of shit, I said, "You're going to pull your wallet out and place enough to cover your meal, along with a nice tip.

Then you're going to get up and walk out of here with your eyes on your feet. Get in your vehicle and drive away. Never coming back here. Am I clear?"

His face was white, his teeth gritted in pain, as he asked, "And if I don't?"

I grinned, hoping he would go that route.

“Well now, see, that all depends,” I said. Letting a smirk play along my lips.

The piece of shit asked, “On?”

“Oh, a few things. See, you can make it easy on me and do exactly what I said. Or I can remove this fork, jerk you out of this booth with my hand wrapped around your throat, haul your ass outside, and then slam this fork into your tiny pencil dick. Or I can do the second but take you to my truck and drive you out to some very infested swamp land. Your call.”

“I’ll have you arrested.” He gritted out.

I grinned, “See, that’s the thing about small towns.

Everyone knows everyone around here. And about a third of our little population is related.

So, imagine your surprise when you hear that the woman you whistled at, the very same woman, just so happens to be beloved by this entire town, if not this entire county.

But she’s especially loved by her godfather, who just so happens to be,” I paused, grinned, then said, “the Chief of Police.”

“Now, what’s it going to be?” I asked.

Ready to deliver my threats without hesitation.

He’s face was still pale, but he nodded, “The first thing you suggested.”

I nodded, “Good call,” then I pulled the fork from his hand. Sat it down on the napkin it had been resting on and stood to my full height of six feet three.

I stepped back, crossed my arms over my chest, and waited.

I didn’t miss the way his eyes widened at my height, my size, the tattoos on both my arms.

I held the smirk in. Barely.

He pulled his hand to his chest, pulled his wallet out with his other hand, pulled out two twenties, laid them on the table, and then he stood, and with his eyes on the floor, he walked out.

I walked back to my booth and sat, my eyes staying on him until he got in his car, backed out, and left.

I had just taken a sip from my Coke when my plate was set down, and I looked up at Peter, Harlee’s dad, “From now on, you never pay when you come in here.”

I shook my head, “Nah.”

He nodded, “Yes. Don’t you dare think her mama and I miss the way you look at her.”

And with that, he walked away.

Was that unsolicited approval?

Too goddamn bad I would never act on my feelings for her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

I love what I do.

I love what I do.

I love what I... oh fuck it.

On days like today, I really hate what I did.

Was it too much to ask for someone to take a shower more than once a month?

I mean... really.

I almost told him to go home, shower, using soap that had disinfectant in it, then I would reschedule his appointment.

Do you know how gross it is to smell ball sweat?

I was gagging as the smell was still lingering in my nose.

It felt as though it was in my hair, on my clothes... a shower was going to be the first thing I did when I walked into my house.

Badass Chicks Text Thread

Talia – Thank god it's Friday.

Lila – Preach it. I swear the crazies came out today.

Me – I second this.

Me – I gotta shower before I do anything else.

Talia – Oh crap. You only say that when you have a client who disgusts you.

Me – Old Man Hooper.

Lila – \*gag\*

Talia – I swear that man has a fetish for not bathing or something.

Twenty minutes later, I was freshly showered and perusing my fridge, trying to figure out what I wanted for dinner.

Talia – What are y'all's plans for tomorrow?

Lila – Nothing yet. I'm in for anything.

Me – Nothing planned. Mom and Dad have help at Gusher's.

Talia – That name gets me every time I see it.

Me – Remind me to tell y'all about the Bachelor party last night.

Lila – Dang. I can't wait.

Talia – Is it Saturday already?

Me – What are your brothers doing tomorrow?

I asked. Because I wanted to do something nice for Carter.

I saw what he did to that man who had been creepy ever since he had walked in and sat down.

Talia – They are painting and staining Mom's front porch. Garrick noticed it was peeling in a few places a few days ago.

Lila – He can come and stain my porch. Shirtless.

Talia – You're about to be removed as my second bestie.

Lila – I'd never act on it. You know that. But your brother is one fine specimen.

Me – She's right. He's definitely good-looking.

Talia – Ugh. Why couldn't I have been born with sisters?

Talia – Please, go back in time and change their dicks to vaginas.

I had just taken a sip of sweet tea and promptly snorted it out of my nose.

Lila – Ummm....

Me – You know we are only teasing you.

Talia – Ugh. I know.

Lila – What Harls said.

Talia – But Harlee, seriously, it's okay if you think that about Carter.

Me – What makes you say that?

Talia – Oh, nothing.

I knew her.

She was just getting back at me for my comment about Garrick.

Yes, Garrick was good-looking, but he wasn't the one who made my motor rev and my heart race.

Too freaking bad, he had slated me in the friend's category.

A category I would forever be in.

As if it wasn't bad enough that I was his little sister's best friend.

That practically made me off limits.

And I hated it.

But alas, what he did for me a few days ago, I owed him.

And as I perused my pantry while pulling out some noodles and sauce, I knew just what to make him.

Talia – Calling it a night.

Lila – You have the brain of a squirrel.

Lila – Why’d you ask us what we were doing tomorrow?

Me – What Lila said.

Talia – Oh. Yeah. Girls’ day tomorrow?

Me – I’m in.

Lila – Definitely in.

Me – Night, girls.

Lila – Night.

Talia – Love you both.

Then my phone pinged with a message.

Lila – How much do you want to bet Dominik will be there helping out?

I snickered.

Me – Ten bucks says she talks to him first.

Lila – I’ll take that bet.

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When my alarm blared at eight the next morning, I stretched, threw the covers off, and headed to the bathroom to get ready.

The weather was going to be nice today. It was almost summer, so it wasn't too cool, and it wasn't too hot.

Perfect t-shirt and capri leggings day.

Once I was ready, and my hair braided off to the side, I headed to my kitchen, made myself a coffee, then walked to my front porch, climbed in my swing, and enjoyed my morning.

It was a ritual of sorts.

If I didn't get to sip my coffee in the mornings on my swing, the day always felt off.

Mallory and Randy Gittens walked by, waving. I waved back.

Juniper and Callie, neighborhood kids, were giggling as they walked by, which caused me to smile, recalling that Talia and I had done the same thing. Multiple times.

Once I drank every last sip, I headed back inside and made my thank-you present for Carter.

An hour later, I was pulling up in front of Frank and Misty Grigg's house.

Lila pulled in behind me, followed by Talia.

More than likely, we would take my car since I was the only one with four doors, whereas Lila drove a two-door Audi A5 and Talia drove a two-door Jeep Wrangler.

My Chevrolet Tahoe was my pride and joy. She was all white with tinted windows and a killer sound system in the back.

Which was why I didn't get the animosity between Dominik and Talia. He was super nice.

And I knew that he didn't charge me what he should have when he did the tint and the sound system.

But what took my train of thought in the other direction.... well... that would be the Grigg's siblings, mainly the boys, working with their shirts off.

Including Dominik.

I grinned and hoped I won ten dollars today.

Ethan had dark brown hair, a tanned, lithe frame, dad bod going on.

Alec had dark brown hair, a tanned, lithe frame.

Garrick had dark brown hair, a tanned, tattooed, built body.

But Carter... Carter Alexander Griggs had the dark brown hair I wanted to run my fingers through and see if it was as soft as it looked. Tanned body, tats up and down both arms, muscles packed with muscles, nothing like Garrick, but he was simply... perfect.

Shaking my head, hoping I hadn't been drooling, I tagged the Ziploc bag and climbed out of my Tahoe.

At Talia's smiling face and Lila's grin, I said, "It's girls' day!" I shouted as I pumped the air with my fist.

Which caused Talia and Lila to giggle.

Which then caused Carter, Ethan, Garrick, and Dominik to shake their heads at us.

Lila smirked at me, which caused me to do the same thing.

Walking beside her, we headed to the front porch.

Ethan looked at the bag in my hand and then grinned, “Who did something nice for you?”

Garrick sighed, “Not me. Ain’t seen her in a few days.”

Alec rubbed his hands together, “Me. Sent her a referral a few days ago.”

Dominik reached for the bag, “Me. Changed her oil a few days ago.”

Smirking, I moved the bag out of his reach. “That was nice, Dominik. But it wasn’t the nicest thing someone has done for me.”

I stepped around him, reaching Carter, I winked up at him, and offered him the bag, “For what you did to that guy.”

He rubbed the back of his neck as he accepted the bag with the other hand, “Didn’t think you saw that.”

I grinned, “Dad, Mom, and I watched the video after we closed.”

We watched the video more than a few times.

And I may or may not have sent the video to my phone and used it in the privacy of my bedroom.

Sue me.

I watched as he opened the bag, took one out, bit into it, and moaned.

I tried. I really did try.

But I couldn't help but squeeze my thighs together ever so carefully.

He winked down at me and said, "Peanut butter chocolate chip?"

I nodded, "Yeah, your favorite."

That was when Ethan asked, "Going to share the cookies?"

Carter smirked, "Nope."

"Rude," Garrick muttered.

"What Garrick said," Alec grumbled.

And then it happened... I heard Talia say, "Dang, surprised you fit through the opening of the porch. You and your big ego."

I spun around and widened my eyes at Lila.

She sighed, pulled out a ten-dollar bill, walked to where I was still standing, and handed it to me.

I snickered, but it was drowned out by Dominik's reply, "And here I was hoping the carnival called and wanted their main attraction back."

It took two point five seconds for the chuckling to start.

I tried to hold it in, right along with Lila, but one look at Talia's reddening face, it was a lost cause.

Laughter filled the front porch.

That was when Misty Griggs walked out, her hands on her hips, and said, "What's so dang funny?"

Ethan jerked his chin at Dominik and Talia.

Misty appeared to be thinking about it, then she nodded, turned, then headed back into the house.

Which caused Talia to gasp, and then, she smirked.

"If the Carnival calls, I drop your name for the biggest draw they will ever have."

Dominik shook his head, "Nah, ain't going there."

Talia grinned, "Surprised. According to Hanna Liplock," yes, that was her real last name, "you've been going there all week."

"No. Really?" Carter asked at my back.

Alec visibly shivered, "Hope you double wrapped your dick.

Garrick gagged, "Wouldn't touch that bitch with a ten-foot pole."

Then like clockwork, we heard Misty call out, "Language."

Followed by Frank chuckling.

Dominik set the paintbrush down, then stepped in front of Talia and said, “Okay, Torpedo, this one I will engage in.”

Talia opened her mouth, but Dominik shook his finger in her face, “Say what you want ‘bout me. Don’t matter. But if you ever associate my name with that whore again, I’ll flip you over my knee and spank your ass red.”

Talia smirked, “So, you’re calling her a liar?”

Dominik nodded, “Yeah. Cause ever since she thought it was funny to spread the rumor around school about you and Brett, I hated that whore. And that’s just what she is. A whore. It was her who caught the clap from Brett.”

Talia, Lila, and I gasped, “Really?” We all said at once.

Dominik nodded, then walked back to his paintbrush and got to painting.

“What are y’all up to today?” Ethan asked.

“Shopping. Pedicures. Then who knows.” Talia said.

Not seeing Melanie, Ethan’s daughter, I asked, “Where’s Melanie?” I asked.

Ethan sighed, then ran his hand through his hair. “She’s with Fred and Ginger.”

I nodded.

That whole story was sordid. Sordid in a way that one cannot believe.

It had apparently escaped my notice that Carter was still behind me when I felt something tickle the back of my neck, “Be careful. Need me, just call. Yeah?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

I twisted my neck and looked up at him, trying and almost failing to get lost in his oceanlike-colored eyes. Thankfully, my mouth spoke for me, “Yeah.”

With waves of goodbyes, Lila, Talia, and I walked off the porch and headed to my Tahoe, but not before they grabbed their bags out of the cars.

“Yo, Talia?” we heard Dominik call out.

Talia stopped, spun around, hands on hips, and asked, “What?”

“Who’s driving?” he asked.

She pointed her finger at me.

Dominik nodded, “Thank Christ. Got a full shop next week. Ain’t got time to repair any damage you do to your Jeep.”

I locked eyes with Carter, shaking my head.

He winked at me, then mimicked the phone symbol to his ear.

Nodding, I reached forward, tagged Talia’s arm, and then led her to my Tahoe.

“Don’t let him get to you, I whispered.

She huffed, “I swear the man spends hours in front of a mirror planning his methods for torturing me.”

Lila winked, “Think you, do the same thing.”

Talia gasped, “No. I don’t. I just do it so I can beat him.”

Then she narrowed her eyes at us, “What was the meaning of the money exchange?”

I opened my door as Lila explained, which caused Talia to huff again.

That was followed by, “Fine. I’m not interacting with him next time. I will be Switzerland.”

The moment the doors were shut, I cranked the engine, winked at the girls, rolled the windows down, and blasted Chevrolet by Hard Target.

The men were shaking their heads, but it was Carter who was smiling.

Oh, that smile. What it does to me.

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“Okay, go home, change, and meet at my place around eight? Uber there?” Lila asked.

Talia sighed, “Yes to all of that, but no Uber. Garrick said the next time we take an Uber anywhere, we’re going to find out how pissed off he can get.

I snickered, recalling a text that was similar to that. One that Carter had sent me a few months ago.

Carter – Take an Uber again, I’ll slash your fucking tires, then find a way to block the Uber app on your phone. Don’t test me, woman.

I nodded, then asked, “Mind if I invite Everly?”

Talia grinned, “Yes, I miss her.”

Lila nodded, “Of course.”

Grinning, I pulled my phone out and shot a text to Everly.

Me – Hey, you got any plans tonight?

Once I made it home, I changed into a pair of black ripped jeans, a flowy tank, and three-inch heels, did a little makeup, I headed out to my Tahoe.

While I had been getting ready, Everly had texted me letting me know that she didn’t have plans and agreed to meet us at Lila’s house.

While I was driving, a text had come through.

I waited until I hit a red light to read it.

Carter – Talia told the group chat where y’all are going. Seriously, you need me, don’t hesitate to call.

Me – I won’t hesitate, Carter.

Making it to Lila’s, it was just in time for Everly to park her car alongside Talia’s.

Garrick pulled up in his Suburban and rolled the window down. “Let’s ride.”

Garrick was the one to take us places. He was also the one who scared most people.

But to us, he was a big softie.

Climbing into the back seat, I leaned forward and kissed his cheek, “Thanks, G.”

He winked at me, “Any time, lil sis.”

Twenty minutes later, Garrick dropped us off and waited to pull away the moment we were inside.

It was a few hours later, and I had already told the girls about the bachelor party that had come into my family’s diner.

The men had strode in, half-drunk already, and when they yelled, “Bring on the girls,” they were met with nothing but silence.

Until the customers in the diner started laughing.

To say that it had sobered a few of them up had been an understatement.

That was until my mother had quickly placed a slice of her famous blueberry pie on a plate, tagged a fork, and then took it to the groom.

They all ended up eating pie, laughing, having a good time, and sobering up.

I knew my mother felt pride in herself when a few of them muttered, “Fuck, best damn meal I’ve ever had.

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But now, it was now, and not for the first time, I wanted to strangle my best friend.

Even more so when Talia sighed, “My gawd, girl, come on,” Talia said as I had shaken my head at the fourth guy of the night I had said no to.

I loved her like I would if I had a true-blooded sister, but in my heart of hearts, she was my sister in every way that mattered.

Ever since we met on our first day of kindergarten.

It had been kismet.

She walked up to me and said, “I got four brothers. They drive me crazy. Will you do that?”

In my six-year-old wise self, I shrugged, “I might, but I’ll do in the bestest of ways.”

That had been good enough for her.

And from that moment on, we had been inseparable.

Another round of drinks had been placed on our table, and I looked at the waitress and lifted a brow. She snickered then jerked her chin to a group of guys in a corner.

Talia, Lila, and Everly looked in their direction, then grimaced. They had been catcalling at every girl who walked by. Talk about players right off the bat.

Before I could tell her no, Talia opened her mouth to do the same thing, I knew, when a shadow fell over our table.

Looking up, it was to see Dominik standing there.

“What are you doing here?” Lila asked.

Everly just blushed.

Oh lord. My sweet receptionist.

I just smiled.

Talia apparently meant what she said, because she didn't say a word to him.

I looked at the waitress who was eying Dominik like he was a tall drink of water.

Catching her eye, I said, "We won't be accepting these. But thank you."

The waitress nodded, then mumbled, "I had someone like him, I wouldn't be accepting these either."

We all watched as the waitress carried the tray of drinks back to their table and shook her head. They all just shrugged, then one of them looked around the bar and pointed to another table.

She carried the tray to the table, and apparently, they hadn't noticed what we had because they accepted the shots.

Shaking my head, I focused back on my friends.

"Garrick is stuck at the garage; told him I'd pick y'all up," Dominik said.

Then he looked at Talia and waited.

When she didn't say anything, I caught Dominik smirking.

"Not going to talk to me, Sparkles?" Dominik asked as he leaned against our table,

his forearms bracing his weight.

Talia's middle finger came up and flipped him off.

He chuckled, "Damn, sorry, hadn't had my fill of alcohol yet to even think about something like that with you."

Talia's cheeks were getting redder and redder every second.

I knew she was about to blow, so to help my friend, I looked at Dominik and said, "So, who are you working on that Corvette for?"

I had seen it in bay five when I was there getting my oil changed.

Dominik owned DG Auto and Body alongside Garrick.

Normally, they didn't do simple services like oil changes for newer model cars. They specialized in classic rides.

If you were anybody other than a small circle of people, you took your vehicle to Sawyer's Garage in the next county over.

Sawyers was started by a gentleman named David Sawyer. It had since changed hands but not too far down the line.

His granddaughter, Briar, had taken half ownership alongside Drake Caine.

The two of them had bickered like an old married couple, and according to Briar, he had almost messed up in winning her back.

But now, fifteen years later, they were happily in love with two of the cutest kids to

ever walk this planet.

Everly leaned into my side and whispered, “Is there something going on between them?”

I leaned into her and whispered, “They’ve been like this since I’ve known Talia. She gives him shit; he returns it.”

She nodded, “He’s unavailable then.”

I shook my head, “Not as far as I know.”

She smiled a small smile, “I consider you one of my closest friends. So that extends to Talia and even Lila. She obviously likes him, and he’s trying to poke at her. Makes him off limits.”

I smiled, “You’re good people, Everly.”

She grinned then, “Just like a certain underwater welder, too.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, playfully, of course, “Nope.”

“Uh-huh,” she shrugged with a smile.

“Come on, you’re not going to talk to me?” Dominik once again poked at Talia.

Talia growled, then asked, “What in the world are you doing here, Big Foot?”

I snickered, then shook my head.

“Could ask you the same fucking thing, Sparkles.” He said.

“You did not just go there,” Talia said with a growl.

Dominick lifted a brow as he took a sip of his beer, “You went there. How’s that fair?”

“It just is,” she snapped.

“Can’t help, I’m tall. Also, can’t help you got a love of sparkles.”

She glared, then said, “Fine. You know what, call me that. I’ll wear that name with pride. Cause one of the girls I work with has a daughter with leukemia. Spent a few hours with her, and she loves anything sparkly. Made my day to see her so happy.”

And when I saw for the briefest of moments that Dominik’s face went soft, I knew she had him.

She was the only one who hadn’t realized it.

“I’m y’all’s ride. Ready?” he asked as he pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and laid it on the table.

Lila was the first to ask, “What’s that for?”

“Y’all’s drinks. My mama would kick my ass if I let a woman pay for her own drink. Mama G would have a conniption fit.”

Talia glared, “What’s the real reason? Know it isn’t just that.”

He sighed, “Garrick covered Everly’s drinks. Ethan covered Lila’s drinks. Carter covered Harlee. And I covered you.” Dominik said as he locked eyes with Talia.

She huffed and puffed, but I knew my bestie.

I caught that little smile.

As we were walking out of the bar, I also noticed something that Talia had missed.

Women were giving Dominik the winks and eye flares, and batting eyelashes.

He didn't see any of it.

Not with Talia at his other side.

After Dominik had opened the back door of his truck, Lila, Everly, and I had climbed into the back seat, with Talia climbing into the front.

He dropped us off at Lila's, but not before saying, "Lock the door."

We all talked for a few minutes that night, but we were all dragging. It had been a long day, albeit a good one. Shopping. Pedi's. Good food. Great friends.

I had just laid my head down on the makeshift pallet in Lila's living room when my phone vibrated.

Tagging it, I felt a smile form on my lips.

Talia nudged me with her elbow. "Carter?"

I nodded.

"He's different with you," she said.

I felt my breath catch. “What do you mean?”

She smiled, then yawned, “Nothing. Night, Hotcakes.”

I shook my head, “Night, Tater Tot.”

Once Talia rolled over, I clicked on the message.

Carter – Make it home, okay?

Me – No. We’re all crashing at Lila’s.

Carter – Have a good time?

Me – Yeah, except for a group of players at another table.

Carter – Need me to teach them a lesson?

Me – No. Karma will get them.

Carter – Alright. You going to sleep?

Me – Yeah, I can barely keep my eyes open.

Carter – Night.

Me – Night.

And it had been a good night.

Even better when he was the last person I talked to before I closed my eyes.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

When a text came through my phone, I didn't hesitate to grab it.

Harlee Belle – It was you, wasn't it?

Me – What are you talking about?

Harlee Belle – The breakfast that was delivered to Lila's house last night.

Harlee Belle – \*breakfast foods and coffee on a coffee table\*

Me – How'd you know?

Harlee Belle – Not even Talia knows how I take my coffee. Everly might, but her phone died last night.

Harlee Belle – \*specific creamer she uses\*

Harlee Belle – I believe I've only ever told you.

Me – Was the breakfast good?

Harlee Belle – Yep. Thank you, Carter.

Me – Welcome.

No, I wasn't going to explain why I had Harlee's name as Darling in my phone. That was for me to know and me alone.

I was sitting with my brothers and Talia at DG Auto and Body.

Our father had shared something that had occurred yesterday.

"What are we going to do?" Ethan asked.

I had no idea.

But this shit was getting out of hand.

They hadn't been in school in over twenty years, and Karen Ratcliff was still trying to throw shit in our mom's face.

She had walked up to our mom in the grocery store and started her belittling shit. But she took it too far when she asked how it felt to have her sloppy seconds all these years later.

They had kissed. Once.

And Karen didn't know, but it had been a dare by our dad's best friend, Chief Klein. He hadn't been the Chief then.

Alec asked, "Toilet paper her house?"

I shook my head, "Too juvenile. And she needs to know it's us who did it.

Talia seemed to be thinking about it. "What if we print flyers and post them up and down Main Street?"

Garrick nodded, “Could work. What would we put on them?”

Talia grinned, “I got this.”

Two hours later, we were all gathered in our parents’ living room. Along with Dominik.

Who had happened to drive by while we were putting the bright as fuck pink flyers all around town, heard what happened, and grinned.

I shared a look with my brothers, as well as Dominik. I could tell we were all thinking the same thing.

Mama Griggs was about to light our asses on fire.

This was proven true when she stepped out of the kitchen, placed her hands on her hips, and glared.

Our dad came out behind her, one hand covering his mouth, then he settled into his recliner.

We all knew he was either trying not to smile, or trying not to laugh, I bet it was the latter.

Mom held one of the flyers in her hand and asked, “Who did this?”

My siblings, along with Dominik, locked eyes, and then we started chuckling, which then turned into hysterical laughter.

“Oh god. Did you see her face?” Alec asked who was now doubled over laughing his ass off.

Talia snorted, “It was so grand.”

On the flyer, it read,

Public Health Announcement

This is from the Griggs.

Addressed to Karen Ratcliff.

The next time you attack our mom, you won’t be allowed into DG Auto and body.

The next time your sewer lines clog up, don’t call Granger’s.

The next time you need to make sure your husband gives you another STD, don’t visit Dr. Mabry.

The next time you need help with a police matter, don’t call 911.

The next time you need a massage because you threw your back out climbing on the ugly fuck you married, don’t call Fusion.

Think about all of that before you try to verbally attack our mother again.

Because she was ten times better than you in high school.

But now, she’s a hundred times better.

Ain’t our fault, our dad has more common sense than you and your husband put together.

Sincerely,

Carter. Garrick. Ethan. Alec. Talia.

Harlee. Dominik. Granger. Dr. Mabry. Chief Klein.

Mom glared at all of us and then locked her gaze on me.

Oh. Shit.

Our dad was kicked back in his recliner with his hand over his mouth, and we all knew he was trying hard not to laugh.

We never wanted to get on our mom's bad side, and our dad, truly, never wanted to.

But sometimes, you just couldn't help it.

Like right now.

And then she dropped the bomb that was sure to straighten everything back out and make it all right as rain, in her eyes, "I'm calling Harlee."

I felt my smile drop instantly off my face.

"Oh. Shit." Garrick said, shaking his head.

Talia's face went white.

Ethan groaned.

Alec just kept laughing.

There was something seriously wrong with him, and I asked before I thought about it, “Did y’all drop that one on his head or something?”

My dad couldn’t help it. Laughter bubbled up from behind his hand.

Mom glared at me, then snapped, “No. He’s perfect.”

Alec chose that moment in time to let out a fart.

A fart that had all of our eyes watering and burying our noses in our shirts.

“You were saying?” Dad asked dryly.

Mom pulled out her cellphone, hit some buttons, and then smiled as a ringing tone filled the room.

Three rings in, “Hey, Mama G. What’s up?”

As Harlee’s voice filled the room, I felt it roll over me, cocooning me in a warm embrace.

I was fucked. Straight up the creek and without a paddle.

“I wanted to get your opinion on something my children did. Do you have a few minutes?”

I heard Harlee’s sharp inhale, “Oh lord. Yes, of course.”

Then our mother proceeded to explain what Karen Ratcliff had said about our mother, and then she proceeded to tell her what we had done and what was on the flyer.

Harlee was silent.

That was until her tinkling laughter spilled out, which caused us to recall what had happened to start laughing again, even Garrick.

“I cannot believe this,” Mom snapped.

Harlee, getting control over her laughter before any of us could, said, “Mama G, I get it. Okay. I do. But... put yourself in their shoes. Then think about why they really did it. They were defending you. You raised some amazing individuals, Mama G. I’m honored, truly.

But I do have to ask if Alec really is your child? ”

Talia tossed me a wink.

Yep. Harlee Belle, my Darling, had just saved all our asses and put mom’s anger in a different direction.

Mom narrowed her eyes at Alec, and then to Harlee she asked, “What did he do?”

Harlee growled, fucking cute, “He thought it would be a good idea to walk into my place of business, my company, mind you, and yell,” whatever Harlee was going to say was cut off by Alec’s shout.

“No! Harlee, don’t you dare. You promised.” Alec said.

Harlee snapped, “Yeah. I did. That was before Mr. and Mrs. Thomas walked into my business and asked if I wanted to join them and make it a throuple.”

Alec’s face went beet red.

Every single eye in the room was on Alec.

I was slowly standing up, narrowing my eyes on my younger brother, my hands clenched into fists, when I heard Harlee ask, “Are Talia and Carter with you, Mama G?”

“They are,” she answered.

“Carter, Talia, don’t you worry your pretty little heads about hitting him, I’ve got my own payback planned.”

I grinned, stopped my movements, and then sat back down.

Mom gasped, and then she looked at the phone. “Did you say that Mr. and Mrs. Thomas wanted you to join them and have a threesome?”

Harlee sighed, “Yep.”

Then mom asked, “What did Alec walk in and yell, Harlee?”

Harlee let out a little growl again, fuck, but it was cute, “With the front door opened, mind you. He yelled, Harlee. I got my Jacob’s ladder removed. Now I want that special you promised me. I think I’ll take the special package number four. I hope you can cure my erectile dysfunction.”

Dad smiled, “I got bail money, honeybee.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

As I walked out of room number four, I pressed my hand to my mouth, trying and slowly failing to hold my laughter in.

Things that happened in my life that didn't make any sense.

And I had learned a long time ago that if you didn't laugh through those moments that they would eat you alive.

I finally made it to my receptionist's desk and stopped trying to fight it.

Unfortunately, the moment Everly's eyes locked on mine, her lifted brow, I let it out.

Laughter came barreling out of me, so hard, I couldn't breathe.

"He... he... asked me... if... I... wanted to come over later and... find out if hot fudge... on his back could do the same thing as the oils I had used." I said through my laughter.

We finally got our laughter and giggles under control by the time Mr. Simpson was dressed and walking out of the room.

Normally, what we had done would have been unprofessional as hell, but thankfully, all of the rooms were soundproofed. I couldn't even begin to tell you how many times I had felt like a therapist instead of a massage therapist.

He looked at me and winked, just as the bell above the door jingled, “So, did you think about your answer?”

A gruff, raspy voice asked, “What answer?”

My head whipped in Carter’s direction, and I smiled, “Hey, what brings you by?”

His eyes trailed from me and to Mr. Simpson, giving him a once-over, then they returned to me. “What answer?”

Mr. Simpson shook his head, “Oh, it was nothing. Just asked if a different type of... of umm... You know what, never mind.” Then he looked at me and asked, “Same time in two weeks?”

I nodded.

The moment he was out of the door, Everly started laughing, and I soon followed.

Carter was looking between Everly at me, clearly at a loss for words.

I was the first to get my laughter under control and shook my head, “So, what brings you by?”

He crossed his arms over his massive chest and raised a brow.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair.

I knew what he was silently asking.

He wasn’t going to let this go, and knowing him, he definitely wanted.

I also knew that when Carter Griggs made up his mind about something, there was no changing it.

So, I did the only logical thing I could. I opened my mouth and told him, “Mr. Simpson gets our deep-tissue package. Well, he had read something and asked me about it.”

He nodded, “Okay, well, that wouldn’t cause you to laugh. What’s the rest of it?”

I let out a little growl and watched as his lips twitched.

“He invited me over to his home tonight to see if hot fudge would have the same effects as the Jojoba oil,” I said. And then I waited.

I could see him working it through his mind, and I knew it wouldn’t take long, and I was right.

His face twisted in a grimace.

And at that grimace, Everly and I started laughing again.

He shook his head, “That’s just fucking disgusting.”

Everly smiled, “Well, I mean, if it was with someone hot, I wouldn’t mind it.”

I grinned, “Neither would I. Reverse the roles...” I said.

Her eyes smiled as a blinding smile hit her face, too. “You’re totally right.”

Carter had just opened his mouth to say something when Everly said, “Damn, but I need to get laid.”

Carter closed his mouth with an audible snap.

“So, what brings you by?” I asked.

“Need a favor,” he said.

I nodded, “Okay, shoot.”

With his eyes locked with mine, he said, “Having a rewards banquet at the headquarters office in two weeks. Wanted to know if you would go with me. Hate attending that shit alone.”

I thought about it, “What date?”

“April twenty-eighth.”

I nodded, then pulled out my phone and called my mom.

She answered on the third ring, “Hey, Belly belle. What’s up?”

“Do y’all have coverage on the twenty-eighth?” I asked.

I was surprised when she didn’t have to check the calendar, “We do. Apparently, Alec did something to upset you, so he offered to help on the weekends for a month.”

I snickered. I was still doing my own payback. That little weasel.

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It was two weeks later, and I was getting ready.

Since I'd never been to any type of banquet, I had been unsure of what to wear.

That had been where my girls had come through.

Our text thread went like this.

Badass Chick Thread

Me – Carter asked me to attend a rewards banquet with him on the 28 th . What do I wear?

Talia – One night we will go shopping.

Talia – Love my brother, but those things are kind of boring.

Talia – Also love that you didn't ask me if it was okay with me.

Me – Shopping one night this week will totally work.

Me – And I didn't bother asking if it was okay with you. Not when you sent me a text thanking me for agreeing to go with him when he asked me.

Lila – Just let me know what day y'all wanna go.

Me – I have a question.

Talia – .....

Lila – Shoot.

Me – Y'all okay with adding Everly to this thread?

Talia – Wait.... I thought she already was.

Lila – Right. Feels like she should have already been in here.

Added Everly to the text thread.

Everly – Umm.... should I be worried?

Me – Negative. This is our only girls' text thread.

Everly – Gotcha. And I just scrolled up. I can come with.

Me – Perfect. I love your opinions.

Talia – Totally read that in a sarcastic voice.

Lila – You have four brothers. It's a given.

Me – What she said.

At the sight of the dress we had all agreed on, I felt something in my stomach do a little flip.

It really was gorgeous.

I've never owned a black cocktail dress... I may have developed an addiction.

It sat just above my knees, fitted at the bodice, and then flared out at my hips, with one shoulder, making my exposed shoulder look sexy.

I had already plugged in my hot rollers and was doing my makeup when my phone

vibrated with a text.

And when I looked at the notification on my phone, I felt my brows furrow.

That was a new one.

Lil Sis Text Thread

Garrick – The only person you have to be super nice to is his boss, Caulson.

Alec – Don't accept drinks from anyone other than Carter.

Ethan – If there's a dish called Happy Mello, avoid it.

Garrick – What they said.

Me – So this is a new text thread...

Garrick – You're practically family.

Totally not missing that they hadn't included Carter in this.

What the hell did that mean?

Me – But I'm not.

Garrick – Semantics. Suck it up, buttercup.

Me – I just snorted at hearing you say that aloud.

Ethan – what she said.

Alec – What they said.

Me – Where's Talia?

Garrick – She has her own text thread with you. This is ours.

Me – Gotcha.

Me – Thank you for all the advice. I've gotta finish getting ready.

Garrick – You'll knock him on his ass.

Garrick silenced notifications.

Alec – What Garrick said,

Ethan – Just have a good time. Anything goes wrong, call us.

I was shaking my head at them. And I was thanking my lucky stars that not only did I have Talia in my corner, but I also had them.

Made a girl feel super special.

Once the hot rollers were ready, I put them in my hair and started on my makeup.

I've become very adept at applying straight lines, and I was thankful for it.

With a smoky eye to enhance my mossy-oak-colored eyes, and dark eyeliner... it made them pop.

Once I had my dress on, my phone received another notification.

Carter – Be there in 15.

Me – Okay. I'm almost ready.

Carter – See you then.

Once my hair was ready, I sprayed a few things in it, and then flipped my head over, and shook my head five times.

Then, when I flipped it back over, it fell around my shoulders and down my back perfectly.

A pair of earrings I had gotten from Misty the year prior for Christmas went into my ears.

Spritzed some perfume on and then slid my feet into a pair of black peep-toed, three-inch heels.

Looking at myself in my full body mirror set up in the corner of my room, I gave myself a once-over.

This was perfect.

Then, I heard three knocks.

Taking in a breath, I turned my bedroom light off, then strode down my little hallway and walked to the front door.

Leaning up on a tiptoe I checked the peephole.

And at Carter's face, I lowered back down, flipped the locks, and opened the door.

When his eyes caught mine, he smiled, and then when he looked down, I watched as that smile faded from his face, his throat bobbed as he swallowed, then I watched as he shook his head, “You’d think I was raised as a caveman. Sorry, Harlee. You look beautiful.”

Then he bent his neck and pressed a kiss on my forehead.

I smiled up at him, then said, “You’d think that about me, too. You look nice.”

I had said that, but all I wanted to say... well... ask... If I could climb him like a spider monkey and block anyone else’s view of him.

His dark brown hair was styled back and out of his face, from where it sometimes fell in front of his forehead.

The black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up on his forearms made his oceanlike-colored eyes shine.

A pair of dark jeans and black shoes fitted his look.

He didn’t need anything more than that.

But... would it be wrong to picture him with his shirt off for the rest of the night... I mean... I knew what it looked like.

I’d seen it often whenever they’d worked on something in the summer, or the family vacations I sometimes went on when they went to the lake.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” he teased.

I grinned, “Oh yeah, care to be photographed with me?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Anytime. Pretty sure there are quite a few at my parents’ house.”

I smiled, then, thanking my lucky stars, when I left my room, I had grabbed my phone.

I spun around as I brought my phone up, opened my camera app, and handed it to him. “You have longer arms.”

He took the phone from my hand, then held it out.

Then... he made me shiver as his arm wrapped around my waist as he moved closer, feeling his chest against my back, feeling his heat.

And then I felt it. A press of a kiss on my temple.

I hadn’t meant to close my eyes at the sensation, but I had.

And then he lowered the phone and handed it to me while asking, “You ready?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

I nodded, then said, “Let me grab my clutch.”

Once I had it in hand, Carter took my keys from me and locked my house up.

Then, with his hand at the small of my back, he led me to his truck.

Once he opened my door for me, I climbed in, and then he shut the door.

Minutes later, we were headed to the banquet.

A song had come on, and just like Carter and I usually did, we sang along, laughing when we missed the notes.

He turned on his blinker and then pulled into a parking lot where a bunch of vehicles were already parked.

Once he found a parking spot, he looked at me, “You okay to walk?”

I smiled, then nodded, “Yeah.”

He nodded, “Okay. Feet start to hurt, just tell me, yeah?”

I nodded, then asked, “If they do start to hurt, what are you going to do about it?”

He winked as he turned the truck off and opened his door, “You’re never too old for a piggyback ride.”

I tossed my head back and laughed.

With his help, I climbed out of his truck, and then he offered me his arm.

Smiling I slid my arm through his and rested my hand in the crook of his elbow, his neck bent as he said, “If I don’t remember to say it, thank you for coming with me tonight.”

I winked, “Anytime.”

The banquet was being held in the Citizens’ Center.

Round tables with white linens were set up around the room, each with at least fifteen chairs.

A long table, or rather, a bunch of what looked to be nine-foot tables, were pushed together and held what I presumed to be food.

Then, at the right of the room, a stage was set up with a table behind it, holding plaques.

A few men called out greetings to Carter, well, it was more like half of the room’s occupants, and when the last man had said hello, Carter bent his neck and whispered, “I need at least one drink in me before this starts. Do you want one?”

I giggled but nodded.

Once we made it to the bar, he ordered a beer and a vodka cranberry for me.

I had just taken a sip when a man and a woman, I knew had to be related, walked over to where we were standing, to the left of the bar.

Carter held out his hand to him as he said, “Ready to get this shit show over with?”

The man nodded, “Yeah. Then we can relax for a year, only to do it again.”

I looked at the woman who smiled at me, then held out her hand. “Apparently, Carter and my brother have no manners. I’m Tatum, Granger’s sister.”

I winked at her as I offered her my hand, “I know, right. I’m Harlee. A friend of Carter’s.”

For some reason, her eyes widened.

I was about to ask if something was wrong when Carter chuckled, garnering my attention.

“Leave it to the two of you to call us out. Harlee, this is my best friend, Granger Rogers. Granger, this is Harlee Murray.” Carter said.

Granger took me in, then glanced at Carter, then back to me, “Any friend of Carter’s is a friend of mine,” he said as he offered me his hand, “Pleased to meet you, Harlee, friend of Carter.”

And no, I didn’t miss the way he emphasized the word friend.

Which was why I handed my drink to Tatum as I asked, “Hold this for a sec?”

She nodded, then took my glass.

With my hands free, they went to my hips as I narrowed my gaze at Carter, and damn it all to hell, even with the three-inch heels, he still towered over me, but I didn’t let that stop me.

“What have you been saying about me?” I asked, glaring at him.

He smiled, shook his head, “Just random things. Promise.”

Granger took a pull of his own beer, and I swore I heard, “Random things my ass.”

Tatum smiled as she handed me back my drink, “I think I’m going to like you, Harlee.”

I grinned and knew I was going to be returning the sentiment when she followed my actions with her own hands on her hips, glaring at Granger and Carter.

“Were the two of you raised in a barn?”

I smiled, “Tatum?”

She glared at them, then looked at me, and lost that glare, “Think I’m going to like you too.”

Apparently, everyone needed a drink, before this thing got started.

Because the right side of the room, where the bar was, was crowded.

Granger had walked off to see where we were all sitting, asking us to keep Tatum with us.

I had just told Tatum about how I met Carter, through his younger sister Talia, when I felt Carter stiffen at my side.

That’s when I heard a man ask, “So, who is this?”

I looked at where I heard the voice, at the same time, Carter growled, “None of your fucking business.”

Granger came up behind him, clapped him on his shoulder, and I watched as the man winced, then looked over his shoulder, and then he fled.

Which had Granger and Carter chuckling, “Damn. He really can’t help himself.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

“He’s the creeper that none of us wants to work with. But... he’s the owner’s nephew.” Carter said with a sigh.

“So, we can’t kill him,” Granger pouted.

I laughed as Granger’s sister simply shook her head, “I swear, I love you, big brother, but I’m not coming to one of these again.”

Granger sighed, “If this stuff wasn’t mandatory, I wouldn’t come either.”

I looked at Tatum and asked, “Care to go check out the food?”

She nodded, “Yeah. And it better be edible. I’m not a rabbit.”

I giggled and nodded.

Together, Tatum and I headed for the tables with food atop them, as Granger and Carter fell into step behind us.

And seeing the food... well... I wouldn’t even feed it to my dog.

And I didn't have a dog.

Needless to say, by the time we were asked to take our seats, all of our stomachs had been growling.

A few people braved the food table, but they all seemed to take a few bites and then leave their plates untouched.

Rewards were given out.

Carter received a reward for his dedication and his time at being with the company for sixteen years.

Once he was back at our table, I leaned over and asked, "You've had to come to sixteen of these?"

He looked down at me and nodded.

Since it was him, knowing there was no one else I'd ever offer it to, I said, "I'll come to the rest of them with you. If you want."

He winked, "Appreciate that, Darling."

That was something else I'd started noticing.

He didn't call me Darling that often.

It had honestly started about three weeks after I graduated from high school.

And only then, when something I had said or done meant something to him, did he refer to me as Darling.

Granger sighed, and then I looked at him and asked, “Everything okay?”

Tatum nodded, “Yeah, just this woman that won’t take a hint.”

I grinned, then looked at Granger and asked, “Care to have some help?”

Carter laughed, “Take her up on it. Trust me.”

Granger nodded, then handed me his phone, “Name is Kendra.”

I found her name, then pressed the button.

And I also pressed the speaker button.

Putting it in front of me, I listened to it ring, and on the third ring I heard, “Granger, baby, finally. When are you going to put me out of my misery? I’ve been patient long enough. It’s time you made a woman out of me.”

I paused, then said, “Oh, sugar, I am so sorry. It took forever to get Granger in my bed, too. But let me tell you something, it was so worth the wait. Now, don’t get me wrong, I love his big dick, but I didn’t like pushing his six kids out of my vagina.”

Granger’s mouth dropped open indignantly.

Carter’s shoulders were shaking in laughter.

Tatum was giggling.

Kendra gasped, then, “Really? Wait... who is this?”

“Oh, I’m the mother of his six kids,” I said.

And I waited.

Kendra said moments later, “Wait, he has kids?”

I grinned, “In my dreams, he does. My name is Harlee. I was currently in a meeting with him. I’m his lawyer.

When he told me about a woman who needed to learn what the word no meant, I demanded to speak to you.

You make all the women who have said no weep in tears.

You should be ashamed of yourself. And if you don’t stop contacting him, you will be served with a cease-and-desist order, as well as a restraining order, and anything else I can pin on you. ”

I took a breath, and a shot in the dark, then said, “I have records of all the text messages you’ve sent to him that he hasn’t replied to.

I also have proof of when he told you no, as well as the missed calls and voicemails.

Believe me, I’ve gotten people to back off with a whole lot less.

Now, please make my day and push me. It’s been a while since I’ve had fun. ”

And then, the call ended.

She hung up on me.

“I’m half tempted to call her back and bitch her out for hanging up on me,” I muttered as I handed the phone back to Granger.

And then all at once, a round of applause sounded around me, as a few people laughed.

“Remind me to never piss you off,” Granger said.

Tatum grinned, “I so need your number, girl.”

Granger looked at Carter, who was smiling widely, “She’s done this kind of thing before?”

Carter nodded, “Oh yeah. She can be vicious when she wants to be. And when my family has an issue, they always call Harlee. She’ll either roast someone verbally or take the attention off one of us and point it elsewhere.”

I grinned, then shrugged my shoulders. “I might be small, but I’m mighty.”

Tatum chimed in then, “Want to call her and see if she blocked you?”

Granger grimaced, “Nope.”

“Speaking of blocking, why haven’t you done it already?” Carter asked him.

Granger looked at him, “You can do that?”

Carter shook his head. “Hand me your phone.”

Once he blocked Kendra’s number, he handed Granger back his phone.

“How’d you know you could do that?” I asked him.

He winked down at me, “First, it was Talia who did it for Garrick. Pamela. Then she

did it for me. Janie. And so on and so on.”

I nodded.

Granger shook his head as he pocketed his phone, then, like it was a symphony, his stomach growled, followed by Tatum’s, then Carter’s, then mine.

I chimed in then, “Y’all got plans after this?”

They both shook their heads.

At that, I looked up at Carter, “Swing by Gusher’s and actually eat some real food?”

He winked, “Sounds good.”

“Gushers?” Granger asked.

“Is that a pun?” Tatum asked.

I grinned.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Once the banquet was over, Granger and Tatum followed Carter and me to Gushers.

And when they walked in, they started giggling.

“Thought it was a strip club?” I asked as we all sat down.

When they nodded their heads, I giggled.

To say the meal we had was a little better would be a lie.

It was a lot better.

I had exchanged numbers with Tatum and Granger and made plans with Tatum to introduce her to Talia, Lila, and Everly.

As Carter pulled into my driveway, he turned the truck off, climbed out, and I waited.

I had learned long ago about the Griggs siblings, mainly the boys.

Women didn’t open their own doors or close them.

Therefore, I waited for Carter to round his truck and open my door for me.

Once again, with his outstretched hand, he held it out for me.

Placing my hand in his, he helped me out of the truck.

And once again, with his hand on the small of my back, he led me to my front door.

He held his hand out, and knowing what he wanted, I grabbed my keys and handed them to him.

Unlocking my door, he handed me back my keys and said, “Thank you for coming with me. You still mean it, I’ll gladly take your offer of coming with me to those things from now on.”

I nodded, “Yeah, of course. I actually had a good time.”

He nodded, “I’m glad. You looked beautiful tonight, Harlee Belle.”

I smiled, “You didn’t look so bad yourself, Carter Car.”

He laughed, “Damn, you haven’t called me that in a long time.”

I smiled.

When I was maybe nine or ten, I was hanging out at Talia’s house, when Carter had pulled in with his first vehicle purchase, he had made on his own. And for some reason, I had called him Carter Car that entire summer.

“Good night, Harlee Belle.” He said as he bent his neck and pressed a kiss on the top of my head.

“Night, Carter. Thank you for tonight.” And with that, I headed into my house and locked the door, knowing he wouldn’t leave until he heard the locks click.

I stood there, taking in breath after breath.

The way he waited outside the bathroom for me.

The way he wouldn't let me pay for anything.

The way he glared at anyone who stared at me too long.

The way he pulled my chair out for me. The feel of his hand on my body.

.. damn, but this was getting harder and harder to push the feelings I had for Carter deeper and deeper.

And then, a few minutes later, I heard his truck rumble to life.

A few minutes later, when I still heard it, I stepped to the side and lifted the curtain a fraction of an inch.

Seeing him sitting there, with his hands on the wheel and staring at my house intently, I started to worry that something was wrong.

However, before I could unlock my door, his truck started backing out of my driveway.

I took off my heels and then wiggled my toes, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Yes, my feet had started to hurt, but I had enjoyed standing at his side even more.

Opening my clutch, I pulled out my phone and saw text messages.

I read them and replied as I made my way to my bedroom and got ready for bed.

Lil Sis Text Thread

Ethan – If you need Pepto, I've got a few bottles for you.

Alec – If you need some ginger ale and crackers, let me know.

Garrick – Do I need to go to the jail and bail out Carter?

Me – I steered clear of the food at the banquet. Thank you for the heads up.

Me – I wouldn't have fed it to my dog.

Me – Nope. Carter kept his cool.

Garrick – Surprised.

Ethan – Same.

Alec – Same.

Me – What is that supposed to mean?

Garrick silenced notifications.

Ethan – Plead the fifth.

Ethan silenced notifications.

Alec – Fuckers. Just what it means, Harlee. He's always looked out for you. Night.

Me – Thank you for working for my family at the diner.

Alec – Mean I'm forgiven?

Me – This time. But you do it again, and I'll go around town and hang up my own fliers.

Alec – Dirty.

I clicked on another text from my mother.

A picture of Alec, weighed down with plates in his hands.

I laughed at the picture.

Misty Griggs – Thank you for going with my baby, Harlee. You truly are one of a kind.

Me – Any time, Misty. Truly.

Frank Griggs – Hope you guys had a good time. Thank you for saving one of us from possible food poisoning.

Me – You are so welcome.

Badass Girls Text Thread

Talia – Did you have a boring night? Need me to come over.

Lila – Heard the stories. How bad was the food?

Everly – Had to be better than what I had for dinner.

Everly – Remind me to never leave a pot of boiling water with eggs in it for longer than twenty minutes ever again, please.

Talia – Umm, earth to Harls? That thing ends at eight. You should have been home by eight thirty. It's now ten. You, okay?

Lila – Talia. Hush.

Talia – What? I'm worried.

Me – It wasn't boring. I actually had a good time.

Me – We all avoided the food.

Me – Met Carter's best friend, Granger. He's a riot

Me – I also met his little sister. She's our age. Told her about y'all. Plans are in the works.

Talia – Okay. So, why'd it take so long for you to text us back?

Lila – Talia. Geez.

Everly – I'm with them. Chill.

Me – We stopped at Gusher's. Actually ate good food.

I tried to swallow the hurt at Talia's words. What was the big deal?

At times, it seemed as though she didn't care if Carter and I hung out, then at other times, it seemed as though it bothered her.

Then my phone vibrated with a new text.

Carter – Thank you again for going with me tonight. You made the night not boring and a lot of fun.

Me – Good. I am so glad.

Carter – Night, Harlee Belle.

Me – Night Carter Car.

\*\*\*

I smiled as I opened two packages of instant grits, then dumped them in the bowl. Followed with a dollop of butter, shredded cheese, and just the right amount of sugar into my bowl.

All I was waiting for was for the water in the kettle to finish boiling.

The first time I had eaten grits like this had been after a slumber party at Talia's house when we were seven.

And ever since then... I can't eat grits any other way.

Even my parents thought it was weird, until they tried it... and now.... at Gushers, we offer the Plain Jane Grits, or the Rock Me Grits.

That thought sobered me up, in more ways than one.

Last night with Carter had been fun. Just the two of us.

And how he was protective over me, his hand on the small of my back, I wished, gah, I wished I had met Carter first before I met Talia.

Freaking girl code.

I sighed. At the same time, my kettle started whistling.

Taking it off the burner and turning the dial, I poured just the right amount of water and dove in.

The taste never got old.

I had just washed my few dishes in the sink and dried my hands when there was a knock on my door.

Walking to it, I checked the peephole and opened the door.

Talia stood there with a bag in her hand, and the moment she saw me, she said, “I’m sorry. I know it came off way wrong, but by the time I realized how it had all sounded, it was too late, and I knew you had already gone to bed.”

“You’re my best friend, Harls. And I know you’re close to my family. Also never seen Carter act with anyone else like he does with you. So, I’m sorry.”

I gestured for her to come in, then, when she did, I closed the door.

I nodded, “So what happened last night?”

She sighed. “I kind of got into it with Dominik. I stopped at Milagros to pick up my order for dinner, and he was sitting there with a woman. The big old bastard saw me, and apparently paid for my order. Telling them that they wouldn’t want any money that came from my hands because it had been stuffed in a G-string last night at work.”

I gasped, “He didn’t.”

She nodded, “He so did.”

“What did you do?” I asked her.

She sighed, “Nothing. I just shook my head, took my order, and walked out of there.”

“Has he tried to call you?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I’ve been ignoring him,” she said.

Then it hit me. She only went to Milagros when she had a real shitty day at work, which was why I asked, “What happened at work?”

Then she preceded to tell me about the boss’s son hitting on her and him touching her ass.

Once she left, I got in my Tahoe, cranked my baby up, and drove to DG Auto Body.

The moment I parked my Tahoe right in front of one of the bays, I climbed out, then stormed inside.

Immediately, I heard Garrick say, “Oh shit. Your pissed. Whose ass are we kicking?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “Where is Dominik?”

He pointed to bay five.

I stomped my way to bay five when I heard, “Yo, Dom. Incoming.”

His head jerked out from underneath the hood of the Corvette when Dominik looked at me, and then, without thought, I picked up a wrench and threw it at him.

Sadly, the big bastard dodged as I asked, “What the fuck is the matter with you?”

Everything in the garage stopped. Halted. You could have heard a drop of oil hit the floor.

“Excuse me?” Dominik asked with a growl, anger forming on his face.

“You heard me, Dominik. How fucking long have you known Garrick? How fucking long have you known Talia?” I asked but didn’t wait for an answer.

“Years. Decades. That’s how long. And you know, you fucking know that anytime one of them has a shit fucking day, they do one of three things. And one of those things is getting takeout from Milagros.”

Dominik’s face cleared of the anger I had seen building in him, and then his face sobered, “Shit.”

I nodded, “Yeah. Shit. Let me tell you something, you fucking asshole. How in the hell you managed to make a shit day for her even shittier is beyond me, but you managed it. I won’t betray her confidence.

But if you decide to kick the ever-loving hell out of her boss’s son, I’ll provide the bail money. ”

My voice softened as the anger worked its way out of me, “You hurt her, Dom. And nobody does that. So, fix it. You owe her an apology.”

And with that, I walked away. Garrick’s raised brow stopped me.

Leaning forward, I whispered, “Her boss’s son grabbed her ass at work yesterday.

Then Dominik teased her in the way they do, he paid for her meal, then told the staff that they wouldn’t want to accept money from her because it had been stuffed into her G-string.

He basically made her feel like a slut.”

And then I left.

But not before I watched with a smile on my face as Garrick punched Dominik right in the face.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Seeing the picture of Harlee and me on her front porch did something to me.

Because it looked so right.

Two halves of a whole finally coming together to make something perfect.

And yes, you better believe I made it my lock screen.

As for my wallpaper, I might be going to hell for that one.

It was a few summers ago when we were at the lake, on our parents' boat.

Harlee had taken off her cutoff jean shorts and her tank top, revealing a red bikini.

Her hair was down, the wind blowing the blonde strands around.

I was staring at my phone, trying to hide that I was looking at her.

For some reason, my finger had pressed the camera app, and then when she turned her head and looked in my direction, my finger had pressed the button.

Capturing her small smile, her eyes on me, just right.

To say I was probably going to hell... well... I might be.

Because that picture had helped me in a number of ways when it was just me and my hand.

“Who is that?” I heard and then tried to hide my aggravation.

“That’s not Talia.” She continued.

“You’d know if you attended the rewards banquet a few weeks back,” Granger said at my side.

“My sister was getting married. Cleared it already.” She said with a haughtiness I didn’t know how she pulled it off.

“Anyway, who is that? If I’d known you weren’t going to bring one of your siblings, I might have changed my plans.”

I didn’t care to engage with her. It wasn’t worth it.

She was one of those people who had to have the last word in, and it didn’t matter if it was perceived as an insult or not.

She really just didn’t care.

With that thought, I locked my phone, slid it in my pocket, picked up my tray, and headed to the galley.

Granger was walking step for step with me, and at the sound of running feet, I growled.

Granger chuckled, “She has it bad for you.”

“I’d rather swallow bleach followed by a shot of... nah, five shots of vinegar than even get within ten feet of her.

“Guys, wait up.” I heard her say.

Thankfully, someone up ahead was going to provide our escape route.

“Yo, Marshall?” I called out.

Then, almost immediately, she breathed out his name, “Marshall?”

I fought like hell to hide my smirk, but I managed to do it, just barely.

Marshall turned his head, jerked up his chin at us, looked around us, then narrowed his eyes at me as he mouthed, “Payback is a bitch.”

We had passed Marshall and left Susanna behind with Marshall.

“Man, that was epic,” Granger said.

My smirk came out full-blown then.

\*\*\*

Marshall’s payback came in the form of a blow-up doll with a Susanna nametag standing beside my station.

I shook my head and then flipped him off from where I knew he was in the control room.

Then with Granger, George, Kyle, and Phillip, I got on my gear and then headed into

the ocean to get to work.

\*\*\*

Deep in the water, one hundred feet deep, I let that little light I always saw guide my way.

Her light.

Leading me home without ever knowing it.

\*\*\*

Whispering Falls, North Carolina

Population – 3,738

Corrected Population – 3,739

For years, I have been trying to figure out who maintains that sign.

Just as everyone else that I knew had also been doing that.

But whoever it was, they were being quiet.

Man, I was fucking tired.

I had just gotten done with a three-month contract.

I stretched in my seat, trying to work out the kink in my back.

I loved what I did.

Was it terrifying at times? Fuck yes it was.

Did I see some cool shit sometimes? Oh, absolutely.

But being an underwater welder wasn't for the weak.

Can't tell you how many I have seen come and go.

Chasing the paycheck, wanting more than what they can handle.

But thankfully, that wasn't me.

I'd been smart.

Chosen a career path that I actually was interested in.

Sixteen years is a long time in any profession.

And thanks to my dad being an accountant before he had retired three years ago, meant that he had helped me save money in more ways than one.

No one knew how much I had in my bank account.

I made a whack at my job.

I owned my own home, no mortgage.

I owned my truck outright.

And since I was gone more times than I was home, my bills were small.

I had all of this money, and no one to spend it on.

Well... that was a lie.

I had spent a portion of it on something that only three people know about.

I had bought the building for Harlee when she graduated from college and had dropped subtle hints to my sister about a space for rent that would be perfect for Harlee.

I had someone appear as the landlord for her, and my dad had facilitated the paperwork and the lease.

Harlee didn't know it, but every payment she'd made through the years went into an account.

One I never touched. One that would go into a trust fund for Harlee's future children.

Yeah, I loved her.

I loved her with every beat of my heart.

I just wasn't good enough for her.

She was all light and sunshine.

All rainbows and color.

There wasn't anything that made me feel this way.

Honestly, I couldn't explain it.

It wasn't just the age gap that had me thinking that way.

Nor was it the fact that she was my little sister's best friend.

I just looked at her when she smiled, and felt unworthy of her.

There was a man out there who would be worthy of her.

And I knew that when that time came, I would lose the closeness I had with her.

It would kill.

But I would do it.

For her.

And speaking of that, if the man who wins her heart hurts her, they'll have me in cuffs before you can say, oops.

Shaking my head at where my thoughts had headed, I pulled into Frozen Tree, the local ice cream parlor, and met up with Talia.

We got our ice cream.

Me, rocky road, and her, mint chocolate chip.

I had moved my back a certain way when I sat down, and Talia hadn't missed my grimace.

Something had tweaked it a few weeks ago while I was working.

“Go see Harlee. She’ll help.” Talia said.

I nodded, “Planning on it. Just wanted to make sure she didn’t have any plans.”

Talia took a bite of her ice cream and shook her head, “Nope. She said she was doing a facial tonight and catching up on one of her favorite shows.”

Jerking my chin up at her, I pulled out my phone and shot a text off to Harlee.

Me – Hey, can you work on my back tonight?

With that done, I asked, “So heard something went down with you and Dominik. You okay?”

She sighed, “Who told you?”

“Garrick,” I said.

She nodded, “Yeah, it would have been fine. Like every other time we bicker, but that day, it was just wrong.”

“Sorry, Tal. Did Dom apologize or anything?” I asked.

Talia snickered, “You could say that,” and with those cryptic words, she pulled out her phone and showed me a picture.

I was damn glad I didn’t have any ice cream in my mouth.

Dominik stood in Milagros in nothing but a Speedo, with one-dollar bills stuffed into

it.

I busted out laughing. “Damn. That’s just sad, but fucking epic.”

Talia beamed, “I know. Right.”

“By the way, is there a video of Harlee throwing a wrench at him?” I asked.

She smiled, wide, “Yep. She’s the freaking best. But when she drove me to Milagros that following night, I hadn’t been thinking that. Dominik had somehow enlisted Harlee to help him.”

I pulled out my phone and texted Dom.

Me – Heard about your strip show at Milagros. Points man. Points. Way to grovel.

Talia and I finished our ice cream and got in our own vehicles.

She had just pulled away when Harlee texted me back.

Darling – I would. But I’m out of the oil I need.

Me – What is it, and where do I find it?

Darling – \*pinned the location\*

Darling – \*picture of the bottle\*

Me – Got it. I’ll go get it and bring it with me.

Darling – That’s fine. Just don’t judge my face mask.

Me – Wouldn't dream of it.

Just as I started to pull out of the lot, my phone beeped with a text.

Dom – I fucked up. Didn't know it. Mama always told me that if you hurt someone close to you by being careless, you better own up and fix it.

Dom – I'm not just some 2-bit mechanic.

Me – Whoa, brother. Never thought that.

Dom – I know. Just some old bullshit.

He was talking about his ex. Never met her, but I knew of her.

Thirty minutes later, I had the bottle of stuff she needed and was waiting to check out when I heard it.

Fuck.

Me.

I so didn't need this right now.

"See that your back, Carter," I inwardly winced at Bridgett's voice.

What was this girl's deal?

How many times did I have to say that I wasn't interested?

I did it again by pretending I hadn't heard her.

But Bridgett was Bridgett; she was a lot like Susanna. Couldn't take a fucking hint if it slapped her in the face.

Sighing, I did something I hadn't ever done before; I pulled out my phone, hit Harlee's contact, and pressed the button.

Putting the phone to my ear, she answered on the third ring, "Hey, did you find it?"

"Hey, baby, yeah, I got it. You worked fucking miracles before I left. Can't wait to get your hands on me here in a little bit."

She was silent for a beat, then she asked, "Umm, Carter. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, baby. Liked that too. Especially the thing you did with your tongue." I said.

I heard Bridgett's gasp.

But I ignored her.

"Whose there?" she asked.

"Tell you all about the way I see that fantasy going. Bet you'll knock it out of the fucking park."

She started giggling.

"Yeah, I know. Can't wait too. Want me to grab takeout on my way home? That way we can pop it in the microwave, keep it warm while we see to some other... interesting matters." I said.

Then I glanced back and watched as Bridgett stormed away.

I sighed long and deep.

“She’s gone?” Harlee asked.

“Yeah. Bridgett.”

“Well, in that case, you can use me as your alibi anytime. That girl, I swear.” She snickered.

I chuckled, then stepped forward and paid, “But seriously, need me to grab some takeout or something?”

“Nah, I got us covered. Thankfully, I put a roast in the crock pot before I headed to work this morning.”

“Fuck. You know the way to a man’s heart.” I groaned.

I loved my mother’s cooking. Seriously. But Harlee’s cooking knocked anything my mother made out of the freaking park.

She chuckled, “Okay, see you in thirty minutes or so.”

After we hung up, I walked out to my truck, climbed in, and headed to Harlee’s.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

Badass Chicks Text Thread

Talia – I swear I’m going to smother my brothers in their sleep.

Me – Need any help?

Lila – What did they do now?

Talia – Inserts screenshots.

Me – \*laughing emoji\*

Lila – \*puke emoji\*

Me – Carter is swinging by later. His back is acting up again. Wanna sneak in and take care of it?

Talia – Tell him to go home and offer that to Ethan... I am all for it.

Lila – Oh, while I’m thinking about it.... Harden asked about you today.

Talia – Me? Why?

Lila – Not you. Harlee.

Me – \*puking emoji\*

Me – Anyone who drives a Mini Cooper is a no-go.

Lila – My little sister does.

Me – Your little sister is cute. He. Is. Not.

Lila – ... So, I should tell him you're not interested.... right?

Me – That's a big 10-4, good buddy.

Talia – You watched your second favorite movie last night. Didn't you?

Me – You know it.

Lila – I got your back. I'll tell him.

Me – Thanks.

Talia – Okay, I gotta get back to work.

Me – Smooches.

Lila – xoxo.

Everly – I swear, I always miss these texts.

Everly – Just read the screenshots. I'll help.

I had just cued up my favorite relaxing playlist when I heard a knock on my door.

I set my bottle of water down on my island and headed to it.

Stepping up on my tip-toes, I peered into the peephole.

I smiled when I saw Carter.

I was never going to mention my maddening crush on Talia's oldest brother.

We had made a pact when we met in kindergarten.

I could only be her best friend if I didn't like one of her brothers.

And at five and a half years old, boys were gross.

..... But now.

Just the thought of this man had my lady bits tingling.

Shaking my head, I flipped the lock, then opened the door and smiled at Carter.

"Hey, you ready?"

He winked, "Yep."

I nodded. "Want anything to drink first?"

He shook his head, "Nah, thanks though."

I nodded, then headed toward my guest bedroom, where I had a smaller setup compared to my office.

Carter knew the drill, so I turned my back and got the oil he had gotten for me heated up.

Then I got to work on his back with a deep tissue massage.

And at the first press of my hands, he moaned.

Thankfully, with his face buried in the padded cushion, he didn't see me squeeze my thighs together.

I kept working on his back, even though I desperately wanted to work on something else with him.

Stop it, Harlee.

You're a professional.

Act like it.

Once his massage was done, and he was able to get his clothes back on, I said, "If it starts to hurt, take a hot bath and some ibuprofen. Or take a hot shower, stretch your muscles out, and then take some ibuprofen."

He nodded, then followed me into my kitchen, where I plated the mashed potatoes and the roast.

Sitting down at my kitchen table

\*\*\*

"Mr. Olson scheduled another appointment with you. What do you want me to do?"

Everly asked.

I sighed, then shuddered a breath.

Normally, I adored Mr. Olson.

But lately, like the last four months, he had been asking me to give him a happy ending.

Apparently, Mr. Olson and Mr. Alvarez thought some dirty thoughts about me.

I shivered at that.

“Schedule it, and please figure out a document that all clients have to sign about our practices and things we won’t do. If they refuse to sign, drop them as a client, and if they sign and disobey, drop them as well.”

She nodded, “Can do.”

I never thought I would have this problem, working in a small town, but I guess there are crazies out there.

It was two hours later, and I had met with four more clients; I needed a drink after this day.

I had just walked Justin Winston to Everly’s counter when he looked at me and said, “Thank you, Ms. Murray. Wanted to ask you something.”

I smiled at him and nodded, “Of course.”

Thinking it was in regard to the services I had just offered.

But it wasn't. No, it definitely wasn't.

"Would you like to have dinner with me on Friday?" he asked as he paid for his massage.

Everly shot big eyes at me.

Today was Monday.

Then it hit me, on a Friday. The start of the weekend. Two days that I didn't work here.

Not saying that was his innuendo or anything, but I had a type.

And it wasn't the pretty boy next door.

My type consisted of.... Carter Alexander Griggs.

Therefore, I said, "Thank you for the offer, but I already have plans."

And then he said something that crossed so many lines, I couldn't even begin to think about.

I gave a firm, resounding no.

Then I looked at Everly and said, "Definitely make him sign the document."

And with that, I walked back to the rooms to clean them up, Justin had been my last client of the day.

I pulled my phone out and texted my bestie.

Me – Cancel any plans you have for Friday. We’re going to the movies.

She answered back almost instantly.

Talia – Done. Explain to me later.

It was finally Friday; Talia and I had just paid for our tickets as we walked into the movie theater.

With popcorn, M her mouth dropped open, her brows raised, and I nodded.

“Gross. Love you. More power to people who like that, but that ain’t us.” She said.

I nodded.

Oh, and apparently, I didn’t need to worry about dropping Justin as a client.

He had decided to do that, after Ethan, Alec, Garrick, Dominik, and Carter had heard him talking about me in some nasty ways.

I was informed by a video of the altercation when I woke up Saturday morning.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Harlee really was a magical worker.

My back had eased off, and I finally had better movement in it.

And tonight, we were at Virgin Mary's, a bar in the next town over, for our monthly sibling meet-up.

It was something our parents had encouraged us to do, because when they were gone, we would only ever have each other.

We went to a different place each month, and then when the year was over, we started back with our rotation.

"Wouldn't be surprised if that girl doesn't accidentally trip and land face-first in your lap," Talia said with a giggle.

I rolled my eyes at her.

Ethan grinned, "I mean, she ain't bad looking."

"Then next time, you order our drinks and flirt with her," I growled.

Ethan shook his head, "Nope, it's against the pact."

The pact was something we had all agreed to years ago. If a woman flirted with one

of us, that made her off limits for the rest of us.

And then Alec did it again, he winked at the other woman he had been flirting with off and on since we got here tonight.

Vickie's face was getting redder and redder.

She was about to blow, and I couldn't blame her.

I caught my sibling's eye as they all just shook their heads.

Alec was a shameless flirt.

He always has been.

But we all thought he was serious about his current girlfriend.

He had brought her to Sunday dinner at our parents' house last week.

"Um, who is she?" the woman asked as Vickie stormed away from our table and out of the bar.

Alec looked shocked as he turned to look at us, and asked, affronted, "What the hell did I do now?"

I shook my head at my youngest brother.

Garrick just glared at him.

Talia sneered at him.

Dominik just sat there, stony-faced, showing no reaction at all.

And Ethan... well... he looked at Garrick, Talia, and me and asked, “Yeah, for once I’m with Alec. What the hell did he do now?”

I took a pull of my beer as Garrick, Talia, and Dominik looked at me, letting me take the lead on this conversation, and I didn’t mind it in the slightest.

Therefore, I said, “You said that Vickie was your girl, right?”

Alec nodded, “Yeah.”

“Okay. Well, since you said she was your girl, that means that you're committed to her and she’s committed to you. Which means that you don’t allow other women to touch you intimately.

Means you don’t allow yourself to be put in a situation where another woman even has a molecule of a thought that she has a chance with you. ”

Alec opened his mouth, but I kept going.

“So, flirting with another woman is a no-no. Winking at another woman is also a no-no. And you were doing all that tonight. Giving that other woman signs that you were interested. So, giving that woman those signs and thinking that you're interested, she’s going to make a play for you. Coming over here and sitting on your lap and whispering in your ear...” I pointedly looked at the woman in his lap.

Ethan got it, so he nodded.

Alec opened his mouth, but again, I wasn’t finished.

“So, with all that, you're honestly surprised that she didn't appreciate watching her man flirt with another woman, wink at another woman, and when said woman climbed in your lap and whispered in your ear with your girlfriend sitting right beside you?”

The woman got what I was saying just then, nodded, climbed off of Alec's lap, and winced, “Yeah, didn't know he was taken.

” Then she looked down at Alec, “You showed me you were on the market and interested. If you have a girl, don't do that shit.

” Then she looked at all of us, “Tell her I'm sorry. ”

Talia smiled at her and winked, “Don't you worry about it. You did nothing wrong,” and then she reached over and slapped Alec upside the back of his head.

Doing the same thing we all wanted to do to him.

The woman walked away.

Vickie had walked away, and Alec was still sitting there, flabbergasted.

Hint, he was still sitting there, not going after Vickie to apologize.

I inwardly groaned.

He just lost her. I was sure of it.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Leaning back, I pulled it from my pocket.

Tapping the screen, seeing whose name was on there, I felt a small smile grace my

lips.

Opening the text, I read Harlee Belle's words.

Darling – Next time hail breaks one of my windows, I'm checking into a motel.

Me – Why?

Darling – Because I don't want to hear my parents having sex.

I snickered and felt eyes on me.

Me – It's awesome that their still in love. Going strong. \*eggplant emoji\*

Darling – I just puked in my mouth.

I chuckled.

Me – Got a question for you.

Darling – Shoot.

Me – You were in a committed relationship, would you be okay with your man flirting with another woman, and letting her sit on his lap and whisper in his ear?

Darling – No, he'd be dead.

Darling – I'd buy the woman a drink.

I glanced up then and found the woman who had sat down in Alec's lap, flagged our server down, and the moment she reached us, with a sway in her hips, I might add,

not interested, I said, “See that woman over there in the glittery top?”

Her shoulders dipped ever so slightly, I held in a smirk, “Take her a drink,” her shoulders straightened back up, and a glint hit her eyes, oh no.

Then I pulled out the so-called alibi, Harlee told me to use, “and tell her that my woman said she would have killed him and then bought you a drink.” Her shoulders dropped again.

She nodded and then strode away.

“Umm, care to share with the class?” Talia asked.

“She helped me get Bridgett to finally back off, told me that any time I needed to pretend I had a woman, she would be my alibi. But only if the woman was being too obvious, if they weren’t, then just tell them I was taken.

” I said, reiterating some of the conversation Harlee and I had while we ate last week.

“And if that woman doesn’t get the hint?” Garrick asked.

I grinned then, “Calling Harlee.”

Talia snickered, “Damn but I love my bestie.”

I had to bite my tongue to prevent the words that wanted to flow from my mouth and shout it to the world, Yeah, I love her too.

\*\*\*

Me – Tell me something funny.

Darling – Are you sitting down?

Me – Lying down. That count?

Darling – Much better.

Darling – Okay. So, do you remember the time that someone spray painted Mr. Brewer's tractor that bright purple color?

Me – Yeah.

Darling – Well, imagine that, but on seven cows who wandered down Main Street.

I snorted.

Then I chuckled.

Me – Are you fucking kidding me?

Darling – \*picture inserted\*

I chuckled.

Me – Jesus Fucking Christ.

Me – Who the hell is doing this shit?

Darling – I haven't a single freaking clue. Just like who changes the population sign.

Me – Or who writes in the Whisper?

Darling – Oh, I have theories on that one.

Me – Do tell.

And that was how Harlee managed to make my time on the oil rig bearable.

This rotation was three months.

Then she got to talking about who she thought could be writing the Whisper.

The Whisper, a newspaper, was a small-town staple, and in the Whisper, you found out things you didn't know.

Mrs. Collins loved to wear frilly pink underwear. She was ninety-eight.

Or like Paul Cantrell was seen coming out of a hotel room, and the woman wasn't his wife, and the man who followed was another woman's husband.

Just like everyone found out about Old Man Travis leaving his estate to his two dogs, and not his two kids.

\*\*\*

Darling – Are you okay?

Me – Can you keep a secret?

Darling – Are you really asking me that?

I shook my head, yeah, I was an idiot.

I can't tell you how many of my secrets Harlee held close to her chest.

Me – Had a close call today. My umbilical cord kinked up on me.

Darling – Fucking hell. You're sure you're okay?

Me – Yeah. Someone would have gotten a call if I weren't.

She didn't know it, but it was she who would get the call.

Darling – I'm not the type of person to tell you not to do something dangerous.

Me – But...

Darling – But you love what you do. I admire that.

Darling – Makes me want to find some high IQ person and ask them to create something that guarantees nothing happens to you when you go down there.

It was her and her light that did that.

But I wasn't going to say that to her.

\*\*\*

What I didn't know... was that the moment my rotation ended in one week, things were going to be changing.

In a massive way, manic proportions.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

Why in the world did I agree to this?

Again, why in the ever-loving hell did I agree to this?

Freaking mom.

That's why.

Said she saw the way Victor Jessup kept eyeing me when I worked at the diner and said that he was a sweet boy.

Sweet boy my ass.

I had just sighed as he eyed another waitress who walked past our table.

Thankfully, my phone chose that moment to vibrate with a text.

Normally, I wouldn't dare touch my phone if I were out somewhere.

However, I needed a distraction to stop me from going all Xena Warrior Princess on this guy's ass and giving him a piece of my mind.

Sin – What are you doing?

I felt the breath in my lungs catch when I looked down at my phone and checked the

time. Here I was hoping that half an hour had just passed, but really, it had only been a few minutes.

But that thought quickly flew out of my head, as my fingers rushed to see what he had sent.

I wasn't even going to snicker at the name I dubbed him in my phone.

Because that way, when Talia looked in my phone, she wouldn't see the messages.

There was nothing wrong with them, but still.

Oh, and the nickname of Sin... he was hotter than sin.

Me – Sitting across from my date.

Me – How many times can someone talk about the different uses of peanut butter?

Sin – Don't get me wrong, I fucking love peanut butter. But... uhhh... what?

Me – Too long to text it all.

And then as soon as I sent him that text, my phone vibrated in my hand.

Before I could look down at it, I heard a flirty giggle, which caused my eyes to glance up.

Just to see our waitress, who had been awesome, smile down at my date, and for my date to smile up at her.

Shaking my head, I read what he said.

Sin – Who's the date with?

Me – Victor Jessup. Mom begged me to accept a date from him. Said she saw how he looked at me. Said he was a sweet boy.

Me – He isn't. He's currently in the process of flirting with our waitress.

Me – Oh, and he's checking out every single woman that walks by our table.

Sin – Where are you?

Me – Milagros.

Sin – I got you covered.

Me – What do you mean?

Silence.

Nothing.

No lighting screen.

No vibration, which could be a bad thing.

A very bad thing. Considering the man that I was texting is far out of my league and all I can think about is having those rough hands run up and down my body.

Harlee Belle Murray, stop it.

I chided myself.

“Umm, excuse me. Is your name Harlee?” At the sound of my name, my gaze jerked up to see a woman in her mid to late forties. Auburn hair pulled back in a classy knot at the nape of her head. White button-down and black slacks.

I shook my head and then mumbled, “Umm, yes.”

“Great. Your husband said that he hopes you got your wild oats sewn tonight. And you better wear that sexy red negligee to bed for him. Because his date was a bust, too. Apparently, she didn’t like it when he told her the reason he really agreed to dinner.”

I felt my cheeks flush scarlet red. And then I snickered. And then that snicker turned to an outrageous giggle, which turned to full-out laughter.

I was laughing so hard I found myself unable to breath, when she said, “Umm just to say, he sounds sexy as fuck. I’d be interested.”

My laughter tapered off, and then I winked at her and pulled up my contact.

His laughter greeted me after the first ring once he picked up.

I waited a beat, put the phone on speaker, and then he finally asked, “Now, how’d I know that this call was comin’?”

“Well, I promised the lovely woman that just delivered your message to me in a room full of people that I would find out if you wanted her to join us.”

His laughter died, instantly, “Well, shit.”

I smirked.

The woman instantly took in the vibe, the waitress that was standing close to my date, said date, who I also noticed had a faint tan line on an important ring finger, and the way he was looking at the waitress's boobs.

Huh, didn't know he was married. Knew my mother definitely didn't know.

"He was calling to distract you and give you a better night from wherever he is, isn't he?" the woman asked.

I smiled at her, huge, "More than likely, but honestly, if that man were my husband, no way in all that's holy would I ever entertain the thought of spending even a nanosecond with another man."

She smiled back down at me, "So, it's like that?"

I nodded, then let something slip I hadn't ever told a single soul about, "He's so far out of my league it's not even funny."

And then... well.... it would seem that the three glasses of wine I had tonight, in the thirty minutes I had been here, had caught up to me.

Literally.

Because my little wine-lidded brain completely forgot that the phone had been on speaker, which was proven true when I heard, "Harlee Belle, I think you have it the other way around."

My wine-lidded brain spoke for me before I could stop myself, my eyes were trained on my phone, when I asked, albeit breathily, "Which part?"

"The part about me being out of your league. Cause, Darling, where I'm sittin' that

title would go to me.”

I scowled, then, “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He said,

“Yeah, it sounded like you said you weren’t good enough for me. And if that’s the case, then that’s the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. Even worse, when Billy Turner told the entire school in ninth grade that he had gone all the way with me.”

Carter was silent then.

And then I heard, in that low raspy tone of his, “He’s been cruisin’ for a bruisin’ for a while. Thanks for giving me the perfect ammunition I needed to go pay that fucker a visit when I get back.”

Then he said, “Okay, gotta get to a meeting, then I gotta get suited up.”

My brain wasn’t too wine lidded to say, “Okay, please be careful.”

“Always, Harlee Belle. Always.” And then the call ended.

The waitress who had come over winked down at me, and asked, “What does he do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I grinned, “You probably know him. It was Carter Griggs.”

She gasped, then she nodded, “Figures. Have a good night.”

I watched her walk away and then looked across the table at Victor.

Who was still talking to our waitress, and I grimaced when I saw her scribble something on a piece of paper and hand it to him.

I looked up at her then and asked, “Can you bring us the check? I think this date is over.”

Her eyes widened at that, and Victor looked shocked.

Seriously?

Just then, a shadow fell over our table. I looked up and then sighed when I saw Garrick. “He called you?”

Garrick shook his head. “Texted me. Wanted me to come pick you up, and to let you know that the moment he gets back into town, the two of you are going to have a conversation.”

I groaned then and promptly face-planted the table. It was even followed by the little thunk of my head meeting the wood.

“Talia is going to kill me,” I murmured, but was muffled by the table.

I heard Garrick snicker, okay, not muffled enough apparently, “Nah, seein’ as she’s waiting in the truck, and is more than likely about to come in here, drag you out, and sit on you until Carter gets home.”

My head jerked up, my gaze colliding with Garrick’s, when I asked, “What?”

“You heard me. She’s been wanting to get you with one of us ever since she met you. Honesty, she was starting to worry.”

I gasped, “Then why the hell did she encourage this date when I told her about it? Why in the hell does she act like she’s cool with Carter and I spending time together and then be bothered by it at other times?”

Why the hell, when we go to the city to a few bars, has she tried to get me to talk to any of the guys? ”

Garrick smirked, “Honey, if you can’t see that she’s showing you different types of men that are so far unlike Carter, then you’re crazy.”

I paused then.

Because that was true.

And at that, I narrowed my eyes up at him, “And how would you know that?”

He rubbed the back of his neck as his cheeks got slightly pink, “Well.... you see...”

I felt my eyes narrow into slits, then I pulled my phone back out and called Carter.

He answered on the second ring, “You with Garrick?”

I snapped, “Not yet. Why do I get the impression that you’ve mentioned me finding a man with Talia?”

“Because I’m not worthy of you, and you deserve better.” He said so low I almost missed it.

But I heard every single word.

And him thinking he wasn’t good enough was a bunch of bullshit, which was why I

snapped, “Yeah, that conversation you wanted to have, don’t fucking bother with it.”

He chuckled, “Harlee Belle, let me...”

I growled wine wine-lidded brain for the epic embarrassment I’m about to have, “No. Damn you, Carter Alexander Griggs. No. I’ve been madly in love with you since I was seven years old.

Seven. Years. Old. And what? Y’all think it’s funny to cram men in my face as if to say, well, it’s clear Carter doesn’t want you because you aren’t good enough for him, so how about we show you the men that you are good enough for.”

“Harls,” it was that pained tone that did me in from my best friend, who I didn’t know had come in.

I hung up, pulled my wallet out, and pulled some cash to pay for my meal, only for the waitress to say, “Oh, honey, your meal is covered.”

I narrowed my eyes and then snapped at the nice woman, who wasn’t so nice right now, because I understood what she was saying.

Carter had done that.

I threw the money on the table and said, “Nobody takes care of me. And especially not some man who I was stupid enough to put on a pedestal and would lay my body down on the line for, and his family thinks I’m not good enough for him.”

And with that, I walked out.

Ignoring Garrick.

Ignoring Talia.

Ignoring my vibrating phone.

I walked home.

Thankfully, I didn't live too far from Milagros.

And in the morning, I would more than likely feel like shit for blowing up at him while he is working, because nothing needs to be in his head other than work, even more so when you are one hundred plus feet down in dark depths.

Talia

I looked at Garrick and then winced, "I feel like shit."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Garrick took his eyes off the road for a second and looked at me. “Yeah, me too.”

His phone started ringing, and when I saw that it was Carter, I winced again.

Garrick sighed, then hit the accept button on his steering wheel, “Brother.”

Then Carter growled, “Want to tell me what the fuck just happened? Who the fuck thinks that Harlee isn’t good enough for me?”

I sighed, “We don’t think that, Carter. Far from it.

I saw the way she looked at you at the last party.

I saw the way your eyes tracked her every move.

And then I started paying attention. I thought that I was helping by showing her guys that were all wrong for her, so she would see what was right in front of her face.

And I was letting you know every time we went out so you would pull your head out of your ass and fulfill one of my dreams.”

I heard him sigh through the speakers, “And what dream would that be?”

“For her to be my sister in real life. I’ve always hated how girls at school treated me after they found out about my brothers, but Harlee never did that.

She didn’t care that my brothers were gorgeous.

She didn't care that half of the county would give their entire life for one night with one of you.

No, all she cared about was when Molly Watson tripped me in the fourth grade. ”

“And you, well, you're my big brother. I remember the day you told me that if a man doesn't seem like it's hard for him to breathe when I walk in a room, then he doesn't deserve me. And if he reacts like that and is too stupid to make a move, then he's not worthy of my love.”

He was quiet, and at first, I worried that I had pushed too far, but I knew I was right. And I knew that he knew it too.

Besides, if I didn't push, I wouldn't be worthy of being called his little sister.

“I hear what you're throwing down,” he said.

Then I heard someone in the background say, “Time to suit up, Griggs.”

And with that, Carter said, “Love you, guys.”

“Love you too, big bro.” I hurriedly said.

Garrick jerked his chin, totally a guy thing, “Back at you, fucker. Stay safe, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Carter replied, and then the cab was silent.

Garrick

After I parked my truck in front of Harlee's house, I debated on what I should do.

Was this the right move?

I honestly didn't know.

Hell, I didn't have any experience in relationships personally, but I had seen what a good woman could do for a man. And I had seen what a good man could do for a woman.

And other than my dad, and Dominik, Carter was the only other man I truly respected.

I sighed, then watched as Harlee's front porch light came on, and I saw her open her door.

She recognized my truck, then ran her hand through her hair, and said, "Well, you coming in to plead your brother's case or are you going to show the town that Maise Albright was right and you're nothing but a creepy stalker?"

I chuckled then, "Fuck me."

Then I climbed out of my cab, shut the door, and walked to her front porch.

The moment I reached her, I pulled my phone and scrolled to the video I had taken one night when Carter was plastered.

Now that I really think about it, it was the same night that Talia and Harlee had agreed to go on a double date when they were both twenty and on break from school.

And Carter's gaze was narrowed on the little punk who was lucky to still be breathing, who had his arm around her shoulders.

“Watch this, then when he gets back, have that conversation, alright?” I asked as I handed her my phone.

Harlee

I narrowed my eyes up at Garrick and then sighed.

On the walk home, I had thought about everything and knew that I was partially in the wrong for blowing up like I did.

But still, I would hear Garrick out.

So, I took his phone, and pressed play.

“My man, what are you talking about?” Garrick asked.

Carter sighed, “I’m talking about Harlee Belle. Harlee Griggs. Damn, but that has a nice ring to it.”

“Uh, last time I checked that wasn’t her last name.” Ethan chimed in.

“Yeah, but it could be, if I was a decade younger.” Carter sighed.

“The fuck does age have to do with it?” Garrick asked.

Carter rolled his head to the side, “Fucking everything. Fuck. The way she lights up a room, the way she twirls a strand of hair when she’s concentrating on something. The way she shows her love with her eyes. Give anything to be worthy of that woman.”

“You are,” Garrick said.

Carter shook his head, “Nah. Won’t do it. She’s got her whole life ahead of her.

“What are you going to do when she gets serious about someone else?” Garrick asked.

“Fucking be there in the shadows, making sure he treats her right,” I could hear the seriousness in his tone.

Ethan chimed in then, “And what are you going to tell the woman you fall for?”

“Remember what Mom told us. Everyone has their true Darling. The one person who can read deep inside our souls and will always be our safe place?”

I guess they both nodded because Carter continued, “That’s what Harlee is to me. She’s my Darling.”

I felt my breath catch.

I recalled all the times Carter would call me Darling. And the one time I got a peek at his phone and was curious that he had my name saved as. It had read Darling.

At the time, I had been on cloud nine when I had seen that... and now.... I felt tears prick at the corner of my eyes.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Operation – Get Carter and Harlee Together Text Thread

Talia – Okay, team. We have an objective. Let's get it done.

Me – Thanks, but I'll take it from here.

Dad – Always loved that girl.

Mom – I'll do everything I can to help.

Garrick – No need. Took care of the problem.

Garrick – Carter, just tell her how you feel when you come home.

Talia – What do you mean? Because last time I checked, and that wasn't too long ago, she didn't seem amenable.

Garrick – Showed her something.

Ethan – Oh dear lord.

Mom – What?

Dad – What?

Alec – Finally. I’m not the last one to know things.

Me – You showed her that video. Didn’t you?

Garrick – How’d you know?

Me – Cause I don’t have a text or a voicemail chewing my ass out.

Me – And I know about that video because one night, when you were drunk, you sent it to me by mistake.

Me – Along with a picture of some woman without a top on.

Silence.

Mom – Now I get it.

Dad – Saw that the first time she tripped and skimmed her knee. Boy, you looked panicked.

Ethan – Well, shit. Now I feel like a bag of dicks for getting onto you about never calling her darlin’ like every southerner I know.

Talia – What are y’all talking about?

Me – Thanks, Garrick.

Garrick – Got your back. Always.

Ethan – Have Garrick show you the video, Tal.

Me – Speaking of that, remember the shit Billy pulled a few months back?

Garrick – Yeah.

Ehtan – Oh yeah.

Dad – Now, I want in on this.

Me – I get back, after I straighten things out with Harlee, make her mine, we've got some shit to talk to Billy about.

Talia – This about what he said about Harlee in the ninth grade?

Mom – What did that little piss ant say about Harlee?

Me – Told the whole school he went all the way with her.

Talia – Told the whole school he went all the way to third base with her and that he won the five-hundred-dollar bet.

Me – What?

Mom – Oh no. No, he didn't. I'm in on this one.

Dad – I'll flay him alive.

Garrick added Dominik to the text thread.

Dominik – I'm in. He told my receptionist last week that she needed to stop eating so many calories because no one wanted to fuck a woman who would snort like a pig every time he entered her.

\*\*\*

She says I'm good enough, even though I don't think I am... going to bust my ass to make sure she never changes her mind.

Because she has always been in my heart.

Lodged so deep inside of it, that I could dig for the rest of eternity, and she would remain right where she was.

Safe.

Protected.

At that, I tapped the tattoo that rested over my heart.

Everyone knew about the tattoo, and the rest that I had.

But no one had looked inside the mechanical gears and read, ' My Incandescent.'

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

Yes, I had been right, that following morning, I had felt like t-total shit for how I'd acted.

I'd also woken up to text messages from the Griggs siblings, as well as Misty and Frank.

Not to mention my mother asking me to call her.

So, I took care of that one first.

She answered on the fourth ring, breathless, rushing around, "I'm so sorry, sweetie. If I'd known he'd act like that, I never would have pushed you to go on a date with him."

"It's fine, Mama. Don't worry about it." I said.

"I'm really sorry. And well, your dad got mad at me, too. Said I'd been missing the way Carter Griggs is with you. Called me a fool. He was right."

After a few more words were exchanged, I asked, "Did you know that Victor is married?"

She gasped. And then she said, "Just you wait until he comes back into the diner."

And Sunday morning, I had received a video of my dad, tossing Victor out on his ass,

all the while saying, “No man disrespects my daughter.”

It had been epic.

Apparently, a day and a half was enough for the Griggs family to let me be and to process everything.

Because Misty, Frank, Garrick, Ethan, Melanie, Alec, Talia, and Dominik pulled into my driveway at two o’clock that afternoon.

At the sight of them, I shook my head and then opened the front door.

They all walked in giving me shoulder squeezes or kisses on the cheeks, but when it was Talia’s turn, she said, “You and me, back porch.”

I smiled at her family, “Make yourselves at home. Be back.”

As soon as I closed the back door, Talia turned to face me and said, “I didn’t mean to ever make you feel as though you were never good enough for Carter. I think what I was trying to do was to show you what was right in front of you.”

“But why would you act like you didn’t mind it, and then other times, it bothered you... The times Carter and I spent time together.”

“It didn’t. Honestly. I don’t know what was up my own ass. I honestly can’t think of anyone more perfect for my brother than you. He can be gruff and hard, but ever since the two of you got close, I’ve noticed a change in him. You bring him peace. If that makes any sense.”

I took in her words and knew exactly what she meant. Over the years, sometimes, I had seen him just going through the motions from day to day.

Talia had been watching my face as I took in her words and thought about what she said.

Then she said, “Can I ask you something?”

I nodded.

“How long?” she asked.

I was confused.

With a furrow in my brow, I asked, “How long what?”

“How long have you been in love with him?” she asked.

I didn’t bother to deny it.

“Since I was seven,” I told her.

She gasped, “And you never told me?”

I shook my head, “Knew you before I knew your brother. You had my loyalty.”

“And if last night never happened? What were you going to do for the rest of your life?”

I didn’t even hesitate with my answer, “I had two different solutions. The first was moving away. The second, adopting a lot of cats and pouring the unused love I had stored, and giving it all to them.”

She laughed but quickly stopped. “You’re serious?”

I nodded.

“Well, now I feel like a bitch for asking you to promise me that all those years ago.”  
She said.

I chuckled, “No. Not a bitch. You just wanted someone who was in your corner and not trying to be a part of your brother’s so-called corner,” I said and waggled my brows.

She shook her head, “Okay, I can imagine they will send someone out here to get us in a few minutes. But unless it isn’t clear, I’m cool with you and Carter. Truly. I just need him to know that I was here first.”

I laughed as I stepped forward and hugged her back, “Love you, Tals.”

She squeezed me in return and said, “Love you, Harls.”

Then we stepped apart and walked back into my house.

The moment we entered my living room, Talia sat down beside Garrick and said, “Now, let me see this flipping video.” Then she held her hand out to Garrick.

Garrick shook his head and then handed his phone to Talia.

Everyone was quiet while Talia watched the video, but we all heard the audio.

Frank was smiling.

Misty was beaming and whispered, “That’s my boy.”

Once the video was over, Talia looked at me, “Blame whatever you need on me. But

have that conversation. Okay? Meant every word I said earlier.”

I nodded.

Alec shook his head, “Still can’t believe I never noticed it.”

Garrick opened his mouth, but it was Misty who cut him off, “If you hadn’t had your dick up some skanky women, you would have.”

Silence.

And then laughter.

“Damn, Mom,” Garrick said as he shook his head.

“What is a dick?” Melanie asked.

Ethan narrowed his eyes at his mother, and the way Misty’s face reddened, that started a whole other round of laughter.

“You expecting company?” Frank asked.

I shook my head, “No, Mom and Dad are at the diner. Y’all are here. Maybe Everly?”

Frank looked out the window and grinned.

I narrowed my eyes at that grin, “What’s that grin for?”

He smirked, “My boy certainly doesn’t dally.”

At his words, I inhaled a deep breath. He wasn’t supposed to be back home for

another three weeks.

What in the world?

Suddenly, the sound of a vehicle door slamming caused me to jump, and then I watched as Garrick stood, strode over to the door, and opened it.

Carter came in then, bypassing Garrick without saying a word.

He also ignored everyone else as he strode over to where I was sitting, and then I watched as Carter knelt on the ground in front of me, took my hands in his, and said, “Will you bitch me out if I kick them all out?”

“No need. We’re going.” Frank said.

Feeling eyes on us, I looked over Carter’s head and saw Misty smile, “You’ve always been a part of this family, Harlee. Let my boy make an honest woman out of you, okay?”

At her words and what they meant, I felt my blush deepen.

Carter’s shoulders were shaking.

Frank pinched the bridge of his nose.

Garrick was the first to ask, “You know what that means, right?”

Talia waited for her to reply, along with Ethan, Alec, and Dominik.

“It means to make her his.” Then she sighed, “What did I just tell him to do?”

Garrick looked at Ethan, “Think you should cover her ears.”

Ethan nodded, then did just that.

Garrick looked at Misty and said, “Make an honest woman out of her, means to take her to bed that very moment and then marry her.”

Misty nodded, “Then y’all got what I meant.”

And with that, she walked out of my house, Frank walking in her wake with a smirk on his face.

“How she manages to shock all of us is beyond me,” Talia said.

I looked back down at Carter, who only had eyes for me, and when we heard the door close, he said, “Been driving for twenty hours. Told the boss I had something important to take care of. I did all that for you. Because I couldn’t go another minute with you thinking you weren’t good enough for me.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Sweet, but don’t you ever do that again. You need to stop and rest.”

He narrowed his eyes right back, “I stopped, I wouldn’t have been resting. Your words have played on repeat in my head.”

Getting his point, I asked, “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Don’t think you can cute your way out of this. I want to know on what planet you thought I was out of your league?”

I sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to let up until I answered him; therefore, I

gestured up and down his body, “Everything about you is so far out of my league it’s not even funny.”

He nodded, “Get that. But why?”

When I kept my lips pressed closed, he shook his head, “Love your stubborn side sometimes. Okay, I’ll tell you why I thought you were out of my league and why you deserved better.”

I opened my mouth to say that I wasn’t, but he kept talking, shooting me a look.

“You’re twenty-four years old, Harlee Belle. You’ve still got your whole life ahead of you. Swear to Christ, when you smile, it’s like having the sun bear down on you for years. With just a fucking smile.”

I nodded, “So, you’re saying I burn you. That’s nice to know.”

He chuckled, “Smart ass.”

“I’m thirty-seven, Harlee. I’ve lived my life. If you decided you wanted to spread your wings and fly, because there’s a great big world out there, I would have stood there and waved you away.”

Then I shared one of my truths, “Why would I want to see all that’s out there, when I had everything, I ever needed right here?”

He was silent, and then he said, “What all do you need?”

“You in my life in any capacity I could have you.”

He winked, “Well, since I want the same thing, what do you say, we both set our

feelings of being unworthy to the side, and make a go of this?”

“And how would we make a go of this?” I asked him.

“Well, haven’t been on a date in well over six years, but I’m guessing that’s our first step. Then we just take it from there. That okay with you?”

I nodded, “Just to clarify, we’re going to make a go of this, in a monogamous relationship?”

He nodded, “Yeah. Just the thought of you with anyone else has me seeing red.”

I nodded because I felt the same way.

Then he lifted my hands that were still clasped in his, and pressed a kiss to my knuckles, then he said, “Okay, get up, let’s go.”

I tilted my head, “Go where?”

“Got my shot with you, not wasting it.” He said as he stood there, waiting.

“Carter, you’ve been driving for twenty hours straight. You need to get some sleep,” I said.

He nodded, “I will. After our date.”

“Carter,” I said.

He smirked, “Normally, that would work, but not this time, let’s go.”

I sighed, “Do I need to change?”

I gestured to the oversized t-shirt and leggings I had on.

He shook his head, “Nope. Look beautiful already. Don’t need you to make yourself even more beautiful and have others see you. I’ll be too slow in kicking their ass.”

At his words, I giggled, then I stood and said, “Okay, but just so you know, I’m not some cheap date.”

He grinned, “I got us covered.”

I shook my head, then placed mine in his as he helped me up.

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And then he wrapped his arms around me, pulled me close, and whispered, “Missed you.”

I smiled into his chest, “Missed you too.”

A kiss was placed on the top of my head, and then he was leading me to my front door, tagging my purse as we went.

Once he locked my door, he led us to his truck.

Opening my door for me, he waited as I climbed in, and only once I was settled did he close the door.

Once he was in the truck, he looked at me, then he winked, “Trust the process, okay?”

I lifted a brow but nodded.

And with that, he winked and then pulled out of my driveway.

Trust the process.

Okay, that was weird coming from Carter.

However, what wasn’t weird was that one of my favorite songs on the radio came on, yes, you guessed it, he turned the volume up.

We were both silent on the ride to wherever he was taking me; it was always like this.

We never needed to talk when we were together.

It was bliss.

What wasn't bliss was when he got out of the truck fifteen minutes later, walked into Gusher's, and I watched as three women came out while he opened the door and smiled up at him.

They were being friendly, I knew that, but... nope, they weren't being friendly.

If they had been, they wouldn't be staring at him.

And me being me, well, I just couldn't help myself.

I opened my door, stood on the step rail, and narrowed my eyes at them, "Hey, he's taken. Quit embarrassing yourselves."

The three of them stopped immediately, cheeks flushed, and then they nodded and hurried to their car.

I nodded.

Then I climbed back in and waited.

Carter walked out of Gushers a few minutes later, shaking his head as my mom and dad walked out behind him, and right to my side.

Since my window was partially down, my dad said, "Have a good time, Harlee. We love you."

I smiled, “Love you guys too.”

My mom winked at me, “Make him work for it.”

I giggled.

Carter chuckled as he handed me the bag.

Ten minutes later, we were pulling into the marina.

With my hand in one of his and his other carrying the bag, he led me to the dock where Misty and Frank had their boat.

He placed the bag of food behind us the moment we were both settled.

I was looking out over the water, as I said, “Don’t ever tell me you're not good enough for me, okay?”

I looked at him once I finished and saw him shaking his head, “Harlee...”

I shook my head, “No. You're one of the best men I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. I call you; you come. I’m scared; you fight my fear. I’m sad, you do something to make me laugh. You’ve been like this my whole life. And honestly, I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Promised myself that if you thought I was good enough, that I was going to bust my ass to prove to you that I was. Still going to do that. And give all of me to you. And I want the same in return. I want all of you, Harlee Belle.”

I smiled, then said, “Can I ask you something?”

He looked at me with a lifted brow, “Okay.”

“Can we really be in a relationship and never have kissed before?” I teased.

He laughed. “We’re us, Harlee Belle. Rules don’t apply to us.”

I smiled.

His eyes dropped to my lips, then I watched as his throat swallowed, and his eyes heated, then he said, “Been wanting to kiss you since you turned eighteen.”

I tilted my head to the side, “Would have made my day, if you had.”

His eyes came up to mine as he leaned closer and whispered, “Had I done that, I wouldn’t have treasured this moment.”

And then he brought his hand up to cup the side of my face, his thumb stroking my cheek.

I tilted my head to the side, craving more of his touch, and then, as he bent his neck slightly, tilted his head to the side, I leaned in, and then... felt everything in the entire world stop.

His lips, full, lush, soft, pressed into mine.

I felt his tongue tease along my lips, and I opened my mouth, welcoming him in.

He pressed closer into me, wrapping his arm around my waist, his fingers clenching into my shirt.

As soon as my tongue came into contact with his, I felt him moan into my mouth, and

that caused me to return the favor. Gladly.

I was so lost and caught up in the kiss that I hadn't heard the whistles from someone who was out on a boat.

And neither had Carter because he was still kissing me, until the moment he slowly pulled his lips from mine, then he rested his forehead against mine, "Better stop."

I nodded, then whispered, "Yeah."

He pulled his forehead away, looked at my lips, smiled, then he looked down at my shirt, cocked his brow, then he looked back up at me, "Come to think of it, that shirt looks awfully familiar.:

I felt my cheeks tinge pink, "Umm."

He winked, "Fucking cute. Looks better on you."

Then he reached back and tagged the bag of food but not before pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

My thigh was brushing his, and when I shifted my leg to give him a little space, his hand came down softly on my thigh, and I stilled, "Been craving your touch for years. Don't take it away from me. Please."

I nodded, and then together we ate the meal my parents had thrown together.

Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and apple pie.

We sat there, talking about our hopes and dreams, and at his sixth yawn, I narrowed my eyes at him.

He chuckled as he shook his head, “Fine.”

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Half an hour later, we were outside my front door.

“Need to tell you something.” He said as he caressed my lips with his own.

I nodded, “Okay.”

He wrapped his big hand around the nape of my neck and said, “When I’m down there in the deepest parts, so fucking dark, you wouldn’t believe, there’s always a little light, guiding me on my way back home. To you.”

I smiled up at him as a tear trailed down my cheek and then smiled even wider when he brought his thumb up and brushed the tear away.

“Be that for you. Happy to,” I whispered.

He winked, “Okay, get some sleep.”

And yes, he didn’t walk away until he heard my locks click in place.

And then I had a thought.

I unlocked my door, just as Carter was halfway down my porch.

At the sound of my door opening, he stopped mid-step and turned his head to look up at me, “You, okay?”

I nodded, “Yeah. But I don’t want you to make the drive home, I know you're tired.

And you said you didn't want me to take my touch away, so umm, wanna stay the night?"

I watched as his body twisted to face me as he came up my stairs, and then his hand was wrapped around the back of my neck, "You sure?"

I nodded, "Yeah. You've got at least half an hour or more of driving. Stay here. With me."

He winked down at me. Don't have to ask me twice, Harlee Belle."

Then, together with his hand in mine, we walked into my house, he flipped the locks, and then I led him to my bedroom.

I went into the bathroom and changed into my pajamas and did what I needed to do.

Carter took his time in the bathroom doing what he needed to do, as I got the bed ready and climbed in.

He opened the door, stepped out, and I felt my thighs clench, seeing him without a shirt on and in his boxers, goddamn.

All that glorious, tanned skin on display, and those tattoos. He was sexy. Oh, so sexy.

He winked at me, "Baby, keep looking at me like that, and I'm going to have to sleep on the couch."

I stopped immediately. It was hard. But I did it.

He chuckled, then he said, "Slide over."

I lifted my brows, “Why?”

“Because I’m your man. I’m here to protect you no matter what. And if god forbid someone breaks into your house, they come through your doorway to your bedroom, they’re going to have to go through me to get to you.”

At his words, my insides melted.

This man.

Freaking hell.

I slid over, and then he slid into bed next to me.

He reached over, turned out the lamp, and then he wrapped me in his arms, curled his body around mine.

Front to front.

And then I whispered, “Glad you're home, Carter.”

He winked, “Wasn’t home until I had you in my arms, Darling.”

And with that, I fell asleep.

What I didn’t know was that Carter lay awake exactly five minutes longer, taking me in, and vowing once again to never cause me to regret choosing him.

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Carter

Waking up in Harlee's bed, well, that was a fucking dream come true.

The only thing that would make this any better was if my rings were on her finger, she had my last name, and my baby was in her belly.

But we would get to that.

I knew that she didn't feel as though I had anything to prove to her, but for myself, I did.

I lay there as I watched her eyelashes flutter.

And then slowly she opened her eyes, and the moment recognition set in, I watched as she smiled, and then she whispered, "Morning."

I winked, then said, "Morning."

I leaned my head and pressed my lips to hers.

She did what she did yesterday, going all in with her kiss.

After a few moments, I lifted my head and said, "Share a secret with you?"

She nodded, "Always."

“Haven’t kissed a woman in six years,” I told her.

She smiled, “Really?”

I nodded, “Never lied to you, Harlee. Never will.”

Then she smiled, “Can I share a secret with you?”

I nodded, “Always.”

She smiled, “Yesterday, I’m glad my first kiss was with you.”

I felt something in my gut tighten, “You serious?”

She nodded, “Yeah. I wasn’t lying when I said I had you on a pedestal, Carter.”

Something inside of me roared in my head, and I didn’t hesitate.

Slanting my head, I kissed her. Hard.

Trying to pour my emotions into a single kiss.

At Harlee’s moan, I shifted my body, so I was atop her.

Her hands came up and ran up and down my arms, the back of my neck, then she tangled her hands in my hair.

I pressed my body into hers, kissing her as her tongue came out and played with mine.

My hand that wasn’t bracing some of my weight moved up her hips to her waist, just

under her t-shirt, my fingers pressing in, feeling the soft skin beneath my fingertips.

Knowing I needed to stop this, but knowing if I didn't, I would do something she wasn't ready to do.

Therefore, I lifted my head, pressed my forehead into hers, and said, "To be your first kiss, you know how to drive me fucking wild."

She giggled, then nodded, "How'd you sleep?"

I winked down at her, "Like a fucking baby."

She smiled, wide, then my stomach chose that moment to growl.

Her head fell back onto the pillows, laughing.

And I stayed right where I was, watching. Soaking it all in.

Never before has anyone seen a more beautiful sight.

\*\*\*

After we both got up and got dressed, she in a pair of jean shorts, and a t-shirt, I had changed into clean clothes I had in my bag.

Harlee was at her stove, cracking eggs after she had made bacon and biscuits.

When I heard her ask, "So, did they say anything when you left early?"

I shook my head, "Nope."

“Really?”

I smirked, “Yeah. Talk about you. They know about you. Saw my face when shit went down, told me to get my ass home and fix it.”

She smiled and then got back to cooking.

Once we ate, I moved her from the sink where she tried to wash the dishes and did them for her.

She was shaking her head and smiling, “This is what I have to look forward to? I cook and you clean?”

I winked at her, “Only fair.”

She nodded, “So, what do you want to do today?”

I looked at her. “Mom and Dad are having a barbecue today. Want to go with me?”

She nodded, “Totally.”

The moment we walked into the backyard hand in hand, hoots and cheers sounded.

My woman was clutched to my side, giggling.

Shortly thereafter, Talia and Mom pulled her away from me. I grumbled playfully when Talia said, “I had her first.”

I was shaking my head as I walked to my brothers and took a seat.

Then I accepted a beer from my dad.

“So, how does it feel?” Ethan asked.

I took a pull from my beer and lifted a brow, “How does what feel?” I asked.

“To be the first of us officially off the market?” Ethan asked.

I opened my mouth to answer him, but Alec opened his mouth and said, “What the hell do you mean? I’m the only one who’s had girlfriends.”

Ethan didn’t say anything to that.

None of us considered Melanie’s mother his woman. Ever.

That was a shitty form of torture I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

I felt bad for Melanie at times, and unfortunately, with the times that I worked, I had missed a lot.

I was taken from my thoughts when my dad reached over and slapped Alec upside his head, “He said officially off the market, boy.”

Alec lifted a brow and tossed out his hands as if to say, duh, “Yeah. And?”

Garrick shook his head, “Ever plan on marrying any of them?”

Alec’s face paled. “No.”

Garrick pointed at him, “That’s our point.”

Alec tilted his head to the side, and we all watched him. Then his eyes widened, “Right.”

I shook my head and looked at Alec, “Keep being you, bro.”

He winked, “I plan on it.”

Then I looked at Ethan and answered, “Feels pretty fucking good.”

Once we ate and played a few games of corn hole, we said our goodbyes.

There was something we did sometimes, and that was to window shop on Main Street.

Therefore, once we loaded up into the truck, we went and did just that.

Only this time, I had Harlee’s hand in mine.

And the looks we both received were totally worth the wait.

Everyone we passed had been happy for us.

Even Mr. Olson.

Mr. Hooper.

Even Bridgett.

We had just stopped at Frozen Tree for milkshakes and were pointing at things we liked. I noticed that the sky was starting to darken; therefore, I looked down at her and asked, “Tell me what you want to do, Darling.”

She stopped, and then looked up at me, biting that bottom lip I wanted to suck between my teeth, “Anything?”

I nodded, “Yeah. Anything you want to do, the world is your oyster, gorgeous, I’m just living in it.”

She gave me that blinding smile that always rocked me to my core, and then her cheeks turned a pretty color of light pink.

I grinned down at her, placed my finger under her chin, so I could stare into those mossy oak-colored eyes, and said, “What is it?”

She bit that bottom lip of hers, and then said, “You said the world is my oyster, right?”

I nodded. Because I meant every word of that.

“Then... what I really want is to be yours.” She said.

I felt something in my chest click into place, had no idea what it meant, but if it pertained to my Harlee Belle, then I was here for it. In every sense of the word.

“You already have me.” I reminded her.

And then... she shocked the ever-loving shit out of me.

She pressed close, her body tight into mine, and then she said, “In every way that counts.”

Harlee

“Be absolutely sure about this, Darling. Cause once I get inside you, I’m never going to want to leave.”

“Never been more sure about anything in my life.”

He waited a beat, standing there, almost waiting to see if I was going to change my mind.

And when I didn't, he swallowed.

“Say it. One more time.” He said.

“I want to be yours in every way that counts. So do it. Make me yours. And give me you. All of you.”

That was all it took.

Clothes were torn off and thrown somewhere in his bedroom.

His eyes devoured my uncovered body, as I did the same.

My eyes locked onto his hard cock.

I licked my lips at the sight of it.

And then I looked up at Carter, only to see his eyes on mine, and then he bent, wrapped his hands around the backs of my thighs, and lifted me.

My legs locked around his waist; I leaned forward and kissed him.

Our tongues came out, and danced, and then I realized we were moving, but we never stopped kissing.

Passion.

Hunger.

You could feel it in the air.

It was heady, filled with excitement.

I felt something soft cover my back as he lowered me down.

His lips moved from mine as he broke our kiss, to trail over my cheek, down my neck, and then to my breasts.

He rested himself between my thighs, as he placed his hands on my waist and slowly moved them up, wrapping them around my breasts.

My body jerked when his thumbs brushed over my nipples.

“Dreamed about these tits, baby.” He said.

“Yeah?” I asked as a smile crept across my face.

I watched as his head lowered, and then he took one nipple into his mouth, tonguing it, teasing it.

His other hand was caressing my other nipple.

And when my hips lifted to rub my sex against him, I swear I felt him smile, and then he moved his attention to my other nipple.

Against my skin, he whispered, “Yeah.”

Would it be wrong if I had no clue as to why he just said yeah?

His hand left my breast as it traveled lower, “Dreamt about this pussy, baby.”

“Yeah?” I asked as I smiled.

I felt his head come up, and then I locked my eyes with his. He winked, “Oh yeah.”

“Keep your eyes locked with mine, alright?”

I nodded.

And then when I felt his fingers trail through my sex, I felt my breath catch.

But I didn’t take my eyes from his.

I felt his fingers move deftly over my clit, and then I felt one finger push into my entrance. at the invasion, my body tensed, and then it relaxed.

My eyes stayed locked with his.

And then he moved that finger in and out, while his thumb traced circles over my clit.

And then he pulled his finger out and replaced it with another one, “Gotta get you ready, baby. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Relax,” he whispered.

At his whispered word, I relaxed my body, and then I felt a third finger in my entrance, and then he moved them in and out of me at a slow leisurely pace, and when he hit a certain spot inside of me, I couldn’t help it.

My back bowed off the bed, but my eyes stayed locked with his.

And then... at that feeling that all of this felt so right.

With him.

With what he was doing to me.

Playing my body like a bow string, I felt it.

The heat rising in my body, and then, I gasped, as my toes curled and I experienced my first orgasm.

So, that was what all the talk was about.

I hadn't realized I had said that aloud, when Carter smiled, winked, then said, "Part of it."

His fingers were still buried deep inside of me when he asked, "Gotta ask."

I nodded as I slowly came down from that particular brand of high.

"You on birth control?" he asked.

I nodded, "Yeah. Talia and I both are. We both have horrible periods."

He nodded, then he said, "You okay if I go bare?"

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I nodded, “Promised me all of you, Carter. I want it.”

He winked, and then... undoubtedly the hottest thing I had ever seen, he pulled his fingers from my entrance and slid them into his mouth. His eyes closed, as he moaned, “Better than any fucking fantasy.”

“Next time, I’m going to feast in your pussy. But not this time. It’s been six years since my cock has known anything other than my hand. And I can’t wait a second longer.”

I nodded.

I got that, I totally did.

And I knew that I would process his words later.

But I knew one thing.

He has wanted me and been loyal to me for far longer than I ever knew.

I knew something else.

I never had to worry about this man ever cheating on me.

And that feeling.... There was nothing like it.

“You need me to stop, you say stop. I’ll do it immediately. Okay.”

At my nod, he lined his cock up at my entrance, and then he said, “Darling, eyes on me.”

Once I had my eyes locked with his, he slowly entered me.

I watched his eyes as he pulled out and then pushed forward.

He gritted his teeth, “Fuck. Tight. Fucking perfect.”

He pulled out, and then back in a little more, and he repeated that process.

Filling me up, so full, a fullness I’ve never known before.

It took everything I had, trying to battle the need, the want, to close my eyes and revel in the euphoric sensations I was feeling, but I did it.

My eyes clashed with his, and I knew, knew that had I closed my eyes, I wouldn’t have seen the heat in his oceanlike eyes. The want, the crave, but most importantly, the love.

A kind of love that I’ve only seen twice in my lifetime.

The love that Frank had for Misty.

And the love my parents shared.

And I wanted it. Needed it. Craved it.

But only with Carter.

Only ever with him.

He pulled out, and then slowly pushed his way back inside of me, making love to my body, showing me what was deep inside of him.

Words weren't needed.

I had read that in a romance book.

When true love was at stake, words were never needed.

Just like now.

Just like tonight.

And just like the very moment I fell in love with Carter.

He started moving a little faster, and I saw it.

The strain his muscles were dealing with.

The tightening of his jaw.

And at that sight, I whispered, "Carter, stop holding back."

He shook his head, "I do that. I hurt you. Never fucking do that."

I looked into his eyes, lifted my hand and wrapped it around his neck, and said, "The Only way you hurt me is if you're in pain. So, stop holding back. All of you. Remember?"

His eyes drilled into mine, and then he nodded, "All of me. All of you."

And just like that, he pulled out, and then with one hand wrapped around my waist, the other holding up his weight, he slammed back into me.

My back bowed, my muscles tightened as I said, in a moan, “Again. Please.”

He pulled out and then slammed back into me.

Over.

And over.

Thrusting inside of me, so fast I had to force myself to breathe so as to not get lost in the feelings he was bringing to the surface from somewhere deep inside of me.

And then... when he slammed back in, hitting that spot, I felt my body clench.

The feeling.... There wasn't anything like it.

And then he did it again, and again, and again.

My eyes stayed locked with his, and then... he whispered. “Give it all to me, Harlee Belle. All of it.”

I nodded, and then when he slammed back in and hit that spot, my entire body went up in a myriad of fireworks.

He pulled out and slammed inside of me one more time, and then, he was coming with me.

I heard him moan my name as he came.

His face buried into the side of my neck as I felt his cock jump inside of me.

My body was tingling with sensations, as I said, “Okay. Now I really see what all of the fuss was about.”

Carter burst out laughing.

His head lifted, his eyes were shining, and he was smiling, “Only you, Harlee Belle. Only you.”

I winked.

He stayed where he was for a few minutes, and then he slowly pulled out of me, and at the sight of the blood on his cock, he looked at it, then looked at me, and grinned.

And then he climbed out of bed, but not before he placed his hand on my cheek and whispered, “Might not have been my first, but you're going to be my last. Honored as fuck to be your first. Your last. And your only.”

And then I watched his sexy ass go into the bathroom.

He was out moments later, with a washcloth in his hand.

And then he winked, and said, “Spread ‘em.”

I laughed and then did as he asked, and I watched as he cleaned me up.

And when he was done, he leaned forward, pressed a kiss on my belly, and then he went and tossed the washcloth into the laundry basket.

Once he was back in bed, he wrapped me in his arms, with my head pillowed on his

chest, and then he whispered, “Best I ever fucking had, Harlee. Hands down.”

At his words, I let everything that happened flow through my body.

There wasn’t a part of my body that Carter didn’t reside in.

“Would it be wrong for me to ask about your past partners and put itching powder in their underwear?”

His chest moved, and then he burst out laughing.

Little did he know, I was being completely serious.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

Normally, on the fourth, we would take the boat out, hook up with a few others, grill out, and watch the fireworks.

However, a big storm was set to blow in a matter of hours.

Harlee had the idea of gathering at someone's house and having a cookout and doing fireworks there.

The only place that had a covered area was mine.

When she had looked at me, I winked, "It's cool."

I sighed as I finished picking up the last of the clothes in the living room and tossing them into the washer.

I had just walked back into the kitchen where she was cooking.

Again.

The table was already littered with food.

"Harlee Belle, the fuck are you doing now?" I asked her.

She smiled up at me, "You've seen how much you and your brothers put away, right?"

I looked at the food, thought about it, and nodded, “Just tell me to shut up next time, okay?”

She grinned, then got back to making a few more dishes of food.

I had offered to help, I truly did, but she had laughed in my face, “I love you, Carter Alexander Griggs, but you can’t cook for shit.”

Yeah, I still felt bad when I made her chicken last week, and the chicken wasn’t done in the middle.

I felt like total shit when she was puking.

She had banished me from ever cooking for her again, unless I took some cooking lessons.

Garrick was the first to show up with Dominik.

Alec showed up then Ethan and Melanie.

Talia walked in with Lila and Everly, heading to the kitchen to offer their help.

Darla and Peter showed up at the same time mom and dad did.

And when Misty, Darla, and Peter headed to the kitchen to help, my woman smiled at them and said, “Please don’t take this as rude, but I don’t want any of you in my kitchen.”

No one commented on the my kitchen comment.

Because, since I was hers, everything I had was hers.

Peter, Misty, and Darla all lifted their brows.

Then Harlee sighed, “Mom, Dad, y’all are in the diner seven days a week, cooking for the masses. You’re not doing it here. Misty, you’ve cooked all the meals for your family. Take a load off, please.”

Peter nodded, then looked at her, “Beer?”

She lifted her chin to the fridge.

Talia walked over to it, opened it, and grabbed a beer for Peter.

She handed it to him, and then she reached into the cooler on the counter and grabbed two wine spritzers. Then she handed them to Mom and Darla.

Mom walked over to where I was, knowing what she wanted, I bent, and offered her my cheek.

She kissed it, and then she whispered, “If you don’t make that girl my daughter, I will never forgive you.”

She hadn’t said it quietly enough because Darla and Peter had heard her.

Darla winked at me, and Peter said, “You already have our blessing.”

Well. Shit.

I looked over at Harlee, catching me looking, she lifted a brow.

I threw up my hands, “Okay, I’m going.”

Then I headed to the covered back porch where everyone was seated already.

However, before I could sit down, a knock sounded on the door.

I turned and headed for it.

Everly was set to open it, which had me lifting a brow, “No woman in my house opens the door.”

Her cheeks got pink, and then she nodded.

Opening the door, I smiled at Granger.

“Hey man, glad you could make it,” I said as I offered Granger a shake and a slap on the back.

He grinned, “Thanks for having me.”

Just then, Tatum stepped in behind him.

And at the sight of her, Harlee squealed, then rushed to her.

Granger and I shared a look and then shook our heads.

“Come on in, and I’ll introduce the two of you to everyone,” I told him, as I waited for my woman and Tatum to move, then I closed the door.

Harlee led Tatum to the kitchen, but not before she called out, “Hey, Granger.”

He chuckled, “Hey, Harls.”

I led him to the kitchen and waited for Harlee to finish introducing Tatum to the women.

Once she was done, and they laughed and hugged, I said, “Guys, this is Granger. Granger, that’s Lila, Everly, and my little sister, Talia.”

They all waved at him, and then I led him to the back porch.

Once I introduced him to everyone, he took a beer Garrick had pulled out, held it out to him, and said, “Okay, start.”

Granger took the beer, popped the cap, and then handed it to my mom, who had her hand out.

She pocketed it in the bucket I had behind her chair.

He took a pull, then asked Garrick, “Start what?”

“The stories about Carter. Know you have some.” Garrick said.

Granger looked at me, and I sighed, “Okay, well, here’s one. So, we got off the rig, headed to this little hole-in-the-wall bar there on the coast.”

I knew what story he was about to tell. Fucking hell.

“So, we get there, we’ve been there before. So anyway, the woman behind the bar always flirts with us and shit. Trying to latch onto one of us. Anyway, she hadn’t tried anything with Carter. Until that night.”

He took a pull from his beer, then he continued, “So she’s trying to flirt with him, and he’s pretending like he can’t hear her over the crowd and the music, so this woman

gets mad.

I mean, her cheeks are red, her fists are clenched, and everything.

She gets up on the bar, and then at the top of her lungs, she says, I'm pregnant with that man's baby, and he refuses to acknowledge it. "

Ethan's eyes were wide.

Garrick was shaking his head.

Dominik chuckled.

Alec leaned forward, grinning.

My mom and Darla weren't paying us any attention as they were chattering away.

My dad and Peter were leaning on the railing, just listening.

"So, the moment the last word leaves her mouth, Carter drops his head and sighs. Then he says, 'Woman, I haven't had sex in a long fucking time. So, tell me, how in the ever-loving fuck, I knocked you up'?"

"She says, and I quote, You wanted to wait for our wedding night, but you wanted me rounded with your baby in my belly, so we used a turkey baster ."

Drinks flew out of mouths, and coughs sounded.

I shook my head, then looked at Granger, "Really? My mom is right there."

Granger looked over his shoulder and then shrugged his shoulders, "She brought you

into this world.”

My mom stopped talking long enough to wink at Granger, and then she was back talking to Darla.

Alec was laughing his ass off when Ethan asked, “What happened then?”

“We had thirty Mexicans coming at us, looking pissed. Until a woman walked in, then stormed to the bar, got right in her face, and said some rapid-fire angry Spanish words at her. I looked at Carter, he looked at me, and then we got the hell out of there.

I nodded, “Heard through the grapevine that the bartender was indeed pregnant. With her sister’s husbands, baby.”

Just then, Harlee came to the back porch, leaned down, and kissed my cheek, then she straightened and said, “Food is ready.”

And my little brother, the shit head, stood up first and raced by me; however, I stood up, and grabbed the back of his shirt collar, jerking him back.

Then I said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “My house. My rules. My woman cooked, she fixes her plate first. Then the rest of the women. Then us.”

Alec whipped his head around. “Seriously?”

I nodded, “Deadly.”

“Going to have us doing the dishes too?” Granger asked.

I nodded, “Yep.”

“Raised him right,” Misty said with a smile.

As soon as we entered the kitchen, my woman was standing to the side, with Lila, Everly, and Tatum.

Harlee was telling her who everyone was.

And she pointed at Garrick... I watched my brother Garrick and saw something I’ve never seen in his eyes.

Interest.

Well. Shit.

I jerked my chin at Harlee and got her attention, then I said, “Fix your plate first, baby. Then the rest of the women.”

She lifted a brow, “Why?”

“First, you cooked. Second, learned a long time ago, a man who doesn’t make sure his woman has all she needs, then he isn’t a man worthy of her smile. Third, don’t even think about doing the dishes.”

Her cheeks flushed, then she nodded and moved to make her plate.

Lila sighed as she moved in behind my woman, “Harlee, clone him.”

Everly giggled as she followed Lila, “Ditto.”

Tatum chuckled and then followed Lila.

Talia gagged, “I have enough brothers, I don’t need any more.”

Mom walked past me, wrapped an arm around my waist, squeezed, and then she too went to make her plate.

Darla had hers made, and then she looked up at me and mouthed, “Thank you.”

As soon as their plates were made, the rest of us moved to the food.

Dominik clapped me on the back, “If I ever find a woman, remind me to never let her around you.”

I lifted a brow, “Why is that?”

He shook his head, “Because you're going to make me look bad as fuck.”

Garrick chuckled, “What he said.”

Ethan nodded, “I’m with them.”

Alec nodded.

Peter slapped me on the back.

Dad looked at me and winked, “Proud of you, Carter. So damn proud.”

Granger sighed, “And I’m fucked.”

Every eye came to him as he took a bite of the potato salad she had made, and he moaned.

“Gonna have to hunt to find a woman like Harlee. You lucky bastard.”

I laughed.

Drinks in hand, we headed out to the back porch, and I was grateful my parents had dropped off chairs earlier in the week.

Once her food was rightfully demolished, yes, my woman had been right.

Seconds and thirds were filled to the brim.

Once I had the dishwasher loaded, Ethan stepped up and started washing the dishes. Alec was drying them as Granger put them where they went.

Dominik was cleaning the table and counters.

Garrick was sweeping.

We could all hear the women laughing.

My dad was sitting on a bar stool and sighed, “Good people. Good food. Nothing like it.”

Peter, who was sitting beside him, nodded.

\*\*\*

We were on the back porch, not even twenty minutes later, when Granger asked, “Still cool with you?”

He was referring to when he asked if Tatum could hang out here with the girls while

he and I headed to work in a few days.

I looked at where my woman was sitting with Talia, Lila, Everly, and Tatum, and saw it, she indeed fit right in. Then I nodded, “Totally.”

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

He looked at her and then back at me, and nodded, then he asked, “The fuck is up with your brother?”

I chuckled, then shook my head at where Garrick was leaning against the wall, close as fuck to where they were sitting but out of eyesight.

“Got no fucking clue. Can say, never seen him like this,” I told him.

“Well, he’s your brother, so, know he’s a good man. Long as it ain’t Alec,” he said with a hint of disgust in his tone.

I laughed, “I agree with you there, man. Love Alec to death, but something is seriously wrong with him. It’s going to take a special kind of woman to shape that kid up.”

\*\*\*

Dominik was out in the yard with Garrick and Granger, getting the fireworks ready.

Harlee was cuddled to my side.

She twisted her head and pressed a kiss over my heart when she said, “Thank you.”

I looked down at her, “For what, baby?”

“For this. You didn’t have to let us use your house.”

I leaned back, brought my hand up, placed one finger under her chin, lifted her head.

The moment I had her eyes, I said, “Plan for this house to be our home, Darling. Why wouldn’t I be okay with it?”

I watched as a slow smile formed on her face, and then that blinding one that always caused my heart to stutter.

Just then, they lit the fireworks.

And since it had cleared up just enough with the rain, we all moved out from under the porch, hanging and watched.

Something caught my eye, and I watched as Dominik moved, but where he moved shocked the shit out of me.

Hmmmm.

He moved directly behind Talia and stood there.

\*\*\*

To say I loved our friends, and our families would be an understatement.

But I had waited all day to have Harlee where I wanted her.

And the reward, as she moved up and down on my cock, on top of me... had been worth it.

So goddamned worth it.

\*\*\*

I had just stepped onto the chopper that would take us to the oil rig when my phone vibrated.

Darling – Be careful.

Me – Always am.

We were on day four of being on the oil rig, and I had just come from the deep and was resting in my bunk with Granger in his when my phone vibrated.

Curmudgeon Text Threat

Alec – I need some help.

Me – What did you do?

Alec – Who says I did anything?

Talia – It's you.

Ethan – What Talia said.

Garrick – Fuck. Me.

Alec – I want different siblings, y'all are assholes.

Me – Fine with me. You drive me insane.

Garrick – Bat shit crazy.

Ethan – I'm with them.

Talia – What they said.

Me – What do you need bro?

Alec – Well, I might have pissed someone off, and umm, I woke up with my dick and my balls glued to my thigh.

I read that and I froze.

The entire group chat was silent.

No one said anything.

Alec – Umm, I need help.

Garrick silenced notifications.

Talia added Mommy-kins to the chat.

Talia – Mom, you keep asking why we ask you if you dropped Alec on his head as a child. Just read up.

Mommy-kins – He's not that bad. Really, all of you....

I was pretty sure she gasped as she got a look at what had occurred and hit the send button.

I pocketed my phone and sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“You, okay?” Granger asked.

I looked at my best friend and shook my head.

He was on alert immediately, “Harlee?”

I shook my head, “Nah, she’s fine. It’s my idiotic brother.”

He groaned, “What did Alec do now?”

“He pissed a woman off, and she glued his dick and his balls to his leg while he was sleeping.”

My phone buzzed.

I pulled it out and read it.

Alec – I called her by a different name while I was inside of her.

Mommy-kins – You are on your own. Jesus Christ, Alec. What the absolute fart in space is the matter with you?

Ethan – Ummm.

Talia – Now you get it.

Me – You deserved what she did.

Alec – It gets worse.

Talia – Oh god. How much worse?

Ethan – It gets worse?

Me – Fuck. Me. What. Did. You. Do?

Talia – Shouty capitals. Shit.

Mommy-kins – Not even going to get onto either of you for your language.

Mommy-kins – Alec? Start talking.

Alec – I called her by her mother's name.

Silence.

Fucking Silence.

Granger looked at me and asked, "Why'd she do it?"

I sat there for a moment. Stunned.

Then I told him, "He called her by another woman's name while he was inside of her."

Granger lifted a brow, "The woman's name he used?"

"Yeah?" I asked, not wanting to repeat it.

However, Granger didn't waiver.

"It was her mother." I dropped that bomb.

And then I watched as Granger did the same thing as I had. Sat there and thought about it. Stunned.

“He deserves everything she does to him for that shit. Fuck.”

Need For Speed Text Thread

Harlee – So can y’all confirm a rumor I heard?

Talia – Shoot,

Me – Let’s hear it.

Garrick – I don’t mind this chat at all. What’s up?

The need for speed group chat was started by Harlee when we were at our parents’ house for Sunday dinner, and we had all jumped up from the table and raced into the living room when the opening song of our favorite movie of all time started playing.

Harlee – Did Alec really get his pecker and balls super-glued to his leg?

Talia - \*snickering\* oh yeah.

Garrick – Fucker deserved it.

Me – He sure as shit did.

Harlee – Wow.

Harlee – Why?

Talia – He was fucking his girl. Called her by another woman's name.

Harlee – He didn't. \*groaning\*

Garrick – Sure as shit did.

Garrick – It was the girl's mother's name.

Harlee – wait.

Harlee – Are you serious?

Harlee – It's you, so I know you're serious.

Harlee – Ewwwwww.

Harlee – Yeah, fucker deserved it.

I chuckled.

Me – What would you have done, Harlee Belle?

Harlee – I would have probably done the same thing and then called the girl's father and told him where he could find Alec.

Garrick – Vicious.

Talia – I love you rotflmao.

Me – Remind me to never piss you off.

Harlee – You won't. You know better.

Yes. Yes, I did.

Me – Yes, ma'am.

Garrick – Any other rumors?

Harlee – Not yet.

Forty-five minutes later...

Talia – Garrick, why'd you tell Dominik about that guy?

Garrick – He asked.

Harlee – Oh shit.

Me – Wait. What guy?

Darling calling.

\*\*\*

“So, who bought Miller's old place?” I asked her.

She grinned, “Who does the world refer to as Beast?”

It took me a minute. My brain tried to think about it. And then I gasped like a woman.

Well, like this particular woman.

And I fucking loved it.

Because it caused her to giggle.

“No fucking way!” I exclaimed.

She nodded, “Yes, way. And I can definitely say that the cameras didn’t do the man justice.”

I quit smiling and then narrowed my eyes, “Is that right?”

She nodded, “Oh yeah, the man is fine.”

I flipped her over onto her back, then nipped at her bottom lip, “Take it back.”

She shook her head, “It’s okay for men to talk about other women, but not for women to talk about other men?”

“You’re playing with fire, Harlee Belle. Take. It. Back.”

She lifted a brow, “What are you going to do if I don’t?”

“Well, first, I’m going to fuck you so hard that you forget you ever laid eyes on that fucker. Then second, I’m going to leave you sated in my bed while I go beat the dog shit out of him so you don’t think he’s good looking anymore.”

“My god, I watched him take his shirt off the other....”

She didn’t finish her sentence.

I reached down and ripped the threadbare shorts from her body, lined my cock up to

her entrance, and threatened, “Last chance.”

She smirked, “And the way his abs flexed when he...” She didn’t finish.

I plunged my cock into her tight heat.

And did as I promised.

We were panting, hours later, when Harlee rolled over into my side, tangling one of her legs with mine, her head pillowed on my chest, where she said, “Happy Early Birthday, Carter Car.”

I narrowed my eyes at the top of her head, “You pricked my temper to give me an early birthday present?”

She nodded.

I sighed, this woman.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

I pressed a kiss to his neck and then said, “Okay, I need to go home, get showered, and changed, or I’m going to be late.”

“Take a shower here,” he said as he whispered against my lips.

And the thought of using his bathroom, the same place he washed his magnificent body, I found myself nodding.

I had the water started and had taken off my clothes, then I stepped into the shower.

Letting the hot water wash over me for a few minutes, and then I looked down at his shower caddy... and froze.

What in the world, “Umm, Carter?” I called out.

I watched through the glass as he stepped into the bathroom, “Yeah. Everything okay?”

“Care to tell me why there are bottles of shampoo and conditioner, the very brand I use, and the very same ones?” I asked.

Then I slid the door open and watched him.

He was leaning against the doorframe, as his hand came up to cup the back of his neck, his cheeks-tinged pink.

They.

Tinged.

Pink.

“Can I plead the fifth?” he asked as he looked at me.

Slowly, I shook my head, “Not a chance.”

He sighed, “This may very well go down to one of my most embarrassing moments, but for you, I find myself not caring in the slightest.”

I nodded, then gestured for him to start explaining.

“Remember the night of your prom?” he asked.

My brows furrowed. Where was he going with this? But I nodded.

“I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of your head, inhaled the scent, had to go to eight stores to find the right scent.”

I didn’t know what to say.

It wasn’t often that I was rendered speechless.

My mind went back to that night... six years ago.

That memory had often replayed in my mind over the years, along with a few others that have stuck with me over the years.

My eyes went back to the bottles, then to him. I whispered his name softly, “Carter.”

He stepped from the doorway and came to me, the moment I was within reaching distance, his hands came up and cupped the sides of my cheeks, “Told you. Only ever been you.”

My response... well... it was something I hadn’t ever done before, but I read enough books, so I winged it.

I smiled, then leaned up on my tiptoes, placed a kiss to the underside of his jaw and then softly, I said, “Need you in this shower with me.”

He lifted a brow, but nonetheless, took off his clothes and got into the shower with me.

Hands roamed lips pressed together.

Tongues danced.

And then... I dropped to my knees.

“Harlee Belle....” he started.

His cock was already hard and at the sight of it, I let out a moan, and then I whispered, “That’s not what you call me.”

“Darling,” he rasped out.

I felt my lips tug into a grin.

Then I moved.

I swirled my tongue over the tip of his cock and then took him as deeply as I could.

Moving my hand up, I worked it in tandem with my mouth.

Taking him as deeply as I could go, all the while swirling my tongue around and around his cock.

“Baby, don’t want me coming in your mouth, you need to stop.” He said with a rasp.

I wasn’t stopping.

Carter had promised all of himself to me.

And I wasn’t settling for anything less.

“Baby,” he moaned.

I moved my mouth sucking hard on the head of his cock, as I worked my hand faster around his length.

And then I felt his cock starting to swell, as he moaned my name, “Harlee Belle. Last. Chance.”

I didn’t stop.

I kept doing what I was doing.

And then... I felt it.

And tasted it.

Hot bursts of cum filled my mouth, coating my tongue, working my throat I swallowed every last drop.

Then I licked him clean, making sure I had all of him.

Once I did, I pulled away from his cock and then stood up.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then crowded into me. My back was against the shower with his front plastered against mine.

Against my lips, he whispered, "Don't think I'm not returning the favor.

I was so in love with this man; it wasn't even funny.

I nodded, "Tonight."

He nodded, "Fine."

Then I felt his fingers.

Running through my sex, and then when his fingers moved to circle my clit, my head fell back, and I moaned.

He made me come with his fingers alone, his lips and tongue teasing along the side of my neck.

And then... he did the most sexist thing alive.

He washed and conditioned my hair for me.

\*\*\*

Needless to say, I was indeed late to work. About an hour and a half late.

But it had been so worth it.

Everly smiled when she saw me, “Happiness looks good on you, boss.”

And yes, that night, before he had to leave to go to work, he made good on his promise.

The way he could work his tongue... freaking miraculous.

Twice.

\*\*\*

I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take.

Lila had asked earlier in the week if a coworker of hers could join our girls' night.

We had all agreed.

And as I caught Everly's eyes, she rolled them.

I felt the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I didn't even have to turn around; I knew who had just walked into the bar.

I smiled as I took a sip of my drink.

The girls were talking about a new band that had come onto the scene when Hillary made a snide remark about how she was probably the only one of us in the group who

could land a guy like him.

Lila looked at her and lifted a brow.

Talia looked at her with disgust all over her features.

And Everly just sighed.

Then Hillary looked at me and snidely asked, “So. Where’s that man of yours at?”

I grinned, then I looked over at the bar and pointed to him, “Right there.”

Her jaw dropped. “He’s been there this whole time?”

I nodded, “Yep.”

“Talk about possessive.” She said with a roll of her eyes.

It took everything I had in me not to snap at her. Talia’s eyes met mine as she rolled them.

“Yeah, I believe this is the first and last time we will ever hang out,” I said.

“What? Why? It is possessive. I mean, does he not trust you or something?” Hillary asked.

I shook my head, “It’s not that. And honestly, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

With that said, I grabbed my drink, and stood up, Talia followed suit, as did Lila, and Everly.

But it was Talia who said, “He just got back from being gone for a month, literally, rolled into town, and all he wanted to do was to be wherever she was because he missed her. He didn’t even go home to shower or anything, just came straight here. That’s not possessive, that’s love.”

And with that said, we all headed to the bar.

We stopped our waitress on the way, and handed her cash for our drinks, but she winked at me, “Your drinks have already been taken care of.” Then she looked at me, and winked, “You got a good man, honey.”

I winked back and smiled, “I do. Thank you.”

We had just rounded the right side of the bar, and my man saw us coming, read the undoubtedly still heated look on my face, looked around me, and narrowed his eyes at Hillary.

I smiled as I reached him and shook my head, “She’s not worth it,” I said as I walked into his arms he had just opened.

The moment I was wrapped tightly in his embrace, he buried his face in my neck and let out a long breath, “Fucking home.”

I couldn’t help the soft smile that graced my face as my eyes closed, and then I whispered, “I love you, Carter.”

I felt his body tense, his face reared back, his eyes drilled into mine, showing me everything I’ve ever wanted.

“Say it again,” his voice was raspy and broken.

I smiled, “I love you, Carter.”

I had just finished moving my lips with the last syllable in his name when his hand fisted in my hair, tipping my head to the side, and then his mouth was on mine.

You know that saying when you kiss the right one and the world just falls away?

Well, it’s not just a saying.

The bar quieted down, so quietly, it felt as though we were the only two people on the planet.

The moment his lips pulled from mine, his forehead rested on mine, and he whispered, “I love you too, Darling.”

“I need a man,” Talia said as she fanned herself with her hand.

“Same,” Lila said with a small pout.

Everly sighed, “Ditto.”

Carter chuckled then lifted his head, licked his bottom lip, and said, “Go find a table, baby. Finish your girls’ night.”

I really didn’t want to do that.

I wanted to stay right where I was, wrapped up in his embrace.

However, Talia, Lila, and Everly had other ideas.

They both grabbed my arms and hauled me away from him. He smiled and shook his

head, then spun in his stool so I was in his line of sight.

It was maybe half an hour later when I heard Lila giggle, then jerk her chin towards the bar.

I saw a woman talking to Carter, trying to lean in.

The keyword in that was trying.

He shook his head, stood, and then said something to her, and pointed right at me, and when he did that, I crooked my finger at him, and said to my girls, "I'm calling it a night."

\*\*\*

"Leave the fucking heels on, baby," he growled against my lips.

"You like them?" I asked.

"Like them so much I'm stopping myself from going back to the bar and beating the shit out of every motherfucker who saw you in them."

And at that... my panties got wet.

Needless to say, I planned on wearing heels a little more often.

I was definitely wearing them when he was inside of me, pounding hard and deep.

His moan when he filled me had me digging my heels in his back, as he whispered, "Doing that again."

I nodded. Definitely.

\*\*\*

As my eyes closed, his fingers were running through my hair, and then he whispered, “Love you more than words can say, Harlee Belle.”

I smiled, then snuggled even deeper into his embrace, and murmured, “Love you more than words can say times infinity.”

He chuckled, “Always have to have the last word?”

“Only with you,” I whispered.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head and said, “Only ever with me.”

That was the last thing I heard before I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

With Harlee wrapped in my arms, her back to my front, her ass nestled perfectly against my groin, I groaned when I heard my phone ringing.

Well, I groaned at that particular ringtone.

Sighing, I carefully extracted my body from Harlee's, pressed a kiss to the back of her neck, rolled, and tagged my phone.

Seeing Caulson's name, I answered it and said, "Hello?"

"Hey C-dawg, had a man call out. You want it?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose when I asked, "When would you need me?"

After he told me the details.

I hung up and then curled my body back around Harlee's.

Intending to get a few more hours of sleep.

However, my woman had other plans.

Daddy-Kins & Mommy-Kins Text Thread

Me – Got a call out. Leave tomorrow morning. Rotation is for a month.

Mommy-Kins – Okay, baby boy. Be safe. Love you.

Daddy-Kins – Keep an eye on the weather. Supposed to be a storm hitting at the end of the week.

Garrick – On my way.

Talia – Be there in ten.

Alec – Damn. Won't be able to make it.

Mommy-Kins – Language.

Ethan – I'm on my way.

Alec – Come on, Mom. I'm 34 years old. Give me a break.

Daddy-Kins – I swear we were given the wrong baby at the hospital.

Garrick – We've been saying that for years.

Me – I just can't wait to see what Mom's payback is going to be.

Talia – \*rubbing hands together\*

Mommy-Kins – Don't you dare come to my house this weekend. No Chocolate 7-Layer Cake for you.

Alec – Sorry. Sorry. So, sorry!!!!

Mommy-Kins – Too late.

Alec – What can I do?

Mommy-Kins silenced notifications.

Garrick – Oh, damn.

Ethan – Oh, shit.

Talia – What they said.

Me – You done fucked up, boy.

Daddy-kins – You worry me.

\*\*\*

Once my family had left, Harlee was sitting curled into my side, with my arm around her shoulders as I watched whatever she had on the TV.

I was getting into it too.

It was pretty fucking cool.

She reached forward, tagged the remote, paused it, and then went to the kitchen.

While she was gone, I was running through the rotation I would be working when I heard popping in the kitchen.

I smiled as I shook my head.

She came back moments later with a bowl of popcorn and two drinks.

Handing one of the sodas to me, she sat down, took a sip of hers, and set it on the coffee table.

“How much do you love this show?” I asked her as she settled back into her place at my side with her bowl of popcorn.

She tilted her head to the side and said, “Well, I’ve watched the entire show all the way through three or four times.”

I thought about it for a split second and said, “You really love this show?”

She smiled, nodded, then popped a piece of popcorn in her mouth.

Since I was getting into it too, I said, “So, my question is that you won’t watch any more of it until I get back?”

She smiled, then she nodded, “Anyone else asked me that, I’d say no.”

I pressed a kiss to her lips, and then tagged the remote, and pressed play.

And wouldn’t you know it, but it was perfect.

I had my woman in my arms, a bowl of popcorn, a show playing, and it was a Friday night.

Nothing fucking beat it.

It was all because of the woman at my side.

\*\*\*

Taking her face in my hands, I pressed a soft kiss against her lips, then I pulled away, “Okay, I gotta go.”

She smiled up at me, “Okay. Be careful. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I said as I winked down at her.

\*\*\*

If I had known what was going to happen, I would have thrown Harlee over my shoulder, carried her to my bedroom, and made love to her, soft, slow, and sweet.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

I had just walked Harvey Sims out the door when my phone rang.

I pulled it out and saw that it was Misty.

Swiping, I answered the call, “Hey Misty. What’s shaken bacon?”

Her tone had the hairs on the back of my neck rising, “Hey, Harlee. Have you heard from Carter?”

I frowned, “I talked to him three days ago. Why? Is everything okay?”

I heard her sigh, “There was something on the news just now. Where is he working?”

“He’s working on the south coast of Texas,” I whispered.

Hoping that this wasn’t going where my brain was going.

And I knew that it was when I heard her gasp.

“Misty.... what?”

Just then, Frank came over the line, “Hey, sweetheart. Think it might be a good idea to head over to the house. Yeah?”

I nodded, “Okay. I’m on my way.”

I ended the call, then looked at Everly's pale face. "What is it?"

Softly, I said, "There was something on the coast of Texas where Carter is working."

She nodded, "Okay, go. I'll reschedule your appointments and then close up."

I nodded, then raced by her desk, and said, "Thank you."

I was packed up and, in my Tahoe, headed to Frank and Misty's house when my phone rang.

Seeing that it was Talia, I answered, "Hey."

She'd been crying, "Are you on the way?"

Immediately, I said, "Yes."

"Okay, be careful."

Ten minutes later, I was pulling up into their driveway.

I didn't pay attention to the vehicles parked haphazardly everywhere, as I raced up their front drive and straight into their house.

I locked my eyes with Misty, then raced over to her.

She saw me coming and then opened her arms.

I wrapped mine around her and held on tightly.

The front door opened and closed twice before we let each other go.

Frank stepped to her side and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Two sets of arms wrapped around me, and I knew they belonged to Talia and Lila.

“Tell me,” I whispered.

Everything quieted down.

Frank was the one to speak.

“News report just now. The storm that had been forecast was a whole lot worse than they thought it would be. Lightning struck the main generator, and a chain reaction unfolded.” He paused, clearing his throat of emotions he was trying to keep locked down, “The oil rig was up in flames.”

Tears ran down my cheeks, and then I pulled out my phone and scrolled to the numbers Carter had given me.

Reaching the one I needed, I dialed and then pressed the speaker button.

“Caulson,” a man answered.

“Hi, I’m calling for a check-in on Carter Griggs,” I said.

I heard him inhale a breath and knew that wasn’t a good sign.

“Your name?” he asked.

“Harlee Murray.”

“He calls you Harlee Belle.” At the man’s words, I sobbed.

Once I had control over my tears, I asked, “Yes. Is he okay?”

He was silent for a beat, then he said, “There was an accident. Right now, we aren’t sure of the confirmed damage or the survivors.”

I felt my knees weaken, and thankfully, Lila and Talia let me go in time for Garrick to catch me.

Garrick whispered in my hair, “He’s going to be alright. He’s a stubborn motherfucker.”

I knew that Misty was in the same predicament I was in because she didn’t chastise Garrick for his language.

“Who is that?” Caulson asked.

“That was his brother Garrick. We are all at his parents’ house.” I told him.

Then he asked, “Are Frank and Misty there?”

I nodded, “Yes. They are standing in front of me. You’re on speaker.”

“Your boy spoke highly of the two of you. And his brothers and his sister. But especially you, Harlee. As soon as we know something, expect a call from me. Okay?”

I wiped at my tears and said, “Okay.”

And like that, everyone gathered around, and we waited.

The calls went out.

Casseroles were delivered.

Friends came by to offer their support.

And we waited.

Every time a news station aired the story, our eyes were glued to the screen.

“It has now been confirmed that an explosion has taken place on Solace, an oil rig stationed off the southern coast of Texas. Exact damage has not been reported yet. We will return when we have more news.”

Just then, my phone rang, and everyone’s gaze came to mine.

I checked it and saw that it was Julie’s name, seeing that I shook my head and said, “It’s one of the wives.”

I answered it and put it on speaker, and immediately I heard her crying, “Harlee, it’s Julie, Sam’s wife. Have you heard?”

“Just that there was an explosion, but we don’t know anything more than that,” I told her.

Then Julie came out, in full force, “I knew something like this was going to happen. I asked him to stop. Over. And over again.”

I didn’t particularly like Julie. I’d met her a handful of times, and something about her rubbed me the wrong way.

She was always complaining about his job. But she never complained about the money she spent. The money he earned while she blew it all.

“If I hear anything, I’ll call you. Okay?” I said.

“Right. Oh, before you go, I found the cutest pair of shoes. They were worth the fifteen hundred dollars I paid for them. I’ll send you a picture.”

I shook my head as I ended the call, then stared at my phone.

Wanting it to ring, and at the same time, wanting to reach through the phone and slap the absolute shit out of Julie.

Fucking. Shoes.

Fucking. Shoes!

“That woman is fucked up,” Garrick said as he shook his head.

“Our son is in an unknown condition, same as her husband, and wanted to tell you about her shoes?” Misty asked with a growl.

I nodded, “Yeah, she’s a vain woman.”

“She makes the rest of us look bad,” Talia said as she ran her fingers through my hair.

Another news station shared the same coverage.

It was nearing on midnight.

Some of us had nodded off for short bursts of naps, but we were still here, huddled in front of the television.

Just then, my phone beeped with a text.

Everyone's eyes that weren't closed came to me.

Just as they had every time, my phone made even the slightest noise.

Over the course of the day, and well into the night, calls had come in from the other wives. Parent's. The phone tree was active.

Carter was higher up in the profession. And he had asked me if it was okay to add me to the phone tree.

I had readily agreed.

And I was thankful I had. In a situation like this, everyone needed support.

I lifted my phone and then felt my tears that I had thought had all dried up start spilling down my cheeks.

I hurriedly wiped them away, and then bleary-eyed. I read what was on my phone.

Sin – I'm okay.

I read it.

Over.

And over.

And over.

Then I looked at everyone and said, "He's okay."

Sighs of thankfulness lit up the room.

A few tears were wiped away.

Smiles replaced looks of sorrow.

Sin – Where are you?

Me – Your parents' house.

Sin – Call you in a minute. Put me on speaker. Okay?

Me – Okay. I love you.

Sin – Fuck. Love you more.

Then I looked at everyone and said, “He’s calling in a minute.

Within that minute, everyone who was asleep was woken up.

Then my phone rang, I swiped to answer it, and then put it on speaker.

Immediately, I said, “Hey, honey.”

Hearing his voice, knowing that he was alive, it took a beat for my heart to catch up with my brain, “Hey, baby. Am I on speaker?”

“Yes,” I said.

“We love you, Carter,” Misty called out.

“Love y’all too.” Then I heard him swallow. “I’m headed to the closest hospital that has a trauma one unit. Dallas. Baby, I need you to get on a plane. Need you here.”

I nodded, “I will.”

He was quiet for a beat when he said, “We lost nineteen people. Including Sam. And..... Joey.”

I inhaled a breath, “Oh no.”

Then I asked, “Granger?”

“I don’t know,” He swallowed again, then I heard him inhale a gasp.

“We’re about to load you into the chopper.” A man’s voice called out.

“Okay. Baby?” he asked.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“I love you. So goddamned much,” his words caused my heart to wrench.

“I love you, too, Carter. So goddamned much.”

An hour later, Frank, Misty, and I were going through security to board a plane.

My phone rang just as we headed to our gate.

I pulled it out and, without checking the caller ID, answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Harlee, this is Caulson.” He said.

“Hi,” I said as I raced to our gate alongside Misty and Frank.

“He’s headed to Parkwood Memorial Hospital in Dallas. They are a trauma one hospital and.... try not to panic, but they have an excellent burn unit.”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me. “Okay. Carter called. His parents and I are almost to our gate, so we can get there.”

“Okay. There will be someone at baggage claim, you’ll see a man holding up the word Solace. Go to him. He will get you where you need to go. Okay?”

“Okay, thank you for letting me know and for calling me,” I said.

Three hours and twenty minutes later, our plane was taxing on the runway in Dallas, Texas.

Twenty minutes later, Frank, Misty, and I were headed to baggage claim.

Thankfully, we had all fitted what we needed into our backpacks.

None of us had dallied in packing.

When I saw a man in a pair of black slacks and a dark blue polo with the company's name on it, that Carter worked for, I lifted my chin in his direction.

Seeing the word Solace , I felt my gut clench.

Other people were standing in front of him.

“White vans parked out front will take you where you need to go. If your name is not on the approved visitor list, then I’m sorry, but we won’t be able to tell you

anything.”

“This is Channel Nine News. Are there any survivors?” A woman with a blonde bob, wearing a wrap-around red shirt, and black slacks said as she shoved her way past us all with a microphone in front of her mouth, and a man carrying a video recorder.

The man looked at her and narrowed his eyes.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Frank said through gritted teeth.

The woman turned to him, and then the camera was pointed at him.

The woman asked, “And you are?”

“None of your goddamned business. You should be ashamed of yourself. Ambushing people who haven’t heard a goddamned word about their loved ones and you think you're entitled to it first?”

And with that, Frank shook his head, wrapped his arm around Misty, and then took my hand and barreled his way through the throng of people.

At the memory of Carter doing the same thing, I felt tears prick my eyes.

“Well said,” a man said as he followed us.

When we reached the white vans, a woman stood there with a clipboard in her hand.

Seeing us, she asked, “Who are you here to see?”

“Carter Griggs,” Misty said, wiping tears from her eyes.

I let go of Frank's hand and moved to Misty's side, and grabbed her hand.

She squeezed back.

The woman looked at Misty and asked with a soft tone, "And you are?"

"Misty Griggs."

She nodded, then looked at Frank. "Frank Griggs."

Then she looked at me, and I said, "Harlee Murray."

Then she flipped a couple of pages, and then looked at me, "Could you have another last name?"

I shook my head, "No."

Her eyebrow furrowed as she asked, "Spell your first name for me."

I spelled it out for her, unsure of what was going on.

Then she sighed and took out her phone and placed a call.

I looked at her, then at Misty and Frank.

Misty asked, "Is there a problem.

"Hey, Caulson, I'm standing here with Frank and Misty Griggs and Harlee. She said her last name is Murray, but that's not what we have."

Then I watched as she waited, and then I watched her smile as her eyes came to me,

“Got it. Thanks.”

She winked, “You're good to go, sweetheart. Apparently, Carter felt that you deserved more than what a girlfriend would get you, so he said you were his wife and listed you as Harlee Griggs.”

Misty nodded, “Well, of course he did. She's our future daughter-in-law.”

Frank guffawed, “As soon as my son asks the question. He better do it soon.”

Then, according to who we were here to see, we were directed to different vans.

Apparently, the one we were directed to go to, was headed for the hospital instead of the convention center.

We were all loaded up in the vans and headed to the hospital.

The moment the van came to a stop, Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas stood before us. Imposing.

And all I could think about was that this facility better be the best in the nation.

With Frank's arm around Misty's shoulders, and my hand clasped in one of hers, we headed into the hospital.

And suddenly, that thought vanished from my head when I saw nurses, doctors, you name it, running around trying to save lives.

Lives of men and women who had been on that oil rig.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

We were directed to a cafeteria, the only room in the hospital that was big enough to hold everyone.

My eyes scanned the room for Tatum.

When I didn't see her, I worried.

I had tried calling her earlier, but it went straight to voicemail.

And all the texts I'd sent her were left on sent. Not delivered. Not read.

Every eye in the room was on the man in dark blue scrubs as he walked with another man who had a black collar over his black shirt with that little tab of white on it.

Everyone knew what that meant.

Breaths halted.

The room quieted.

They walked to the woman who had introduced herself as the Director of Family Services. They spoke quietly for a brief moment, her shoulders sagged, her eyes softened, yes, she was a good person.

Then she scanned the room and pointed to a table that was five away from us and to

the right.

The doctor and the priest walked over to the table, and spoke softly to an older woman, an older man, and two young little girls, and I knew.

Those kids were only left with their grandparents.

Sobs filled the room.

Gut-wrenching sobs.

And sadly, that was how the next seven hours played out.

Different doctors.

Different colored scrubs.

But the priest never wavered. Offering his support in any way that he could.

The room emptied as it did so.

When there were thirty-eight families, including ours, left waiting, another doctor appeared, spoke to the woman, and then my breath caught as she pointed directly to us.

My hand was tagged by Misty; Frank shifted in his seat and wrapped his arm around her.

The doctor made his way to us and then took a chair beside us.

“You are the family of Carter Griggs?” he asked.

Misty and Frank nodded their heads.

Then he looked at me, “Are you, his Darling?”

The tears I had been holding back with a sheer force of will I had no idea where it had come from, suddenly vaporized, and I didn’t even try to hold them back.

I nodded, and smiled a shaky smile, “How is he?”

“He was conscious when they brought him in; therefore, he was able to tell us what had happened. But before I tell you how things played out, as he was on my table.” He smiled at me, “He asked me to tell you, his Darling, that he loves you. That he won’t leave your side.

No ifs nor buts about it. Those were his words. ”

I chuckled softly, “Yeah, that’s my Carter.”

Then he proceeded to tell us everything that had happened.

Thankfully, he had pulled through surgery from a ruptured spleen, and they said that he suffered second-degree burns.

Misty’s hand had tightened so hard at one point over mine that I winced but didn’t say anything. Yes, he was the love of my life, but he would always be her son.

She was the first woman to love him, and I would be the last.

The rest of the family arrived shortly after.

Once we told them all that we knew, a nurse came and got us, but they only allowed

one person at a time in the ICU.

Before I could offer Misty or Frank that option, they both had shaken their heads.

Misty wrapped me in her arms and whispered, “No more of this Misty nonsense. You hear. I’m Mama or Mama G. Just choose one of those. I loved him first, but you’re going to love him last. Go be with your heart, precious.”

Hugs were given.

Cheeks were kissed.

Frank and Misty got a hotel room along with the rest of the family.

Then I was led to the room that Carter was in.

Nothing could have prepared me to see him lying in that hospital bed.

Wrapped up in bandages. Connected to machines. Tubes attached to his body.

A comfortable chair was pulled up beside Carter’s bedside, and there I stayed.

My small hand was wrapped around Carter’s strong hand.

“I love you, Carter Griggs. And I can’t wait to be your wife, but it would seem that I already am. Usually, you ask a woman before you give her that title. Or in my case, that honor. Because I would be honored to be your wife. Forever and always.”

As the minutes trickled by, I kept talking to him.

Hours had passed, and my voice was getting raspy when Misty and Frank walked in,

“How is he?” Misty asked.

I shook my head, “No change.”

Misty nodded, and I sensed that she wanted a few minutes alone with him, but her heart wouldn’t allow her to say it.

Smiling to myself, I stood and then asked, “Okay if I run to the hotel and get a shower, and change my clothes?”

I gestured at myself, as I was still in the same clothes from three days ago. Yeah, that was totally fine.

She smiled as her shoulders dropped slightly.

“Come on, sweet girl. Take you there.” Frank said to me, as he moved to his wife, and pressed a kiss to her temple, whispering something.

She smiled up at him and winked.

Then she looked at me, “Knew the moment he came into this world he was going to give me gray hairs, and look,” she said as she pointed to her gray strands mixed in with her blonde hair, “knew I would love him unlike anything I’ve ever loved before.

And I knew that once he had fallen in love with someone, it would be the forever kind of love.

Deep. Rooted in, and I was right. Because everyone came to me when they realized who we were and shared that you were all he had talked about. For years.”

I felt tears prick my eyes. Jesus, how many tears could one being shed in a short time

frame?

“No one else I’d ever think was good enough for my boy, but you. We all love you, Harlee. Now I love Melanie with all my heart, but she’s older. So, get on getting me another grandbaby, alright, daughter-in-law?” she winked.

I was smiling and shaking my head as Frank wrapped an arm around my shoulders and led me out of the room.

\*\*\*

As the hot water cascaded over my body, loosening my shoulders, unable to help it, I dropped to my knees and let my tears fall unheeded down my cheeks

Then I got myself together because Carter needed me.

I got dressed in the clean clothes I had packed, and then I headed back to the hospital. With Frank at my side.

I was going to remain at his bedside.

I knew what I was going to say to him the moment he opened his eyes.

The only thing I didn’t know... was how to tell him the other news I had.

\*\*\*

Five days had passed, and we were still staying vigilant. Since he was past the forty-eight-hour mark, he was moved to another room to free up that bed.

And thankfully, the entire family was able to come in and sit, to be with him.

Garrick had been trolling the channels, the family saying yay or nay to what he stopped on.

And when he stopped on Top Gun, the entire room said yay.

While the movie played and we watched, saying lines that we knew by heart, nurses came in, his doctor came in, and all the while, my hand was wrapped in Carter's.

And wouldn't you know it, as soon as Iceman spoke... the most glorious sound in the entire world sounded.

"You can be my wingman any time," I heard rasped out.

My eyes shot to his to see his gorgeous oceanlike-colored eyes already looking at me.

His hand tightened on mine, I squeezed

"How long have you loved me?" I asked.

"Love you forever if you bring me your lips," he said.

And tears, once again, crawled down my cheeks.

But I did it.

I rose up, leaned over him, careful of his bandages, and pressed a kiss to his lips just as his undamaged arm came up, and his hand fisted in my hair, holding me in place.

To say we forgot about the rest of his family in the room would be an understatement.

Until the sound of a throat clearing, I lifted my head and then smiled down at him.

His fingers left my hair, then he used his thumb to brush my tears away, as he whispered, “Since the night of your prom. I fell, right then and there.”

Garrick headed out of the room to let the doctor know he was awake.

Frank and Misty, hugged him, Misty buried her face in his shoulder and softly wept.

Talia followed.

Ethan hugged him.

Garrick hugged him.

Alec freaking fist bumped him.

We were all asked to leave the room as they checked him over.

However, we all heard Carter snap, “Don’t you ask her to leave ever again.”

That caused all of us to chuckle, as Garrick said, “Yeah. He’s going to be just fine.”

Alec nodded, “Still can’t believe I never saw it.”

“Because you had your dick up in anything that moved,” Garrick said dryly.

And that caused us all to start chuckling even harder, which turned into laughter.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and before we moved to go back into the room, the nurse looked at me and said, “He would like you to come in first.” Then she looked at the rest of them and said, “He asked y’all to give him fifteen minutes or so.”

They nodded, then said they would go grab food for all of us and bring it back.

I headed back into the room and did something I've needed.

He apparently needed it to, because he opened his arms, and his other arm, which was bandaged, came up slowly.

Carefully, I lowered myself next to him and gingerly wrapped my arms around him.

Breathing him in, with my eyes closed.

Tilting my head, I placed a kiss over his bandage that was over his heart.

And then.... I heard words I had always wanted to hear from him.

"Marry me," he asked.

I felt the breath in my lungs catch, "What?"

He whispered, "Marry me. Did they give you my stuff?"

I nodded then pointed to the little armoire thing, or whatever it was called, and said, "It's all in there."

He nodded, "Go and get it for me, please."

With that, I pressed another kiss over his heart, followed by him pressing one to the top of my head, then I got up and went and got his things.

"Black backpack." He said.

I tagged it and brought it to the bed.

Then he pointed at a zipper on the side of it and said, “Open that.”

Once I had it opened, he reached in and pulled out a tiny light blue box.

I tried to fight the tears once again, and just barely.

The moment he had the lid opened, the stunning ring that was nestled in a silk fabric.

I looked from the ring to him and asked, “Carter, how long have you had this?”

He winked, “Can’t tell you the feeling I had. The instant drive to go and look. And when I found that one, I don’t know. But I’m sure as fucking glad I listened to whatever it was about, bought it.”

And there, in Parkwood Memorial Hospital, I smiled as he slid the beautiful ring on my finger.

I stared at it and whispered, “I’m going to love saying that my name is Mrs. Carter Griggs.”

He winked, “Always referred to you in my head as Harlee Belle Griggs. That okay with you?”

I nodded.

And then sobered.

Not wanting to ruin any of this, but he needed to know.

He knew me.

He asked in a worried tone, “What is it?”

I sat down in my chair, and wrapped my hands around his, bringing his hand to my mouth, I pressed a kiss on one of his knuckles, then I whispered, “How much do you remember?”

I hadn’t found this out until Caulson came and told me.

“Mostly all of it. Why?” he asked.

“Do you remember being thrown off Solace and into the ocean?” I asked.

His brows furrowed, and then I watched as his eyes widened, “No.”

Sadly, I nodded my head, tears I had held back came down my cheeks once again, “Yeah. He didn’t get off the rig in time.”

And then I sat there, trying to absorb the pain Carter was in emotionally as I watched a few tears trail down his cheeks.

Softly, he whispered, “Remember. Granger told me if it was his time, he wouldn’t mind going, only so he could make sure I made it back to you.”

I leaned my head down and pressed it into our grasped hands.

Frank, Misty, Garrick, Ethan, Melanie, Alec, Talia, Dominik, Bronson, and Tatum walked into the room.

At the sight of my ring finger, I watched as everyone slowly had smiles forming on

their faces.

It was Garrick who asked, “Finally asked her, huh?”

“According to everyone else, they were already married,” Tatum said with a soft chuckle.

At the sight of her, Carter looked at me and asked me without words.

I winked at him and nodded, “Come on, let’s give Tatum and Carter a few minutes alone.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

One week later, I stood there, trying to hold it all in as the preacher did the eulogy.

My family had stayed with me and Harlee.

They had attended every funeral in the area with us.

And we were all back in our state, standing by the graveside of Granger Harris Rogers.

His headstone read his name, the date he was born, the date he passed, and gained his wings.

Then below that it read, ‘ Beloved Brother. Beloved in Heart .’

Harlee cried softly at my side.

Tatum’s boyfriend I had recently found out about, stood there with his arms crossed as Tatum sobbed at his side.

I didn’t bother hiding my lifted brow as Garrick had apparently had enough of it.

He shoulder-checked the fucker out of the way and then gathered Tatum in his arms.

Giving her his strength to get through it.

When it was over, none of us batted an eyelash as Garrick spoke softly to her.

And when we all headed to our vehicles, I didn't miss Garrick standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, glowering, as Tatum's boyfriend didn't open her door for her.

Things had slowly returned to as normal as we could get, as we all waited for me to heal.

And thankfully, Harlee had taken off work for three weeks, and offered Everly the same time off, but paid.

She was a damn good boss.

Speaking of things, she was good at, what she wasn't good at was letting me have my way.

I couldn't walk up the stairs. I couldn't stand for a long period of time. I couldn't make love to my woman. She informed me that once we had an all clear from the doctor, she would lighten up.

I highly doubted it. I knew my woman.

I had also noticed that more and more of her things were showing up at my house, and when she started to walk out the door to get a few more things, I growled, "Stop."

She stopped, then turned to me and lifted a brow, "What?"

"Leave it. Brothers and I will move you in this weekend."

And my woman, being my woman, simply smiled and nodded.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

To say things were back to normal would be an understatement.

They were slowly getting there, but there was a dark cloud hanging over us, trying to process that Granger had really left this world.

And speaking of Granger.

I sat there as Optimus, the owner of Badd Motha Ink, worked on a memorial piece for Carter.

It was a huge piece that took him the whole of his left thigh.

I knew that when it was finished and healed, it was going to be something amazing.

Carter had said a silent prayer that the burn marks on his arm and on his left upper chest were the only ones he had.

I also got two tattoos by Hugo, one of the tattoo artists there.

On the inside of my left wrist, I had him tattoo the words, His light.

And also, on my right hand, I had him tattoo a heart on my middle finger, and then a C on my ring finger.

I didn't know what I wanted to get for Granger yet; I was still thinking about it.

Optimus had just set his tattoo gun down; he had worked on the lines today, and next week, he would work on the shading. The piece was going to be done in all black; however, Granger's name was going to be the color of green. His favorite color.

Three weeks later, his tattoo was all done, and thankfully, he had gotten the all clear from the doctors that he could return to work.

I had held it together for Carter.

However, that night in the shower, I let my tears fall.

And my man, clothes and all, climbed into the shower with me, and let me break down in his arms.

And that night, when we were in bed, I pressed soft kisses to the healed skin that still held faint little white scars.

That had caused Carter to growl, and then he made love to me.

Long. Soft. Sweet. Slowly.

I knew what he was saying.

He was cherishing this very moment.

Because we almost hadn't had it.

\*\*\*

Carter had informed me a few months ago that it was time, and he wasn't waiting anymore.

Therefore... today was the day.

The day that almost every little girl dreams of.

My wedding day.

When Carter had asked me where I wanted to get married, he informed me that the sky was the limit.

But if I wanted to go higher, he would make it happen.

When I'd told him where I wanted to get married and the reason why... well... Talia, Lila, Everly, and Tatum had all busted out laughing and promptly left our house.

All because Carter had gathered me in his arms and carried me to our bedroom so he could show me just how much in love he was with that idea.

He had been involved in all of the decisions for the wedding.

The colors.

The food.

The cake.

The guest lists.

Everything.

However, what he hadn't been happy about was that I hadn't let him see me in my wedding dress when Talia, Lila, Everly, Tatum, Misty, and my mom had gone dress

shopping.

He also hadn't been happy for him to be kicked out and sent to stay at Garrick's the night before our wedding.

I'd seen his temper.

And to say it was getting high would have been an understatement.

Which was why I had said one word, "Honey."

That one word had caused his shoulders to drop.

A kiss was placed on my lips, and he whispered, "Haven't spent a night apart since we got together unless I was working. Ain't doing it again. Don't ever ask me to."

I nodded, "Promise."

I had watched my man walk out of our house with his tux in the bag, and a smaller bag at his side.

The moment we all heard his truck start up, Talia threw her hands in the air.

Okay, time to get you ready, and then into bed."

Face mask. Manicure. Pedicure. The manicure and pedicure were done by Tatum. She loved doing them and was even licensed.

The girls had gotten me in bed, after copious amounts of wine.

And yes, I had a hard time falling asleep.

My phone had pinged with a text.

Sin – Ain't doing this fucking again. Can't fucking sleep.

Me – Agreed. It feels so wrong.

Sin – Love you, soon to be Mrs. Griggs.

Me – Love you too, Mr. Griggs.

The next morning had dawned bright and early.

The girls and I loaded up everything we needed and then we headed to Misty and Frank's house.

I took a few peeks out of the window in Carter's old bedroom and let out a happy giggle.

Dominik, Bronson, aka Beast, who had gotten close with Dominik and Garrick, and then into the fold, and a few other men were moving chairs around and placing them in rows.

All in front of a lightly stained arbor that had greenery curling around the posts.

It really was beautiful.

Talia clapped her hands behind me, causing my head to turn. "Okay, time to get you ready."

My hair was curled and in long waves down my back.

The only request Carter had was that he wanted my hair to look like it had when I had gone to prom.

And for my man, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do.

Therefore, the right side of my hair was swept back and pinned with a beautiful diamond clasp, courtesy of Misty, for my something old.

My something borrowed was courtesy of Tatum. It was a pretty little anklet. Granger had bought it for her on her sixteenth birthday.

I had been hesitant in accepting it, but she had informed me that she knew Granger would have approved.

A few tears had been shed at that moment.

My something new was the bracelet I had on my right wrist, courtesy of Carter.

Each letter of Incandescent had been engraved into the little links.

As for my something blue... well... my cheeks had flushed.

I had blue on my laces in my bra and panties.

Once everyone was ready, I stared into the mirror one more time, taking my reflection in.

My dress was a mermaid style.

I had seen it.

My girls had seen it.

And it was the only dress I had tried on.

It had been perfect.

Meant to be.

Same as my engagement ring.

It cut low in the front, a little deeper, giving me awesome cleavage.

It tapered in at the waist and then flowed out around my knees.

I loved it.

It was overlaid in lace.

Classic. Elegant.

I read somewhere that if the man you are walking down the aisle to doesn't react as if he were blown away, you should turn around and walk back down that aisle.

Well... today, that definitely wasn't happening.

Because standing there with my arm wrapped through my dad's, I saw my man standing at the end of the altar.

His eyes were on me, and I saw it.

The single tear that trailed down his right cheek.

Oh, my sweet, sweet man.

Lila, Tatum, and Everly were already standing there as Talia walked down the aisle as my maid of honor.

Beside Carter stood Garrick, Ethan, Alec, and Dominik.

And no, I hadn't missed as Garrick's eyes had followed Tatum, and Dominik's were currently following Talia.

The two of them had come to some sort of deal after I had bitched him out.

And it was weird.

I shook my head to clear it of those thoughts the moment Talia took her place.

I felt my dad's eyes on me and turned my head to look up at him.

He winked down at me and said, "The day you were born, I promised myself that if this moment ever came and I thought for even a nanosecond that you weren't going to be happy, I'd have a getaway car at the ready."

I smiled and tried to hold back my tears. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Really. Nothing I won't do for you, baby. But that man standing up there, I have zero doubts that he won't make you happy. That he won't bust his ass to make sure you have everything you could ever want or need. And now, I see he's getting a tad bit impatient."

I looked at Carter and saw that my dad was right.

His eyes were narrowed, and his fists were clenched at his sides.

I chuckled and then said, “Well, let’s go.”

And together, my dad walked me down the aisle to my forever.

\*\*\*

Carter led me out onto the make-shift dance floor as the opening chords started to play.

He tilted his head, and the moment it hit him, he started laughing, pulling me close and gathering me in his arms.

The song I had chosen was none other than Take My Breath Away by Berlin.

“Of course, you would choose our song from our favorite movie,” he said as he whispered in my hair.

It was only a few moments before his family figured it out, and I heard them all laughing.

We danced to that song, and then once it was over, he pulled me in even closer, pressed a kiss on my forehead, and said, “Told you it was okay for you to choose our song, but I wanted to dance to a second one. This is my vow to you.”

I stared into his oceanlike-colored eyes and felt that flow through me.

And when the song that he had chosen started, he once again used his thumbs to wipe away my tears.

Then I was back in his arms, swaying and dancing to Everything I Do by Bryan Adams.

I sat there feeding cake to my husband as he returned the favor when he jerked his chin at something on the dance floor.

Looking over, I wasn't surprised to find Tatum and Garrick slow dancing to From This Moment On.

Then I looked for Lance, her boyfriend, and when I didn't see him, I lifted a brow at Carter.

He shook his head, "No clue. Do know if Granger was here, he'd beat the shit out of Lance."

I looked back at Garrick and Tatum and said, "Be surprised if they're not where we are in a few years."

Carter chuckled, which drew my eyes back to him, "Years? I give Garrick a few months."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Never seen him like this with anyone."

As we finished our cake, Stella, our wedding planner, headed to the stage as soon as the song ended and asked for everyone to take their seats.

Once everyone was in their seats, she brought a microphone to her mouth and said, "It has been my honor to help in the marriage of Carter and Harlee. Seen you two out and about over the years, and I've never seen a couple more perfect for each other

than the two of you. Cheers.”

I smiled as I took a sip of my drink, and Carter took a pull from his beer.

“First up is the best man, Garrick.”

“Anything ever goes wrong with Carter, we choose you,” Garrick said without humor.

I busted out laughing.

Carter just flipped Garrick off.

That resulted in him getting his head slapped by Mama G.

She winked at me, and I winked back.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

I giggled.

Carter shook his head and then pressed a kiss on my temple.

A few more speeches were said, and then Stella took the microphone and said, “And now it’s time for the groom to say a few words.”

Carter kissed me softly and then stood.

I watched the man I was lucky enough to trick into marrying me head to the stage, take the microphone from my mother.

He looked around the space and then right at me, “Most of you know this, some of you don’t.

But I first met Harlee when she came over to spend the night with my little sister, Talia.

Thought she was as cute as a button. She still is.

Only now, she’s the most gorgeous living, breathing thing I’ve ever seen in my life. ”

I wiped a tear away, sniffled, and then giggled when his brothers all reached forward and pulled a tissue from the little box and handed them to me.

“My mom told me a story once upon a time, and I want to share it with y’all. She said that everyone has their true Darling. The one person who can read deep inside our

souls and will always be our safe place.” I watched as his throat swallowed.

“A few months ago, I had one of those moments. One of those moments where your life changes in a second. Let’s talk about that for a moment. One second, it seems so insignificant. But in reality, it means so much.” He sniffed.

“When I was thrown off the oil rig by my best friend, who unfortunately isn’t here tonight, but I know he’s up in heaven smiling down and probably saying, it’s about damn time.

There was that split second before I went under, and the only thought, the only image in my head, was Harlee Belle’s smiling face.

“Over the years, she’s always been my safe place. Anytime something has gone wrong, all I had to do was close my eyes and see that little light over a hundred feet deep, and know that she was there, guiding me home.”

“So, if you’ve found your Darling, like I was lucky to do, grab hold, hold tight, and never let them go.

Harlee Belle? I love you. Those three words don’t cover nearly enough, but it’s god’s honest truth.

I wouldn’t want to ride this thing we call life without you.

So, here’s to you. My light. My Incandescent. ”

All around the reception area, drinks went up, “To Harlee.”

I was grateful his brothers had all handed me tissues, because I definitely needed them after that.

Once I was in control, I stood up on shaking legs, tagged another tissue, then made my way to the stage.

Carter smiled at me, offered me his hand, and helped me up. Then, I leaned forward and whispered, “As soon as we can, we need to leave. After that, I need you inside of me. As deep as you can go.”

When laughter sounded, my cheeks went pink because Carter still had the microphone in his hand.

Carter laughed, then said, “Anything you want. I’ll always give it to you, long as it’s within my power.”

Taking the microphone from him, I walked to the center of the stage and waited for Carter to take his seat.

Then I brought the microphone up and said, “I don’t know if I can beat all of that. Honestly, I don’t think I want to. Because it was perfect. Totally Carter.”

Everyone laughed.

Then I locked eyes with Tatum and said, “Tonight, we are missing someone crucial to our story. Carter spoke about his best friend. What y’all don’t know is that Granger is the one who threw Carter off the rig so he could come back to me.

Not knowing that he wouldn’t have enough time to get off himself. ”

“There’s more to the story. Something that I was told, something that I’ve held close to my heart ever since I met Granger.” Then I looked at Carter and said, “Sin, I’m going to have to share one of your secrets. Okay?” At his nod and wink, I continued.

“Carter had a bad day at work. His umbilical line had gotten kinked. That night, I received a call from Granger. He told me what had happened, and then he watched as Carter had texted with someone. He knew that Carter was texting me. He told me that in the fourteen years he has worked right alongside him, he’d seen him chuckle.

But never, not once, has he heard him laugh.

And he’s seen him smile but never seen him smile like he did when he talked to me. ”

I swallowed, recalling that conversation, then I said, “Here’s to Granger. We wouldn’t be here without him.”

All around the space, glasses or bottles were held up, “To Granger.”

Then I looked at Talia and said, “I love you. Made you a promise, sorry I broke it.”

She laughed, then called out, “So worth it.”

Then I looked back at Carter. “To my heart, to the man I’ve had on a pedestal ever since I was seven years old, skinned my knee, and you broke the sound barrier by how fast you got to me.

There have only been six years of my life where you weren’t a part of it in one way or another.

I know that the man above planned things like he did, so I would treasure you, more than I did yesterday, more than I do today, and more than I will tomorrow. ”

He smiled.

“Like I said, I can’t top Carter’s speech, and no, I still don’t want to, but I’ve been

holding onto another piece of information. Wonder why I've only been drinking water tonight?" I asked, and then I waited.

Heads tilted.

Eyes searched.

But it was Misty and my mother who stood up and asked, "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

Then they both cried.

Carter got it soon after that, and I watched as his face transformed into a blinding smile, then he was up, walking to me.

I handed the microphone off to Stella, who took it and said, "Congratulations."

The moment Carter reached me, he hauled me into his arms and then kissed the daylights out of me.

And then... he carried me out of the reception, but not before calling out, "We love all of you."

Hoots and hollers followed after as he carried me to his truck, and then he took us home.

I was in his arms once I was free of the truck, he kicked the door closed, and then our lips never separated until we were behind our closed front door.

I had him out of his tux, and he had me out of my dress.

Clothes followed us to our bedroom.

Hands roamed.

Kisses were shared.

Tongues danced rhythms that only the two of us understood.

We had made love well into the night, and as dawn was kissing the morning sky, we were still making love.

He had just thrust inside of me, long, slow, and sweet with his hands on either side of my cheeks, he asked, "I'm going to be a daddy?"

I smiled and nodded, "You're going to be the best. Frank is awesome, and my dad is too. But you had Misty for a mother. You're going to blow all of them out of the park."

Yes. Oh yes.

My man, my husband, buried himself as deep as he could get, all the while keeping his eyes locked with mine.

Felt like the very first time," I whispered as tears cascaded down my cheeks.

He winked, then used his thumb and brushed them away, "Always will be. You've held my heart in your hands far longer than either of us realizes it."

"I love you, Carter Griggs.

"I love you, too, Harlee Griggs."

\*\*\*

The next five months followed like this.

He kissed me stupid when he headed to work, only four hours away.

I worked with my clients and hired a second massage therapist to take over while I finished this pregnancy and went into maternity leave.

Something had happened with Tatum.

She actually ended up moving into my old house with her boyfriend.

I wanted the story there, so bad, but I knew that if I pushed it, it would be wrong.

But what wasn't wrong was calling Garrick and Dominik to come over and hang pictures of our wedding. It also included my mom and Misty bringing over pictures of me and Carter through the years, then having them blown up and hung in our house, too.

And there, on our mantle hanging right above it, was the very moment my eyes were closed, my hair done up, soft makeup, my wedding dress, Carter in his tux, leaned down, pressing a kiss on my forehead as we danced as husband and wife for the very first time.

Oh, and if you didn't already know that my man was that kind of man.

He proved it when he pulled the rocking chair he made in the living room into the nursery, told me to plant my cute ass in it and keep him company while he built furniture, and moved it to where I wanted.

We were ready for our little one to grace this world.

Everyone wanted to know what we were having, but neither of us wanted to know.

Call us crazy, but we wanted to be surprised.

Another thing we had done... we hadn't discussed names.

We were going to wait until we saw our baby for the first time in our arms before we named him or her.

The only name that really mattered was Griggs.

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Carter

I walked into the human resources office and headed for Maribell's desk. She saw me coming and narrowed her eyes, "Nope."

I chuckled, "You don't even know what I was going to ask," I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me, "You're going to ask if we offer paternity leave, and the answer for you is no."

I grinned, "Aw, don't be like that."

She clucked her tongue, "I'm going to be like that because you make my job a hell of a lot easier. So, the answer is no."

I chuckled, "Okay."

Then I pulled my phone out and hit Harlee's number and placed the phone on speaker.

As the ringing filled the room, Maribell lifted a brow. "Who are you calling?"

I grinned, "My wife."

She gasped at the same time I heard Harlee say, "Hey, handsome."

"You didn't," Maribell asked, indignantly.

I grinned, “I sure as hell did.”

Maribell sighed, “Ugh. Fine. And I’m only doing this because she gives me a family and friends discount.” Then she said, “Hey, Harlee, I’ll take care of it.”

Harlee’s tinkling laughter came through the speaker, as I said, “Thanks, Darling. Love you.”

She was still laughing, I knew she was either rolling her eyes or shaking her head, “I can’t even with you sometimes. Oh, before I forget. Baby and I are craving eclairs and mint chocolate chip ice cream. And yes, I love you too.” And with that, she hung up.

I grimaced at the thought of ever pairing those two together.

Maribell shook her head, “I don’t miss those weird cravings. One time I wanted filet flounder and dipped it into vanilla ice cream. It was so good, but what wasn’t good was my husband running to the bathroom to puke at the sight.”

I chuckled, then shook my head, “Thanks, Maribell.”

She winked, “You got it. Now, get going, get your woman what she asked for.”

I nodded and headed out of her office, but not before she called out, “Carter?”

I stopped and turned and looked over my shoulder, “Yeah?”

“I can say I know a lot of bad men. Can’t say I know a lot of good men. I’m honored to know you.”

I chuckled, “Same.”

And with that, I headed out to my truck, and the store, and got my woman and my baby what they wanted.

Thankfully, I didn't have to go puke after watching her eat that.

But I may have thrown up in my mouth when she took a hotdog bun, slathered on peanut butter, mayo, and pickles... yeah, be right back.

Her sounds of moaning... it wasn't the good kind I was used to.

\*\*\*

I realized something right then and there.

The first time I had slept in Harlee's bed, wrapped around her, I had thought that nothing could be better than this.

And the next morning, when I woke up, I knew that only a few things would make it better.

And now... she has my rings on her finger. My last name. And my baby is in her belly.

Yeah, life wasn't good.

It was goddamned perfect.

Carter

Three Months Later

I felt tears prick my eyes; a man wasn't a man at all if he didn't allow the woman who was his world to see him at his most vulnerable.

I placed my lips on Harlee's damp, slicked, sweat-covered forehead and whispered, "Thank you."

She smiled up at me and then grimaced as another contraction started.

I held her hand, whispering, encouraging, doing anything and everything I could to help her get through this.

Hours and hours this had gone on.

Everyone told me that the first one was always the hardest.

And I vowed right then and there that I wasn't going to be putting her through this ever again.

That was when another contraction hit, and the doctor said, "Okay, Harlee, I want you to bear down and push as hard as you can."

She nodded, and then she pushed.

Crying out with her strength.

I heard words like I see the head.

It's out.

Another contraction.

Rest.

One more.

One more.

Then, with one final push, my woman fell back into my embrace, exhausted.

Our baby's cries filled the room.

I pressed a kiss on her lips and whispered, "I love you."

She smiled, tiredly, and whispered, "I love you too."

Then the doctor held our baby up and said, "Congratulations, you have a handsome and healthy son."

He was cleaned up, checked out, and then brought to Harlee.

Once she had him in her arms, she took him in. I ran my finger over the bridge of his tiny nose, taking everything in about him.

He was perfect. The perfect mix of me and my entire world.

She looked at him, then looked up at me and whispered, “Granger Alexander Griggs.”

I didn’t know how it was even possible to fall even more in love with her than I already was, but there I stood. Taking in our son in wonder, and then I felt it.

Something warm trickled through my body, and I knew that it was Granger’s approval.

I nodded, then swallowed, and said, “It’s fucking perfect.”

Our family came in shortly thereafter to meet him.

Our parents held him first, followed by Garrick, Ethan, Melanie, Alec, and Talia.

The next day, Dominik showed up along with Bronson, Lila, and Everly.

A few people in our town showed up with well wishes and to meet the newest member of Whispering Falls.

Tatum had shown up and when we told her his name, she had come to me, and I wrapped her in my arms as she cried softly. All the while saying it was perfect.

We were home that following day, with our fridge and pantry bursting to the brim.

Our family crowded in the living room, cooing over Granger.

And Melanie pressed a kiss on his head and whispered, “We’re the third generation of Griggs. We’re going to be awesome.”

Mom and Darla had told me and Harlee to get some sleep, that they had him.

I got a full nine hours of sleep, but my woman got a full eighteen hours of sleep.

It was the next morning, and we were alone with Granger.

I was shirtless on our couch with her in one of my t-shirts with Granger resting against my chest.

“So, something I wanted to ask you,” she said.

I looked over at her and nodded, “Okay.”

“We haven’t talked about godparents for Granger,” she said as she bit her bottom lip.

I nodded, “Yeah, we need to do that. Do you have someone in mind?”

She nodded, “Yeah, Tatum?”

I thought about it.

For two point five seconds, and then nodded my head, “Yeah. Fucking love that baby.”

We named Garrick not only as his uncle but also as his godfather.

When we informed the two of them, I had never before seen Garrick shed a single tear, but that moment, I had.

Tatum had simply smiled and nodded, as a tear ran down her cheek, too.

Harlee

After our baby boy had come into this world, I immediately went and got another tattoo.

I had Granger's footprints tattooed on the back of my left shoulder.

And any more kids we would be blessed with, I was going to do the same.

I might be my husband's Incandescent, but he was simply my everything.

I didn't have to change Granger. Carter did that.

I didn't have to get up in the middle of the night with him. Carter did it.

His only response when I had asked him why he said, "First, you hogged him for nine months. And second, I didn't do a fucking thing to bring him into this world. You did that."

And that was that.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Frank

Taking my wife's hand in my grasp, I brought it to my lips, placed a tender kiss to her knuckles, really to her wedding band, and winked, "We didn't do too bad, did we?"

My wife of forty-one years smiled at me, as we watched Carter spin his beautiful wife, Harlee, around the dance floor, set up in our back yard, then she looked at me, and winked, "No, we definitely didn't."

Misty

I walked over to my daughter-in-law, Harlee, and wrapped my arms around her and hugged her close.

"Love you, sweet girl," I said.

I could hear the smile in her voice as she whispered, "Love you too, Mama G."

My eyes strayed to my husband.

The love of my life, the father of my children, the very man who had paled at the idea of me ever being in pain again after I had Talia.

The very man who had shaken his head and in no uncertain terms had said to me, right there in the doctor's office, "Absolutely fucking not. My woman had five children. My woman risked her life for forty-five months to bring them all into the world; she's not going to experience any kind of pain again.

Whatever you need to do, set it up for me to get snipped. ”

My eyes had misted over as I looked at my man.

Then he winked, “Besides, I told you forty-one years ago, tell you the same thing now, I was put on this earth to be your man, nobody fucking else’s.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:44 am*

Harlee

Five Years Later

“You sure?” I asked my husband.

He nodded, “Totally fucking sure. Spent thirty-eight years not having everything. Finally, fucking have it. I don’t want something to happen to me and leave you holding the cards.

So yeah, I’m retiring. Besides,” he winked, then tossed me a plastic bag, “I wanna be here to experience everything as you round with my child, and I wanna be here for it all.”

If my husband said something, he meant it.

And yes, he busted his ass to prove to me, unnecessarily, I might add, that he was worthy of me.

He didn’t need to prove anything to me.

He had done that a million and one times infinity over the years.

And I knew he would never stop.

He was there when we welcomed our second son, Zaden Nathaniel Griggs.

The same with our daughter, Lola Ella Griggs.

And with our last child, our daughter, Hattie Elouise Griggs.

When we told our parents about their middle names, they had been ecstatic.

Lola was named after Misty.

Hattie was named after my mother.

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Fifty Years Later

Carter

I sat in my Adirondack chair, as I rubbed my wife's feet.

Her blonde hair had turned to silver; her skin wasn't as tight as it used to be.

But she was still the most beautiful thing in this world to me.

Her mossy-oak-colored eyes she had passed down to all of her kids sparkled as she asked, "Do you feel it now?"

I lifted a brow, "Feel what, baby?"

"That you made it?" she asked softly.

She was referring to the day that we brought our first son into the world

I looked up at the night sky, then at my wife, and winked, "Fuck yeah, baby."

She smiled back, that smile I'd fight wars over.

One I did fight, just so I could be there by her side, my feet planted on this earth... for her.

And fifty years later, she's still my light in the darkness.

My Incandescent.