



# Through the Flames

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy

**Description:** He was a firefighter with a past. She was a girl with no future. When Lieutenant Carter Reid pulls a seventeen-year-old girl from a blazing apartment, he thinks he's saving a stranger. But Amaya Chase is no ordinary survivor—she's been hidden away her entire life, forgotten by the world, and orphaned by the flames.

Haunted by her innocence and strength, Carter finds himself unable to walk away. As he steps into the role of her reluctant protector, boundaries blur, secrets unravel, and a forbidden connection begins to form.

But love born from rescue is dangerous. And when the past catches up with both of them, it threatens to ignite a fire no one can control. How do you protect someone who's never known freedom, especially when it's your own heart on the line?

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

I took my keys out of my back pocket and opened my locker. I dropped my things on the floor.

A few of my coworkers walked into the locker room and started talking loudly, which caught my attention.

They looked me in the eye and stopped talking. I kept packing up my stuff, ignoring them, and getting ready for the long day ahead.

“Hey lieutenant, are you looking forward to tonight?” Finn was the only one brave enough to talk to me, which made me mad.

He was a great firefighter. He really did listen to what people told him to do on the pitch, and he was a pretty good thinker when things got tough. But other than that, he’s a total idiot. He called himself a “ladies’ man,” but he was a huge pain in my a\*s. To be fair, they’re all a pain in my a\*s.

Finn talked too much, didn’t know how to keep his mouth shut, and most importantly, he was the only person at this station who didn’t get the idea of leaving me alone.

“What am I supposed to be excited about? A building catching fire? A drunk person crashing into a utility pole?”

This was another issue. He not only talks too much, but he also never thinks about what he says. One of my biggest pet peeves was when someone spoke without knowing what they were talking about.

He coughed in embarrassment while the other men laughed at him.

I slammed my locker shut because I was sick of this boring talk.

I kept myself busy with some case reports in my office for about an hour, until the alarm went off and scared me.

I jumped into action right away and ran to the ground floor. On the way, I ran into chief Benneth and we just nodded at each other, which is something we do all the time. He stays out of my way, and I stay at my station.

My team and the EMT were already at the garage, getting ready by putting on their uniforms and safety gear. I quickly did what they told me to do.

We all got into the engine, and I sat at the end of the bench like I always do. As we drove away, I put my glove on my hands and thought about what kind of fire we were going to face.

I heard one of the new EMTs say, “Guys, what if the fire is on the top floor or something? Do you think Chief Benneth will let me use the ladder?” I couldn’t help but scrunch up my face.

What kind of dumb kids did I work with?

Twenty minutes later, we got to the apartment building. In my mind, I was already thinking about how bad the damage might be, how the building was built, and how big the fire was. You could see the smoke coming from the seventh floor, and I just hoped that everyone above and below had already left the building.

Everyone who lived in the building was outside, and Chief Benneth told a few men to move the crowd to the other side of the street.

He stopped a fat, bald man who looked like he owned the building.

“Sir, do you know which unit the fire is coming from?” he asked, getting right to the point.

“It’s coming from the seventh floor. I think it’s East 742 Maple.”

From where I was, he looked more angry than scared, and I could tell that he was more worried about the money than the fact that people might die.

“Is there anyone still on that floor or in the flat?”

“I believe the whole floor is empty, but I’m not sure if there is someone in that flat. The man who lives there is very private.”

Chief Benneth nodded and told him to join the rest of the crowd. He turned to us just as an explosion went off, and I knew that the longer we stayed down here, the more likely it was that people would die.

“Reid,” Chief Benneth called, and I turned to him, ready to follow his orders. “Take Finn, Harris, Troy, and Blake and do a primary search on the 7th floor.” I nodded and told the men to follow me.

We ran up all six flights of stairs to get inside the building, and we were already wearing our gas masks.

When we got to the 7th floor, I told Troy and Blake to check to see if anyone else was there. The rest of them had to come with me to East 742 Maple, which is at the end of the hall.

I put my ear close to the door and could hear the fire raging behind it.

“Fire Department, call out if you’re in there!” I yelled and waited for an answer.

I called again, but I still didn’t get any.

When Finn held my shoulder, I got ready to kick the door in.

“Lieutenant, there is no one in there. Don’t waste your time.”

My eye twitched.

I asked him calmly, “How the f\*\*k would you know that, Finn?” and waited for his stupid answer. “I don’t have time for this. If you’re too scared, get the hell downstairs and let me do my job. Stay out of my way.”

I counted to three in my head and kicked the door hard. It all fell apart.

The heat hit me hard, and I jumped to the side to avoid most of it. I walked in slowly, keeping an eye out for anything that might fall.

It was hard to see through the flames and smoke, but I knew I shouldn’t give up.

I walked around some more and came to what looked like a living room. When I saw how many empty alcohol bottles were on the floor, the pieces of the puzzle started to fit together.

When I saw the body on the couch, my stomach turned.

Even after all these years, I still feel sick every time I see a dead body.

“Dispatch, we have a 10-45, code 2. Send engine 2, over.”

While I waited for dispatch to respond to my message, I stood there looking at the body. It's not every day that you see someone burn in front of you, and when I felt a hand on my shoulder, I almost jumped out of my skin.

Harris said, "We have to put out the fire, Lieutenant." I nodded, and he walked over to a window and told the dispatch team to bring the ladder there.

I moved closer to him and heard something squeak under my boots. It was a brown teddy bear covered in soot when I looked down.

There was someone else here.

"Hello! Is anyone there? Can you hear me?" I yelled as I walked right through the fire.

The flat was small and there weren't many places to hide, so when I saw a door near the kitchen, I marched over to it and kicked it down. Harris yelled for me, but I was already in the room.

There was so much smoke in the room that it was completely black, but I couldn't have missed the body on the floor that was crumpled up.

I ran to her and knelt down next to her body. I put two fingers on her neck to check for a pulse. I did find one, but it was very weak.

I called it in and said, "Dispatch, we've got a 10-37 here. I need a paramedic waiting when I get down, over." Then I rushed around the room looking for a blanket.

The fire didn't start in this room, so it's likely that the victim passed out from the smoke. She probably wouldn't have lasted much longer because of all the smoke in here.

I found a bathroom and turned on the water to soak the blanket as much as I could. At this point, I started to panic inside, but I told myself to calm the f\*\*k down. It didn't help anyone for me to panic.

I put her in the blanket and picked her up.

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She was so light that it was easy to move her around in my arms, so I took off my gas mask and put it on her face.

The thick, black smoke took my breath away. We had to get out of here right away.

As I walked back to the main area, I coughed and held the small body close to me. I moved quickly, hardly noticing that my men were starting to put out the fire.

I ran down the stairs faster than I had run up, and my mind was full of bad thoughts.

Please let her be all right.

As soon as I burst through the main doors and saw the light of day again, I took a deep breath and welcomed the fresh air (as fresh as Portland air can get) into my lungs.

I was mostly focused on the girl in my arms, and when I looked down at her, it felt like the wind had been knocked out of me again. Her mask had fallen off, and I couldn't think of anything.

"Sir, we need to treat her." I didn't understand what the paramedic was saying at first, but then I realised what was happening.

I put her on the waiting stretcher and stepped back, not sure what to do, so the paramedics could do their jobs.

I didn't get it. I couldn't believe what I had just seen.



She was a heavenly being.

The ECG machine's loud screeching woke me up with a start. My brain quickly took in everything that was happening.

I ran to the edge of the bed again and hugged her to me.

"I told you you were okay," and I ran my hand over her head to try to calm her down. She coughed and gurgled, choking on her own spit as she tried to breathe.

"No, no, no," I said as I held her trashing body gently but firmly so she wouldn't hurt herself.

I promised her, "You're safe. You're safe." Then I kept stroking her head.

Her body shook with sobs. I felt the same hopelessness that I've been living with for a long time as I held the little face in my arms and watched it break down.

Her breathing slowed down and she stopped convulsing after a few minutes. I thought she would go back to sleep like she had every other time, but this time she turned and looked right at me.

Her hazel eyes were so bright they looked orange. I was shocked not only by how rare her eye colour was, but also by how innocent they looked. She looked so... not dangerous.

Her stare was so strong that it kept me where I was, unable to move.

Her eyelids started to droop again, and she wrapped her arms around mine and rubbed her head against it like a kitten.

I listened to her little breaths as she closed her eyes. She was too special, and I'm not sure I could have handled it.

I thought I heard her mumble, "My hero," and for the first time in a long time, I smiled a cheesy smile.

I carried her out of a burning flat about twenty-four hours ago, and she has been waking up every hour for the past ten hours, completely and utterly traumatised.

I couldn't make myself go. I haven't left her since the EMT took her to the hospital and moved her to this room. Except for the twenty minutes I spent in the hospital shower. I had taken off my uniform and put on some casual clothes that I had bought at the store across the street.

For hours, I sat next to her bed, wondering what I was doing there. I tried to tell myself that this was very wrong, but every time I tried to leave, I would look at her face and know that I couldn't go.

As the hours went by and the investigation results started to come in, I found more and more reasons to stay.

The first reports say that the fire may have started when a lighter exploded on the couch. It spread quickly, and they think the man we found was passed out from drinking too much.

With all the bottles I saw on the floor, it wasn't hard to figure that one out.

The fire spread quickly, even though the flat had carpet. The gas pipes caused the explosion, and they said that if we had come ten minutes later, the damage could have been much worse.

The thing is, we still didn't know who the victims were, but I was going to find out very soon.

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"Mr. Reid, Mr. Reid?" Someone was shaking me awake, and I could feel my annoyance rising in my chest. Who the hell was waking me up?

I grumbled, "What?" and then I heard a whimper from next to me and knew I had made a mistake.

She was still asleep, but I cursed myself for making her even a little bit upset. I stroked her fingers, which were tightly wrapped around my thumb.

Someone cleared their throat, and when I looked up, I saw what I thought was a doctor looking at me like I was a rabid dog that was about to attack. Then I saw the four big security guards behind him. They looked just as scared, if not more so.

I knew right away where they were going with this.

I asked, "How is she doing, doc?" and leaned back in my seat, keeping my face completely still.

"W-well, you see, Mr. Reid, the hospital can't... we can't tell you that," he said, pulling out a yellow handkerchief and wiping the sweat off his forehead. If this had been any other time, I would have laughed.

"And why not?" I asked, trying to figure out how long it would take him to just say it.

"It's our policy," he began strongly, but I could see the exact moment his resolve began to wane. He weakly said, "This is a very sensitive matter and we have to

follow the rules. So, you can't... be here... right now."

I stayed quiet for a while, trying to calm down so I wouldn't do something that would make things worse. The only sound I heard was the beeping that told me the little angel was breathing. I looked at her sleeping face for a moment before turning back to the idiots in front of me.

"I am not leaving her," I said firmly, with no room for argument.

They probably thought I would fight back, so I had no idea what those confused faces were about. They looked at each other, not sure what to do next, and I rolled my eyes at how stupid they were.

"Mr. Reid," he began, but a tiny sneeze and the sound of shuffling cut him off.

I was only paying attention to her now. Her hazel eyes blessed me again, and the innocence and purity on her face shocked me for a second.

I thought I saw a small smile on her pouty lips, but it was gone as soon as she saw the five other men in the room.

A lot of noise.

That was the only word that came to mind to describe what happened next. She screamed so loudly that it made her blood run cold, and then she climbed up on the bed to get as far away as she could. When that didn't work, she pulled my body in front of her with strength I couldn't explain and used me as a shield.

I felt proud that she trusted me enough to know that I would always protect her, but I couldn't think about it for long because these jerks were back.

They grabbed their teasers and moved closer, making her scream again as she tried to get off the bed and behind me. I was so angry that I could feel my blood boiling. I knew she was probably moving her IV and hurting herself, all because these idiots don't seem to have enough common sense to know that now is not the time.

I thought about attacking them. It wouldn't have taken much to take these fat clowns down, but I couldn't imagine being that violent in front of her. So instead, I turned around and wrapped my arms around her small body, covering her completely and keeping the men behind me from seeing her.

"Don't be scared, honey," I said, holding the back of her head as she buried her face in my chest. "I'm here, so nobody will hurt you."

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She sniffled and moved away from my chest, whispering the first word she had ever said to me.

“Promise?” she said, and the sincerity in her eyes made me know that I could never let anything bad happen to her as long as I lived.

“I promise angel,” I said back. We stayed like that for a few minutes, but then I looked down and saw blood on the back of her hand.

I was scared and looked around the room, but there were no guards there. The doctor was in the corner, acting like he was hiding. I looked him straight in the eye, and to my surprise, he kept doing it. I nodded at him a little, and he did the same. We both agreed to stop fighting.

“Baby,” I said softly, and she hummed back. I pulled her away from my chest and held her chubby cheeks in my hands, trying not to say “aww” at her face that was all squished up.

“Why don’t you tell me your name?” She seemed unsure, so I decided to try something else.

“How about I start? My name is Carter, but you can call me whatever you want. You can call me Cart, Cartie, or Carter.”

I could hear her little giggles all over the room, and I knew then that I could listen to them for the rest of my life.

She laughed again and said, “My name is Amaya, but I don’t have any funny nicknames like you, Carter.” Then she went back to rubbing her head against my chest like a kitten.

I thought to myself again, “Amaya.” It was just right for her. Soft, clean... lovely.

“Amaya is a beautiful name, pumpkin. Do you have another one?”

I turned to the doctor to see if he was paying attention, and he was writing something on the clipboard he was holding.

“Mmhm, it’s Chase. My name is Amaya Chase. I don’t have another name, though. Some people have three names and some even have four, but I only have two. It makes me sad sometimes,” she said, pouting her lip and looking down.

“Don’t be sad, baby. Your two names are prettier than any other name I’ve ever heard,” I said, happy to see the smile return to her face.

“Amaya, you have some bruises, honey, and this nice man wants to help you feel better. Don’t you think we should call him over?”

I laughed at how hard she was thinking because her face was scrunched up.

“Okay,” she finally said. “But you have to be here the whole time, Cartie.”

I knew I was in trouble when I tried to make her laugh earlier, but I guess I’ll just have to deal with it. If she wants to call me Cartie, that’s fine with me. Forget about pride.

“Amaya, I promise I’ll never leave you.”

I helped Amaya get back into bed the right way and called the doctor over.

“Hello Amaya,” he said quietly, and she said “hello” back. “Okay, my name is Dr. Cole Ramirez and I’m here to help you get better.”

He checked Amaya’s vital signs after she nodded. She held my hands in an iron grip the whole time, and I couldn’t figure out how she was so strong.

Dr. Ramirez began to joke with Amaya in order to get her to trust him and talk to him.

“Amaya, do you think I look old?” Dr. Ramirez asked. I was curious about where he was going with this.

I couldn’t help but smile when her thinking face came back. She was so cute.

“You don’t look very old, Dr. Ramirez, but you don’t look as young and pretty as Cartie.”

I was shocked by what she said, and I was even more shocked by how red my cheeks turned. The doctor laughed at how I reacted, so I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“How old are you, Cartie?” Amaya asked.

“Sweetheart, I’m twenty-eight years old.”

“And what about you, Dr. Ramirez?”

Dr. Ramirez said, “Well, I’m forty-two.” Amaya was quiet for a few seconds while she thought, and then she spoke again.



“Dr. Ramirez, I’m sorry, but you’re the oldest person in this room. Then Cartie, then me because I’m only seventeen.”

She was 17? I thought she was about sixteen. She looked like a baby and, from what I could tell, she was about average height.

“That means you’re going to be an adult soon,” Dr. Ramirez said with excitement. “When is your birthday, Amaya?”

I could tell it was a big deal for her because her face lit up.

“Can you believe my birthday is in two weeks? I can’t wait! I’m going to watch all the TV I want and no one is going to tell me no!” She clapped with excitement, and I saw her mood change to one of curiosity as she looked around the room.

“Cartie, where is my dad?”

In a panic, I looked at Dr. Ramirez. How was I supposed to tell this poor little girl that her father had died in a fire that also destroyed her flat and almost everything in it?

I looked into her eyes. I looked at how they looked like they were twinkling. It was so bright and innocent, and I knew I couldn’t tell her the truth yet.

“He’s not here, Amaya.” I didn’t lie, but I also didn’t give her more information about the truth. I can’t stand to see her go back to that horrible place.

“Oh, well okay. He probably disappeared again. He’ll be back in a few weeks,” Amaya said, not paying attention to me and rubbing my thumb with her small fingers.

“Amaya, how often does your dad leave you? Is there someone who stays with you

while he's away?" Dr. Ramirez kept asking, and I glared at him from across the bed.

"Okay, I think that's enough questions for now. Amaya needs to sleep," I said, putting my hand on her head and helping her lie back down on the pillow.

"But I'm not tired, Cartie," she said, turning to Dr. Ramirez. "And to answer your question, my daddy leaves all the time. I'm always by myself. He would go and when he comes back he brings me all different kinds of stuff. He always brings a lot of groceries and he'd bring more paint for me-"

"Okay Amaya, that's enough talking for now," I said, cutting her off because I didn't want to hear any more. I didn't get what was going on, and I didn't think it was right to try to get her to talk by tricking her.

"Amaya, I think Carter is right. I'm going to send in a really nice nurse to take care of the bruise on your hand, okay? Then, she's going to give you some medicine to help you sleep. Is that okay with you?" Amaya nodded, and Dr. Ramirez turned to leave, but not before giving me a look that said it all.

What the hell was going on here?

After he left, the room was quiet, and Amaya and I just sat there and looked at each other.

"Cartie," Amaya said, and I hummed back.

I found her face so beautiful. From the light dusting of freckles on her little nose to the rosy, full cheeks. Her eyelashes were so long that they brushed against her cheek every time she blinked. And don't even get me started on the hazel irises they protected.

Her reddish-brown hair was messily braided into two braids, which only added to the sickeningly innocent aura that was driving me crazy. This caramel-skinned angel was making me feel things that a 28-year-old man should never feel for a 17-year-old girl. Especially since they were going through one of the worst things that could happen to a person right now.

The nurse came in just in time to stop my mind from going down a very dangerous path.

As the nurse came up to us and introduced herself, Amaya held my hand tighter. I didn't say anything; I just kept my eyes on Amaya and whispered words of comfort.

Every time she cried, my heart raced as the nurse quickly and skilfully fixed her hand.

I was so thankful that Amaya wasn't hurt in the fire. I just know she wouldn't have been able to handle that much pain.

I saw her eyes get droopy as the nurse put the pain medicine into her new IV line.

"Promise me you'll be here when I wake up, Cartie," Amaya said, her beautiful eyes fighting to stay open.

"I promise Amaya. I will never leave you."

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“Okay, Doc, just say it,” I said as I walked into his office without warning.

“Listen here, Mr. Reid. You know very well that I can’t tell you anything about Ms. Chase. She’s a minor, she’s part of an ongoing criminal investigation, and to top it all off, you’re not related to her.”

I didn’t say anything and walked deeper into his office, counting down the seconds in my head until he broke down.

“Fine,” he said with a huff as he took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead in frustration. “Can’t believe I’m putting my job on the line for a six-foot-tall lumberCart,” he said under his breath.

“If you think for even a second that anything said in this room—”

“Stop it,” I said, trying to hide how badly I wanted to know more about Amaya.

“Fine, since you insist. Let’s start with the fire. Our tests show that Amaya’s respiratory system is very weak. She passed out within minutes of breathing in smoke.”

I kept my eyes on my sweatpants while I thought about this new piece of information.

“What did the police say?”

“Well, we did some DNA tests on her, and just in case you were still wondering, the dead man was her father.” He stopped and handed me a file. While he talked, I

looked through it.

“Patrick Chase, who was 39 years old, had lived in Portland his whole life. He got married a long time ago, and state records say her name was Siobhan Leary. She came from Norway and met Patrick right away. They got married five months later. Seven months later, Siobhan died giving birth to their baby girl. Since then, Patrick and the baby, Amaya, have been missing.”

I stopped reading and looked up at him. “There is no record of Amaya going to kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, or high school.”

She never went to class.

“Patrick probably kept Amaya locked up in that flat for her whole life, and from what we just heard, she might have been there alone for most of the time.”

I let out a sigh, which made the facade fall apart for a moment. If all of this is true, Amaya has been through a lot more than I could have imagined. I had to help her, but I didn’t know how. This is the worst case of neglect I’ve ever seen.

I asked, “What happens now?” I could see that he was in a lot of pain, and my eyebrows scrunched together. “What is it?”

He said, “They’re just going to throw her into a foster home as soon as she gets out.”

I said, “What?” in a deadpan way, giving him a chance to say something smarter than that. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. She’s only seventeen.”

“Exactly, she’s still a minor. So, I’m saying this off the record, but those bastards are going to leave her there.”

“But she’s going to turn eighteen in two weeks. What do they think will happen to her then?”

“Mr. Reid, I don’t know if this is news to you, but they don’t care,” he said, pausing for a moment as if he had something to say but couldn’t bring himself to it.

“This is probably the most immoral thing I’ve ever said, but my plan was to keep her in the hospital until she turned eighteen. I would have paid for all of her hospital bills, and then when she turned eighteen... I don’t know what I would have done, but I would have done everything I could to help her.”

I said, “You’re speaking in the past tense,” because I was surprised at how much he cared about Amaya.

“I was going to go through with my plan, but then you came along. Well, you never really left,” he said to himself at the end and then snorted a laugh. This guy was a real mess.

“How can I keep Amaya safe and out of the system?”

“First of all, you need to become a foster parent. More specifically, her foster parent. You take her in for the next two weeks and when she turns eighteen... well, I don’t think I need to narrate your inner ambitions.” The cocky smirk on his face made me angry, especially since I wanted to get those thoughts out of my head.

I wanted to help Amaya. I wanted to protect her in every way I could because she was too innocent for this world. Also, I was ten years older than Amaya. I should only feel like a brother protecting her.

“Watch it, Ramirez,” I said, not liking what he was saying.

He put his hand up in front of him and leaned back in his chair, smiling as if he knew everything.

“Anything you say, Mr. Reid.”

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“I haven’t heard from you in forever, Carter. What have you gotten yourself into this time?” Gabriel’s cheeky voice filled the line, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes at how cocky he was.

Gabriel Langston was the lawyer for my family. I last talked to him a few weeks after I graduated from high school. I took all of my money and flew to Portland.

I never thought I’d have to call someone from my past, but Amaya Chase was making me do the impossible.

“How quickly can you get up here, Gabriel? I need your help with something very important.”

“Wow, I haven’t heard from you in ten years and I can’t even say hello? To answer your question, I can be there by tonight.”

“Well, I’ve never been one for niceties, have I?” He didn’t say anything, and I actually felt... not good.

What was going on with me?

I looked back at Amaya, who was lying on her hospital bed so beautifully, and I felt guilty. I was a terrible person.

“Look, I’m sorry. I just really need your help. When you get here, I’ll explain everything.” My voice shocked me, so I can’t imagine what it did to him.

“Uh... yeah. I’ll take the company jet and be there in the morning.”

I heard soft whimpers from behind me before I could answer. I turned around and saw Amaya moving around in bed.

“I’ll see you soon, Gabriel. Have a safe flight.” I hung up the phone without waiting for a response and ran to Amaya’s side. She asked me to be here when she woke up, and I will keep my word.

She opened her eyes and let out a little giggle right away.

“Cartie, you stayed!” she said with a cheer and tried to move up. I carefully helped her sit up, then I sat down next to the bed.

I gave her some water, and she happily drank the whole glass.

“Did you do anything fun while I was sleeping, Cartie?” she asked as I put the glass back on the side table.

“Well, I talked to your doctor about some important things, and I also talked to my lawyer on the phone.”

“Oh, I know what a lawyer is! They are the people who talk in court, right?”

I forgot for a second that Amaya had never been to school and I didn’t know how much she knew. Just thinking about it made me feel so bad that I couldn’t help but reach out and touch her cheek.



“That’s right, babygirl. Where did you learn that?”

She said, “I learnt it from TV.”

“Hey pumpkin, you watched a lot of TV, huh?”

“Are you kidding me? I love TV! I watch it all the time,” she said, going on and on about her favourite shows and the characters in them.

I paid close attention because I loved how animated she got when she talked about things she cared about. I didn’t think it was possible, but her smile was brighter than ever and her eyes shone even more.

I couldn’t stop thinking about how no one would ever hurt her again.

“Carter!” When I opened the door, a happy squeal greeted me. It made my heart feel warm. “You missed out. Cole has been telling me stories that are so funny.”

I walked over to the girl who was talking too much and kissed her forehead softly. I couldn’t be more proud of how much more outspoken she had become in the last few days.

She really liked Dr. Ramirez, or Cole as she calls him, which was great for me because I’ve had to leave her a lot more than I would have liked to in the last few days.

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This whole foster parent thing was a lot more complicated than I thought it would be, and I've been to court more times than I ever thought I would in just four days.

The good news is that the process was almost over. Cole was right: they really wanted to get rid of Amaya. They didn't care much about how things were going. Yes, it was wrong, but it worked out for me. It also helped that my lawyer was so persistent.

Gabriel was the best player.

The only thing left to do was for a social worker to come to my condo and make sure it was a good place for a child. The smart part of me knew that my flat was fine for a seventeen-year-old, but I still went a little too far.

I wanted everything to be perfect for Amaya, so I bit the bullet and brought my sister down to Portland for a day.

Tessa was my younger sister, and we got along well, all things considered. She was the only family member I still talked to. I tried to fly her in as often as I could so we could hang out. But lately, I've been ignoring her. It wasn't anything personal; I've just been really busy with work and the stress was getting to me.

I didn't want to start yelling at her for no reason and make things worse between us, which was already bad. I began to pull away.

So, she was very surprised when I called her and couldn't stop asking questions about the "mystery woman" who was "changing" me.

She was smart and quickly figured out that I wasn't giving her any Cart shit. I let her use my credit card completely, and we spent the whole day yesterday shopping for Amaya. She helped me get my guest room ready and buy food for the week. We also bought Amaya some clothes and shoes to wear until I can take her shopping for herself.

The social worker came this morning, and I was really nervous about the evaluation. She just came in, looked at my fridge, checked where Amaya would be sleeping, tried to flirt with me, and then left.

I guess it went well then?

Now all I could think about was getting Amaya out of the hospital and home to safety as soon as possible.

"I hope you had a good time, pumpkin," I said as I sat down next to her bed.

"I did, Cartie, but I missed you," she said with a pout and took my hand, putting it on her chest.

Cole said, "Okay, I think this is where I say goodbye." I've been very thankful for him during all of this. He's been with Amaya while I'm gone, and I wouldn't be able to protect her without him.

"Bye bye Cole, come see me later okay." Cole kissed Amaya on the head, promised to come see her later, and nodded at me before leaving.

I turned back to Amaya and saw that she was already looking at me. Her eyes were still sparkling with the same brightness. I just hope that our next conversation doesn't take away that sparkle.

“Hey baby, there’s something I need to tell you.” She looked at me with interest, which gave me the go-ahead to keep going. I was praying for the right words to come out of my mouth.

“So the reason I’ve been gone a lot lately is that I’ve been getting ready for you to come stay with me.” As soon as I said this, I realised that I had never asked Amaya if she wanted to stay with me. I felt terrible because I was basically making her do this. Yes, I wanted to keep her safe, but I also wanted to let her speak. I need to let her know that she has options in life and the power to choose what she wants to do.

I still wanted to ask, even though it was too late. “Amaya, would you like to move in with me?”

She stayed quiet while she thought about what I had said, which I had seen her do before.

“Cartie, I would love to come stay with you, but my dad would have to move all of his clothes and things there too. That way, when he brings me food and things, he won’t have to go all the way back home to bathe. Can my dad stay with you too?”

I knew it was time to tell her the truth, and my heart ached and my eyes softened. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but I had to take the bandage off as carefully and painlessly as I could.

I got into the hospital bed with her, and there wasn’t much room, so she was basically lying on top of me. I put my arm around her shoulder and she snuggled into my chest, letting out a soft sigh.

“Amaya, I don’t know how else to say this, so please be patient and calm with me. Do you remember that I saved you from a fire a week ago?”

She nodded slowly, and I could tell that her mood had dropped to the ground. My happy baby was gone, and in its place was a scared little girl.

“Do you remember anything about the fire, honey?”

She shook her head yes and said she remembered a little bit. I pushed her to keep going.

“I remember falling asleep and then waking up feeling like I couldn’t breathe. There was a lot of smoke in my room, and I tried to get out, but I think I fell asleep again. The last thing I remember is seeing your face. Then I woke up in the hospital.”

“Amaya baby, we could only save you when we found you in that burning house. Your daddy didn’t make it.”

Her eyes shot up to mine, and right away they were full of tears.

“Is Daddy dead? Is he not coming back?”

I didn’t know if she was crying or screaming, but she shook and fell against my chest. I wanted nothing more than to take away all of the pain and sadness in her voice.

If I could, I would do it right away.

I knew that nothing I said would make her feel better right now, because her sobs weren’t getting any better. So I let myself be there in person. I couldn’t take away her pain, but I can be there for her.

I moved so that her whole body was on mine, and I hugged her tighter. She stopped crying and snuggled into my neck, but I could still feel the hot tears running down the side of my neck.

She didn't deserve any of this.

~ ~ ~

Amaya learnt the truth about a day ago, and she still feels bad. It broke my heart to see her so sad, and I couldn't stop thinking about how to help.

I had an idea that I thought might work, and thankfully, today is the day she gets to go home. I have her present at my flat, and I just hope it works.

Amaya was saying goodbye to Cole, who was trying to calm her down by saying he would come to see her as often as he could. She didn't want to leave the hospital, but Cole said that her "injuries" were healed enough for him to give the job to a bumbling fool like me. Not my words.

Tessa and I bought Amaya some clothes, and I brought her a simple blue dress, tights, and a trench coat to wear. It was late November, and the weather was already getting bad. I wasn't going to take any chances.

Amaya was about 5'6" tall, and I was well over six feet. So it's safe to say that she almost didn't reach my chest. She looked like a little muffin next to me, which only made me want to protect her more.

I held a bag over my shoulder with all of her hospital things and held Amaya's hand in my other hand. Before we left the room, we said goodbye to Cole for the last time.

The hallways were moderately busy, and Amaya said hello to everyone we passed. It was so cute to see, and she made my day better and everyone else's day better too.

I thought about how this might be the first time in Amaya's life that she's been around so many different people. It was probably very overwhelming, but she was so

happy and positive.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

Amaya bounced on her toes in front of the lift doors, and I laughed at how excited she was.

“I’ve never ridden a lift before Cartie,” she said, her words coming out so quickly that I could barely understand them. I thought about telling her that this was the fourth time she had ridden a lift, since she had ridden a lot of them while she was unconscious. Instead, I stayed quiet and let her have her moment, happy that she was acting like herself again.

We were lucky enough to be the only ones on the lift, and we rode it down to the basement level where my car was parked. I held her hand tightly as we walked to my car, always on the lookout for danger.

When we got to my car, my sweet Escalade, I didn’t expect Amaya to scream. It echoed in the empty space, and I laughed as she jumped up and down.

“This is the first time I’m going to be in a car too!” Wow, this is so exciting!”

I opened the door for her and helped her in because it was a little high for her. I think everything might be too high for her, though.

The ride was probably the most fun I’ve ever been on. Amaya was so excited that her face was pressed against the glass for almost the whole time. She only took it off to tell me what she saw.

I heard her whisper, “So many people,” a few times, and her voice was full of awe.



Seeing someone appreciate every little thing around them warmed my heart. It made me appreciate the things I took for granted, like being able to go to school and ride lifts. Amaya was showing me a new side of things, and I wanted to show her everything she had never seen.

I wanted to help her do all the normal things she had been denied.

When we got to my apartment building, Amaya was amazed at how tall and shiny it was. She also made sure I knew that this was only her second time in a lift.

As we walked to my floor, my hands got clammy because I was worried that she wouldn't like everything I had made for her.

I opened the door to my apartment and let Amaya go in first. She gasped when she saw the view right away. The windows that went all the way to the floor were hard to miss.

She walked slowly towards it, and I watched as she stood there for a few minutes, taking in the Portland skyline. I cleared my throat to bring her back to reality, and she turned to me with a shy smile.

She walked slowly around the living room, brushing her hands over the big grey sectional. For a moment, I wondered if she would realise that all the pillows and blankets on it were just for her.

It was clear that I was a minimalist, and my flat showed it. I wasn't home very often because I was a certified workaholic, so I never really paid attention to the little things in my home. Until now, that is.

Amaya moved to the kitchen, and I went in and showed her all the snacks and drinks I got just for her. I got her a lot of stuff to try because she's been missing out on so

much.

I thought it was better to show Amaya her room and the present that was waiting for her now than to wait.

I took her hand and led her down the hallways to the bedrooms. Mine was right across from hers, and I told her this before opening the door and letting her look around.

I made sure that Amaya's room showed that she wasn't a little girl. She told me she loved pastel pink, but I wanted the room to have a more grown-up feel. Once I told Tessa this, I let her decorate it however she wanted because I didn't know what teens these days liked.

I was only twenty-eight, but being with Amaya all the time made me feel like I was a hundred.

Amaya really liked the room; the number of blankets and pillows seemed to make her happy. She jumped right into bed and wrapped herself up tightly, leaving her cute little face peeking out from the top.

I walked over to the bed and sat down, putting my hand on her cheek. She smiled up at me, and I felt that familiar tingle in my chest that told me what I felt for Amaya was anything but innocent.

~ ~ ~

"Amaya, I have something for you." She crawled out of her little cocoon and came over to me. She crossed her legs and sat still, and I smiled at how obedient she was.

I took the medium-sized gift box off the dresser and put it on her lap. Her eyes lit up,

and I realised that this was probably the first time she had ever gotten a gift that was wrapped.

“We were able to get back a lot of things from the fire, especially in your bedroom because the flames didn’t spread very far. “I thought you should have them,” I said as she took the lid off.

When she saw what was in the box, she gasped and her eyes filled with tears. I let Tessa handle the gift as much as I could because I wanted to respect Amaya’s privacy. I thought that if she wanted me to know more about her past, it should come from her mouth.

She took out a pale pink scarf and slowly brought it to her nose. As she breathed in deeply, she let out a soft sigh that sounded like relief.

Tessa brought it to my nose, and the strong lavender smell filled my nose. I don’t know how she knew that this scarf was supposed to smell like lavender or how she got it to smell that way after all the smoke, but she definitely deserves a shopping spree for all her help.

“This scarf was my mom’s. My dad says it smells just like her, and I sleep with it every night. “That’s why lavender is my favourite flower. It reminds me of her.” She wrapped the scarf around her body and crawled the short distance between us.

She sat down between my legs and leaned against my chest, putting the box back in her lap. I slowly wrapped both of my arms around her waist, telling myself that I just wanted her to be comfortable.

She opened each item and told me how important it was and the story behind it. She also showed me a few pictures of her mother, and they looked just like her. It was like a copy and paste.

She was so happy to show me pictures of her parents when she was pregnant with her. Amaya said these were the only family pictures she had.

Seeing how happy Patrick and Siobhan were in the pictures really made me think. I had always thought of Patrick as the bad guy who didn't care about his beautiful little girl.

But when I read between the lines, I saw that Patrick and Siobhan were in love. They were probably very happy together, and when Siobhan got pregnant, that happiness probably grew by ten times.

But Siobhan died while giving birth to Amaya, and Patrick had to raise their daughter on his own. Amaya looks just like her mother. He probably felt like his wife had died, but she never left. Seeing Amaya's face must have driven him crazy.

I'm not saying that what he did to her was right, but I think I'm starting to see things from Patrick Chase's point of view.

~ ~ ~

"So what made the wishes come true?" I pushed. Amaya had forced me to watch a dumb Disney movie, and of course I said yes. I can't say no to her anything she wants. I think we were watching something called 16 Wishes, but what do I know?

I thought it was funny that my little angel was getting mad at me. Amaya was the definition of an angry bunny; they were completely harmless, but their rage was the cutest thing ever. I was scared she would start gnawing on my wrists.

"I just told you, Carter." "The candles have the power of birthday magic in them and are making her sixteen sixteenth birthday wishes come true," Amaya said, turning her face back to the TV.

We were comfortable on the couch, with me lying behind her and her back against mine. Amaya covered us with two blankets, even though the apartment was only 12°C. I like it really cold, so when I offered to raise the temperature for Amaya, she actually wanted it to be lower.

It seems that colder weather makes it much more fun to bury yourself in two or more blankets.

“But what—” I started again, but I got a surprisingly hard elbow to the gut.

“Shut up Carter or I’ll never watch another movie with you again,” Amaya said, and I laughed hard. She was too cute.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

I stayed quiet and tried to watch the movie, but my mind kept going back to a little face that didn't seem very little.

I felt like a paedophile, preying on a broken, neglected teenage girl. There was nothing decent about the situation, even though that teenage girl was a week away from being legal, the most beautiful person I've ever seen, the sweetest little angel, and had a great body.

My mind was a battlefield of right and wrong, morals and lessons in common decency, and I felt like I was going crazy.

I heard a soft snore right next to my ear in the middle of all my thoughts. When I looked down, I saw Amaya sleeping soundly, her head buried in my neck and her hands spread out on my chest, holding on to my t-shirt. This is how Amaya always sleeps.

I carefully sat up, and she ended up straddling me because one of her legs was thrown across my body. I put her arms around my neck and stood up, but I accidentally put my hand too low on her back.

I felt my throat tighten and looked around in a panic, as if the police were there to arrest me for child molestation or something.

I calmed down my nerves and told myself again that I didn't think of Amaya that way. I wasn't a pervert.

I quietly led us through the apartment, and when we got to her bedroom, I lifted

Amaya higher on my waist. I put her in the middle of the bed, and right away she reached for me with her arms. I gave her a pillow and she hugged it tightly.

I put the scarf on her and pulled the blanket up to her neck. Before I could change my mind, I kissed her on the cheek and said goodnight. I turned on the nightlight because Amaya was terrified of the dark, and I left both of our doors open.

I took off my t-shirt and sweatpants and crawled into bed in just my boxers. As soon as I laid down, I felt uncomfortable. It was hard to get comfortable without Amaya's warm body next to me. I've slept with her in my arms every night for the last week, so it felt strange not to have her there with me.

I lay there thinking and the clock on my nightstand said 3 a.m. I remembered telling Amaya it was time to go to bed a few hours earlier. She said she didn't have a bedtime and could watch TV for as long as she wanted.

It was becoming clearer and clearer that Amaya's whole life revolved around TV. I don't think that's a good thing because it seems like everything she knows she learnt from TV.

She has a sassy side under those angelic features.

That doesn't make sense because the only TV she could watch was Disney, and that was just princesses and stuff.

I didn't want to jinx myself, but I had a feeling that it would only take a few days for Amaya to make me a Disney expert.

~ ~ ~

The next thing I remember is jumping out of bed when I heard a scream. I ran to

Amaya's room and saw her yelling and fighting the blanket.

Without thinking, I got into her bed and pulled her body on top of mine.

She stopped screaming right away when she rubbed her head against my chest and wrapped her arms around my neck. I didn't realise I was crying too until I felt the tears run down my nose.

"You left me." That was all she said. There was no chance to make things right or make excuses.

"I didn't leave you, Amaya," I said. I held her face in my hands and made her look at me. She needed to see that her pain was mine.

"I promised I would never leave you, didn't I?" She nodded, and tears ran down her face.

"Why didn't you sleep next to me?"

"Amaya, baby," I said as I wrapped my arms around her to pull her back to my chest. "I wanted to show you that I cared. I don't want you to think of me... "badly."

I don't want anyone to think I'm a sicko.

"I will never think badly of you, Cartie." "You saved me." She pulled me closer and kissed my neck, making my body go against what my mind was saying. "I don't care what anyone else says." Okay, you're going to sleep with me every night.

I looked down and saw that she had the most determined look on her face.

"Okay, Amaya, we'll sleep next to each other every night."



“Okay.”

I pulled the blanket over us and was finally ready to sleep. Just before I fell asleep, Amaya called out to me.

“Yeah, babe?”

“Now I have a name that I like. You’re my Amaya and I’m your Cartie.

“Yeah, I guess we are, babe.”

~ ~ ~

That’s for sure, living with Amaya was different.

She was a light. Seeing that face every day made me happier than I’ve ever been.

But don’t get it wrong; Amaya Chase drove me crazy for a lot of reasons.

First of all, she was a rude little brat. She was stubborn, sassy, and had no filter. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love it.

She was a total brat, just like you’d expect from a girl who had never been punished before.

She ate candy like it was going out of style, yelled at me when it was time to shower, and never cleaned up after herself. It gave me headaches, but it kept me on my toes and was kind of funny.

When she screamed and ran around the flat at one in the afternoon, it was hard to keep a straight face because she thought bathing wasn’t necessary.

For example, I made breakfast yesterday. It had sunny-side-up eggs, bacon, and toast with lettuce, baby tomatoes, and fresh slices of avocado. I worked really hard to make it look like Spongebob and everything.

She got really angry.

She was apparently terrified of raw eggs. I didn't cut the crust off her toast, and she wasn't a goat, so she didn't get why I was giving her goat food.

She was very happy to eat a big bowl of Lucky Charms for breakfast.

But what really drove me crazy was that Amaya never wore bras. It was fine when she wore my hoodies and t-shirts because they covered everything up, but other than that, it was hard to keep my eyes above her neck.

I'm not saying I look below her neck, but it's hard not to, especially since she was so... blessed in that area. All areas, really.

Stop talking, Carter.

"Okay, Carter. Amaya came skipping into the living room, all dressed up for her big day. "Do you like it?" she asked. Hey

She did a little spin, and I had to look away again. She was wearing a red turtleneck sweater and a tiny black skirt that was way too short and tight. She didn't wear a bra, which is typical for Amaya.

I was scared of two things: that she would die of cold outside and that I would go to jail today. But I couldn't stop her from smiling.

"You look beautiful as always, Amaya." She smiled and ran to me for a hug. "But

you need to put on some tights.” Outside, it’s very cold.

She frowned, and I thought we were going to have a tantrum, but instead she just pouted.

“But why?””

“Because it’s freezing outside and I don’t want you to get sick.” She rolled her eyes up to the sky but didn’t argue because she understood what I meant.

I promised to take her out to see the city today. I wanted to give her some time to get used to things, but I wasn’t going to keep her locked up in this flat. She’s had enough of that for a lifetime.

I also decided to fly Tessa out here for the weekend because I was going to take them both shopping and I thought we both needed help. Amaya really wanted to meet her too.

I thought about making some rules for Amaya before we left because she was supposed to get there any minute.

“Amaya, Portland City is a very dangerous place.” I walked us over to the window so she could look down at the city and really get my point across. “You will not leave my sight for a second. Don’t run away. I know you’re excited, but if you want to see something, just ask me and I’ll take you.

I was really dreading today. Portland City was dirty, crowded, and the people were terrible. I wanted Amaya to see the world, but I was afraid that the truth would really disappoint her. The world wasn’t a very nice place, especially for pure people like Amaya.

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“Do you get it, baby?” At that exact moment, a soft stream of sunlight shone directly on Amaya, and I couldn’t breathe.

She stood there, glowing, and before I knew it, my hands were on her face. She looked up at me with a question in her eyes, and I could see something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Her eyelashes fluttered, and I knew for sure that I had an angel in front of me.

Her hazel eyes had a little bit of green in them.

I jumped back when someone knocked on the door. What the hell was I doing?

I said, “I think Tessa is here.” My skin turned red, and I scratched the back of my neck in an awkward way. Amaya didn’t move, and I didn’t look at her. That was until I felt her arms wrap around my body to hug me.

Amaya was just too special. I didn’t deserve to have her in my life.

“Come on, let’s go let Tessa in.”

I held her hand as we walked to the door, and she bounced back to her usual self. When I opened the door, my seventeen-year-old sister was standing there, just like I thought she would be.

“Hey, brother!” She squealed and jumped into my arms. This is how I knew Amaya and Tessa would get along: they were both so bouncy.

“Hey Tessa,” I said as I led her into the flat and shut the door behind us.

She looked at Amaya and her eyes said shock. I’m not sure why.

Amaya held out her hand with a big smile on her face, and she felt proud. She was so brave.

Tessa looked at Amaya’s hand, then ignored it and hugged her. Amaya was shocked, but it only lasted a few seconds before she hugged her back.

“You are so hot,” Tessa said, and I mentally facepalmed.

I saw Amaya act shy for the first time since the hospital. Before Tessa could say anything else, I told Amaya to go back to her room and get her coat and tights like I had told her to.

“What’s wrong with you?” As soon as Amaya was out of sight, I yelled at Tessa.

“You didn’t tell me she was that hot? Look at her, I mean. I want my breasts to be that high.

“Oh my God. “I didn’t need that picture in my head.” I held my head and turned away, thinking of hairy butts to get rid of the pictures in my head.

“What? Did you see those things? She’s at least a C cup, and gravity doesn’t even matter. That’s not fair. And her b\*\*t is nice.

“Okay, that’s enough from you, Tessa.” I told them, “That’s strike one.”

She looked up at me with a glare and made fun of what I said. My eye twitched a little, and I felt the urge to strangle her come back.

“You’re a real jerk, Tessa.”

“S\*\*k my d\*\*k, Cartie.”

“Cartie?” Amaya called and we turned to her. “I’m ready.”

Tessa snorted, and I cursed in my head because I knew I would never get over “Cartie.”

I left them alone to talk and went back to my room to get the camera I had bought. I wanted to record everything that happened today because it would be full of firsts for Amaya.

For the first 17 years and 362 days of her life, all Amaya can remember is a lonely flat in Portland and a father who wasn’t there.

She can’t just remember things from when she was a kid on TV. I’m going to help her make new ones.

~ ~ ~

“Oh my God, did you see that, Carter?” Amaya turned to me, and I nodded. Then I raised the camera to my eye and took a picture of her.

A couple of breakdancers on the sidewalk completely captivated Amaya. She and Tessa went to the front of the crowd while I stayed back and enjoyed watching her have fun.

We’ve been walking around Portland for a few hours now, taking the tube to and from our main stops. The most surprising thing about my day so far was when I was having fun.

I have to admit that it didn't start out that way. Especially when we had to ride the damn tube. But seeing how happy Amaya was on a dirty, rat-infested train really threw me for a loop.

Amaya could find the good in everything. For example, when I saw graffiti, she saw art. When I saw dirty, she saw authenticity. When I saw rats, she saw something called a ratatouille? When I saw rude, disgusting people, Amaya saw diversity. She saw a lot of different people going about their day with their own views.

It was nice.

It was like I was seeing my surroundings in a new way, even though that sounds cheesy. I had always thought of life as black and white, but Amaya showed me the grey area, where the good and the bad mix. Maybe that was the real life.

You couldn't have the good without the bad, and it was up to you to find and enjoy the good in everything.

I was a philosopher after only two weeks with a bouncy teen.

"Hey Amaya, I think it's time for us to go get some lunch," I said, and she came right back to me. She's been so good today, and I'm so proud of her.

I thought I would spend the day like a soccer mom at the store, yelling at her bratty kid.

She came up to me and held my hand. I ignored Tessa's teasing look and walked to the edge of the sidewalk to get a cab.

Since I was going to take them both shopping after lunch, I thought it would be best for us to just eat at the mall. We got there about forty-five minutes later, and I found

us a table at this cute Italian bistro.

A skinny teenager came to take our order while Amaya and Tessa sat across from me. I rolled my eyes as Tessa started flirting right away. That girl is going to give me grey hairs way too soon.

Amaya was completely unaware of his advances, which made me very happy. When I got tired of his nonsense, I interrupted and stared him down. His macho act quickly faded, and I smirked when Tessa glared at me.

I mouthed “strike two” to her, and she made fun of me again. So grown up.

I secretly filmed a short video of Amaya bravely ordering chicken Carbonara pasta with broccoli.

She said, “I’ve always wanted to do that,” and she smiled broadly. Tessa and I both looked proud, and I reached across the table to hold her hand.

“You’re doing a great job, Amaya.”

I let go of Amaya’s hand and pretended to clear my throat when I saw the look Tessa was giving us.

Tessa started, “So, Carter, how is this little deal going to work out when you have to go to work?”

I said, “Well, I think you’ll be glad to know that I’m on vacation.” I looked over at Amaya, who was busy staring at the people walking by outside the restaurant with interest in her eyes.

“Vacation? Are you really serious? You have never taken a break from work. How



long are you going to be on vacation?Tessa's shock was understandable because this was so unlike me.

"Yes, I am serious, and I am on vacation for an indefinite amount of time."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, since you said I've never taken a vacation before, I told Chief Benneth that I'm taking ten years' worth of vacation time all at once. I'm on leave.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

“You can’t do that.” It is against the law.

“I can do whatever I want, Tessa.” “I’m a grown man.” I know that what I did was against the law according to someone’s rules, but I’d dare them to say otherwise.

“So you finally get to go on vacation, and it’s for her.” Her voice was full of jealousy and pain, and my heart sank.

I was only 18 years old when I left Dallas, and Tessa had just turned 8. My dad had died two years before, and my mom had just married his best friend.

I couldn’t stand to look at my mother or her cheating husband. The house had become so toxic.

My dad owned Reid Law Group, one of the biggest law firms in Dallas. I was going to take over for him, but after he died, everything changed. I had all this money, but none of it could bring him back.

Without my dad there, that big old house was so lonely. When my mom remarried, the loneliness was replaced by the smell of betrayal.

I left. I quit college and my job at the company and moved to the other side of the country. The money my dad left me was enough to last me the rest of my life, but I only used a small part of it to buy my flat and car and settle down.

Like my dad did when he was younger, I became a firefighter.

I haven't been back to Dallas or talked to my mother since then. Tessa keeps telling me how much our mother misses me and that I should take a vacation and come home. I'm old enough to say I miss my mother, but I know I won't be able to face her without getting really angry.

I fly Tessa to Portland whenever she wants to make me feel better about my guilt.

So now it's clear that I may have hurt Tessa a lot with what I did. She's been asking me to take a vacation for years, and I do it for someone I've only known for less than a month.

I was a jerk.

The waiter brought our food, which made me forget for a moment how much of a jerk I was.

I realised that Amaya's facial expressions were everything over the last few days. She looked like someone who had watched TV their whole life because she was so cute and dramatic. She didn't seem to notice the tension between Tessa and me; she just picked up her fork and slowly stabbed her pasta.

She suddenly dropped the fork and pushed her plate towards me.

"I can't do it, Carter." I've always wanted to try chicken carbonara, but what if this one isn't good? Then my first time will be ruined. "Please try it and let me know if this is a good Carbonara," she said sweetly.

Tessa and I looked at her for a while before we started laughing.

I had eaten here before and knew the food was good, but to make her happy, I took a forkful of her pasta.

I told her, “This is a good one, Amaya.”

She sighed with relief and pulled the plate back to her, quickly starting to eat.

My pupils got bigger when she moaned and threw her head back, enjoying the cheesy treat.

Some of her hair was up, and the rest fell down the sides of her neck, framing her face and drawing attention to her smooth skin.

F\*\*k

I cursed myself in my head and ate some of my bolognese.

Tessa chatted with Amaya quietly and I was actually taken aback by Tessa’s maturity. She didn’t hold my actions against Amaya. However, I knew she’d have it in for me sooner or later.

I didn’t say anything while they talked and ate. I only paid attention when Tessa said my name.

“Don’t you think so, Carter? We should stop by Victoria’s Secret to get Amaya some more knickers. I mean, I picked out some for her last time, but I think she should be able to choose her own.

To hell with you, Tessa

“That’s fine, Tessa,” I said with a fake smile and looked around the restaurant.

“Oh, and we should buy her some bras. Now that she’s here, they can figure out her bra size and we can buy her some.

I knew my cheeks were bright red, and Tessa was enjoying the fact that she was better than me.

I said under my breath, “Great thinking, Tessa.”

“Is that possible for them? I’ve never had a bra before. This is so thrilling!” Amaya bounced in her seat, and I looked down.”

“Saggy balls, saggy balls, saggy balls,” I started chanting in my head right away.

“Okay, Amaya, let’s get to work. “We have to go spend all of my brother’s money,” Tessa said with a smile and dropped her serviette on her plate.

“That sounds like fun, Tessa, but Carter and I talked about it last night and he said he could only get me things that he thinks I need. Amaya said kindly, “I already feel so bad about it, so that’s what we decided.”

When I told her I was taking her shopping and wanted her to get everything she wanted, we ended up arguing last night.

She was adamant about not wasting my money and said that I had already spent too much on her. She was thankful for all the basic things I did for her, but she didn’t see the need for me to go above and beyond.

So, to calm her down, I told her that I would only get her things that I thought she really needed.

It’s just bad for her because I think she deserves the world.

Amaya sat comfortably on my lap while I gently rubbed her back up and down. Yes, we were still shopping, and Amaya was clearly starting to feel the bad effects of

being on her feet all day.

I whispered to the tired girl, “I think someone is going to have to start going to the gym with me.”

We were in a private viewing room in this very expensive dress store. Tessa wanted to buy her dress here for her winter formal.

I was sitting in the purple, semicircular lounge chair when Amaya just sat down on my lap. She put her head on my chest like a puppy and whined about how much her legs hurt.

I should have known she would be in pain. She’s never walked this much in her life, and it was wrong of me to let her walk so much today.

“Do you think I’m overweight?” She gasped and stared at me like I had just hit her in the face.

“What? No, of course not, baby. I told them that fitness isn’t about being fat or skinny; it’s about having a healthy heart.

“What does that mean?””

“Well, the heart is a muscle, and when you work it out by doing hard things, you make it stronger. Do you get it?”

She nodded quickly and was completely focused on what I was saying. It felt great to share what I knew with her, no matter how small. She appreciated every bit of it, and that made me happy.

“Your heart gets stronger when you keep exercising, and you can do more things.

This is also true for the muscles in your body.

She stayed quiet for a moment, spending some time absorbing and processing this new information.

“So if I start working out with you at the gym, we can go on more trips like this?”

I nodded, happy that she was able to use what she had learnt in her own life.

“I can’t wait to go to the gym now.” “You’re so smart, Cartie. I wish I could be smart like you.” She frowned, and I held her close, wanting nothing more than to make all of her wishes come true.

“I’ve always wanted to go to school.” She said sadly, “I always wanted to decorate my locker and try out for the cheerleading team, just like the kids my age do in the movies.” “Every time I asked my dad, he’d say he missed the admission date and would try again next year.” I guess it’s too late now.

Date of admission?

I knew he had to lie to her to keep her from getting suspicious, but wow, he really did deny her an education. It’s so hard for me to understand, and I had so many questions that I would never know the answers to.

Why keep her from going to school if you weren’t going to be home anyway? What was Patrick always thinking about, knowing he had a little girl at home with no one to help her? Was he worried?

Patrick was the only one who could answer my questions, but that wasn’t possible. It was very unsettling not getting the full picture.

“Okay, guys, I think this is the one.” Tessa walked out of the dressing room, and the skin-tight, low-cut black dress she was wearing drew my attention away from my thoughts.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

My eye twitched again.

“Tessa, are you—”

“Amaya said, “Tessa, it’s beautiful,” and then she jumped off my lap and went up to the podium to look at the dress more closely.

I would never let Tessa try on or buy a dress like that on any other day. But I made her very angry today, and I owed her. I didn’t want to have to pay for it, so I bit my tongue and gave her my card.

We were even now.

We left the store with Amaya’s hand in mine and her shopping bags in the other. We had already been to a lot of clothing stores and the stores with all the shiny things where you can buy hair and skin care products.

I looked up what kind of hair products she should use because her hair was clearly different from Jules’s and mine. I spent too much money in that area.

I’d like to say it’s because I wanted her to try everything, but I really wanted Amaya to be my guinea pig for my new obsession with natural hair products.

Then I bought them some body washes, creams, perfumes, bath oils, and something called a bath bomb. I felt like an idiot half the time because I didn’t understand what Jules was saying. This took us to the dress store, and now I wasn’t sure where we were going next.

“Oh, I just remembered! We need to get some pants,” Tessa said loudly in the courtyard.

Amaya, who also didn’t get the idea of shame, loudly agreed, and I felt embarrassed for a whole other reason than talking about knickers in public.

I wasn’t going to buy knickers with my baby sister and foster child.

It’s not going to happen.

That would be the most uncomfortable mix of embarrassment and s\*\*\*\*l desire, and I didn’t want any part of it.

I needed to come up with an idea quickly.

“Okay, here’s the deal: you can take my card and go to that store. You have one hour, and then you both have to meet me here. No more than an hour, okay?”

Tessa seemed way too happy, and I realised that she might not have meant to make me look bad after all. She has a plan.

Amaya hugged me tightly and then tiptoed over to whisper something in my ear.

“I promise I’ll be good, okay?”

I had to close my eyes and make a fist to stop myself from doing something that would get me arrested and banned from the mall.

“I know you will, baby,” I said, kissing her on the forehead. Then I turned to my stupid sibling, who still had that smug look on her face.

I took my card out of my wallet and held it out for Tessa to see, but before she could grab it, I pulled her closer to me so Amaya couldn't hear us.

I said, "If anything happens to Amaya, I will hold you down and shave your head." There was no hint of humour in my voice.

"Don't worry, I'll keep your girlfriend safe." I was so angry at her smug face that I let her go with one last warning look.

"Don't do anything dumb," I yelled as they walked away. Tessa gave me the finger behind her back, and I wanted to throw my shoe at her big head.

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do with myself and trying to calm down my worry for Amaya. I was worried about Tessa too, but she can take care of herself. On the other hand, Amaya was a baby who was just learning to walk.

I thought hard about what I could do to keep myself busy for the next hour, and then I had an idea.

I had to buy birthday gifts, and I knew exactly where to go to get some jewellery.

~ ~ ~

We got home from the mall a few hours ago, and the girls have been stuck in Amaya's room ever since.

I wasn't sure what they were doing, but every now and then I heard Tessa's loud cackle or Amaya's soft giggles.

I stopped by at one point to ask them what they wanted for dinner, and Jules said he wanted a pizza. Amaya was excited to finally get to eat pizza, which she had always

wanted to do.

It seems that she had already made a pizza for herself, but she had never had the chance to order and eat one.

I let her do it, and I was able to take a picture of the excited look on her face. I bet the person on the other end of the queue had never gotten such an excited call.

I was excited to see her finally take a bite of the pizza when it got there. I realised I had caused another addiction after she ate her third slice.

I need to get that kid to like goat food.

They've been locked up in her room ever since.

I took a shower and put on some sweats and a t-shirt. While I waited, I sorted through all the pictures I took today. I thought today would be bad, but it was much better than I thought it would be. I told Amaya that it was one of the best days of my life and I hoped it was the same for her. It made me realise how boring the last ten years of my life have been.

After I had sorted through all the pictures and uploaded them for printing, I lay on the couch and watched TV without thinking.

My mind was too busy going over today, especially how I felt when I went to the jewellery store.

What was going through my mind when I bought that?

I didn't know I had fallen asleep until I felt a small pair of hands on my arms. When I looked up, Amaya was already climbing over me. Then she pushed herself between

my body and the couch. So now we were lying down in the big spoon/little spoon position.

“Hey, baby girl, are you okay back there?” I asked playfully.

She hummed a positive answer, and I figured she was in one of her clingy/silent moods. Amaya would sometimes get really quiet and act like she needed a lot of help. I really liked that. This was one of my favourite versions of her.

“Where’s Tessa?” I asked in a low voice.

“She fell asleep on my bed,” she said softly as she stroked my back.

I sighed with happiness, and Amaya reached around to hold my hand. I put our hands together and put them on my chest so she could feel how fast my heart was beating.

Letting her know how she made people feel. Showing her where she fit in.

~ ~ ~

The next morning was very busy. Tessa made me make a spa appointment for Amaya and her, so we had to get up a lot earlier. Also, Tessa was leaving in the afternoon to go back to Dallas for school the next day.

That day, I learnt that Amaya was not a morning person at all.

She was really cranky, and while Tessa ran around the house trying to figure out how to pack all the things she bought, I was trying to calm my baby down.

## Page 11

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“How about I make you waffles and let you choose any topping you want? You can have strawberries, chocolate, whipped cream, Lucky Charms, or anything else you want, baby girl.”

I had her sit on the counter and stood between her open legs, with my arms lazily wrapped around her back.

When I saw the short satin nightgown Amaya was wearing, I had a good idea of what Tessa was up to. I think she bought a lot of these for Amaya.

“Okay, but I want ice cream later. And can we order pizza too? Can we, Cartie?” She begged, rubbing her tired eyes.

“Anything for you, sweetheart.”

I picked her up from the counter, and she instinctively wrapped her arms around my neck and legs around my body. Amaya would not let me down, so I started making breakfast with her hanging on to me like a koala. Yes, I loved it.

Amaya had fallen asleep on my chest again, and I had to stop for a second to look at her sleeping face.

I knew Tessa was picky about her food, so I put everything on the counter for her and went to the living room to feed my big baby breakfast.

I put her toppings in the shape of a smiley face to try to make her feel better, and I was very happy with the laughs I got. And of course, the quick kiss on the cheek.

Amaya was going to a spa for the first time today, and I wanted her to have fun, not be grumpy because she had to get up at six in the morning.

I finally got her to go down to the floor, and then I told her to get ready. Tessa had finished and come out for breakfast while that was going on. I got ready too and waited in my room for Amaya to finish. I was worried because it had been more than thirty minutes, so I went across the hall to check on her.

“Amaya, sweetie, are you okay?”

Everything was quiet, but then she heard her soft footsteps and opened the door just a little.

“Cartie, something’s wrong, but you have to promise not to be mad at me.” Her voice was panicked, as if she knew whatever it was would make me hate her or something.

“Amaya, I could never be mad at you. What’s wrong, baby?”

She hesitated again, not sure if she should tell me or not. But then she lost her willpower.

“Tessa picked out some bras for me yesterday, and I was so happy, but I put them on Cartie and they hurt.”

Oh, crap.

I thought she thought I was mad at her because I didn’t answer her. She went on an apologetic rant.

“I’m very sorry I wasted your money, Cartie. We could try to go back and get your money back. I understand if you don’t want me to be here anymore.”

“Amaya,” I said, cutting her off from saying anything else stupid. “Money isn’t important to me, you are. If it’s uncomfortable, don’t wear it. I just want you to be happy, okay?”

She took a few seconds to answer, but when she did, it made me feel good.

“Okay, Cartie. Thanks. You’re the best.”

It was the big day today.

It’s Amaya’s 18th birthday.

I wasn’t Amaya’s foster parent anymore after today because she had “grown out” of the system. My child was now an adult, and I really felt like a proud but worried parent.

I was proud that she had made it this far after going through so many hard things as a child. But I was worried about her, that’s for sure. Amaya had the right to make her own choices because she was an adult. I couldn’t make her stay here if she didn’t want to, regardless of how much I wanted to keep her safe.

But I didn’t want to think about all of this bad stuff on her big day. I pushed it out of my mind and kept making her favourite breakfast. Waffles with every kind of topping. I even added ice cream as a bonus.

I put everything on the tray and walked back to my room, where Amaya was still asleep. I put the food on the dresser and sat on the edge of the bed. I reached over and brushed her hair back from her face.

She moved around and grabbed my arm, hugging it to her body.



“Hey birthday girl,” I said softly, and she whined back sleepily. I picked her up off the bed and put her on my lap. I knew she liked being woken up this way.

As she rubbed her eyes with both fists, I started to hum the birthday song. I hugged her tightly and kissed her forehead.

Amaya squealed and threw us down to the bed as if she had just figured it out.

“It’s my birthday!”

I was completely enchanted by her. Her smile was so bright that it hurt my eyes. Her hair fell forward, covering me in her soft curls and giving me the best close-up ever. I was sure this was heaven.

“Happy Birthday, Amaya,” I said as I sat up and put my hand on her back. I teased her, “Your birthday ice cream is melting,” and her eyes got bigger.

“I get ice cream for breakfast on my birthday?”

“Even better,” I said with a smirk and pointed to the dresser. She jumped off my lap to get the food and started eating right away. I told her to eat her breakfast and get ready for the day. I’ll be in the living room waiting for her.

After thirty minutes, Amaya came over to the couch with me. She had changed out of her old pyjamas and into new ones.

“Amaya, why are you in your pyjamas?”

“Because you have to wear your pyjamas all day on every special day, like Christmas, New Year’s, and St. Patrick’s Day.”

I threw my head back and asked God to give me strength.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a second.”

We sat down on the couch after I changed into pyjamas, and I started to tell Amaya about our plans for the day.

“Here’s your first gift before I start.” I gave her the small white box, and she screamed with joy. This girl really loved getting gifts.

She opened the box by pulling on the pink ribbon. I held my breath because I knew this could go very wrong. I shouldn’t have gone to that store for jewellery.

She carefully took the necklace out of the box and then threw herself at me.

“I love it! I love it! I love it!” she yelled, jumping up and down. “Thanks, Carter. I’ve never had any jewellery before.”

That’s good to know.

“Anything for you, Amaya.” She turned around and held up her hair so I could wrap it around her neck.

She played with it for a few minutes, and I could tell she was really happy with it. The necklace was simple. It was just a thin chain of pure silver with a heart pendant on it that had a diamond on it. There was nothing special about it, but Amaya looked at it like she was holding the queen’s crown. I thought it was worth it because of the look on her face.

“So, we can do whatever you want today. But I have some things for us to use to decorate the house.” Her eyes got big and she looked at me in awe.

“Like, things for the party?”

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“Should we have a party? I should warn you, it will only be the two of us. Unless you want to invite Dr. Ramirez?”

“No, I want it to be just the two of us today,” Amaya said. “But we could invite Cole over for dinner this weekend.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what you get.”

For the next two hours, we worked on decorating the flat. I might have bought too many decorations. When we were done, my bachelor pad looked like the place where Barbie had her sweet sixteen birthday party, and Amaya was the happiest she had ever been.

I asked Amaya, “What do we do now?” as I pushed my way through the pink balloons on the floor of our living room.

“How about we watch every episode of iCarly in a row?”

“Every episode of what?” I asked, my voice full of confusion. I hoped it wasn’t some Barbie spin-off. I don’t mind watching TV with Amaya, but cartoons are the worst.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at me like I was too stupid to understand when I said, “You don’t know what iCarly is?”

“Well, I know it’s a show,” I said in a “duh” tone and rolled my eyes at her. She laughed at how childish I was.

“Oh, you’re going to love this one.”

Before we started our marathon, I gave Amaya a second gift. I had been giving her gifts every other hour, and it was time for another.

The doorbell rang right on time, and I went to the door to get the package. I signed for it, and then I led about five guys into the flat, each carrying a medium-sized box.

I teased, “I think someone is about to be very happy,” and then I took Amaya into the kitchen after they left. I worked on taking off the little pieces of tape that were on all the boxes on the counter.

“What is it, Cartie?” She climbed up on the counter and sat with her legs crossed, excitedly waiting for me to open the boxes.

I was used to her being very happy, so when I finally found them, the tears in her eyes surprised me.

“What’s wrong, baby?” I picked her up off the counter and put her on my hip. I thought she would like all the cakes and pastries, but I didn’t think about the fact that she might hate cake because she never got any for her birthday. Or maybe I got too many cakes?

Seven birthday cakes are a lot...

I’m worried about whatever it is.

“There’s nothing wrong, Carter. Everything is just right. I couldn’t have asked for a better birthday.”

Oh, happy tears

“I’ll do anything for you, Amaya. This is nothing compared to what I’ll do to keep you safe and happy.”

She hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, which made me blush.

“So this cake is just for us?” she asked, looking down at all the cakes.

“You can eat the whole thing if you want.”

“Really? That was always my dream.” She paused for a second, and then her face lit up. “I’m going to change my dream just for you. My new birthday dream is to sit down and eat a whole cake with Carter Reid, the nicest man in the world.”

Those simple words did more to my heart than anything else ever could, and it became clearer and clearer to me that Amaya was becoming the most important person in my life.

~ ~ ~

“... and then he got me cake and I cried and then we cuddled on the couch and Cartie finally got to see how great iCarly is. Then we cuddled some more, and at night he gave me my last present, which almost made me have a heart attack. I think I’ll show it to you so you can feel as happy as I did,” Amaya said as she ran out of the dining room, her short pink dress flowing behind her as she disappeared down the hall.

We were having a nice dinner with Dr. Ramirez a few days after Amaya’s birthday, just like she asked.

They talked on the phone a lot, but they both looked very happy to see each other. Amaya looked more excited than Dr. Ramirez.

Amaya made us all get dressed up for the night, but all she wanted was a two-course pizza meal with Dr. Ramirez's leftover birthday cake and some breadsticks.

I was making this kid sick enough to get diabetes.

Sorry, this is an adult.

"So, you guys really cuddled a lot for her birthday." I could tell he wanted to get that off his chest as soon as Amaya left the table.

I didn't look up to please him, but I could see his smug smile from across the table. I pretended that cutting a bread stick with my knife and fork was the most important thing I would ever do.

"I'm just saying, she's of age now."

I dropped my forks and knives on the table with a loud bang, not caring that he was laughing so hard.

I told him, "You're an asshole." "I don't think of Amaya that way,"

"You're weak."

"Yeah, you want to come over here and say that to my-

When I heard Amaya come back into the dining room, I stopped what I was saying. When I saw her trying to pull out her huge canvas to show Doctor, my mood went from totally annoyed to completely happy.

"This... is what... Carter... bought me," she said through heavy breathing. We just started going to the gym together yesterday, and it was clear that we had a long way

to go.

“Amaya, I see you’re interested in art,” Dr. D=Cole said.

No, I would get her a ten-foot canvas to sleep on.

“I love art, and Carter got me all the tools I need to practise it. Isn’t that nice of him? He’s the best.”

When I winked at her, she became this shy little girl, which is the opposite of how brave she really is.

“Amaya, leave the canvas there. I’ll take it back later. Come eat your dinner.”

I was curious as she ran to her room with the book. She held her sketchbook tightly to her chest when she came back. We saved it from the fire, and I had already talked to her about it a lot.

She was really good at both realistic and unrealistic art.

With a smile, I told her to come back to the dinner table. She went over all of her work with him, and I could tell how happy she was to do it. She hasn’t had many, or any, chances to show off her work.

Amaya did the dishes after that (only because I promised her a bag of gummy bears), and I asked Ramirez to talk to me alone because there was something important I needed to talk to him about.

“What’s wrong? Is Amaya okay?” He was a jerk most of the time, but when it came to Amaya’s health, he acted like a father who was too protective.



“She’s doing great physically. She’s excited to learn and loves going out and seeing new things, as expected. After the holidays, I’m going to get her a tutor to help her get her high school diploma. What I’m worried about is her mental health.”

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Even though Amaya looks like she's getting better on the outside, she still wakes up screaming in fear every night. I thought that by now she would know that her bad past is behind her. But the night terrors haven't stopped, and I'm really worried.

I told Ramirez all of this, and he nodded but didn't say anything.

"I think you should take her to see a therapist. She may not be near the source of her trauma anymore, but her mind may still be stuck in that pain and neglect."

I was a little shocked by his suggestion because I had been to therapy myself. My dad died, and I obviously didn't handle it well. My mom was too busy grieving to notice that I was hurting too. Her answer was to hit me in therapy.

It didn't work, and if anything, it made things worse. I felt like I was going crazy, and my therapist never really helped me deal with my grief.

She kept asking me how my father's death made me feel.

Karen, I don't know. You tell me.

I wasn't going to tell Ramirez my deepest, darkest secrets, so I kept my face neutral.

"Do you really think that's a good idea? I mean, she doesn't get along with new people very well."

Yes, I know that was a lie.

I know it's wrong of me to lie to Amaya.

"I think we should give it a shot and see what happens. You and Amaya have a strong bond. If therapy isn't working, I'm sure she'll let you know."

I didn't want to admit it, but maybe Ramirez was right. Because my wounds were still fresh and my feelings were always anger, therapy probably wasn't right for me.

But Amaya needed to admit that the way she grew up was not right. For eighteen years, she was cut off from society and lived in four walls.

She still had a long way to go to get over all of that, but I knew for sure that I would be with her every step of the way.

TWO YEARS LATER

I put lip balm on my lips and rubbed them together. Then I fluffed my hair in the mirror one last time.

"AMAYA!" Carter yelled again and again.

"I'M COMING CARTIE!" I yelled back. I took my time leaving my room after grabbing my purse to make him even angrier.

I walked into the kitchen and saw the monument that was Carter Reid. He was wearing his work clothes: dark blue cargo pants, tightly laced black boots and a grey t-shirt that didn't do anything to hide the rippling muscles underneath.

I've been seeing the same thing for two years now, and I'm still not used to it.

"Why do you always make us late in the morning, Amaya?" He sighed and pushed

my breakfast closer to me.

“That look on your face gets me going,” I said as I sat down at the island. He walked around and hugged me good morning.

When he didn’t kiss me good morning, I frowned, and he noticed right away. Carter can read me like a book. It also doesn’t help that I can’t control how my face looks.

He laughed and said, “Spoilt,” then kissed me on the cheek and forehead in the morning.

“Now eat up; we’re already late,” he said as he turned to leave. I took his hand.

“Did you eat yet?” I frowned at him when he shook his head. I took the plate and led us to the living room, holding his hand.

I sat on his lap on the couch like I always do, and we ate breakfast together. When it was finally time to go, we took the lift down to his car and got ready to deal with the traffic in Portland.

Carter is just so dramatic in the morning. If I weren’t “late,” we’d be at work forty-five minutes early every day.

Carter broke the silence in the car by asking, “Do you and Tessa have any plans for tonight?”

“I don’t know what Tessa has in mind, but I was hoping for a quiet night at home,” I said, looking out the window at all the busy people in Portland.

Tessa moved to Portland about a year ago and lived with us for the first few months. After that, she moved into her own place about twenty minutes from our building.

Tessa comes to stay with me every time Carter has to work at night because he doesn't like it when I'm alone in our flat.

We got to the coffee shop where I worked about thirty minutes later. Even though it wasn't the best job in the world, I always wanted to work in one as a teenager, no matter how cheesy that sounds.

Carter, my therapist Diane, and I all agreed that getting a job would help me become more independent, learn how to be responsible, and improve my social skills.

I really liked it. My boss was pretty cool and my coworkers were great. The best part was meeting new people every day. Everyone had their own story to tell as they went about their day. I really enjoyed getting a peek into the lives of so many people.

Carter leaned over and kissed me on the cheek for a long time. "Have a good day at work, Amaya," he said. As I got upset, a light blush spread across my skin. I didn't want to go.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and crawled over the console to straddle his lap.

"I don't want to go," I whined, putting my head on his chest.

He kissed my forehead and held my cheeks in his hands, squeezing them together.

"Do you want to go somewhere fun for a day?"

I almost took him up on his offer, but I knew he had to go to work. He had already taken more than a year off for me, and since he went back to work, he took a lot of days off. I need to save as many days as I can for when I really need him.

"No," I said softly. "You have to go to work."

“I need to take care of you and make sure you’re happy,” he said, and my heart just burst.

The way he took care of me...wow, it was like nothing else.

“And I’m happy because I’m with you,” I said after that.

He smiled at me and then kissed my nose. He only pretended to be the big bad wolf to other people. Carter was like a big, soft teddy bear. He was kind and caring, and he really made me feel special.

“How does that sound? I’m going to take you out for the day tomorrow when I get home from work.”

I tried hard to keep my feelings in check, but I couldn’t. Carter might not call it a date, but I’m going to act like it is.

I quickly packed my things and made him promise to call me whenever he could. I got out of the car on his side.

It was hard to leave, but the thought of tomorrow made my heart heavy.

“I love you, Cartie,” I whispered, holding onto the door and getting ready to close it.

“I love you more, Amaya.” He blew me a kiss, and I smiled and finally closed the door after saying “see you later” one last time. We never said goodbye to one another.

As he drove away, I turned away, getting ready for a long day at work. I could see the mile-long queue at the cashier from here. That was always true: the café was always busy.

I opened the door and went straight to the employee room. I was the last one to get there, so I quickly put my purse in my locker and put on my apron.

My coworker Sophia said, “Good morning, Amaya.” I said good morning to her and then got right to work on filling orders.

“So, did your boyfriend drop you off at work again?” Sophia teased, and I wondered how long it would have taken her to start.

“First of all, he is not a boy at all. And yes, Sophia, he drops me off at work every day.” I laughed as she moved her thick eyebrows around while I expertly added creamer to the cappuccino in front of me. They probably hired me because I’m really good at making coffee art.

Over the past two years, I’ve had the chance to try a lot of different hobbies with Carter, but the best part was working on my art.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

When I lived with my dad, he would bring me paints, brushes, and pencils every month. When I wasn't watching TV, I was trying to paint and draw the characters.

Carter really helped me get better at those things. He was the most helpful person in my life. He made a small art room in the apartment for me and went with me to every pottery class. I wouldn't know what to do without him.

He helped me get my high school diploma. It was hard at first because I didn't know how dumb I was until I learnt how little I knew.

I was embarrassed, and I was thankful for my therapist at the time because I was too ashamed to talk to Carter about it. But Carter, being Carter, figured it all out.

I remember crying my eyes out when he told me I wasn't stupid and would never be stupid in his eyes. Those words were so simple, but they were just what I needed to hear.

"I just don't get how you can get so close to a man like that and not bag him right away," Sophia said, sounding like she was thinking about my Carter in a s\*\*\*\*l way. I clenched my jaw and accidentally smeared my creamer leaf. "Don't you worry that he might get a girlfriend?"

This is why I wish Carter had never come into the store months ago. I didn't like how much these girls talked about him.

He was my Carter, and nothing will change that.



~ ~ ~

I yelled, “What’s up, bitch? Your best friend in the whole world is here,” when Tessa came into the shop, ready for our lunch date.

I said, “Sophia, I’m going to have lunch now.” I took off my apron and grabbed my purse, then ran around the counter to say hello to my best friend.

Tessa and I have become very close over the past two years. Carter always made sure I was safe and getting better in every area of my life. Tessa always made sure I had a good time. She made me feel like a rebellious teen, and I loved that she told me to be myself.

“Are you ready for our lunch date?” Her blue eyes, which were a lot like her brother’s, sparkled in the dim light of the cafe, and I missed him. I’ll text him when I get to the restaurant.

We held hands and walked down the sidewalk to this cute little lunch spot that had the best Caesar salads. Even though it was lunchtime, we got there and were seated right away. I got my salad, and Tessa got a double cheeseburger and steak fries. We always ended up sharing our food, so the junk food and healthy food were well-balanced.

“So I was thinking—”

“Well, that can’t be good,” I said, and then I started to laugh at my own joke.

“Whatever. Like I said, my coworker told me about this new club that just opened and it’s the place to be. They also have the best burgers, I guess.”

“Oh no, I’m not going to a club with you,” I said.

Her pouty lips and platinum blonde hair made her look like a bombshell.

“But why not? Don’t you want to go out with me, your best friend in the whole world?”

“No Tessa. Don’t you know that everything that can go wrong will go wrong in a club? What if someone drugs me? Or what if you get drunk and leave with a guy and I’m stuck in the club with no way to get home? What if I go to the toilet and some sicko corners me and tries to touch my b\*\*\*\*t?”

I could feel my anxiety getting worse, so I was glad when the waiter brought our food.

“I think you’re overreacting here, Amaya. Clubs have security guards, or at least the ones I go to do. And in real life, girls never go to the toilet alone. We don’t do it on a regular day, so why do it in a club?”

I cursed myself for even thinking about her offer as I bit my lip.

“Okay, imagine this: we get all sexy and you wear something tight that shows off those beautiful breasts of yours. I take some amazing pictures of you and send them to Carter. Bam! You’re pregnant with his babies.”

I choked on my drink and started to cough a lot, which made the people around us look at me funny.

“Don’t say those things.” I tried to hide how upset I was by stuffing my mouth with romaine lettuce, but Jules didn’t believe me.

“Oh come on, are we seriously going down this road again? Everyone knows you love each other so I don’t know why you both don’t just drop the act already.”

“Of course we love each other. He saved my life and has been taking care of me ever since.”

“Of course we know all that. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s wanted to f\*\*k you since you turned eighteen and you’ve wanted to marry him since... well, ever.”

“That’s not true, Tessa. He sees me as a little sister.”

The thought made me sad.

“Oh, really? Then he must like incest.”

I tried to keep a straight face, but I couldn’t stop laughing. Tessa says things that drive Carter crazy.

“Don’t you call him daddy?”

My eyes almost popped out of my head.

She said it so loudly that an old couple stopped to shake their heads at me.

I was caramel-colored, but then I turned red. That’s how shy I got.

“What the—Why would you?” I stammered.

“Hold on, let me say that again. You want to call him daddy.”

“Tessa!” I yelled in a panic, and half of the restaurant turned to look at us. I had to shrink back in my seat.

Tessa was laughing so hard that she started to snort, which made me feel even more

embarrassed.

“You’re so easy,” Tessa finally said, wiping her eyes.

I said, “I don’t like Carter like that,” lying right through my teeth.

Tessa rolled her eyes up to the sky, and for a second, she looked so much like her brother that it scared me.

“I really don’t know what’s stopping you,” she said. She was holding a fry in her hand and eating it while she yelled.

“First of all, he’s ten years older than me.”

Tessa snorted, making it seem like my point was completely wrong, which it probably was in her mind.

“Remember when I f\*\*\*\*d a forty-two-year-old? What’s your point?” she said bluntly.

We looked at each other, hazel against blue, but we both knew I could never say win when it came to Tessa.

“Okay, I’ll go to the club with you.”

~ ~ ~

We had just gotten back to the flat when Tessa ran straight to Carter’s liquor cabinet. I don’t drink because I’m only twenty and I want to do things the right way. I know that’s silly, but I do good things for Carter because it makes him happy.

While Tessa started drinking for the night, I looked through my closet for an outfit that would do exactly what she said: get me pregnant with his babies.

For the past year or so, I've been trying to get Carter to notice me by wearing less and less clothing and choosing clothes that are much sexier. But it has never worked. I've never seen Carter look at my legs, boobs, or b\*\*t.

It makes me feel good, but it also drives me crazy.

It makes me feel like I'm not good enough for him, and that kind of insecurity stops me from doing anything. My therapist would probably go crazy if she heard me say this, but my only goal in life is to make Carter happy. I want him to always be proud of me, happy with me, and (I pray for this one) want to be with me.

Could tonight be the night? Carter will stop seeing me as his little sister tonight, and I will finally tell him how I feel.

Sure. Okay.

I found a short black and white pinstriped dress with a low neckline. It went all the way down to just above my belly button, giving my girls a lot of room to grow.

I liked it, and so did Tessa, so I took a shower and got ready for tonight.

Tessa did my makeup for me because I still don't know how to do it myself. I did my own hair, which didn't take long because I just put it in a neat low ponytail. When I was done with everything, I was very happy with how it all turned out.

"Carter will die when he sees you."

He better

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

She began taking a lot of pictures of me and giving me the strangest directions.

“Make it look like you’re a slut, but you don’t know it.”

“Don’t act like you know your breasts are out.”

“Bend over and act like you’re putting on lipstick.”

I loved Tessa very much, even though she was a basket case.

While Tessa finished getting ready, I picked up my phone and thought for a second about just telling Carter where we were going.

I threw the idea away right away. Carter was out there helping people stay alive. He would worry about me all night if he knew I was going to a club. In his line of work, that could mean the difference between life and death.

I kept my mind busy by checking and rechecking that I had everything I needed for tonight in my purse.

After ten more minutes, Tessa was finally done, and we got ready to leave the flat.

I never thought that Carter would be there, looking as angry as ever, right when I was about to leave.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going in that outfit?”

\*\*\*\*\*

I barely had time to get settled in at work this morning before we were called to a huge car accident. At least twelve cars were involved, and there were dozens of injuries. To cut a long story short, I was very happy to find out that there was a mix-up with the night shift. After a long day, I could go home to my girl.

I never thought that when I got home, my girl and my baby sister would be dressed like they were trying to give me an aneurysm.

“I’ll ask again but don’t expect a third time. Where do you both think you’re going dressed like that?”

Amaya looked like she was about to shit herself, but Tessa was always ready for a fight.

“Well, since you want to know so much, Amaya and I are going to a club,” she said as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Oh, really?” I said with a lot of sarcasm.

I looked at Amaya for the first time in front of Tessa and didn’t try to hide how much I wanted her. From her smooth, caramel-colored legs to the way her dress showed off her big bust,

Amaya Chase was no longer a teenage girl; she hadn’t been for a long time. The last few months have definitely shown that.

“Go down to the lobby and wait for me to call you,” I told Tessa, making sure she knew I wasn’t in the mood for her nonsense.

“Don’t talk to Tessa that way.”

Disrespecting Tessa is one thing that really gets Amaya going. She was very protective of her best friend.

I could see a little bit of doubt in her eyes when I looked directly at her, but I was proud of her for sticking to her guns.

As Tessa closed the door behind her, the sound echoed through the apartment, and Amaya’s annoyance was clear.

“Now that we’re alone, could you say what you said before again?”

“So you can’t hear well now. Too many sirens in your ear.” She threw her purse on the couch and stormed into the kitchen. I moved slowly and carefully towards her, wondering how far she would go with this.

She was busy trying to pour herself a shot of tequila, and I knew she was doing it to make me even more angry. Amaya doesn’t drink.

She picked up the little glass, ready to drink it, and I stopped. Let’s find out how brave she really is. I raised my eyebrow in a rude way when we made eye contact over the glass.

“Don’t let me stop you, Amaya. Drink up.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Carter!” She marched over to the sink and poured the shot down the drain in “defiance.” I knew she wouldn’t go through with it. No matter how stubborn she is, she will always be my good girl.

When I walked into the kitchen, she immediately started to back away, not even



noticing that she was about to trap herself.

When her back hit the counter, I moved quickly to keep her there.

She pushed her little hands against my chest to keep me away. She turned her head to the right, so I couldn't see her face.

When I put my hand on her waist, she gasped and pushed her chest into mine even more.

I chuckled in a dark way, and the sound shook my chest.

"You know what's funny, babygirl?" I leaned in and kissed her neck and shoulder, which made her shudder all over.

"You always have so much to say..." Kiss. "...when I'm far away." Kiss. "But when I get close..." I kissed her jawline. "You're so quiet."

She threw her head back and showed me all of her beautiful, smooth neck.

So obedient

I ran my nose up and down her neck, making her whine in a small way. She grabbed my hoodie and pulled herself closer to me.

I moved my hands down to her hips and played with the end of her dress.

She still wouldn't look at me, and I told her how mean she was being.

"Don't you want to look at me, Amaya? Show me those hazel eyes." She wouldn't budge, but her body sang a different song.

“I told you not to tell me what to do, Carter.” I picked her up and held her legs around my waist while she held on to the front of my hoodie for dear life.

“You’re just a little brat, aren’t you?”

She huffed and gasped. “I am not a brat.”

“Is that so?” I thought. “I’ve spoilt you rotten over the years, so it’s really my fault that you think you can do anything.”

It was partially true. I have definitely spoilt Amaya over the past two years, but she is a good girl overall. Tessa poisoned her a little, but she’s still good. The problem is that she knows that if she bats her eyes at me, I’ll drop to my knees.

“I’m not spoilt.” With an unusual surge of confidence, Amaya wrapped her legs around me more tightly and put her hands on both sides of my neck. “You just can’t help but want me.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little shocked and wonder who the little vixen in front of me was. I mean, this isn’t the first time we’ve been in a situation like this, but she’s never been this direct before.

Except for that one time with the whipped cream

“Okay, since I can’t say no to you, tell me what you want to do right now.”

I had a few ideas for what we could do right now, and none of them involved clothes.

“Well, I’d like to go to that club with you and Tessa.”

That’s too bad. I thought I was finally getting on the same page.

“I need us to go to that club so you can see how spoiled I am.”

My jaw went limp.

I didn't understand what she meant, but damn, I wanted to know.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

We had just gotten to the club when we lost Tessa.

That reminds me, the tension between Amaya and me went away as soon as we went downstairs and saw Tessa again. As soon as I saw her stupid face, it was like someone had thrown a wet blanket on the mood. When your sister is sitting to your left, it's hard to think about having s\*x with the woman on the right.

I held on to Amaya's waist tightly as I led us to our private booth. I called ahead so we wouldn't have to wait in queue when Tessa told me which club they were going to. I knew the owner.

The owner was waiting for us at the booth, and I quickly introduced him to Amaya. He asked a waitress to come over and take our orders, and he told us to just call him if we needed anything.

I got myself a whisky on the rocks and Amaya a lime soda and a burger because she hadn't eaten dinner yet. The waitress took our orders and left. I turned to Amaya, who was sitting across from me in the semi-circular booth.

She reached over the table and took my hands, turning them so that they were facing up. She started drawing different patterns on my palm, which she did when she was bored and waiting for something.

A few minutes later, the waitress brought us our drinks and food. As soon as she left, Amaya crawled around the boot and sat on my lap.

As I said, spoilt.

“We haven’t had dinner yet.” She put the plate of food between us and fed me first, then herself. She asked how my day was, and I told her everything, down to the last detail.

It was funny to me that Amaya was sitting on my lap and feeding me a burger while I told her about a big accident. That wasn’t the strange part; we were in a private area of a club that was really loud, and about thirty feet away, people were grinding on each other and having a great time.

Amaya Chase made life interesting all the time.

After we ate, Amaya snuggled into the space between my neck and shoulder. I was curious as to why she wanted to come here if she was in the mood to cuddle. I’m not complaining, but we could have cuddled at home too. It was just above freezing, and I could feel this tight little body against mine under all those blankets.

That sounds great right now.

“Carter,” Amaya whispered in my ear. Her voice was soft and airy, and it made my arms feel tingly.

“Yes, baby girl?”

“I want to touch you.”

I gulped because I wasn’t sure if this was a trick or if she was on the same level as me.

She seemed to sense that I was unsure, so she pulled her hands down my chest and under my shirt.

“Please, Cartie, let me touch you.”

It would have been stupid of me to say no.

I held her by the back of the neck and pulled her face closer to mine. “You can do anything you want to me.”

She leaned in and kissed the side of my mouth, going down my jawline on both sides. I leaned my head back on the leather cushion and saw that she had me in the same position I had her in earlier. But when I felt her kiss my neck and start to s\*\*k, I couldn't care less.

As she nipped and sucked on that one spot, my hands got tighter around her thighs.

I haven't had s\*x in a little over four years, and at first, that was fine because I was going through a phase where I hated women and myself.

About six years ago, I couldn't take the loneliness anymore and for the next two years, I tried to fill that void with as much alcohol as I could.

I was so drunk one time that I slept with a woman whose name I didn't even know. I was so disgusted with what I did that I promised never to drink again. I was so ashamed that I also swore off women.

I had a younger sister. I'd beat someone up if they treated her the way I did that woman.

Of course, after that I spent more time alone, and just when things seemed to be getting worse, Amaya came into my life.

All I wanted now was to be with Amaya. She needed to know that I couldn't live

without her. I wanted her in every way that a person could want another person.

I was out of it.

I was so glad I didn't have to work because I couldn't even get out of bed after last night, let alone make coffee all day.

Last night... was great.

Carter really did touch me and let me touch him. I mean, we didn't go all the way, and I had to blame myself for that because I fell asleep in the cab. I turned over in bed and yelled into the sheets.

Why did I have to act like a baby sometimes? He could have had s\*x with me last night.

Just thinking about it made me shiver.

Thinking about how he would touch me and squeeze me with his rough hands in any way he wanted. He was so much bigger than me, and the difference was so... interesting. I can't even begin to think about what I would do if he took off all his clothes and let me look at him.

I wanted to sit down and look at every part of him. I wanted him to lie naked by the window so I could paint him in the morning sun.

I missed Carter.

He had to go to work this morning, and I really wished it wasn't so. I got out of bed and stood up. Carter's hoodie fell to my knees.

I remember him waking me up last night to take off my dress, but other than that, I was out cold.

As I walked into the kitchen, I muttered to myself, “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

I saw a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast with a cover on it on the kitchen island. Next to it was a note.

Hello, lovely.

I really wish I could have seen those hazel eyes before I left for work this morning. Waking up with you in my arms is enough to get me through the day.

I’m sorry our night didn’t go as planned, but when I get home today, we should sit down and talk about everything that’s been going on between us lately.

Please be a good girl for me until then.

Love, Cartie

I hugged the letter to my chest and squealed. Then I danced and spun around the kitchen like a crazy person.

I was very lucky to have him. Carter was the most caring person there was. He cooked my eggs until they were almost burnt, which is how I like them, and he even cut the crust off my toast.

He was so nice to me, and I wanted to show him how much I appreciate everything he’s done for me. I wanted him to know that I was thankful to have him in my life and that I wanted to be with him.



I put his letter in the small box where I usually keep them. Then I turned on the TV and watched some reruns of The Big Bang Theory while I ate my breakfast.

I didn't know what I was going to do today. I would usually just paint, but I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate with all these thoughts of Carter going through my head.

I couldn't believe that the day had finally come when I would tell Carter how I really felt. Yes, I was scared and nervous, but more than anything else, I was excited.

I had to see him.

I had an idea that made a light bulb go off above my head.

I'll make Carter lunch, dress up really nicely, and bring it to work for him. That way, I can see him and he can see that I'm a good wife.

A situation where everyone wins.

I started making his favourite meal right away: creamed pumpkin soup with freshly baked dinner rolls. I know this is strange, but Carter will eat this at any time of day and he eats a lot. I don't care what he likes to eat; I just want him to be happy.

It was only nine in the morning, so I got right to work with the goal of finishing by noon. I knew I was taking a big risk because Carter was a firefighter and could be out there saving lives right now.

I was hoping and praying that everything would work out today and that Carter would be at the station when I got there.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

I started putting together my outfit while the dinner rolls were baking. Carter never really told me what clothes he likes on me, but after last night, he likes them short and tight all the time.

I took a shower and used my honey coconut body butter all over my body. It made my skin soft, smooth, and shiny. And it smelt great too.

I remembered the dinner rolls in the oven as I put on my pants and ran outside half-naked. If Carter only knew how often I'm naked at his house.

I went back to our bedroom and changed into the outfit I had picked out after letting them cool. There was a fitted, long-sleeved, baby blue top and a short, white pinafore dress.

At first, I wasn't going to wear a bra, but I changed my mind at the last minute because I thought it would be appropriate for work. Over the years, I've come to terms with the fact that bras were horrible things, but they did help keep my breasts up and made Carter feel better around me.

He usually has trouble looking me in the eye when I don't wear one.

I wore a simple pair of baby blue vans with the outfit and left my hair down. I put some hair clips on each side to keep my hair from getting in my face, and that was it.

I put his soup in the biggest Tupperware container we had and stacked about seven dinner rolls in a container that was a little smaller.

I put everything in one of my tote bags, grabbed one of my little backpacks to hold my phone and other important things, and took my coat because winter was coming and Cartie would kill me if I left without it. Finally... I was gone.

I was a little nervous as I rode down in the lift because I hadn't travelled alone very often before. There was a car waiting for me right outside, but this still counted as travelling.

What if the guy hit me in the back of the head with a bat and took me to an empty building where he and a stylish but heartless woman would sell me to the highest bidder?

"Breathe Amaya." I heard Carter's calming voice in my head, and I took a deep breath as the lift doors opened on the ground floor. Before I went outside, I waved to the doorman and the receptionist in the lobby.

I saw my ride and got in. I said hello to the man in a friendly way so he would feel bad if he decided to knock me out and sell me. Before we left, he made sure I had the right address. During the whole ride, all I could think about was Carter.

How shocked would he be to see me?

Will he be happy?

Will he be angry that I left home without telling him?

Oh, who am I trying to fool? Carter could never stay mad at me for long.

The car stopped before I knew it, which meant we had reached our destination. I thanked him a lot and promised to write a good review. I was glad that I made it through without losing a hair.

I walked across the street and stood in front of the building where Carter worked. The washed-out brick walls showed that the building was old, and the firehouse red paint on the doors and windows could use a little more fire.

I put on a brave face and pushed the doors open. I was ready to fight anyone who got in my way. I was only 5'6" and had the face of a baby (Carter's words), and he taught me that if I wanted to be taken seriously, I needed to stand up for myself and be brave always.

"Hello, I'm here to see Carter Reid," I told the woman at the front desk. It sounded a lot more confident in my head, but whatever. I'm still a mean, green killing machine.

"Oh, you must be Amaya," she said, and then she got up from her seat. I noticed that a few other men had come over to us, and I got nervous because of all the attention.

"How did you find out my name?" I asked, really wanting to know. Did Carter talk about me with his coworkers?

"Well, you're almost famous around here." Her words only made me more confused, but I didn't want to stand around and talk. I wanted to see Carter.

She was smart enough to know this and told me where Carter was, supposedly having a meeting. I quickly followed her directions and soon saw Carter standing in an office with the door wide open.

I ran into the office without thinking and jumped on him, wrapping my arms around his neck tightly. He held me tightly, and I finally felt at peace. I was in his arms again.

"Baby, what are you doing here?" I was still in his arms, but I leaned back so I could see those ocean eyes that I couldn't get enough of. They were cerulean blue and so

bright that they made my heart stop every time.”

“I missed you,” I said with a pout and hugged him again. Then I remembered why I was there and pulled back, holding up the tote. “And I made you lunch!” You like it too.

His eyes lit up, and I felt a wave of happiness wash over me. I had done my job: I had made him happy.

He sat me down on the desk with his arms on either side of my body. I was ready to pick up where we left off last night, but the loud, annoying throat clearing stopped me.

I looked at the source and saw a woman sitting at the front of the desk. She looked older than me and was actually quite pretty. She had a really big bust, bigger than mine, and her professional-looking pantsuit made her look like a very important woman.

Carter would look great with her.

She was better than I was.

The idea made me very angry.

I didn’t forget my manners and introduced myself. I loved how tall I looked sitting on the desk. Then she stood up, and I was back to being a dwarf.

“Hey there, I’m Olivia. You must be the daughter of Carter?”

I hated her.

Yes, I looked like a teenager half the time, and yes, people often thought I was one, but this woman said that on purpose.

“I’m not his daughter.” Who are you?” My tone was harsh, and all signs of my previous kindness were gone.

“Well, I’ll have you know, little girl, that I am a detective and I was interviewing Carter here about an accident that happened yesterday.”

I tried to get on the desk so I could kick her in the throat and be taller, but Carter stopped me and took me down.

“You little brat, I’m not a little girl.” “I’m twenty years old.”

She raised one perfectly arched eyebrow, and I hated her even more. I’ve always wanted to be able to do that.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Shouldn’t you be in bed waiting for someone to fix that ugly nose of yours?”

I could take it, but I could also dish it out just as quickly. Tessa taught me that I should never let people like her make me feel bad about myself, and I’ve never had a chance to test my skills until now.

“Keep your dog on a leash,” she said, turning to Carter. I may have growled, which made her point.

“You’re the only dog in here, bitch, and you need to learn how to fix your attitude.”

She laughed at what I said and turned to Carter again. He still hadn’t said anything to

defend me. I fought my way out of his arms and turned to face him, but his face was unreadable.

He just stood there and let this woman insult me. Sure, I insulted her too and can take care of myself, but still... doesn't he care?

I dropped the tote and ran out of Station 12 as fast as I could. I ran across the street, breaking every rule I've ever learnt about how to be safe on the road, and jumped into the safety of my waiting cab.

This clearly didn't go as planned, but three things were clear.

I was in a bad mood, and something inside me felt green. When Carter got home, I was ready to kill.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

I stepped into the flat slowly, terrified of what Amaya would do to me.

One reason Amaya still goes to therapy every Saturday is that she hasn't learnt how to deal with her anger. She didn't see a lot of anger growing up, and I quickly learnt that when she got angry, she got really angry.

To cut a long story short, Amaya had a huge fit.

When I walked in and saw that my clothes were all over the flat, I wasn't too surprised. I put my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing so she wouldn't think I wasn't taking her seriously.

I followed the noise of clanging and ended up in the kitchen. There she was, unpacking all of our groceries and every piece of tableware we owned.

I thought this would be easier than it was.

"Amaya," I said, but she didn't even look up. "What are you doing?" What

I decided to use some of the techniques her therapist told me to use when she still didn't answer me. I was supposed to get her angry and make her "talk" it all out, which usually meant screaming it all out. After that, I had to calm her down and make her see reason.

"Amaya, don't you think you should say you're sorry for how you acted at work today?"



As she slowly looked up at me, her hand and the plate in it froze in midair.

In the morning light, her eyes were green, and in the dark of night, they were a beautiful brown. But I've never seen her eyes glow like fire before. They looked orange.

I didn't have time to enjoy it, though, because the plate in her hand flew right at me. I ducked as it broke above my head and fell on me.

"Say sorry? FOR WHAT?" I ducked again when a glass came right after."

She ran out of the kitchen, and I followed her right away.

"Hey Carter, you know what? She suddenly stopped and walked right up to me. "You are a very bad man!" "She hit me everywhere she could, and I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't stop.

"You don't value anything I do. I make you lunch! I look cute! I go there by myself! AND FOR WHAT?"

She screamed and ran away, and I tried to catch up with her, but she was as fast as she was small. I might have fallen while running because I slipped on some of my clothes on the floor.

She ran towards the bedrooms, but I didn't know which one. I knew she was probably hiding, though.

I yelled at her, but she didn't answer. I looked in what was supposed to be her bedroom first. Amaya has never slept here since that first night when she had a nightmare.

Tessa lived with us for a few months when she first moved to Portland. This was her bedroom. Now, all of Amaya's things are in our bedroom.

I checked under the bed and in the closet, but I couldn't find my girl. I was about to check our bedroom when I heard a small snuffle coming from the closet.

I sat by the door and listened to her quiet sniffles.

My heart sank.

"Amaya, why are you mad?"

"No! Get out of here!"

"I won't do it until you tell me what's wrong," I said.

For a short time, all that could be heard was her sniffing. Then she groaned and blew up.

"You're the problem!" You didn't stand up for me in front of that mean old lady!"

So this is what it's all about? She was making a big deal out of nothing.

"Just go away Carter! You're just making things worse. I don't want to see you right now!"

It didn't make sense to talk to her right now. I had to wait until she calmed down.

"Amaya, I'm going to leave now, but I'll be right outside when you're ready to talk."

I spent the next few hours putting all of my clothes, groceries, and dishes back in

their boxes. I also cleaned up all the broken glass, which took longer than I thought it would because it went everywhere.

Amaya was a crazy little girl, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I turned on the TV and sat down on the couch after I had cleaned up the flat. I fell asleep while watching an episode of this dumb show that Amaya has me hooked on.

It didn't surprise me to find a small body on my chest under the blanket when I woke up.

I held her close and enjoyed the warmth she gave me. She stuck her head out from under the blanket, and when I saw her puffy, red eyes, my heart sank.

I held her face in my hands and kissed her all over.

"I'm really sorry I threw a plate and a glass at you, Cartie." I knew she was using her extra cute voice to get me to feel bad, and I also knew that it was working. "I'm also sorry that I put all of your clothes in different places around the flat and that I unpacked all of our groceries and dishes."

She started crying again and turned so that she was lying on my neck.

"I'm a bad girl, Cartie. I don't deserve you," she cried, her tears soaking my skin.

"Aw baby," I hugged her tighter and patted her back to calm her down. "Amaya, you're not a bad girl. A little crazy, yes, but not bad."

My words didn't help at all, and she started crying right away.

"Is that why you didn't stand up for me? Because I'm a little crazy?"

I had to laugh. I tried to hold it in, but Amaya was too much. Too cute, too unstable, too crazy, and yes, too cute.

I turned us over so that she was under me. I lay down on her body, knowing she wouldn't mind because she had told me before that she likes it when I crush and smother her. It makes her feel warmer in some way.

I kissed her cheeks and wiped the tears from her eyes, but they kept coming back.

“Amaya, I'm really sorry I didn't defend you today. Things got out of hand so quickly that I didn't want you to get arrested for kicking a detective in the throat. I was trying to keep you calm and safe, but then you ran away. After you left, I did defend you.”

“That's not the point!” she groaned, and I felt like I was out of my depth.

“What's wrong, Amaya? You tell me.”

“The problem is that you keep acting like I'm your little sister or daughter. You never treat me like an adult!”

I was shocked by her outburst, but it was like I had pressed play and couldn't stop.

“I try to dress like a grown woman. I go to work, cook for you, and cuddle with you. I wear bras so you won't be uncomfortable. But still, you don't look at me the way I want you to. I want you to look at me like a woman, not a girl.”

Her breathing was quick, and every time she took a deep breath, her chest pressed against mine. As my internal restraint fell apart, I looked into her eyes.

I gave her a kiss.

When her soft lips met mine, it felt like everything that was bothering me just melted away. They looked and felt just as soft and supple as they looked, and I was hooked right away.

This is why I fought so hard for so long. I knew that once I tasted it, I wouldn't be able to stop. I wanted to make sure she was ready for everything I would bring to the table.

Thank God the day had finally come.

When I leaned over, her eyes were glazed over and her lips were slightly open.

She couldn't believe it.

“Do you still feel like a little girl?”

I leaned back in and worked harder when she didn't answer. She opened her mouth for me, and I didn't waste any time looking around inside.

I was bothered that she didn't answer, so I slid my hands up her waist, which made her sigh softly.

I sucked on her tongue like it was my favourite candy while I rubbed her side with my thumb.

I asked, “How about now?” as I moved to s\*\*k on her neck, wanting to leave as many marks as I could. “Do you still feel like my sister?” All I got back was a whine as she rubbed her hands against my body and tried to take off my shirt.

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I did what she asked and sat back on my knees, pulling the thing that was holding me down over my head. I looked down at her body, which was now moving around, and saw what she was wearing. The silk, light pink nightgown had ridden up and over her thigh, showing off the tiny black lace that hid her arousal from me. The nightgown had a low neckline, and her b\*\*\*\*t moved with every deep breath she took.

She looked like a vixen. A little garden face that acted sweet and innocent, but I knew the witch that was really there.

And she was mine.

I leaned over her again and put my hands on the sides of her face. I ran my hands down the side of her neck, over the dark purple bruise, and across her chest.

When I lightly held her neck, her eyes got darker with desire. I bent down and sucked on her bottom lip, chewing on the pink flesh.

I made it clear that “You have never been like a sister to me. You may have been my foster child for a week, but you have never been like a daughter to me.” “I tried to hide my feelings for you at first because I thought I was taking advantage of your situation. But Amaya, as the months went by, I couldn’t help it.”

“You’re a light in my life. You’re the only thing that makes me happy, and I live for you. You thought I was protective of you because I saw you as a sister, but I’m really protective of you because I would die if anything happened to you. Amaya, I’ve told you many times that I love you, but you need to know that I’m in love with you and have been for a long time.”

Her eyes turned red, and tears filled them. I quickly wiped them away and kissed her slowly, taking in the moment. Her arms wrapped around my neck and her legs crossed at the small of my back.

She whispered against my lips, "I love you too, Cartie."

I had a feeling she had, but hearing it from her made me feel better. I didn't think it would have such an effect on me. So I kissed her harder when my eyes started to hurt. Thanking her for loving me, promising to never hurt her, and saying that I will always love her.

She was everything to me, and that was all I needed.

\*\*\*\*\*

At one point in my life, I thought that fate was against me. I was sure that I would be alone for the rest of my life.

Tessa would have kids one day, and I would treat them like they were my own. As I got older, her kids would look up to me as their cool uncle who was too cool to ever settle down.

Then one day I would die. A firefighter with a lot of medals and hundreds of saves. My body would lie there, cold and alone, forever.

The thought scared me.

I was terrified of what would happen to me, and I didn't know how to save myself.

Some people might say that I saved Amaya, but I don't think they know that it's the other way around.

I owe my life to Amaya Chase.

I was in such a dark place in my life, but she brought me light. I hadn't laughed in years, but every day since Amaya has made me smile.

I needed Amaya, but I also wanted her. The problem with the word "need" is that it means "necessary." It says that I won't be able to live without her, and that's something Amaya and I both know.

I wanted her, though. I wanted her and was so lucky to have her.

I told Amaya every day that she was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I heard her whisper from behind me, "You look so pretty in the morning sun." I was sitting on the edge of the bed when I turned to see her sleepily looking up at me.

The silk sheet barely covered anything; it hung over her body like a blanket.

I turned my head away.

"I think that's my line, baby girl," I said with a smile and kissed her, not caring about anything else.

She hummed, "Mmmm," and sat up. Her legs were so smooth that they looked like they went on for miles, even though we both knew she was only a little taller than average.

She moved off the bed and stood between my legs without breaking the kiss.

I couldn't help but touch her because her body felt so soft against mine. She broke the kiss and threw her head back as I kissed my way down her neck.



You'd think I'd get used to how she made me feel after almost six months, but every time it felt like the first time.

"Do you want some breakfast?" she asked, and the rest of her sentence sounded like she was in pain when I bit her soft skin.

"I just ate breakfast," I said with a smirk.

"Don't waste my time; you won't eat what I want you to."

I nearly choked.

Tessa and I have been together for too long, and now my sweet angel is a nymph in heat.

I didn't pay attention to what she said and tried to get my bearings. We got out of bed, and Amaya's smug face was clear.

While Amaya showered, I tried to get rid of all the thoughts that were racing through my mind by making some food.

She came into the kitchen just as I was making her plate. She was wearing denim shorts and a cropped hoodie. We sat across from each other at the table, and every now and then I would see her looking at me.

I asked, "Do you want to come over here?" and they nodded their heads. She came over and sat down on my lap. After she finished her breakfast, she batted her eyelashes at me so I'd give her my food too.

I teased her by blowing raspberries on her neck while she tried to eat. "My baby is hungry," I said.

She acted like she didn't want me to play with her, but we both knew she loved it when I did.

I sang, "My baby..." and swayed us from side to side. "Little queen of mine..." Her whole neck turned a soft shade of red. It always amazes me how she can go from being a s\*\*\*\*l goddess to an innocent fairy.

"My wife..."

The elbow to my gut knocked the wind out of me, but I knew it was coming.

She jumped off my lap and ran into the kitchen with our dirty dishes in her hands.

"That wasn't funny, Carter," she said angrily when I walked in behind her.

"Yeah, you're right. Your elbow is mean."

The glare I got could have melted a small country, but it just made me smile.

For a while now, Amaya has been hinting that she wants to get married. I have no problem making her my wife; in fact, the thought of it gives me chills. I just want to make sure it's the right time.

Amaya is just twenty-one. I'm ten years older than she is. I'm going to be a captain in the Fire Department soon. For only a few months now, she's been old enough to drink.

I might be ready to settle down, and she might think she is, but I will not force Amaya to get married at such a young age.

Anyone can tell you that I'm not afraid to be with her. Keeping Amaya safe and

happy is the most important thing in my life. That's why I want her to think about whether or not she really wants to get married right now.

"Fine! Don't bother me about it if you don't want to marry me."

"I want to marry you, but I want to make sure you want to marry me too."

She picked up the glass she was washing and turned to throw it at me, but she stopped at the last second.

She was trying to calm down her anger.

"I don't think it's safe for me to marry you. I mean, I might end up being a victim of domestic violence," I said with a smirk.

She yelled in anger and ran to the bedroom. I might have gone a little too far this time, and I knew I had to calm her down.

I saw her making the bed in the bedroom. That was when I knew she was really angry. Amaya doesn't clean anything.

"You know, if you don't want to marry me, just say it. You don't always have to be so mean." She sniffled and wiped her eyes, making me feel like the worst person in the world.

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I moved closer to her, but she pushed me away and told me to stay on the other side of the bed.

She cried out loud and wiped her face with her hands to stop the tears from flowing.

She was always so pretty. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, even when she was crying. Her hair has grown out a lot in the last few years, and it was longer and thicker than ever. It fell all over the place, giving her the look of a warrior bunny from another world. Her nose was red from crying, and her cheeks were red from working too hard.

Very beautiful

“Of course I want to get married—

“Don't say that, you liar!” she screamed and threw the pillow in anger. “You told me that actions speak louder than words, but all you've said lately is a bunch of horse shit!”

How did we even get to this point? We were just having a nice, fun breakfast, and now we're yelling at each other.

“Believe what you want, Amaya, but what I say is true whether you believe it or not. I want to marry you, and I will. There is no doubt about that. I will marry you when the time is right,” I said, and she rolled her eyes up to the sky.

“You're not going to marry me. You don't want to have s\*x with me. You might as

well be dating your sister.”

There she goes again with this sister stuff. Every time she says it, I feel like my balls are going to shrivel up because I can only see Tessa’s dumb face.

“Then why do I kiss my sister Amaya? Answer that!”

“I don’t know! Maybe it’s because you’re too scared to f\*\*k her!” Amaya yelled.

I groaned and pushed the heel of my hand into my eyes.

“Stop talking about this sister shit,” I told her, really sick of the things she was saying.

She yelled, “Don’t tell me what to do! You’re not the boss of me!” and crossed her arms.

“That’s why I won’t marry you! You’re such a f\*\*\*\*\*g kid!”

As soon as I said the words, I felt bad. She looked like her heart was broken.

“Amaya,” I whispered, and I quickly crossed the small space between us.

She tried to run across the bed, but this time I was faster than her. She fought hard to get away from me, but I held her down on the bed.

“Don’t touch me!” she cried. “You still think I’m a little girl!”

“Amaya, stop it. I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean it.” I said this in a desperate tone as I tried to fix what I might have broken.

She knows just how to get me to snap, and I need to work on that.

“Is that all you do now? Talk about things you don’t mean?”

It seemed like I had gone back on so much of what her therapist had been working on. I was supposed to help her, not hurt her.

Amaya was sure that I thought of her as my daughter or sister when we first got together. I worked hard in the last six months to change that.

I don’t want to blame anyone, but I do blame Tessa for everything. I think she’s been putting ideas in Tessa’s head lately, and now my little angel baby thinks that the only way I love her is if I marry her or have s\*x with her.

I don’t know why Tessa thinks she can give anyone life advice when she can barely take care of herself.

It just makes me more sure that Amaya isn’t ready to get married.

I was able to calm her down by holding her hands above her head and covering her body with mine.

I said firmly, “Amaya, you are being childish,” and the pout on her face did not help her case. “That’s why I won’t marry you right away, but it’s also one of the main reasons why I will.”

“What do you mean? You’re talking in riddles,” she said in a low voice.

“I love how childish you are. It drives me crazy, but I love it. Amaya, I don’t want you to change that part of yourself, but at the same time, that part of you can’t make all your decisions.”

I said, “You are not a child, so you can’t make childish decisions. Marriage is a big deal. Having s\*x is a big deal. I believe in your progress, Amaya, but I don’t think you’re ready for such big changes.”

She mumbled defiantly, “You don’t know that.” “I believe I’ll be a great wife and mother one day.”

“Yes, you will. You don’t need to tell me that. But I don’t think it’s right for two babies to be throwing tantrums in our house right now,” I joked.

She huffed and tried to shrink away again. But I held her in place.

“Amaya, answer this: do you want to have a baby with me or do you just want to have s\*x with me?”

Her silence only made me more sure of what I thought.

Tessa, you bloody

“Can’t you just f\*\*k me and get it over with?” she begged, her eyes begging me to do what she wanted.

After this, no one could ever say that I don’t have any self-control. I should get some kind of award for my strong will.

I don’t think any man could have resisted what I’ve resisted.

“Amaya, I won’t have s\*x with you until I put a ring on that finger,” I said, and I meant it.

I couldn’t do that to her. I wanted more than just s\*x with Amaya. She meant the

world to me. I loved her more than I can say. I could never want her more than I wanted to keep her safe and happy.

Amaya's growth has always been my top priority. To me, she's more than just a girlfriend. She has always been and always will be.

"Please put a ring on my finger already," she begged.

I smiled softly.

Amaya still had a lot to learn, and it was my job to make sure she kept growing. That meant being strong and firm even when she said crazy things.

I kissed her lips and then her nose and said, "And that's why I won't give you the ring just yet."

"I love you more than anything else in the world. You're my little angel. I want the best for you all the time. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, and I'm going to stop making fun of you for wanting to get married."

She sniffled when I let go of her hands. I turned us over, and now she was lying on my chest while I rubbed her lower back gently.

"I just want to do something to show you how much I care," she said softly.

I moved quietly so that I was sitting against the headboard with her on my lap.

"Do you love me, Amaya?" I asked plainly.

"Of course I love you. I love you so much it drives me crazy."



I teased, “So it’s your never-ending love for me that drives you crazy.”

She bit her lip and wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling her body closer to mine.

“Maybe,” she said quietly. “Thinking about you with another woman makes me think of some violent things.”

I laughed at how sure she looked. I didn’t need her to tell me how violent she could be. That little spark in her eye was all the proof I needed.

I told you, “Knowing you love me is all the commitment I need.”

I leaned in and kissed her softly, enjoying the happiness I felt.

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She said, “You’re so good to me, Carter,” against my lips. “Can’t wait to love you for the rest of my life.”

I could tell from the look in her eye that she was still thinking about s\*x, and even though I looked calm on the outside, I wasn’t going to stop my imagination.

The thought of the future made my stomach tighten. I know for sure that it will be a heated one.

“Let’s say I somehow grow up by tomorrow. Will you marry and f\*\*k me then?” Amaya asked as she kissed her way down my jaw.

Very heated.

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“Amaya,” I said, fixing my cufflinks. “We’re going to be late!”

Amaya still doesn’t get the idea of getting ready on time after all these years.

I took a deep breath and let the bow tie around my neck go. I don’t remember the last time I put on one of these monkey suits.

Amaya is the only person who makes sense to me to get me back into one.

“Carter, by now you should know that you can’t hurry up and be great.”

I spun around so fast that I almost got whiplash. I wondered why I ever chose to wait until I was married at times like this.

She wore an emerald green silk dress that fell off her shoulders. The thigh-high split in her dress showed off her caramel-colored legs with every step she took. She looked like a goddess, my goddess.

She came over to me and put her hands around my waist, under my trousers.

“Do you like it?” she asked with a sly smile.

“I love it. You could wear a trash bag and I’d still think you’re the most beautiful woman to ever walk the Earth.”

She bit her lip and turned red, shaking her straightened hair behind her shoulders.

“Stop being corny. If I really wore a garbage bag, you’d run and hide,” she said, turning away from me and walking to the kitchen.

I said, “We both know you do all the running and hiding in this relationship, my love,” as I followed her.

She went straight for the bowl of strawberries on the counter, taking one in each hand and biting it.

I said, “You’re nervous,” as I walked up behind her.

“I think that’s fair. This is the most important night of my life.”

Amaya’s art has gotten better over the past few years. She has a lot of fans on social media and is now very famous.

A lot of people say that she caught the eye of a very rich woman in Dallas. She has chosen to show Amaya's work in her gallery.

They flew us to Dallas and set up for us to stay at one of the biggest hotel chains in the world.

She was a model, fashion designer, artist, and an heiress, which should give you an idea of how wealthy she was. Her parents owned the hotel where we were staying.

She was a socialite and one of the few people who were close to the hotel owners' other daughters. Not to mention that she was married to the son of a rich oil man.

In short, one of the richest people in America knew my babygirl, and I'm so proud of her.

The formal clothes were because they were throwing a gala tonight to celebrate the opening of Amaya's work at the Marlowe gallery.

"I know you're scared, but trust me, you'll be fine," I said as I watched her eat her sixth strawberry.

I recently started to cut back on the sugar she ate, but all that did was make her obsessed with berries.

It's better than all the gummy bears she used to eat.

"I know that, but what if something goes wrong? These people are very, very rich. You know how I can get with snobby people," she said, pouting and looking sad that she could be a total bitch when people disrespected her.

"Well, you should know that there will definitely be snobby people. Are you willing

to give up all your progress for them?” She bit down on the strawberry and thought about it, already reaching for another one.

These wealthy people have definitely spoiled Amaya. From the presidential suite we’re staying in to all the baskets of berries they’ve sent her. They’ve done everything they can and spent a lot of money to make her feel welcome.

“Sometimes I forget that you’re used to all of this,” Amaya said as she fed me a berry.

A long time ago, I made the decision to never go back to Dallas. Coming back here brings back too many bad memories.

It’s been more than ten years since I’ve been this close to my mum, and it made me more anxious than I’d like to admit.

But I came here for Amaya, and she was my main concern, as always.

“Don’t worry about that tonight. This is your night, so let’s just have fun.” I kissed her forehead, and she hummed back.

I went into the living room to answer the phone when it rang. One of the receptionists told us that our car had arrived.

I told Amaya, and she went back to the room to get her purse. We walked the mile-long hallway to the lift after locking up the suite.

I asked her, “Do you remember the first time you rode a lift?” and she smiled the biggest smile.

“Of course I remember. It was one of the best days ever.”

I couldn't believe what she said. "Really? What about all the places we've been? Or the first time you ate pizza?"

"Every day I've spent with you has been the best day of my life. But that was the day I knew I was free at last."

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"Is my makeup still good?" Amaya asked as soon as the dealer she was talking to was out of earshot.

"I think I need to get you away from all these bad people. You're becoming one of them," I joked as I pulled her into me by the waist.

"Come on. Have you seen those women? I look like a troll next to the people in this room," she said. I never got why the most beautiful people couldn't see how beautiful they really were.

"Then you're the prettiest troll I've ever seen," I said, kissing her on the lips.

"You're just saying that. All of those girls are older than me and have kids. Do you think I'll look that good after I have kids?"

I frowned. I've been making jokes and teasing her all night to make her happy, but I really didn't like where her mind was going.

"Listen, I've been joking, but if you keep talking like that, we're leaving. I won't let you stay in a place where you feel less than. You're amazing, talented, and beautiful. Don't forget that."

I held her cheeks in my hands and kissed her, not caring about the people around us.

Amaya has never had to deal with feelings of insecurity before, and I won't let her start now.

She pulled away from the kiss, lifted her head, and looked me in the eyes. "You're right. I shouldn't compare myself to other people because I'm beautiful."

"That's my girl."

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The next day was our last in Dallas, and I wanted to do something really nice for Amaya. I woke up early and started getting ready for a picnic.

While I packed the basket, Amaya was still sleeping. I took advantage of her new love of berries, as well as a variety of cold cuts, cheeses, and breads. I also got a cheesecake with strawberries on top.

This hotel was like a mall.

I woke up my girl after I had everything packed and ready to go.

Amaya was completely worn out when we got back to the suite last night. I took off her makeup and put her in pyjamas while she was passed out in my arms.

I let her sleep for most of the day because I knew how hard she had been working the last few weeks.

She was lying on the bed in a messy way, with her hair all over the pillows. Amaya couldn't sleep like a normal person.

I got down on my knees on the bed and held her by the armpits, then lifted her off the bed and onto my hip.

I whispered, "Time to wake up, sleepy head," and kissed her on the head.

I took her to the bathroom next to the bedroom and put her on the washbasin. Her head rested on my chest and her hands loosely wrapped around my back.



I started to pull her hair back and used one of the hair ties I always had on my wrist in case of an emergency.

I said, “C’mon pumpkin. I’m taking you on a date, so please get dressed.” When she heard the word “date,” she perked up, kissed me on the cheek, and pushed me out of the bathroom so she could get ready.

I had already showered, so I got dressed while she did. I wore a plain black t-shirt and knee-length cargo shorts to the beach picnic.

“You’re wearing shorts?” I heard Amaya say from behind me just as I pushed the box into my back pocket. Even though I was trying to fight off arousal, Amaya didn’t seem to care that she was in a useless white towel.

“Are we going to the beach? Should I wear a swimsuit under my clothes?” she asked all at once.

“Yes and yes,” I said, kissing her on the lips. “Get moving or we’ll be late.” I had to get out of that room and away from all the temptation.

I had to think that Amaya was excited to go because it was unusual for her to get ready so quickly. This quickly only happened when I was taking her out for ice cream.

Her denim shorts made her look great, and her pink top only drew attention to her amazing cleavage. Her pink trainers made her look even cuter in my eyes.

She begged me to let her hold the basket all the way to the lobby, but it was too heavy for her.

Our ride was already full in front, so I opened the door for her to get in. Amaya

couldn't sit still the whole ride because she wasn't patient.

I thought she might have jumped out of the car as soon as we got to the coast, but even our driver wasn't ready for the scream that came when we started driving on the sand.

We parked next to the cabana, and while she waited for me to get out, her head looked like it was going to explode. She used to run out of cars like a crazy person for years, but now she knows to wait until I get out and see if there is any danger.

As soon as I opened the door for her, she ran out and ran across the sand to our picnic spot in no time.

"You set all this up?" Amaya screamed, twirling around and around.

"Of course I called for help, but this was all my idea," I said, putting the basket down.

This strange, bare, teepee-like building was where we had our picnic. There was a big red blanket on the floor with a small table in the middle and a few throw pillows around it.

I started to put everything out, trying not to laugh at how Amaya gasped every time I took something out.

Amaya still gets excited about everything, even after all these years.

"I can't believe you did all this for me. You're so romantic." I was surprised when she climbed on my lap and kissed me, but I quickly melted in her arms.

I let her take charge, but I quickly regretted it when she told me to lie on my back. I was about to say "to hell with it" and take her by force, but Amaya suddenly pulled

away.

She crawled off my lap and over to the other side of the blanket. She picked up a strawberry and started to eat it, as if she hadn't just driven me crazy.

I was still trying to catch my breath when she acted like the strawberry in her hand was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

"I kissed you silly," she said with a mischievous laugh. I sat up and narrowed my eyes at her while I picked a blueberry.

Tease

I asked Amaya, "Are you excited to go home?" as I gave her some fruit.

"I guess?" Anyone could have seen that she was in a bad mood, and I jumped on it.

"What's wrong? Do you want to stay a few more days?"

"No! Well... maybe? I don't know," she said, scratching her head. "I really like it here. The beach is close by, it's always sunny, there are a lot of different kinds of food, and it's clean."

"Did you really smell the air in Dallas?" I mean, Portland had a lot of smells, but Dallas wasn't far behind.

"No, Cartie. I mean the suburbs. I've been looking into it, and it's all so nice. There are some really great places to raise a family—"

I asked, "You want to live here?" because I wasn't sure what to say.

“It was just a suggestion,” she said quickly. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the future, but I understand if you say no. I know it’s hard for you to be here with your mum and everything. I wouldn’t make you live here if you didn’t want to.”

“And before you say anything about how my happiness is the only thing that matters, this is one time when it doesn’t. I love you and your happiness is mine. I won’t make you do anything. Don’t even think about it.”

I didn’t say anything while she caught her breath. Her words made my heart and mind race.

“Get married to me.”

Her eyes popped out of her head, and the strawberry she was holding fell to the blanket.

“You can’t be serious,” she said, her voice shaking.

I took the small, velvet box out of my back pocket. “Really, I’m not joking. Not at all.”

“But you said, “Why now? Why would you propose now?”

I opened the box and slid it across the blanket so it would rest in front of her.

“I’ve wasted so much time. I’ve wanted you to be my wife for so long, but I was so afraid that I was forcing you to marry me. I just realised that even if you felt pressured, you’d tell me. You’ve grown so much, Amaya. You’re so much more than the broken girl I pulled out of that building. You haven’t been for so long.”

“So I’m asking you, no, I’m begging you. Will you marry me?”

\*\*\*\*

I was bored.

Bored to death.

I didn't have to work today, which was the best way to be bored. Tessa is going to the spa to treat herself and then going out with her other friends tonight.

Carter wouldn't be home until later tonight, which was the worst of all.

To get him to be more social, I told him to go out for drinks with his coworkers after work.

I really wish I hadn't done that.

I was the most restless person ever, and I had no one to spend my extra energy with.

I walked around the flat for no reason, wearing only one of Carter's t-shirts.

As soon as I thought about cleaning the place, I knew I had to find something to do.

I decided to just eat a lot of food to pass the time, and like always, I wanted something sweet.

I got an idea, and it just got worse when I realised Carter wasn't there to stop me.

I started making as many sweets as I could.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:15 am*

Choux pastry, cookies, cakes, French toast, pumpkin pie... everything I could think of.

It wasn't all peaches and cream that's for sure.

The cookies burnt and my cake didn't rise so that's why I made the French toast; to heal my broken self esteem.

I was so proud of how well my French toast turned out that I decided to try the choux.

I want to say that the recipe was so easy that it helped me a lot, but I'm not going to take away from my own success.

I made that choux my slave.

I was on a roll at that point and felt like a master chef.

I made the pumpkin pie as part of my never-ending mission to show Carter that I would be the best wife.

I don't get how he can't see how much I care about him. We could be so good together; we're already so good together.

I didn't care how long or how hard I had to beg him to show him that I was the right woman for him.

I didn't realise how messy I had made the kitchen until I put a lot of whipped cream

on the pumpkin pie. More of a mess than usual.

The thought was real.

This pumpkin pie could make Carter fall in love with me tonight. He loves that vegetable. If I just dress up like a big pumpkin, he might fall in love with me a lot faster.

But if he saw how messy his kitchen was, he might lose it.

Carter didn't get mad at me very often, but when he did, it was the worst kind of guilt trip, except for when Asian parents were mad at me.

I had to think about the pros and cons, and I knew that the best thing for me to do was clean the kitchen.

He wouldn't be mad at me, and he might even fall in love with me just because I cleaned something, like the kitchen.

I don't care if you think it's silly; it took me two hours to clean that kitchen. The kitchen was made for a giant, which was hard enough on its own. The main thing that held me back was that I didn't have enough experience.

When I was done, my shirt was soaked with cleaning fluid and I smelt like a gross mix of dish soap and eggs.

When I was making that stupid cake, I broke one of the stupid things on myself.

I knew Carter would be home soon, so I took a shower and did a quick pampering session by putting on his favourite lotions and wearing one of his t-shirts. I still didn't wear a bra, but this time I did wear knickers.

Not for me, but for him.

I had just finished putting my hair up in a messy bun when I heard the front door open and ran outside.

“Cartie!” He grabbed me at the last second and fell back, which made me feel nervous right away. When I randomly dive on Cartie, he never falls.

“Hey, babygirl.” I could smell the alcohol on his breath, and all the bad memories came rushing back.

My dad was drunk almost all the time he was home. He would sit on the couch and drink while looking at pictures of my mum. There was a time when I could talk to him a little, even when he was drunk. But as I got older, he couldn’t even look at me without crying.

I was so confused and heartbroken. I thought it was my fault that he was like that, so I stayed in my room until he left. As the years went by, I was a little glad that he came home less and less.

I didn’t like going over those memories again. My stomach got tight, and I felt like I was going to throw up.

I asked him, “Are you drunk?” as I held his cheek.

I was scared to think of Carter as my father, but I knew they weren’t the same. They couldn’t be.

Carter always talks to me, but my dad hardly ever did. Carter never leaves me alone for long, but my dad always did. They could never be the same.



Also, I knew I could help Carter even if he started acting like my dad. I was set on doing it.

“No, I think I have 95% control over my senses,” he said in that deep, calming voice of his.

To me, he didn’t look very drunk. To be honest, he didn’t look drunk at all. He just seemed to be smiling more than usual.

This was good.

“You didn’t drive home, did you?” If he drove home drunk, I would kill him. After that, I’d wake him up so I could kill him again.

“What? No way,” he said right away. “I took a cab home. I would never be that careless. Amaya, you know I’ll always come home to you, right?”

I felt like my heart stopped for a second, and I got really embarrassed. The little things he says make me think I might have a chance one day.

“Okay,” I said, lightly scratching the back of his neck with my nails. “Go sit in the living room and wait. I made something special for you.”

He frowned and silently asked me what I was doing.

I pretended to slide down his body to get him worked up and lightly tapped his b\*\*t as I walked by on my way to the kitchen. He hated it when I did that, but I would never stop.

It was important to appreciate an a\*s that great.

I ran to the kitchen and got a fork and the pie. He had sat down in the living room when I got back, as I had asked.

I couldn't help but look at his arms and almost moaned. He was in great shape. When he walked around this flat without a shirt, oh my goodness.

That's why I almost dropped his pie when he took off the dumb t-shirt and raised his bazookas.

Oh, sweet holy cannoli.

My pants.

No one could tell me I wasn't the luckiest girl in the world.

I didn't wait a second longer; I walked right up to him and sat on his lap, where I belong. He quickly put his hands on my waist, and I made myself comfortable.

He smiled at me in a silly way, and I thought he might be drunker than he said he was. I was thinking more like 85% of his senses were under my control.

"What do we have here, baby?"

"I made you a pumpkin pie." I cleared my throat when I realised I sounded like I was trying to sell Girl Scout cookies. I get why Carter wouldn't want to be with me sometimes. I acted like a baby a lot.

That didn't mean I wasn't going to do my best to be a grown-up woman for him.

He looked at the pie with heart eyes and said, "I think I love you a little more every day."

I know that when he says he loves me, he means it in a brotherly and protective way. That doesn't stop me from pretending that I was his soulmate and that he was always telling me how much he loved me.

It helped me get some sleep.

"I love you too," I said sincerely, even though he didn't get how serious my words were. With courage, I began to run my index finger down his chest, between those beautiful pecs, down his toned stomach and across the path where his trousers kept me from going lower.

He kept looking at me while I shamelessly touched all over his torso.

"When did you start to like baking?" he asked, and I told him about how bored I was earlier today.

I made sure to use the pictures I took before and after when I got to the part where I cleaned the kitchen. I had to be sure that I could stretch it out as long as I needed to.

The next time he says I don't clean, I'm going to show him these pictures and shove them in his face.

But that doesn't mean my heart didn't stop when Carter told me he was proud of me.

I got tired of talking, so I picked up the fork and gave him a big bite. He groaned and licked his lips, but all I could think about was how dumb the fork was.

He fed me next, and I was excited to eat with the same fork. We counted this as a kiss. It always did, and it always will.

We ate the pie in silence, listening to the quiet of the flat. He put down the fork and

picked up a dollop of whipped cream with his finger halfway through.

I couldn't take my eyes off his finger as it went in and out of his mouth. Forget what I said before. I wanted to be that finger.

He went in for another dip, and before he could put it in his mouth, I lost it. I took his hand and put his index finger in my mouth.

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I sucked gently, enjoying the taste of the sweet cream on my tongue. I took a chance and opened my eyes. I could feel my pants getting wet from the clear desire in his eyes.

There was something else in his eyes that day that I don't usually see in his eyes. We only went over the edge when we took these few extra steps.

Carter and I never talk about these things, and I don't think we ever will, but I know there's something between us. I can just tell.

I can tell when he looks at me and when he tries to hide it. I mean, I'm not very brave either, but still. I just wanted us to stop messing around all the time.

But I didn't have time to think about all that because he pushed his finger deeper into my mouth and held my neck lightly with his other hand.

I don't know what I did, but I think I dropped the pie on the couch next to us. I was too busy sucking on Carter's finger and thinking it was something else. Something longer and, judging by the way things felt under me, a lot thicker.

I knew that he was only this brave because he was drunk, but I didn't listen to that part because Carter was finally touching me the way I wanted him to.

I knew that the moment wouldn't last long. I also knew that we would never talk about it.

But the moment... That moment was all I needed.

\*\*\*\*\*

“C’mon chubs! You’re doing great,” Amaya cheered, looking like she was having the best time ever. Even though she does this every time we go to the gym, I could only compare her happiness to that of a child playing on a monkey bar for the first time.

I finished the last pull-up and then fell to the floor, being careful to hold on to Amaya’s body, which was still wrapped around mine.

She clapped her hands in happiness and praised me for doing twenty pull-ups with an extra hundred and twenty pounds on me.

I walked over to the bench and got a drink of water for both of us.

“I don’t even know why you come to the gym, Amaya,” I said to her as she drank the water and held the bottle with both hands. “You don’t work out.”

“Oh darling,” she said with a dramatic sigh as she put the cap back on her water bottle. “Don’t you know that the only reason I come here is to watch you work out?”

I laughed at how strange she was when she wiggled her eyebrows. I wondered why I even try sometimes.

“Maybe it’ll do you some good if you actually work out while you’re at the gym,” I said as I drank some water. I sat on the bench, and Amaya moved around on my lap.

“But I do work out,” she said with a defiant tone. “I do everything you do.”

“Yeah, holding on to my body.”

She made a little stink face at me, and I smiled back, sticking my tongue out at her.

I joked, “I think the real reason you like to go to the gym is to show off your athletic clothes.”

As soon as I said the words, I regretted them because I knew I had trapped myself. My eyes went right to the short, grey tights, and believe me, they don’t call them tights for nothing.

I don’t know why I keep hurting myself like this.

After about thirty minutes, I was done with my workout and we went back to our flat. The gym was definitely one of the best things about this building.

I took a shower in our bedroom, and Amaya took a shower in what was supposed to be her room but is now Tessa’s room for a short time.

I love my sister and want to keep her safe, but wow, that kid was a pain. Living with Amaya was scary enough, but now I have both of them with me. I’m buying more candy, groceries, tampons, and clothes than I ever have in my life and probably ever will. The two of them together are what I call an average height recipe for disaster.

The worst part is that Tessa never lets me have a moment of peace with Amaya.

I’m not calling her a cockblock because the c\*\*k in question wasn’t going anywhere. I’m calling her a pest who wiggles her eyebrows, comments at the wrong time, and doesn’t give you privacy.

Thank goodness she was working today. She’ll be home later unless she decides to go out with friends again. Tessa was definitely in her party girl phase, which made me more anxious than I’d like to admit.

On the one hand, I had my little sister Tessa, who was determined to make the most

of her twenties.

Next, I had Amaya.

Tessa wanted to do everything and anything she could think of. Amaya wanted to do everything and anything she could think of, as long as I was there with her.

Don't get me wrong; I wanted to see the world with Amaya by my side, too. But I didn't want her to think she couldn't do anything without me.

She was smart, talented, and pretty. The world was hers for the taking, and she needed to know that.

I know her therapist has been working hard on that, but Amaya could be as stubborn as a bull.

Amaya seems to think that being independent means living without me. She doesn't seem to understand that the only way I'll leave her life is if she grabs me by the ear and throws me out.

I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. I'm going to keep trying to help her understand that she can be independent and still have me in her life.

I took a shower before Amaya (shocker) and then waited for her in our bedroom. I saw one of the framed pictures of us on the bedside drawer and picked it up with a smile on my face.

It was a picture of us from our trip to Spain a few weeks ago.

We have travelled twice since Amaya came to live with me. I took her to the Maldives for her nineteenth birthday and then to Spain for her twentieth birthday as a



surprise.

I want Amaya to see the world and discover its magic. She deserved it, and it was my job to make sure she got it.

She came in a little later, right after I had put the picture back where it belonged. She was wearing a grey cropped hoodie and grey shorts.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was getting better at not looking at Amaya like a piece of meat, but sometimes she made it very hard.

No pun intended.

She threw herself on the bed and said, “Cartie, come put lotion on my legs.”

I was going through a mission shutdown on the inside, and I could hear the alarm bells ringing in my head. On the outside, I looked like the poster boy for calm.

I can feel the start of a bad idea coming on again.

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I took the lotion from her dresser and went back to bed. She put her legs over mine.

I did my job quietly, fighting with myself between enjoying the smoothness of her legs and remembering that this was probably very wrong.

I didn't really know who would think it was wrong. I was an adult who wanted to put lotion on another adult's soft legs, and they were okay with it.

But I was also an adult who wanted to have s\*x with this other consenting adult over the back of my couch.

I was a mess.

Amaya whispered, "You always put the lotion on better. It's because your hands are so big."

There's something else big that will do a better job of putting on lotion.

What?

Stop talking, Carter.

I smiled gently at her and kept working on her.

"Cartie, can you brush my hair too?" She asked, right after I was done with her legs.

"I think someone wants me to spoil them." I felt a little silly, so I picked her up and

threw her over my shoulder.

She screamed and then started laughing uncontrollably, wrapping her arms around my waist from behind. I took us to the living room and dropped her on the couch without any ceremony.

You think I held Amaya down and tickled her, but she couldn't stop laughing. You don't want to see what happens when I tickle her.

I sat on her body, making sure not to put too much weight on her. Her hair was like a fiery mane of reddish brown, and she looked up at me with that familiar happy glint in her eye.

“Say this to me. What do I get in return if I comb this mess of a head?” I wasn't sure where I was going with this, but then again, I'm not sure where I'm going with my life either.”

“I guess you'll just have to wait and see.”

I loved that Amaya wasn't naive. She was innocent and clever, but that didn't mean she didn't know what she was doing.

Amaya looked like a fairy on the outside. She was pure, otherworldly, and innocent. But on the inside, she was a force.

She was always up to something, always looking for a hidden agenda. She was mischievous, coy, and crafty.

She was so interesting. Not knowing what was going on in that pretty little head of hers drove me crazy. It made me want to f\*\*k answers out of her.

I ended up brushing her hair, but I think we both knew I would do it anyway.

I am a firefighter with a lot of experience, and I do some pretty hard and tiring work every day. I always thought I was a tough guy until the day I first combed Amaya's hair.

This was not a joke. There were so many knots, and there was so much separating and moisturising.

I really think I could do anything on this planet because I know how to do hair, and not just any hair, but Amaya's hair.

After about forty-five minutes, I had Amaya's hair in a couple of waist-length braids. She tied them up in a messy knot on top of her head and then snuggled up next to me on the couch.

But we were doing more than just cuddling, of course.

As my hands stroked the side of her face, her fingers moved up and down my clothed chest. She played with the ends of my t-shirt, and I could feel the goosebumps forming when she touched my bare skin.

After a few minutes of sexy silence, she whispered, "Carter, take off your shirt."

I felt sick to my stomach.

I really don't know how much longer I can take this. The girl of my dreams is next to me, telling me to take off my shirt, and my morals are fighting me tooth and nail.

I joked weakly, "You know, if I ask you to do the same thing, it'll be considered inappropriate." I hoped she couldn't see how much I was sweating.

“Please just take it off.” “Please,” she begged, lightly dragging her nails up my chest under my jersey. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

F\*\*k

It’s times like these when I make really bad choices. My brain can’t handle it when she goes from being my sweet little baby to a sexy little vixen in just a few sentences.

I sat up and slowly took off the shirt. She was looking up at me and biting her soft lip. She knew what she was doing to me. She had to.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her because she was so beautiful. She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me down, slyly switching places with me.

“Please lie on your stomach,” she said.

She was so beautiful that I felt like I was really under her spell. I couldn’t think of anything smarter to say than “Why?”

She laughed and put her hand on my chest, then pulled it down to my sweatpants’ waistband and back up again.

“I want to give you a silly massage.”

Shitttttt

What should I do? What should I do?

“You work so hard all the time.” I bet your muscles are really sore.

Amaya was making fun of me. I was smart enough to know that. She knew she had

me right where she wanted me, so I bet neither of us was that surprised when the next smart thing I said was, “Uh huh.”

She slyly slipped her fingers right under the waistband of my trousers and left them there, not even going an inch below the elastic lining.

“Why don’t you let me make it all better? You will get it as a reward for doing such a good job of brushing my hair.

Crap

When the hottest woman in the world offered to give me a massage that I knew wouldn’t end well, I started to doubt all of my life choices. I would have a painful erection and no way to relieve it except for my hand.

There’s a really dumb part of me that only wants to have s\*x. It keeps asking me, “Why don’t you just make love to this beautiful woman? You’re probably going to ask her to marry you anyway.

My answer has always been and will probably always be, “I don’t know, but it feels wrong.”

I’m even thinking about going back to Karen for a session, even though it hurts me to see her stupid face.

I don’t think there was any doubt that I was going to lie on my stomach. I had already done it, and Amaya had straddled my body and settled on my a\*s right after.

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I wondered what part of her tiny baby hands would help my muscles feel better, but I didn't care. I was too busy thinking about how her hands felt on my body.

She began by rubbing my shoulders, and as I had thought, her tiny hands weren't strong enough to really massage my muscles, but it felt so good.

Amaya moved her hands up and down my back, barely rubbing anything. She mostly just smoothed her hands over my skin. This was better than any deep tissue massage, that's for sure.

"Carter," she yelled after what I would call ten minutes of pure bliss.

"Yes, my love?" "I didn't need to turn around to see that she was blushing. I think I've called Amaya every pet name in the book, but when I call her love, she just melts. I guess she knows that's who she is, my love."

She rubbed her thumbs in circles at the base of my back and said, "I was thinking we should go out for dinner tonight."

"Anything you want, baby, it's yours." And that was the whole truth.

"Not everything," I heard her mumble to herself, and my head went up a little.

"What's wrong, pumpkin?" "I was really confused about what she was talking about. What did she want?"

"Nothing." "Forget about it." She answered too quickly for me to think it was

anything serious, but she was also smart enough to keep me from thinking about it.

She quickly lay down on my back and moved her arms under my body so that they wrapped around me. She rubbed her nose along my neck and began to kiss the sensitive skin lightly.

Darn it, minx

I moved around on my back so that she could lie on top of me, but I clearly didn't think it through because she ended up sitting on my very prominent bulge.

We both gasped at the same time, but I didn't try to move her body from where she was sitting.

She ran her hands up my body until they were holding my lower jaw, which brought her face closer to mine. My hands followed the same path, but they went up her back until I could gently hold the back of her neck.

I couldn't take my eyes off of hers, especially since I could see the storm of greens, browns, and oranges in her irises from this close.

She shut her eyes, blocking my view of her soul, and rubbed her nose against mine. I did the same thing, moving my nose against hers in the sweetest Eskimo kiss.

I could feel my resolve weakening as my mind tried to come up with a good reason for why I was denying myself heaven and all its stars.

I put my hands on her cheeks, already knowing that I was going to give in to my desires.

“Amaya I—”



“Hey, I’m home, bitches!””

\*\*\*\*\*

I always thought that feeling was the best thing ever when I saved a life or pulled a body out of a fire.

I used to think that the only reason I became a firefighter was because my dad was one. But I’ve come to realise that the real reason was that I wanted to feel needed.

I became a firefighter to give my life meaning and a purpose. Every time I saved a life, I felt like I had done what I set out to do.

I could never have imagined how wrong I was.

I was no longer putting myself in danger to find some false sense of pleasure.

My wife and our beautiful baby girl are my life.

I used to look forward to going to work every day, but even then, I didn’t feel any excitement.

I’m excited to wake up every day now. My life was blessed.

And I was very thankful.

“Papa!” Siobhan yelled as she ran up to me and hugged my leg.

This is why

“Hey, peanut,” I said with a smile, my jaw hurting from how hard I was smiling.

I picked her up and hugged her close to me, kissing her chubby cheeks all over.

“Miss you, papa,” she said, trying to get the words out as quickly as she could. She had just turned two and was at that stage where her words and sentences were hard to understand.

I don’t care if it makes me a bad parent to say this, but I hope she never learns to speak correctly. Hearing her try to talk makes my life worth living.

It also has to do with the fact that I never want her to grow up.

“Papa missed you too, my little angel,” I whispered as I moved her hair away from her face.

She got her mother’s hair, and Amaya refused to comb her own hair. Half the time, Siobhan looked like a little rugrat.

It made me feel good.

“Where’s your mommy, little girl?” I asked, pulling her attention away from trying to climb my chest.

“She said, “Mama kitch’n makin’ din,” and pointed in the right direction.

I laughed at what she said, and I could see Amaya laughing in the background.

When she looked at me, she slyly looked up and down my body, which sent chills through me right away. We’ve known each other for more than eight years, and I still get the same feeling when she looks at me with those darn eyes.

I walked up to her, wrapped my arms around her, and kissed her like crazy.

Things were getting heated, but Siobhan was there to calm them down.

When your baby is screaming, “Kish!” it’s hard to think about hitting your wife on the nearest table. Kish!” in the background.

“I’ve missed you, Cartie,” she whispered against my lips. I rubbed her nose against mine and felt good about having my family so close to me.

“Papa, are you hungry?””Siobhan asked, and my heart melted at how serious her little face was.

“Papa is really hungry, baby. Did you help mom make dinner?”I asked as I led us all into the dining room.

“Yes, Papa!” “Mama make me shtir,” she said with a smile as she bounced in my arms.

“Then I can’t wait to try it, peanut.”

We started walking towards the kitchen, and I not so subtly grabbed Amaya’s b\*\*t, which made her gasp quietly.

She scolded him in a low voice, “Don’t do that in front of the baby.”

“Don’t tell me what to do with my a\*s,” I said, laughing at how her skin was starting to turn red. “We’ll talk about this later.”

The smell of cream of pumpkin soup filled the house, and I already knew I was going to have s\*x with Amaya tonight.

“Do you want me to help you, babe?” I asked as I put Siobhan on the island in front

of me.

“No,” Amaya said right away. “I like to cook for you.”

I’m definitely going to f\*\*k the holy shit out of her.

I sat in front of Siobhan on a bar stool, carefully holding her under her arm. As usual, Siobhan started her daily recap, trying to tell me everything that happened today.

The best thing about being a father is just looking at my daughter. She is the embodiment of my love for her mother. She is my heart in human form.

Every time I saw her, I felt like a poet. I had all these strong feelings that I couldn’t put into words, and I thought the only way to show them was through art.

The happiness I felt when Amaya told me she was going to have a baby...

Unbelievable

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### FLASHBACK

“Hey Amaya,” I yelled as I walked into the bathroom. “What do you want for dinner?”

When I saw the huge mass of reddish brown hair in the bathtub, curled up like a baby, I stopped talking. My heart sank because I was so scared that something was wrong with her.

“What’s wrong? Why are you in the bath?” I asked, kneeling next to the tub.

She looked at me with wide, bright eyes and said, “I don’t know.” This place is so cosy.

I raised my eyebrows and blinked a few times because I didn’t know how to respond.

I took her out of the tub and put her on my lap. I kissed her forehead and tried my best to get all of her hair out of her face. It was harder than it sounded.

“Now, my beautiful wife, can you tell me why you were in the bathtub with me?”

She looked down at the rock on her finger and her eyes got bigger. “That’s right! I’m your wife!”

Okay, now I was lost.

“Yes, you are my wife. “I remember very clearly you walking down the aisle to me a

few months ago,” I said slowly. Maybe she was having a breakdown. Should I call Diane?

“That’s also right. She mumbled, “We just got married a few months ago,” more to herself than to me.

I snorted a laugh. I think Amaya was in some kind of trouble and needed someone to talk to about the good and bad things.

Maybe she and Tessa were up to something?

“Amaya? Do you want to go out to eat? Maybe getting some fresh air would help? We could even go out for drinks after that.

I thought I heard her lungs constrict when she gasped so hard, and then she hit me in the chest.

I bent over in pain and held my beating chest, wondering what I had done to deserve such pain. This is why I am always careful around Amaya.

You never knew when or where she would strike.

“What’s wrong with you?” Amaya growled at me. “I can’t drink! That will hurt the baby!”

“Well, you could have just said that! You didn’t have to stop my heart for a little while.

I cut myself off and thought back to what she said.

“What baby?” I whispered.

She smiled and bit her lip. Her hazel eyes drew me in. “The baby we made is so silly.”

My mouth was wide open, and Amaya laughed and took my hands and put them on her lower abdomen.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes, but I didn’t try to wipe them away or hide them.

“Are you pregnant?””I let out a breath, not even knowing it was mine.”

“I just found out,” she said, putting her hands over mine. “Are you happy?””

I stared at her.

“Am I happy? I’m so happy that I feel like crying or throwing up.”

She screamed with joy and hugged me around the neck.

I couldn’t believe it.

My baby was going to have a child.

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And she had a baby.

My wife and daughter were everything to me. If anything happened to either of them, a part of me would die, and I don’t mean that in a figurative way.

I don’t even want to think about what would happen if something happened to both of them.

I made myself stop thinking about those bad things. I just realised that the more you had to lose, the more these thoughts seemed to come up.

“Papa? Not listen?” Siobhan frowned at me, and at that moment, she looked so much like her mother that it hurt my heart.

“Papa is very sorry, peanut.” How can I make it up to you?”

She scrunched up her little face in thought, and I had to bite my lip to keep from squealing.

We made a small Amaya.

“Kish?” She touched her cheek, and a part of me melted.

I held her face and kissed her cheek for a long time. I blew raspberries on her cheek, which made her laugh like a baby.

Amaya finished cooking a few minutes later and brought me a huge bowl of my favourite food. We moved to the dining table, and I strapped Siobhan into her seat.

The happiest sound at dinner was Siobhan gurgling as she drank her pumpkin soup.

It's clear that my child had great taste in food.

Amaya and I took turns feeding Siobha, and by the time we were done, her whole face was orange.

I could see Amaya yawning a lot during dinner, so I thought Siobhan must have given her a hard time that day. I loved my little girl, but she was fast, naughty, and loved to play hide and seek.



I don't want to say this, but a small part of me is happy that karma has finally given Amaya the same hell she gave me.

I told Amaya, "Why don't you take a nice bath? I'll take care of Siobhan and put her to bed." I saw her shoulders drop.

"Thank you, Cartie," she said, and then she started to clean up the table. I put my hand over hers to stop it.

"Leave this alone." "I'll clean the kitchen and then I'll come up to see you." I kissed her deeply, and she smiled against my lips.

She whispered in my ear, "I'll keep the bed warm for you," and then she bit my lobe.

I had to get Siobhan to sleep right away.

I took Siobhan upstairs and gave her a bath. I added a little extra lavender essential oil because it helps her sleep better.

The bath was fine, but putting her in pyjamas was a nightmare. Every time I tried to buckle her onesie, she played football with my face. And when I finally got those stupid buttons together, she ripped it open in one go.

I gave up and let her sleep in her nappy, but she wouldn't go to sleep.

I walked around the house with her in my arms, but as soon as I thought she was asleep, she looked up at me with those hazel eyes and smiled with a toothy grin.

I took off my shirt, hoping that some skin-to-skin contact would help, and when it did, I almost fell to my knees in thanks.

I took her back to her room, tucked her in, and stayed there for a while to watch her

sleep. It was hard for me to let Siobhan sleep alone when she was younger, but it's getting easier now.

I kissed her goodnight and left, suddenly remembering that my wife was waiting for me. I went through the door that connected Siobhan's room to ours, but Amaya wasn't in the bedroom, so I had to assume she was still in the bath.

I was right: Amaya was in the tub, resting with her eyes closed.

"Did she bother you?" Amaya asked with her eyes closed.

"When does she ever not cause trouble?" I laughed. "But she's my daughter, so I don't mind at all."

Amaya hummed in response as I sat down on the edge of the bathtub. I began to rub her shoulders, and when she threw her head back and moaned, my back tensed.

"She gave you a lot of trouble today, didn't she?"

Amaya snorted, and I laughed at her.

"When does she ever not cause problems?" "But she's my daughter, so I don't mind at all," Amaya said, quoting me.

We laughed together and then stayed quiet for a few minutes. I kept giving her a massage, trying to keep my cool despite her deep moans and groans.

"Carter?" Amaya called.

"Yeah, baby?"

"How long will it take for you to get the message and f\*\*k me already?"