



LOVE
Unexpected

Q.B. TYLER

LOVE
Unexpected



Q.B. TYLER

Copyright © 2020 by Q.B. Tyler

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination and used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Design: Design Honey
Editing: Kristen Portillo—Your Editing Lounge
Interior Formatting: Stacey Blake—Champagne Book Design
Proofreading: Leslie Middleton

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About this Book](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Preview of Unconditional](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Also by Q.B. Tyler](#)

[About the Author](#)

I'd only wanted one kiss.

One kiss, under the dark of night, in a city where no one knew us.

One kiss fueled by my hormones and alcohol and the blinding grief over
losing my mother.

One kiss from the man I told myself was untouchable.

But, it didn't stop at one kiss.

And now we are running full speed down a road with no intention of
stopping.

His touch disarms me.

His kiss revives me.

But, our love, could *destroy* me.

*This is a taboo novel and is intended for mature audiences only.

Disclaimer:

This is a very taboo novel featuring a stepfather and stepdaughter. If this is
not for you, I would advise against reading this one.

Seriously.

*This book is dedicated to the women that loved Cal and Maddie's story and
asked for more.
You haven't seen anything yet.*

PROLOGUE

Stassia

The first time I saw him, it was love at first sight. At least my ten-year-old brain, that had watched too many romance movies with my incurable romantic mother wanted to believe. He was standing across the playground talking to the Social Studies teacher whose name I could never remember. He was new from just a few towns over, I later learned, after his wife died in a fatal car accident leaving him widowed and devastated.

It was a warm Spring day, one of the first of the season and I found myself getting hot under my sweater that my mother made me promise not to take off. I pulled at it, wishing I had the courage to disobey just this once, and sighed.

Mark Erickson, this stupid bully that my mother told me only picked on me because he was sweet on me, ran past me, knocking me over and breaking my line of sight with my new love. I hit the mulch, but I didn't get up. I just stared up at this beautiful man willing him to look at me. He looked like Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*, with jet black hair and tanned skin. I couldn't see his eyes, but I bet they were blue just like his. I cocked my head to the side briefly wondering what it would be like to be part of his world.

The second time was later that week. He entered my math class just as we began a test. I set down my pencil, watching him move towards the front to quietly talk to my teacher. I tried to angle my ear towards them just to hear his voice. *What did he sound like?* I got up and moved towards the sharpener as it was in the front of the room. My heart pounded with every step, knowing that I'd get to hear his voice any second now. *And I did.*

Soft. Smooth. Rich.

I imagined it was what my father would sound like, *if I had one.*

The third, and perhaps the most pertinent time, he spoke to me. He told me he liked my pink overalls that I begged my mother not to make me wear. He gave me a grin, baring all his teeth and I almost melted. My heart

slammed against my little ribcage and I couldn't help but feel like I was floating.

The beautiful man noticed me.

Maybe he'd love me one day.

Maybe he'd kiss me like they do at the end of the movies.

But I was wrong.

So, fucking wrong.

Because although I saw him first and told myself at the young age of ten that I was madly in love with this beautiful man, said beautiful man fell in love with someone else.

My mother.

I was ten years old when I fell in love.

Two years later, I fell in *hate*.

ONE

Stassia

“STASSI VALE, GET UP!” His voice booms through the house and I cringe hearing the way he says my name. First of all, my name is Stassia. Pronounced *Stah-See-Uh*. It was allegedly a nod to my father and my Italian roots. Roots I don’t know all that well, because said father up and left the second my mother learned she was pregnant. A part of me wonders about them. Not really my father because he didn’t really sound like a guy worth shit, but maybe a grandmother? One that could teach me to make pasta or cannolis from scratch or maybe an aunt on her fourth marriage that knows where to find the best gelato and sneaks me wine at dinner.

I sit up in bed, wondering about that side of my family for perhaps the millionth time in my life. My mother claims not to know anything about them or even how to get in contact with them and my heart sinks every time she brushes off my feelings about this whole part of me I know nothing about. Maybe it was just too painful for her to talk about.

I get up and move towards the vanity in my bedroom, pulling my hair out of the two braids that I’d put in last night so that it would sport some natural waves today. My mother is black and my father was...*well...is* Italian, so my hair can be temperamental, but luckily, today isn’t one of those days. There’s a knock on the door and I snap my gaze towards the sound, glaring at the man I know to be on the other side of it.

“What?”

His deep booming voice moves through the room and resounds off the walls. “Are you decent?”

“If I say no, will you go away?” I rub under my charcoal eyes and lean forward, staring at the bags I know to be beneath them from staying on the phone until two a.m. the night before. A guy, of course. Carter James, the captain of the football team. I’m a cheerleader and it seems the whole school is set on us becoming a walking cliché. I’ve gone along with it because,

frankly, I'm bored and he looks *really* good in that uniform.

But in actuality, I'm just looking for something to kill time. I'm so bored with everything. I go to school, get good grades—ones good enough to get me accepted to a few Ivy League schools my mother *made* me apply to and every state school *I wanted* to apply to. Luckily, I convinced her to let me go to a local university in the fall because I'm not keen on going away much like so many of my friends.

I'll admit, I slacked off this semester after getting into college and most of my teachers know not to fuck with the principal's stepdaughter anyway. I go to cheerleading practice and the occasional French club when I don't ditch to go get high in my friends' basement.

I'm excited about college and the very bright future still in front of me, but I'm not enjoying the present at all.

"You're going to be late for school," he tells me and I roll my eyes.

"Can't have that," I murmur. "Good thing my mother is banging the principal," I call through the door. "Write me a note, Daddy dearest."

I hear a huff and I can bet every dime I have he's pointing at the door, waving that index finger around like it gives him *any* authority. "I am leaving here in twenty-five minutes; your ass better be in that seat."

I get up and stomp towards the door, flinging it open and meeting his piercing blue eyes. He's already dressed in his usual attire: a black suit, white shirt, and a tie with a pop of color. Today it's turquoise, and I wish I could admire the fact that it really brings out the color of his eyes. I look away because there's been a time or two that I've gotten lost in those blue eyes, and I'm too annoyed to let them sway my current mood. "This is ridiculous. I'm seventeen, I have a license, I'm graduating in *two* months, and I'm forced to ride to school with *you*. I want a car." I cross my arms over my chest. It isn't fair. I don't have a car, and my stepfather hates when I ride in a car with any of my friends; most of us only have our provisional licenses and thus shouldn't be riding around with any other minors. *And yet everyone else does it.*

His eyes narrow and he leans forward and points his finger at me. "You can have a car when your attitude changes."

I swat his hand away immediately and press my hands firmly to my hips. "You're the only one who thinks my attitude is a problem. I'm a charming delight to everyone else in my life. Seems *you* just bring it out of me."

"Lucky me." He grumbles before he takes a step back and runs a hand

through that lush head of hair. Even though I hate sharing a house with him, I can admit he does provide for some nice eye candy. He has a nice face attached to an even nicer body, complete with abs and this tapered waist you rarely see on a high school principal. Veins protrude from his arms whenever he flexes and he has perhaps the most muscular legs I've ever seen thanks to four years of college soccer. He's the best thing that ever happened to a pair of shorts and I'll admit to even running my gaze down his frame when he wears these particular sweatpants of the grey color.

I mean, he might annoy me but I've got eyes.

It's no secret that all the girls want to stay at my house, dying for the chance to catch the hot Principal outside of school. *I should start charging some of these thirsty bitches.* "I made you some breakfast."

I look towards the staircase that's just off my bedroom wondering what he possibly made for me. "Did you poison it?"

A look of hurt crosses his face, and I mentally pat myself on the back that I was able to temporarily disarm him in today's battle of wits. "What reason would I have to poison you?"

I lean against the door jamb and stare up at him. He's tall, at least a foot taller than me, and I have to crane my neck most of the time when I want to look at him. "I don't know, revenge?"

"Revenge for what?"

I shrug, noncommittally before looking down at my nail beds. "Taking your car out and scratching it."

His eyes widen and darken to an almost sinful shade of blue and I know it's only a matter of time before he explodes. It's always the same, and I know just how far I can push him to make him snap. But he gives as good as he gets it. "I KNEW that was you."

I roll my eyes and sashay towards the bathroom. "You'll live."

"That car is brand new, Stassia Rae."

I spin around and stare up at him in shock. "Ah, so you *do* know my name."

He takes a step closer to me. "Don't change the subject."

I take one as well, making it so we are almost toe to toe, and as usual I have to crane my neck to glare at him. "Don't tell me what to do."

"You're infuriating."

"And you know this, man." I smile, quoting one of my favorite movies as I shoot him a peace sign from behind my back. "I'll be ready within the

hour.”

“TWENTY-FIVE—” he starts just as I slam the bathroom door.

I let out a breath, wanting to scream. My stepfather, the dreamy object of my affection for most of my tenth year of life, became my nightmare just a few years later. He met my mother during Back to School Night in the beginning of fifth grade and they hit it off. I tried everything to sabotage things that night, knowing that my mother fell fast and *hard* and my silly ten-year-old brain was still convinced that he would eventually fall in love with *me*.

Incoming: Dominic Callahan the vulnerable, grieving widower with piercing blue eyes and a heart of gold.

Sparks flew so fast I was surprised the school didn’t catch fire that night. A year later, despite begging her not to, my mother married my crush, thoroughly breaking my heart and forcing me to move on *because who would have a crush on their stepfather?*

It was just way too porny and weird. Not to mention, the rose-colored glasses quickly faded when I realized he was a royal pain in the ass. Overprotective, slightly neurotic, and worried about every little thing. I guess that comes with the whole dead wife thing but *my God, relax*. It’s been seven years, and though I’ve learned to live with it, I can’t say it hasn’t been challenging along the way.

There’s a knock on the door, just as I finish applying toothpaste to my brush. “What?” I ask, expecting Dominic and not the sweet voice that floats through.

“Angelface, it’s Mama.” I unlock the door immediately, shocked that she’s home and not at the hospital where she works as the resident oncologist. It’s nearing seven-thirty, and I’m surprised she hasn’t already left for the day for eight o’clock rounds.

Eyes that match mine, lined with liner and no less than three coats of mascara blink at me with a bright smile. “Sweetheart.” She gingerly fingers the split ends of my hair that slightly graze the top of my breasts. “You’re due for a trim.”

“Ugh,” I scoff. “I know. Will you take me tomorrow?”

“Not when I hear you and D fighting like that.” She says using her nickname for my stepfather.

“But Mom...he’s being...well, you know.”

She shuts the door behind her and sits on the side of my bathtub, facing

me. “You know he’s crazy about you.”

“No, he’s just plain crazy,” I tell her as I pull my hair up into a bun to prepare for my shower making sure not to get too undressed around my mother so as to not reveal the ink on my side or the ring through my nipple.

Yeah, there was no way I’d be ready in twenty-five minutes.

“Watch it. Overprotective and you know why.” She shoots me her signature mom look and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. She must know it too because she raises an eyebrow as if to say *try me*.

I turn towards her and sigh. “Mom, can you please talk to him about the car? Furthermore, can’t *you* just get me a car? You make more money than he does!”

“It’s not about the money, baby. It’s your attitude.”

“I don’t have an attitude!” I hear the whine in my voice, which rarely works with my mother, but sometimes I have a chance. “Dominic just...irks me.”

“He irks you? Stassia Rae, if I ever said that about my stepfather, my mother would have put me over her knee. Hell, if I said it *now*, she’d put me over her knee.”

“That’s different, Grandpapa is the best thing that ever happened to Grandma *and* you.”

“No, *you’re* the best thing that ever happened to me.” She stands and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I’ll work on D about the car, if you work on your attitude, and not skipping French club.” She points at me before holding out her pinky for us to link just like we always do. I oblige, wrapping my pinky around it and we kiss our fists. “Have a wonderful day at school; I’ll see you later.”

“Not if I see you first,” I reply my usual response.

My mother was barely twenty years old when she had me. She was a young mother; and learned the very tough lesson that putting herself through college and then med school was no easy feat. But my grandparents are actual saints, and my mother worked her ass off, with two day jobs and night classes. They say it takes a village, and she certainly had one supporting her, rooting for her, and a long nine years later, she graduated top of her class. I still remember sitting at her medical school graduation, cheering as she walked across the stage. I was her number one fan, and for as long as I could remember, she was mine.



The sound of my name over the loudspeaker causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. A shiver snakes down my spine instantly as a frown finds my face. I recognized the voice as the school secretary; a voice that is usually cheery and full of enthusiasm that causes a class full of apathetic teenagers to roll their eyes. Unlike all those other times, her voice is morose and glum making me wonder briefly *who died?*

I pack up my stuff quickly, avoiding the eyes of all my peers as I make my way out of third period Chemistry. I've made it no more than ten steps when my phone buzzes alerting me of a text.

Kate: Heard you got sprung from Chem. What gives!?

I roll my eyes at the thought that word spreads faster than wildfire at this school. I punch out a text to my nosy best friend letting her know that I'm not sure but I'll keep her posted. I'm looking down, not paying attention when I walk right into something hard and firm. Hands grip my biceps, forcing my gaze upwards and away from my phone and straight into the eyes of my stepfather.

"Oh hey—" I start until his eyes give it all away. *Something's wrong.* "What...what's wrong?"

"Stassi—" His voice breaks and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he was about to completely break down.

He pulls me into a hug in the hallway, rubbing his hand down my back so slowly and in slow circles that it sends a lightning bolt of tingles through me. I snuggle my face into his chest, loving the feeling of his strong hands around me. A taboo thought floats through my mind, wondering what it would feel like to brush my lips against his throat and taste the skin there.

Fuck.

I shake my head and take a step back, away from the embrace of my stepfather and bite my lips nervously. *Well, that was new.*

He cups my cheek and rubs his thumb over it as he gives me a sad smile. "Let's go, Stass." I frown, wondering why we're leaving in the middle of the school day and more importantly why he's so solemn, but I'm too afraid to

ask.

Minutes later, we're in his car and he still hasn't told me what's happening.

"Dominic, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"Stas—" His voice breaks and he shakes his head slowly.

Hearing the emotion in his voice is like a punch to the gut and I find myself struggling to breathe. I'm not sure what a panic attack feels like, but I think the way my throat is closing up and my heart is racing is pretty close to what it feels like. I unbuckle my seatbelt, desperate not to feel the weight of the belt against my chest for a second longer. The tension in the car is so thick it's almost unbearable and despite the rain falling on this particularly cold April day I roll the window down slightly.

"Where are we going?" I manage out between deep breaths.

"In and out, sweetheart." My eyes flick to him, hearing the term of endearment he hadn't used in years. I move my gaze away from his face to the steering wheel, noting his firm grip that has his knuckles turning white.

"Dominic," I repeat his name, "I'm not kidding around. You yank me out of school without a word in the middle of the school day. What the fuck?"

His eyes move away from the road for no more than a second to chastise me for my language I'm sure. He doesn't, but I see the brief scolding look in his eyes before he turns back to the road. His brows are furrowed as if he's angry but I can see the devastation in his eyes and he has the posture of a man that looks as if he's got the weight of the world on his shoulders. Slumped and defeated and so unlike how he usually carries himself. Every few seconds his Adam's apple bobs, like he's struggling to swallow and suddenly the need to comfort him overwhelms me like a wave threatening to take me under.

"I'll tell you as soon as we get there. I'm worried..." He swallows. "Worried that once I say it, I'm going to lose it. And you..." He lets out a deep breath. "You're definitely going to lose it."

TWO

Stassia

I don't say anything in response to Dominic's ominous comment. Instead, I let my mind run wild with all of the possible scenarios. I note that we aren't going to my house, but we're taking the familiar route to where my mother works. Feelings of dread pool in my stomach in hopes that we're just going to visit my mother and not that someone we know is *in* the hospital. Those feelings of dread turn to terror as he pulls into the Emergency Room parking lot which is *not* the entrance we would use if this was just a friendly visit.

Dominic shuts off the car and rests his forehead against the steering wheel before a deep sigh leaves his mouth. "Stassia...I'm so sorry."

"For...what?"

"For what I'm about to tell you..." Tears pool in his eyes but they dissipate when he clears his throat. "Your mom..." he chokes out.

And instantly my worst fear comes to life.



The funeral falls on the coldest, rainiest day of April. My teeth chatter together as we sit beneath the tent at the gravesite and I chastise myself for not wearing a heavier coat like my grandmother advised. I pull the black jacket tighter around me and bounce my legs both out of nerves and to warm my bare legs. I hear sniffles around me every few moments and Dominic grips my hand tighter as if to say *I'm here*. I can tell he's trying to keep it together for me, but I haven't cried yet and his eyes won't stop watering.

"I can't...I can't fix it. I'm so sorry." He says this over and over under his

breath.

I still don't cry despite hearing the emotion in his voice. I don't know why I'm not having that reaction when I loved my mother more than anyone in the world. But the tears don't come. I don't even feel the familiar prickle. I feel numb. Hollow. Like I'm in a dream where feelings and sensations don't exist. I let go of Dominic's hands and pinch myself for the hundredth time in the past week. *God, are you sure I'm not dreaming?*

It's been a week since my mother died and I haven't shed a tear. I haven't spoken much either. Dominic has all but begged me to see someone, as he thinks I'm internalizing my feelings, but every time I tell him no, I don't want to see anyone. When I'm ready to talk, I will and I'm not ready to talk even though the news spread quickly at my school and everyone was trying to *be there for me*.

The wife of the principal and mother of a student, killed in a car accident, has everyone lending their support. My phone still hasn't stopped buzzing and I know that if I turn around, there will be several students and teachers standing just behind the tent, all doing their best to give strength and support to me and my stepfather.

I look up at the man who's been through this once before. A man who at only forty, has now been a widower *twice*. My heart hurts for him just as much as it does for me. I may have had my mother for nearly eighteen years but he's only had her for seven. Neither seemed fair.

My eyes pull away from my stepfather as something just to the left of the tent catches my attention. Well, *someone*. He's dressed in black slacks and a gray overcoat over a turtleneck. Glasses are perched on his nose and his brown hair is slicked back completely. He looks like someone from the mob who's fallen into a Ralph Lauren catalogue. Everything about him screams, 'stay the fuck away' and yet, I can't keep my gaze from moving back to him. There's almost a familiarity about him but I can't quite put my finger on it.

"Dominic," I whisper and his eyes snap to mine instantly despite the preacher asking us to bow our heads in prayer. Dominic is probably in shock because it's one of the few times I've spoken in the past week. I nod towards the mysterious man. "Do you know who that is?"

His sad blue eyes trace my face for a second before he pulls his gaze from me almost reluctantly and looks towards the man. "Son of a bitch," he murmurs. He leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs and puts his head in his hands. His father, seated to the left of him, rests his hand on his

back, assumedly trying to comfort him. From an outsider's perspective, I'm sure it seems like he's having a moment of weakness. Like he's breaking down over losing the love of his life, but I can feel the tension radiating off of him in waves.

He is pissed.

"Who is it?" I lean forward and repeat my question.

He doesn't answer again, nor does he meet my eyes, and I'm instantly irritated over his blatant disregard for my question. I sit back in my chair with a huff, crossing my legs, making my skirt ride up slightly and revealing more leg than may be appropriate for a funeral. Dominic sits back in his seat. "Later. Not now."

After the funeral, Dominic and I have been passed around several times for hugs, kisses, and what seemed like never ending promises of 'anything you need' and 'call anytime.' I'm sure most of them meant it, but I'm sure most of them know I'll never call them. I don't need many people. My grandparents. My best friend. *My mother.* I bite the inside of my cheek as the tears form for the first time in a week.

My mother is dead.

I don't have a father.

I'm an orphan.

That's not true. You've got Dominic.

He's not my father.

He's the closest thing you've got.

I'm just about to provide another rebuttal to my subconscious, but in that moment, fate decides after seventeen and a half years, it's ready to fuck with my daddy abandonment issues.



"You look just like her."

I had managed to get away from the crowds and the endless hugs that were making me feel like I was suffocating. I'd stepped away for some peace and maybe to take the edible that Kate had given me in case I needed an

escape.

I turn around to find the guy that I'd spotted at the funeral. *Mob guy*. I blink several times as if to say *what do you want?* His English is good, but his Italian accent is thick. Like maybe he's spent a lot of time here at some point but is currently living abroad.

"How old are you?" he asks and I frown at his question. *No, I'm sorry for your loss? My condolences? What the fuck?*

"I'll be eighteen next month."

"Wow." He chuckles and pulls his glasses from his face. "I feel so old at this moment." He takes a step closer to me and I take a step back, suddenly wishing that I hadn't been so curious about this man. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Who are you? I've...I've never seen you before. Are you a long lost family member or something?" *Maybe an old boyfriend of my mother's?*

"Or something." He nods as he slides his glasses back on. "Stassia, right?"

"You know my name, but I don't know anything about you. How about we just cut to the chase? In case you couldn't tell, I'm not really in the mood for it today."

"Get the fuck away from her, you worthless piece of shit." My eyes widen when I hear Dominic's voice booming over all of us. My grandmother is behind him and I want to glare at Dominic for using that kind of language around her but something tells me that she's on board with it at the moment with the way she's glaring at the mysterious stranger.

The stranger's eyes find Dominic's and he puts his hands up in surrender. "I just came to pay my respects."

"Pay your respects? Are you fucking serious?" Dominic growls.

He shakes his head and pulls his glasses from his face to clean the lenses, but if I had to guess, it seems more like psychological warfare than anything. "Have you thought that maybe you don't know *everything*? Maybe there's things about your precious wife you don't know?" he says as he slides them onto the bridge of his nose.

"Screw you," I snap before Dominic can say anything. "Let's say for argument's sake he doesn't know everything *if* you're going to allude that you had some weird relationship that has her cheating on her husband. I call bullshit, because I'd know. I *do* know everything."

My mother and I were close, we told each other everything.

“So, you know all about me, then?”

Dominic takes a step closer to the stranger, partially in front of me, blocking my view. “Stassia, go with your grandmother.”

“Come on, honey.” I smell her before I feel her hand encased in mine. Cocoa Butter and a brief hint of cinnamon. One of my favorite smells.

“Wait. I want to know who this is. Why does he know me?” I take a step forward and look up at Dominic. We get on each other’s nerves and we knew how to push each other’s buttons but to my knowledge, he’s never lied to me. In fact, he’s quite good at doling out the hard truth when it’s necessary, even if it hurt.

“She knows nothing of me, does she?”

“Why would she? You haven’t been around.” My grandmother interjects. “Ever.”

“That was by no choice of mine,” he retorts.

I frown, hearing the words spelled out almost completely for me. “Wait.” I stop. “Are you...” I take a step forward, in front of Dominic, and I stare into the eyes of the man who’s becoming less and less like a mystery. “Are you... my father?”

He has the decency to look contrite as he slides his hands into his pockets. “She kept you away from me, Stassia...”

“Bullshit!” Dominic spits out from behind me and I put up a hand, which I know he hates, but I’m hoping in this moment he’ll just shut the fuck up.

“Answer my question,” I demand.

“You’re a spitfire, aren’t you?” I narrow my eyes, staring him down. He pulls his jacket tighter around him as wind whips around us in this already icy moment. “Yes.”

I was anticipating that answer, but clearly, the rest of me wasn’t because I drop to my knees in a fit of sobs. The cathartic release my body has been desperate for clings to that one word that leaves his lips. *How!?*

“Shit.” I hear and then strong arms are wrapped around me. For a brief moment, I think it is dear old dad comforting me and my back stiffens, but then a sense of familiarity washes over me. “It’s just me,” Dominic whispers in my ear. “I’ve got you.”

I briefly hear my grandmother and grandfather, who rarely raises his voice, using the words *good for nothing* and *abandoned* and *so much fucking back child support*.

Dominic pulls me to my feet so my back is to the altercation and he

slowly walks me away from the scene unfolding. “Don’t look back there. That’s not about you. It’s just that asshole making the situation about *him*, per usual.”

My mind is racing a mile a minute, trying to unpack everything that’s happened in the last week. *Losing one parent but gaining another? Is this the trade off? If so, this is bullshit.* But I also know if this is the last chance I’ll ever have to speak to the man that is responsible for half of my DNA, I want answers. Or at least *one* fucking answer. I pull from Dominic’s grasp and move towards my grandparents and *whatever his name is.*

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Darling,” my grandmother starts.

“Grandma, please,” I plead.

“Micah,” he answers, despite the three sets of eyes glaring at him to walk the fuck away and leave me in the dark.

“Where do you live?” *Is he nearby? Has he been living down the fucking block this whole time?*

“New York, but I spend a lot of time in Italy for work.”

“Why...now? Where have you been my whole life?”

“She kept me away, Stassia. She said I wasn’t fit to be a father, and she was right. I was in with a lot of bad people for a long time. Dangerous people. But I got out of all that. I run a legitimate business now, I swear.”

“Okay, so you were in the mob or whatever the fuck.” I wince and look at my grandmother. “Sorry,” I tell her before turning back to him. “But that doesn’t stop you from picking up the phone, or writing me a letter, or even letting me know you existed...or that you cared that *I* existed.”

“I did write to you. I sent birthday cards...you never got them, I guess.” *Is he fucking serious?*

“Wow, that must make you father of the year, huh? You’re a coward. You didn’t want the responsibility or the liability of having a family while you were off playing *The Godfather* or whatever. Excuse me for not being moved by your attempts to reach out via some bullshit *Hallmark* cards.”

His face falls and I watch as his seemingly perfect posture deflates slightly. “Stassia...”

“You didn’t want me.” My voice is even and I’m proud of myself for keeping the emotion out of my voice. I’m proud that I didn’t let him see just how much years of indifference affected me. How much his presence is affecting me *now*. He doesn’t deserve that.

“I did.” His voice is pleading, like he wants so badly for me to believe him, but I can’t help feel this is all some bullshit act to ease his guilty conscience over being a shitty father especially now that I don’t have a mother.

Don’t let years of your mother’s truths be erased by ten minutes of pretty words, Stassia. “My mother said you split when she got pregnant.”

“That’s not entirely true. I split because they would have taken you both from me. I couldn’t care about anyone or they would have taken them as leverage. I loved you before I even met you and I loved your mother more than I loved myself, so I left, to save your lives.”

I look over at my grandmother, wondering how she feels about what I assume to be new information. “I think it’s very easy to say all of this now, when your child is damn near grown,” she snaps. *Wow, she didn’t even buy it, and she’d invite the devil in for a hot meal if he needed it.*

“It’s the truth. I’ve been out of that life for a few years now, but...your mom...Angela, she said it was too late. You were fifteen and doing so well. She said I’d fuck your life up by coming back.”

Why Mama!? You knew I wanted to know this side of my family and you turned him away when he was trying!

“Is that true?” I turn around to look at Dominic and he looks just as stunned. “Tell me!”

“I...I don’t know, Stassi.”

“I just want a chance to be in your life, Stassia. I know you don’t trust me and have probably heard a lot of terrible things about me growing up. But I’m not all bad. I made a lot of mistakes, but any mistakes I’ve made regarding you was to keep you safe. I should have come for you sooner, but...I thought I owed it to your mother to respect her wishes.”

“How did you find out she died?”

He clears his throat and looks off into the distance. “How? I...I had someone who kept tabs on you...to make sure you were safe. I haven’t in some time, but when your mother died...”

“You come here?” Dominic growls and steps in front of me. “What happened to respecting Angela’s wishes?”

“She’s practically eighteen now, she deserves the option to have a relationship with her father.”

“I’m her father.” He growls. “I taught her how to ride a bike and to drive. I’ve been there for her every second of the past seven years and she may not

like it but I'll continue to be there for her forever."

I gasp quietly, not expecting that kind of reaction from the man I assumed only put up with me because he was married to my mother, not because of...*me*. Now that my mother is gone, I assumed he'd send me to live with my grandparents.

"Stassia is still seventeen, and in the eyes of the law, she's still a minor, so it's my job now to protect her from predators like you," Dominic continues.

"I'm not a predator, you pretentious asshole, I'm her *father*." I watch as this pissing match between my alleged father and stepfather unfolds. Both sides are getting heated, and I pray it doesn't come to blows.

"I'd say on paper only but you're not even listed on her birth certificate. You're nothing. A phantom. Which is how you wanted it, right?" Dominic snarls as he flexes his fists.

"Dominic..." I start, not wanting this to become an even bigger scene, today of all days. "People are staring. Can we not do this now?"

Dominic's eyes find mine and they soften as he reaches up to stroke my tear-stained cheeks. "I'm sorry," he whispers before he pulls me into a hug. "Do you want to leave?"

I nod against his chest and wrap my arms around him, finally feeling the warmth I've needed all afternoon. His large body engulfs my tiny one, warming both my outsides and insides on the worst day of my life.

"I want you to have my number." Micah's voice interrupts us and much to my disappointment, Dominic lets me go. I look to Micah to find him holding a card toward me. "Call me. Day or night. I'd like to know you, Stassia..." He looks Dominic over before looking at me. "I'd like a chance to start over."

"I don't need a father..." I shake my head, hearing how it sounds and not wanting Dominic to get offended. "I mean...I have one."

"Well, maybe we can be friends?" He's still holding the card out and I watch him lower it slightly as he notices I'm not reaching out to grab it.

Fire blazes in Dominic's eyes as he snatches it from his hands. "You said your piece, now go. If she wants to contact you, she will."

Micah shakes his head as he stares at the card still in my stepfather's hand. "I am sorry for your loss, Stassia. Your mother was an amazing woman. I wish things had been different. Maybe in another life..." He looks at my grandparents and then Dominic before landing on me. "I hope to see

you soon.”

THREE

Stassia

“You’re almost eighteen, so I suppose I can’t stop you,” Dominic says as he hands me the card with Micah’s information.

It was the following day and I had just emerged from my room after a much needed fourteen hour sleep. I’d succumbed to exhaustion about halfway through the repast and left Dominic with all of my loud, overbearing, yet well-meaning family and his as my grandmother stroked my hair.

I look up at him and then down at the once pristine card that had now been folded in half and smelled like it had been soaked in gin. “I don’t... really know what I want.”

“You don’t have to make any decisions right now.” I notice he’s not dressed for the day, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt that stretched tightly across his muscles and torso and I let my eyes feast on the visual for no more than a second before averting my gaze. “Do you want some coffee?” I nod, knowing the small source of comfort will at least snap me out of the groggy feeling. I sit down in one of the chairs and rest my head on the kitchen table as I hear him placing a cup in the Keurig. “You still tired?” he asks. “You want to go rest? I can bring your coffee up to you.”

My head snaps up at his kind offer. I’m not used to this side of Dominic.

Kind. Caring. Protective.

Well, he’s always been those things in his own way, but he usually goes about it very differently.

“Can we talk about the elephant in the room?”

He turns from where he’s preparing my coffee and stares at me. His blue eyes are curious and he cocks his head to the side as if to say *well, on with it*. “Can...I stay? I mean, my grandparents live kind of far, and although I know you wouldn’t kick me out, I’ve got a month before my senior year is over and then I’ll be gone at the end of the summer.”

“I didn’t realize I’d given you any indication that I wanted you to leave.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and the way they flex catches my attention. “Of course, you can stay, Stassia. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to go and stay with your grandparents. As far as that...” he nods towards the card in my hand, “I would prefer you not meet with him alone the first few times...at least not until he’s been cleared completely.”

“Do you not trust him?”

“I’m not sure, yet. He’s your father, Stassi, so I’m not going to say you can’t see him. I’m just...apprehensive. I would like to know more before I go sending you into something that could be dangerous. Your mother would never forgive me.” He grabs my coffee and some creamer from the fridge before moving through the kitchen towards me. He sets my favorite FRIENDS mug in front of me and the hazelnut creamer beside it before taking the adjacent chair at the table. “It would kill me to lose you too, Stassia...you’re...you’re all I have left.”

“Me?” I squeak. “You have your parents and your siblings, I’m not *all*...”

“You’re all I have left of *her*,” he corrects.

I swallow, nodding slowly as his words sink in. “I’m skeptical about Micah too, Dominic. I’m not going to sneak off and meet up with some random stranger.”

“I thought you wanted to get to know your father.”

I shrug before taking a small sip of my coffee. “It’s different now that he’s right in front of me. Now that the opportunity is there. It was easy to fantasize when I didn’t know him. When he wasn’t in front of me full of potential lies and half assed apologies.” *Maybe he wasn’t completely full of shit, but maybe my mother kept me away from him as I got older to protect me from the disappointment and rejection that inevitably comes when dealing with a fair-weather father.* Hiding a few stray birthday cards that he sent over the years hardly makes my mother the villain in this story.

I chew on my lower lip and look up at him. “The only father I’ve ever known has never lied to me. At least that I know of.”

“Never.” He nods and the sincerity radiates from his blue orbs. I give Dominic a hard time but I know he loved my mother. This is just as hard on him as it is on me.

I look around the kitchen. She’d turned this house into a home and it feels unfathomable that I have to stay here without her. Like somehow, this isn’t a home anymore. “I can’t believe she’s gone.” My voice cracks and I take another sip of my coffee to try and clear the emotion from my throat.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Dominic speaks up. “Would you like to stay somewhere else tonight? Maybe Kate’s? Or I can get you a hotel room if you want? If it’s too hard to be here right now?”

“No...I...I don’t want to leave you here.”

“I’ll be okay, Stassia.” I hear his words, but his demeanor says something else entirely. Something calls out to me, and although I had no intentions of leaving in the first place, I shake my head.

“No, we’re in this together, Dominic.”



Days turn to weeks, and neither of us has returned to school. Since I’m a senior, my year ends in the middle of May, which means I’ve essentially missed the last of my high school career. Prom, the class picnic, yearbook photos, taking my claim as ‘Best Smile Class of 2019,’ I’ve missed all of it. Dominic is on leave for the remainder of the year, and although I’m not required to return, it’s my last week of school, and after being gone for nearly a month, I think seeing my friends will do me some good. I’m still planning to walk across the stage, and I need my cap and gown, although Kate told me more than once she’d pick it up for me. But I need some sort of normalcy.

But how will things ever be normal again without my mother?

Children are taught, unless they tragically succumb first, that they will lose their parents at some point in life. It’s never easy, and even older adults struggle to cope; why did I have to do this at eighteen? Before I’ve even lived? There is so much I still need her to teach me.

I’ve never been in love before. I haven’t lost my virginity. I’ve never lived on my own. Or owned a car. I don’t know anything about a 401k or interest rates or the best time to buy a house. I don’t even know how to cook anything besides toast and scrambled eggs. Who will teach me all of that?

Dominic’s face briefly flashes through my mind regarding the more practical things. He’s taught me how to ride a bike and to drive, but I still need *her*.

I head down the stairs, my flip flops slapping against the hardwood with

every hop until I reach the bottom. I'm wearing a black sundress that highlights my waistline and comes to just above my knees underneath a chambray shirt that I rolled to my forearms with my hair pulled into a sleek ponytail that grazes the tops of my shoulders. It's the first time I've put any effort into my appearance in weeks, and it feels good. For the first time in a month, I see a glimpse of my old self.

Dominic is sitting in the kitchen reading the newspaper like he does every day, when he must hear me coming. He looks up and meets my gaze. Unashamedly, I watch as eyes wash over me from my feet to the ponytail on the top of my head. He turns back to his newspaper, like he can't look away fast enough. "Going somewhere?"

"School," I tell him as I pull out a cup of yogurt from the fridge. "Can you drive me? Or I can ask Kate to pick me up?"

He turns around to face me and concern flashes in his eyes. "You know I don't like you riding around with kids your age."

"Which is why I asked if *you'd* drive me." I pull off the lid and lick it before tossing it in the trash can. "It's my last week of school...I'm trying, Dominic."

He nods before letting out a deep sigh. "You're right. Of course. It'll do you some good to see your friends. Let me just go get dressed." His words resonate, and I find myself wondering if any of *his* friends had checked on him. If his siblings had reached out since the funeral. His brother, Seth, who is truly one of the sweetest guys ever, had flown here for the funeral but had to fly out the next morning on an early flight to be back in Florida for a meeting, so they didn't get to catch up.

My grandparents, however, have been here two to three times a week, and Mama's friends from the hospitals visit on a constant loop with food and labors of love. I swear my mother's favorite nurse has done more of our laundry this month than I have.

Is Dominic lonely? Does he have anyone besides me? Or is he pushing everyone away while dealing with being a widower for the second time?

I don't have a ton of time to contemplate this because he's back almost as quickly as he left wearing sweatpants and a Lakewood High football t-shirt that takes at least ten years off his age. He doesn't say anything as we head to the car and he's silent almost the entire twenty minute ride to school. "Are you mad at me or something?" I ask just before he drops me off. I'm no stranger to his anger but I'd at least like to know why so I can proceed

accordingly with goading him.

“Of course not.” His eyes are fixed on the road.

I turn in my seat to face him and I take a moment to admire his profile. A strong nose, a sharp jaw, and long lashes that rest on his skin whenever he blinks. “Why are you being so...sullen?”

He runs his tongue over his teeth and takes an exasperated breath. “It’s nothing, Stassia.”

“But...”

“I said to drop it.”

I cross my arms and face forward. “You’re being a dick.”

“Don’t start.”

“What’s going on with you? Is this about Mama? Or some weird man thing? If you’re not mad at me—”

“It’s not about you, Stassia. Not everything is about you,” he snaps.

“Wow.” I bite my bottom lip in an attempt to shield myself from the angry words washing over me. He pulls to a stop in front of the school and I hop out without another thought, slamming the door behind me. I turn around, hoping he’s preparing to apologize but all I see is that fucking profile. He’s facing forward without another glance at me and then he’s gone.

That interaction with Dominic puts me in a mood for most of the morning. The day that had started out with so much promise, has been shot to shit with my stepfather’s behavior. *Why the fuck do I care? We are at each other’s throats ninety percent of the time; why does it bother me so much all of a sudden?*

Things are different now, a voice speaks from somewhere within.

By lunchtime, I’m done mulling over Dominic’s peculiar mood swing. I sit down at my usual table in the courtyard just behind the school where seniors can eat lunch and Kate is already shooing people away to make room. “Oh my God, finally, we can talk.” Sadly, I don’t have any classes with Kate, so the only talking we get to do is between classes, at lunch, or when we’ve decided to ditch.

She’s pulling her blonde hair into a ponytail just as a few guys from the football team start to crowd around us. “What do you think of doing something Friday night? Last day of school...” she trails off and instantly, as if they’d planned this ambush, Carter James chimes in.

“It’s my folks’ anniversary, and they’re going to some bed and breakfast in the Hamptons in New York. I’ll have the place to myself all weekend.” I

can practically see the want in his eyes as he lays out the perfect scenario that leads to him and me fooling around in his bed. I didn't hate the idea because his tongue game is good, but I'm not sure I want to lose my virginity this weekend and I have more than enough smarts to know that if I'm not sure, I shouldn't do it. Especially when I'm this vulnerable.

Carter James is gorgeous, a regular doppelganger of Michael B. Jordan in *Creed*. Girls and women practically fall at his feet just so that he'll flash those gorgeous brown eyes at them even if most of the time they're fixated on me. He'd wanted to be exclusive at the start of the year, but I've kept him in the friends with benefits zone for reasons I don't even really understand. He's smart and gorgeous and the most popular guy in school with a full ride to the University of Maryland to play football. He doesn't have a reputation for banging half the girls in my grade like some of his friends and he treats me with the utmost respect. And yet, I don't want more. *Was I the fuckboy here?*

Well, fuckgirl?

His dimple forms and I see his perfect smile. "Come on, Vale, it'll be fun." He takes a bite into the apple he's holding before coming around the table and leaning over me. His hand finds my chin and strokes it gently before pulling it up to meet his in a kiss. A kiss I give in to because I know all about the claim thing guys like to have when they're around their friends, so every once in a while, I let him have it. It's a short, sweet kiss that warms my heart, especially after the iciness that had been doled out towards me this morning. "Please?" he asks and I look around the table at all of our friends who appear to be pleading with their eyes.

"Okay sure." I shrug. "I'm in."



The idea of going to sixth period has long been forgotten as Kate and I took a few hits from her bowl that she keeps in her glove compartment followed by a trip to Chick-Fil-A for French fries and milkshakes. "So, how's it going? I mean...besides the obvious?" We're in the parking lot, with the windows down as old school Kanye plays in the background. I push the shake around

the cup, mixing the whipped cream into it and pulling the straw out to suck the flavors out of it.

“Shitty. But what can you do?”

“How’s it been being alone with Dominic?” Kate is privy to our ongoing battles and I’m shocked she didn’t use her usual name for him which is “the sex on a stick stepfather from hell.”

“He’s been okay. A little weird when he dropped me off, but maybe he was just having a bad morning.”

She nods in understanding before stuffing a few fries in her mouth. “Are you going to stay with him the rest of the summer?”

“Yep.”

“Oh good, then I have the whole summer with you. I’d hate if you went all the way to Virginia to stay with your grandparents. I’d never see you.” She taps her cup with mine and sucks down a healthy sip of her cookies and cream milkshake.

Kate is brilliant beyond belief and is going to MIT next year to study biochem or chemical engineering or some shit that would account for eighty percent of her social life. But that meant she’s been planning for this summer to be epic before we’re separated for the first time in ten years. We’d been best friends since elementary school, bonded by our hatred of P.E. and our love of Disney movies, so preparing to go to college without each other in tow has weighed on us both. I’ll even admit a part of me felt guilty that I was throwing a wrench in the debaucherous plans she had for us this summer because I had no plans to go out every weekend like I’m sure she intended for us.

“Are you going to have sex with Carter this weekend?” She blinks at me and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Kate is as invested in my virginity as I am, I swear. Kate lost hers at the beginning of this year to Brax Hinton, the star running back and one of Carter’s best friends. They’d been together almost a year before they did but she’d made him wait because he’d been a bit of a manwhore before she came along. It’s been about nine months since then and they seem to be going strong for now. Although, I can’t see how they’ll handle the distance with her head in the books at MIT and his head... possibly between some cheerleader’s legs at the University of Florida.

“I don’t know, K. I don’t think so.” I’m not necessarily opposed to it or Carter. I just feel indifferent towards the idea. *Which means I shouldn’t, right?* Shouldn’t I be feeling some passionate response to the person I choose

to lose my virginity to? The apathy I feel towards giving him something that special makes me feel like it's the absolute wrong choice even if he is a nice guy with good head game.

"Whyyyyy?" she whines. "Come on, you do not want to go to college still being a virgin."

I lean my head back against the headrest and let my eyes flutter closed dreading the case she's about to make. "And why don't I?"

She blinks her green eyes several times, as if she's preparing to impart her wisdom. "Because guys in college won't be concerned with getting you off. Some frat fuck won't take the time needed to make you feel good."

"Then that isn't the right guy. There are nice guys in college, you know." Maybe I'd read too many romance novels, but I find it hard to believe there aren't guys in college that would take the time to make a woman feel special. *Especially* her first time.

She narrows her green eyes. "I'm just saying, a guy like Carter would do it right. He cares about you, and he knows you've been through a lot."

Irritation spikes in my veins and I realize I'm fully over this conversation. "Did he ask you to talk this up?"

"No! He knows I wouldn't anyway. This is me as your best friend just trying to give you advice. I know you're not like saving yourself for marriage or God or something, so why not have sex with Carter? You already know he can make you come."

"I want more, Kate. You love Brax and you loved him when you decided to give him your virginity. I want that too. And if I'm not in love, I just want more."

FOUR

Stassia

I let Kate take me home after our trip for French fries and milkshakes, which means as I turn my key in the door, I'm already expecting Dominic's attitude about her bringing me home especially after this morning. But what I don't expect is full on yelling as I make my way through the foyer.

"She said she would call you if she wanted to talk. It's her decision, Micah. You can't expect her to instantly jump at the idea of getting to know you when she thought you'd abandoned her. Hell, you *did* abandon her! And you chose now to come back while the pain of losing one parent is fresh thinking you can prey on that vulnerability. What, do you think she needs *you* now that Angela's gone? Fuck off."

I creep towards the kitchen when I realize he's just on the phone and Micah isn't actually at my house. Micah must be replying because it's silent and I hold my breath as I wait for Dominic's reply. "Stay away from her until she says the word. Do *not* ambush her."

Silence.

"I am what's best for her."

My heart squeezes in my chest hearing his fierce protectiveness. I hadn't called Micah because I felt like my mind wasn't clear enough to make that decision either. The death of my mother had completely clouded my judgment. About sex. About my father. About everything. I just wanted a moment where my mind wasn't racing with a million thoughts.

And unfortunately, lately, weed has been doing the opposite of mellowing me out. I spent the ride home thinking about sex with Carter and the anxiety mounting in my chest over it means it isn't what I want. I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I don't notice Dominic has turned around and is staring straight at me. He narrows his gaze slightly when our eyes meet. "I have to go," he grits out before hanging up the phone and looking down at his watch. "You're early and how did you get here?"

“Do you want me to answer that question?”

He sighs and rests his forearms on the counter before looking up at me. “You told me you and Kate wouldn’t ditch anymore.”

“It’s the first time I’ve been to school in a month and it’s my last week of high school, I think you can let this slide.”

He presses a hand to his forehead. “How much did you hear?”

“Not much. Why are you talking to Micah?”

“He called the school. I guess he didn’t realize I was the principal, but Vice Principal Finch called me. I was furious. I am furious.” He growls as he slams his hand down on the island in the middle of our modern kitchen. “You don’t have to talk to him. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. And if you *do* want to, you can make him wait. He’s made you wait all this time.” He grumbles that last part and I hear the resentment in his voice.

He wanted to talk to me that desperately? Why now? “I...I don’t know.”

“That’s okay too. I don’t want him bullying you into talking to him. This needs to be on your terms. He’s said what he needed to say; he can wait for you to respond. Him calling the school and sniffing around is just showing how selfish he’s always been.” He lets out a sigh. “It’s why I was such a jerk this morning. I’d heard he called and I was worried he’d call again while you were there or worse show up. I just don’t trust him, Stassi, I’m sorry because I know he’s your father but—”

I’d seen this scenario play out before in books and TV shows and movies when a child finds out they’re adopted and feels this strong need to meet their birth parents. The adopted parents sometimes feel as if they’re not needed or that the child will somehow forget everything they’ve done for them. I can hear it in his voice and a part of me is glad that he wasn’t angry this morning because of anything I’d done.

“I wouldn’t consider him my father, Dominic.” I drop my purse to the table and slide into one of the chairs. “I mean biologically, obviously. But there’s so much more to being a father than conception. I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate you or the fact that you stepped into that role when no one else wanted to.”

He moves through the kitchen. “Stassi, this isn’t about me.”

“No, but it’s about us. I still need you in my life, Dominic. I get that it’s weird without my mom here holding us together, but...”

“I already told you I would never turn my back on you.”

I nod at his words, happy that he’s spoken the affirmation I need to hear

again. “I’m not ready to talk to Micah. I don’t really know what he can say that he hasn’t already and I’m not ready to start the process of getting to know him while I’m dealing with...” I let out a breath as I nervously twist my ponytail around my finger. “Is it that bad that I can’t talk about it? That the only time I’ve cried was because of Micah’s ambush at the funeral? What’s wrong with me?”

Warm hands wrap around mine and slowly pull my hands out of my hair to hold them between his as he drops to his knees in front of me. “There is nothing wrong with you, Stassi. I am sorry that I’ve been pushing you to see someone. Is that where this is coming from?”

“I don’t want to internalize my feelings but I don’t want to see a shrink...” I whisper, repeating his words back to him.

Shock crosses my face when he raises my hands to his lips and brushes them over both of my hands gently. “Look at me.”

I pull my gaze away from where our hands are joined and meet sad blue eyes that are highlighted by the water in them. “I don’t know what the right answer is here. I don’t know what you’re feeling in your heart, so I can’t tell you how to grieve. But I can assure you, that it happens differently for everyone and *nothing* is wrong with you.”

“A part of me is angry that she didn’t even give me the option to meet Micah. She didn’t tell me he wanted to meet me. I can understand if it wasn’t safe, *if* that story is even legitimate, but when I was fifteen and he reached out? Why not then?”

“I don’t know, Stass. I didn’t know anything about that, I swear to you. I’m sure she believed she was protecting you. You know she only did anything with your best interest in mind.”

“It feels wrong to be mad at her...I feel guilty. But I don’t know how else to process it.” *How can I be mad at her? And what good is it to be mad at someone that can’t respond to my anger?*

“Anger is easier than grief. A part of you may be angry at her for dying. That’s normal also. I feel that, often.”

“Really?”

He lets out a deep sigh and leans closer. I smell his rich oak and amber cologne that is inherently sexy. “When my first wife died, I spent so long being angry. At her. At myself. At the world. I hated her for leaving me and I hated myself for feeling that way. It was a vicious cycle, Stassi. With your mom, unfortunately, I’ve learned how to cope, having gone through this once

before. I let the stages of grief hit me in their own time and move through them as best I can. I don't try to change what my heart is saying. I don't try to convince myself that I'm not hurting or angry or upset. I think you're trying to deal with all of this in a way you *think* is right."

I lower my head, shameful for feeling the way I do when soft fingers find my cheek. His knuckles trail down my face and the same hand moves my hair behind my ear. Tingles are left in its wake and instinctively I bite my bottom lip. When I look up his eyes are soft and I see the smile in them as they trace my features. "I'm here for you, however you need me, Stassi." His voice is barely above a whisper and a part of me, *a very depraved part* wonders if he's speaking quietly on purpose. As if he's worried someone will hear him and take his words out of context. How else would I need him except for in a father figure type way? *Is he offering something else?*

Stop it, Stassi. We've talked about this.

I swallow hard, pushing the wicked thoughts back into that box labeled *Daddy issues*. It isn't often that the carnal thoughts about my stepfather float through my mind, but every once in a while they spring up, setting my insides on fire and the space between my legs slick with desire. I've forced those thoughts out of my head and replaced them with what I believed to be hate. I told myself that I don't like my stepfather. That he is overbearing and irritating, but really, he's just overprotective and the only reason he irritates me is because I can't have him.



"You swear you'll be safe and call me if you need me to come earlier?" Dominic says as I go to open the car door after he pulls into Carter's driveway. It's nearing nine p.m. and I was supposed to be at his house an hour ago to help *set up*, also known as makeout in his room before the rest of our friends arrived. I wasn't into the idea so I made up some shit about a headache which would also serve to get me out early. This is why I told Dominic the truth instead of saying I'd be at Kate's which would allow me to be out for the whole night. I'm not in the mood to go to some party where I'll

be thwarting the attempts of both Carter and Kate to get him into my pants all night. But I'd agreed to go and I'm nothing if not a woman of my word, so I convinced Dominic that it will be a lowkey party and I let him drive me there and pick me up so that he won't be worried.

"I swear, I'll be fine. I go to parties all the time."

The party looks far from lowkey and there's skepticism in Dominic's eyes, letting me know he's not buying what I sold him. "Stass..." He looks at me and surprisingly down my legs to my feet. I'm not dressed in any way scandalous; just a black tank dress that falls to just above my knees under a burgundy leather jacket with sandals instead of my usual Vans. I straightened my hair, something I haven't done in a while, and pulled the front of my hair up in a messy bun, while the rest falls around my shoulders. His eyes dart away from me to face front. "Just be careful, okay? You know I worry about you. I'm not completely oblivious as to what happens at these parties. You've just always been smart enough not to get wrapped up in that...at least I think."

"I know, Dominic, and I appreciate that you always look out for me." And much to my own surprise, I mean that. Usually, I'd be sarcastic or combative, but for the first time, I'm genuinely glad that I have someone like Dominic in my corner. I lean across the console and press my lips to his cheek on impulse. I'm going for just an innocent display of affection but it feels like anything but the second my lips touched his cheek. They tingle as my skin brushes against the stubble sitting along his hard jawline. His skin smells like he'd just washed his face before we left and the clean scent makes my insides practically melt. A part of me wants to taste that same skin, let my tongue dart out and feel the sharp bristles of his beard.

Shit.

I pull back quickly as if I've been burned, and the fiery redness in his cheeks makes me wonder if maybe I had. He's still facing the road, and I'm not sure what it means that he won't look at me, but I'm sure it's all in my head. "Thank you," I manage to get out, despite my racing heart and a slight shortness of breath. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice because he nods once without another word.

Beer and marijuana are the first things I smell when I walk through the front door. I look to the left to see the entire football team surrounding a long folding table littered with red solo cups as they play beer pong. A slew of girls surround them, tossing their hair and taking selfies, hoping that one of

the guys will notice them. My guess is they are hoping that *Carter* will notice them.

Why doesn't that thought bother me?

I spy Carter and note that he's busy; I pray that he stays that way for the majority of the night. I move down the hallway to the kitchen and see Kate sitting on the counter, swinging her legs as she drinks what looks like a pink lemonade. "Stassiiiiiii," she squeals as she hops off the counter and pushes through a crowd of people to get to me.

Definitely not just pink lemonade.

"About time you showed up!" She pushes the cup towards me and I shake my head vehemently.

"You know that is not my thing." She rolls her eyes and grabs the bong sitting on the counter and hands it to me along with her pink lighter.

"Oh, come on, we finished high school! We are done, baby! College here we come!" She bounces up and down which draws all the attention to her breasts that are barely contained in a bright red tank top. She hugs me tightly and kisses my cheek. "Have you seen Carter yet? He's been circling the door like a little puppy waiting for his owner to come home, I swear."

"He's on the beer pong table."

"Oh, let's go. He's going to freak when he sees you. You look hot!" She spins me in a circle and smacks my ass. "Your ass looks great in this dress. How did you get here?" She's talking at the speed of light and I know this means she's had more than enough to drink so I try to coax the full cup from her hands.

"Nuh uh!" she shrieks as she swats my hand away.

"Kate, you're drunk and it's only nine-thirty."

"So, what!? Brax and I are staying here tonight. You are too, right?" She takes a sip of her drink and I can see the mischief in her green eyes already.

"Actually..." I start.

"Wait, what? Stop. You're staying. Where does Dominic think you are?"

I sigh and take a hit of the bong knowing that I'll need to be high after I drop this bomb on Kate. "He dropped me off."

"Stassia Rae! Why didn't you tell him you were staying at my house?" she whines.

"Did you see how hot Carter looks tonight? I'm totally staying over." The sound of Marissa Jaxon's voice infiltrates the kitchen as her entourage follows behind her, hanging on her every word. Marissa is mainly popular

because people fear her due to having dirt on essentially everyone at Lakewood High School. Well, that and her father has more money than God and is in the running for Governor. She is essentially Regina George from *Mean Girls*. I don't pay her any mind because she mostly stays out of my way, but I can't escape the feeling that her comments are strictly for my benefit, especially because of the smirk sitting on her overly-glossed lips.

"Fuck off, Jaxon," Kate snarls. "You *wish* Carter paid you the time of day. Anyone with eyes can see he's practically tripping over his dick to be with Stassi."

I shrug nonchalantly. "Honestly, Marissa, you can have him. But let's not pretend that part of your obsession with him isn't that he wants *me* and not you." I cross the room so that I'm in front of her. "You want him? Take him. But the only reason you *can* is because *I* am not interested in being more than friends." I toss a lock over my shoulder and shoot her a wink. "Bye now." I sashay out of the kitchen with an eye roll to the heavens. I'm barely a few steps out of the kitchen before a hand is wrapping around my wrist and I'm being hauled against a hard familiar chest.

"Why didn't you tell me you were here?" Lips find my cheek and move down my neck and I already know I'm not nearly high enough to entertain this.

"Hey, Carter." I smile and push him off. "Do you have any weed? Kate doesn't have any and I just took a hit out of someone's bong that I don't know." I scrunch my nose. "You know I hate that."

"Yeah, of course, babe. Anything for you. Come on." He presses a light kiss to my lips and I follow him up the long stairwell to his bedroom. We are barely in his room before he has me pressed against the door and his lips moving down my throat as he locks the door behind us.

Great.

"You look like sex on legs in this dress. How are you this perfect?" His lips move lower and pepper kisses along my chest just as his fingers find my nipple and pinch slightly. "Fuck, I love this." Most of the guys know now about my snap decision to get a nipple ring while Kate and I were in Ocean City, thanks to her huge mouth, but Carter knew from the beginning and he'd spent a lot of time exploring it with his mouth and his hands.

"I know." I push him back again and move out of his grasp to lean against his desk in the corner of the room. I contemplated sitting on his bed, but I don't want to send any signals that we'd be spending any time on it.

“Where’s your bowl?”

He backs up a few steps and drops to his knees to grab something from under his bed. He retrieves a black box and pulls out his bowl and a small bag of weed. *Thank God.*

He packs it for me before handing it and the lighter to me. It takes two long hits but I start to feel a little better and less anxious than I’ve felt in a while.

“Can you sit? I’m not going to bite.”

I raise an eyebrow at him and raise my index finger to tap my chin. “You sure about that?”

“Not unless you want me to.” I don’t move and he sighs before lowering his head into his hands. “God, you make me work for it, don’t you?”

He’s not looking at me so I’m not sure how I should take his comment, but I assume he’s irritated that I don’t seem to be in the mood to *give it up* tonight. “Work for what, exactly?”

“You.”

Precisely. Carter is a good guy, so I’m surprised at the turn this is taking. Maybe he’s getting fed up with only being a *sort of* fuck buddy. *But how is that my problem? I haven’t led him on.* “I didn’t realize smoking me out was making you *work* for anything. I can ask Brax if it’s a problem, or any of the other guys on the team.” I don’t intend to come off bitchy, but I’m not about to let him think I owe him anything.

“They only would as a favor to me, because you’re my girl.” He points at me and then himself.

“Just because you labeled me that doesn’t mean I accept it.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Really, Carter? We’re not together. We mess around sometimes, yes. But I thought we both knew the deal. I’m not...yours.”

Irritation flares in his brown eyes and I note his jaw tick slightly. “Well, what if I want to change the terms?”

I’m starting to think that Carter and I are not going to get out of this room without some sort of mutual destruction, but maybe it’s time to get everything out in the open. “I don’t.”

“Why? Do you know what a power couple we’d make?”

“For what, the summer? As soon as you get to college, you’ll have your pick of women.”

“I don’t want that. I want you and you won’t be that far. We could see

each other every weekend. Come on Stassi, you know how I feel about you.”

“I thought...”

“Don’t lie to me,” he states. “You know I’ve had it bad for you since we started whatever this is. I’ve been patient, but...I want more.” He stands and takes a step towards me. I’m not afraid of him even if he does seem sort of drunk, but that doesn’t mean I want to be alone with him under these circumstances either.

I cross my arms over my chest and cock my head to the side. “Meaning you want to fuck me.”

“Why are you so fucking cynical? Maybe I want more than a fuck, Vale.”

“I can’t give you that. At least not now.” *Maybe not ever.*

“Don’t try to blame your fuckgirl ways on some dead Mommy issues, Stassia, because I call bullshit.”

Fury spikes in my veins and my stomach flips so hard I’m surprised I don’t throw up all over his white carpet. “Are you fucking kidding me? Carter, you’re an asshole. I don’t owe you any explanations as to why I don’t want to fuck you or be with you or anything in between.”

The blow to his ego is written all over his face and I know I’m in for a visceral response. “Where was this energy when your mouth was on my dick?”

I chuckle sarcastically. “I’m not having this argument with you and I’m really glad I saw this side of you before you and I went any further.” I shake my head. “We’re done.”

“Stassi...” He actually has the audacity to reach for my arm and when I turn around to look at him, I see the hurt in his eyes. *Too late.*

“No. Did you actually think you could guilt me or what, slut shame me into wanting to be with you? And ‘dead Mommy issues?’ Did you honestly say that to me?” I shake my head. “I’m so glad this happened because this made turning you down ten times easier.”

I storm out of his room and down the stairs and out the front door, thankfully without a lot of attention. I’m surprised I don’t feel much over this sort of break up with Carter, especially with how high I’m getting by the second. There’s a group of guys on the porch smoking and they all call different versions of my name as I make my way down the stairs.

“Vale, you bouncing already?” Brax calls out as he follows me into the driveway. He runs a hand through his shaggy blond hair before throwing his baseball hat back on. “You’re not staying? I think Carter was hoping you

would.”

“Carter has plenty to keep him entertained tonight.”

“Really? You didn’t strike me as the jealous type. He doesn’t have eyes for Marissa or any of those chicks.” He shakes his head as if he’s trying to convince me. *Like I don’t already know.*

“I’m not jealous, Brax. I actually want him to move on. I don’t want to be with him.”

“Oh,” he says, pulling the Coors Light beer can to his lips. “Well, that’s different.”

“I wasn’t trying to lead him on. I thought we were just hanging out.”

“I guess...he just thought different. You wear his jersey on game days and sit in his lap whenever you guys are in the same room. I know you guys hook up sometimes. That’s like the universal code of being together in high school, isn’t it?”

“Brax...things...changed, I guess. Call it a change in perspective that comes with losing a parent. I just want *more.*”

“That’s fair, I guess. I just wish you appreciated what a good guy Carter is and whatever happened that’s making you leave twenty minutes after you got here, I hope you know how much he cares about you.”

The sound of the door opening and someone calling Brax for beer pong interrupts his guilt trip. He nudges my shoulder. “Catch you later, Vale. Text Kate when you get home, I guess.”

I shake my head trying to ignore the thought that I’ll probably be one of the least liked girls at Lakewood after word gets around that I’d *jerked* Carter around or however he and his boys will see it. *Fuck it.*

Thank God high school is over

I pull out my phone and just as I’m about to pull up Dominic’s contact, a thought floats through my head. Before I can tell myself I’m not ready to open that door, I press the contact I saved in my phone a few days ago.

I hold my breath as the phone rings and just as I’m about to hang up, he answers and all of the air leaves my lungs.

“Hey, Micah.”

FIVE

Stassia

“Stassi? Wow, I’m surprised to hear from you, especially at ten o’clock at night.” I detect a touch of irritation underneath his shock, but I ignore the feeling that I’m bothering him because he’s been waiting for me to call. *Supposedly.*

I momentarily forgot how late it is *and* how high I am, not that I think he’ll be able to tell. “Yeah, uhhh I’m at a friend’s house and...”

“Good for you, Stassi. That’s great to hear. Getting out will do you some good,” he interrupts.

“Right. Well, I just wanted to see if you wanted to come to my graduation next Saturday.”

The silence on the other end is deafening. *Did I misread the situation? I thought he wanted a relationship?* “Or not, if you’re busy...”

“No no no! I mean, I’ll need to move some things around, but I should be able to make it.”

Busy guy. “Ummm okay, I can text you the details.” I bite my bottom lip already willing this conversation to be over and wishing I’d just called Dominic instead. *I should have just left it alone.*

“That sounds great. Send it over, but, Stassi, I do have to go. I was in the middle of a meeting with the west coast when you called.” *So, I am bothering him. Figures.*

“Oh okay.” The thought isn’t lost on me that he hasn’t asked me how I’m holding up or even how I am for that matter.

“It’s not a problem. I’m glad you called Stassi. Now go have fun with your friends. You’re young and you only live once.” His words sting more than anything I’ve heard tonight. This cavalier attitude towards me when I’m still grieving the loss of my mother makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

“Bye, Micah,” I mumble into the phone before hitting the end button and before he can respond. I’ve had three interactions with the opposite sex

tonight and all made me want to scream. *I can only hope this fourth one won't do the same*, I think as I press the familiar contact.

He answers on the first ring. "Stass? You okay? You've only been there like an hour." The concern in his voice warms me all over and I genuinely smile for the first time since I got to Carter's house. I don't realize I haven't said anything when he speaks again. "What's wrong, baby? Talk to me."

Baby? That's...new.

"Will you just...come get me?"

"I'm on my way."



"You haven't said anything since you got in the car; what's going on Stassi? Did someone mess with you at that party? Whose ass do I have to kick?" My head snaps towards him in shock, as I've never known him to inflict violence on anyone, let alone at a party with a bunch of his former students. He's smiling when I meet his gaze and I realize he's just trying to lighten the mood.

I let out a deep sigh and rest my head against the headrest as I prepare to give him a very watered down version of what happened. My guess is he may actually try to kick Carter's ass if he knew what really happened. *Or call his parents.*

"I didn't want to go in the first place. Kate thought it would be good for me, but I wasn't into it."

He nods as he pulls onto the freeway back towards our house. The night is dark, without a star in the sky and I can't wait to get home and crash. "But you're okay? No one messed with you?"

"No," I tell him, without missing a beat.

"I don't think you're being honest with me, but you'll let me know if you can't handle it?"

"Dominic, I don't need you to rescue me from a stupid high school boy."

"Ah, so there was someone." He points at me before putting his hand back on the steering wheel.

“I can handle it.” *And I can. I don’t need Dominic charging in on his white horse because a boy hurt my feelings.* Especially when I’m struggling with the thought that maybe I deserved some of his anger. *Had I led him on?*

“Of course, you can. You can handle anything life throws at you. Just know I’m in your corner if you need me.”

My nose flares like it does when I feel tears coming on but I swallow them down before I can feel that familiar prickle in my scalp. “Can we order pizza when we get home?”

He’s silent for a moment. “So, am I just supposed to pretend you aren’t under the influence of something?”

I freeze in my seat and look around the car, hoping there’s some sort of hint for how to answer his question. “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘ignorance is bliss?’”

“Stassia Rae.” His voice is stern but I can hear the humor in it.

“I smoke sometimes. Well, more than sometimes,” I confess.

“I know.”

I gasp. “You know? Did Mom know?”

He shakes his head. “Not that I know of.”

I’m shocked at his answer and even more shocked he didn’t ground me for the rest of my life. “How come you didn’t bust me?”

“I haven’t known for very long. Maybe a few months and then...your mom died, and I didn’t think it was fair to take away something that gave you some peace or relief. That’s probably really shitty parenting. I smoked a ton in college, so I figured even if I did get on you for it now, you’d be right back at it in a few months,” he explains as he pulls into the driveway. He turns the car off but makes no move to get out. “I’m navigating this new norm as best as I can so I’m sure I’ll make some mistakes without your mother’s guidance, but I hope you know I’ll always do right by you.”

“I know.”

“Okay, so pepperoni and green peppers?” he asks in response to my need for pizza.



Dominic went to bed after I got settled and my food arrived, but I, on the other hand, was wide awake and uncomfortably full after eating my weight in pizza. After spending far too much time scrolling through Instagram and watching my entire class get wasted at Carter's, I decided I was over it. Kate had texted that she would call me in the morning because she wanted to hear *my side* over what happened which means the Stassia Vale slander had already begun. I'm thinking most won't give a fuck, or at very least will agree with me that he was acting like a big baby with a bruised ego because I didn't want to be his girlfriend. But I'm sure his boys have been in his ear that I fucked him over.

It's nearing midnight when I settle on watching *Scream* for the hundredth time. I love scary movies. I love the flip in your stomach that comes with watching one. Of course, I've long lost that flip with this movie with how many times I've seen it. But that doesn't stop the hairs on the back of my neck from standing on end when something spooks me. I dart my head up off the couch and look behind me towards the kitchen area, but I don't see anything. I squint, to try and see into the darkness behind me before shaking my head.

I'm totally tripping from that weed. We have a top of the line alarm system and Dominic made sure every window and door is locked every night. I turn back to the TV and just when I've settled back under the blankets, I hear someone right behind me.

"BOO!"

I almost fall off the couch with how high I jump, and I scream so loud, I wouldn't be surprised if the neighbors show up to see if we're alright. I turn around to see Dominic doubled over in laughter.

"Are you kidding!?" I scream as I try to slow my racing heart by rubbing my chest.

"I'm sorry, Stassi, it was just *too* easy. You should have seen your face when you were peeking over the couch." He moves around the couch and drops to the space where I was just lying and props his leg up on the table in front of us. "Why are you watching a slasher movie by yourself at midnight?"

"I'm not scared, and I love this movie." I place my hands on my hips.

He narrows his eyes and points at me. "You're scared."

"Yeah, I'm scared of you sneaking up on me! Who wouldn't be?"

"Aww," he pulls me to sit next to him and pinches my cheek. "Poor baby."

I push away from him despite the fact that he's warm and comforting and I wouldn't mind cuddling up against him. "Not funny."

"It was a little funny," he chuckles as he puts his thumb and index finger together.

"No."

"Just a little?"

I roll my eyes at his playfulness when a thought hits me that he may be under the influence of something as well. "Have you been drinking?"

"Nope, I figured I'd take a page out of one of your books tonight."

"You...smoked?" My eyes are wide in shock that my straight-laced stepfather smoked weed. "Without *me*?"



Twenty minutes later, Dominic and I are in his bedroom, sitting on his bed passing a joint back and forth. It only took one look and me batting my eyelashes a few times for Dominic to relent to taking a few hits with me. "Where'd you get this?"

"I'm forty-one, I know where to find weed, Stass."

"Well, excuse me," I snap my fingers and pull the joint to my lips again. "I'm shocked you can roll a joint too."

He pulls the joint from my fingers and holds it away from me. "Can we cool it with the insults? This is grade A weed I'm sharing with you."

"Whatever!" I chuckle as I reach for it. "Gimme."

"Say please."

"Please, Daddy." I put my hands together under my chin like I'm praying and give him my most innocent smile.

The look that flashes through his eyes, however, is far from innocent, but it's gone as quickly as it appears. He takes another hit and hands it back to me. We do this a few more times and before I know it, I'm lying on his pillow. "That is really good." I let my eyes flutter closed. "I am high as fuck."

"Shit, same." I feel the bed move and when I open my eyes, he's next to me staring at the ceiling.

“Is it hard?” I ask, my eyes still closed. “Getting over a spouse that dies? I mean like for the next relationship you’re in? It’s not like you had a nasty break up or hated each other. Life forced you apart. Well...I guess death to be more specific. It must be hard for the new woman you’re seeing? Competing with the memory of a dead woman who probably did no wrong?” I ramble, and when I open my eyes, he’s staring at me.

“Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering...”

“Honestly, Stassi, I don’t see myself getting serious again.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“But you’re so young.” *And kind and considerate and you have so much love to give.*

“Exactly. I’ve been married twice and they both died. I’m too young to feel like everyone I love, I lose.”

Shit, that’s deep. “Dominic, it’s not you. You know that, right? It’s sad and unfortunate but they were both in car accidents. One involving a drunk driver and one involving inclement weather. There’s nothing you could have done.”

“It doesn’t stop the words in my head telling me I could have done more. I *should* have done more.”

I prop myself up on one elbow. “You don’t believe that.”

“Stassi, a mind in mourning is complicated. There’s guilt, resentment, anger, relief, and that’s all before you’re fully awake in the morning. I can tell myself it’s not my fault but it doesn’t stop the pain in my heart every time I think about your mom or even...Tessa.”

My heart races hearing his first wife’s name but I don’t know why. Maybe because he didn’t talk about her much and I feel like I’m getting an inside look to this part of his life he’s kept away from me until now.

“I don’t know much about your first wife...”

“We dated in college, got married right after we graduated. Not much to tell.”

“I mean...did you love her...more than you loved my mom? Was it weird when you started dating my mom?” I hold my breath as I prepare for his answer.

He squeezes his eyes shut. “I don’t want to have this conversation, Stass.”

“Why? It’s not like she’ll ever know. I was just wondering.”

“I loved them both in different ways. With Tessa, everything was one hundred miles an hour. We were still partying hard every weekend. Staying up all night. Smoking. Drinking. We did this well into our thirties. Then I got tired, but she kept at it. It was hard to keep going to class to teach on Monday morning after I’d just come off a two day bender,” he explains.

“Sounds like you grew up and she didn’t.”

“I guess,” he sighs. “And then I met your mom and she was obviously so settled because she had you. But she was just so sure about everything. She’d just started interning at the hospital when we met. She was so positive and understanding. She was like a ray of sunshine in my darkest days. I was still so devastated over Tessa and she was just *there*. You were too young to notice but I swear she spent the first year of our relationship healing me.”

My mother in a nutshell: everyone came before her.

“Fuck, I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this.” He presses his hands to his face and scrubs his jaw. “I need to go to sleep.”

“Dominic, you can talk to me, you know. I am an adult.”

“That’s right,” he chuckles. “Eighteen. God, where does the time go?”

“No clue. It feels like just yesterday I was ten years old and I had the biggest crush on you.” My eyes, which were previously closed, fly open. *Shit*. “I mean before you met my mom.”

“Wait what?” He’s still on his back, but he moves to face me.

“Okay, don’t get all weird, but I had a crush on you when you moved here and started teaching at my elementary school, okay? Let’s not make it a thing. I was ten.”

He looks at me and then back at the ceiling. “I see.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. I rarely think about that. *Obviously*.” *Sell it better than that, Stassia*. He still doesn’t say anything and I turn over on my back and let out an indignant huff. “Stop being so weird,” I grumble.

“I’m just...high as hell, Stass.” I see the glazed look in his eyes; he’s fading fast underneath the strong weed. “Not being weird.”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re acting like this over me having a crush on you when I was *far* from legal. It’s not like...” I swallow, my tongue suddenly very dry and feeling super heavy in my mouth as I prepare to speak these particular words. “Like I have a crush on you *now* or something.” I roll my eyes like it’s the most absurd thing in the world. I say it as if even at this very moment, I don’t feel something slowly shifting inside of me. Something I thought I’d lain to rest the second my mother said ‘I do.’

I'd told myself I couldn't have a crush on my mother's husband.
And he was still my mother's husband.
Right?

SIX

DOMINIC

The feeling of someone pressed right up against me is the first thing I feel as I make my way out of unconsciousness. I'm vaguely aware of the sound of birds chirping outside of the window and the smell of coconut and lime that is oddly familiar. Still somewhat out of it, I reach for the smell, expecting to be hit with a wave of nostalgia as I submerge my face in my late wife's pillow. It's the conditioner she used and there were many mornings I submerged my face in her hair and took deep breaths. However, instead of a soft satin pillow, I find a warm body instead.

My eyes fly open as my mind catches up with my body and I realize that Stassia is pressed up against me sleeping soundly. I've been lying on my back and her back is pressed directly against my side, so it isn't super sexual but uncomfortable enough that she's here given that she'd never shared a bed with me before. *Ever*. She's still wearing her sweatpants and sweatshirt and I'm grateful she didn't shed any clothes during the night.

I sit up slightly, trying my best not to wake her and slip out of bed unnoticed. *Thank God, Stassi sleeps like the dead*. After I relieve myself and brush my teeth, I head down the stairs to make us some breakfast, disallowing my brain to unpack the fact that my dick was semi-hard when I woke up. I know that it's a completely normal thing for men and it probably has nothing to do with the fact that Stassi was in bed with me.

Probably.

The thought I've been ignoring makes me groan as I pull the bacon out of the fridge. I turn on the Keurig and start preparing the cup when my phone rings. It's only eight a.m., so I can already guess who it is, probably coming in from his morning swim.

"Why do you insist on calling me at eight in the morning? You're lucky I was already up." I roll my eyes at my younger brother Seth. He's eight years younger than me but acts more like he's twenty years younger than me. He's

still single, no kids, and if I can recall, he's never had a serious relationship. A slew of one night stands, yes, but I can't remember the last time he entertained a woman for longer than a few weeks. Swimming has been his life from a young age and he even almost made it to the Olympics, but another guy from Maryland kind of had the lock on that the year he was close. He never let it sway his passion though, and I commend him for not being bitter about it. He still swims every day, sometimes more than once depending on his schedule.

Stanford University is the best division one swimming college in the country, and they essentially broke down our door his junior year to get to him. He went and received an Ivy League education for free. Once swimming on the professional level didn't pan out, he'd gotten a job at a recruiting firm and has been there since, climbing his way up the ranks to senior vice president. He now lives in Florida because "fuck that Maryland weather."

"Some people have to work on Saturdays, dickhead, and I wanted to check on my big brother. Shit."

I can't ignore the smile that finds my face at my well-meaning little brother. I have one brother and one sister and I'm close with both, but only my brother dropped everything when Angela died. My sister, Elle, was in med school at Princeton and under a rigorous schedule, so she couldn't make it. She swore she'd come visit this summer, but she's as flakey as she is busy, so I'm not counting on it.

"I'm good," I tell him.

"You sure?" I can hear the concern in his voice. "You don't sound good."

"I've been up twenty minutes. Sorry I haven't already swum eight miles and had breakfast," I joke.

"You can't hoot with the owls and sing with the birds I guess," he retorts and I give him the middle finger in my brain at his jab that I was always the night owl, while he was getting up at four in the morning to hit the pool by the time he was thirteen.

"You're working today?" I change the subject.

"Yep, we're rolling out this new software on Monday, so I have to make sure the education team is prepared. I'm hoping to be out in a few hours though. This girl I'm seeing is having some birthday shit tonight at this bar."

"When you say 'seeing' you mean...?" I ask for clarification, hoping he means he's trying to settle down.

"I mean she does this thing with her tongue where—"

“Enough, I don’t need to hear it.”

“You should be hearing it man, it’s been two months. How’s your dick holding up?”

“Fine, thank you,” I grumble as I take a sip of my coffee and walk towards the front door to step outside. The last thing I want is for Stassia to overhear any part of this conversation.

“Have you...”

“No! Seth, not every man thinks with his dick. My wife’s been dead two months; it took me a full year to sleep with someone after Tessa.”

“Times are different, man. When T died, you didn’t have the kind of access to women that you do now. Get with it, join an app and you can have a woman at your door in thirty minutes if you play your cards right.” He pauses. “Well, words. You know what I mean.”

“You’re almost thirty-five, aren’t you ready to grow up yet?”

“Excuse the fuck out of you, old man. I’m almost thirty-four, and don’t turn down your nose at me because you don’t know how to pick up women. Didn’t both Tessa and Angela have to make the first move, you pussy?”

“No,” I bark. *Well...maybe Angela because, again, I was still mourning my first wife. Fucker.*

“Uh, yes. Tessa was like your lab partner or you tutored her or some shit. Anyway, didn’t she plant a kiss on you out of nowhere?”

I smile at the memory. “Why do you remember that?”

“Because you talked about her that summer the whole. fucking. time.” I’m silent and he chuckles in response. “Exactly. Now listen, I am about to go into a meeting but I was thinking, I could come visit soon? I know I didn’t get to stick around much after the funeral and I feel like shit over it.”

“Don’t. I appreciate that *you* came at all,” I say, but I can hear the resentment in my voice implied toward my sister.

“Give Elle a break, Dom. She’s stressed the fuck out.”

“And I’m not? My wife died *again*. I have to deal with not only my feelings this time around but a very sensitive adolescent who just lost her mom.”

“How is Stassia anyway?”

I take a seat on the top stairs. “I think she’s okay. One day at a time. She’s sleeping right now.”

“Wait, she’s staying...with you still?”

“Yes?” *Where else would she be?* “This is her home.”

“I just figured she’d go stay with Angela’s parents. She was practically attached to her grandmother after the funeral.”

“They live kind of far and she wanted to be close to her friends and school when she went back.”

“Interesting.”

I know my brother; for him to say something is ‘interesting’ means he has a whole bunch of thoughts on the subject. “What?”

“That you have an eighteen-year-old that’s basically a younger, hotter version of your late wife living with you.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I bite out, but I’m not sure if I’m defending Angela in that moment or irritated that he referred to my stepdaughter as ‘hot,’ but I feel my blood boiling.

“Oh, don’t even hand me that shit. Stassia is a smoke show and that is a fact.”

“I’m fucking warning you. She’s my stepdaughter.” I feel the anger welling up inside of me. Anger that isn’t only directed at my brother, but also at myself. We’d smoked last night and I’m just now remembering a little piece of information I hadn’t been privy to.

She had a crush on me when she was younger?

I hadn’t been angry at that fact. She was ten and I was sweet to her while I courted her mother. I suppose there’s some understanding to that.

No, I’m angry at myself for the thought that flashed through my stoned mind no more than a moment later.

Does she still have a crush on me? Does she feel anything for me now that she’s older? Has that crush developed into something else over the years?

“Actually, ex-stepdaughter if you want to get technical?”

“I have to go,” I tell him. I don’t have time to get hung up on ‘technicalities.’ Stassia is off limits. Indefinitely. And I hate myself for even having to voice that unwritten rule. It should have been a given. A line in the sand I shouldn’t even be getting close to crossing. “Don’t come here because now I have to worry about you pushing up on the very vulnerable young woman that lives here, and I won’t have it.”

“Relax, D. I wouldn’t do anything to Stassi, mostly out of fear for my life.” He chuckles. “I’m more concerned with you, big bro. Men do interesting, and at times questionable, things in times of grief.”

“You forget I know how this works.”

“You forget you slept with Elle’s best friend in a coat closet at Elle’s birthday party and subsequently ended their friendship.”

My hand clenches around my phone as I recall the drunken blow up that happened that night. My sister definitely overreacted and she was angrier at her friend than she was at me, but I never fully understood why Elle cut her off after that.

“Come on, let me come up. Maybe next month?”

“No.”

“Okay, think about it and get back to me. I gotta run,” he says before he’s gone. I let out a sigh as I walk back into the quiet house trying to ignore my brother’s words, and yet I’m unable to escape them. I decide to make Stassi a cup of coffee and take it upstairs mostly so I can wake her up and force her out of my bed so I can stop thinking about the fact that she’s there in the first place. I hear Seth’s words in my head and as much as I want to say he has no idea what he’s talking about, I hate that maybe he’s not completely clueless.

The sound of sniffles breaks me out of my thoughts just as I pass Stassi’s door and a fleeting feeling of disappointment ripples through me as I realize she’s not in my room, contradictory to how I felt just moments before.

I am losing my fucking mind.

“Stassi?” I knock lightly on her door. “You want some coffee?” The sound that moves through the door vibrates through me. *A sniffle.*

I don’t think twice before I’m moving through the door into her bedroom. She’s sitting on her bed, her body facing away from me as her tiny shoulders shake up and down. Her head is lowered and I see her hands covering her face. I set the coffee on her nightstand and move quickly towards her, my long legs eating the distance between us until I’m lowering myself slowly onto her bed. “Stassi?”

She doesn’t say anything at first, but then I hear her voice, choppy and broken and full of emotion. I can see the tears cascading down her cheeks rapidly before she wipes her face once. “Go...away...” She’d shed the sweatshirt and sweatpants she’d worn last night, leaving her only in a tiny t-shirt and a pair of shorts. She shifts away from me and hides her face and I feel as if someone is standing on my chest as I watch my sweet girl break down. I can still see her eyelashes that are wet with her tears, and I watch as one lone tear drips down her chin and into her lap. “Stassi, look at me, sweetheart.”

She shifts again slowly towards me and what I see knocks the rest of the

wind out of me. I let out a shaky breath as I see her brown eyes that are so bright that it stuns me. For a moment, I'm so captivated by the beautiful color of her eyes, I forget *why* they're that color. "Your eyes...they're so clear and bright. I've never seen them this color before." I press a hand to her cheek and rub a thumb under her eyes. "They're like honey."

"Sometimes..." Her bottom lip trembles and she traps it between her teeth, "...when I cry, they get lighter."

"Stassi," I whisper her name like it's a plea as I prepare to beg her to open up to me and not to shut me out. She needs me and I refuse to let her down. "Why didn't you come get me?"

"I...I didn't need to. It just hit me all at once." Her nose scrunches slightly highlighting the few freckles she has on the bridge. She purses her lips and the faint dimple she has on one side shows itself. I pull her into my arms on instinct. "I miss her," she mumbles into my shirt. "Fuck, I miss her so much." I rub her back in slow methodical circles, hugging her tighter each time she snuffles or hiccups. She continues to sob into my shirt and her tears feel like tiny knives stabbing my chest as I do my best to console her.

"I know, sweetheart. I know. So do I." Her wild curls are pulled into a bun on top of her head, made messier after our night of sleep, but a few of the tendrils framing her face tickle my chin. I pull away and push them back slowly before I press a kiss to her forehead. A short intake of breath falls from her lips and for a second, I regret what I've done, but I push my thoughts to the side because I'm just consoling her. *Nothing about that kiss felt intimate*, I tell myself. Even as I think the words though, I don't believe them.

"Why?" Her voice breaks again. "She was a good person. The best. Why her?"

Hearing this question destroys me because it's one I've asked a million times over the past two months. Having gone through this once before, I came to the conclusion a little quicker this time, but it's just as difficult nonetheless. The conclusion that life is hard and dark and sometimes it fucking *sucks*.

That sometimes living is harder than dying.

But Stassi is eighteen and I refuse to contribute to her having such a morose outlook on the world. She has so much life to live and I want her to thrive in spite of this tragedy. I want her to live for both herself and the woman that can't any longer. So, I say the most positive thing I can think of

in the moment.

“You know I’m not very religious, Stass, but your Mom would say because it was her time. Because God was ready for her.”

Her cheek is pressed against my chest as her sobs begin to quiet, but I don’t stop rubbing her back. “Do you really believe that? Or are you just bullshitting me?”

“Okay, here it is in my words. I don’t know why the universe decided it was her time, but from the beginning, we are taught that tomorrow isn’t promised, for *any* of us. You have to live, Stassi. Every day to the fullest. I want you to mourn, of course, because your heart will hurt for a while. You almost won’t feel like yourself. Death is hard. But...that’s *life*. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned is that it goes on. You will go on. And, sure, there will be fleeting moments where the feelings of missing her will overwhelm you, but those feelings will go just as quickly as they come. You’ll heal, Stassia. You’ll find strength in the people you love and the people that love you. You’ll find strength in your passions and your dreams. You can’t use this as an excuse to not be happy. To not, *live*.”

She pulls back slightly and looks up at me as fresh tears stream down her face. “Wow. That was really...powerful.”

“I know a thing or two about grief and I’ve got one hell of a therapist.” I give her a smile, that I know doesn’t reach my eyes and she returns it before moving back into my arms. “Thank you...for being here.” She wraps her arms around my back and squeezes me. “Don’t let go.” Her voice is quiet but it’s like she screamed the words with how much I feel them deep in my heart.

“Never,” I tell her. I continue to rub her back for a few minutes before she finally drops her arms, releasing me from her grip.

“Sorry,” she murmurs and I cock my head to the side as her face comes into view.

“For what exactly?”

“Getting all emotional.” I reach for her but she leans back slightly and wipes the tears that had fallen. I wish she’d let me do that. I don’t know why in this moment, the need to take care of her overwhelms me. Maybe because I’d never really seen her cry. She’s never been a crier, and the few times she had, she would retreat to her room and emerge later with a clear face like it had never happened.

“You don’t need to apologize for that.”

We’re both silent for a few minutes; when I look over at her I spot her

staring off into space and I realize I would do anything to get that painful look off of her face.

“So, what do you want for breakfast?”



The following Saturday is her graduation day and I can safely say I have never been prouder, especially since, as the Principal of Lakewood High, I get to be the one to hand her the diploma.

It's after the ceremony and I'm searching for her in a sea of burgundy gowns after being inundated with parents and teachers wanting to thank me for everything as well as apologize for my loss. I finally spot her across the grassy field talking and taking pictures with Kate and a few of her friends. She's still holding the flowers I gave her this morning that she insisted to bring with her. I'm happy I was able to put her in better spirits this morning after she broke down again over her mom not being here today.

She's been much more willing to show her feelings to me and has cried a few times over the past week. I just held her in my arms as I tried to heal her heart. Things have been shifting between us and neither of us are acknowledging it. I think we think if we don't acknowledge it, it doesn't exist.

I tap her shoulder and when she turns around, I'm disappointed that I can't see her eyes that are hidden behind her dark sunglasses. She straightened and then curled her hair to give it subtle waves instead of the curls I'd come to love. She's unzipped her gown revealing the strapless white dress underneath that makes her skin fucking glow. I wrap my arms around her and squeeze her. “You did it, baby.” She beams under my praise as her bottom lip finds its way between her teeth and she presses down, sinking her straight white teeth into the flesh.

Her arms find their way around me just like she's been doing every day and she squeezes back. “I couldn't have done it without you too, you know.”

I smile at her words because she and I both know her mother pushed her harder than anyone. And even though she slacked off some her senior year,

she worked her ass off the other three years.

“Take a picture!” Kate squeals before snatching Stassi’s phone and standing in front of us. I see Stassi’s grandparents in my periphery and I wave them over to join the picture, mostly so I don’t have all of these eyes staring at me and my stepdaughter turned...friend...take a picture together. The three of us stand around her, smiling from ear to ear as Kate takes a bunch of pictures of this perfect moment.

“Stassia.” A deep voice penetrates our happy moment, and when I look towards the source, the person I see makes me see red.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I snap and Kate’s eyes widen before a giggle leaves her lips. When I shoot a glare at her, her mouth snaps shut and she puts a hand over it.

He ignores me and continues to walk towards Stassia with a bouquet of white flowers that look to be three times bigger than the yellow—*which by the way is her favorite color*—roses I’d given her this morning.

He’s dressed in gray linen pants and a black polo shirt, and I spy a watch that cost probably more than three months of my salary sitting on his wrist. For a second, I can’t ignore the flare of jealousy that spikes that he’d be able to give her more than I could.

“Mi-Micah. You came?” Her words confuse me. *Had she invited him?*

“Of course, I told you I would.” He smiles as he hands her the roses. I chance a glance at my in-laws who look less than impressed and I’m grateful to my mother-in-law, Pamela, for speaking the words I want to.

“Baby, you invited him? I wish you’d told someone.” She looks at me in question and I shake my head, alerting her I had no idea.

“I’m her father—” Micah starts and my father-in-law, Dwight, interjects.

“I wish you’d stop saying that like it means something.”

“Papa...” Stassia starts and her grandmother pulls her into a hug and away from Micah.

“She’s eighteen,” Micah states like all of us aren’t more than aware of her age.

“I don’t care if she’s one hundred and eighteen,” my mother-in-law snaps. “I’ll protect her as long as I’m alive from someone like you. Someone that will hurt her just like he hurt my baby.”

“I’ve explained what happened with Angela, and I hardly believe this is the place for this conversation.” He looks at Stassia’s friends who are no more than a few yards away pretending to look busy so that we don’t know

they're eavesdropping. "Stassia asked me to be here, and so I am."

Stassi seems uncomfortable and when she looks up at me, she looks almost like she feels guilty, though I can't understand why.

"I...thank you for coming, Micah." She nods and smells the flowers that look bigger than her. She looks at her grandparents and then at me, and to my shock, Kate's voice infiltrates again. "Stassi, some of the other cheerleaders want pics. Let's go!" Kate grabs her arm and pulls her out of the tense group of adults and I watch Kate wrap an arm around her neck and squeeze her as they walk away.

That's a good friend if I ever saw it.

"You should go," I speak up.

"What, are you jealous or something? What is your issue with me?"

"That you hurt the woman I love and you're going to do the same to her daughter. Angela left me with a responsibility I am not going to take it lightly." I take a step towards him and Micah takes one as well.

"She's not yours."

"The hell she's *not*," I growl back. "She doesn't need you, Micah."

"And what, she needs you? A pathetic widower that's trying to hang onto the memory of her mother through her? She's not Angela." He yanks his sunglasses from his face and points a finger towards me. "Maybe *you* should go. Since you're the only one here not related to her by blood."

"That doesn't mean anything," Pamela states. "He's her guardian. Something that Angela and Stassia both stated. Angela died while Stassia was still a minor. While she's eighteen now, Dominic has been more of a father to her than anyone, he deserves to be here. *You do not*," she barks. "If she wants you here, fine, but I'll be damned if I let you stand here and insult the man that was here when *you* weren't. Sit your ass down and be quiet or don't come around."

"Did you honestly expect we'd welcome you with open arms given everything we know about you?" I ask. "Do you honestly think Stassia, who's a very intelligent woman would just let you assume that *dad* role? It's not that simple. That title is *earned*. She doesn't trust you and neither do we."

Stassi rejoins us and I'm pleased to note that she stands next to me. "I didn't mean to cause such a thing." She lowers her face sadly and shakes her head. "This is my graduation day; this should be about me."

"It is, honey," Pam speaks up.

"No, it's about my birth father, who I called while I was under the

influence mind you, and didn't even expect to come." She looks at Micah. "You said you were busy and then I didn't hear from you."

"I said I would move some things around and that I would be there. I never said busy, Stass."

"Already in the running for that father of the year title, I see." I shoot daggers at Micah, hating that he even insinuated to Stassi that he wouldn't be able to make the most important day of her life thus far.

"I really threaten your sweet little place in her life, don't I?" Micah growls and Stassi takes a step forward.

"You can't. No one can replace Dominic in my life. That's what it seems you aren't getting. I don't need a father. I thought you wanted a shot at being in my life. I thought we could be friends at first, and maybe one day, years down the road, we could talk about a more familial place in my life. But the spot of father is spoken for." Stassi is visibly shaking at this point so I pull her back into a hug.

Micah runs his hands down his pants and shakes his head. "Congratulations again, Stassia." Without another word, he turns on his heel and walks away.

Her head moves off of my chest and watches him walk away with a devastated look on her face. "Well, it's not the first time he's walked away from me."

SEVEN

Stassia

“So, I was thinking about heading to Charleston this weekend. Go to the house? We’ve been cooped up in here since the start of summer and I think we both deserve to have some fun.” Dominic decided years ago that he wanted us to have a beach house, a place we could go every summer and unwind. Somewhere not too far, but far enough that it was truly a vacation when we made it down there. I stopped going two years ago because I cared less about the quiet beach and more about throwing a party since my parents would be out of town.

“You want me to come with you?” I look up from my Kindle. It’s the third book I’ve read this week, but seven years late, I finally decided to see what all the fuss was about Christian Grey. Three books and three sleepless nights later, I’ve come to the conclusion that I’d definitely let him take me for a spin in the red room of pain. *Marriage, though? Eh, pass.*

“Yes, Stassia I do. I don’t want you alone in the house.”

He can’t be serious. I sit up and stare at Dominic from across the room. “Now you don’t trust me? You know I’ve been throwing parties while you’re gone for a while now. Now that I’m eighteen, suddenly I need a babysitter?” I’ll admit my tone has a bit of sass, especially when we’d been doing so well...at least until my graduation when Micah showed up. I wasn’t expecting Dominic’s reaction. I especially didn’t expect him to react so coldly towards *me*. He’s barely spoken to me all week, only to ask if I’m hungry and to let me know when he’s leaving the house. It’s strange considering everything that happened prior to my graduation. *It couldn’t be that he thought I wanted Micah to take his place in my life? Right? I mean I made that clear that day.*

A sigh comes from deep in his chest, letting me know that his irritation is building. “It’s not about that. Quite frankly, if I knew that’s what you were doing, I’d be glad to leave you. But you’re not yourself. You haven’t been

out since graduation. You don't even see Kate."

"I'm sorry, my mother died. Forgive me for not jumping to go to the mall and cruise for guys." I scoff and move off the couch with every intention of leaving the room, but he grabs me by my forearm, stopping me in my tracks. His grip is firm but not painful, and I'm amazed at how his large hand completely wraps around my arm. I look up from his grip into his blue eyes that don't look angry despite my asshole comment.

"I wasn't saying that, Stassia." He shakes his head and loosens his grip on my arm. "I'm just saying, I don't want to leave you here alone...and I don't necessarily want to be alone down there either. I was thinking maybe you could bring Kate? Or a few of your friends? I'll stay out of your way, I promise." I'm used to the Dominic that consistently goes round for round with me. A man that is equally stubborn and combative and always has to have the last word. I'm not used to this man that is practically walking on eggshells around me. That doesn't completely bulldoze over me when I don't want to do what he wants.

I mean it might be nice to get out of the house. What am I doing here that I can't do in South Carolina? "Can I think about it? I'll...talk to Kate."

"Of course." He finally lets me go, with a nod. "You let me know."



I stifle a yawn before taking a long sip of my coffee. I could barely keep my eyes open because Dominic wanted to get on the road at the obscene hour of three a.m. and it is now two fifty-five a.m. I practically begged to fly instead of making the eight-hour trek, but Dominic said the drive would do us good. I'm already dreading the drive, especially since Kate managed to get herself grounded two days ago for sneaking her boyfriend into the house and letting him stay overnight in her room. Dominic even got involved, asking her parents if maybe they could let it slide and ground her when we got back. He argued that it had been a hard year for me and I'd like my best friend around. Kate's mother is a close relative of the anti-Christ, so naturally, she said *absolutely not* before hanging up on Dominic.

So, now it's just me and Dominic, which is fine. I don't feel like having to entertain anyone anyway. Kate was the only person that would have been fine with a chill weekend. Any of my other friends would be rallying to get me drunk or trying to find guys to party with. I just want to be still. Lie on the beach, read a few books, maybe eat my weight in seafood. There is this hole in the wall taco bar just on the edge of the city that has these spicy shrimp tacos that can change a person's life. I'm also hoping that things can go back to the way they were between Dominic and me. A time when we were truly getting along and leaning on each other for the support we both need.

"I'm sorry it'll just be us," he says as he loads my suitcase into the car and I climb into the front seat, along with a blanket and a pillow.

"It's fine, just don't expect me to keep you company on this drive until at least seven a.m.," I joke.

"That's fair. Your mom used to sleep the first few hours too," he chuckles and his words are like a shot straight to my chest. I swallow, not wanting to start the day like this. My eyes immediately find my feet and the fresh white polish on my toes. *Focus on something else, Stass. Literally anything else.* As if he can hear my thoughts, I hear him break through the emotions swimming in my head.

"It's okay to talk about her, Stassi." He clears his throat. "It's the only way we are going to survive this...so we don't get swallowed up by the grief."

"What's there to say that hasn't already been said? I need to move on."

He nods and I turn away as devastation covers his features. "Unfortunately, Stass, this isn't something that you'll be able to move on from easily." I look up, wondering where this morose piece of wisdom is coming from when our eyes lock. "The pain will lessen, but it'll never completely go away. Losing a parent...a parent you were close to at that, changes you. You'll feel their absence in every move you make for *years*. You can't ignore or avoid this grief, Stass. You have to learn to live with it. To cope."

"Fine, I'll cope. Can we go now?" I rest my head against the pillow that I've propped against the door. "Let me know when you stop for coffee."

The hum of the engine starts a few moments later, followed by what I assume is a playlist he made for the trip. I can expect a healthy list of everything from Johnny Cash to Cardi B. I don't think we're even out of my neighborhood before the first few notes of a Marvin Gaye song lulls me to

sleep.

The next time I open my eyes, the sun is blazing despite the cool air circulating the car. I grab my phone from where it's charging and note the time reads just after eight. I'm surprised I slept this long in this position, but I chalk it up to not having slept the night before. I look over at Dominic who looks surprisingly...*hot*. I wouldn't be surprised if my eyebrows touched my hairline with how wide my eyes are at the moment. He's wearing a baseball cap marked with his alma mater, backwards, allowing some of his onyx colored hair to peek out the bottom and the sides. Wayfarers cover his eyes and a smile tugs at his lips, assumedly due to the song playing as he's moving with the music. He must have stopped while I was sleeping because he's now wearing basketball shorts revealing strong, muscular legs thanks to living on the golf course during the summer. I rake my gaze up his body and the black v-neck t-shirt that seems to be even tighter than usual around his biceps.

Damn. He looks like a college student or grad student or whatever. He looked nothing at all like my stepfather, the man that wore a suit five days a week and business casual on the weekend.

"Have you been working out?" I blurt out.

"Look who's awake!" His voice is way too chipper for eight a.m. and I instantly regret not just going back to sleep. "Are you hungry? We can stop for coffee if you want. We are making excellent time. Should be there in about two and a half hours." He rambles and my eyes move to the console where I spy a Red Bull and a coffee, and an empty can in a bag at my feet.

I wince and lift the bag that also has an energy bar wrapper before tossing it to the back seat. "Maybe you should lay off the Red Bulls, speed demon."

"A lot on my mind; I guess it gave me a bit of a lead foot, but that's why I like to leave early." He smiles.

"What's on your mind?" I ask even though I know exactly what it is. What's been on his mind for the past two months and maybe what's been on his mind the last week. I nod in response and lower the visor to check my face but immediately regret it. I am in desperate need of some lotion and mascara and to fill in these brows. *Stat*. I rub a hand over my face and through my curls that thankfully feel pretty manageable. I pull them up into a bun on top of my head anyway and grab my sunglasses from my purse. "I wouldn't mind stopping to stretch and get some breakfast."

"Cracker Barrel okay with you?"

I scrunch my nose to showcase my slight disgust. "Do I have a choice?"

“Come on, don’t be such a snob; it’s the only place for breakfast that isn’t fast food for the next sixty miles. Unless you want...” He smirks and I put up a hand, stopping him from finishing his sentence.

“Don’t say it.”

“Waffle House.” He snickers and shoots me a smirk.

I cringe. “Didn’t I say not to say it?” I’ve been traumatized by that place ever since I got food poisoning five years ago. I spent the whole time in Charleston throwing up my entire soul and have vowed not to set foot in a Waffle House ever again.

He chuckles as we take the exit for Cracker Barrel and within minutes, we are pulling into the parking lot. I stretch my arms to the sky the second I get out of the car and bend over to touch my toes hoping to work out any kinks that may have formed in the five hours I was asleep. When I stand up, I notice Dominic staring at me.

“What?” I ask and look down at myself. “Do I need to change?” I’m wearing yoga leggings that I know highlight my ass and curves and a short-sleeved crop top but not one that reveals *that* much skin.

“No,” he shakes his head. “I was just...” He puts his hands on his hips. “Let’s go in.”

We head inside and are seated quickly given that it’s still pretty early and I’m grateful for the coffee already on the table. “Thank God.” I reach for the coffee pot when Dominic beats me to it and flips over my mug to pour me a cup. I raise an eyebrow at him. “You’re being awfully nice to me after you’ve basically ignored me for the past week. Are we reverting back to how things were before?”

He sets the pot down without pouring himself a cup and passes me the cream from his side of the table. “I’ve always been nice to you, Stassi.” He shrugs and opens his menu. “Maybe you didn’t see it that way, but at very least I’ve always treated you respectfully.” I can hear the sincerity in his voice and see it all over his face. He leans forward slightly and reaches his hand across the table, setting it on top of mine. He squeezes it gently and gives me a small smile. “I know we used to go back and forth and sometimes you may not understand where I was coming from, but I thought you knew that I always cared about you and wanted the best for you.”

“You were overbearing.”

He lets out a sigh and slides his hand back across the table. Somewhere deep inside I miss his warm hands encased around mine. I frown because the

feeling is foreign and confusing and I am not trying to deal with it before I've had coffee. "I was new to the parenting thing and you were...*are*...a handful. I was just trying to keep you safe and *alive*, Stass."

"Maybe you should have focused harder on Mom," I mumble and I'll admit it was below the belt but it just came out. I look up into sad blue orbs and instantly feel like the biggest bitch on the planet. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply it was your fault...it—"

"No, Stass. I understand, and if you need someone to blame, I'll be that person. I'll be whatever person you need me to be. I'm sorry I failed you *and* her. But I swear I'm going to keep you safe." I put my coffee cup to my lips and blow gently on the hot liquid as I stare at him with curious eyes. He's different, that much I'm certain. I can see it in his eyes, in his demeanor. But I can't figure out why. "As far as the past week..." He trails off and clears his throat. "I was a jerk to you and I'm sorry."

Now is the time to get all my questions out so we have a shot at actually enjoying this trip. "Was it about Micah?"

"Partly. I don't trust him and I didn't think he deserved to be there on such a big day for you. But it wasn't my call to make, and I'm sorry that I took my anger over that out on you."

I nod and lean forward on the table. "I don't like it when you're mad at me...at least not anymore." I bite my bottom lip and look out the window towards the parking lot, spotting Dominic's car. "I feel like things were changing between us the week before graduation. I felt like we were becoming friends...and I liked that. You shouldn't worry about Micah...I don't need him, Dominic. I need you."

"I know that, Stass. I guess I'm just protective over you and I was trying to think how your Mom would have handled everything and I felt like I let her down. I shouldn't have made such a scene and I'm sorry that I made you uncomfortable."

I hadn't imagined he was feeling guilty over how he reacted to him being there. That he felt embarrassed for getting in a low-key pissing match with my birth father. I hadn't been embarrassed. In fact, I went back and forth feeling bad that Dominic felt in any way threatened by Micah's presence and slightly turned on at how he chose to handle it.

Keep that to yourself, Stassi.

"And on a lighter note, yes," he grins from ear to ear as the waitress approaches our table, "I have been working out."



A few hours later, after passing miles of beach and crossing that familiar bridge that led to our beach house, we are pulling onto our property. I'll admit Dominic and my mom did good. The house is a gorgeous white three-story, highlighted by a balcony that wrapped around the middle floor with a pool and hot tub just behind the house. We were a stone's throw from the beach and there were many nights when I was younger that I fell asleep listening to the waves crashing onto the shore.

I hop out of the car, so ready to ditch these travel clothes, get into a bathing suit and take a nap under one of our umbrellas by the pool.

"Place looks better than I remembered."

"I had some additions done last year, and it's been a while since you've been here. Did you even come last year?"

"Doubt it," I tell him as I grab my suitcase from the back and start moving towards the gray stone steps that lead to the front door. I hear Dominic unpacking the car as I plop down on one of the lounges on the front porch. I take a deep breath, smelling the salt in the air, and feeling the warm wind on my skin. *This is just what I need. Some time away from everything.*

Although I had succumbed to tears a few times, it feels like I'm not coping. I barely have the energy to keep myself going from day to day. I focused on hour to hour and sometimes minute to minute. For the most part, I disallowed myself to dwell on the pain I'm feeling so I do everything I can think of to keep my mind off of it. Maybe this is the perfect place to really start healing. Without the helpful but very prying eyes of everyone around me. I lean my head back against the chair and let my eyes close as I wonder how different my life was a few months ago. A deep sigh leaves my chest and when my eyes flutter open, Dominic is standing over me. "Want to go in?"

"Definitely. I can't wait to get out of these clothes." I hear him trailing behind me and I'm instantly met with the sharp contrast of the freezing cold temperatures of the house. "Holy shit, it's cold in here!"

I hear chuckling behind me. "I had them cut on the air when they came to

clean the pool and hot tub, I guess they set it to arctic chill.” I’m bouncing on my heels as I watch Dominic move the thermostat a few degrees before he looks at me. “Let’s just get outside; it’s much warmer out there.”

“Seriously.” I don’t even bring my whole suitcase, I just rip into it for my bathing suit, my hat, my kindle, and some sunscreen. Within minutes, I’ve donned a yellow bikini that in no way shape or form would my mother let me wear anywhere but our private pool. The bottoms are a thong style that covers the space between my legs and not any part of my ass. The top covers everything, though just barely, held together by two strings that tie behind my neck.

I pull my hair from the confines of my bun and let it spill around my shoulders in a mass of curls and grab my sunglasses that had been previously on my head and put them back, pushing my mane back behind my ears. I grab the towel and sling it over my shoulder as I make my way down the stairs to hear him making something with a blender. I head into the kitchen which is the last stop before the deck and stare at him. “Whatcha making?”

“Daiquiris. Virgin of course.”

“Oh fun! Bring me one, pool boy!” I say with a snap of my fingers and skip out the door without another thought. I pull my chair underneath the umbrella so that I don’t completely roast on the first day. It’s only ten a.m. and the sun is already intense, which means by twelve, I’ll barely be able to stand it if I don’t pace myself. I slather my thirty SPF sunscreen on and put on my white floppy hat to deter the sun from beating down on my black hair. I dip my toe in the water and I’m pleased that it’s not freezing but feels like a perfect seventy degrees.

A cough behind me alerts me that Dominic is here and when I turn around, I note his gaze is about a foot lower than my eyes. For a moment, I feel like he’s ogling me, feasting his eyes on all my flesh on display. My eyes are hidden behind my sunglasses but his are very visible and I watch as he drinks me in for what feels like an eternity. Up my legs, my torso, over both breasts and finally he meets my eyes. “Your uh...daiquiri.”

I lick my lips and take a step forward to take it from his hand. “The water is perfect.”

“Good.” He shakes his head before taking a step back. “Don’t uh...wear that to the beach.”

“Seriously? But...it’s cute.”

“You’re barely covered up. It’s not appropriate.”

“I’m eighteen, Dominic. Relax.”

I see a flash of something in his eyes that I don’t really understand. It’s almost like he’s surprised or as if he’d forgotten my age. “Change if you go anywhere but this pool, I mean it, Stassia.” He’s moving up the stairs without another glance towards me before slamming the sliding glass door.

“Okay, grumpy, sheesh.” I set the drink down before taking a very healthy sip and moan as the strawberry flavors explode on my tongue. I swipe a finger through the whipped cream sitting on top and slide it between my lips before settling back in my chair. I take a peek behind me to make sure Dominic isn’t planning to come back because I know he’d act all weird and uncomfortable over what I’m about to do. I untie my top, not wanting the inevitable tan lines that would come with this suit before sliding my chair slightly out from underneath the umbrella. I lie on my stomach at first, just in case he comes back and open my kindle app to the latest book I’m reading.

I’m at the beginning of the book which is my favorite part. It’s when everything is heated looks and touches as the couple tries to hide the feelings bubbling below the surface. When the tension is so palpable you can almost feel the heat through the pages. The time just before the couple gives in to their desires with explosive, passionate lovemaking. A slow burn that is so delicious you can almost taste it. And my God, I can taste it.

EIGHT

Stassia

About an hour later, I realize Dominic hasn't come outside and I frown in confusion when he seemed all about getting some sun. I tie my top back together and grab my empty glass for a daiquiri refill before heading up the stairs. The kitchen is empty and I don't hear any noise on this floor, making me wonder if maybe he's decided to take a nap after the long drive and those Red Bulls finally wore off. I make my way through the quiet house and up the staircase and towards what used to be my mom and Dominic's room.

"Dominic?" I knock quietly and I don't hear anything. I knock again a little louder before pushing through the door. I let out a sigh of relief but also of concern when I don't see him. I realize then that the water is running in his bathroom and he must be in the shower. I turn around to exit his room when a noise catches my attention. It's a loud, low, throaty groan that makes every single one of my hairs stand on end. The goosebumps are almost painful as they appear all over my arms and legs and I can't escape the tingle between my legs that feels like someone has set a fire. It's as if I have no control over my body as it propels me forward closer to the noise that seems to be getting louder and louder.

I'm right against the door now, holding my breath, my body physically shaking in...fear? Arousal? Probably a mix of both. Some of his groans are guttural like a roar and some are low moans. Then there's his voice. His words are like a passionate plea that I can feel in the depths of my soul. Like he's begging for his climax.

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"Right there."

"Fuck."

"I can't...can't..."

Can't what? I wonder. I stand there for I don't know how long listening to my stepfather in this intimate carnal moment.

I rub my legs together trying to create some friction without literally sticking my hand down my bikini bottoms. As much as I want to, I can't. *I shouldn't*. My sex clenches in response, dying for some relief but I do my best to ignore it and focus on what's happening on the other side of the door.

My God this is hot. Hotter than the time I figured out what kind of pornography he watched. I'd borrowed his computer once when mine was being temperamental and I needed something printed. I couldn't look away from the first site that popped up when I started typing Google into the search bar. Something about *Good Girls*. In a moment of curiosity, I'd clicked and was fascinated by the older men and younger, *legal though just barely*, girls engaging in quite frankly some of the hottest sex I'd ever seen.

A loud slap breaks my thoughts and I jump slightly, thankful that no sound escapes my lips. I hear another groan and, "*Fuck, I am so sorry.*" I frown, wondering what he means by that. Why is he apologizing? *And to who?*

The sound of the water shutting off makes my eyes widen and as quickly and as quietly as I can I back out of the room.

I don't breathe again until I'm safely in the hallway. I sprint to my room and close the door and begin to pace back and forth wondering what in the hell I just did, invading his privacy, and more importantly, why the fuck I'm *still so horny*.

Maybe I should just get off and get it over with.

"No, I can't." I told myself that is a line I can't cross. I can't allow myself to touch myself thinking about my stepfather because I'm worried it would become my go to. It would become what I *need* to come and nothing would work the same. I've always been very careful to keep him out of my thoughts when my hand is between my legs and I can't start now.

Not while we're alone in the house.

Not while we're both vulnerable.

Not while he's lonely.

Not now that I'm *legal*.



I give myself about ten minutes before I head down the stairs and back to the pool. I'm surprised to see Dominic outside and reading a book with a fresh daiquiri on the table next to my chair.

"There you are, I was wondering where you went." It's not lost on me that he hasn't looked up from his book even as I approach him.

"Yeah...I...uhhh had to use the bathroom. I was going to see if you were hungry, but you were in the shower." *Why did I say that? Why?*

His eyes snap to mine, and surely enough, ghost down my body again. Even though he's wearing sunglasses, I see his head move slowly downwards and then upwards. "That swimsuit should be illegal," he says looking back to his book and a shiver runs through me despite the warm temperatures.

"Really, now?" I sit at the end of his pool chair, moving his feet that are stretched out to make room.

"Stassi, you're barely covered."

"Well, it's a good thing it's just *you* here." I raise an eyebrow at him and he doesn't respond. We just stare at each other and I feel the heat radiating from him that has nothing to do with the temperature. His bare muscular chest is glistening as he begins to sweat and I suddenly feel the urge to run my fingers through the light chest hair that clings to his skin. Everything about him screams raw masculinity and it makes my mouth dry.

He doesn't reply; he just stares at me, and in a moment of boldness, I get up while I know his eyes are still on me and give him a full show as strut towards my chair with my ass swaying back and forth with the yellow fabric snuggled between my cheeks. I hear a brief intake of air and when I sit down, I notice him staring at me out of my periphery. I grab the sunscreen and squeeze some into my hands before rubbing it slowly down my legs and over my arms. "Do you think you can get my back for me?" I toss him the sunscreen and he gets up and walks towards me.

"Stand up." His voice is gruff and low as he approaches me and stands behind me. I'm expecting his hands along my back but instead, I feel his fingers tracing down my side.

"When did you get this?" he asks and I realize he must be looking at the tattoo just above my rib cage.

"A few months ago..." I wince. I'd been so good about keeping it covered and wearing dresses and tops that covered it up, but this bathing suit exposes a lot of skin and leaves practically nothing to the imagination.

"You are enough," he whispers and rubs his fingers over the words.

“You’re more than enough. You’re everything, beautiful. Who’s made you feel like you weren’t?” *Beautiful*. I melt under his words as he begins to rub the sunscreen into my skin.

I swallow and shake my head grateful that he can’t see my face. “I...no one.”

“Bullshit. Tell me.” His voice is gruff and I briefly consider giving in. I consider telling him that I got it in response to the abandonment issues that have plagued me my whole life. Now that Micah has resurfaced, I hate that I have something so permanent on my skin reminding me that I’ve spent too much time longing for his presence. Especially now that I’m not even sure how I feel about his recent reappearance.

“I...not now.”

He spins me around to look at him. “Do you not trust me?”

“Of course, I do...I just...” I trail off, not wanting to have this conversation now. “Want to get in the pool!” I giggle as I pull out of his grasp and dive into the deep end of our pool. When I resurface, he’s staring down at me with a smile on his face before he pulls his sunglasses off and follows suit.

He pops up next to me and I watch in fascination as the water clings to him. His hair. His eyelashes. His chest. The water trickles down him in rivulets and I watch in fascination as it does. My feet don’t touch the bottom so I move towards a shallower area when I feel his hand around my wrist and he hauls me towards him, safely above the water. On instinct, I clamber around him and climb onto his back, wrapping my legs around his waist. I feel my sex opening up and my clit clenches in response to the fact that it’s pressed up against his back. I squeeze my legs around him tighter and wrap my arms around his neck. “Thanks for the ride.” I giggle as he moves slowly around the pool.

“I’ll admit it bothered me that you invited him,” he starts as he wades slowly in the six feet waters. “I thought maybe...you were trying to fill a void that I couldn’t fill.” I gasp and go to speak up when he continues. “I know it’s selfish because you deserve the opportunity if you want it. I just...I’m being stupid. I was jealous.” I move from his back so that I can face him and wrap my legs around his front. I pull back slightly and grab his face to make our eyes lock.

“Listen to me,” I start. His arms lock around my back and in this moment, I’m not thinking about how sexual our position is. I’m only concerned with

making him understand. “*No one*, not even the person responsible for half of my DNA, can take your place. You’re...” I turn my head to the side to avoid his deep penetrating gaze. He turns my chin slowly towards him so that I meet his eyes. He squints slightly due to the sun but I can still read the look in his crystal blue eyes almost perfectly. “You’re...*you*.”

He doesn’t say anything; he just continues to stare at me before he must realize the compromising position, we’re in. He clears his throat and backs us slowly into shallow waters before setting me on my feet. “Are you hungry? I was thinking maybe we can go into the city for dinner?”

Even though the moment has passed, I can still feel the heat on my skin from our close proximity. My back still feels his hands and my legs still feel the hardness of his body between them. *Fuck, I want to touch him again.* I want to run my hands over every hard, lean plane of his body. I want his arms wrapped around me again in protection. *In possession.*

“Stass?” I realize I’ve completely spaced out as he begins to get out of the pool. He turns his back to me pretty quickly but not before I can catch a glimpse of the hard-on he’s sporting beneath the red swim trunks. I can’t tear my gaze away from it and I find myself backing up slowly to catch it at a better angle as he makes his way to his chair. He grabs his towel and his empty glass and turns back towards me. I frown when I realize he must have hidden it in the waistband in that way men try to hide their erections.

I don’t even try to hide the pout that finds my face.

“What?” he asks and I shake my head, remembering his question.

“Sorry, ummm, food sounds great. Where are we going?”

“There’s this spot that your mother and I discovered last summer. It’s right on the water. I think you’ll really like it.”

I nod, as I try to ignore the weird feeling in my stomach brought on by Dominic mentioning my mother. *Why did that thought bother me so much?*



“Stassi, you ready?!” I hear from downstairs and a spike of panic shoots me as I am nowhere *near* ready. I just figured out what I’m going to wear; a

short, white, flowy tank dress that comes to just about mid thigh. It's a v-neck and I'm grateful that I don't have to wear a bra and that the material is thick enough to not expose my nipples or my nipple ring nor do I have any ridiculous tan lines from my swimsuit. I've pulled my curly hair, that is much curlier than usual due to the humidity, up into a high ponytail on the top of my head before letting a few strands fall to frame my face. However, none of that matters at the moment because I don't have a stitch of makeup on and I'm not going anywhere until I at least put on some mascara.

"Five minutes!" I open my door and scream down the stairs which is followed by an immediate chuckle.

"So that means fifteen?"

I stick my tongue out at him even though I know he can't see me before closing my bedroom door again and darting towards the bathroom. The room is all white because my mom always believed that all white sheets and comforters made you feel like you were at a hotel, so she decorated the house like we were at a swanky resort. I dart into my bathroom as I spritz some of my Dior perfume and pull out my mascara and a bit of bronzer to bring out the tan I got today. I finish the look with my favorite matte red lipstick before puckering my lips at the mirror. I throw on my wedges with silk straps that tie around my ankles before making my way out of my bedroom.

When I make it to the bottom, I spot Dominic sitting on the couch in the living room, looking as if he's lost in thought. I take a few steps closer, thinking that my presence will snap him out of it but he's still staring into space. "Dominic?" I touch his shoulder and he flinches before his eyes snap to mine and then slowly move down my body and up again meeting my eyes. His eyes feel like they're burning holes into my flesh and suddenly I'm hot even in this lightweight dress.

"Fuck." He utters the one word syllable so quietly I feel it more than I hear it. It's as if that word slithers up my body, dances up my legs and torso, and finally burrows into my brain.

I look down at myself, feeling emboldened under his praise. "I guess I look okay?"

He stands up, clearing his throat. "Beautiful, as always. Should we go?" He crosses the room to grab his keys, allowing me a good look at him. He's wearing a white button down, and gray slacks. Together we look like we planned our outfits to match and I secretly loved that people will assume we were together.

Like we were here for some sort of wedding festivities. Or our wedding.

I head out the door, him following close enough behind me to smell the cologne he always wears and suddenly I feel the need to have that smell ingrained in my skin.



“Hi! I’m Cassandra and I’ll be taking care of y’all tonight. Is this your first time dining with us?” A woman who looks to be about mid-thirties with brown hair and blue eyes that seem to stare at my stepfather a bit too long approaches our table after we’ve been seated. I’ve never felt what I can only assume to be some sort of territoriality over a guy before and the feeling is unnerving.

We take our seats after Dominic pulls out my chair for me and my stomach flips at the chivalrous gesture. Our table is outside in an area closest to the beach and the sounds of the waves and the smell of the salt in the air are serving as some weird aphrodisiac I can’t ignore.

“I’ve been here, but umm,” Dominic points at me, his eyes dancing down the V of my dress for the third time tonight. *At least the third time that I’ve noticed.* “She has not.” A smile pulls at my lips as he usually refers to me as his daughter when we are out together. But for some reason tonight, from the hostess to the maître-d and now this waitress, he had not.

“Lovely. Welcome back, sir, and we are pleased to have you joining us, ma’am.” She nods at me and I smile in response. “I’ll be back momentarily to grab your drink orders!”

“This place is nice.” The ambiance is chill but still somewhat sophisticated. Like a bohemian speakeasy complete with candles and low lighting causing an amber glow to bounce off of the beige walls that I can see from my seat due to the open-air seating.

Dominic leans back in his chair, stretching his lean legs under the table; one brushes against my leg and it’s as if he doesn’t seem to notice how much this innocent touch affects me. “I thought you’d like it. Do you know what you might like?”

“Everything looks great. I’m not sure.”

“Get whatever you want. Try it all. Whatever you don’t eat we can bring back. Or...do you want me to pick something out for you?”

The thought of him ordering for me seems so...*sexy*, and I can’t ignore the feeling that it is something he’s done for women he’s dated in the past.

Fuck. Like my mother. I squeeze my eyes together trying to put those thoughts out of my head.

What am I doing? I look down at my dress, wondering why in the world I’d chosen the tiniest and sexiest dress I owned to go out to dinner with my fucking stepfather.

“I’ll...I’ll be right back,” I say without answering his question and proceed towards the bathroom. I sensed some eyes on me as I proceeded through the restaurant earlier, but now without Dominic behind me, I feel completely on display. I spy nods of approval from men, and glares of annoyance from the women they’re with as I make my way to the bathroom. I’m used to attention from high school boys and the occasional man here and there, but it was never anything like this. I feel powerful and sexy. Maybe I’d feel more nervous under their eyes if I were here alone or under the influence, but being here with Dominic makes me feel safe.

“Excuse me, Miss.” I hear just as I begin to push my way into the bathroom. I turn my head and spot who I assume to be a waiter based on the clothes that matched all of the other waitstaff. He looks like he’s probably about my age or a little bit older, with sandy brown hair and chocolate brown eyes and a tan that could only be brought on by spending every day in the sun. “First, I have to ask...before I say anything. How old are you?”

A laugh escapes my lips at his carefulness not to hit on an underage girl. “I admire that, but don’t worry, I’m eighteen.”

He lets out a breath of relief and nods. “I just had to tell you; you are the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Stunning?

I’d expected hot or pretty or even beautiful. But stunning? Me?

I know the shock on my face matches my thoughts. “Oh, thank you.” I smile at him and I know my dimple must pop out because his eyes widen even further.

“And you’ve got dimples. Shit girl, I think I just fell in love.”

“Alright, Casanova, I’ve got to hit the lady’s room,” I say pointing to the door.

“Wait, what’s your name?”

“Stassia.”

He puts a hand over his heart and shuts his eyes. “And a name that suits you. I’m Trent,” he says as he holds his hand out for me. I give him mine, and shockingly he raises it to his lips and places a kiss to my knuckles. *That southern charm is real, huh?* “That guy you’re with...is that...?” he starts, but stops, assumedly waiting for me to fill in the blanks.

“He’s my...” I start to answer with the truth, but something—and I’m not sure what exactly—stops me. “We’re not together if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s what I was asking. You live here or are you just here for the weekend? Because I’d love to take you out? Or if you’re around tonight, my friends are throwing a party later?”

“Stassi?” My head snaps towards the voice and I spy Dominic moving towards me with what seems to be an annoyed look on his face.

“Hi.” I smile and, surprisingly, one does not find his face in return.

“I was getting worried; are you alright?” He looks at Trent and then back to me and I nod, trying my best to keep tensions low.

“Of course.”

He gives Trent the once over and then me again before nodding at me. “I see. I’ll just meet you back at the table then.” A guilty feeling rips through me and I don’t know why. *Is he...jealous?* He didn’t even pull a ‘she’s my stepdaughter, so you better watch yourself,’ or any kind of fatherly shit he’s said in the past.

“He’s kind of intense,” Trent says as he raises his pierced eyebrow. “You may not be together, but he surely wants you to be.”

“I...don’t think so.” I shake my head.

“Alright,” he chuckles. “Well, can I have your number? I’ll text you when I get off, and see where you are?”

“Ummm, sure.” I write my number on the pad he hands me before heading to the bathroom. As soon as I enter, the gravity of what just happened hits me hard. Was Trent, right? Did Dominic...want me? There was no denying what had been shifting between us in the last month, but did he really want to cross that line? Or merely...flirt with it?

I reapply some lipstick before I head back to the table. I spot a glass of water in front of my seat and Dominic staring down at his amber liquid pensively.

“Why the long face? Miss me that much?” I take my seat and give him a smile but he doesn’t return it.

“You like him?” His tone is even without even a hint of playfulness. It almost sounds accusatory, like he’s upset that his hypothesis might be correct.

“The waiter? Well, we exchanged about three sentences before Hurricane Dominic came in. What was that about anyway?”

“I just worry about you...” He lowers his voice and leans forward. “You should have seen every head that turned when you walked by. Watching you like...like you were their prey or something.”

“Well, you’d never let anything predatory happen to me, now would you?” I say with a wink. I pull the glass to my lips and take a long sip before licking the excess water from my lips.

Dominic shifts in his seat and I wonder if he really *is* affected by me. “He asked me if I wanted to go to this party later.” Dominic goes to respond but I hold my hand up. “I’ve seen enough movies that I won’t just go gallivanting off with a Charleston townie at night all alone. That’s how young tourist girls get roofied and date raped. Maybe if Kate were here.” I shrug. “Besides, I’m not going to leave you at home all by your lonesome. Clearly, you need me around.” I smile and for the first time, he smiles back.

“I do enjoy your company, Stassi.” He swallows and takes a long sip of his drink. “Probably far more than I should.”



The rest of dinner is less intense. We laugh and talk and even though his mysterious comment about enjoying my company still sits in the back of my mind, I try not to obsess over it. I try not to over think it and imagine that he wants to enjoy my company in other ways. He’s still nursing his whiskey, and curiously, I wonder what it tastes like. “Can I try your drink?”

His drink is halfway to his lips before he freezes with it mid-air. “You’re not twenty-one,” he responds.

“What are you a cop? Come on.”

“There could be a cop here,” he rebuts.

“No one is looking. One sip. They don’t know that I’m not of age.” I cock my head to the side in a way that’s gotten me my way in the past.

He sighs. “I’m going to the restroom. If you try it while I’m gone, I’m none the wiser.” He winks before getting up. I expect for him to retreat immediately but he presses his lips to my forehead first before heading towards the restrooms. My skin tingles from his kiss and I briefly wonder what it would be like to feel his lips on mine. I let out a breath before reaching my hand across the table. I look around the restaurant and surprisingly people seem to be minding their own business, though I do spy a few floating eyes. *Whatever*. I internally shrug before taking a long sip of his drink.

HOLY SHIT, is the first thought that enters my brain. *SPIT IT OUT*, is the second. I hold the liquid between my cheeks and suck it down slowly, letting it burn all the way down. I’d drained the glass, which wasn’t much, maybe a shot, and it tastes nothing like the fruity vodkas and rums I’ve had in the past. Even *those* I barely tolerated. I let out a breath before sucking down a large gulp of water, swishing the traces of the oaky flavors from my mouth. I shudder and scrunch my nose though I can’t help the warm feeling that is slowly flooding my veins and heating my insides.

“That was pure comedy,” Dominic says as he sits down and pulls the glass from in front of me. “I knew you’d hate it.”

“It’s so...strong.” I shake my head, my body shuddering again at the memory of the taste.

He chuckles. “It’s not for little girls, baby.”

I pout and furrow my eyebrows in indignation. “I am *not* a little girl.”

“No, Stassi. You certainly are not.” His voice is low and his eyes flare with a look I’ve never seen before.

“Can we go for a walk on the beach?” I ask. It’s still relatively early, and I’m not ready to go home quite yet. I think the whiskey is starting to kick in and I want to enjoy the effects after what was quite possibly the nastiest thing I’ve ever tasted. It’s only fair.

He looks around the restaurant and signals that we are ready for the check before turning back to me. “Whatever you want.”

NINE

DOMINIC

I'm playing with fire. Actually, fuck playing. I've taken up residence in hell and Satan has been whispering in my ear all night about how fucking sinful Stassia looks. How every move she makes is so innocent and yet so sexual that it makes me feel things I've never felt before. It's like she's become this whole new person and I'm struggling to see her as my stepdaughter and not this charming, unbelievably gorgeous young woman who is currently pressed up against my side as we sit on the beach. She's wiggling her toes in the sand and giggling that it tickles which makes me believe that the whiskey is kicking in.

"We may need to get you home. You're feeling good, aren't you?"

She looks up at me, those innocent brown eyes that are wild with wonder and intrigue disarm me the second our eyes lock. I'm grateful she looks back towards the water almost instantly, which allows me to get a hold of myself before I completely lose it.

"Warm and toasty." She rests her head on my shoulder before linking her arm through mine. "This is really nice. Thank you for dinner, Dominic."

"Of course."

"Can I ask you something?" I freeze, wondering what question that's potentially fueled by liquid courage could possibly fall from her lips.

"Mmmhmm?"

"How come you didn't mention to anyone that I was your stepdaughter?"

Fuck. I was hoping she hadn't noticed that. I usually make a point to say that she is my stepdaughter because sometimes people do mistake us for a couple when they can't quite pinpoint her age, but for some reason I hadn't. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't tell anyone...I mean I didn't tell Trent either, but...I guess I wondered why? Did you not want people to know?"

"No, Stass. Of course not. I didn't really notice, I hadn't." I pray she

believes me. I pray that the whiskey will convince her that I'm telling the truth because something tells me in her sober mind, she'd be able to see through the bullshit. She can sense the changes in us, just as well as I can.

"Oh." She slides her arm out from under mine but turns to face me. "I guess I just thought..." she clears her throat. "You're different, Dominic. We're different."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Dominic. I may have had a little bit to drink, that's making me a bit more...bold, but it hasn't made me stupid."

"I'd never say you were stupid," I tell her honestly. I'm not surprised that she's speaking up about the tension growing between us with each passing day. It's been bubbling to the surface and maybe this conversation is necessary before things escalate and get way out of hand.

"You're...different with me. You were this annoying, overprotective father figure type and now...I'm eighteen and it's like you're this whole different man that looks out for me." She bites her bottom lip and I swear she's doing it just to fuck with me.

"Stass..." I trail off, unsure of what I want to say that could potentially change our relationship forever. "I think it's in your head."

"I think you're lying. I think you're struggling with what you're feeling." She turns her head again and moves slightly closer. "Tell me I'm a liar." I swallow, not wanting to use such a harsh word that couldn't be further from the truth. "Tell me you feel nothing when you look at me."

I close my eyes slowly and look up towards the sky, praying for something, anything that would prevent me from having to answer this question. When nothing seems to intervene, I look back at the young woman whose eyes are imploring me to tell her the truth. Tell her what she wants to hear and more importantly what I'm dying to say. "I... can't tell you that."

"Can't...or won't?"

"Stassi..."

"I like that things are different." Her voice is airy and I can almost taste the whiskey on her breath due to our close proximity. I'm preparing to respond when her phone beeps alerting her that she's received a text message.

"Should you get that?" I ask her, praying for a distraction that will allow me to collect my thoughts.

"It's not important," she whispers.

"It might be. Maybe Kate or...your grandparents checking on you." I'm

grasping at straws as I list off the people she'd care about talking to.

A scowl finds her face as she turns to her phone and I happen to catch the generic number and frown when I see the message over her shoulder.

Unknown: Hey, it's Trent. Still up for some fun tonight?

A feeling of annoyance takes over and I'm pissed at myself for pushing her to open a message from that fuckboy.

She looks up, catching me as I stare at her screen and a smirk finds her face. "Should I answer?"

Tell her yes. Anything to get her mind off this conversation. "Only if you're telling him, no."

"Why does it bother you so much anyway?" she asks in such a way, I can tell she already has her own answer made up in her mind.

"You know why," I tell her.

"Because you worry about me." She rolls her eyes. "I don't think that's the only reason."

"Stassi..."

"I think you're jealous." *And there it is. The feeling I've been trying to avoid.*

"I am not jealous of some fucking kid, Stassi. Get a grip."

"You're jealous that...he's my age and *not* my stepfather."

Shit. Why the fuck is she so perceptive? "That's not it, Stassi."

"Fine, then I'll tell him I can't...but that I'd love to hang out tomorrow. Maybe he can come hang at the house, at our pool? Think he'll like my yellow swimsuit?"

She's goading me and she's doing a fucking good job. "Don't," I growl, as I grab her wrist preventing her from texting him back. "Tell him no and leave it at that."

"Why?"

"Because he's no good for you and you'll never see him again after this weekend. What's the point?"

"To have some fun? It's been hard for me; you know, and it's nice to feel wanted. Maybe some male attention could help cheer me up." She blinks her eyes several times, her eyelashes fanning out over her glowing skin with every blink.

I lean forward slowly. "You think you're so smart? Manipulating me? You're playing a dangerous game, Stassi."

"I know," she whispers. "I know this makes me crazy and maybe a little

fucked up, but...I won't tell if you won't." She leans forward. "We're here, where no one knows us. No one knows who we are to each other. We can be...whoever we want. Haven't you ever done anything bad, Dominic? Have you ever taken a walk on the wild side? Haven't you ever wanted something you know you shouldn't have? Or...someone?"

My heart feels like it could beat out of my chest at any moment. I'd be concerned I was having a heart attack if not for the fact that my left arm isn't tingling and my balls fucking *are*.

The strap of her dress falls to her shoulder and my eyes immediately find it, eyeing the exposed skin before turning my gaze back to her seductive eyes. "Dominic..."

"Stassia...please," I beg her. Crossing this line is dangerous. I want to, yes, but it's irresponsible and could have very damaging effects on her. *How could I think about fooling around with my stepdaughter? One that I've known since she was ten years old? One that I've treated like my own for the past seven years.*

"Just...one kiss." She looks up at me and I see the water building in her brown eyes; it feels like a stab to my already racing heart. I can't breathe. I feel like air isn't getting to my lungs and on top of that, I'm getting harder by the second in my slacks. She's this insanely gorgeous siren sitting in front of me begging me to kiss her.

Love her.

But what if she wants more?

"One kiss, Stassia." I give in, much to my own disappointment. I'm not drunk, but the whiskey flooding my veins is making me hornier than usual and all I want is to pull her into my lap and kiss her until the sun rises.

"Really?" Her eyes clear from the unshed tears and I nod.

"You know this changes...things."

"Things have already changed," she whispers back.

Her words knock the rest of the wind that I've been struggling to get into my lungs out of me and I stand up, to put some space between us and hopefully give myself some clarity.

"Wait!" she squeals as she stands up and grabs my hands. "I need to *feel* something. I feel so numb sometimes and I just...even if it's guilt or shame, it's better than feeling nothing." Her lip wobbles slightly. "Don't you think I'm pretty enough to kiss?"

You're fucking pretty enough to eat. The sinful thought crosses my mind

before I can keep it at bay and I ball my hands into fists at the rage building inside of me for lusting after Stassia so fucking aggressively.

“Stassi...” I back up and run a hand through my hair. “What you’re asking me...”

“Is *not* incest. We aren’t blood related and it’s just a kiss...”

“Something tells me you won’t just stop at a kiss.” *And once I kiss her, I’ll be powerless to stop anything she wants after.* “I think you are beautiful, Stassi. So fucking beautiful sometimes it hurts to look at you and know that you’re *you*. Someone I can’t *ever* fucking have.”

“Why not? Why can’t you have me...in the dark? We’re hundreds of miles from home where no one knows us.” I look into her imploring eyes and before I can put more space between us, she’s in my arms and that perfume she always wears surrounds me. “God, you smell so good.” I look down to find her pushing her nose into my shirt. Without her shoes, she’s significantly shorter than me but the perfect height to rub her delectable body against my growing cock.

“Baby...” I pull away to stop her rubbing.

“And *that!* You’ve never called me *baby* before, and now it’s that or *sweetheart*. You think I don’t notice? You think I don’t notice the way you eyed me in that swimsuit? Or in this dress tonight? The way you held me the night we smoked? You want so much more with me and it scares the shit out of you.”

“YOU THINK?” I scream and her eyes widen as she takes a step back. “Stassia, you’re my stepdaughter.”

“I’m eighteen!”

“What the fuck does that matter? I was married to your mother, and then sadly, so fucking sadly, she died. In what world does that mean I should just move on to her daughter?” I yell at her and I watch as she lowers her head almost shamefully.

“It’s not...you’re not cheating on her.” Her voice is quiet and like she’s trying to make me feel better for wanting her this way.

“It’s not the point, Stassi. It’s wrong.” I point at her.

“It’s a kiss.” She shrugs as if that one thing wouldn’t shatter the conventional lines of our relationship.

“It’s more than that and you know it,” I tell her. “It’s a slippery slope.”

“Because you want me...just like I want you.” I look over and see the look in her eyes that no longer seems to be fueled by alcohol. *She does want*

this.

“You don’t know what you want, Stassi. You think you want me because I take care of you but...it’s not how it works. You think you can use me to grieve.”

“I think we can help each other grieve.”

“By messing around? No.”

“By...leaning on each other and being what the other person needs.”

“And you need what? An orgasm?” I snap.

“I said a kiss.” She tells me raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you were that good of a kisser to give me an orgasm, unless of course, you’re about five steps ahead of me. And you’re thinking about kissing me...elsewhere.” She raises an eyebrow and crosses her arms in front of her chest, elevating her tits.

I almost choke at her innuendo. *Who is this woman? Sure, she’s fiery and sassy as fuck but I didn’t know she was this sexual creature who is talking about me kissing her pussy.*

Fuck, now I’m thinking about kissing her pussy. Sliding my tongue through her perfect folds...tasting her orgasm...

“I’m not having this conversation anymore, Stassia,” I tell her. “Grab your shoes and let’s go.” I glare at her as I turn my back to her.

“Wait you promised!”

“I didn’t promise shit.”

“You promised me a kiss.”

“Well, too bad,” I growl at her as I begin my way up the beach towards the mainland. I don’t hear her behind me and when I turn around, she’s still rooted in the same spot, staring down at her phone.

“Do not text that asshole, Stassi, I mean it!” I call out to her.

Her head snaps up and she stomps towards me until she’s close enough to not have to yell. She presents me her middle finger and tosses me her phone and I almost see red when I see the words on the screen.

Stassi: Where should I meet you?



“You’re being a brat,” I growl at her as we begin our drive back to our house. “I’m not taking you anywhere.”

“Fine, I’ll take the car.”

“The hell you will,” I snap. I grip my hands tightly around the steering wheel as I imagine all the places I can hide my car keys so she’ll never find them.

“Then I’ll have him come get me,” she retorts.

“No.” I know I’m behaving like a jealous caveman. I don’t care. I want her, and I can’t have her. So, by that logic, no one fucking can. Especially not some waiter who probably collects teenage girls here on vacation.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“Afraid that doesn’t work anymore, Daddy Dearest,” she sasses.

“If you want a prayer at getting your way, I suggest you stop calling me that.” I speak the words, but my cock wholeheartedly disagrees with the way it’s pulsing in my slacks. I can already feel the precum leaking into my briefs and I shift uncomfortably at the thought that I’m in this confined space with my stepdaughter getting harder by the second.

The movement must catch her attention because she looks towards me and then down at my lap. “Are you...hard?”

“Stassia Rae. Stop it.”

I notice she licks her lips in my periphery and I wish I could squeeze my eyes shut in this moment in attempts to calm myself down. I feel like I’m ready to combust, and Stassia is making it fucking worse. “I brought weed,” she tells me and I shake my head.

“No. I’m not smoking with you again.”

“Come on, didn’t you have fun?”

“Yes, but the way you’re acting...It’s not a good idea.”

“Why? Worried you might completely bypass the kiss to something else?”

“Stop talking,” I tell her. “No more talking for the rest of the way home.”

She crosses her arms and legs and a pout leaves her lips. “You’re being a real fucking prude, Callahan.”

“Whatever,” I tell her. I want to tell her I’m far from a prude and that in a different life, her dress would be up around her waist as my hand fingered her pretty clit until she came all over my seat, all while keeping us on the road. “Stassi,” I croak out and when her eyes snap to mine, I briefly meet hers

before I turn back to the road.

I grapple with the idea of telling her the truth. “What color are your panties?”

“Wh-what?”

“What color are they?”

“White...because obviously,” she says pointing down at herself and the white dress she’s wearing that makes her look almost ethereal.

“Are they lacy? A thong? Describe them,” I command her.

Her eyes widen. “Wait...what?”

“You poked the beast, baby. Now tell me.” I grit out and she smiles before biting her bottom lip. “All lace. Sheer at the crotch. A thin string between my ass cheeks.”

I drool at the thought. The thought of plucking that thin string, moving it to the side, and sliding my tongue between her ass and into that sacred hole. My mouth waters at the idea of kissing her through those sheer panties. “Do you have hair on your cunt, Stassi? Or are you bare?”

“Fuck.” She breathes out and stares at the road in front of us. “I’m bare...”

“Of course, you are,” I grumble. I hadn’t expected anything else from my walking sex of a stepdaughter.

Stepdaughter, you fucking perv.

I’m not touching her, I argue. We’re just talking.

We pull into our driveway and as soon as I shut off the car, she turns towards me. “When we go inside are, we...?”

“I want to talk,” I tell her.

“About...this?”

“Yes.” Her pupils dilate and I note that her thighs are pressed together. “Are you wet, Stassi?”

“Yes, wetter than I’ve ever been in my whole life.”

A growl leaves my throat and before I can think I’m out of the car and practically ripping Stassi from her seat. I’m pulling her but she’s keeping up just as well, practically sprinting to get into the house behind me. I open the door and slam it behind us before pressing her up against the door.

“You cannot tell a soul about anything that happens tonight.”

“Never,” she whispers.

“Whatever happens...stays between you and me, got it?”

“Yes.” Her eyes are wild with fire and sin and I have a feeling she’ll be

controlling this ride tonight.

“I’m not saying I’m going to fuck you,” I tell her honestly, “but I’m not saying I won’t do that either.”

“Fuck...me?” The innocent side of her must take over because the fire in her eyes subsides slightly.

“I think if you asked me, I would do just about anything you wanted at this point.”

“So...kiss me,” she commands, tilting her chin upwards and staring into my eyes. “Press your lips to mine and kiss me like you fucking mean it. Like I’m all that matters to you.”

“You are all that matters to me, Stassi.”

“Prove it.”

TEN

DOMINIC

Her chin lifts in defiance and a wicked look flares in her brown eyes as I lean down and brush my lips across hers. Her tongue darts out, my guess as an attempt to slip into my open mouth but I'm not ready for that so I take a step back. "You're not in control, Stassia."

She whimpers slightly and closes her mouth before nodding slowly. "Sorry. I'm just...anxious."

She's still pressed against the door as my arms box her in on either side. I slide them down slowly—down her slim tiny body before I find her hips. I grip them through her dress wishing I could lift it and put my hands on her bare skin. I take a step closer to her, pressing my body against hers and grip her chin harder than I intended, but the moan that slips from her lips lets me know she's fine with my mild aggression. I run my lips from her temple down her cheek and neck before moving to her chest to that delicious area of skin that has been calling out to me all night. I leave a wet open-mouthed kiss just at the base of her collarbone before lowering my mouth ever so slightly. My tongue darts out to taste her skin and I trace her bare skin delicately as she mewls beneath me.

"You wore this dress on purpose. To tease me." My nose is pressed against her skin, smelling her sweet perfume and my hands are still gripping her hips so tightly I won't be surprised if I'm leaving bruises through her dress. Her hands have found my biceps and she's squeezing them equally hard as she shifts back and forth between feet. "If I lift your dress up, will your panties be soaked?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes," she whimpers, assumedly as an answer to all of my questions. "Touch me and see for yourself."

"No," I growl. I may have my lips and hands all over her in this moment, but the idea of sliding my hand between her legs to see the desire I've caused her is too much. I pull her away from the door and lift her into my arms,

allowing her legs to wrap around my waist. “You are so fucking sexy.” I drop to the couch with her legs still around me and we fall into a rhythm like old lovers that have been doing this for years. My cock, hard and standing practically upright nestles between her legs, rubbing against her lace covered pussy and she moans in response to the stimulation. She moves up and down on me while her eyes bore into mine. “You’re so wet, beautiful. Tell me, it’s all for me?” I grip her butt, still careful not to go beneath her dress even though we are hurdling over lines with every passing second.

“Yes. Kiss me,” she whispers and I’ve just now realized, I’ve yet to kiss her despite the fact that we’re dry humping on this couch like teenagers.

I grip her face, making our eyes lock and the look on her face mixed with her wet cunt bouncing up and down on my cock makes me lose complete control. I grab her neck and squeeze gently, before slamming her mouth to mine, sliding my hand from the front of her neck to the back to keep her in place. I’ve yet to begin to explore her mouth; both of our mouths are closed at the moment but I know it’s only a matter of time before she opens and gives me a taste of that sweet tongue.

She pulls back and I don’t miss how red and swollen her lips are. *Fuck.* “Dominic,” she whispers before running her tongue over her bottom lip. “More,” she begs and I nod in response.

She presses her lips to mine and instantly I open my mouth. Her tongue darts in and I groan at the taste of her. She tastes like a hint of whiskey but mostly of her vanilla lip balm that she just applied in the car. *She has the softest lips I’ve ever kissed.* She continues to move back and forth against me, making me wish I could free my cock from the confines of my pants and the ache in it. Her hands move behind my head, pulling at the hair there and I let her neck go and move back to her ass to move her harder against me. Our tongues twist and turn with each other, exploring and tasting each other for the first time. She slinks back into her mouth and I follow her, making love to her sweet mouth the way I would to her pussy, if I ever have the chance. I cup her face to keep her in place as I continue to kiss her like I’ve never kissed another woman. Like I need her kiss more than I need oxygen. Like if I stop, I’ll die.

Fuck. I’m going to come soon.

The thought that I am about to have an orgasm by dry humping my stepdaughter fuels my hormones and makes me even harder and more desperate for my release. We kiss for I don’t know how long, my lips

exploring every inch of her face, neck, and chest as she finds the weak spot behind my ear and a spot on my neck. I can feel her sweet pussy leaking all over me and with every thrust, my cock glides easily over her making a mess between us. After what feels like hours of kissing, she pulls back. Her lips are swollen and wet with my saliva and her skin is slightly red from my beard. *My God, she's beautiful.*

"Dominic..." Her curly ponytail has gotten slightly wilder and more unkempt and I can't help but think she's the sexiest woman I've ever seen in my life.

"Stassi, you're the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen," I tell her honestly and her eyes widen before she looks away from me towards the door.

"Really?" Her eyes are full of shock and I can tell by the way the goosebumps appear all over her skin that she's pleased with my comment. "You think I'm gorgeous?"

"Fuck yes."

"Do you want..." She pauses and I run my hand up her back and into her hair. In the back of my mind, I know what she's about to ask. She wants to cross another line. She wants to go further than fucking with our clothes on. I want to tell her no. Tell her that we can't go further than we are right now. That even this is too far.

Instead, I probe her to ask her question.

"Do I want what? Tell me, baby."

"Do you want to see...more of me?" She nibbles on her bottom lip. My cock jolts in response and she must feel it because she gasps and smiles devilishly. "You do, don't you?"

No. Tell her no, you sick fuck. This is Angela's daughter. My subconscious is screaming at me and yet I can't bring myself to tell her no. Another part is screaming even louder and I can't ignore the pain not only in my cock but in my heart over telling her no.

As much as I want to continue this argument with myself, I know I need to answer Stassi and I know what she wants to hear; more importantly what I want to say.

"Yes," I tell her honestly. "But...not here. Not yet."

"Where and...when?" She lifts an eyebrow at me as if to say, *now is the perfect time.*

"I want to take my time, Stassi. One step at a time," I whisper. I'm

breaking about a thousand rules right now, and though parts of it feel right, I don't want to overwhelm myself or Stassi by going too fast.

"Okay." She lets out a breath and looks around the room. She's still seated on top of me and I wonder if she needs a break from the dizzying intimacy we've been engaged in. "In case it isn't obvious...I want more." Her lips part and a tiny gasp escapes her lips as she rubs herself against me.

"I don't know that it can go past this weekend; you know, that right?"

She nods but I see the sadness in her eyes over the thought. "Our secret."

I lift her chin and cock my head slowly to the side. "You're sure about this? The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you. But you're eighteen and you seem to be sure about what you want. You seem to be sure about taking this step with me."

"I want it, Dominic, *please*." She begs and cuddles against me rubbing her perfectly manicured hands over my chest. "I want you so bad I can't take it." She frowns and rolls her eyes.

"Why?" I ask her. If we were going to take this step, I want to know why all of a sudden she sees me differently. Why I'm no longer the man that drives her insane and who she drives equally insane. She's spent the last eight or so years arguing with me about everything and now she wants me sexually? I'm struggling to wrap my brain around it just as I'm struggling to rationalize the choices I'm making as her stepfather.

"I don't know, Dominic." She bites her bottom lip and hops up from my lap. She knows this is an important conversation and not one that she can have in my lap. "I know this is wrong."

"So, fucking wrong," I add.

"But these last few months I've seen how well you take care of me, how much you love me. How you've put your feelings aside to help *me* heal."

"But that doesn't mean..."

"No, I didn't say it did." She points at me and begins to pace the room slowly. "But you make me feel things I've never felt before." She stops and looks at me. "Safe, protected, loved...special...sexy..." She trails off. "You make me feel like a woman." She moves back towards me and lets one strap of her dress slide down her arm revealing her entire shoulder. "You make me feel like you want me as *your* woman."

I swallow at her words, hating that they affect me so much. *What is she doing to me?* "I'm not asking to date or for your hand in marriage, Dominic. I'm asking for one weekend and then we go back home and pretend none of

this happened.” She bites her bottom lip and lets out a deep breath. “I’m a virgin and I just...I want my first time to mean something.”

Her words knock the wind out of me. I wasn’t sure she was sexually active, but she’d always had boys sniffing around her so I just assumed that she’d lost her virginity somewhere along the way. It isn’t like we had an open dialogue. I just assumed her mother handled that. The idea that I would be the first inside of her makes a feeling of possession shoot through me like a bolt of lightning.

I get up and make my way towards her, prepared to give in to whatever she wants when the universe decides to step in, in what I can only assume is some kind of warning.

She looks away from me towards the jarring noise from inside of her purse alerting her of a phone call. “It’s probably Trent. Let me just silence my phone.” She walks across the room and I drink her in from her feet to her eyes, memorizing every part of her. I’m so mesmerized by this goddess in front of me that I don’t realize she answers the phone. “Micah?”

Micah? The fuck?

“It’s so late...?” Immediately, I move towards her prepared to snatch the phone from her hand. The movement must catch her attention because she looks up at me and holds a hand up to keep me from coming closer. “Oh, I’m in South Carolina...at the beach?”

“What do you mean with who? With Dominic,” she answers like it’s the most obvious answer in the world, but I noticed a bit of hesitation before she said she’s here with me.

She frowns and looks at me and I can read her look instantly. *Speakerphone. Now.* I mouth at her. She shakes her head and before I can think I’ve taken the phone from her hand and hit the button to place it on speaker.

“I don’t trust that guy, Stassi. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Rage flares in my veins and if it weren’t for Stassi grabbing my hand and running her fingertips up my arm, I would have ripped this asshole a new one. “I’m fine, Micah. Dominic is the most trustworthy man I know.” She looks up at me, her eyes bright and innocent and a feeling of guilt floods me. *Fuck.*

“He just seems very...intense about you. Like how a boyfriend would feel about his girlfriend.” *Fuck. I know I was a little over the top at graduation but I didn’t think it was that obvious. But maybe just to an*

outsider who didn't know us very well. I know Stassi's grandparents don't see it that way. At least, I fucking hope they don't.

"That's absurd, Micah. You don't know him or me for that matter and my mother, *his wife*, just died. He's just overprotective."

"I don't think that's it and I don't love the idea of you being alone with him on some fucking vacation, Stassi." *I'm fed the fuck up with this guy. He actually thinks he has any fucking say when it came to Stassi? Even if she wasn't eighteen and could make her own decisions. He's so delusional, I'd think it was comical if he didn't piss me off so much.*

"Well, it's a good thing that what you do or do not love doesn't make a difference to me. I'm eighteen and you don't exactly get a say just because you're jealous of his role in my life." She looks up at me and then down at the phone. "Micah, we can talk when I get back."

"Wait, Stassi," he pleads.

"Goodbye, Micah." She hangs up and immediately puts her phone on silent before tossing it back in her purse and turning back to me. "I'm sorry I answered."

I back away from her and I see the hurt written all over her face as if she knows what I'm about to say. "He's worried about you...in his own way."

She scoffs and takes a step towards me. "Are you joking?"

I shrug and move out of the living room and into the kitchen, suddenly needing a drink or something to calm my racing heart. "He doesn't trust me."

"He has no reason not to."

"Oh?" I pull off the top of the Macallan 18 bottle and pour myself a small glass before sitting it back on the counter. "I don't think dry humping my stepdaughter makes me very trustworthy. I'm sure he wouldn't be thrilled to hear what happened here tonight. He'd be about ready to kill me."

"Why do you care what he thinks?"

"I don't, but he's worried about you being here with me and he's spot on. I don't care about his opinion but I do care about your grandparents' opinions. Pam will kill me if she ever finds out."

"No one is going to find out. We said, our secret, remember?"

"But..." I start and she shakes her head and moves around the counter.

"No buts. No one is going to know. It's just you and me here." She slides her hand into my back pocket and squeezes slightly before hopping up on the counter and leans back slightly. Her dress moves up her legs to the point that I can almost see those sheer silky panties that have been rubbing against my

cock all night.

Her eyes find my crotch and she moves her bare foot up to stroke the space. “Is this you or me?” she asks and when I look down and see the wet spot on my slacks. I’m hard again and the prior conversation forgotten.

“Probably a little of both. You were soaking me, baby.”

“I can’t help it. You make me this way,” she whispers. She pulls her dress up slightly more and before I can ask her to wait, her hand is under her dress and between her legs. “I’ve never been this wet before.”

“You said you were a virgin...has any guy, *anyone* made you wet before?” I briefly wonder if she and Kate have experimented. If they practiced on each other while they prepared to fool around with a guy.

“*Anyone*, huh? Are you asking if I’ve ever messed around with a girl?”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry, and I down the contents of the tumbler as I prepare for her answer. “You’re curious if I kissed a girl and I liked it?” She gives me a cheeky smile as she continues to swing her legs back and forth. “If I kissed a girl somewhere other than her lips?”

My cock feels like it’s about to explode in my slacks, so I grab my dick, adjusting it and making it so it’s not pointing at her so obscenely.

“Is this conversation making you hard, Dominic?”

“What do you think, Stassi?” I lower my face so that we are eye to eye. “You’re teasing me and you’re enjoying it.”

“What is it with guys and girl on girl anyway?”

“I’m not particularly into girl on girl,” I tell her honestly. I mean I’m a man, which means by law I don’t hate it, but if asked my preferences, I typically liked pornography that involves a man and a woman.

“Liar.”

“No seriously. I’m into *you*. Thinking about you with another guy would make me lose my fucking mind, but you and another girl? It doesn’t make me quite so irate.”

“Well, I hate to kill the mood, but I’ve never physically messed around with a girl. Kate and I kissed once on a dare, but that’s about as far as my lesbian experiences go...in person that is.”

I’m curious about her qualifier, but I have another question I’d like to know first. “Would you ever want to...go further?”

Her cheeks turn crimson, and a part of me is glad I’ve embarrassed her with the way she’s been torturing me all night. “I’ve thought about it...” she starts. “Touched myself thinking about...that. But Cosmo says that’s

normal,” she recites.

“What? Thinking about fucking a girl?” I cock my head and she huffs indignantly.

“I’m serious. I’m not saying I would! I just...I don’t know. I may have... umm...sexed once.” *Ah, so that’s what she meant.*

“With a girl?” She nods. “Who?”

“Someone online. It was nothing.”

“Glad to know those parental controls we set up worked.” I roll my eyes at the restrictions we had in place for the internet to keep her out of trouble.

“It was some girl from another state, and it was only once. We never met up or anything.” I don’t respond, because I want her to continue on her own accord. “Do you want to know what we talked about? How far we...went?”

“Yes.” A part of me can’t believe that I’m asking her for the dirty details of her sapphic fantasy but, on the other hand, I can’t believe I’m contemplating putting my mouth on her pussy...*tonight.*

“She told me she had a vibrator and that she wanted to use it on me. That she wanted to slide it into my pussy and make me orgasm all over it.” She takes a deep breath. “Then she wanted me to suck my orgasm off of it.”

“Fuck.” I take a step back and shake my head. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

“Why...is it working?” The cheekiness in her voice makes me wonder if this is all bullshit to try and get me worked up. *But I’m not quite sure.* And *that* is what’s keeping me hard as granite. Is it the truth or not?

“Yes,” I tell her honestly.

“How would you feel if I told you that she wanted to rub her cunt against mine until she orgasmed? Scissoring, I believe they call it?” A devilish smirk finds her lips as she stares up at me through thick full eyelashes. “She wanted me to make her come just using my pussy.”

“Stassia,” I groan as she hops off the counter and begins to walk towards me. With every step backwards I take, she takes another step closer, until I’m backed up against a wall and quite frankly terrified of this eighteen-year-old in front of me, goading me.

“She said she’d rub her clit against mine until I came so hard, I saw stars. Direct quote.” She winks and slides her hand up my shoulder. “Do you think you could make me come so hard I see stars? I am rather fond of astronomy, you know.” She stands up on her tiptoes, her body completely pressed against mine as she actually purrs against me.

“What am I going to do with you?” I whisper as I tug on her ponytail and run my lips down her cheek.

“I think you’ll come up with something,” she says before she turns and grabs the whiskey from the counter. “I’ll be upstairs. Waiting.”

ELEVEN

Stassia

I hear him shuffling downstairs, and it gives me a chance to calm my nerves. I don't know what enticed me to share my experience with *VABCHbabe*. I didn't even know her name, just that she lived by Virginia Beach and that she'd recently figured out that she liked girls a little bit more than she liked guys. She hadn't told anyone, I guess—except me. We talked on and off for a few days before things escalated one night when I was a bit too high and she was a little too drunk. But it turned out to be one of the most erotic experiences of my life, and until today I hadn't told anyone. Not even Kate.

I hadn't ever felt anything for a woman before or after that, but something about that night makes me wonder if there's just a side of me I haven't explored. Maybe I'll never explore it further. Maybe I'm just one of those girls who enjoys watching or reading girl on girl but never engages in it. I shrug as I begin to pace the length of Dominic's room, preparing for him to come upstairs.

A tremor moves through me and although I'm ready, a part of me is nervous. Not just about taking this step, but about taking this step with Dominic. I know I talked a big game that it will be like nothing happened when we return home, but...is that realistic? Will I be able to look at him the same after he's fucked me all over this house?

I can't help the smile that creeps over my face at the thought of doing just that for the next two days. A thought flies across my mind as the door creaks and when I spin around the thought flies from my mouth just as quickly. "I want to have sex in the pool."

His eyes ping pong from me to the bathroom to the bed back to me as if he isn't sure what I just said. "Who said we're having sex at all?"

"Now who's teasing?" I ask. We hadn't come all this way to just stop. I don't want to stop and neither does he. I just need him to stop thinking so much.

“Stassi...” He rubs his hand over his face and groans as he moves towards me. “I...this is *a lot*.”

Fuck this. I think to myself. Initially, I wanted him to peel this dress off of me, kissing every inch of skin as it became exposed, but clearly, I’m going to have to do all the work. I roll my eyes to myself, knowing that if I want it, I’m going to have to *take it*.

Before he can say another word, I’ve pulled my dress up over my head, revealing my tits and more importantly the ring that went through my nipple that I know drives men wild. Most of the guys know I have it, thanks to Kate’s big mouth and they were constantly asking me to show them until one day Carter threatened to beat the shit out of them.

“Fuck.” He groans and before he can move towards me, I move towards his suitcase and fetch one of his t-shirts, sliding it over my half naked body.

I let out a sigh that I hope sounds as sexy as it does in my own ears. “It smells like you,” I tell him as I raise the neckline to my nose and take a deep inhale. I climb on his bed and stretch out, loving the feeling of his cool blankets on my heated skin.

“I...saw something. Unless my mind is playing tricks on me.” He moves towards the bed and toes off his shoes before climbing onto the bed next to me.

My heart pounds as we’re now on a bed, preparing to lie down and potentially continue what we were doing downstairs in far less clothes. “What did you see?” I ask, knowing exactly what he’s referring to.

A wicked smirk plays on his lips as his fingers make their way underneath my shirt to touch my stomach gently. My skin tingles in anticipation of what’s to come. His fingers move up higher and higher until they’re right beneath my bare breasts making my nipples harden into points as his tips stroke the sensitive skin. My pussy clenches in response and my bottom lip finds its way between my teeth.

“Dominic.” I moan just as his fingers find my left nipple. I hold my breath as his eyes find mine and then without a word, he lifts my shirt, revealing my breasts to his eyes and more importantly the ring that goes through my left nipple.

“What...how...? When did you get this?” He tugs slightly on the silver star sitting against my brown skin and I whimper.

“Last year.”

“When you were seventeen?” He wets his lips as a guilty look floats

across his face and clears his throat. “Fuck, when you were seventeen... which was only a few months ago.”

“Don’t stop...” I breathe out, hoping that he’s not getting in his own head again about the fact that we’re *here*. Not that I would blame him, I’m having a hard enough time not obsessing over the fact that my stepfather is lying between my legs rubbing my tits. Even if this is all my doing, the feeling is fucking surreal. His fingers surround the puckered nipple and he rolls it between his fingers. Goosebumps rise on every inch of my body and I let out a breath to steady my breathing.

“How?”

“I have a fake.” I clear my throat. “Not for alcohol,” I clarify, because deep down even though the lines are blurred, I still don’t want him disappointed in me. *Well, anymore*. “I just wanted it for this and for tattoos.”

“Are you going to tell me what your tattoo means?” He brushes his fingers down my side. “I know what’s happening...between us doesn’t make me seem very trustworthy, but you can tell me—”

“No.” I interrupt and I grab his face so he’ll look at me. “What’s happening...what I’m asking...it means I trust you the most.”

He looks back down at my tits before looking back up at me in question. I can hear it as clearly as if he asked it. I nod, wanting to know what my breast would feel like in his mouth. “Please,” I beg.

His tongue darts out to wet his lips and then that same tongue, that sinful tongue that’s been in my mouth for much of tonight, drags along my breast. He circles my piercing with it and then his hot wet mouth sucks my puckered nipple inside. “Fuck,” I groan. He’s still lying between my legs, so I can’t rub them together in attempts to stoke the growing inferno between them, but I try, my body desperate for any type of relief. “Dominic.”

He bites down gently and I hear the sound of metal against his teeth. *Fuck, that sounds so hot*. “Is...is anything else pierced?”

My eyes fly open in question. “Are you asking...if my pussy is pierced?”

“Yes.” His husky voice makes the fire spread from my pussy throughout my whole body.

I contemplate telling him the truth, but I want more in this moment. *So. Much. More*. “Do you want to see for yourself?”

“Fuck, Stassia.” He moves his lips to my other breast, his blue eyes boring into mine as he suckles the flesh. “I have to know, has anyone kissed you here?” His hand snakes down and rubs me gently through my wet

panties.

I bite my bottom lip. “Yes.”

“Who?” he growls and I yelp when he bites down harder on my breast.

“Guy from school.”

“What. Fucking. Guy?” he growls again.

I grab his dark luscious hair and pull his head away from my breast to stare into his eyes, his mouth slick with his spit that’s glistening on my breasts. “You can’t be jealous when you’ve been banging my mother for years.”

I chastise myself for my knee jerk reaction to his caveman attitude as I fully expect my comment to be the end of this tryst. “Watch me,” he says and a wicked smirk plays at his lips, goading me.

“Carter James,” I tell him. “He eats me out sometimes.”

“Do you come?”

“Yes.”

“Hard?”

“Not so hard I saw stars or anything.” I smirk at my reference to earlier.

He chuckles. “I can promise you, I can make you come harder than any fuckstick at that school. Harder than anyone...”

“Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is?” I raise an eyebrow at him. “Better yet, why don’t you put your mouth where my pussy is?”

He swallows. “I don’t...I don’t know that I can...yet.” He tells me as he falls to my side, putting a hand over his eyes. “I’m struggling to figure out how the fuck we got here?”

I huff, officially over this back and forth, this push and pull. In books it’s delicious but in reality, it’s fucking annoying. I’m ready to explore my sexuality completely with this man and the fact that he’s holding up the process every step of the way is beginning to irritate me. “I’ve explained how I got here, but since you aren’t getting it, I’ll give you another reason. You’re a man and I’m a woman. We’re grieving. It happens.”

“Not with you. It shouldn’t happen with you. You’re my—”

“That’s what makes it even hotter.” I cut him off, knowing where he’s going with that and I climb on top of him to straddle him. My panties aren’t doing much to hide the wetness between my legs, and I can smell my arousal in the air. *My God, I pray he can too.* “Seriously, don’t you watch stepfather/stepdaughter porn?”

Blue shocked eyes bore into mine. “Who said that?”

“I know all things.” I smirk at him and lean down brushing my lips over his. “Would it make you feel better to hear that I sucked his dick too?”

“It certainly does not,” he growls as he grabs my forearms in the same deliciously painful way, he grabbed my hips earlier.

“So jealous.” I tsk. “So jealous when he has no reason to be. Would you like to see my skills?” I smile at him and I can feel his heart pounding under my hands. “Would you like me to suck your dick, Daddy?” He doesn’t say anything. He just stares at me as I begin rocking myself against his dick. “He always comes in my mouth.” I bite my bottom lip for emphasis. “I swallow.”

“Do you?”

I nod. “He...he wants to fuck me. I tell him no.”

“That’s...good. I’m proud of you. These boys will get you into trouble so fast.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Will you get me into trouble?”

“No, Stassia. We can’t...I can’t fuck you,” he says but his body language says something different. His hands are resting possessively on my hips and every few moments he thrusts upward, driving his very hard dick up into me.

“But why? I know you want to.”

“Of course, I want to. Look at you. You’re a walking wet dream. You know how many men I’ve had to stare down when we go out?”

“No?”

“You can’t not notice. You’ve got this tiny fucking waist and these perfectly round tits.” His hands move from my waist to my breasts and he squeezes. “I can see the fantasy in their eyes when you walk by them.” He pinches my nipple and flicks my piercing. “And now I know you have this,” he tugs. “No more bras. I want to see this all the time. Poking through your shirt. Fuck, better yet, just go topless.”

“Okay,” I agree without a second thought. “Well, wait, I feel like this deal is one-sided. What’s in it for me?”

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want, Dominic.” *I knew I should have struck when we were downstairs. Now he’s had time to clear his head and calm the raging hard-on he had earlier. Now he’s thinking this is a bad idea.*

“Besides that.”

I grab his hand and set it on his chest before sitting on top of it. I smirk at the look he gives me when he feels how wet I am for the first time. “Will you at least touch me?”

“I...I think the second I see your pussy, I’ll lose my mind.”

“That’s not a no...besides, having a mind is...overrated,” I whisper. “I can help you look for it after my orgasm.”

He laughs loudly and I smile at the ability to bring humor to this intimate yet scary moment. “God, I love you, Stassia.”

I frown at his words, wondering what he means. “Like a daughter?”

“Like a daughter.” He clears his throat. “And something else. Something I don’t understand.”

“Like...your lover?”

“You can’t be my lover, Stassia. It’s wrong.”

I cock an eyebrow and head in tandem. “You’ve kissed me and left hickeys on my tits, I think we’re way past wrong.”

“I helped raise you,” he counters.

“No one knows that, here.”

“I married your mother,” he argues back.

His cock jumps between us again, rubbing against my clit and I moan. “Seems like that turns you on, Daddy Dearest.”

He sits up, his pale skin glistening with sweat, and turns on the light next to my bed. “Stassia...we can’t.”

“Dominic...”

“No, Stass. I’m your stepfather and you just graduated high school.”

“So what?”

“I was your Principal. I’ve known you since you were ten years old. You know how fucked up this is?” He moves me off of him and begins to pace slowly next to the bed. “No. Fuck. I can’t believe I let things go this far. Your mother would kill me. I’m supposed to protect you and keep you safe, not...” He kneels on the floor next to his bed, and because of how tall he is, we’re almost at eye level with me sitting on the bed. “Stassia, please don’t hate me for this.”

“I don’t...I won’t hate you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He nods. “I hope you know...in another life.” He lets out a breath. “If you weren’t...you, and I wasn’t...me, I’d want you. I do want you. I just...can’t have you.”



I listen to Dominic pacing in his room for two more hours before I think he must have fallen asleep. In that time, I've masturbated twice thinking about my stepfather and I'm still horny. I've watched porn and read some erotica which only makes it clearer that the only thing I want is for the man one room over to make me come, and not much else can fill that void. I slide my shorts down my legs for the third time, prepared to fuck myself with the vibrator I'd brought along when a better idea comes to mind.

A better, *bolder* idea.

I leave my thong on and pull on a tight tank top over my tits before creeping out of my bedroom. I make my way down the hallway, careful not to hit the floorboards that creak louder than the others. I make my way to his room and take a deep breath, half wishing I'd snuck a shot of something. I push my way into his room and find him snoring softly on top of his covers.

Even better.

He's shirtless, lying on his back with one hand down his shorts and one over his head. I bite my bottom lip, wanting to take a peek under his shorts but I worry that will definitely wake him up and successfully derail my plans. I move slowly to the other side of the bed and slide up next to him. The room is dark except for the moon that is illuminating the room, allowing me to see his handsome face and muscular physique. I run my gaze down the hard planes of his body and up to that chiseled stubbly jaw that I desperately want to feel scraping the skin between my thighs.

I take a deep breath, praying that this whole plan doesn't backfire and slowly move my panties down my legs. I toss them, and I hear the wet fabric hitting the floor with a gentle thud. My eyes sweep back to Dominic, hoping he didn't hear that, but he's still snoring softly. I get up on my knees and before I let my nerves talk me out of it, I straddle his neck as carefully as possible. My clit throbs almost painfully at the idea of masturbating over my stepfather while he sleeps peacefully and the need to touch myself overwhelms me. I run my fingers between my wet folds and let a sigh escape from between my lips.

I begin rubbing harder and faster as my third orgasm in an hour builds in my belly. I get super wet whenever I'm turned on, so I'm not surprised that I'm already soaked and the juices are sliding down my fingers. I look down and note he's still sleeping soundly, so I allow myself to get more into it. Rocking harder, my moves become more erratic and my breathing gets equally uneven. I'm not sure what I'm expecting if he wakes up, but I'm hoping that the scent of my pussy will make the decision for him. I close my eyes and continue to rub, moving back and forth against my hand, and just as my body starts to hum and I feel myself begin to lose control, I hear my name whispered faintly.

I freeze and with two fingers resting on my clit, I look down and see Dominic staring up at me. "Stassia, what the fuck?" he growls. He sounds angry but he makes no effort to move me from over his face. Instead, he closes his eyes and leans up slightly with his face no more than an inch from my pussy and inhales *deeply*.

"Have you come yet?" His pulse flickers in his neck and I can see his tongue dart out to wet his lips.

I shake my head to tell him I haven't and without another word, he removes my fingers from inside of me. He stares at my hand for a second before they're in his mouth, his tongue swirling around my coated fingers, and then his eyes find mine. "Put your hands on the headboard."

"Why?"

"Because, Princess, you need leverage for when you ride my face."

TWELVE

DOMINIC

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

That's the only word that runs through my head as I lap at Stassia's wet cunt. I lick everything she has to offer, using my tongue to make love to her pretty clit. She's so sensitive; every time it ghosts over it, she whines and grinds her pussy harder against my face.

Fuck. I wish I could see more. I wish I could see her pussy. See those beautiful brown eyes that can make me weak in the knees staring down at me between smooth legs.

Fuck this.

I pull back and she whimpers in protest. "I'm not stopping. I just want to see you. Hit the light," I command and she obeys. My cock throbs at her eagerness to share her body with me especially when she peels off her top exposing that fucking nipple ring again.

I almost impaled her with my dick the second I saw it. A nipple ring and two tattoos. It's like God made this girl with the sign that said "Insert Dominic Callahan's dick here."

Shame washes over me as the thought floats across my mind, but the feeling is instantly forgotten when she moves back to hover over me. "Wait. Do you want to sit on my face? Or lie on your back?"

"I...I have to choose?" Her face is innocent but I hear the implication loud and clear. *Both.*

"No. You don't." I smile up at her and she smiles back. A toothy perfect grin that I've only seen a handful of times and never directed at me. "You're so gorgeous. I've always thought so."

Her face falls slightly, and I wonder what's caused this sharp change in her mood. "Because I look like my mother?"

Ah. Right. "No, because you look like *you.*"

I spread her lips, revealing pink slick flesh that makes my cock throb and

arousal pools at the tip. I meet her hooded gaze as I take one slow lick through her folds. She convulses and I feel her legs shaking around me. “Daddy, I’m going to come,” she whispers and fuck if that doesn’t make the precum slide down my shaft.

I need these shorts off.

No! My mind screams. The second they’re off, you’ll fuck her.

So? My dick screams in response.

I move away from her clit to spear her opening, spreading her inner folds so I can go as deep as possible. I don’t go far enough to break her hymen, only enough to feel her. I pull her off my tongue. “Ride me, baby.”

She looks down at me curiously. “How...?”

“Use the headboard to bounce yourself up and down,” I tell her.

She bites her bottom lip innocently. “Like...how I’d ride your dick?”

So, fucking sweet. Exactly like that.

“I want that.”

I look back and forth between her gorgeous eyes to her perfect pussy and wonder how in the world I’d be able to deny her anything; the look in her eyes tells me she knows that. “Whatever you want.” I press my lips to her sweet cunt and continue to eat her like she’s my last meal. I grip her hips as she does what I ask, bouncing her deliciously pert ass up and down as she uses my tongue to get herself off. Her hands find my hair and she must be nearing her climax because she grips the strands hard.

“I think I’m going to come,” she whispers. “Oh my God, right there. Just like that. Fuck, nothing has ever felt like this before,” she tells me and I increase my efforts. I see she likes more attention on her clit, so I focus there, rubbing my tongue fast and then slow against her. She’s been doing well at keeping herself upright but in the past few seconds, she must be succumbing to her orgasm because her pussy is directly against my mouth as she moves against me.

Fuck. This is the hottest moment of my life. I’ve been married twice and no one has ever been this uninhibited with me. My first wife rarely wanted me to eat her pussy and Stassia’s mother only wanted it if she was on her back or in the shower. Little had she known, I’d have eaten her out the second after she worked out if she’d have let me.

I grip Stassia’s ass pulling her harder against me and with one final swipe over her clit she detonates. Her flavor explodes on my tongue as she squirts down my throat. Her salty sweet arousal pours out of her and all over my lips

and chin, dripping down my neck.

Untouched.

Pure.

Like sex.

Fuck, I want her for every meal for the rest of my life.

Her hands leave the headboard and drop to either side of my head as she humps my face, rubbing her wet cunt all over my mouth and chin. “Dominic,” she whimpers and I smile at the fact that she switches back and forth between calling me by my first name and Daddy.

It kept me *and my dick* on my toes.

She’s breathing like she’s just run a marathon as she slowly pulls her pussy away from my face—much to my reluctance. I hold her in place and run my tongue through her folds one more time and she whimpers. “Fuck, stop. I’m too sensitive.” She shivers. I let her go with a small kiss on her mound and shoot her a wink that I hope she reads as *holy fuck, am I planning to do that again later*. I expect her to move and lay next to me but instead, she straddles my chest. “Holy fuck. You were right, I came so hard, for a second I think I blacked out.”

“That can happen.”

“It’s never been like that. I...I think I need more.” Her voice is shy, barely above a whisper as she moves down my body and slides my shorts off. She swallows as my cock bobs up towards my pelvis.

“Stassia, wait,” I command, not trusting her to just hop right on my cock.

“I won’t...do that. I just want to rub against it. Can I please? I’ve never felt a cock between my legs before.”

My heart begins to race at her words. I’ll be the first dick she feels against her smooth, sexy cunt. *Fuck yes*. I nod. “Yes, but not inside.” The reason is probably not what she’s thinking. I want to be the one who controls the ride her first time. I worry about her being a virgin if she slams herself down on top of me, she’ll write off sex forever with the pain that’ll rip through her.

She grips my cock and rubs it between her folds and instantly my dick jumps to get inside the wet warmth. “Such a nice dick.” She murmurs before licking her lips. “I’m going to come all over your cock doing this, and then I’m going to lick myself off of you. How does that sound?”

My eyes widen at the filthy words coming out of her mouth. “It sounds like you watch a lot of porn, little one.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “Only what you watch, Daddy.”

“You said something to that effect earlier. How do you know what porn I watch?”

“I checked your browser history.”

My heart stops as I think about what my pornography preferences entail. *She did what?* “Why?”

“I saw you jacking off once. I wondered what floats your boat.” She shrugs, and normally I’d find this a gross invasion of privacy but with her, I’m wondering what she thinks.

My heart skips a beat knowing what she found if she’d done her research. “And?”

“You like daddy daughter stuff. Kinky.”

Fuck. “Stepdaughter.”

“Tomato, tamato. That implication means you’ve fantasized about fucking *me*.”

“I have. I’m not proud of it.” She pulls my dick away and taps her clit with it in rapid succession and I see it enlarge and pulse right before my eyes. “Holy fuck, Stassia.” I watch, completely enthralled by my stepdaughter using my cock to masturbate herself. Cum drips from the tip and in a brief moment of clarity, I manage to get out the most responsible thing I’ve said all day. “Birth control.”

“On it,” she says without missing a beat. She continues to rub and I’m fairly certain I’ll combust if I don’t get my dick into one of her holes.

I let out a shaky breath to prevent myself from coming, which seems impossible with the way she’s making these sexy noises as she rubs against me. “I think...” her eyes flutter closed and one hand remains on my dick as the other finds her breast, “I’m going to come again.”

“Come, beautiful. Come for Daddy.” I don’t even know where the words come from. Maybe the mention of my pornography tastes or the fact that she keeps calling me that. Either way, the words slip out like I’ve been saying it forever.

Her eyes struggle to flutter open, probably because her body is on the precipice of an orgasm but she manages to stare down at me through hooded slits. “Fuck me, please.”

I swallow hard at her request as her pulsing clit continues to rub up and down my shaft. I’m holding on by a fucking thread and I know the second she orgasms, that thread will snap. “Not...yet.” I manage to choke out. I grip her ass cheeks and move my fingers inward, stroking a finger up and down

her crack and I can see the pink tinting her cheeks.

“Dominic,” her voice is breathy and sexy and it takes everything in me not to pin her down and slide my cock inside of her.

“Have you ever had someone touch you here?”

She shakes her head innocently making her hair dance along her warm brown skin. I reach up with one hand and finger her locks gingerly before dancing my fingers down her spine and back to her ass. “No one has put their cock here? Or their tongue?” The thought of sliding my tongue inside her ass, priming her as I get her ready to take my dick has me getting harder by the second. There is something about anal sex that makes me harder than granite and knowing that I’d be the first to ever grace that sexy ass of hers has my cock ready to explode over her body.

She shivers and bites her bottom lip. “You want...that?”

I feel like I’m standing at a crossroads and ready to take off full speed down the path to damnation. But I’ve come too far to get to this point. I’ve touched her. Tasted her. And now she’s rubbing her cunt up and down my shaft as cum pooled at the tip.

I can’t turn back.

I’m a good man. I’m a pillar of the community. I’ve successfully turned my school into the best in the county during my tenure. I’ve played by the rules my whole life and then I lost two wives before I was forty-five. I’m ready to take a risk.

I’m ready to *take* because the world had no problem taking from me. “I want to claim you everywhere.”

“You’re giving me whiplash. One second you’re not sure about touching me and the next you want me everywhere.” She pouts in that way that used to drive me insane. It still drives me insane but in a completely different way. “If you’re in, be *in*.”

I nod. “You just came all over my face, I’m in. I want you, Stassia. I just want to take it slow when I take your virginity.”

“*When?*” she emphasizes.

I swallow nervously as I plan to speak words I’ll never be able to take back. “When, sweetheart.”

“You...you want it? You want...*my* virginity?”

“I want anything you’re willing to give me,” I tell her honestly as I stare into her chocolate eyes. She’s full of fire but there’s also softness and innocence behind the burning embers and I’ll certainly walk through hell to

touch that part of her. To feel that. To *love* that.
“I want to give you...*me*.”

THIRTEEN

Stassia

“I need to get you ready to take my cock.” His words have this dizzying effect, and I almost pass out when he flips me onto my back. My eyes flutter open and my vision is still slightly fuzzy, but it’s clear enough to see the sweet smile on his face. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispers as he pulls his shirt over his head revealing his hard, lean body.

“You make me feel beautiful,” I tell him. No one has ever made me feel so cherished and if I really think about it, Dominic has always made it a point to make me feel special. He hovers over me and stares down at me, drinking in my naked body and I can feel my skin heating under his gaze.

“Wow,” he whispers and shakes his head before rubbing a hand over his eyes. “You’re actually perfect.”

I lick my lips, dying for more than just to lay here and stare at this naked Adonis. His cock seems to grow and pulse every time my eyes pass over it and when I look back up, Dominic’s eyes are hooded and full of lust.

“How...are you going to get me ready? I’ve already come twice.”

“Third time’s a charm, you know?”

I smile at his playfulness and the ability to make light of this, as if this situation isn’t intensely erotic and I chuckle in response. “Dork.”

He leans down and presses his lips to my neck and I yelp when I feel the sharpness of his teeth. He runs his tongue over the space he bit, soothing the sting, and I sigh under his lips. He trails kisses down my body, taking time to nibble on my nipples and dip his tongue into my navel before he’s back at the slick space between my legs. My sex pulses; my body knows what it’s in for again and I grip his jaw to make him look at me.

“I’m so glad I’m doing this with you,” I tell him honestly. “It’s never felt right...before now.” And that is the truth; all those times with Carter felt good but it never felt like *this*. I never felt like he could really see me. He saw the pretty, popular, at times quirky cheerleader. I guess that’s why it’s so

intense with Dominic. He knows me inside and out. He used to say he knew me better than I knew myself. *Is that why it feels like this? Because he knows me so well? He knows what my body wants and needs?* Feelings of something dark and wicked bloom in my chest, that maybe this was the plan for me all along.

Fuck. No.

He smiles, a genuine smile, and it momentarily disarms me and clears my mind of all the morose thoughts about me, my mother, and the man we've both been intimate with.

Not now, Stassia. Have this traumatizing breakthrough later.

He reveals all of his teeth and it makes my heart flutter that this man is this fucking good looking. This good-looking and also wants *me*. I realize I'm still holding his face and he presses a kiss to my palm before looking back down at my pussy and then back up at me. I don't have a second to question what he's going to do when I feel a slap on my pussy. An actual slap. On my pussy. *Oh my God.*

"FUCK!" I scream. I'm about to ask him what possessed him to do that when he spreads the lips of my sex and does it again and again *and again*. "Ohmigod," I mumble as I stuff my fist in my mouth. My sex is actually tingling and I can feel the beginning of my orgasm leaking out of me when I hear his deep voice.

"Look at me, Stassia," he commands, and instantly I obey, my eyes flying open to meet his. "You good?"

I nod, words failing me, and then while his eyes are locked on mine, I watch in complete fascination as a stream of spit falls from his mouth and lands on my clit that's still exposed to the air.

"Oh. My. God." I cry out, throwing my head back into the pillows and shutting my eyes to prepare for the first wave of the orgasm that is threatening to pull me under. "Baby, I need your mouth." I moan. It was the first time I'd called him 'baby,' and I'll admit it felt weird falling from my lips. I'd called him 'Dominic' and 'Daddy' both in jest and in lust, but 'baby' felt so intimate. A part of me doesn't care, though. A part of me recognizes that what I'm preparing to share with this man requires a level of intimacy that *Daddy* just doesn't fill.

His tongue finds my sex first and when I look down, I see the carnal look in his eyes that lets me know he's ready to devour me. His hands find my thighs, pinning them down as he begins to eat my pussy more aggressively

than he did earlier. Earlier I'd controlled the ride because I was on top, but now, he's in control and he's showing no mercy. He slides two fingers inside of me, doing his best to open me up as he continues to tongue my clit. His stubble feels like tiny knives stabbing me but the feeling is so delicious, I don't dare tell him to stop or slow down. I can feel my orgasm nearing, and as desperate as I am to come in his mouth again, I want this feeling to go on forever.

"Dominic," I manage to choke out and I hear him moan in response between my legs.

"Mmhmm?"

"I...I don't want to come yet. I want...this feeling to last." I run my hand through his hair, pulling him harder against my pussy which I'm sure is sending him mixed messages, but I can't help it. I want more. I want less. I want it harder. I want it softer. I want it all. I want to feel this sense of euphoria every second for the rest of my life.

I look down again and find his eyes closed and that his hips are grinding into the mattress. *Fuck, that's hot.* But also, I know he's been making me come on and off for the past hour with no release for himself. "Dominic," I whisper and he ignores me as he continues to fuck my pussy with his mouth. *My God, I can barely form a coherent thought.* I pull his hair hard, and sadly he moves away from my cunt. His lips and chin are slick with my desire, and when he licks his lips I convulse from the visual stimulation. "I'm ready."

"I'm not," he answers immediately. His eyes, which are normally a bright blue are almost black, and I've read that a man's eyes can change color when they're aroused. "I need you to come again."

I'm not used to this; with Carter it was typically tit for tat. An orgasm for an orgasm. If he made me come, it was my turn to do the same for him. I'm not used to this level of worship and it makes me melt.

"But..."

"Quiet, Stassia." He growls as he presses a kiss to my inner thigh. "I don't want to hear anything out of you unless it's 'more' or 'I'm coming.' Got it?" He raises an eyebrow at me, testing me to disobey him and I nod in response. *He's commanding me to have an orgasm? My God, who is this man and can I keep him?*

No Stassia, you most certainly cannot. One weekend. That was the deal.

I shake my head, trying to keep myself in the present and from obsessing about a future that doesn't involve Dominic's head between my legs. "Okay."

Sweat begins to bead at my forehead as he increases his efforts, and my hands grip the sheets on each side of me. “Oh God!” My toes begin to curl and I know I’m succumbing to another orgasm that will more than likely take every last bit of my energy. I struggle to keep my eyes open as the feeling makes me almost dizzy and the last thing I see before my eyes close, is a smile playing on his lips.

“Fuck, Stassi.” I manage to hear his words through the fog of my orgasm. I sit up as I begin to come down from the high brought on by Dominic’s mouth and without another thought, I lunge for him.

He sits up just in time for me to wrap my entire body around him, rubbing my slick pussy against his washboard abs as I probe his mouth. The taste of my sex on his tongue does nothing but spur me on further as I dig my nails into his shoulders and he groans in my mouth allowing me better access.

Firm hands grip my butt as he pushes me back into the sheets, nestling his naked body between my legs as we continue a kiss, so desperate it makes me weak. Hands snake their way into my hair, freeing my tresses from the confines of my hair tie and then he weaves his hands through them as he continues to kiss me. I can’t escape the mewl that leaves my lips as he breaks our kiss, but it soon becomes a moan when his lips trail behind my ear and down my neck and shoulder. “Stassia, you’re sure you’re ready for this? This is something...we can’t take back.” His blue eyes bore into mine and I can see the concern flashing across his face, but beneath that, beneath this facade of the responsible man momentarily trying to break through is someone else. Someone wild and uninhibited and potentially dangerous.

But I want it and *him*.

“Because we can take back any of the other things we did tonight?” I raise not only an eyebrow, but my pelvis, grinding myself against the area just above his cock and the feeling of his pubic hair scraping along my clit makes me ready to jump out of my skin.

“Stassi...” He looks down between us and I follow his gaze towards his cock that’s erect and currently dripping pre-cum onto my glistening flesh. He lowers himself slowly, too fucking slowly and when I try and raise myself up again, his hand almost painfully grips my hips. “Don’t. Fucking. Move,” he says quietly. A breath escapes between each word and I know without a doubt if I press my hand to his chest, I’ll feel his heart pounding. *Mine certainly is.*

He lowers himself so that his tip has pushed slightly through my slit and

my eyes widen in fascination as he grips his cock and slides it through my lips back and forth. Slow at times and faster at others.

“Holy fuck, I’m going to come again if you keep doing that.” I’m trying my best to keep my eyes open because watching him tease me this way is almost as delicious as the feeling.

His cock pushes through and I can feel him at my entrance, pressing against me slowly and I want nothing more than for him to push through to claim me. Own me. Even if it’s just for the night, I want to be his.

“Dominic...” My lips part and my tongue darts out to wet the dryness. Dominic, who’s watching my mouth in fascination, slips two fingers past my lips and into my mouth.

“Wet them.” He commands and I close my lips around his fingers and suck, swirling my tongue around his fingers. I bite down playfully and he chuckles before removing his fingers from my mouth and places them in his briefly, before pressing them to my sex. He continues to rub my clit as he inches further inside of me, slowly tempering the pain with pleasure.

I am trying to steady my breathing and focus on his fingers on my clit and not the searing pain moving outwards from my pelvis. I look down to find him not even halfway wedged inside but despite the pain, I feel a flutter in my stomach. A flutter that meant so many things. Thoughts of guilt and betrayal swirl around me and tug my heart and mind in a completely different direction. But my body wants this. *Needs this*. Feelings of lust take over, removing any traces of guilt from my mind and I remind myself that Dominic isn’t cheating on my mother. My mother left him. She left me.

She left us when we needed her and maybe this is a fucked up way to grieve, but it’s too late to turn back.

“You okay?” he asks and I nod as I’m brought back into the present and out of the probing judgmental thoughts of my subconscious. He nods in response and pushes a little further and I notice that his hands that are still gripping my hips tightly are trembling. *He’s holding back so he doesn’t hurt me*. The need to make him feel as good as he’s made me feel takes over my senses.

“Dominic, just push all the way in.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t care, Dominic, just...I need it and so do you. Make me a woman. Make me...*yours*.” I lift my head, brushing my lips against his and down his throat. He relinquishes his grip on me to allow me to continue my trail across

his shoulders.

“You feel so good, baby. I don’t want to lose control. I can never lose control with you.”

“Lose control? How?”

“I’d hate myself if I hurt you.” He ignores my question as he turns his penetrating gaze away from me and focuses on a spot next to my head.

“Hurt me?” Thoughts of that book and BDSM and Rihanna’s song about whips and chains float through my head and I briefly wonder if my stepfather has other predilections.

“I can get pretty aggressive when I fuck,” he tells me. He pushes me into the mattress and a hand snakes up my body and wraps around my throat. “I like to fuck hard.”

Intrigue spikes in my veins which is louder than my mind screaming at me to run. Run from this completely fucked up situation that will have me sitting on the couch of a therapist’s office in ten years explaining how I fucked my stepfather because I was horny and lonely and confused over this whole bullshit year.

But the part that seems to be controlling all of my actions screams to run through the door he’s holding open. I raise my pelvis again, pushing him further inside and I wince at the intensifying pinch but another swipe over my clit makes the feeling subside. “Fuck...me...hard,” I choke out.

“Fuck,” he grits out. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Princess.”

“I know I want what you want.”

“Once I start...”

“You won’t hurt me; I know that much. Don’t say you won’t be able to stop because you would if I asked you to.” I reach around him and grab his perfectly sculpted ass and push him harder inside of me and he lets out a growl so sexy and wicked, I almost come. I’m about to urge him again when he pushes completely inside ripping through my hymen. My hands fly to his shoulders and I dig my nails furiously into his hard broad shoulders as a scream flies from my mouth.

“Fuck fuck fuck, I’m sorry!”

“Keep. Going,” I grit out, knowing that the pleasure will eventually take over after we’ve begun a rhythm. He pulls my hands from his shoulders and before I can think they’re by my ears on each side, with his hands pinning them down. I look into his eyes and see him looking down at me in question.

“Is this okay?” he asks, assumedly in reference to being restrained and I

nod.

“Yes.” His hands slide into mine as his thrusts begin to become more erratic. He fucks me like he’s starved for me. His lips are on mine. Then my neck. Then my right nipple, then my left. He’s everywhere, starting a fire on my skin he has no intention of putting out; all the while his cock drills into me, fucking me relentlessly, punishingly, bruisingly. His hands leave mine and slide down my body back to my hips.

“Leave your hands there, or I’ll restrain you next time,” he tells me and I listen, although a part of me wonders what would happen if I were to disobey. His eyes find mine as if he can hear me and raises one eyebrow cockily as if to dare me.

Damn.

I smile and nod, obeying his command and it’s amazing that just in that quick exchange that the pain is already lessening.

“I knew your pussy would be tight, but fuck, Stassi.” He drops his face into my neck. “It’s taking everything out of me not to come right the fuck now.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Because I want this to last...” He pushes and a groan floods my ears. “Forever,” he whispers and the need to have his lips on mine overwhelms me as my heart begins to pound. A fantasy of fucking him even when we return home begins to creep into my mind.

Waiting for him when he gets home from work in nothing but a pair of panties and a smile.

Sucking his dick in the shower before he goes off to work.

Sitting on his face every night just after pillow talk.

My body is succumbing to the thoughts of continuing this taboo relationship even back in our hometown where the moves have to be more stealth. The idea of getting caught has my body barreling towards an orgasm. “I’m pulling out,” he tells me, breaking me from the thoughts of my fantasy.

“What?!” I shriek, wondering why the fuck he’d want this feeling to end, ever.

“I’m fucking you from behind,” he tells me as he pulls out and flips me over all within a second. A hard hand finds my behind and I snicker.

“How long have you been wanting to do that, Daddy?”

“You have no fucking idea,” he chuckles. I turn around to look at him and watch him ogle my ass. “Holy fuck, your ass is pretty. Arch your back,

beautiful,” he tells me and I do as he says. While I expect to feel his cock, I see him lean down and then I feel it. He drags his tongue through my slit, licking me from behind before moving upwards. My eyes, that had closed at the idea of having my pussy eaten *again*, fly open at the idea that he’s preparing to eat my ass.

“D-Dominic.” My voice is timid and shy and frankly scared as fuck at the thought of him doing something so...nasty.

“If you even think about getting prude on me, I’ll put you on your stomach, tie your arms and legs to each corner of this bed and eat your ass until you fucking cry,” he growls as his tongue circles my hole.

“I just...”

“Till. You. Cry,” he says as he probes my ass between each word. He pulls back and smacks my ass again before I feel his cock again. I turn around and see his eyes boring into mine, a sweet smile playing on his lips despite his sinfully sexy words and actions. “Before this weekend is over, I will have claimed every inch of your skin with my lips and tongue.” He slides inside of me and rotates his hips in a way that already has my clit splintering. “You hear me? Every fucking inch.” He grabs my hair, pulling the majority of my wild dark tresses into a ponytail as he begins to pound into me harder. With one hand in my hair and one hand on my hip, he fucks me wildly and aggressively, fucking me deeper with every thrust.

“Yes. Claim every inch.” I moan. I’m drunk on him and this and I know I’ll promise him anything he wants in this moment. I’m relishing in his possession and I feel equally possessive, wanting him all to myself forever. “Tell me how much you want me. How much you want to be the first man to come in my pussy.”

“I want to be the only fucking man to come in this pussy. You gave me a taste, Stassi, and now...*fuck*. I know it wasn’t the plan but...”

“Yes,” I agree. I will agree to anything to keep him doing that thing with his hands and his cock.

“FUCK,” he growls, letting his hand fall from my hair and to my other hip so he can pump into me even harder. “God, I’m close, are you? I need you to fucking get there.”

“I don’t know if...”

“That wasn’t a question or a fucking request, Stassia Rae. Make your pussy cream the fuck all over my cock. I don’t care what you have to do to get there.”

“But...”

“Now.”

“I need...touch me, Daddy, please,” I moan, and just as I thought it would, my clit tingles in response to my taboo words. One hand leaves my hip to slide between my legs and finger me all the while keeping the pace of fucking me. “Oh God, that’s it. Right there.”

“That it? I feel your pussy quivering. My God, you’re close.” Hands find my shoulders as he continues to fuck me and then I feel him move, like he’s mounting me and when I turn around he’s hovering almost above me, with one foot flat on the bed for leverage as his thrusts, damn near pushing me up the bed.

It’s so much deeper this way and I briefly recall every meme or post saying that a man can rearrange your insides in this position. *My God, they’re right.* My body will never be the same after Dominic and his dick wreck me.

I’ll never be the same.

“Stop thinking so much, baby. I’m here with you. Stay with me.”

“I’m here,” I whine. I’ve been climbing towards the peak for what felt like hours and I know this will be the culmination of the night. The most powerful and most intense orgasm of them all.

“Fuck, this pussy is mine. You know that. Even if we never do it again. Even if you go on and date other men or fuck other men or marry another man. This pussy will always be mine because I laid my claim first.”

“Oh God,” I cry out. My vision blurs as tears well in my eyes and slowly cascade down my cheeks as the orgasm flares in my belly and shoots through me. “FUCK, Dominic!” I scream. I press my face into the pillow and bite down, and scream again, muffling the second sound just as Dominic succumbs to his own orgasm and lets out a guttural groan.

“Stassia, fuck, baby.” He continues to thrust for what feels like ages, prolonging my orgasm, and then suddenly, I feel him moving in the opposite direction and I feel empty. Like a part of me that I’d just recently discovered and fit so fucking perfectly is now gone. I turn around to see him sitting back on his heels, staring at me. I half expect him to have a look of horror or terror on his face now that he’s come, but I see a serene smile on his face. He moves closer to me and pulls me into his lap before capturing my lips with his and rubbing my back gently. “That was...the most...” He swallows and turns away slightly before shaking his head. “I’ll be honest, it’s never been like that for me. You are so...responsive. The noises you make, the way your

body moves with mine. You're perfect, baby," he whispers in my ear and kisses down my neck. "Are you sore?"

"No, I think I'm in shock," I whisper before I look up, meeting his worried gaze. "Good shock. Amazed shock." I look down and see the red between my thighs and on the sheets and I feel my cheeks heat when I spy the blood on his cock as well.

"Hey, none of that. Nothing to be embarrassed about. To be honest, it makes me feel proud as fuck to have your blood on my dick, Stassi. I don't know how I'll ever look at my cock again and not remember this. Remember how you came and bled all over my cock the night I took your virginity." He smiles and rubs his nose against mine. "But let's get you cleaned up in the meantime. How about a bubble bath?"

If we only have one weekend together, I don't want to spend one second away from him so the idea of taking a bath to get cleaned up doesn't exactly appeal to me. He chuckles and presses his lips to mine. "I can hear your thoughts, Princess. I meant *together*."

FOURTEEN

Stassia

After our bubble bath, where Dominic spent almost an hour cleaning the traces of blood from between my legs, first with soap and water and then his mouth, we'd found our way back into bed. He'd removed and replaced the bloody sheets and we are now lying on fresh satin that cools my heated skin. He hasn't said much since we lay down, and I briefly wonder if the gravity of what we've done has finally begun to weigh on him. I'm pressed against him, my face nestled under his chin, inhaling the Dove body wash we both used and his arms are wrapped tightly around me as he strokes my damp hair that he helped me French braid. "Do you regret it?" I ask quietly, my heart pounding in anticipation as I await his response. He doesn't say anything and I fight the urge to fill the silence.

He removes his leg that had been resting between mine and pushes me onto my back so that he can hover over me. I've since put on a t-shirt but I had foregone panties in case the overwhelming need to touch me in the middle of the night came over him. "Stassi, I don't believe in living with regrets. I've seen too much to live one second regretting my choices. I wanted you. *I want you,*" he clarifies. "But we crossed a line that is going to be hard to uncross. In a perfect world, we have this weekend and never talk about it again, but life isn't perfect, and I worry we will struggle with finding some sense of normalcy now that I've known what your cunt tastes like."

His words send a surge of empowerment through me and I fight the grin playing at my lips. "I don't think what we did was a mistake."

He sighs and falls to his back. I'm not sure what to make of this conversation until he slides his hand into mine and presses a kiss to the skin on my wrist before turning on his side to face me. "You could never be a mistake, but you do see how hard it would be to...continue this at home? And in that same breath, I just don't know how this weekend could ever be enough. I feel so connected to you, and maybe it's the tragedy or the guilt

that we both share but you make me feel things I haven't felt before, Stassi."

I gasp, knowing he's been married twice before, I wonder what possibly he couldn't have felt yet. "What is it?"

"I don't know and it terrifies me. It terrifies me that my eighteen-year-old stepdaughter makes me feel something that I haven't felt with any woman, including those I was married to. Maybe it's the fact that you *are* my stepdaughter." He sits up and I watch as his muscles tense and flex. "It feels like more than that though. I still want to protect you and keep you safe and take care of you." He stares out the window into the dark night and lets out a sigh. "But I also want to hold you and kiss you and fuck you and make you come." I note his muscles tightening in his back and shoulders. "The world won't let me have it both ways."

His admission renders me speechless. *Is it possible that he's struggling with the thought of wanting more?*

He lies back down and rubs a hand over his eyes. "It's late, we can unpack all of this in the morning." He pulls me closer to him and presses a kiss to my nose and then my lips gently. "I love you, Stassia, always."



The smell of coffee and syrup rouses me from sleep the next morning. The last few moments of my peaceful, sex-induced slumber are ripped from me when I hear movement next to me. I open one eye and frown instantly when I see I'm all alone in this very large bed. The frown is instantly replaced when I turn to the other side of the bed to see Dominic standing beside me in nothing but tight black briefs that leave nothing to the imagination as he slides a tray of food onto my nightstand. A cup of coffee, a small bowl of fruit and yogurt, and a short stack of pancakes grace the tray and instantly my mouth waters to accompany the growl in my stomach. I look up at him and give him a smile to show my gratitude. "Morning."

"Morning, beautiful, did you sleep well?" He presses his lips to my forehead before taking a seat on the bed next to me. "I brought you some Advil as well, in case you need it." He nods towards the plate and only then

do I notice the two brown pills sitting next to the coffee. “Are you sore?”

I am. The space between my thighs aches in a way I know I’ll feel his absence every second I move today. “Deliciously.” I smile before leaning in and pressing my lips to his neck. “It aches...but for more of you.” Desire flares in his eyes and I don’t miss the way his eyes flit to the space between my legs before he lifts my top up slightly. “I don’t know about sex right now, but...how about a kiss?”

He licks his lips and runs a hand over his jaw before he pushes me back. I’m expecting him to full on attack my pussy but he doesn’t. He merely presses a kiss to my sex. A peck. He doesn’t even use his tongue. When he pulls back, he gives me a wicked smile and I know he can see the fury in my eyes because he chuckles.

“Why the teasing?”

“Because you need to eat, and I need to run to the store.”

“Why?” I ask, sitting up and grabbing the steaming cup of coffee.

“We need a few things.”

“Well, can’t you wait for me and I’ll go with you?” I’m eager to spend more time with Dominic in a different capacity, one where we discuss more than just my grades and why I break curfew. There is so much about him that I don’t know despite the fact that we’ve shared a house for seven years.

“No, you stay. Eat and get set up by the pool; I’ll be back before you know it.” I frown, wondering what is so important that we need right now. What is more important than the orgasm, *I* need right now? I huff and roll my eyes, and he smiles before standing up.

“So impatient.” He cups my chin and presses his thumb to my lips. “You did want me to fuck you in the pool, right?”

His mention of my request last night has my sex pulsing in anticipation. “Yes, please.”

“Later,” he mouths before pressing a heated kiss to my lips. His tongue finds mine and I can taste the coffee on his tongue. I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck in attempts to pull him closer when he laughs against my lips. “Baby, I’ll be right back. I don’t want to go out tonight because I want you all to myself, so I just want to get a few things for dinner.” He brushes a few of my curls back that had sprung free in the night and drops another sweet kiss to my forehead.

The idea of this sexy date night with Dominic has all reservations floating away. *He wants to be alone with me.*

“Put on that yellow bikini again,” he says as he moves towards the door. “I want to fuck you while you’re wearing that.”



“So, how’s Charleston?” Kate’s chipper voice blares through the speakerphone as I continue to apply sunscreen. I’ve obeyed Dominic’s orders and donned the yellow bikini again, and now I’m sitting on the side of the pool with my legs in the water as I anxiously await his return. “Met any cute locals?”

The words that I’ve lost my virginity are trying to burst out of me, but I hold my tongue knowing that I’ll never be able to get away with disclosing half of the truth to Kate. I promised Dominic I wouldn’t tell a soul and even though I could probably swear Kate to secrecy, I don’t think I’m ready to reveal the truth either way.

“Ummm, there was a guy last night. He was a server at this restaurant Dominic and I went to. He invited me to this party but I wasn’t really feeling him. He had fuckboy vibes written all over him, which I don’t always write off right away, but I just wasn’t in the mood for it last night.”

“Ugh.” She scoffs. “Well, you still could have gone to the party. Sometimes guys come into your life so that you can meet their friends, you know.”

I snort in response and shake my head and change the subject. “How’s lockdown?”

“Boring. I’m so pissed I got grounded and can’t be down there with you on the beach getting my tan on. The freaking warden won’t even let me out to go to the pool and I’m losing my color.” I chuckle at her reference to her mother though I’m glad she is on lockdown. It would have been a very different trip otherwise. “Is it weird being there with just Dominic?”

My lips form a straight line and I’m grateful she can’t see my face because she’d be able to read the lies instantly. “Eh, not really. He mostly stays to himself and I’ve been living by the pool.” As if my conversation with Kate causes him to manifest, Dominic strolls down our back stairs and

towards me carrying two bottles of water and a bowl of something. He's wearing only red swim trunks, baring his sculpted chest and torso with a smattering of hair that goes down his stomach to a part of him I've recently gotten to know very well. A thought flashes through my mind that perhaps I could know that appendage even better.

I bite my bottom lip wondering how he'd taste and a smile forms on his face as if in response—as if he can hear my thoughts. He pulls his sunglasses from his face as he sits beneath the umbrella with me and points at the phone.

“Alright Kate, I have to go, my grandma is calling me on the other line,” I lie, knowing I have no real reason to get off the phone other than wanting to continue the kiss from this morning with Dominic.

“K, call me later!” she chirps before hanging up and I toss the phone onto the chair behind me.

“Hey,” I grab the sunscreen from my bag and hand it to him. “Mind getting the rest of my back?” I turn my back to him and I feel the heat radiating from his skin as he moves closer to me and sets his legs on either side of me. Fingers at the back of my neck untie the strings holding them together and I look down in time to see my suit falling forward and my breasts being exposed. I gasp and immediately dart my eyes around the backyard. Our backyard is gated and there isn't another house for a few hundred yards but there's a chance we could be spotted from their deck. I catch a glance and breathe a sigh of relief when I don't see anyone.

“I don't think anyone's home,” he whispers in my ear which causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand at attention. “When I drove by, there weren't any cars in the driveway. They may not be here this weekend.” His hands reach around to palm my breasts and he pulls at them, rolling them to points as his lips find my neck. He tugs at my nipple ring and a flare of pain shoots through me. “You didn't think I was going to let anyone see you like this, did you?” I shake my head, words failing me as the lust courses through me. I hear the sound of him squirting the sunscreen into his hands and then I feel the cool substance on my back. He rubs my shoulders and down my back just above my butt before moving around and rubbing lotion into my inner thigh. “You want to get in?”

“Like...skinny dip?”

“You can leave the bottoms on but this...” he says as he removes the yellow top from my skin. “This stays off.” He tosses it to the adjacent chair and stands up before pulling me to my feet. I follow behind him, moving

slowly down the stairs into the shallow end of the pool. I sit on the stairs and he kneels on a lower step in front of me. He slowly pulls my bottoms off and spreads my legs slightly. I look down and spy the tan lines that have formed from just the last hour. He runs his finger along my skin where the light brown turns to a richer brown and smiles. "So sexy." He runs his finger through my sex and rubs my clit in slow methodical circles before shooting me a wink and lifting my butt upwards towards his mouth to take a slow lick through my folds.

"Dominic..." I protest, wanting his cock more than his mouth at the moment.

"If I can't taste you after this weekend, I need to gorge on you as much as possible." He sucks my clit into his mouth, running his teeth over the sensitive bundle of nerves, and I convulse under his full lips. I assume he's planning to eat me to an orgasm so an immediate whine leaves my lips when he stops. My eyes fly open to see him hovering over me and stroking his cock.

"I see your pulse flickering in your neck. You want this, don't you?" This is the first time I'm really up close and personal, and he's right, I do want it. I want to suck his dick into my mouth and down my throat. I want to show him just how far he can go and how good my gag reflex is. I nod and wet my lips before letting my mouth fall open in invitation.

Fuck. He mouths as he continues to stroke his cock from root to tip before moving up one stair to straddle my hips and hold his cock towards my mouth. I lean down angling my head and take one slow lick up his hard shaft. A hard hand grips my hair almost painfully and he jerks his dick towards my mouth.

I move my head back slightly, even though I'm desperate to sheath my lips around him. "Now who wants it?"

He yanks my head back "Open your mouth and stick out your tongue." His cock slides across it before he drags it along my lips as if he's applying lipstick. "I can't wait and I'd rather come in your pussy than your mouth." He drops his dick and yanks me hard into the water before pushing me against the wall of the pool.

I wrap my legs around him on instinct and just as his lips land on mine he enters me. Memories of last night flood through me and I already feel myself building despite the soreness in my sex. I pull at the hair at the nape of his neck, threading my fingers through his silky strands as I feel my orgasm pooling in my belly.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

With each thrust, I feel him everywhere.

Marking me.

Branding me.

He's fucking me so hard my back scrapes against the cement lining the side of the pool.

"Fuck. How am I supposed to stop?" His words are so quiet, I wonder if he means for me to hear, but I do, and it's the question I haven't allowed myself to think about. I don't respond because, frankly, I don't know how I should. A part of me, a part largely controlled by the orgasm dangling in front of me right now, wants to tell him we don't have to stop. That we can keep this going for as long as we want.

But what if that want never wanes?

The thought hits me harder than the orgasm.

FIFTEEN

DOMINIC

I wake up with the biggest smile on my face. A smile that quickly turns to a frown when I realize this is our last day in Charleston and we'll be packing up to make the eight hour trip back home in just a few hours. I turn my head to the naked woman sleeping soundly next to me, her skin riddled with hickeys from my mouth. I run my hand down her shoulder towards her hip and she sighs in her sleep before snuggling closer against my chest. Her back is to me, something that my dick has already noticed as her ass is unconsciously moving against me.

I am so fucked.

How could I possibly have thought this was going to end well? One carnal weekend of passion with Stassi and now we just have to go back to how things were? My dick softens in response to the anger coursing through me. Anger at myself, anger at her, anger at the world for putting this woman in my life as the only role I can't have. *Shouldn't want*. I'm not sure what it is about her that makes her so enticing. My cock wants to say it's the forbidden aspect of our relationship that makes our encounters so hot. That forbidden fruit bullshit. But I'm not sure it's just that. Despite all of our arguments over the years, I always had a different kind of connection with Stassi. I've always found her smart and charming and she could captivate my attention quicker than anyone with her wit and fire.

Part of me wonders if she's taught me more than I've taught her over the years. I pull myself out of bed and make my way into the bathroom, wanting to take either a scalding hot shower or one worthy of the arctic to try and snap myself out of the sex induced fog I'm in. I've barely made it two feet when I hear her voice. "Where you going?" She sounds sleepy and lethargic; it makes me want to just crawl back in bed and kiss her senseless. I turn towards her and notice her swollen puffy lips that I spent hours biting at last night. Her hair is wild and she instantly pulls it up into a bun on top of her

head, letting the sheet fall around her to expose her chocolate nipples that I just want to suck between my teeth. *Fuck*. Absolutely not helping.

“Stassi.” I rub a hand over my face and pinch the bridge of my nose. “We need to head out soon. I was just going to take a shower.”

“You...” She bites her bottom lip and looks away from my gaze. “You don’t want me to join you?” We hadn’t taken a bath or a shower without the other in two days so I can see why she’s disappointed.

“I think it’s time we start training ourselves not to expect the other to be there.”

“We’re still in Charleston,” she points out.

“Stassi...”

“This already fucking sucks,” she says crossing her arms and falling back into the pillow. “I didn’t know last night was going to be the last time.” Her lip trembles slightly and I can see the tears forming in her eyes. “I would have tried to make it last longer,” she whispers. “I would have wanted it to last all night.”

I make my way across the room and grab my briefs from where Stassi threw them in her haste to wrap her mouth around my dick. Tingles shoot through me down to my balls at the memory of her sucking my cock. Her drool sliding down the sides of my shaft, her tongue rolling around the tip, and sucking every drop I had to offer. I let out a shaky breath as I try to calm my dick and realize I’ll definitely need that cold shower. I pull on the briefs before I sit on the bed with my very naked stepdaughter knowing that she could probably seduce me with just a look while we’re both naked on the bed we’ve defiled countless times this weekend. “Stass, we talked about this. We said one weekend. That’s it.” I sigh as I prepare to share some of my truths with her. “It’s going to be hard...knowing what we know and having done what we’ve done. But this is something we have to leave here. We can’t take this,” I point between us, “home with us.”

“But...”

“No,” I tell her. “I never would have gone down this road with you if I knew you wouldn’t be able to separate this from the reality we left back at home. No one would understand, Stassia. Hell, I don’t even fucking understand. How I could be in love with your mother and then fuck her daughter two months after she died? What kind of man does that make me?”

“What kind of daughter does that make me? Was that what your next words were going to be?”

“No, Stassi. It’s different for you. You trust me and you know I’ll take care of you.”

“You’re still my mother’s widower.” She winces. “It’s hard for me to wrap my brain around that too, you know. But you’re right, it is different for me. You were always this untouchable man. The one I couldn’t have. I made myself hate you because I wanted you for myself and I couldn’t have you... and then I turn eighteen and something really terrible happens to me. And it was like the grief and the anger at the world for taking her from me was quieted by the lust and want I had coursing through me over...you. I know that makes me a shitty person. To want you...to seduce you—”

“You didn’t seduce me, Stassi. I’m a grown man and you are incredible in so many ways, any red-blooded man would be a fool not to want you. If you weren’t your mother’s daughter, I’d be fucking you senseless right this second, but you are who you are. We have to end things here because things would become too messy at home. Even if no one found out, how would either of us ever move on if we continued this affair behind closed doors? Don’t you want to meet someone? Someone you can be with out there...” I ask her as I point towards the window to the outside. “Not someone you have to sneak around with in the dead of night or flee the state to somewhere that no one knows you?”

I can sense the wheels turning in her head and I hope maybe she’s understanding what I’m saying, because it will be ten times harder to live under the same roof with her if we aren’t on the same page about this. “I just don’t see why we can’t finish out the weekend.” She moves up next to me and before I can think or move or make an effort to stop her, she’s straddling me and moving her naked body up and down on my covered cock.

“Stassi...” I groan, but the way I’m rising between us, I know my willpower is withering with every stroke of her pussy against me. She rubs her nose against mine and across my cheek and down my neck before placing a kiss behind my ear and rubbing her tongue across the pulse flickering in my neck. I’m just about to give in to both my desires and hers when she slides off my lap to the floor in front of me.

She runs her fingertips up my thighs and separates my legs before those soft delicate hands find my dick. She rubs me through my boxers, and I assume she’s preparing to free me from my briefs, but instead, she raises up on her knees and presses her lips to my cock through the fabric. I lean back to get a better look at her and just as her eyes meet mine she runs her sinful

tongue along the fabric. Spit finds the corners of her mouth as she sucks me through my underwear. She completely wets the fabric, leaving a dark wet spot on the navy briefs. “Do you want it?” I ask her. My voice is hoarse with the way I’m trying to restrain myself. I’m at war at this moment with how easy I gave in to Stassia’s seduction. I told myself, last night was the last time and here I am letting her perfect brown eyes and perfect brown nipples sway me into letting her ride my cock until I come inside of her.

She frees my cock and stands, straddling me again and sliding herself agonizingly slow down my length. I groan with every inch she takes of me and the second she’s completely full of me, with that delectable ass resting against my thighs she begins to move up and down using my shoulders as leverage.

She’s been having sex for two days and she’s a fucking goddess. Jealousy surges through me at the thought that someone else will get to see this side of her. That despite the caveman attitude I’ve had, she isn’t mine.

She’s mine in this moment.

That’s all I have.

This weekend.

This moment.

I palm her smooth ass, pulling her harder against me with every downward stroke. Her eyes are staring straight at me and I blink away, hating that she has the ability to see too much. To see *everything*. To see that I’m struggling just as much with this being the end of us. That it’s the end before there was ever really a beginning.

“Stay with me, baby,” she whispers, pulling my face back to her. “Don’t think about what comes after this. Stay in the moment. It’s just you and me and nothing else matters.”

But that’s the thing. Everything matters. We have a whole life at home that matters. A life full of people who will absolutely find fault with the fact that we spent an entire weekend fucking all over the beach house I bought for her mother.

I am the fucking worst. Not only to the memory of her mother, but to Stassia, to my in-laws that see me as the son they never had, and to every single person that deemed me trustworthy.

“Stop,” I tell her, and as gently but as forcibly as I can, I pull her off of me. “This was a mistake.”

“Wha—what?”

“You and me. *This*,” I tell her. “I can’t think like this.” I begin to pace back and forth in front of the bed as I can see the emotions written all over Stassi.

“You don’t...you regret doing this with me?”

“No.”

“That’s what a mistake is, Dominic. Something you wish you hadn’t done. Didn’t you go to graduate school for English, Principal Callahan?”

If I wasn’t so completely fucked up from this situation, I would find humor in her sarcasm, but I feel like a volcano ready to explode and I know I need to get away from Stassi before she’s caught in the explosion.

“I need to take a shower. You should start getting ready.”

“Are you serious?” She stands up. I try to ignore the slickness between her legs that is a mix of both of us, but my eyes jump there on their own and my mouth waters for a taste.

I am in fucking hell.

“Fuck you, Dominic. Fuck you and fuck this. You’re so freaked out about something that no one is EVER going to know about!”

“I KNOW ABOUT IT! Isn’t that enough?! Is your moral compass that fucking skewed that you don’t feel bad at all about this? Is your pussy really blurring your conscience that fucking much?” I snap and instantly regret taking that tone or using those words. I’m not angry at her, and I’m not angry at her for not showing her guilt. I know she feels guilty. She knows this is wrong. She just asked for one more time. She wanted closure.

This is why I want to get the fuck away from her.

The tears threatening to fall down her sweet face shatter me, and when I take a step towards her and she takes a step back, she grabs the sheet and wraps it around her naked body to shield herself from the pain I’ve flung at her.

“Stassi...I didn’t mean.”

“No, you meant it.” She shakes her head. “I get it, okay? You feel guilty, but don’t take that guilt out on me because you certainly weren’t feeling that when we were sixty-nine-ing on the floor downstairs or when you pinned me to the floor of the shower and full on mounted me like a fucking animal. The fun is over, and the shame or whatever it is, is washing over you and you want to lash out at me. I feel guilty, yes, but I also feel...so many other things. Maybe in five or ten years, I’ll hate myself or you for doing what we did, but right now I’m just trying to process everything, and right now I’m

processing the fact that the man I lost my virginity to, who also happens to be the man who claimed to love me, is telling me that what we did was a mistake. That *I* am a mistake, so forgive me for not rolling over and taking that bullshit because you're better than that and so am I." With a shaky breath, she marches out of the room without another look back at me.

SIXTEEN

DOMINIC

Stassia hasn't said one word since she stormed out of my room and now we are preparing for an eight-hour car ride that I imagine will be icier than the Arctic. I've just finished packing up the car when she comes down the stairs, furiously typing into her cell phone and I take a second to admire how beautiful she is. Not sexy or gorgeous or hot, all words I've used this weekend. But beautiful, inside and out. A remarkable young woman who I've had the honor of seeing grow up before my eyes. My stomach turns at the thought. The thought that I've been present for yet another one of her firsts. A first I had no business being a part of. She's wearing her tiny white cheerleading shorts and a black t-shirt that's tied just above her navel, making her a walking fucking temptation.

I briefly wonder if she's torturing me on purpose for my choice of words this morning. My thoughts are further proven when she slides into the backseat and all but slams the door.

I open the driver's side door. "Not sitting up front?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

She looks up from her phone and pulls her sunglasses down revealing brown eyes with a spark of mischief behind them. "Stupidity isn't a good look on you, Dominic." She slides her sunglasses back up over her eyes and slides her air pods into her ears effectively ending this conversation.

Okay, anger it is. Anger I can take. If she's angry it means she won't try to tempt me.

At least I hope so.

About three hours later, I feel a cramp in my leg and figure it's the perfect time to stop to grab some water, use the bathroom, and stretch my legs. My eyes move to the rearview mirror and I aim it towards Stassi, only to find she's asleep. She's removed her sunglasses and I see her thick full lashes

fanned out over the tops of her cheeks. I watch for a few moments as her chest rises and falls with every breath she takes. I reach my arm towards her and shake her knee lightly to wake her up. Her eyes pop open and I see the disorientation in her sleepy eyes. “What?” she says, but her tone isn’t sharp or angry.

“You want something from here? Or to get out for a second?”

“How far away are we from home?”

“About another five hours.”

“God, seriously?” She rolls her eyes, opens her door and gets out on her side. I do the same.

“Stass...” I start and she puts a hand up as she walks into the rest stop minimart. I trail behind her and watch her pick up a water, pretzels, and Skittles—her favorite car ride snacks—and I grab a Red Bull and a water. She leaves her items on the counter and storms back out without another word.

The cashier, an older gentleman with a beer belly and a beard that almost touches the counter looks at me and chuckles as he begins to scan my items. “I feel for you, man. I’ve got one myself at home.” I go to respond when I realize I’m not sure who he thinks Stassia is to me.

A daughter? Or...a lover?

In one weekend she’s been both, so I just give him an awkward smile before sliding my card into the chip reader. I make my way outside towards the car when I spy Stassia leaning against it with her phone pressed to her ear. I can’t hear her but as I get closer I notice she makes a point of talking louder. “Yeah, Kate, I’m so glad you’ll be off lockdown when I get home. It was such a long *boring* weekend.” I know she’s only saying it to get under my skin. *Surprisingly, she’s succeeded.*

I shake my head before sliding into the car. It takes everything in me not to roll a window down to hear what other jabs she’s making at my expense. I am trying my best not to take it personally, but hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. *A teenage woman at that.* I hadn’t meant to reject her or scorn her or make her feel undesired or unwanted or unloved, only that I was struggling with being the one who made her feel those things in the first place. She finally gets off the phone and slides into the car. “I’m going out when we get home.”

I let out a sigh. “Where, Stassi?”

“Out.”

“Out. Where?” She’s testing my patience and she’s fucking enjoying it.

“I’m sorry, I’m fairly certain your authority is non-existent, Daddy dearest. Asking me where I’m going once you’ve had your tongue in my ass kind of sounds like a jealous boyfriend asking, don’t ya think?” She kicks off her flip-flops and puts her feet up on the passenger seat in front of her, giving me a look that says *do not fuck with me right now*.

Evidently, I have a death wish, so what do I do? I fuck with her.

“You’re acting like a fucking brat, Stassi, and this is what the fuck I’ve been talking about. I’m still allowed to be concerned about your wellbeing and what you’re doing when you leave the house. I don’t give a fuck how old you are or what we’ve done. Above anything else, I care about you and I don’t want to see you hurt or in trouble.”

“Then maybe it’s best I go stay with my grandparents so that it’s not hard now that all these lines are blurred? Or maybe I can ask Micah if I can stay with him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Now you’re what? Trying to make me jealous? Grow up.”

“Wow.” She puts her headphones in her ears and presents me with her middle finger. “Please do not talk to me until we get back to Maryland and not a second before.”

The next five hours are hard. Long and hard and seem like they go on forever. With each passing mile, my disgust and self-hatred seem to intensify. I’m not only angry at myself for what transpired but for taking my anger and guilt out on the emotional woman whose virginity I had just taken. *What the fuck had I done?*

“Stassi...” I start the second I see that familiar sign that reads *Welcome to Maryland*. I’d obeyed her wishes, not speaking to her until we were back in our home state, but now after eight long hours, I feel it’s time to clear the air. I look into the mirror and see her eyes gazing back into mine.

“Yes?”

“Please don’t hate me.”

She raises an eyebrow and tilts her head to the side. “For what?”

“Any of it.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment and I’m instantly worried about what she’s going to say. “I don’t hate you for what we did. I don’t even hate you for feeling guilty over it.” She shakes her head. “Dominic, I don’t hate you at all. Not after what we did this weekend.”

“You don’t?”

“No, just because I’m angry it doesn’t mean I hate you. We’re connected, Dominic. Maybe in a way neither of us expected to ever be, or maybe in a way you wish you weren’t connected to me, but we’re here now.”

Her maturity over this situation stuns me. Could it really be that easy to never talk about it again? That it was just a moment—well, several moments of weakness brought on by grief and sadness and lust all rolled up in one forbidden clusterfuck? That maybe we are both mature enough to move on from this. “I’m going to Kate’s,” she tells me with a short smile. “I’ll be safe, I promise.”

Stassi: What are you doing?

It’s nearing midnight and Stassia’s text message after mostly radio silence all night makes me wonder if something is wrong or if she’s just under the influence of something. I’ve been in bed for a while after the long drive home that took all of my energy.

Me: You okay?

Stassi: Of course, answer my question.

Me: I’m in bed. But you never text me when you’re at Kate’s. You’re staying until tomorrow right?

Stassi: Depends

Me: On?

Stassi: Never mind.

Me: Stass, what do you mean?

Stassi: Do you want me to come home?

Me: I want you to stay with Kate. I know you’ve missed her.

Stassi: Not as much as I miss other things

I can already tell this is a dangerous road that I’m starting down. *Stop it now, Dominic. Shut it down.*

Me: How much have you smoked?

Stassi: I’m not high!

Me: Lies.

Stassi: I'm not, I swear. I would never lie to you.

Me: Me neither. Even if you may not like what I have to say, I'm trying my best to be honest.

Stassi: Brutally so it seems.

Me: I wasn't trying to be brutal

I want to say so much more, but via text message was not the right time.

Me: I don't regret it, Stass.

Stassi: I know you don't. I saw the way you looked at me while you were inside me. The way you held me. The way you kissed me. You may have fucked me but you also made love to me.

The words. The very incriminating words are now in print and on my cell phone and hers too.

Me: Stassi, you can't text me like that.

Stassi: Shit, sorry. I deleted it.

I breathe a sigh of relief in hopes that maybe she really does realize her mistake and that putting something like that in print could destroy us both. I delete the text message as well but decide to respond in a way that she would know what I'm talking about, but no one else would if they happened to stumble onto these messages.

Me: But...I am glad that you realize that. That you realize that my anger earlier was just that. Anger. But at myself. So, I'm sorry for taking it out on you, Stass.

Stassi: It's okay

Me: It's not.

Stassi: You're right, it's not. But I forgive you anyway. Night. xxx

I stare at the x's on the screen for longer than I care to admit, wishing those were real kisses pressed against my lips. My cock practically screams for me to touch it or stroke it as I picture my stepdaughter's sweet face, but I can't.

I can't allow myself to have her in any way, even if it's only in my mind.
I'd tasted the forbidden fruit, and my God, was it sweet, but I fear taking another bite, another lick, another suck would be nothing but poisonous.

SEVENTEEN

Stassia

It's been a week since we got back from Charleston and Dominic and I are moving around each other like polite roommates. I half expected something to come about from the texting while I was slightly tipsy off of this strawberry vodka drink that Kate made me, but the next morning he'd just kissed my forehead and said he was glad I was home. I honestly am not sure what I wanted. I'm not sure what I want next week or next month or next year. I'm not looking for a husband or a boyfriend or even Mr. Right. I do know I'm looking for an orgasm that only my stepfather can give. I want more of that. I want to explore so much more with him.

He'd told me that he was going to claim every inch of me when we were in Charleston and while he did with his mouth, there was still one hole that he hadn't claimed with his dick, and though I knew it would be even more painful than losing my virginity, I wanted it because I knew it would be amazing just like all of the other experiences we'd shared. I'm fantasizing about the weekend in Charleston for perhaps the millionth time when my phone begins to ring.

I'm surprised that Carter has been calling, especially after the last time we met was far from friendly, and yet I'm getting texts and calls and voicemails.

Who the fuck leaves voicemails except for my dentist's office?

And here he goes again. I ignore the call yet again and prepare to delete the voicemail that I know will be coming moments later when there's a knock on the door. Dominic would have my ass if I answered the door to an unexpected guest at night, but it's four in the afternoon, so I figure I'm safe from any abduction attempts. I make my way to the foyer, surprised Dominic isn't already down here and let out a groan when I look through the peephole to see just who I've been avoiding.

"What?" I call through the door. "Most people take a hint when someone ignores their texts and calls."

“Stass...baby...” I hear through the door and I roll my eyes at his term of endearment.

“That ship has sailed.”

“Well, what about the old ship? A friendship.”

“The only friendship I’m interested in having with you is one that doesn’t involve any kind of sexual activity.”

“But...” A hand darts out next to me and before I can blink, I’m pushed back as Dominic opens the door.

“Can I help you?” He crosses his arms and glares at Carter.

“Oh...Principal Callahan I...I didn’t know you were home.”

“Well, I am. Is there a reason you’re on my porch, one calling my stepdaughter ‘*baby*’ and two talking about any kind of sexual activity? Have you lost your mind?”

“Well, sir...I didn’t exactly say anything about sex.” I can see he’s visibly shaken up at this conversation with Dominic. I try to contain the smile pulling at my lips at this possessive show Dominic seems to be putting on for me. *At least I hope that’s what this is.*

“I did hear her say she hasn’t been interested in talking to you. Take the hint, son.” His voice is even, though if I’m not mistaken, I detect a hint of smugness in his voice.

“Sir, I would just like to talk to her.”

“She doesn’t want to talk and until she does, until she reaches out, I would advise that you not show up at my house unannounced again.” He takes a step back into the house. “I don’t want to have this conversation a second time.”

He huffs and looks at me, still somewhat in his line of sight and I simply shrug as if to say ‘Sorry not sorry.’

He turns and heads back to his car just as Dominic closes the door. “That the guy you mess around with?”

“Why? Are you jealous? I have to admit I enjoyed this little show.” I place my hands on my hips and cock my head to the side.

“I don’t like that he’s bothering you,” he responds. *Yeah, bullshit.*

“You don’t like that he’s bothering me? Or that he’s the only other man that knows what my cunt tastes like?”

His nostrils flare and he takes a step closer to me. “Both.”

“Hmmm.” *I wasn’t expecting that response.* He’d been careful not to even get too close to me, let alone reference anything from that weekend, but

I guess jealousy can make you do some crazy things. “Well, as I said, that ship has sailed. I don’t want him. I ended things that night you picked me up from his house.”

“That’s whose house you went to that night?” he growls and takes another step closer to me so that’s he’s towering over me. “Did you let him touch you that night? Did you let him touch you and then you called me to come and make it better?”

Oh, this is good. I could make this work in my favor. “No, caveman. He wanted to fuck me and I said no. I didn’t want to have sex with him. We’ve talked about this.” I turn away and begin walking towards the kitchen knowing without a shadow of a doubt that I’ve got Dominic on the hook for this conversation.

“You’ve never really said why though,” he says as he follows close behind me.

“Because I thought my first time should be special. With someone I trust and someone who loves me.” I turn around and look up into his eyes. “Someone that would make me feel cherished and hold my hand through a really important thing.”

“Did I...you felt those things about me?” I’m surprised he has to ask but perhaps he’s still feeling particularly green with jealousy having met the only other man I’ve messed around with.

“Of course.”

He presses a hand to his face and drops to a chair in the dining room. “And then I was a dick to you.”

“You weren’t a dick. You’re freaked out. Although, I’ll admit it hurt when you said I didn’t have a moral compass. Is that what you think of me?” Those words have been playing in my mind on a loop. Does he judge me for coming onto him? For propositioning him in the first place? Does he think I’m a shitty daughter?

I am a shitty daughter, but the thought of him thinking that makes me feel lower than dirt.

“Not at all. I lashed out and said stupid shit I thought about myself.”

“I don’t think sleeping with me means you’re a bad person.” I sit down across from him.

“I think it makes me a bad person that I want it again,” he tells me and I can see the war he’s at with himself all over his face.

“I definitely want it again, if that makes a difference.” I bite down on my

bottom lip and give him a small smile.

He smiles back, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "You're so young, I should have known better. A woman always feels super connected to the man she loses her virginity to. Forever. It's a bond that can never be severed and you were already connected to me so deeply." He slams a hand down and begins to pace the kitchen. "I'm not even done grieving your mom."

Hearing him talk about her is like a punch in the gut. I know he was married to her. I know he misses her. But now I'm starting to worry I'm living in the shadow of her memory.

"Did you fuck me to try and feel closer to her?" The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. I'm terrified to hear the answer but I have to know if he wanted me for *me*. Or because I look like a younger version of the woman he married.

"You're nothing like your mother, Stassi."

"I don't think that makes me feel better considering you were in love with her. If I'm so different, what is it you love about me?"

"Everything," he tells me. "You have so much fire and passion. You see the world how I used to see it. With so much hope."

"Sounds like you like how naive I am. You like that I'm young." I frown.

"No. Fuck." He moves to kneel in front of me. "Remember when we were in Charleston and you told me you looked up the pornography I watched?" I nod and he continues. "It's not something I'm proud of, but I've fantasized about fucking you." He lets out a breath. "While your mom was alive." He shakes his head. "I never thought anything would come of it, obviously. I'm not a cheater. Even when she passed, I never thought we would get here."

"When...I mean when did you? Was it often?" My sex tingles at his confession and I wish we could continue this conversation in a more intimate setting. *Like a bed or a shower or just fucking naked.*

"I remember the first time. You were seventeen and you came home from practice but you'd gotten caught in the rain. That tiny fucking cheer uniform was clinging to you and it was white and I could just see...too fucking much." He puts his head in his hands and shakes it slowly. "You probably think I'm sick."

"No. I was seventeen." I grab his hand and squeeze. "And you never touched me inappropriately."

"Once you turned sixteen, I became hyper aware of how I should and

shouldn't touch you. When you were younger nothing crossed my mind, but I never wanted you to be uncomfortable." His words are so raw and honest it both chills and heats my skin.

"You couldn't make me uncomfortable. You annoyed the shit out of me, yes, but I always felt safe with you. I don't feel preyed on, because you saw my nipples through a wet tank top. You're still a man."

"You were my stepdaughter," he argues.

"We aren't related by blood, and it's not like you and my mom have a child together. Could you imagine how weird *that* would be?" I shudder at the thought fucking the father of a half sibling.

"I've known you just such a long time..."

Another argument.

"I know, and that's the part that is the hardest to wrap your brain around I think."

He nods and sighs. "I prided myself on always doing the right thing, and this is just all the wrong things." He puts a hand up before I can protest. "Not saying I don't want it or that you're a mistake, but in its most basic terms, this is wrong, Stassi."

"It's probably frowned upon, but I wouldn't say wrong." *Okay, time to reroute this conversation back to what I want.* "What happened after you saw me in the wet uniform?"

His eyes widen and he nods knowing I probably won't let it go without hearing the rest of the story in great detail. "I had never responded to you before. So, instantly I felt like shit. I went upstairs immediately to avoid you. I needed away from you and the visual stimulation that was making me hard as a fucking rock. I tried everything to calm myself down and nothing was working. I knew what I needed to do but I was so worried you'd flash through my mind while I was doing it." He shakes his head. "Until this week I've never masturbated to you."

"This week?" I raise an eyebrow and he raises one back.

"Coyness doesn't work now, Stassia Rae." He rubs his temple and stands up again to make himself a drink. "I've damn near broken my dick off this week."

"You know we could fix that."

"Stassia." His word is firm *for now*, so I wave him off in hopes he'll continue. "I started looking for porn that featured an older man and a younger woman. It worked, but I wanted more. So, I searched for interracial stepfather

stepdaughter porn.”

“That’s oddly specific.” I can’t stop the smile from finding my face and he chuckles.

“I rationalized that it wasn’t about you but that it interested me. The woman was beautiful and the guy wasn’t grossly old. They had a few scenes.” He shrugs. “I know it’s still fucked up. I’m not delusional.”

“Was she prettier than me?”

He shoots me a look. “Now who’s jealous?” I glare at him. “No, Stassi, she had nothing on you. And she didn’t wax. Which kind of took away from the appeal.” He scrunches his nose slightly.

“You like that I’m bare?”

“Fuck yes. It’s so sexy. But then again, I probably wouldn’t care if you had hair either. I find everything about you sexy as hell. Even your smartass mouth.”

Confidence surges through me. I stand up to make my way towards him and stand next to him at the counter. “My smartass mouth can do a lot of things you know.”

“Oh, I remember.”

“Your mouth isn’t so bad either.”

He lets out a sigh and takes another sip of his drink. “Fuck.”

“I know.” I grab the glass from him and take a sip of the harsh whiskey. “So, you watched that couple a lot?”

“More than I care to admit.”

“And you never once thought about me?”

“It was hard as fuck. But no. Maybe once or twice you floated across my brain but I did everything I could to force you out. I was trying to exorcise you from me in any way I could.”

“Did you tell my mom?”

He shoots me an incredulous look. “Good joke.”

“I meant about the porn, not necessarily my connection to it.”

“No. I mean she knew I watched it from time to time but it was never really a big thing for me in general. I’ve always preferred the real thing and I’ve had partners for most of my adult life. Why watch porn when I have access to a naked willing woman that wanted me? Porn is for lonely single guys. Or lonely married guys. Either way, it’s for a lonely man. Someone who is missing something from their sex life. The other side of that is couples that watch porn together. But that wasn’t your mom’s cup of tea.”

It feels weird learning such intimate details about my mother. *Don't focus on it.*

“Did you with Tessa?” I feel like I’m fighting for information at this point. I’m not sure if it’s fueled by plain curiosity or because I want to know what is left that I can claim as Dominic’s first, if anything. But I want to know everything about what came before that sex filled weekend with me. Maybe I’m not entitled to the information, but it won’t stop me from asking for it.

“Yes, but I already told you my marriage to Tessa was much wilder and crazier. We were young and were stumbling our way through life making all kinds of mistakes.” He leans against the counter and I watch in fascination as his arms flex beneath the t-shirt. “Have I answered enough of your questions?”

“Does it mean this conversation is over if I say yes?”

“No. You can ask me whatever you want, Stassi. I’m officially an open book at this point.”

“Okay...well, I think I kind of know the answer to this question, but in the off chance I’m wrong, I’ll ask you.”

“Go for it.”

“I want to break the rule we made in Charleston. I want to have sex again and a part of me thinks you do too.” He doesn’t say anything he just stares down into his drink. “So, what’s it going to be?”

EIGHTEEN

Stassia

I'm holding my breath as I anxiously await his response. The worst he can say is no. That we have to stick to the original plan. He still hasn't answered me when he leans back against the counter and lets his eyes move lasciviously over me. "I told myself I couldn't give in," he whispers, and I'm not sure if it's more to himself or me, but I take a step closer so that I'm standing between his legs.

"What are you telling yourself now?"

He lowers his head and pushes me against the counter, boxing me in with a hand on either side. "That I can't give in," he tells me but there's something about his tone that leads me to believe that there's a *however* or some other qualifier attached. He grabs my chin and tilts it upwards, rubbing small circles across my lips with his thumb. "Why do you have to be so fucking tempting?" He leans down and lets his lips hover over mine. I'm about to reach up to touch my lips to his when he grips my forearms, keeping me rooted in place. "Stassia..."

"Yes?" I blink my eyes a few times in rapid succession, as I try my best to appear as innocent as possible.

"You're going to ruin me."

"Never."

"*This* is going to ruin me."

My tongue darts out to wet my lips. "Only when it's over," I whisper. "Only when our time is up and you can't touch me or taste me or fuck me. But not now, we still have now."

He closes his eyes and when they fly open, I know I've got him. "Let's go," he growls, and then I'm not only in his arms but lifted over his shoulder as he carries me through the kitchen and up the stairs to his bedroom. It all happens so fast; it takes me a second to process it. One second I'm hanging upside down over his shoulder and the next I'm bouncing on his bed and my

shirt is being pulled over my head.

He's on me in an instant, his lips capturing mine with a bruising kiss as he presses his hard cock between my legs and we find a rhythm of grinding against each other. I'm desperate to lose the clothes and rub against him skin to skin, but I also can't bring myself to break the heated lip lock we're in. His tongue rubs against mine so passionately I feel it in every cell of my body. "Fuck me," I breathe out. "Please. You have no idea how bad I need it."

His lips pull away from mine and he peppers kisses across my face and the bridge of my nose. "Need, Stassi?"

"Yes, yes, yes," I chant. "I need to feel you."

"You don't want to come like this? I know your greedy little pussy can come this way."

"Probably, but I don't want to. I want your cock inside me. The way you stretch me is fucking indescribable."

"It's because you're so tight. Your cunt conforms to my dick so perfectly. When I enter you for that first thrust, I have to will myself not to come."

I giggle at his words and when he pulls away he narrows his gaze as if to scold me. "Something funny?"

"It's just...you always have so much control."

"Not with you. I lose all control when it comes to you." He grinds harder against my pussy, and I am officially dying to get these leggings off. "All reason goes out the window, and all I'm left with are my primal urges to fuck you, claim you, own you." He thrusts against me with each phrase, forcing me higher and higher towards my orgasm. "I want to leave indents of my teeth on the precious skin between your thighs."

"Dominic, naked. Now," I demand. I've been without him for seven days and I'm officially over the teasing. I don't want foreplay. I want the rawest sex we've ever had.

Hard. Intense. Aggressive.

The sound of banging breaks through my thoughts and our kiss and when I look up at him, I see him staring at me with the same confused expression.

"Wha—" I start when he puts his hand over my mouth as the knocking continues as well as rapid doorbell ringing.

"Seriously?" Dominic says as he pulls off of me and adjusts his very hard dick. "If it's Kate you need to get rid of her in the next twelve seconds," he tells me as he moves out the door and down the stairs. I don't immediately follow, as my hair is completely disheveled and my loose flowing shirt is

completely wrinkled. I move into my room to throw on a hoodie to make myself look more presentable when I hear Dominic's voice.

"What the fuck?"

I dart out of my room, into the hallway, and down the stairs only to be met with a man that looks like a younger version of Dominic.

Carrying a suitcase.

"Seth?" I try my best to hide the annoyance in my voice and sound excited about the fact that Dominic's younger brother has paid us a surprise visit.

"Can't you call?" Dominic growls as Seth moves through the door and gives his brother a confused look. They've always been close and under normal circumstances, Dominic would be thrilled over the surprise. But due to reasons Seth is definitely not privy to, he is probably confused by his attitude.

"What's the big deal? I knew you were home, I wanted to surprise you." He takes a few steps towards me and wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Stass. What's the old man grumpy about now?"

The same thing I am.

"I think he was taking a nap." The lie rolls off my tongue easily enough, but Dominic is about to blow our entire cover if he doesn't take the murderous look off his face. "That is not a way to greet your baby brother that flew all the way from Florida to see you," I tell Dominic sassily.

Seth really does look like a younger version of Dominic; his hair is a little bit lighter and a little shorter on the sides and longer at the top, and his eyes are grayer instead of blue, but he has the same nose and jawline and build. He's a few inches shorter than Dominic and had packed on a bit more muscle since the last time I saw him, but he certainly has a great body from spending years in the pool.

"Hey, Seth." Dominic relents and wraps his little brother in a hug. Now that his hard on is probably softening, his rage is probably lessening over being interrupted. My heart, however, is still pounding in my chest and the space between my legs is still positively roaring, so I figure now was the time to slip out for them to have some brother bonding time and I could bond with myself.

"I'll be upstairs," I tell them before turning around on shaky legs but a voice stops me.

"Stass." I hear the edge in Dominic's voice which does nothing for the

thumping between my legs that's getting even more aggressive as it anticipates my fingertips, my vibrator. *Fuck, any fucking thing.*

"You don't have to rush off. Stay and hang." He smiles at me and I can read his face clearly. *If I don't get to come, neither do you.*

"But..." I start, but I'm not sure what excuse I really have for disappearing mere seconds after Seth arrived, a guy I actually quite like in the funny, slightly inappropriate Uncle type way. My nose flares in irritation and I grit my teeth hard as I try to stop myself from throwing a full-blown tantrum over not being able to have the orgasm I desperately need.

"So how long ya staying?" I ask Seth as I follow them into the kitchen.

"Until Monday, there's a nine a.m. flight that will have me back just in time for my afternoon meetings."

Three fucking days? JESUS. I ball a hand into a fist behind my back and dig my nails into my palm to try to temper the tingling between my legs.

The idea of having to wait an entire weekend to continue what we'd started makes me want to scream but thankfully Dominic speaks up before I can respond.

"Awesome, listen it's good to have you here man. Sorry, I was just totally out of it when you got here."

"All good," he says as he claps his hands and rubs them together. "Okay, so what's the plan for tonight?"



Thankfully, Seth wants to wash his few hours of travel off with a shower, leaving Dominic and I alone for a few moments. Neither of us want to start something up again in the off-chance Seth takes the world's quickest shower, but the second we hear the shower run, I am pinned against the wall with Dominic's lips sealed against mine.

I whimper against his lips and he groans in response. "Fuck."

"I know. He could not have worse timing," I whine, and surprisingly, tears spring to my eyes.

"Don't cry, baby," he whispers as he wipes the skin under my eyes.

“I’m just so...wound up. I feel so overwhelmed I could scream,” I tell him. “And you wouldn’t let me come.”

“For selfish reasons.” He shakes his head. “I want to watch or do it myself or be a part of it in some way and I can’t.”

“So, I can’t come *at all* while he’s here?” I stomp my foot and tilt my ear up to the ceiling and breathe a sigh of relief that I still hear the shower running.

“Stassia...”

“What if I took a video and sent it to you?”

“No. I don’t need that in either of our iCloud storage or wherever the fuck things go when we think we’ve deleted them.”

“Dominic, be reasonable,” I plead, yes plead. I know I can just touch myself later tonight while I’m safely tucked away in bed. Or while I’m in the shower. But a part of me loves the fact that he wants to control my orgasms. How I come and with what and for how long. My body is a slave to his and I relish in that fact.

“I’ll figure something out,” he says, probably realizing just how long this weekend will seem.

“While he’s here?” I squeal. It’s not like he has many excuses to be out of the house, nor do we have many to leave the house without him. The only thing that would work is if he’s occupied with something. *Or someone.*

“Find him a girl, Dominic. Find him someone he can take home tonight or preferably take *him* home and then you and I can probably be alone.”

He points at me. “You know my brother well.”

The sound of the water shutting off should serve as a reminder for us to pull apart, but it’s as if Dominic has no intention of stopping. His hands are still tight on my hips as his lips dance up and down my neck. “Dominic... he’s out,” I whisper.

“I didn’t hear the door open.” His voice is low in my ear and I shudder when he grabs it between his teeth.

“But...voices carry.”

“Then stop talking.” He grabs my leg and wraps it around his waist, grinding himself against my pussy again. I’m just about to protest that we are playing with fire when he grabs the other and hoists me up into his arms, so both of my legs are wrapped around his waist and he has me pinned to the wall.

My hands immediately go behind his neck and I shake my head at his

recklessness. “You’re going to get us caught.”

He doesn’t answer, he just presses his lips to mine and feeds me his tongue as we rock against each other. We’re in the kitchen, while his brother is one floor up in the bathroom and while I believe we’d hear him should he descend the stairs, the risk that we could get caught in this intimate moment has me panting against his lips. He finally pulls away and rests his forehead against mine. He’s breathing like he’s just run a marathon and when he pulls away, his eyes are so intense it startles me. “What?” I ask, my voice breathy and soft.

“I just...” He stops and looks towards the entrance of the kitchen before looking back at me and shakes his head. “I want to be able to touch you whenever the fuck I want.” He lets me down and takes a step back.

I’m still trying to catch my breath when I hear footsteps on the stairs. I make a move towards the refrigerator so it appears I have a reason for being in the kitchen other than talking to Dominic and grab a bottle of water just as Seth makes his appearance. He’s pulling a t-shirt over his torso and I briefly catch a glimpse of his abs as he covers himself. I don’t think much of it, but Dominic, on the other hand, looks far from pleased. Seth’s hair is wet, and he sends a hand through it just as he drops to a chair at the table.

“I’m starving, what are we doing about dinner?”

“What if we went out?” I say, trying to diffuse the mounting tension in the room that Dominic is causing and Seth seems completely oblivious to.

“I’m down, what’s there to do in this town on a Friday night anyway? Dominic, you going to show me a night out?” He looks at me and smiles. “Sorry, Stass, I wish you were twenty-one. I’m sure you’re more fun than the grump over here.” He points at Dominic and I giggle. “You got a fake yet?”

“Maybe.” I shoot him a grin and take a sip from the water bottle.

“That you are not using tonight,” Dominic interjects.

“Hold up, *Mr. Uptight* knows you have a fake ID?” His eyes widen as he shoots a look of shock towards his brother and then back to me.

“He knows I don’t drink. I got it so I could get a tattoo,” I explain with a shrug. I can feel Dominic’s eyes boring into the side of my face and I wonder if he thinks I’m going to reveal that I have a nipple ring too. *Silly, jealous man.*

“Well, if we’re going to go out for dinner, I should get ready.” My eyes ping pong back and forth between them before making a swift exit to escape the iciness that had spread across the room. I’ve barely made it two steps

when I see his text.

Dominic: Do not touch yourself.

NINETEEN

DOMINIC

It took an hour of back and forth between Stassia and Seth for us to decide on the restaurant I had suggested first. It's in D.C., which is a bit of a hike, but it's worth it for some of the best Italian in the tri-state area. Also, I'm hoping that the D.C. nightlife might entice Seth into staying out to check out the crop and allow Stassia and me to leave because, of course, she wouldn't be able to get in anywhere after a certain time and I would never let her worry about getting herself home late at night all by herself.

It was the perfect plan. Now I just hope my baby brother doesn't fuck it up.

We are seated pretty quickly, thankfully and I'm pleased that it's cooled down enough for us to sit outside. Stassia is wearing these high waisted black pants that tie around her waist with a black and white striped strapless shirt that shows way too much fucking skin for my liking. It's taking everything in me to keep my eyes off of her while I have very inquisitive eyes on me, but it's like she's tempting me on purpose. I also haven't missed the way Seth's eyes raked over her in appreciation when she came down the stairs, and if he hadn't averted his eyes as quickly as he did, I might have made them both fucking black.

Seth insisted on ordering us a bottle of wine and two shots of tequila to start, and I'm more than a little irritated that it seems like he's trying to get hammered while we're out with Stassi. *But there's a plan and his alcohol consumption will help it move along a little faster.*

"Stassi, are you ready for school next year?" Seth asks as he takes a sip of the Malbec he'd ordered.

"Yeah, I think." She nods, before setting down her menu. I'm not sure why she's even looking at it, she gets the same thing every time we come here—or go to any Italian restaurant for that matter—meat lasagna and then at least three bites of whatever it is I order. "I'm glad I decided not to go too

far after all. So, I can look after this one here.” She points at me and smiles and I try not to hold too much stock in her words. I know as soon as she’s in college, I’ll become just a part of her past. The summer fling someone has before their life changes forever. I’m excited for her, of course, but I do feel a slight pang in my chest when I think about not seeing her every day.

Not seeing her every day or not fucking her every day?

I’m not sure of the answer to that question and now isn’t the time for that inner monologue especially when I spot Stassia pulling her hair over one shoulder and exposing her neck to me. She’s still glowing from the beach. Her brown skin is sun kissed and bronzed and making me want to lick the sunrays from it just as I’d done for three days.

Fuck.

I take a sip of my wine to try and snap myself out of the sinful path of my thoughts.

“You’re going to have so much fun, Stassi; college is the best.”

“It’s not all fun though. She needs to be studying,” I speak up, shooting her a look and then Seth.

“Lighten up, Dad. She’s got a good head on her shoulders, she’ll do great.” Seth chastises me. He leans back in his chair and flashes Stassi a grin. I know without a doubt he’d never touch her, but I can’t help but feel like he’s being just a bit more playful than usual. I almost saw red when he came downstairs damn near shirtless. I don’t know that Stassi has any complaints about my body, but compared to a swimmer’s body, I can’t help but feel a little jealous that maybe she admired his physique.

“Yeah, *Dad.*” Stassi giggles. “Relax.” I can hear the meaning behind her words. *Can you stop being so tense?* I’m not sure that’s exactly what she means, but the brush against my leg under the table and the light stroke down my calf has me thinking that it’s the point she’s trying to make.

After we’ve ordered, Stassi gets up to go to the bathroom, and as soon as she’s no longer in earshot, Seth’s gaze shifts to me. “D,” he leans forward, “what the hell is up with you, man?”

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me. You’ve been a complete dick all night. Well, really since I got here. What gives? I came here to see you and try and spend time with you and just be there for you after your terrible start to this year. This isn’t like you. Sure, you’re kind of moody and quiet sometimes, but you can usually open up with me. Is something going on?” He actually looks hurt,

which makes me feel guilty that my brother is only trying to help and I'm taking out my sexual frustration on not being able to fuck Stassi on him.

Though he does keep low key eye fucking her and *that* is pissing me off.

I lean back and run a hand down my jaw and scratch at the stubble that's a little more overgrown than I usually have it. "No, just...tired, I guess."

He seems to take my answer for the truth because his hard eyes soften slightly. "I know. God, I can't imagine. I hate what the world has done to you. You don't deserve it all. You're a good man and you love hard. It's fucked up that the universe takes them from you so viciously."

I clear my throat to prevent the emotion building in my chest from crawling into my voice. The thought that I haven't properly mourned Angela flashes through my mind. While I mourned Tessa, I had a therapist and my brother was checking in on me four times a day. There had been a month-long binge where I did nothing but consume whiskey and pizza, and a list of other destructive behaviors while I grieved who had been the love of my life for so long. It wasn't until I met Angela that I felt myself start to move on. She loved me through that pain, but it took a few years for me to even be ready for *her*.

Losing Angela devastated me in a different way, but even I can see the differences in this mourning process. I smile more, I laugh more, I don't feel bouts of depression or self-destructive thoughts. There were moments I felt I couldn't breathe because I knew Tessa no longer walked the planet. I haven't felt that yet about Angela.

Fuck. What is wrong with me?

Maybe I'd be feeling those things if I didn't have Stassi—a woman that makes me smile and laugh—maybe I didn't feel self-destructive because I know I have to be strong for her.

Or maybe she's healing me in the same way Angela did.

So, what happens after we're done?

My thoughts are interrupted by Stassi returning to the table with bright red lips that were not there before she left. Thoughts of sliding my cock through those ruby red lips flash through my head and my cock immediately starts to rise under the table. It's only made harder by the fact that she hasn't looked at me since she sat back down and now has her lips wrapped around a straw.

"Seth," she says, breaking me from my thoughts, "there was a lady at the bar. She stopped me..." she holds a piece of paper between her fingers. "She

wanted you to have this.”

A wicked grin finds his lips as he reaches for it and she pulls it back out of his reach. “Ah ah ah. What are you going to do for this?”

“Seriously? Come on, Stass. Give me. Wait, first, was she hot?”

“I’d say so. She looked easy.” She shrugs.

“Ha ha.” He mocks and even I let a laugh slip between my lips. I’m not sure what game Stassia is playing right now. If there is even a woman, if that is even her phone number, but I’m willing to play along with any plan she has if it gets us alone.

“She says she’s about to meet some friends at a bar around the corner.” She shrugs. “I told her I’m not old enough to get in and that she knew the bouncer to get me in. I mean...if you need your wingman,” she says as her eyes glance over at me.

Not. Part. Of. The. Plan. Stassia.

“I don’t want you going to a bar, Stassi.” I voice my opinion that thankfully won’t raise any suspicion.

“Oh, come on. They’ll probably slap an under twenty-one wrist band on her or something so she can’t order alcohol.”

“Not the point.”

“Look, you can hash out the details with her. She might still be there; she was nursing a cocktail when she stopped me,” Stassi interjects.

“So, wait, what did she say, and are you sure she meant me and not this one?” He rolls his eyes. “Not that there’s any comparison.” He jokes as he points at himself and then at me. “I mean come on, am I right?”

“Uhhh.” Stassi cocks her head to the side before looking at me and then at him. “I don’t think I want to answer that question.” She giggles. “I’m trying to convince him to buy me a car, after all.” She looks at me and smiles. “I think you’re the most handsome man in all the land,” She says with exaggeration and a giggle, but I hope somewhere inside of her she actually feels that way. “She’s blonde, her name is Rachel, and she’s wearing a red jumpsuit. You can’t miss her.”

Seth nods and grabs her shoulder as he stands. “Good lookin’ out, Stass. Be right back.”

I look over my shoulder to make sure he’s gone before I turn back to her. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun!” She puts her hands under her chin and sticks her bottom lip out. That red fucking bottom lip.

“I shouldn’t give you shit since you put that lipstick on to tempt me.” I glare at her, though I hope she can see the playfulness in my eyes.

She throws her head back and lets out a hearty laugh, putting a hand over her chest and drawing my eyes back to her skin. “So, you like it then?” She leans forward and puts a hand under her chin before shooting me a sexy wink. “I can’t wait to see it all over your dick later.”

“And you won’t let us leave Seth, why? Also, is the woman even real?” I whisper as I lean forward as well.

“Of course, she’s real,” she says looking around me assumedly to make sure Seth isn’t coming back. “It was actually pretty ironic that she stopped me. I think she wanted to make sure I wasn’t *with* him or anything because she was going to send a drink over but didn’t want to offend me.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I was banging the other guy at the table, of course.” She smiles and my heart almost flies out of my chest, when she rolls her eyes. I let out a sigh of relief when I realize she’s kidding. “Really? I said he was my stepfather’s brother and that he’s only in town for the weekend and she lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.” She shakes her head and scrunches her nose. “I swear, I heard her panties drop. Homegirl needs to close her legs and open a Bible.” She giggles. “I don’t know, I just can’t ever see myself being someone who just fucks anyone with a dick. She’s never even spoken to him and she’s already planning to go home with him.” She shrugs and shakes her head, shaking her dark curls over her shoulders. “Wait! Before he comes back, can we please go? Like an hour tops.”

“Stass...” I look her over yet again, from her dark wavy hair, past her sweet face, down her slim body, and tiny waist and know without a doubt I’ll probably beat the fuck out of anyone that looks at her sideways. “I don’t think I trust myself not to lose it with you at a bar. I could barely control myself with that knucklehead Carter and now you want to dangle yourself in front of grown ass men?”

“I don’t want to dangle...I want to skulk off to a dark corner with *you* and make out.” She raises her eyebrows up and down. “And maybe if it’s crowded enough we can dance.”

“With Seth at the same club?”

“Fine, we tell him we’re going to go and then we disappear to go fuck in the car. If he calls you to find out where we are, you say it was loud and I didn’t feel well so we are waiting in the car or something. But at least by then

we would have fooled around.”

I cock my head to the side because the plan is actually pretty perfect. Not the making out in plain sight but the sneaking out for a quickie. We’d parked on a side street that never saw a bunch of traffic unless people were parking.

“Okay Plan B works.”

She claps her hands together and I can see the sparkle in her eye at having gotten her way. “Perfect.”

TWENTY

Stassia

The walk to the bar is quick, which is perfect because it means the walk back to the car won't be too long. Seth and Rachel seem to be hitting it off pretty well, and Dominic and I are a few steps behind them. Every once in a while our fingers brush against each other and I feel a rush of excitement move through me. Dominic and I haven't been intimate in a week except for the rushed interaction earlier today and my body is dying to return to that place of intimacy. I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry as I think about his cock in my mouth just as I'd promised.

"The things I'm going to do with that tongue later." He leans down and growls in my ear and I briefly look forward to make sure they're still in their own world before turning back to Dominic.

"The same things I plan to do with yours?" I sass and he raises an eyebrow at me. Dominic looks insanely delicious tonight and I can't wait to claim him later after watching women ogle him all night. I never really noticed all of the female attention Dominic receives. Or maybe I did, and it didn't bother me. I'm not sure, but from our waitress to at least three women in the restaurant, Dominic Callahan did not go unnoticed. He is wearing black jeans and a white button up shirt with the sleeves rolled to his forearms, which is my favorite look on a man. I'm not sure if during one of our love drunk induced conversations in Charleston I'd mentioned it because he looked like Stassia Vale's fantasy come to life.

Well, he had been a fantasy of mine once upon a time.

"I can feel you staring at me," he mumbles and I laugh before turning forward again.

"You're so fucking sexy it drives me crazy," I tell him and his eyes meet mine as we continue walking down the semi-crowded street.

"You think I drive you crazy now, just wait until I get my tongue on your clit." I almost choke at his words. Words he says so nonchalantly, like he

hasn't just set a fire between my legs.

“Oh my God.” I let out a shaky breath and try my best to continue walking effortlessly on the wedges I'd chosen. I glare at him slightly out of the corner of my eye and he seems quite pleased with himself. “Dick,” I mumble.

“You'll get it soon, baby. Promise.”



Rachel is right, and I get in easily enough, especially once she tells her bouncer friend that I definitely won't be drinking. He stamps my hand with a different stamp just to cover his bases I guess, and ushers me along without another word. Rachel is adamant that Dominic and I have to come to the table that her friends have reserved for the night, and while I wanted to sneak off to get my plan underway, I know I have to play it cool so as to not set off any red flags for Seth.

What I do not expect, however, is a very pretty brunette that is probably much closer to Dominic's age and also not his very off-limits stepdaughter to be seated at the table. There is another woman there as well, but she seems to be preoccupied with one of the two men, and my guess is she's not available. Or maybe this one has already called dibs on 'Seth's hot brother.'

Fuck. I did not think this through.

After introductions and a list of names I don't even hear, I realize they are probably expecting us to sit down.

Luckily, it's a half booth, and it seems like it will be difficult for us to all squeeze, so Dominic speaks up before anyone can suggest how to create more room. “I'll get a bottle for the table, any suggestions?”

“Oh, I got it,” Seth interjects, probably trying to flex for Rachel. “Let's go see what they have.” The three of us make our way towards the bar; thankfully, no one offers to come with us. “Dana seems pretty nice; you should talk to her.”

“Who's Dana?” Dominic asks, and in this moment, even though I know he's full of shit and does remember her name because he pays attention when

anyone speaks, my heart flutters a bit in my chest.

“Rachel’s friend! Come on, dude. She’s really pretty and Rachel says she’s single, has a good job, no kids, she just bought a house...” he starts.

“I am not interested in anything like that right now. I told you.” He puts a hand up to stop him from continuing down his list.

Seth looks at me and then rolls his eyes before turning towards the bar. “Will you talk to him?”

“I mean, it’s not that unheard of for a widower to not be ready to jump back in after two months. And you’re describing her as someone to have a relationship with. If you were just trying to get him laid, you would have led with ‘fantastic head game’ or ‘yoga instructor’ or I don’t know ‘pierced nipples.’” I throw that last one in just for fun and Dominic’s eyes flash to mine and then to my chest.

“Okay fair.” Seth laughs as he raises his arm to wave down a bartender. “You could at least talk to her.”

“I’m not interested in entertaining someone while my stepdaughter watches. I’m good.” He tells him and I want to add, *and the woman he’s banging!*

Seth hands me a glass of water and sighs. “Oh my God, Stassi does not care!” He looks at me and I look up and then back at him.

“It’s kind of weird. He was married to my mother.” *And I’m going to hell for using that one.*

I feel like he’s about to provide a rebuttal, though I’m not sure what it could be, when Dana slides up to us. “Hey.” Now that she’s standing she’s got about a foot on me. Tall and lean and with perfect curves. Her sleek straight hair falls around her shoulders and curls slightly around her breasts that are very obviously not covered by a bra underneath her form fitting dress. “I just wasn’t sure if you needed help.”

“Oh, no I think we’re good,” Dominic tells her with a polite smile.

“Actually, I got it, if you want to head back to the table,” Seth interjects and I resist the urge to glare at him. *What the fuck is his deal? Do not encourage her!*

Irritation spikes in my veins at everything happening when I feel my bag that’s resting against my hip begin to vibrate. I open my bag and see Micah’s name flash across the screen.

God, what does he want?

I immediately ignore the call, knowing I won’t be able to hear him.

Me: I'm out right now and it's super loud. Will call you tomorrow.

I text him and I hear a huff from next to me. "You don't owe him any explanations."

I look up to see Dominic staring at me. We've caught Seth's attention as well and Dominic just shakes his head. "Her birth father has decided to come around after eighteen years and he's pressing her about having a relationship."

"Ah, well how do you feel about that?" Seth looks at me and I look at the only other person standing with us that I don't know.

"I feel like this isn't the time for this conversation." I laugh nervously and Dana's cheeks turn slightly pink.

"Right, duh, sorry. We can talk tomorrow." He grabs the bottle of tequila and the champagne he ordered and we walk back to the table. Seth and Dana are in front of me and Dominic is behind me as we make our way through the crowded bar back to our table. Before we get there, he pulls us back into the crowd and away from the booth. He grabs my hand and pulls me down a long hallway that I assume is toward the bathroom. There are a few people around but it's darker, and more importantly, there are no prying eyes.

"Beautiful," he says as he tucks a hair behind my ear and I tremble under the gentle touch, "I don't want her."

"I know." I nod. "But you *can* have her. No one would care." I shrug.

"I would." He looks at me, his gaze hard and unblinking. "I would care that she isn't you."

I don't know what to say or how to feel about his comment. *Am I reading too much into it?* "Can we execute plan B now?"

"We can. But it might be harder for us to just disappear now." He sighs and presses a hand to his forehead. "You see why I didn't want to come in the first place?"

"I know. I just...I figured he'd be drunk and preoccupied with her; I hadn't anticipated they were trying to set you up with someone." I sigh and shake my head because I should have known better. I look back towards the crowded space and bite my bottom lip. "Can you just tell him I don't feel well and you're taking me home?"

"You mean the plan I suggested all along, Stass?" He folds his arms in front of his chest and gives me a look I've been on the receiving end of many times. The *I told you so* look. The *why didn't you listen to me in the first place* look.

“Fine, you were right and I was wrong.”

His eyes widen and he leans forward, putting his ear closer to my lips. “I’m sorry baby, it’s so loud, can you repeat that?”

I grit my teeth. “You were right and I was wrong.” I punch out every word and push him slightly away with a glare.

“Wow, how’d that taste coming out your mouth?” A playful grin finds his lips and although I know he’s kidding, now is so not the time. “I don’t think you’ve ever said those words to me.”

“Well, even a broken clock is right twice a day.” I narrow my gaze and stick out my tongue.

He shakes his head and very obviously adjusts himself in his pants. “There goes that tongue again.” My gaze flickers to the movement and then back to his lust filled eyes.

“It’s really risky here, Dominic. We’re not just looking out for Seth, but what, five other people? How many people were at that table?”

“No clue, I wasn’t paying attention.” He rubs his face. “You’re right, we have to get the fuck out of here.”

We’re almost out of the hallway when Dana appears from the crowd and her eyes light up. “Oh, I was coming to look for you. I wasn’t sure if you guys got lost!” She’s chipper and cheery and under any other circumstances, I might actually like her and her upbeat persona, but she wants Dominic and thereby she is the enemy.

“Uh no,” I tell her. “I had to use the restroom and Dominic didn’t want me going alone. I’m actually not feeling all that well though. I think we need to go.”

“Go? Oh no! Should we get you some ginger ale?” she asks and I roll my eyes.

“You do know I’m not twenty-one right? I really shouldn’t be here and I’m not really comfortable anyway.”

“Oh of course, honey. I’m sorry, what was I thinking?” She turns to Dominic. “I assume you have to go too?”

“I’m certainly not going to send her home alone.”

“Well, she is eighteen.” She giggles. “Seth says you’ll be in college in a few months. You’ll have to get used to getting yourself home on the regular.” She rubs my shoulder and gives me a smile as the condescension drips from her voice.

“Well, that day is not today,” Dominic tells her.

“Right.” She nods. “Well...ummm...look...” She looks at me and then at Dominic. “Before you go, can I talk to you for just a second?” I shoot her a confused look that is probably bitchier than anything and she turns back to Dominic who doesn’t make a move either. “Right, guess not. Okay, well, I just feel bad that we didn’t get to talk more and I wanted to see if you wanted to get a drink sometime?” I can tell now that she’s probably had a bit to drink which is probably making her more bold than usual. Or maybe she’s not used to rejection and just feels confident enough to ask men out.

If I weren’t so annoyed, I might be impressed.

“That’s so nice of you, Dana, but my wife just passed away, and I’m not ready for any of that right now.” Even though I’m trying not to fully process his words, his voice is even and kind as he lets her down.

“Oh my gosh.” She shakes her head. “I am so sorry.” She pulls a card out of her purse and hands it to him. “Just take my number anyway, in case you ever want to talk.” She slides it into his hand. “I hope you feel better, Stassia.” She smiles at me before heading past us towards the bathroom.

I don’t even have a chance to ask Dominic what we are doing when I’m being pulled out of the bar and back into the night air.

“Wait...”

“No. I want to be back in the car before she tells them we’re gone.” He pulls out his phone and rolls his eyes. “Seth is already asking where we are.”

“What are you saying?”

“Not replying yet.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to fuck you first.”

“Okay, I’m not arguing with that,” I say as he picks up the pace and I have to increase my steps to keep up with his long strides. “But what if he shows up at the car once Dana says we left?”

“We are going to park somewhere else.”

“But—” I start to refute his logic when he stops and stares at me.

“Stassia, stop fucking arguing with me.” I frown at his tone and he lets out a sigh. “I’ve got this, okay? Do you trust me?”

“Not to get us caught? Not in this moment, no.” I shake my head. “You’re thinking with your dick and it’s a bad idea.”

“Fuck,” he says as he slows his strides as we turn the corner that his car is parked on. “I know. You’re right.”

“And how did *those* words taste?” I giggle, throwing his words back at

him.

He's silent for a moment as we continue walking when he picks up the phone. "Hey, Seth." He puts it on speaker so I can hear it as well.

"Where did you go? Dana said Stass wasn't feeling well and you're going home? Damn, you were just going to leave me?" There's no noise in the background, so I wonder if he stepped outside to call him.

"First of all, you know how to use the Uber app and you know my address. I wasn't even sure you were coming home with us tonight at all. Secondly, we were just going to get some air. It was incredibly hot and crowded in that bar and Stassi isn't used to that environment. Once I figured out if we definitely needed to leave the city and head home I was going to call you to see if you were coming with us." The lies are seamless and I clap my hands quietly in praise. He winks at me in response.

"Damn, well I don't know if I'm going to Rachel's; I may just want to come home with you guys."

"You don't want to get laid?"

"I mean obviously, but I don't know, I'm not really feeling her anymore. Dana's actually more my type."

"Take her," he says immediately. "Please."

"After you rejected her? I'm good. I don't need your cast offs." He chuckles and Dominic rolls his eyes. "Is Stassi okay though?"

"She's okay, just a little queasy."

"Alright, let me just close my tab and I'll meet you back at the car and we can go," he says and I stamp my foot.

SERIOUSLY! I mouth at him and he closes his eyes before opening them back. "Ooookay, just let me know for sure what you decide. I don't want to be in the car waiting for you and you decide you want to stay."

"Definitely. I'll let you know when I'm leaving because I'm definitely not totally sure where the car is so you can just pick me up at the front of the bar."

"Fine, Seth. See you in a bit," he tells him before hanging up the phone. We're finally back at the car, and now that we are working with limited time I feel even more desperate to be with him. "The ONE time you wear pants." He shakes his head as he opens the car door. I giggle, but I am irritated that this will take a bit more work than a skirt or a dress. "Have them off by the time I get to the other side of the car." He tells me as he closes the door. I don't hesitate to take off my pants. I'm trying to decide if I should take the

underwear off too, when his voice fills the car as he slides in. “Underwear too.”

I slide them off, and before I can slide them into my purse he pulls them from my hands and runs his fingers over them. “These are wet as hell, Stass. That means your sticky sweet cunt is ready for me.”

“Yes.”

He turns his head and gives me a smirk. “Tell me what you want. We don’t have time for everything.”

“I know.” The thought that I won’t get to feel his tongue in my pussy makes me want to cry but I know I need his dick more. “Fuck me,” I pause, “with that.” I point at his crotch and he unbuttons his jeans and slides them and his briefs down as he moves his seat back. I’m climbing over the console into his lap and sliding down onto him before the seat is even done moving.

“There’s my baby. God, I’ve missed you.” I start moving up and down on his cock just as his lips attach to mine. I whimper and moan and cry into his mouth and he swallows them as he continues to rub my tongue with his.

I pull away from his lips. “Don’t take this away from me, again. Away from *us*.” I grip his shoulders as I begin to move faster and his hands grip my hips moving me even faster. The glass is beginning to fog up and in the back of my mind, I briefly wonder how fogged up glass and a car smelling like my pussy will be received by Seth. I almost stop to comment on that fact but his cock finds my g-spot and my mind goes blank momentarily. “FUCK, Daddy, right there.” I cry out.

“That where you need me, baby?” I hear his voice floating around me, but I’m already too far gone, floating in the space just before the orgasm takes over. “My God, you should see how sexy you look right now. How beautiful your sweet face looks.” My eyes fly open and I officially feel drunk off Dominic right now. My limbs are heavy and I feel like every nerve in my body is congregated between my legs. My clit thumps painfully with every thrust. “Are you going to come?”

“Yes.”

“How soon, baby? In this position and the way you orgasm, you’re going to soak my cock so much it’s going to slide down my shaft and coat my balls.” He groans. “When I get home tonight, my cock is going to still smell like your pussy and I’m going to lose my fucking mind.” His tongue slides through my lips and I taste the sweat on his. “Should have turned the car on,” he growls, but he doesn’t stop. He continues to fuck me at a relentless speed

as I ride his cock.

“This can’t be it tonight. I need more, Dominic, please,” I beg. For the orgasm. For him. For everything.

He tugs my hair back, pulling our lips apart, but we continue our sexual dance. “Come to my room later.”

I gasp as I let my head fall back. It’s close. So fucking close I can taste it. “Really?”

“Yes. I need more too. We just have to be quiet.” His lips ghost down my throat and his tongue wets the skin at the base before closing his lips around me and sucking.

“I’ll be quiet,” I moan. “But let me get it out now.”

“Scream, baby. Let me hear you,” he commands. “Do it now.”

“Are you ready too?” I ask, though even if he’s not I don’t think I can wait. I squeeze my eyes shut and I can feel them twitching behind my lids. My mouth falls open and at first, nothing comes out. I feel like I’m paralyzed. I’m frozen in this spot as he continues to thrust up into my wanting pussy. I can feel myself gripping him harder as my cunt pulses through my orgasm and then I find my voice. “Oh my Godddddddd,” I cry out, as I dig my nails into his shoulders and push my lips to his. I bite down on his lip as a second wave moves through me and it must spur him because his hands make their way into my hair and pull so hard my scalp tingles with pain.

“Shit. There it is. Fuck fuck fuck. You’re soaking me, baby. Can you hear it?” I hadn’t noticed but now I do, the sounds of our juices mixing together, the elixir of our lovemaking creating a sound I fall in love with immediately. Our bodies slow, but they still cling together. My hands on his shoulders and his on my hips. I look down and see the mess between us, but more importantly, I see his cock completely wedged inside of me. My cunt kissing his pelvis. His pubic hair resting against the lips of my sex. It’s so sexy, seeing the thick thrush of dark hair resting against both his white skin and my warm brown skin.

I let out a sigh, just as Dominic presses a kiss to my wet forehead that is slick with sweat. “Wow.”

“Don’t wipe, don’t pee, don’t do anything with your pussy until I can taste what’s in there.”

I bite my lip at his sinful words and I clench around him. “But it’s...you too.”

“I don’t care. I want to taste us together. Pull your panties and pants on

and hold it in there.”

My eyes flare with excitement knowing that if he’s this crazed and starved for my taste, I’m in for *many* more orgasms tonight.

“Okay, let’s air out the car.”

“Seth isn’t stupid, Dominic.” I shake my head as he turns the car on and blasts the air conditioning to clear up the fogged windows. He opens the sunroof and the glove compartment to pull out a bottle of air freshener and sprays the car as I attempt to tame my waves that Dominic had pulled on and made about three times bigger during our tryst. He pulls his pants up, stuffing his wet dick back into his briefs and runs a hand through his hair before wiping his brow.

“I honestly don’t think I give a fuck.” He closes his eyes as he pulls the chair back to an upright position. “That was the hottest fuck of my life.”

Pride surges through my veins at his words. “Am I the best sex of your life, then?”

“By a mile,” he says turning to me. “I thought that was pretty obvious. I’m addicted to you, Stassi. I can’t stay away even though I know it could destroy us. I should be protecting you from this destruction. But I just...I can’t help it.”

“I don’t want you to,” I whisper just as I notice Dominic’s phone light up in the console. My heart stops when I see the three missed calls and six text messages from Seth, and Dominic rolls his eyes seemingly unbothered. “Did you mute your phone?”

“Of course, I did,” he tells me as he turns the air conditioning off full blast now that the windows are no longer foggy. “If he called while we were having sex, you would have panicked and not been able to focus. I needed you to come, baby. We both did.”

“I think he’s going to know,” I tell him as I roll the window down. “Your brother is a manwhore, he knows what sex smells like.”

He laughs and rolls his eyes. “Then I’ll deal with it.”

“Why are you being so nonchalant about this? We said no one could know. You told me I couldn’t even tell Kate!” I squeal.

“Because Kate has a big mouth and my brother and I have a strong bond built on things we haven’t told anyone. You’re eighteen, Stassi. I don’t want to tell him. But if someone has to find out, I’d rather it be him than anyone else in the world.” He pulls out of the parking spot and zooms down the street; I’m hoping it’s helping air out the car slightly.

“What the fuck? I’ve been calling you mother fucker,” Seth says as soon as he answers.

“You still at the same bar?” Dominic asks, but honestly, I’m surprised I can hear anything over the way my heart is pounding in my chest.

“Obviously, did you leave me here, you dick?”

“No, I did not. I’m turning the corner,” he says before ending the call. “Baby, relax, please. I promise, it’ll be okay. You trust me right?”

We pull up to the front and I see Seth talking to some other girl that is *not* Rachel or Dana and shake my head.

“I trust you,” I tell him.

He reaches across and grabs my knee and gives it a squeeze. “We’ll talk later.”

TWENTY-ONE

DOMINIC

The second Stassia slid down my cock and looked at me with those beautiful bright brown eyes, I knew I would end the weekend confessing the truth to my brother. I knew I wasn't going to be able to hold back and the way she looked when I bottomed out inside of her like I'd somehow made her whole again, I saw a flash of my life in five years that still had her.

Had us.

Which means I have this car ride home to prepare for his reaction. He gets in the car, sliding into the backseat and instantly I know he's noticed something's off. "What's with the overwhelming air freshener? Oh my God, did you guys smoke in here?" *Now THAT would have been a good idea.*

"He said I was nauseous," Stassia says from the front seat but doesn't turn around.

I pull out into the street as we begin the trek home where my dick already is, ready and waiting to fuck my girl properly.

"Oh, fuck yes, pass it to me."

"It was a joint, sorry, Charlie," Stassia quips before turning around briefly and scrunching her nose. "I've got more at home though you can definitely hit."

"Perfect," he says as he lays down in the back. "I took way too many tequila shots in such a short time; I am fucked up." He chuckles.

"Don't puke." I glance over my shoulder to find he's already passed out and shake my head.

"We only got away with it because he's hammered," Stassia whispers.

"I was banking on that." I wink at her.



It takes about thirty minutes to get home, and when we pull into the driveway, Seth is still passed out and Stassia is fading fast too. “You need help getting in?” I ask her, wishing I could leave him passed out so I could tend to her the way she needs me to.

“No, I’m going to go upstairs and lay down and wait for you.”

I nod before getting out and opening the door for her. She heads into the house, and I watch her get safely inside before I open the back door and tap my brother on his shoulder. “Yo, up.” His eyes fly open and they’re not completely bloodshot, but they’re hazy and I know he’s still out of it. “We’re home. Go to bed, bro.”

“Fuck. Okay, yeah.” He yawns as he gets out of the car. I follow behind him and he heads up the stairs immediately without another look back. I set the security alarm and head into the kitchen to grab some water for Seth and Stassi before turning the rest of the lights out. I head into the guest room and Seth is knocked out cold with his shoes still on. I shake my head, and because I’m not a complete asshole—despite how I may have behaved since he got here—I pull off his shoes and set the bottle of water on the bedside table. I turn off the light and close the door behind me before slowly moving into Stassi’s room and close the door quietly behind me. She is completely under the covers with them pulled up to her chin. She’d managed to put her hair up but her makeup, including that bright red lipstick is still on, which I know she wouldn’t want to sleep in.

I kneel in front of her bed and stroke her sweet face in attempts to rouse her as peacefully as possible. “Sweetheart,” I whisper.

Her eyes flutter open slightly and then a serene smile finds her face. “Did I fall asleep? How long have I been out?”

“Five minutes.” I chuckle. “I got to you as soon as I could.” I rub my nose against hers and she smiles.

“Where’s Seth?”

I shake my head. “Passed out cold. Couldn’t even get his shoes off.”

“In the guest room?” She lets her eyes flutter closed again and I can see

she's about to be pulled back to sleep. As much as I want her, she looks so peaceful, I don't want to disrupt her.

"Yes."

"K, can I come to your room now?" She burrows herself further into her blankets and I have to restrain myself from climbing in next to her and pulling her warm, soft body against mine.

"Baby, you're hardly keeping your eyes open and it's almost two in the morning."

"No no, I'm up." Her eyes fly open and she shakes her head. "Please?"

I chuckle and stand up. "You don't have to say please or ask to come to my bed ever." I hold my hand out for her to take and she does so eagerly. When she flings the covers off, I notice she's not wearing her pants or top, but my t-shirt she stole from me in Charleston.

"You look good in my clothes," I tell her as we head to the door. I put my finger to my lips signaling her to stay quiet and carefully open the door before peeking my head out into the hallway. It's pitch black and I usher her to my bedroom. "I'm going to make sure he's still out," I whisper in her ear and pat her bottom gently to send her off. She scurries quietly to my room and I peek my head into the guest room again. I'm grateful to find he hasn't moved from the position I left him in. I know that we still have to be mindful of being loud, but I'm hoping he'll stay out for the rest of the night.

I open my bedroom door and I noticed Stassi has lit a candle and has discarded my shirt leaving her completely naked and glowing under the flicker of the fire. I lock the door behind me and shed my clothes in record time leaving me naked as well.

I make my way to the bed and grab her ankles, pulling her hard down the bed and I can tell she's stifling a giggle to stay as quiet as possible. I drop to my knees and press my lips to her cunt all in a matter of seconds, not wanting to waste a second by teasing her. I need her taste on my tongue more than I need my next breath.

She grabs my hair, pulling it and rubbing my scalp before stroking my ears like she always does when I fuck her with my mouth. Stassi has two sides while I eat her out and I can't get enough of either. The side that is soft and sweet and makes these innocent sighs while I devour her. And the side that grabs my hair hard and pulls me hard against her. The side that makes her wrap her legs around my neck and hump my face till she cries. The side that calls me Daddy and asks how her cunt tastes. That side is typically

louder so this is better given our circumstances, though nothing feels better than hearing that D word fall from her lips while I lick her clit.

Fucked up, my subconscious whispers.

I shake my head, ignoring my thoughts. “Daddy.” She sighs and my eyes fly up when I hear that word right now. *Did I say that out loud?* “Will you watch me when I come?”

Her voice is soft and quiet but her words are of the nasty side of her. My hand grips my dick as I eat her pussy, my eyes trained on her just as hers are on me. She begins to play with her nipples and the silver glint of her nipple ring has the cum pooling at the tip of my dick.

“After I come...” she starts.

“You’re going to come again,” I tell her, pulling my cock harder with every lick against her.

She smiles and bites her lip as she nods. “Yes, please.”

“And again.” I growl against her. “Until you can’t stand another and beg me not to do it again.”

“Never,” she responds. “I’ll never not want this.” She swallows and blinks her eyes several times. “I’ll never not want this from *you*.”

I pull away from her, my lips and chin covered in the beginnings of her orgasm and cock my head to the side. My instinct is to tell her that she’s just horny and on the brink of an orgasm, but a part of me wonders if she really does mean that. That a part of her will always crave this relationship with me.

Even after it’s over.

That word flashing through my head feels like a punch to the gut and even after I put my mouth back on her sex, I still hear that word chanting in my head.

Over. Over. Over.

I can’t do this forever with her. Eventually, it will be over.

As if she can read my mind, she pulls my head gently. “Why do I feel like you’re trying to tell me something?”

I pull back slightly, shocked that she can read me so well and shake my head. “I’m not.”

“You’re freaked out about what I said?” She props herself up on her elbows and frowns. I look up at her sweet face and instantly regret putting that look there, especially when it couldn’t be further from the truth.

I kiss her inner thigh and lean up to rest my elbows on the bed. “No, not at all. I’m actually not freaked out at all.”

“Oh.” Her eyes light up and she smiles. “Then what?”

“It scares me...” I swallow as I prepare to expose my thoughts to her. “That I don’t want to end this. That I am dreading ending this.”

She sits up a little more and holds her hand out for me to take. I do what she wants and she pulls me to sit next to her on the bed before pushing me to lay down so she can lay on top of me. Under normal circumstances, I’d be hard and ready to impale her but she rests her head on my chest and lets out a soft sigh. “Why do we have to end it?”

The question I’d hoped she would ask lingers in the air and now I don’t know how to respond. “I don’t want to make your life harder than it has to be, Stassi.”

“It would only be hard here. We could go somewhere else. There’s a whole wide world of people who don’t know us as stepfather and stepdaughter.”

“And your grandparents?”

“They’ll be a very tough sell. They’re all I’m concerned about though.”

“My parents,” I add.

“Your mom loves me,” she quips and this is true, my mother is crazy about Stassia.

“As a grandchild,” I tell her.

“Well, then we fall off the face of the Earth together and live happily ever after.” She pops her head up and looks at me before straddling my pelvis. “Dominic, let’s not talk about what comes after this and just enjoy it now.”

I nod, listening to her reasoning that maybe I should just go with the flow for now. It’s July; we still have a month before she goes to college and the second Seth leaves, I’ll be defiling her daily.

“You’re thinking too much, I need to shut your brain up for a bit.” She smiles and turns around and hovers over my face before lowering down slowly. I grab her hips and pull her to my mouth, tasting her cunt again just as she wraps her mouth around my cock. We stay locked in this embrace for I don’t know how long, sucking each other’s most intimate parts. It isn’t until she comes for a third time, that she pulls away from me. I’d long since come down her throat but my dick isn’t exactly ready for sex.

“Why’d you stop?” I ask her. “I wanted to give you another.”

“You always want to give me another.” She giggles before putting a hand over her mouth and yawning. “It’s late, I should go back to my room.”

“You don’t want to stay?” I hadn’t expected her to not fall asleep with me

and now I'm annoyed that I can't fall asleep against her soft curves.

"What if we don't wake up before Seth? Might be kind of weird if I'm in here."

I frown knowing and hating that she's right. "Fine." I pull her hard towards me and kiss her senseless, giving her my tongue and she sucks it eagerly just as she always does when my mouth has spent a significant amount of time on her pussy.

She giggles and leans down and gives my cock a sweet kiss. "I didn't want him to think I forgot about him." She hops off the bed and throws my t-shirt back on.

"Trust me, he does not think that. He's fucking crazy about you. It makes *me* fucking crazy." The fatigue of the day is setting in as I follow her to the door and watch her tiptoe back down the hall to her room. She blows me one final kiss and then she's gone leaving me to fall asleep without her, yet again.



The next time my eyes open, light is streaming through the window. I rub my face and my eyes before blindly reaching for my phone to check the time. I hold the phone up to my face and see it reads ten-thirty. *Holy shit, how?*

I don't see any texts from Stassi, making me believe she's still asleep, which is normal. Except for when we were in Charleston and I was giving her six a.m. wake up calls with my dick, she usually sleeps till noon or so.

I head into the bathroom to do my business before making my way down the stairs. I'm not surprised to hear the television on, meaning Seth is probably up after doing some crazy ass workout routine this morning despite the hangover I know he's sporting.

"How ya feeling, champ?" I ask him as I spy him on the couch. He doesn't look like he's done anything this morning, as he's wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt with his hood pulled up over his head.

He groans and jabs the heel of his hand into his eye. "Like I got run over by a car."

"Yikes. Too much tequila?" I ask as I drop to the adjacent love seat. "You

want some coffee?”

“Had some. I was actually planning on going back to sleep, but wanted to sit to see if I got a second wind or felt any better.”

“And the verdict?”

“Still feel like shit, and I could use another day of sleep but that feeling is overpowered by the fact that you are sleeping with Stassi.” His voice is even and I don’t necessarily hear judgment, but I can hear a thousand questions he’s preparing to ask the second I open this door.

I shoot him a look and raise an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I woke up to piss in the middle of the night, man. I thought one of you was watching porn honestly, until I heard you talking. You weren’t exactly quiet. But even then, I thought maybe I was just too fucked up and tripping. The sounds were coming from your room so...I opened Stassi’s door. Obviously, she was not there.”

I let out a sigh, wondering how to start. “Okay...”

“Okay? So, you’re not denying it?” he asks incredulously.

“I mean, would you believe me if I did?”

“Deeeeeeee.” He puts his hands over his face and when he drops them there’s a look of pure shock. “What the fuck, man? When? How? WHEN?” He rubs his forehead and squeezes his eyes together.

“After Angela passed, okay? Since she’s turned eighteen,” I answer instantly. Let’s just clear that up first.

“Okay, so you’re not going to prison for fooling around with a minor, there’s a plus. And I guess you’re a good husband for not cheating on your wife with her daughter,” he says sardonically, “but what, this is how you two are choosing to mourn?” His words are ugly and harsh, and while I might expect them from some people should they find out, I didn’t expect them from Seth.

“Don’t,” I growl at him. “Do not turn this into something it’s not.” I can feel the rage spiking in my veins.

“What? Borderline incest?” He stands up and holds his hands up before letting them drop against his sides.

“It’s not incest; we are not related by blood.”

He gives me a look as if to say *obviously*. “You’re her stepfather. For the past seven years. That means something. You’re the only father figure she’s ever had.”

My heart races hearing him speak my fears into the universe. That people

will think I'm sick. That I groomed her for this. That I touched her before she was legal. That I came onto her the first time. My stomach churns hearing the ugly things they'll say to her and about her. "You think I don't know that?"

"I don't know why I stood up. The room is fucking spinning." He sits back down and puts his head in his hands. "Does anyone else know?"

"No. Of course not." I sigh and tilt my face towards the ceiling. "She seems to think we can tell people and they'll just get over it."

"That's the kind of naive bullshit that comes with banging a teenager that hasn't seen anything."

"She's not naive, Seth. She's just hopeful, I guess."

"This is actually insane. Angela has only been dead what, two and a half months? You made it seem like messing around with ANYONE now was too soon. But it's not too soon to be fucking the woman's daughter!?"

"This was not planned, Seth! It just...we got high one night, we started talking and things just started shifting. We spent a lot of time together. We talked and then we went to Charleston and..."

"Oh, that romantic vacation, of course." He slaps his head. "You know, some alarm bells went off when you told me you guys were going down there alone, but I thought I was being crazy for even thinking it."

"Seth...you're my little brother and my best friend, I have to be straight with you about this."

He looks to the ceiling again and raises his hands in defeat. "Now, he wants to be straight with me. No, that time was before you started. When you were having these thoughts so I could have talked you out of them!"

"Seth, I think I love her." It's the first time I've said the words aloud. Sure, I've thought about it a few times over the past week, but I thought maybe it was me going through some sort of withdrawal from sleeping with her to not even touching her. I thought maybe my dick was trying to convince me I loved her. But in the last few days, I've felt my heart and my mind shift slowly towards the idea of wanting more with her and for longer than either of us planned. The thought has sat in the back of my mind and now it's here and I can't ignore it.

He lets out a breath. "Man, I knew you were going to say some shit like that. Dominic, love? I mean I didn't think you were just messing around with her for kicks. That's never been you. To fuck around and hurt people—hurt women, but Dominic, you can't love her. People won't accept it. They won't accept you. Heaven forbid you want to have a baby. How do you think

Angela's parents will take that? How do you think Mom and Dad will take it?"

"I don't know. I can't focus on that. My concern isn't with everyone's feelings. Only hers."

"And how does she feel?"

"In my heart, I feel that she feels the same." *I hope she feels the same.*

He furrows his brows in question. "Has she said it?"

I swallow down the painful thoughts that she hasn't said it. Though to be fair, I haven't told her either. I told her I loved her in a way I didn't understand, and now I very much do. "No, but I know her."

"And therein lies the problem, D. You know her. Like a parent knows a child. You aren't allowed to know her like a lover too." I'm glad that Seth is hungover for this conversation, which is probably the only thing keeping him from screaming or getting worked up. I'm also glad he's keeping it down so as to not wake Stassia. I want to be alone with her when I tell her what happened. I don't want her to feel uncomfortable in any way even if this could be the first of many potentially uncomfortable conversations.

"I get that. I get everything you're saying. I'm not arguing with you. I'm only saying that it's different now. *Everything* is different."

TWENTY-TWO

Stassia

The vibrations of my phone reluctantly pull me out of my sleep. I could easily sleep longer after the long night I had, but when I see the two missed calls from Micah, I figure it's time to call him back.

But seriously? I told him I'd call him back today. And it's barely eleven a.m.

I press my phone to my ear as I sit up in bed and rub the rest of the sleep from my eyes. "Stassia." His voice sounds irritated and instantly I'm on the defensive. The last time we spoke on the phone wasn't exactly pleasant and I worry this will be more of the same.

"What's with the calls? I said I would call you back today."

"Right, sorry. I guess I just got worried. You were out late last night and I was worried about you getting home safely."

"I'm eighteen, Micah, and again, you're a few years too late on the parenting thing." He lets out a sigh and I roll my eyes, already over this conversation. "I literally just woke up, you're new to me and all, so let me give you a quick crash course, I'm not a morning person. And I definitely don't do well with people's attitudes in the morning."

"I don't have an attitude. I was worried."

"And I'm telling you, you don't have to be. I'm good."

He doesn't say anything for a few moments and I briefly wonder if he hung up or the call dropped. I pull the phone away from my ear and see it's still connected. "Hello?"

"I just...I'm not the bad guy here, Stassi."

"Maybe you're not, but I wouldn't necessarily call you the good guy either."

"There are things..." he starts. "Would you be willing to meet me for lunch today? I'd like to talk to you in person." I scrunch my nose. Lunch is a commitment and I'm not sure I'm ready for a sit-down meal with him,

especially after this conversation.

“How about coffee?”

“I can do that. How about around one?”

“Okay, yeah.” I run a hand through my waves that have gotten even bigger during the night. “Send me the address of where I should meet you.”

“Done,” he says just as my phone vibrates. “Stassi, I’d like the chance to talk to you alone. So please just...don’t bring your stepdad.” *Oh, here we go.*

I roll my eyes at his bone to pick with Dominic. “Fine, whatever.”

“I’m serious, Stassi. I don’t trust him and I know you do, but...I think your judgment is a little clouded with everything you’ve been through this year.”

“Okay, if this coffee shit is just an excuse to ambush me about this weird jealousy thing you have with Dominic, then I don’t want to come,” I snap.

“It’s not. I promise. I just want to talk to you about something.”

“Fine.” I fling my covers off of me and make my way to my mirror to see the state of my face. I don’t remember taking my makeup off and sure enough, I see the ring around my mouth from sucking Dominic’s dick for probably an hour and then not taking the bright red lipstick off. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Goodbye, Stassia.”



I’m surprised I haven’t heard from Dominic because I hear the television downstairs. I peek my head in his room and see he isn’t there. I decide to hop in the shower, knowing I have to wash my hair. I also want to shave my legs and everywhere else as well just in case I pay Dominic a late night visit tonight. I’m turning off the water and reaching for the towel when I feel it pulled from my hands. I slide the shower curtain back, having a pretty good idea who is in the bathroom with me and I’m met with hooded blue eyes and that crooked grin I’ve come to love so much. I’m still dripping wet, having not had a chance to towel off and I love the look of appreciation and lust that flashes through his eyes as he drinks me in. He takes a few steps towards me

and pulls me into his arms before he plants a deep kiss on my lips. His hand snakes down my body and between my legs where he rubs at the slick flesh there and I whimper in his arms. “Morning, beautiful.”

“Hi.” I realize I’m getting him soaked but he doesn’t seem to care as he wraps his arms around me and grabs my ass palming it hard. “I’m surprised I didn’t hear from you this morning. Did you even make me breakfast?” I raise an eyebrow at him as he finally hands me my towel and helps me step out of the bathtub. I wrap the towel around myself as he leans against the door watching me dry the water from my skin.

“I could watch you do this all day,” he tells me, “but to answer your question, I haven’t really had a chance to make anything.” I frown, having grown to expect a full spread in the morning. “There’s a reason for that.” He winces. “Don’t freak out.”

I furrow my brows and then widen my eyes realizing that Dominic is in the bathroom with me while his brother very well may be in the house. “Oh my God, he knows?” I whisper as I point towards the door.

He nods. “It’s my fault baby. I was so fucking reckless. He heard us last night.”

“Oh my God.” My stomach turns and tears well in my eyes in humiliation. “He heard...me?” I swallow hard as I try to stomach this news. I can’t imagine anyone but Dominic hearing me say the things I say during sex. *Oh my God, I called him Daddy.*

“He didn’t stick around to listen or anything and I doubt he heard us talking because we were quiet, he just heard us...you know.” He sighs. “The bed, and your moans, my grunting, our bodies moving together.”

I put a hand over my eyes. “Is he freaked out? Does he think we are sick?”

“He doesn’t think anything about you, Stassi. He blames me for letting it get this far.”

I feel myself getting anxious and panic rising inside me. “Did you tell him it was my idea? That I came onto you? Propositioned you in Charleston?”

“I told him it was both of us. We both wanted it.”

“I’m not going to be able to face him.” I shake my head and wrap my arms around myself, suddenly freezing despite the warm temperature of the bathroom. “Dominic...”

“Hey, look at me,” he tells me and I meet his gaze. “How are you going

to face your grandparents if you can't face my brother? He is probably the least of our worries."

"I don't know...Did he know about last night? In the car?"

"Well, he figured it out now. But no, at the time he said he didn't know. He did say he had a hunch by the way I was behaving all night in regards to you. He said I couldn't keep my eyes off of you and any time you moved it's like I was hyper aware of it."

I hadn't noticed that. *Was it that obvious?*

"He thinks it's going to be a hard road for us should we choose to go down it, but he knows I don't take anything lightly. If I'm in, I'm in."

I feel myself getting short of breath at his words. I remember my comment last night about how I'd never not want him and I remember thinking I'd scared him off. Now I'm coming to the realization that I definitely did not.

"You're...in?"

He takes a step closer, raising my chin and pressing a short kiss at the corner of my mouth. "When Seth leaves, we'll talk all of this out. But...to answer your question, yeah. I'm in."



I am on cloud nine upon hearing Dominic's words. My heart feels like it could burst hearing that he is beginning to feel the same things I do. It makes me feel like I'm not so alone. It feels good that I have someone that understands how my feelings came with guilt and a bit of self-hatred for feeling as if I betrayed the one person who loved me more than anyone.

I had dropped the towel and lunged for him the second he said it. He'd chuckled and sat me down, telling me that if I rubbed my naked body against him one more time, I wouldn't be leaving the bathroom without an orgasm. I warned him not to threaten me with a good time, but I knew Seth was awake and God knew where in the house, and I'd proven I was not quiet when I came.

Amidst all of this, I hadn't exactly mentioned that I was meeting Micah. I

hadn't wanted to ruin the moment by bringing it up and now I'm standing in my room, completely dressed, wondering if I should tell him the truth about where I'm going or make something up. I decide to go with the truth. If things were truly changing between him and me, then Dominic needed to trust me and my decisions. I don't want to be parented by him, even if that might feel like his natural reaction.

I make my way down the stairs and spot Dominic reading the newspaper on the couch.

"Where's Seth?"

"Asleep." He chuckles. "Going somewhere? You look very beautiful as always." He grabs my hand and pulls me into his lap.

"Yes. I'd kind of like to talk to you about that."

"Oh?"

"Mmhmm. I'm glad you said we would talk about everything when Seth leaves on Monday but we might have to have one conversation earlier."

"Okay?" he says as if to say *out with it*.

"Micah asked if I could meet him for coffee." He tenses beneath me and I turn in his arms, wrapping them around his neck. "You have to relax, baby. It's coffee."

I note that his jaw tightens. "I don't trust him."

I reach up to stroke his jaw and I feel it loosening under my palm. "He feels the same about you, and both of you have to stop. I feel like I'm a toy you're fighting over. Or maybe you both feel some way about both being with my mother, which is just so weird for me to even think about. I don't know, I don't care. Just *stop*."

"He has issues with me, Stassia. The issue I have with him is that he wasn't there for you or your mother. His issues stem from some jealous bullshit that I'm the father you needed because he couldn't or wouldn't or whatever the fuck." He starts to move me but I hold firm and turn to straddle his lap.

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

"You mean a million times more to me than he ever could. Even if you weren't..." I start. "Weren't my..." I'm not really sure what word to use here. *Boyfriend? Lover?*

"Man?" he smirks.

I smile back and press my lips to his, sliding my tongue between his lips

once.

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asks as he strokes my cheek and tucks a hair behind my ear.

I raise an eyebrow at him and he raises his arms in surrender. “Okay, okay. I won’t, but you’ll let me know you made it safely? And when you leave? I will track you down if you don’t check in.”

“Dominic...” For the moment, I ignore the flutter in my chest over his protectiveness because I really want him to trust my judgment.

“What, Stassi? Maybe eventually I’ll come around to him. But right now, I don’t trust him.”

“I’m not saying I totally do either. But he’s been asking to meet up and I’ve been blowing him off for months. I don’t want to be in this weird in between with my birth father. I need to know if I can see myself having a relationship with him and I can’t know that unless I have a conversation with him, *at least* once.” He doesn’t say anything, he just pouts. Yes pouts, and it’s actually the cutest thing. “If you care about me as much as you say you do, you’ll support my need to do this. To know this part of me that I’ve never known before.”

He looks at me and shakes his head. “That’s not fair to say that. You know I care.”

“I know you do too, which is why you’re going to relax and let me navigate this. I’ll ask for your advice and I’ll always respect your thoughts but you need to understand mine.”

“So wise for such a young girl.” He taps my nose and I rub it against his.

“A pretty wise man taught me a lot when I was growing up. I’ll have to tell you about him sometime.” I wink before hopping off his lap.



Micah is already sitting at a table inside the small coffee shop when I get there. He nods when he sees me, and I’m disappointed that he doesn’t even get up or attempt to offer to buy my coffee. *Wouldn’t a five dollar drink be the least he could do?* But to be honest, I’m glad to have a moment of peace

before I sit down. I grab my latte and cross the room to sit across from him. I instantly wonder what is causing this scowl on his face. “Stassia.” He nods.

He’s dressed in a suit without a tie and his brown hair is slicked back.

“Micah.” I nod back.

“You look very nice. That color suits you,” he tells me and I look down at the yellow long dress I’m wearing that flows with me when I walk, giving the illusion that I’m gliding.

“Thank you.” I smile and take a small sip of my drink.

“So, I’m going to cut to the chase. I...I’m not sure what exactly your plans are for college, but I’d like to help in any way I can.”

I look to the side and then back to him. “What?”

“Like tuition, your housing. What can I do? Are you living on campus because I was thinking if you want, I could get you an apartment?” *Wait what?* “I own a lot of complexes in the city and one just opened by your school. One bedroom or two bedrooms if you’d like a roommate. You wouldn’t have to pay for anything at all.”

Wow. This is a lot. I did take out one small loan, mostly because neither my mom or Dominic wanted me to have a job while I’m in school and in case I need extra money, but they have most of the big stuff covered.

“That’s really nice of you, Micah, but...I’m fine with staying on campus. I already have a roommate and she’s super nice.” A flare of discomfort sneaks up my spine and I find myself sitting up straighter. *Is he trying to buy my love or something?*

“She can stay with you. I’m sure her parents will be thrilled to not have to pay,” he says and now the red flags start flying up everywhere.

“Micah, that’s insane. You don’t even know her. Hell, I don’t even know her that well.”

“We’d draw up a contract if that makes her and her parents more comfortable. So, they know I wouldn’t just arbitrarily change the terms and kick their daughter out.”

“Okay...” I trail off.

“And you wouldn’t have to leave, ever, like you would if you lived in the dorms. You could stay there for summers and holidays, and it gives you some freedom and privacy.”

My God, could he be any more obvious? Again, is this about Dominic? “Oh...I mean Dominic doesn’t really bother me. I don’t mind staying with him.”

“Hmmm.” He leans back and rubs his face. “It’s not weird? Living with your mother’s husband?”

My mouth goes dry hearing him call Dominic that. I close my eyes and let them open after a moment. “It’s not.”

He looks me over and for a second I wonder if he could see the truth written all over my face. I wonder if he can sense the discomfort over this conversation. “I think you need some space to grow and flourish.”

I resist the urge to snort and call bullshit. *Where was this interest in me growing and flourishing years ago?* “And I can’t do that in the dorm I’ve already signed up for?”

“Kids your age would kill for their own apartment,” he retorts and I’m growing restless with this back and forth. My foot begins to bounce anxiously and I feel my heart begin to race. My hands find my lap and I dig my nails into my palms to try and calm the anxiety snaking down my spine.

“I’m sure they would and I think it’s great you want to help, but I just can’t help but think there are strings attached to this. I am getting this feeling like living in your apartment building and letting you pay for it...gives you control over my life and I don’t want that.” I know my words are harsh, especially if there aren’t ulterior motives, but I am sure there is something I’m missing. I’m even surer that his intentions aren’t totally innocent.

I can see a look of anger flash over his features. “Stassi, I’m trying to help and you’re fighting me.”

“You’re not trying to help; you’re trying to control me,” I reply instantly.

His brows furrow and he lowers his head to look at me from over the tops of his glasses. “By giving you an apartment?” The condescension drips from his voice and I so badly want to comment on it, but I’d just rather end this conversation altogether.

“One you own,” I add. *I feel like we’re going in circles at this point. Can you just let it the fuck go?*

“So, you’re saying no.”

“I’m saying I already have my living arrangements in place. I really appreciate the offer, but I don’t need that.”

He shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair as fiddles with his cufflinks. “I can see you’re just as difficult as your mother.”

Fuck. You. I bite my tongue to prevent myself from blurting those words out. “You’d know if you were around,” I snap.

“Are we ever going to get past that?”

“I don’t know, Micah. I’ve known you existed for about two months. I’m sorry that you coming to my graduation and bringing me flowers doesn’t erase eighteen years of your absence. You’re asking for me to just welcome you with open arms. Why, because maybe you’re not a total deadbeat? Because my mother asked you to stay away? Why didn’t you fight for me? For a relationship with me? Because you didn’t care enough. I was a burden you were happy you didn’t have to deal with—”

“That’s not true, Stassia,” he interrupts and I hold my hand up.

“It is true. You could have looked for me when you supposedly *got out of the life*. You said my mom asked you to stay away; why didn’t you fight her on that? Why didn’t you demand to meet me? To see me? I wanted to know you. I asked about you all the time.” Tears spring to my eyes but I swallow them down because the last thing I want to do is get myself worked up over this. He doesn’t respond, he just looks away from me and shakes his head.

“When I heard your mother died, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I know that I haven’t been there for you in the past, but I was worried about you. I’ve been worried about you your whole life. I admit that I could have done everything differently, but I can’t change the past. I’m trying to do better for the future but it seems you’re not even giving me a chance to make it right.”

“I am! I’m here, aren’t I? But you’re going about things in the wrong way. If you want a relationship with me now, this is not the way to go about it.” I point at the table. “I’ve told you this, I don’t need a dad.”

“Oh, because you have one, right? Dominic?” His voice is accusatory and aggressive and I notice his face starts to get red.

“My God, what is it with you and him?” The exasperation in my tone is evident, but I can’t help it. I was officially over whatever his issue is with Dominic. Even if he wasn’t quickly becoming the most important person in my life, Micah didn’t have any right to an opinion on who I choose to keep in my life.

He lets out a sigh and grits his teeth before running his tongue over them. “Stassia...” He shakes his head. “You think you know everything, don’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve got it all figured out. No one has ever been eighteen and made mistakes. No one has ever gotten themselves into something so deep they can’t see their way out.”

Wait, what the fuck?

I furrow my brow. “I am so lost. What are you talking about?” I realize my voice is getting louder and I take a look around to make sure we aren’t attracting an audience.

“Fuck it.” He growls under his breath and my eyes widen at his aggression towards me. He stands up and I am shocked that he’s actually leaving.

“You’re *leaving*? Really?”

“Stassia...if I stay here much longer, I’ll say something I’ll regret and I do not want to do that.” He narrows his eyes at me. “If you change your mind, my door is open.”

“After this lovely father-daughter date? I don’t think so.” I roll my eyes and grab my half-empty latte and begin walking away before he has a chance to.

He’s walked away from me once. It’s my turn now.

TWENTY-THREE

DOMINIC

A teary eyed Stassia coming through the door has my anger already through the roof before she even speaks a word. She doesn't even try to hide from me or hide the fact that she needs me as she pushes herself into my arms and burrows her face into my chest. Seth is one room over and although he's privy to our relationship, I don't think she'll talk as freely in front of him. I nod towards the stairs, guiding her with my hand on her back as I pull her into my bedroom and lock the door. I set her on the bed and kneel in front of her, rubbing the tears from beneath her eyes. "What happened, baby?"

"He...he was so angry. He offered to pay for an apartment for me to live off campus at school and I politely declined and it was like I'd offended him or something. I just felt so weird about it. Living in an apartment building he owned and letting him pay for it? It just felt like I would owe him something if I did and I didn't feel comfortable with that. Like I'd be in his debt."

I curl my hands into fists, wondering what the fuck he thought the outcome of that would be. "We went back and forth for a little while," she continues, "and then he got up, like he was done with the conversation. Done with me. *Again*. We'd been talking for ten minutes and it was like he was fed up with what I had to say and he was over it. He was walking away from me. My God, that alone crushed me. So, I got up and walked away from him first."

Atta girl.

"I don't want a relationship with him. He doesn't know what it means to be a family. He wants to control me or something. Or push some agenda he has on me. It's just odd. Every single conversation we've had, it's him giving me his opinion on something I'm doing wrong. Like I haven't gotten this far in life *without* him. I don't need him." She looks away and I can see the moment the sadness leaves her face and anger replaces it. It's like I'm watching her heart harden in her chest right in front of me and it hurts me to

watch her lose that piece of her innocence.

The first time someone really lets you down. Sadly, it's someone who'd let her down her whole life, but she'd tried to give him another chance. And even still he didn't get it. She didn't want anything from him but a relationship and he couldn't even give her that.

"Baby, sometimes...people just aren't good. They are miserable and angry because they let the world make them hard. I won't have you being like that. You are too good and positive. You are a ray of light in even the darkest of times." I rub my thumb along her lip and she bites down gently and gives me a smile before she sucks on my thumb. "Now? You know Seth is here."

"I don't care," she whispers. "I just want...I want the only man that's never let me down to...make love to me." She looks up at me through her eyelashes probably because she knows I can't deny her anything when she looks at me like that.

"You don't want to wait for...*that*? Until we're alone?" She's used that phrase once before, but now that the words linger in the air especially that second one, I know I need to have her completely alone for what I have planned for her.

"I can't wait two days for this. I need you to make it better. To fix it. Fix me."

"I don't need to fix you, baby; you're perfect." I kiss her nose and run my lips down her face to her sweet lips and suck her bottom one into my mouth. I bite on it gently, and she whimpers in my mouth.

"Dominic..." She stands up and takes a few steps away from me. "I think...I think I'm falling in love with you." Her lip trembles and when she looks up, her eyes are watery. "And that scares the shit out of me because... what happens if...where do we go from here if this ends badly?" Tears begin to roll down her face. "Do I lose you forever?"

"No," I tell her. The mere thought of not having her in my life feels like a pierce to the heart. I need her in whatever way she needed me. "I'll never leave you."

"How can you...after what we've done. How would we ever go back?"

"I wouldn't call it going back, Stassia. We'd have to form a new normal. One that allows us to be in each other's lives as we try to separate ourselves from our past." I take a few steps towards her and look down at her. "I don't want to think about that though. I don't want to think about a world where you don't let me kiss your tears away." I press my lips to hers. "And then kiss

your pussy.” A smile finds her lips. “There she is, there’s that smile that makes everything better.” I kiss her forehead and wrap my arms around her, squeezing her so tightly I hope she believes I’ll never let her go. I lift her chin to look at me. “I never imagined this for my life. You...and...me...but now I can’t imagine my life without you. Without us.”

She slides the straps of her dress down and her dress pools at the floor by her feet leaving her in a lacy white thong and a matching strapless bra. “Us? There’s an us?”

“There’s *been* an us. For longer than both of us probably realized. You and I, we were unexpected, Stassia. A surprise that I never saw coming. But fuck, am I glad you happened.” My fingertip traces down her collarbone to the space between her breasts and over the cups. My hands move around her back and unclasp her bra and I watch as her perky breasts spring free. Her nipples are hard and I can see she’s cold with the goosebumps appearing all over her flesh. “Are you cold?”

“No.” Her gaze is hooded as she slides her panties down her legs leaving her completely naked and gorgeous.

“I’m going to send Seth out. I want to be alone with you.” The growing need to possess and protect her is being fueled by the fact that Micah sent her back to me teary eyed and devastated by his words and actions. The idea of beating the shit out of him flashes through my mind, but I know that is the wrong course of action.

“Really?”

I don’t answer her, I just head out of the room and down the stairs to find Seth eating pizza on the couch. “I need you to go. Go find something to do. Anywhere.”

“Why?”

I cock my head to the side and he drops the pizza and shakes his head. “Are you joking? Can you two keep it in your pants for two days?”

“No. So get out,” I call over my shoulder as I head into the kitchen and grab two bottles of water for us.

“You can’t fuck in the shower like normal people trying to hide the sound?” he calls from the couch as he seems to be making zero effort to move.

“I don’t want Stassi to feel uncomfortable.”

“What about ME? What about if I’m uncomfortable?”

“Oh my God, take my car. Go do something. Anything. I know you don’t

need an excuse to go out and party.”

He looks at his watch. “It’s four o’clock on a Saturday, bro, and I’m hungover.” I blink at him several times as if to say ‘and?’ “Damn my own brother. You really are sprung.”

“You’re the best.”

“I fucking know I am, asshole.” He grunts as he follows me up the stairs to his room. “I’ll be gone in ten.”

“Five,” I call from my bedroom door before tossing him the keys to my car. “Lock up when you leave.” I close the door behind me and Stassi is in the center of the bed, on her hands and knees, her ass facing me. She turns her head and there’s a gleam in her eye that makes me believe that she’s up to something.

I whistle and begin shedding my clothes at rapid speed. “My God, Stassia.” I walk around the bed so that I’m standing in front of her and I notice her head is lowered. “Look at me.”

She looks up at me and I’m momentarily stunned by how beautiful this woman is as she looks up at me from where I’m about to fuck her. “I was thinking...? I’m ready for you to fuck me...” she swallows, “back there,” she whispers. “I want you to have me *completely*.”

“Fuck, Stassi. You’re serious?” My cock has gotten harder in the last thirty seconds than it’s probably ever been and it pulses every time she takes that luscious bottom lip between her teeth.

She sits back on her heels and looks up at me with tears in her eyes. “I know I’m seriously in love with you.” She bites her bottom lip again and then I’m on the bed next to her.

“Stassi.”

“Please don’t hurt me.” She blinks away the tears in her eyes and I shake my head.

“Never. I could never hurt you.” I push her down into the covers and lie between her legs. “I need to make you come first. *A lot*. You’ve never had anal sex and I want to get you nice and loose and languid and drunk on me and my cock and then I’m going to fuck this sweet ass of yours.” I sit up on my knees and push her legs back so her ankles are next to her ears. “Hold them,” I command and she does eagerly. I grip her delectable ass cheeks and slide my tongue between her cheeks. She whimpers as I fuck her with my tongue, letting the spit slide out of my mouth and into that area. I set her legs down and get up to go to the bathroom to quickly rinse my mouth out before

returning to the bed. “Baby, I just realized we don’t have lube.”

“Don’t be such a baby, I can handle it.”

“This isn’t like how it feels in your pussy, baby.”

“How would you know? Have you ever had your ass fucked? And do you have a pussy to compare?” she sasses, narrowing her eyes in jest.

“Cute,” I tell her as I slap her pussy, and she whimpers. “This,” I tell her as I grip her between her legs. “You have the sexiest fucking pussy, baby. Your taste, your scent, your clit. All of it drives me wild.” I could worship at the altar between her legs for the rest of my life and it wouldn’t be long enough.

I eat her to two orgasms and just when she’s panting and crying out that she can’t take anymore I flip her on her stomach and pull her up on her knees. “Do not move,” I growl and within seconds I’m in and out of her room and back in my bedroom with her vibrator in my hand.

“How’d you find that?!” she shrieks and I shoot her a look.

“In your nightstand, Stassi, really?”

“Did you check there before?”

“Maybe.”

“Dominic! How long have you known that was in there?”

“Only since we got back.” I chuckle. I climb on the bed and hover over her and press her toy between her legs and slide it inside of her greedy pussy. She moans when I begin to play with her. “I wanted to see what you use to get off.”

“You went through my stuff?”

“Yep,” I growl in her ear. “I think you must have used it earlier that day because I could smell you on it.”

She gasps as I put my cock at her asshole. I rub the juices from her orgasm around my dick and on her hole and let a drop of my spit drip down her crack. It isn’t quite as much lubricant as I’d like, but she’s practically begging for it. Panting and crying for me to fuck her while the vibrator fucks her senseless. I begin to inch my way inside of her asshole and I stuff a fist into my mouth and bite down as I’m currently a centimeter into quite frankly the tightest fucking vessel of my life. She clenches around me and I rub her back gently because although it feels fucking incredible it means she’s tense and nervous. “Baby, it’s okay. Relax. We won’t go any further than you’re ready. If it hurts we’ll stop.” I notice she’s biting down on a pillow but she lets it drop from her lips.

“Keep fucking going.” Her eyes flutter and I think they actually cross slightly. “Oh God, Dominic, I think I’m going to come already.” She lets out a low moan and I am very turned on watching how sexy she looks as she fucks herself with her toy.

“Does that vibrator fuck you better than I do, baby? Answer wisely, because I’ll take it.” I warn her.

She giggles. “Definitely not. I can’t imagine anyone or anything could fuck me better than you do. Your cock, your mouth, your fingers. Every part of your body knows how to play my clit like a fucking instrument.” She lets her head drop to the pillow as I inch again inside of her.

“The first time we fucked, Stassi, I knew I’d never be able to give you up after that weekend,” I confess. “The first time I tasted your pussy, I knew I’d never find another that tasted like yours. It’s like all of my favorite tastes and scents are buried between your legs. Yours is the only cunt that has ever made me hard while I’m eating you out.”

“Really,” she pants as she slides her body back on my cock slightly.

“Easy baby, let me take care of it.”

“Then go faster!” she whines.

I slap her ass and move in further. “The first time I sucked your tits, I had a flash of a baby doing something similar.” A gasp leaves her lips.

“Like...your baby?”

“Like my baby,” I growl.

“Do you want...that?” Her voice is shaky and I know it’s because I’m very close to bottoming out in her asshole.

“I want whatever you want to give me. I told you that before we had sex that first time.” I tell her as I grip her hip to try and get control of the orgasm that’s starting to move up my spine.

“I...I would love that.” She moans. “Your baby. Being the mother to your baby.” She lets out a cry. “Oh my God, yes yes yes.” She cries as she lets the vibrations intensify on her clit.

“Come, baby.”

“Yes. Fuck, Dominic, come in my ass, baby. I need you to claim it. Mark it. It’s yours.” A violent orgasm rips through her causing her to convulse and move up and back on my dick. My vision momentarily blurs as I come hard in her ass. I grab her hips keeping her steady as I thrust slowly in and out of her as I work all of the cum out of my dick. She’s still sobbing beneath me from the orgasm she had and a smile finds my lips when I hear her

whispering my name over and over again.

I pull slowly out of her asshole and watch in fascination as I see the white substance sitting at the entrance, slowly dripping out onto the bed.

It's filthy. Hot. Incredible.

I flip her onto her back and within seconds my lips are on hers. I thread our hands together and hold them above her head as we continue to kiss. Each second that passes, I seem to be learning something new about her and about us. By the time we've slowed from frenzied kissing, to slow languid licks into each other's mouths, I'm convinced that I'm in love with her.

"I love you," I whisper into her mouth between kisses.

She pulls back and looks up at me, her brown eyes watering slightly. "Finally." She smiles. "I have you."

"Forever."

TWENTY-FOUR

DOMINIC

The next few weeks fly by too fucking fast. Stassia and I are quite literally attached at the hip with the exception of the few times she had to let Kate drag her out. We're heading into August which is the month she is preparing to head off to college and I'll admit there's a pang in my chest when I think about her going away. Our very first fight stemmed from her wanting to stay here instead of going to the dorms, and I told her that I would be here waiting for her every weekend or whenever she wanted to come home and see me, but that she needed the experience of staying in the dorm. She'd been excited and I wasn't going to take that experience from her just because I want her in my bed every night and not one across town.

It's a rainy Saturday morning when the doorbell rings and I'm wondering who that could be showing up unannounced. Kate had kidnapped Stassia last night for their last sleepover as Kate is heading off to MIT tomorrow, so I'm not expecting any of her friends. I clench my fist when I see who's on my fucking porch probably here to harass my girl more. I open the door to see Micah standing there with a smug fucking grin that I want to knock off.

I cross my hands over my chest. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," he says matter-of-factly as he pulls off his sunglasses. "Can I come in?"

No. "Stassi isn't here." I notice he has a folder with him and I'm wondering what the hell his game is right now.

"I know," he tells me and my blood runs cold. *Why the fuck would he know that?*

"What does that mean?"

"You're going to want me inside for this conversation, Daddy dearest," he growls at me, and in the depths of my soul, I know there is going to be nothing civil about this conversation. I let him in and we stand in the foyer, as I don't have any plans to invite him further inside.

“You’re going to stay the fuck away from my daughter.”

“Excuse me, your who?” I laugh. “Trust me she doesn’t want that title from you.”

“Oh...but she wants it from you, right?” His lips turn into a snarl and he shakes his head. “Because this is really fatherly, right?” He opens the folder and shows me pictures of me and Stassi. *Everywhere*. Very very intimate pictures. Especially that night we went out with Seth and fucked in the car. Someone had been so close; you can see every depraved detail. You can practically see the sweat dripping off of us. Then there are pictures taken through our window, of us kissing. Me kissing her neck. There’s even a faint one where it’s pretty easy to assume she’s giving me a blow job. There are more than a few pictures with my face buried between her legs. Every single photo is more incriminating than the last. Especially the last one. That last fucking one that shows she was in my fifth-grade math class when I was a teacher.

“Class act, Principal Callahan. So, now tell me, how long have you been fucking a student?”

My mouth goes dry and all I can think of is getting to Stassi before she can get home. The last thing I want is for her to walk into this shitstorm. “I never touched her while she was in high school.”

“Bullshit, you were so fucking territorial at that graduation. I knew something felt off. You were acting like a jealous fucking boyfriend.”

“I didn’t touch her until she turned eighteen. You don’t have to believe it, but it’s the truth.”

“Whether or not it’s the truth is irrelevant, all that’s important is what people will believe. And these pictures will ruin you. If not for the mere fact that you were banging a student, but the fact that she’s your dead wife’s daughter? Your reputation is finished. No school will hire you. You’ll be lucky if you stay off a sex offender registry.”

“Stassi would never lie and you can’t prove that any of these pictures happened before she was eighteen.” My palms are starting to sweat and my heart is racing, but I’m trying to remain cool and unbothered by this asshole who seems to be gearing up to blackmail me.

“These pictures will ruin your life, Callahan. Hers too. Is that what you want for her?”

“Is that what *you* want? You’re that angry that she turned you down to buy her an apartment you’re willing to humiliate her? These pictures will

destroy her too, Micah.”

“Collateral damage.” He shrugs. “She’ll move on from these. Her reputation might be a little tarnished, but people will move on. You, however, are finished here.”

“Collateral damage? Do you hear yourself? That’s your daughter.”

“No, as you both have made it so clear. That’s *your* daughter. One you’ve chosen to fuck as some sort of sick twisted game I’m sure.”

“It’s not at all like that.”

“Wow, spoken like a true pervert.” He shoves the pictures against my chest. “These are yours. Trust me, I have copies.”

“What do you want?” I ask him, knowing there is no sum of money too big to get him the fuck out of Stassi’s life.

“I already told you. End it with Stassia. It’s going to ruin her life. Whatever this fucked up affair is? It’s done. Effective now.”

“You do not have a say in that whatsoever.”

“Fine. Don’t do it.” He shrugs. “I’ll just release these pictures to the entire school board. Maybe send them to some shady nerd who codes who can sneak them onto Stassia’s high school website so the whole world can see she’s been riding the Principal’s dick for good grades.” He claps his hand and points at me. “And if that’s not a big deal to you, I’ll send them to Angela’s parents and yours as well. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled that you’re fucking their granddaughter.”

“Micah...”

“For you to defile her in a car like this, Dominic.” He tsks at me. “She deserves better than that.”

“How long were you following us?”

“Long enough. That night I called Stassi and she said she was out; my Private Investigator had followed you guys there and said you two looked...*close*. I wasn’t sure what he meant, but then he spelled it out for me when he spotted you two at the bar, a second away from kissing. He followed you to your car and called me the second she climbed into your lap. I told him to hang up and take as many pictures as he could. This went on until well...” He points at the most recent picture. It is one taken just yesterday morning. We were on the back deck having woken up early to watch the sun rise and she’d climbed into my lap just before she’d pressed her lips to mine. We’d kissed until our lips were raw, whispering how much we loved each other between kisses and how nothing would change even after Stassia left.

She'd rubbed against me until we both came in our clothes, and this picture was a very aggressive shot of our dry humping.

Fuck.

"Micah...I can't say goodbye to her. I know you don't support it, but I love her."

"You loved her as a daughter, you sick fuck! My daughter."

"Don't start that shit, Micah, because you and I both know it's a tired argument."

"So, you decided you raised her enough. She was eighteen, now you could fuck her? What kind of logic? You're right, I'm kind of shit at it. But I don't think that's how parenting works, Dominic. You don't love her. You love her body. You love that she's Angela part two. You love that she gets on her knees and does whatever you want blindly because she's young and desperate for love and attention from a man due to Daddy issues." He puts a hand up. "And before you say it, yes, I know that stems from me. But you're helping her have a whole different wealth of them. You're what forty something? She's eighteen and you're talking to me about love? Fuck off. You're a sick fucking pervert, and I should have you arrested. I'm friends with the Chief of Police, so I just might if you don't toe the mother fucking line, Callahan, so help me."

"I can't just break up with her. It will crush her."

"She will move on. With someone appropriate. Hell, literally anyone in the world would be a better choice than you. Tell her she has to go. She has to move out now."

"Now?"

"I don't want her in the same house as you."

"No, I'm not going to make her leave her house. This is her home."

"That she built with her mom and her stepfather. Yes, truly a family house. Have I thanked you yet for taking such good care of the only woman I ever loved *and* my daughter? You really deserve both father and husband of the year."

His words are hateful but some of them ring true. I am just as shitty as Micah says I am. And what's worse is I've been faulting Micah for his shortcomings. Pointing a finger at him for mistakes he's made when I'm doing things perhaps far worse and more damaging to Stassi. I'm the father she never had and then what seemed like overnight, I became the only man she wanted.

“You need to give Stassi a shot at a normal life. Being with her stepfather is just going to make her a joke. A stigma. The taboo story that her friends will share like urban legends. I don’t care if you love her. But if you do, you won’t let her continue down this road. She deserves better.”

“Don’t talk to me about what Stassia deserves, Micah. I’d give her the fucking world and she knows that.”

“It means something different when you’re talking about the woman who sucks your dick, Dominic.” He takes a few steps back. “Move the fuck out if you don’t want to ask her to leave, but the days of you under the same roof are fucking over. If you’re not out by tonight, I’m releasing these photos.”

“Tonight? Are you insane? How the hell am I going to talk to her.”

“I wouldn’t suggest telling her about our little talk, because I’ll only deny it and by that point, she’ll think you’re just ending it because you want out. Because she’s a silly little girl and you’re a fucking man. How could she make you happy?”

This man is pure fucking evil and if Stassi and I ever get out of this mess, I am taking us as far the fuck away from him as possible. “She would never believe that. She’d never believe you over me. I’ve never lied to her.”

“Fine. Risk it then. Do what you need to do, Callahan. Just know the clock is ticking. You don’t get to be Stassi’s father and her lover, Dominic.” He reaches for the door. I want to literally throw him out of here, but I don’t think I want to add any more things he can use against me with his so-called police buddies.

But fuck him if he thinks I won’t stick up for my girl. Even if she may not be for much longer. “I don’t want to be her father at this point, but it sure as fuck can’t be you either. You’ve lost any chance of that by doing this to her.”

“If she sees this as me doing her a disservice then she’s as naive as I thought. This is me protecting her, Dominic. If you weren’t thinking with your dick, you’d see that.” He storms out, slamming my door behind him and the whole house rattles under the force.

His words swirl around me and as much as I want to hate him, and my God I really do, he is right in some ways.

No, Stassia was right in that you two just need to fall off the face of the Earth and resurface somewhere no one knows your story. No one will know.

Stassia even pushed to transfer schools so that we could start somewhere new, but I didn’t want her to change all of her plans for me. I wanted her to thrive in the environment she wanted and if I had to cheer her on differently

in public than I did in private, I was okay with that.

She won't thrive here if those pictures get out though, and now look at the mess you're in.

TWENTY-FIVE

Stassia

I'm practically skipping into the house after having gotten Dominic's text message to *get home as soon as I could*. I know I'm in for several orgasms, since I spent the night at Kate's last night and not with Dominic's cock inside of me. "Baby!" I call out as I run into the house. But I stop in my tracks when I notice the suitcases by the foyer.

Oh! We're going somewhere?

I run up the stairs. "Dominic, where are we—" I start when I see him sitting in my bedroom on my bed staring at the floor. "Going?" I stop and cock my head to the side. "Hey, what's going on? Why the long face?" I go to sit in his lap, which has become my usual seat if he and I are in the same room but he doesn't let me.

"I can't, if you're sitting on my lap, Stassi." He tells me as he holds his arms up to prevent me from coming any closer.

"Can't...what?"

He swallows and pats the seat next to him. I take the seat and look up at the man I've come to love in such a short period of time, but in the same breath have loved in some capacity for most of my life. "Baby, you're scaring me, what's wrong?" I rub the back of his neck and lean against him. "We can fix it, whatever it is."

"No, Stassia. We can't. Not this. And I'm so sorry, I fucked this up so bad. I...I ruined everything."

"How?"

"I don't know how I thought this could work."

Fear grips my heart. *He can't mean...there's no way*. "Can you clarify what you mean?"

"You and me, Stassi. How the hell did I think this could work?" He stands up and looks at me. "I'm your fucking stepfather!"

My mouth drops open. "Yes, but we're fine. No one knows." I've learned

to read him so well and I can see he's scared more than he's angry, but what I'm not sure of is why.

Stay calm, Stassi.

"That we know of!"

"Okay...I'm not sure what to say to that. So, we're worried about potential people finding out about us?"

"How are we going to tell your grandparents, huh? HOW?"

"We said when the time was right. Maybe in a year or two years or whenever. Dominic, you're freaking out."

"You think, Stassi? I was your principal! Your mother's husband! Your stepfather!"

"Stop yelling at me, Dominic. Have you lost your mind? Who are you right now?" He's never taken this tone with me since the dynamic of our relationship has changed, and suddenly I feel like I'm fifteen years old and we're locked into one of our arguments.

"I'm a man that has definitely lost it if he thought he could be with his stepdaughter forever. What kind of fantasy world have I been living in? Did grief just manifest in a different way this time around?" He shakes his head. "Fuck me." Tears have now started to fall down my cheeks as I know where this is headed and I feel like my heart could pound out of my chest with how hard it's beating.

"Dominic, we're in this together. I'm scared too, but it's not the end of the world. People will just need time. We aren't telling anyone anything now."

"No one will accept it." He snaps as he starts towards the door and I think this is the first time he's ever walked out while I've been speaking.

I follow behind him and down the stairs. "Then they don't need to be a part of our lives, Dominic."

"It's not that simple, Stassi." His back is to me but I can tell he's shaking and when I move to stand in front of him, I can see the tears in his eyes.

"Look at yourself, you don't mean what you're saying. You're just scared."

"No," he says as firmly as he can, though his voice still shakes with emotion.

"Yes. You're being a coward." I point at him. My voice is getting harder as I feel myself shutting down. Dominic and I are supposed to be in this forever, and I certainly can't be the one who keeps it together when he tries to

jump ship. I am not going to convince him to be with me every time he feels guilty for our unconventional relationship.

“Maybe I am, but I can’t stand by and watch as either of us ruin your life.” His voice is getting more even and now he’s almost cold. Aloof. His normally piercing blue eyes are dull and lifeless, like he’s a shell of the man I’ve come to love.

“Who are you?”

“Not a good man, Stassia. No good for you.” He grabs the two suitcases and walks towards the door.

“Wait, you’re like...leaving? Is this a joke?”

“Just until you go to school. I know Kate is gone, but maybe you can have a friend come stay with you, or I can call Pamela.” *My grandmother? And what are you going to tell her?*

“Are you fucking kidding me? Is there someone else? Just be straight up with me. If you want to go bang some boring forty-year-old soccer mom, be my guest, but come up with a better fucking story than this.”

He shakes his head, lowering it slightly. “There could never be anyone else.” He tells me. “I deserve to be alone, Stassia. I can’t keep hurting everyone I love. I can’t keep losing people. I just need to be by myself, so I don’t have to lose anyone.”

“Where are you even going?” At this point, I’m worried. He’s saying things I’ve never heard him say and he’s mentioned having self-destructive behaviors when Tessa died. “Can you please just let me know you’re safe?”

He nods. “Take care of yourself, Stassi, okay? Promise me.”

“Dominic,” I plead, “please don’t do this. You promised *me* you’d never leave me. You’d always be here.” I run towards where he’s in the doorway. “You said forever,” I whisper as I look up into his eyes and see the same pain I feel burrowing in my heart. “You’re doing this, but I don’t understand why.”

“Please don’t try to understand, Stassia. Just...let me go.”

“No. Never.” I bite my bottom lip. “You’re my...everything,” I tell him, as I bare my heart to him. “You’re the most important man in my life. You have been for so long and yes the roles have changed over the years but I think that makes us more special, not sick.”

“It’s not special, Stassia. It is sick. We can’t be together.”

“But...I love you.”

“I love you for healing me, but I can’t love you. Not the same way I loved

your mother or Tessa.” His words destroy me. They hit me so hard I take a step back and press a hand over my heart. “You...” he’s becoming blurry now as the tears flood my eyes, “you don’t mean that! You said you never felt about anyone the way you feel about me.”

“The lust we felt...it convinced me that what we had between us was love. We have hot sex, Stassi, but...we can’t ruin our lives for that.”

“Wow.” My heart can’t take much more of this abuse so I finally retreat into the house. “Go,” I finally say as I sit down on the steps. “Please just go, you fucking coward. Whatever it is you’re so afraid of, I hope you realize that we could have faced it head on if you just talked to me.” I wipe my tears and press a hand to my heart again to see if I feel any cracks or fissures because it sure feels like my heart has split wide open.

“I’m sorry, Stassia.” He shakes his head as he grabs the door handle. “Please know,” I meet his gaze, and in a brief flash, I can see everything he hasn’t said. *There’s more to this. It’s not so black and white.* “I’m just so sorry.” He’s gone without another word, leaving me confused, devastated and heartbroken.



DOMINIC

I’ve had to pull over twice to puke my guts out; the second time, I actually fall to the dirt on my hands and knees as the pain shooting through me kills my ability to stand. I manage to get back into the car again and place my head on the steering wheel as I take another swig of water and spit it out the open car door. I know I shouldn’t be driving with a war of emotions raging through me, but I’m not sure what I want to do. Part of me wanted to go to Stassia’s grandparents and confess the whole thing, but a part of me is scared of Dwight, her grandfather, and I’m fairly certain that Pamela could put me over her knee and whip me like I was one of her own.

I decide to check into a hotel and I shoot Stassi a text.

Me: I'm staying at a hotel in town. I'm safe.

Surprisingly her response is instant.

Stassia: Thank you for texting me and letting me know.

Me: Are you alone?

Stassia: Yes.

Me: I don't like that you're staying there by yourself.

Stassia: You gave up the luxury of telling me what you like when you left me sobbing on our floor.

Fuck. I knew I'd gone too far, but I knew I had to say the things that would make her let me go. Anything else I said she'd argue and wear me down. I had to bring up the things I knew she was insecure about so that she'd hate me. If she's angry, maybe it will hurt her less. Maybe it will be easier for her to move on.

Me: I'm sorry, Stassi.

Stassi: What did I do?

Now that I won't stand for. I won't let her think she did anything wrong.

Me: Nothing. This is all me. I'm fucked up.

Stassi: No, you're not. You're beautifully broken...but you're mine.

Me: I can't be...as much as I would like to be. I just can't.

Stassi: In another life?

The tears trail down my face as I type out one word before tossing my phone far away so I don't have to see any more of her incoming messages.

Me: Forever.



The days slowly turn to weeks, and before I know it, it's been two weeks since I've seen or talked to Stassia. We haven't even texted since that first day and every day that goes by I feel a piece of me floating further and further away. I'd left my entire heart with her, leaving me hollow and empty. I'd given Seth a very watered down version of what happened and made him swear on everything we know that he won't tell Stassi and he obliged, probably because he believes this is for the best as well even though he knows I'm destroyed.

I've heard from Kate periodically, making me wonder if Stassi had broken down and told her. She's away at MIT but every once in a while I get texts like. "She's doing good today," or "She laughed on Skype," or "Maybe you should call her?" I let every one of her texts go unanswered until the one she sent today.

Kate: Micah showed up at your house.

I'm pressing the button to call her instantly. "What is he doing there?"

"I don't know," Kate says. "And hello to you too, by the way." She lets out a sigh. "Why aren't you answering my texts?" I don't say anything because I don't know what I should or shouldn't say without totally incriminating myself. "I know, okay? She called and told me. Borderline hysterical." I still don't say anything because she's not being specific enough. "I know you've been sleeping together. More importantly, I know she's in love with you. The question is are you still in love with her?"

"That doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't."

"Kate, there's shit she doesn't know..."

"And whose fault is that?" she snaps.

"We are getting off track; Micah is there now?" I jab the heel of my palm in my eye before throwing a hoodie on over my naked torso and pulling sweatpants up my legs. I grab my keys and my wallet and am out the door within minutes.

"Yes, I guess to help her move?"

“I don’t trust that guy, Kate.”

“My Spidey senses are tingling too, Dominic. Just get there and make sure she’s okay.”

“She doesn’t want to see me,” I mumble as I head into the parking garage and grab my car.

“Yes, she does.” She pauses. “Be warned though, she’s lost a bit of weight.”

“What?”

“She’s not eating and no one really knows what’s going on. There’s only so much I can do from MIT. I can’t force it down her throat.”

“No one has been to see her?”

“No, not that I know of.”

“Fuck. I should have had food sent there.” I shake my head. I’d been so caught up in my own pain and trying not to think about how bad I’d destroyed the woman I love, I had overlooked the fact that she might not take care of herself.

“That’s not the point, Dominic. She wouldn’t have eaten it. I had my mom drop off food a few times, and Stassia still had it sitting on the counter untouched a day later when we Skyped.”

“You said she was doing okay,” I growl into the phone.

“She had one good day and a few others here and there, but overall, she’s not doing well, Dominic. She misses you so much.”

“I miss her,” I confess in a moment of weakness.

“Then get her back!”

I’m definitely caught off guard by her reaction. *She didn’t think I was sick for wanting her? Needing her? Falling completely in love with her?* “You’re not weirded out by it?” I ask as I pull out of the garage.

“No. I mean...it’s strange or whatever, but you’re not her father and people seem to forget you spent most of the last seven years hating each other. Well...*she* hated *you*. It’s not like you guys were going on father daughter dates and hanging out. Sure sometimes, she tolerated you but overall, you kind of annoyed her.”

“Thanks,” I reply sarcastically though I could have guessed as much. I saw more of Stassi’s back as she stormed away than I did anything else when she was growing up.

“Oh, get out of your feelings! Why the hell did you end it? And so fucking nastily.”

I let out a deep sigh. “I had to, Kate.”

“Tell me why.”

I take a deep breath as I prepare to tell her the truth, but only because I might murder Micah when I arrive at the house so it’ll probably all come out anyway. “Micah had us followed, Kate. A PI, a fucking good PI that had all kinds of pictures of us. Very clear, very vivid, very explicit pictures. She’s naked, I’m naked, we are together, touching, fucking, you name it. Then he found out I was her math teacher in fifth grade. He put all these pictures together in a fucking folder and shoved it in my face and said he’d release them to everyone Stassia and I know if I didn’t leave her.”

The silence on the other end is deafening.

“That son of a bitch.” The voice I hear isn’t Kate’s though. It’s Stassia.

“Wait...Stassi?” My heart hurts just saying her fucking name.

“I’ll kill him. Literally. I am going to commit murder.”

“How...how is this happening? Someone speak,” I growl as I continue to zip through traffic.

“I’m Skyping with Stassi,” Kate answers. “I have you on speakerphone.”

“Why?”

“Because I needed to know the truth, Dominic,” Stassia answers. “I knew...I knew in my heart he’d done something; I just didn’t know it was this bad.” I hear her snuffle. “Are you really coming home?”

“Yes. Is he really there?” I ask, wondering if all of this was just a ruse to get us in the same room.

“Not yet, but he will be in an hour. We need to face him together, Dominic. I’m not afraid of him and you shouldn’t be either. I’m not going to let some asshole I’ve known three minutes with a God complex run my life. But I’ll talk to you when you get here.”

I nod, knowing she’s right. We’ve both been miserable because I made a decision for both of us. Instead of facing the problem, I ran from it and left Stassi in the midst of it to fend for herself against the devil. Why hadn’t I thought about the fact that he’d probably prey on Stassi if I was out of the picture?

“Has he been bothering you?” My scalp prickles and the need to punch or hit or break something clouds my vision as I prepare for the worst.

“No, not really. He’s called a few times but I haven’t been talking to anyone.” A breath I didn’t realize I was holding escapes my lips.

“Has he been by?” I should have had a private investigator of my own put

on him. I know he has to have some shady dealings.

“No.”

“He hasn’t hurt you in any way?”

“No, Dominic, the only man who’s hurt me recently is you. Why didn’t you talk to me?” I’m acutely aware that Kate is still present and currently very involved in our business, but I didn’t care. This is the first time I’ve talked to her in weeks and I am minutes away from seeing her sweet face.

“All I could think about was that if those pictures got out, it would ruin you. If your grandparents saw them? I knew you’d be so humiliated. I was trying to save you from that.”

“Humiliation you can get over. But the pain from losing you hasn’t lessened at all. I’ll take embarrassment over heartbreak any day. And those pictures are a gross invasion of privacy, if he leaked them, I could sue the shit out of him.”

I hadn’t thought of that. But the damage would have been done by that point and that was what I was trying to avoid.

I’m pulling onto my street and I can already feel the weight of the world slowly lifting off my shoulders at just the idea of seeing Stassi again. “I’m going to be there in a few seconds.”

“Okay. Kate, I’ll call you later,” I hear her say, and then Kate’s voice chimes in, “Okay, behave, lovebirds!”

She hangs up just as I pull into the driveway and Stassi is running out of the door before I even manage to open the car door. Just as she gets to the bottom steps, I get out of the car and catch her in my arms as she lunges for me. She is sobbing into my neck as she wraps her legs around my pelvis. We keep this embrace as I walk us upstairs and into the house, but the second the door closes behind us our mouths find each other as we kiss like we are old lovers that haven’t seen each other in years.

Shit, that’s what it felt like.

“I love you,” I tell her between kisses. My mouth finds all of my favorite spots. Behind her ear, her neck, the corner of her mouth, her cheeks. It’s as if I’m reuniting with every part of her sweet face.

I push her against the wall, grinding myself into her as she fiddles with my sweatpants and reaches inside to grab my dick. “I’ve missed you, Dominic.” She smiles when my eyes meet hers and she must see the same love in my eyes radiating back at her. She’s wearing a dress that I lift slowly and move her panties to the side. I slide one digit up her wet slit and my

mouth waters for a taste. She grabs my jaw. “Dick first. Tongue after.”

“Yes ma’am,” I laugh as I lower my sweatpants and briefs to my ankles and push my way inside of her.

“FUCK!” she screams. “Oh my God, how did I forget how good this feels?” She moans and puts a hand over her eyes as I pound into her. I’m already ready to come because it’s been weeks since I’ve been inside the love of my life so I am ready to explode. “Holy shit, I think I’m going to come.” Her eyes squeeze shut and she bites her bottom lip so hard, I’m afraid she might split it.

“You’re quivering around me. I need you to fucking come so I can get my mouth back where it belongs. I’m fucking hungry, baby. I haven’t eaten you in weeks and it’s the only thing that sustains me.”

“Godddd, your mouth and the dirty filthy words that come out of it. The things your tongue can do to me. I need it all.” She digs her nails into my shoulders just as my teeth attach to her neck and I empty my cock inside of her. She whimpers when she feels the first pump of cum and then she begins to convulse in my arms. “Fuck fuck fuck, I’m coming, Dominic!” she cries out. “Oh my God, fuck me harder.”

I do as she says, fucking her through both of our orgasms so hard, I’m afraid we may break through the wall. At some point, she stops and her eyes are staring so hard into mine, I wonder if she can see every inch of my heart and soul.

“You haven’t told me you love me back,” I tell her. “Do you still?” I ask, hoping for the best but fearing that maybe I’d fucked things up too much.

“The last time I said I love you, you destroyed my heart. You’ll need to work to get that back.”

Memories of our last conversation run through my brain. It was the last time I thought I’d see her like *this*. “I know.”

“I know why you did what you did. I’m glad you love me so much that you weren’t afraid to break our hearts if you thought it would protect me. But losing you isn’t good for me. It isn’t what’s right for me and it doesn’t protect me. Next time, talk to me. Don’t eviscerate me because you need me to walk away. Whether or not you meant them, you knew what to say to hurt me and it did fucking hurt. You preyed on my insecurities. On my mind, Dominic. That’s not okay.”

I let her very calm and rational words wash over me and in this moment she seems wise beyond her years. “I know. I was just so worried about what

Micah was going to do to you.”

“Let me handle Micah.”

“How?”

“I did some research on dear old Dad. Seems he’s not so out of the life after all.” I let her down and watch as she smooths her hair down. “Had a nice little chat with a lovely detective at the police department and I didn’t give away too much necessarily. But maybe enough for them to be able to do some digging.” She shrugs. “In the meantime now, I’m going for blood.”



The look on Micah’s face when he sees me sitting in the living room is nothing short of pure entertainment. “Dominic, I thought you weren’t staying here.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s my home.”

“Yeah, Micah, I know you’re familiar so let’s just get all the intros out of the way.” She rubs my chest and leans in to wrap her arms around me when I stand up. “You remember Dominic? My boyfriend?”

“What did I say I would do if—”

“Blackmail, right? Adding that to your already pretty long list, huh? Extortion, bribery, embezzlement, murder, prostitution, assault with a deadly weapon, my God, and all the drug charges.” She continues to list off his crimes. “You know the detective that’s been after you for years certainly had a lot to say when she showed up here curious about my connection to you. I wonder if she knows the dirty cops you have on your payroll that allow you to hide in plain sight? Anyway, imagine my shock, when I realized that she was talking about my dear sweet birth father that I’d just reconnected with?” She puts a hand over her chest. “The horror!”

“Anywho, she left me her card in case anything came to memory...and of course, I can either be forgetful...or...I can remember a lot. Especially about those apartment buildings you were trying to move me into. What’s going on with those, huh? Fronts for any number of illegal operations?” My girl is on a roll and I’m honestly impressed with how much homework she’d done on

this asshole.

His nostrils flare as he looks between us. “You’re both disgusting.”

“In comparison to everything you’ve probably done; I’d say that’s a false assessment.”

“I’ve never fucked anyone in my family,” he snarls.

“No, but you’ve probably killed a few of them, no?” Stassi snaps and cocks her head to the side. “You know, I’m sure they could find a lot of the weapons for a lot of crimes if they just knew where to look.” She taps her chin.

“You want the pictures? Fine, fucking take them.”

“All of them,” Stassi demands.

“Any copies too,” I interject.

“And I don’t ever want to hear from you again,” Stassi says. “Stay the fuck away from me and out of my life, forever.”

“And if you come near my girl again, you’ll answer to me and you won’t be able to scare me off,” I tell him as I take a step closer to him. “You come near her again,” I whisper. “I will kill you and I don’t need to be in the mob to get that job done, motherfucker. Do not mess with me.”

Stassi grabs me by the elbow and pulls me back towards her and away from the man that I’ve seriously considered punching for the last five minutes. “I want to live in peace, Micah. Just...let us. I love him. Maybe you don’t get it and that’s totally fine, a part of me doesn’t get it either. But I just want to be free to be with the man I love. Please, Micah. In eighteen years, I’ve never asked you for anything. You’ve never done anything for me. I’m asking that you just give me this. Just...let me be happy.”

The look he shoots me is one of pure evil, though the look he gives Stassi is significantly softer. He pulls a thumb drive out of his pocket and slides it into Stassia’s outstretched hand.

“This thumb drive has the only copies.”

“It’s not on a computer anywhere?”

“We change our computers out so frequently nothing is stored on there,” he says and Stassia narrows her eyes as if she doesn’t believe him. “I won’t Stassi. I don’t like it. As a matter of fact, I hate it, and I think you’re pretty abhorrent for this,” he says pointing at me. “But I can’t stop you. I have too much left to do to go to prison.” He looks at Stassi. “Don’t go to the cops. There’s more that even they don’t know...” he starts.

“Well, then we have an understanding. You don’t know anything about

us, we don't know anything about you." She sticks her hand out and although I don't want her touching him, I know Micah comes from a line of a handshake meaning almost as much as your word.

"Have a nice life, Stassia Vale." He looks at me and shakes his head. "Get her out of Maryland. Somewhere no one knows either of you," he says as he makes his way towards the door.

"The second I have a ring on her finger, we're out of here and not a minute later," I say and Stassi's mouth drops open. Micah shakes his head and closes the door behind him hopefully forever.

"Me? You want to marry...me?"

"If you'll have me."

"Forever," she tells me before she presses her lips to mine.

EPILOGUE

Stassia

Five Years Later

“And just what do you think you’re doing, Mrs. Callahan?” I hear from behind me as hands wrap around my swollen belly and then I’m lifted off the small stool. I’m trying to put something away in our newly decorated nursery as we prepare for our first baby. I’m eight months along and Dominic and I are beyond excited to meet our baby boy.

“I am trying to clean!”

“And we agreed that I would put away anything that is above your eye level, if I recall correctly.”

I roll my eyes. “Sorry, Daddy,” I sass and cock my head to the side.

He pushes me against the wall and pulls my breasts out of the tank top I’m wearing. He pushes them together and runs his tongue over both nipples including my pierced one that he’s enjoying as much as possible now before it has to come out. “You know I’m going to love hearing you call me that all the time now.” He leaves one final kiss on each nipple before putting them back in my shirt. “I don’t want you climbing up on anything, my stubborn yet very sexy wife, understand?”

“Fiiiine.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me out of the nursery and down the hall to our bedroom.

We’d left Maryland during my sophomore year of college and moved clear across the country to Colorado. Dominic got a job on a school board in one of their counties and I got into the University of Colorado to study Psychology and Family Studies. We pretty much spent the entire first year skiing and fucking with very little in between. After my graduation, where he’d proposed in front of both my grandparents, his siblings, and his parents, we were married a year later and about five seconds later, I was pregnant.

We just recently bought this house and I'm loving the space and the fact that all of our family has a place to stay when they come to visit.

It was definitely hard at first, telling everyone how our love had transitioned. Surprisingly, our biggest advocates were my grandparents. They didn't love it at first, of course, but once they saw how big and beautiful our love was, they came around rather quickly. Dominic's parents took a bit more convincing, but like clockwork, the second they learned I was pregnant, it was if any animosity or discomfort over our situation just floated away.

Even Micah, who I haven't spoken to since that day seemed to have made his peace with my relationship with Dominic. Somehow, and I don't allow myself to really dwell on *how*, he found out where I lived and that I was expecting because a mysterious package showed up one day, full of baby clothes and toys. When I opened it, there was a photo that I'd never seen before of myself and what looked like a very young Micah and my mother holding me. I broke down in tears and cried for three days.

Happy tears.

I'm broken from my thoughts as Dominic lays me down on the bed and hovers over me, before leaning down to kiss my lips and then trail down my body to do his daily chat with our son.

"Hi, baby boy, it's Daddy. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you this morning. Mommy was being super grumpy and told me I had to talk to her pussy first..."

I swat at him. "Dominic!"

"Am I wrong?" He puts a hand up. "Shh, talking to my son. Anyway, I hope you're having a great time in there, I'm thinking of feeding Mommy Italian tonight, how do you feel about that?" He puts his ear to my stomach and even though I roll my eyes, I can't stop the smile that finds my face over how sweet he is. "He says he's down."

"Oh really? Well, make sure he knows he has to keep it down there then." I chuckle as I fall back into the pillows and he climbs back up and wraps his arms around me.

"My sweet, Stassi." He nuzzles my ear as he continues to stroke my stomach.

"Hmmm?"

"I'm so happy, you know that?"

"I could have guessed that, yes." I smile. "I'm so happy too, Dominic. Thank you for getting us here. To where we can be us and just be happy and

free.”

“Forever, baby.”

THE END

Want to read another angsty taboo story? Check out *Unconditional!*

Prologue

CAL

Ten Years Prior

PIERCING BLUE EYES FULL OF shock and terror fly open the second I open the closet in her tiny room. I drop to my knees as the wind expels from my lungs and I find myself struggling to breathe. She's shaking so hard, a pink polka-dotted bunny stuffed in her mouth as she tries to mask her cries. I can practically hear the pounding of her heartbeat slamming against her tiny ribcage. She's wearing a pair of pink pajamas that I know aren't keeping her warm on this cold October night and I know if I touch her hand, they'll be as cold as ice.

She scoots back further into the closet, bumping into a few pink toys that look older than me in her effort to put space between us. She pushes them toward me in an attempt to deter me from coming closer, so I proceed with caution.

Holy shit, she was here this whole time?

My mind goes through a million scenarios, wondering if this young girl was a witness to the devastation just below.

"No, hey, I'm here to help; I'm a police officer." I coo at her as I reach a hand out for her. Her skin is pale, but you can't tell due to how red and blotchy her face is. The only part of her face that isn't red are her lips which look slightly blue from the arctic temperatures of her bedroom. Her chocolate hair is pulled into two French braids that go down her back and her blue eyes are swimming with tears. She blinks several times as she lets the bunny fall

from her mouth.

“Mama?” Her voice is soft and high pitched and I can hear the tears building in her throat. She must have been hiding because she knew something bad was happening.

But how much does she know?

Did she see the tragedy unfold?

Did she witness her father murder her mother?

I clear my throat. “Mama isn’t...” I blink my eyes trying to figure out how to explain the gruesome scene downstairs to a terrified child.

I hear commotion downstairs and I know it’s the fire department, EMTs and officers from all over the state scouring the premises for clues. When homicide-suicide got called in over the radio, *everyone* reported for duty.

I’ve been in the police force for just under a year, after getting my Associate’s degree right after high school and spending a year fucking around, wondering what the hell I wanted to do with my life. At twenty-three, I am one of the youngest on the force in Ferrell County inside a small town in Oregon. The town had a few more than three thousand people and it definitely isn’t my scene, having been born and raised in Portland, but this is where they need me.

“There’s a lot of people downstairs right now...but we’re gonna go,” I whisper softly. “I’m going to take you somewhere safe, alright? Where no one can hurt you.”

She cranes her neck to try and look behind me and shakes her tiny head one more time. “No.”

No? She can’t possibly think she can stay here. “Sweetheart.”

“Madeline.” She corrects me and her angelic voice floats around me again.

“Is that your name?”

She nods and pushes something towards me. *A book.* A small smile finds my face when I recognize the cover. The Eiffel Tower and young girls in two straight lines or however it goes all wearing yellow hats and matching clothes.

“Like her.” She points. “Mama loves it. She reads to me every night. But you can call me Maddie.”

I nod again. “Maddie is a pretty name... I’m Cal.”

“Cal.” Her voice wavers slightly, but after a moment she sticks her hand out. “How do you do?” I chuckle at her politeness before I take her tiny hand

that's as cold as ice and shake it. Her hand squeezes mine and I wonder if it's because she doesn't want me to let go or if she's just trying to warm her hands.

I hear someone coming up the stairs and it puts me on high alert when I hear them announce themselves. "Stand down," I growl over my shoulder, knowing that another large man was *not* what this girl needed to see. I was larger than a number of the guys on the force. At six-four, and in the shape of my life, I was someone most people didn't want to fuck with. The list of people who showed up to spar with me in the ring at the station has dwindled to practically nothing over the past few months. I'm intimidating enough to a small child, I'm sure.

"Is there a child?" I hear whispered. "Should we send in Daniels?" I roll my eyes as I think about Officer Aria Daniels. She was the officer who was always called in whenever there were any hostile domestic situations involving children. She hated it.

"You guys are so sexist!" she would claim with her hands firmly planted on her hips. But kids loved her. They felt safe with her. And that's all we cared about. That *they* felt safe.

"Fine." I grit out before turning back to Madeline. "A lady is coming. Okay?"

"Mama?" Her eyes light up as she moves closer to me and peeks her tiny head out of the closet and tries to peer around my body. Her eyes dart to mine as if to say *are you lying? Because I'm not amused.*

Even as she's blinked the majority of the tears from her eyes, her gaze pierces mine. They're so young and innocent. It feels like there's a vice grip around my heart as I think about her going into the system. Her growing up without her parents—well a mother...*because fuck her dad.* But her mama. The mama she so desperately loves. "Mama!" She screams, her eyes shut and I wince at the ear-splitting volume of her wail.

"Maddie... sweetheart... please don't cry." I reach out for her slowly and she flinches but she lets me slowly rub her back just as Aria appears in the doorway.

Objectively, Aria was a knockout with green eyes, dirty blonde hair, and curves that stop men on the street in hopes that she is just celebrating Halloween early, parading around in a uniform that is just a *touch* too tight. Aria is that hot girl cop fantasy that probably every man and a few women have had when they come into contact with her.

Except me.

Not only is Aria a royal pain in my ass who consistently acts like she's my mother, but she's been dating my brother for the past few months, and it seems that they are pretty into each other.

"Oh, you are so sweet." I hear her soft voice float into the room and then she's kneeling next to me in front of Madeline. "What's your name?"

Her eyebrows furrow slightly and flit to me. She shakes her head before planting her lips firmly together, a sign that *I am not talking to you*. "We are going to go downstairs now, okay? It's time to leave. Do you want to ride in a police car? I'll turn the siren on." I smile at her, knowing that the bribe usually always worked for children.

"That's bad," she whispers. "The siren on is bad. And it's loud," she says as her eyes are trained on me. She puts her hands up and covers her ears.

"It's not as bad when you're in the car" I tell her, and I don't know why I feel the need to argue with a traumatized seven year old.

"Is Mama coming too?" she asks, and she scurries back to the closet to grab her book and her bunny.

"No, sweetheart," Aria answers and my neck snaps towards her. I shoot a glare at her as if to say *why the fuck did you tell her that?*

She shoots me one back as if to say *I know what I'm doing*.

As we have this engagement with our eyes, an ear shattering cry fills the room and my head darts over to Maddie, as she falls to her knees in a fit of sobs, her hands covering her face.

"See what you did," I growl at Aria.

"She's too old for me to lie to her face. I need her to trust me."

"Well she hates you," I growl at her.

"Oh stop," she snaps at me before she goes to pick up the small hysterical child whose life, unbeknownst to her, was slowly changing with each passing second.

Maddie, however, is *Not. Fucking. Having. It.*

"GET AWAY!" She swings at Aria and scoots closer to me. "You are not my Mama!" she screams and before I even have a chance to shoot Aria a *look what you did* glance, Maddie has attached herself to me and wrapped herself around me as best as she could. Her arms and legs are wrapped around my right leg like ivy, with her cheek pressed against my shin. I pull her from me slightly and stand up so I can collect her in my arms properly.

"I need you to keep those eyes shut until I say, okay?"

She regards me warily, her eyes studying my face for any answers as to why I would be asking that.

“Why?” She asks.

“Please? And then if you’re a big girl, you can have...ice cream?” I’m not sure what I can really entice her with, but I was under the impression that most children could be persuaded to do just about anything for the promise of ice cream.

“I can’t have ice cream before dinner,” she says as she plays with my badge, her blue eyes staring transfixed by the shininess.

“We can break the rule just this once.”

“Okay, deal. Chocolate.” She gives me a smile before squeezing her eyes shut but opens one eye as best as she can. “Don’t forget my bunny and my book...please,” she adds before shutting her eyes again and placing her head on my shoulder.

“Of course,” I point at the items on the floor and nod at Aria before I head out of the door, a smug grin finding my face that for once Aria didn’t know what was best.

“Are your eyes closed?” I ask her now. My hand finds the back of her head as I carry her down the stairs and through the living room. Madeline Shaw can’t be a day older than seven; she is so tiny, I’m almost afraid I’ll crush her in my arms as I carry her out of the house. I press her face against my chest, so she doesn’t see the devastation. Her parents lying in pools of their own blood, her mother’s eyes wide with fear, her mouth agape with shock. It’s something right out of a horror film.

Homicide-Suicide.

The living room is small, the bare minimum furniture is scattered throughout. An old couch that I’m sure has some type of bed bugs lines one wall. A television that looks older than me and a lounge that is covered in blood, line the others. Blood spatters the left wall and there is a rug in the center of the room that looks like more than a few feet have walked all over it. I rub her back slightly, my heart shattered that this sweet girl had to endure these conditions.

Is she so frail because she wasn’t being fed?

Once I get her outside, I tell her she can open her eyes and she does on command, her eyes darting around her front yard. “You don’t have siblings, do you?” I ask, wondering if there was possibly another child hiding. “A brother or sister?”

“No, just me.” She points at herself proudly. “Are you my big brother!?” Her eyes are wide and filled with excitement and I wish I didn’t have to be the reason the look leaves her face.

“No...” I laugh at her huge jump to a conclusion. “No, I just...” I look back at the house. Officers from all over Oregon are surrounding it and taking pictures. I step over the bright yellow crime scene police tape just as I hear someone scream, “There’s a child!”

“Fuck,” I grumble.

Her mouth drops open and points at me. “You said a bad word,” she whispers. “You have to sit on the naughty step.”

“I’m a little old for the naughty step,” I argue.

She furrows her brows together and a smile finds her face. I prepare myself for a sassy as hell response about not *ever* being too old for the naughty step when a group of people swarm us. Her eyes are scared, and she grips me harder, before pushing her face into my neck again. “Who are they!?” Maddie cries, her fingernails dig into my shoulder and I hold her tighter in my arms.

“She’s unharmed,” I tell the EMT. She was hiding, but she’s shaken up. Give her some time,” I tell them as I press a hand to her back.

“We still need to—” one of the EMTs starts.

“I said she’s fine. Now give me a minute,” I bark at her.

“You need to let me do my job,” she argues back and I look down at the small child who is still gripping onto me for dear life.

I pull her back to look at me. “Maddie, sweetheart just go with the nice lady, she’s just going to check you over okay?”

“No! Don’t leave me!” she wails against my chest and wraps her tiny arms around my neck. She perks her head up, the tears swimming in her eyes and threatening to move down her little face. “Please, I’ll be a good girl!”

I’ve dealt with children before, and never had I felt the pain of one of them. Never once did I feel a thump in my chest that I couldn’t ignore as the tears fly down her face. I felt bad, of course, but Maddie’s pleas make me want to do something, *anything* to make them go away. “Just for a minute, okay? I’ll be right here.” One of the EMTs manages to get her out of my grasp and she begins to kick against them in an attempt to get down.

She reaches both arms towards me. “No...CAL!”

Get [Unconditional](#) now!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book wouldn't... *couldn't* have happened without some pretty fabulous people. Your input, your love, your support is invaluable to me. As I, (and Carrie Bradshaw) have said probably a million times—sometimes family is the one you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself.

Carmel Rhodes, my girl for life. Thank you for everything. For pushing. For mom-aging. For talking every last thing out with me at the most insane hours. For telling me “yes, this is it,” but more importantly for telling me “no, this ain't it.” The T to my C. Love you!

Melissa Spence, Leslie Middleton and Erica Marselas you've been with me for quite a while at this point and I don't think you even understand what it means to me. I love you guys so much for everything you've done and do for me every day. You continue to show up for me and for that I'm so grateful!

Danielle James, Oh my God, I could go on for days about how much I'm obsessed with this cover! Thank you so much for making me this gorgeous thing! Your talent is immeasurable!

Kristen Portillo & Stacey Blake, with every book I swear it gets better, and it's because of you both! Your magic never ceases to amaze me!

Harlow Layne, Kelsey Cheyenne, Gemini Jensen, Helen Hadjia, Rose Croft and Alexis Rae, Thank you for being a sounding board, a safe space and my tribe. I love being on this journey with you guys! So much love.

Denise Reyes, I am so freaking grateful for you. You've taken on so many roles at this point, I don't even know where to start thanking you. For keeping me going. For talking with me about everything book related and for being in a different time zone which means I can message you at two in the morning and you'll see it! For running my street team. Gah! My love for you is endless! Thank you so much!

Ari Basulto, My love for you is endless! From being a beta, to the street team, to all the gorgeous graphics that just show up in my inbox. You're so good to me! I can't wait to squeeze you hopefully one day soon!

Chelé Walker, You're a gem in book world and I'm so glad that you found me! I appreciate everything you do for me! For all the gorgeous pictures and reviews and posting and reposting—sending you a million thank yous and so much love!

My Street Team Babes: What was I doing before you all came along? You guys have changed my writing career for the better and I love you so much! Your enthusiasm, your excitement, your support means everything to me. I don't think I can say that enough. A million thank yous!

All the amazing and super talented authors: I'm so lucky to know so many of you and I can't thank you enough for your friendship and advice and support!

To everyone in the Hive, I love you! Some of you have been with me, what, almost five years? Where does the time go? Thank you for your love and your support and making me feel like I *can*.

And finally, to the readers: Thank you for going on yet another journey with me. You guys rock my world every day!

ALSO BY
Q.B. TYLER

[*My Best Friend's Sister*](#)

[*Unconditional*](#)

[*Forget Me Not*](#)

[*Bittersweet Love*](#)

BITTERSWEET DUET

[*Bittersweet Surrender*](#)

[*Bittersweet Addiction*](#)

CAMPUS TALES SERIES

[*First Semester*](#)

[*Second Semester*](#)

[*Spring Semester*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from the Nation's Capital, Q.B. Tyler, spends her days constructing her “happily ever afters” with a twist, featuring sassy heroines and the heroes that worship them. But most importantly the love story that develops despite *inconvenient* circumstances.

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) to stay in touch!
Qbtyler03@gmail.com

Website: www.authorqbtyler.com

[Facebook](#)

[Reader Group](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Bookbub](#)

[Twitter](#)