

A black and white photograph of a white lace garment, possibly a wedding veil or a piece of lingerie, with a pearl necklace draped over it. The lace features intricate floral and circular patterns. The background is dark, making the white lace and pearls stand out. The text 'adriane leigh' is in the top left, and 'Rapture and Lace' is in the bottom right.

adriane  
leigh

Rapture  
*and*  
Lace

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**Rapture and Lace, (Lace Series #3)**

**by**

**Adriane Leigh**

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**Cover Design by Chris Mascaro**

# Chapter One

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"Eva." He dropped to his knees at the edge of my bed and grasped my hips with both of his palms. He laid his head in my lap and I ran my fingers through his hair.

"I knew something was wrong when I left. I knew we weren't right. I tried to go home. I tried to work out, get work done, go to bed. My bed sheets feel empty when you're not there. Your heartbeat helps me sleep. Your breath soothes my soul. I know you're mad, but, please don't leave. Don't run on me Eva, I love you, more than I knew I could ever love anyone. When we're apart I think of nothing but you. You're my everything."

I took slow deep breaths and watched Carter's beautiful head in my lap. I ran my hand down his strong neck to his upper back and circled my fingertips on top of the muscles. For so long I had thought he consumed me; that it only went one way; that he would leave me at any moment once I realized I didn't fit into his world.

And yet here he was.

My hands moved to his face and I held his head in my palms. "Hey, look at me."

His head remained bent.

"Look at me, Carter." I forced him to lift his head and look me in the eye. "You consume me. I've got it so deep I can barely even breathe. When we're together you take my breath away and when we're apart I'm lost. I won't run again, I promise. What can I say to make you believe me?"

Carter's fiery gaze held mine with an intensity that only he could muster. "Marry me. Go to bed with me every night, and wake up with me every morning for the rest of my life."

The air left my lungs.

The seconds stretched like minutes. I knew for every moment I didn't answer him, he thought my answer would be no. Could I do it? Could I live with him in his big house? Would we get sick of seeing each other every morning? Would he get bored with me? I still wasn't convinced that he was the monogamous kind of guy.

Then I checked myself; that had been my problem all along hadn't it? Second-guessing my place in this relationship; my worthiness of such a beautiful and lovable man. I had to take him at his word if I had learned anything over the past few days, it was that. I had to believe him when he told me he wanted me here, in his life, every morning and every night.

"Yes."

"Really?" His eyes looked up at me in childish wonderment. Tears sprang to my eyes as he entwined my fingers in his messy hair. "Yes, Carter." I nodded and pulled his lips to mine tenderly. He wrapped his hands into my hair and held me tightly, kissing me with a new kind of intensity. He pulled away and his lips dusted against mine.

"I love you so much." He kissed my lips lightly. And then he pulled away and shook his head laughing. My heart jumped into my throat for a moment. Had he gone mad? Why was he laughing uncontrollably now. My heart beat faster—maybe this was wrong, maybe it was a joke. He didn't want to marry me; I'd been so foolish.

I pushed myself further up the bed and turned my head as angry tears sprang to my eyes. How foolish could I be? Carter turned me into a blubbering idiot. When I was with him I didn't know u

from down and the logical part of my brain ceased to work.

"Eva." His voice pulled me from my fog. "You've made me so happy. I don't deserve you. I know I'm hard, Eva, I know I'm so fucking hard to be with. But I'll be better." He crawled up my bed and wrapped his hands in my hair again, pulling me to him. His lips pressing to mine made my brain buzz and my nerve endings prickle with heat.

"Carter..." I pulled his head back from mine gently. He grinned a slow, lazy grin and nipped at my lips. I smiled softly; he looked so young and beautiful and carefree in that moment. Not the CEO who ran a billion dollar company, but a man that looked his age. Playful and sweet. "You really want to get married?"

"Yes. I want to marry you, Eva. I want to be tied to you forever." I frowned at his statement.

"Carter, we don't have to get married for me not to leave. I wasn't going to run tonight. I just needed time. So much happened tonight..." My thoughts trailed off softly.

"I'm not marrying you because I'm afraid you'll run, Eva. I was afraid, but that's not why I want to marry you. I love you. Every day I want to show you how much I love you. Will you let me?" He placed one finger under my chin and lifted my head to look in his eyes.

"I love you, Carter, so much." I jumped to my knees and threw my arms around his neck, squeezing him tightly.

"Let's go tonight. Let's leave, we'll go to Aspen and get married this weekend," he whispered.

"What?" I pulled back in shock.

"Let's do it, Eva. I don't want to wait a moment longer than I have to." His thumbs danced along my jaw line and around the sensitive skin of my neck.

"You don't want a wedding with family?" My heart thumped in my chest erratically wondering if I could do this, if I could jump up and marry Carter this weekend.

"No. I mean... I don't care. If you want that, then we'll have that. All I want is you. How I get you, it doesn't matter."

"But Carter..." my thoughts trailed off again. I wondered if he'd forgotten what I'd told him. He waited patiently for me to continue. "I can't have kids." My heart dropped. He wouldn't want me now. He would remember that I was damaged goods. I couldn't give him beautiful children with steely blue eyes and silky toffee-colored hair.

"Eva I don't care about that. You're what matters to me, nothing else."

I watched him thoughtfully as he stroked my hair and smiled at me with a soft look in his eyes.

"What do you say, Eva? Will you marry me this weekend?"

My heart flip-flopped in my chest. My brain buzzed with the idea of marrying Carter. I bit my lower lip, squeezed my eyes tightly and nodded. "Yes, let's do it."

He wrapped his arms around me instantly and squeezed. I could feel his heart beating through his chest, and mine meeting it beat for beat.

"You're so beautiful, I can't wait to have you all to myself."

"You always did, Carter. It was always just you and me." I smiled peacefully at the revelation in my own mind. I inhaled his delicious freshwater scent and ran my fingertips along the nape of his neck. My stomach swam in a cocktail of lust, passion, love, and excitement.

"Let me call Parker." He pulled away from me, pressing his lips firmly to mine, before pulling out his phone out of his pocket.

"Parker, call Livingston and let him know we're flying to Aspen tonight." He made a few more plans and then hung up his phone. "You've got an hour, baby."

My eyes widened in surprise. "An hour? Can't it wait until tomorrow?" I smoothed my hands around his shoulders and skimmed my nose along his neck.

"I want to marry you, Miss Austin, without delay." A roguish grin spread across his face. "Pac

some things. Let's go." He swatted me on the bottom.

~~I pouted and then gave him a peck on the lips. "I love you."~~

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"Say it again." He pressed his forehead to mine as emotion pulled in his eyes.

"I love you." I kissed his nose.

"I love when you say that," he whispered.

"I love saying it." I smiled.

"Now get ready." One of his hands squeezed my bottom. I shook my head with a smile and then pulled away to find a bag to pack some essentials for what would be my wedding weekend. My heart skipped a few beats at the thought.

## Chapter Two

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"Are you ready, Miss Austin?" Carter held my hand tightly in the back of the Bentley, his beautiful eyes regarding me thoughtfully. We'd just pulled up to a private tarmac at Logan International and were preparing to board his private jet.

I nodded at him. I didn't think I could speak I was so nerved up. The ride to the airport had been just enough time for the excitement to dissipate and the anxiety to set in. Carter probably sensed my nerves since I'd been so silent during the car ride. He'd held my hand the entire time and caressed it softly with his thumb. It was that brief contact that was keeping me from leaping out of the moving car. It's not that I didn't want to marry him; I wasn't having second thoughts about Carter, I was having second thoughts about marriage period. I'd never been particularly interested in settling down as my mother often said. Her vision for my future hadn't necessarily been my own. But then again, maybe I'd never found the right person. And now I had.

"Can I still work?" I blurted out. Carter raised his eyebrows.

"Of course. If you want. You don't have to." He continued to stroke my hand with the pad of his thumb. "Are you having second thoughts?" he whispered.

"No." That didn't come out confident at all. "No," I said more emphatically. "I'm just nervous. And I have a lot of questions." I bit my bottom lip distractedly.

"Well don't. Because we'll be perfect." He pulled my lip from my teeth with his thumb. "I love you, and you love me, right?" His gaze penetrated mine. I nodded. "Then that's the only thing that matters." He pressed his lips to mine in a searing kiss. Butterflies jumped in my stomach just like they always did whenever he touched me.

"After you, Miss Austin." He waved a hand toward the waiting plane. A wide smile slowly spread across my face as his grin met mine. I kissed him quickly one more time, turned, and strode to the plane without a second thought.

"Evening, Mr. Morgan. It's a clear night all the way to Aspen. No troubles anticipated." The pilot met us as we boarded the plane.

"Thanks Livingston." Carter's hand held mine securely. Although it was probably a possessive gesture, it was oddly comforting. Carter did possess me, body and soul.

"Mr. Morgan." An older, blonde flight attendant gave us a genuine smile. Her eyes landed on me. "I'm Karen."

"Eva." I smiled and took her outstretched hand.

"I'll be accompanying you to Colorado tonight. Can I get you a drink?" she asked.

"Yes. White wine, please." I was desperate for the butterflies to stop knocking around in my stomach.

"Of course. Mr. Morgan?"

"Whiskey, Karen. Thanks." We made our way to the comfortable leather seats. I slumped down into one as Carter set our bags near the back of the plane and then came to sit next to me.

"You okay?" His eyes watched me.

"Yep." I reached for his hand and squeezed tightly to reassure him.

"Aspen is beautiful right now. I don't get a chance to come often in the fall."

I nodded with a soft smile.

"Have you ever been to Colorado?"

"No." I shook my head distractedly. My inner dialogue was going crazy. I felt like I was on the

verge of a panic attack. In fact, hadn't it been the second time this week Carter had nearly given me one?

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"If there's anything else I can get you let me know." Karen placed our drinks on the table in front of us.

"Thanks." Carter nodded to her. He held my hand tightly and picked up his whiskey glass with his left hand. My palms became sweaty and suddenly I was uncomfortable with his hand in mine. I loved him. I knew I did, but my brain couldn't even begin to process what the next forty-eight hours would hold for me.

My hand flinched in his. Carter glanced at me out of the corner of his eye as he took a soft sip of his drink. His grip tightened as I reached out with my other to grab the wine glass. I brought it to my lips and drank fully. The liquid washed over my taste buds and moved down my throat, helping to calm my nerves. I took another gulp, and then another, finishing off my drink. Karen caught my eye and I nodded for another.

Carter's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"You're not an alcoholic are you?" His mouth quirked into a teasing grin. I gave him a saucy smile and slugged him in the arm with my other hand. His lip pouted in mock-pain and he grabbed his upper bicep. I rolled my eyes at him.

"I love you." He turned his body to me and ran his fingers through my hair. His eyes gleamed with passion and adoration.

"I love you, too." I leaned into him and kissed him softly and slowly. I pulled away and smiled just as Karen came back with my wine.

"Thanks." I gave her an embarrassed smile because she'd just caught us canoodling. She smiled back and then stepped away.

"You okay?" Carter questioned me again.

"Yes. I am so much better than okay." I kissed his knuckles, still interlocked with mine, and then readjusted in my seat to get comfortable, preparing for a long flight across the country.

A few hours later the lights were dimmed and the cabin of the plane emanated a soft glow. I had been trying to read on my tablet, but my brain couldn't focus on the words. Carter sat beside me with his briefcase open looking at reports. He'd taken his contacts out and had put on a pair of glasses. The dark, plastic frames had a geek-chic vibe that looked devilishly sexy on him. Worn with faded jeans, the cuffs rolled slightly, and a dress shirt and sweater, he looked delectable. He, coupled with the wine and the quiet solitude of the cabin, had my nerves humming with lust.

I sat my tablet down on the table and turned so I could face him fully. He held a pen in his hand with the tip in his mouth, clicking it against his teeth absentmindedly. My attention was drawn to his full soft lips and my heart rate spiked. I wanted him, and I wanted him now. I stood then sat back on my knees in my seat. I lightly ran my hand from his arm to his shoulder and he turned giving me a saucy smile before going back to his paperwork. I bit my lip to stifle a groan as my other hand reached up to pull the pen from his fingers. He arched an eyebrow at me and a lazy smile crossed his face. I set the pen and paperwork he'd been working with on the table in front of us and then crawled into his lap.

"I've never seen you with glasses, Mr. Morgan." I gave him a lusty smile. "I like them." My hands came up to hold his face as I kissed his lips lightly. "In fact, I think they're sexy." I breathed into his ear and ground my hips into him suggestively. His hands wrapped around my waist and his fingertips slipped under the hem of my shirt, whispering along my flesh and causing goosebumps to travel across my body. I nibbled on his ear and my hips slowly rocked into him. His fingers pressed tightly into my lower back.

"Eva," he groaned.

~~"Yes, Carter?" I whispered again. I threaded my fingers up into his hair and felt the silky lock~~  
between my fingers, and then pulled softly as my teeth tugged on his ear lobe. A moan escaped his  
throat and he held his hands tighter on my back, stopping me from rocking into him.

"I want you," I whispered and dusted my nose along the line of his neck, inhaling his intoxicating  
scent.

"No, Eva," Carter panted softly.

"What do you mean, no?" I whispered and moved my hips against his growing arousal. The sea  
of my jeans against his hardening length was hitting just the right spot and driving me wild with need.

"I mean, no. I want you, but not here. Not before we're married."

I pulled back and my body stiffened at his rebuff. I arched an eyebrow at him, needing an  
explanation.

"I want to do the honorable thing, Eva. I don't want us to sleep together before we're married."

A giggle bubbled out of me uncontrollably. "Are you serious? You're going to go all chivalrous  
on me now?"

A small smile played across his lips.

"I think that ship has sailed." I pressed my body back into him. "You've had me in your bed..."  
ground my core into his arousal, "and your kitchen..." I whispered in his ear, "your office..." I tugged  
on his ear again with my teeth, "your office shower..." I felt his breathing pick up. Carter couldn't  
refuse sex; I could plainly feel the evidence of that against his zipper. "I also remember a bathroom  
one of Boston's finest restaurants." I wrapped my hand around his neck and pressed my lips to his in  
passionate kiss, my tongue thrusting past the barrier of his lips and smoothing against his. His hand  
slid up the skin of my back and kneaded almost painfully. He rubbed up and down, and then reached  
one hand down the back of my jeans. When his fingers reached the lace of my panties a groan escaped  
his throat. I felt his fingers clench around the fabric and I pressed his lips to mine harder and ground  
my center into his arousal. His hand slid further down the back of my pants and squeezed the flesh  
my bottom. The gesture was so erotic I felt arousal shoot straight to my core. I leaned back off his lap  
to pull my shirt over my head. I wanted to feel Carter. I wanted reassurance that what we were doing  
was right. I needed the reminder that we really were perfect together.

"No, Eva." He held my wrists in his hands tightly before I could get the shirt over my head.  
want you. You have no idea how much I want you right now." His voice came out strained as he jerked  
his hips under me, showing me just how much he wanted me. "But I want to wait more."

My mouth dropped open in shock. Then my lips turned into a pout. "You are so stubborn." I slid  
off of his lap and back into my own seat.

"There's only one other person I've met that's even more so." His eyes twinkled at me and his lips  
turned up at the corners. I rolled my eyes and grabbed my tablet again, desperate to calm the lust  
buzzing in my system and to ignore the impossibly sexy and stubborn man sitting next to me.

We landed in Aspen at midnight but after two flights in one day, we were both exhausted. Plus we  
were still on Eastern time, where it was two o'clock in the morning. A dark SUV met us on the tarmac  
and we were shuttled to Carter's house.

The house was located in Aspen's Red Mountain neighborhood, and although it was a pitch black  
October night, the neighboring houses and gates were lit with an inviting warm yellow glow,  
a reminder that Carter lived in a world of wealth that I wasn't accustomed to. I slipped my hand  
Carter's and rested my head on his shoulder sleepily as the road meandered higher up the mountain.

overlooking the town. All the driveways we passed were protected by imposing security gates disguised in beautiful rich woods and local stonework.

Finally the car slowed and turned into a driveway sheltered by evergreens. The car stopped for a moment as the driver entered the security code, and then we made our way up the driveway to the secluded house nestled among thick evergreens and aspens. The car pulled up to the large entrance and Carter looked down at me tenderly.

"You ready?"

I smiled and yawned, nodding my head. He gave a small chuckle, pulling me to him and placing a chaste kiss on my lips, before we both stepped out of the car.

The soft glow of the outdoor lights bounced off the house's wooden and stone pillars. The home was top to bottom river rock, in every color of gray and beige. The copper-colored stones of the driveway added an inviting warmth, making the home look like it had grown out of the mountainside. Large, reclaimed wooden pillars sat on either side of an oversized wooden door that looked like it belonged on a medieval castle. The estate was, quite simply, breathtaking.

"Welcome home." Carter squeezed his hand in mine and watched me thoughtfully for my reaction. The driver set our few bags just inside the door; Carter nodded to him in thanks and we stepped inside.

The entryway, which opened into the living room, was an expansive space with a warm, mountain feel. Grey slate floors spread throughout the house, and the river rock walls and dark wooden beams carried in from the rustic outside décor.

"Do you want anything? Something to drink? Or eat?" Carter had yet to let go of my hand. I shook my head and yawned. He chuckled again.

"Let's get you to bed, my beautiful girl." He grabbed our few bags in one hand and then pulled me up the sweeping staircase. We paused at the open landing that looked out over the entryway and great room, with hallways to either side leading to bedrooms.

He guided me to a room at the end of a long hallway and, opening the door, we stepped into the master suite. It had a stone accent wall with a built-in fireplace, while the rest of the walls were a neutral cream color. The slate floors from the downstairs continued on the second floor, but a plush cream-colored rug stretched across most of this room. A large king bed, with a thick white duvet and mountains of pillows, faced French doors that opened onto a terrace. I had no doubt there was a killer view out there.

"Bathroom." Carter gestured with one hand. "Closet." He angled his head behind us to indicate the generous walk-in. I squeezed his hand affectionately and then hopped onto the bed and snuggled into the fetal position. I couldn't even be bothered to undress; I wanted only to sleep for days.

Carter set our bags down by the closet door then came to me.

"Here." He sat me up on the bed and pulled my sweatshirt over my head gently. He kissed me on the nose once he'd gotten it off. His fingers got to work on the button of my jeans and then the zipper. Despite how exhausted I was, Carter still had the ability to make my heart flutter. I traced his fingertips up his forearm. I held onto him as he pushed the denim down my hips. He sat me back on the bed, then kneeled in front of me, untying and slipping off my shoes and sliding the jeans off of my legs. He slid his hands slowly back up my legs and thighs until they stopped at my hips, giving me a soft squeeze. He pressed a soft kiss on my belly above my panties and then hugged me for a minute.

My body was begging for his touch, especially since I'd been left hanging on the flight, but after his chivalrous promise of abstinence until we were married, I knew it was a lost cause. He stood and pulled the duvet back on the bed and moved a few pillows aside. I crawled up to the head of the bed and dug in, taking a deep breath of the fresh, soft cotton. I snuggled and curled my body into itself. Carter rubbed his hand down my spine and I wondered how he could touch me so sensually without

taking it further. My body was humming with arousal from his soft and gentle touch.

~~"I'll be in in a few minutes." He gave my hip a soft squeeze. I nodded. Carter walked to the bathroom with one of our bags and I heard the shower start. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep instantly.~~

A short while later I felt the bed shift and Carter cuddled into my body. I could smell his fresh soap scent and I curled my head into the nook at his shoulder. His hair was wet against the pillow, and I ran my hand down his damp body, from his chest, to his abs, and over the waistband of his pajama bottoms. A small part of me that was just barely awake registered a slice of disappointment that he was dressed. I tucked into him tighter as his arm wrapped around my shoulders. He pressed a quick kiss to my head.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Mmm," I acknowledged him before drifting off again.

## Chapter Three

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"Up and at 'em, sleepyhead." Carter kissed me on the forehead. I groaned in protest.

"We've got a lot to do today. We're getting married tomorrow."

I shot straight up in bed. Carter's eyes widened for a moment before the corners of his mouth ticked up in a smile. He pressed a hot mug of coffee into my hands. I held the warmth between my palms and inhaled the rich aroma. It helped perk me up, and then instantly I handed the coffee back to him. His eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Bathroom," I squeaked and jumped out of bed. I heard a throaty laugh behind me.

I tossed the bathroom door closed behind me and searched for the toilet. My eyes shifted over the room once, twice, back a third time. How on earth could I not find the toilet in a bathroom?

The room was a huge, open space, with a large Jacuzzi sitting in the center. Vaulted ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows showcased a view of the mountains beyond. A large glass-tiled corner shower was off to the side of the windows, and a vanity stretched the length of one wall.

And yet still no toilet.

I started tapping my foot in exasperation with the urge to go. And then I noticed a small, tiled half-wall tucked away in the corner from the vanity. I rushed over and instantly heaved a sigh of relief as I quickly pulled down my underwear.

Finished, I stepped in front of the mirrors. My hair was ruffled and tangled, and not in the sexy bed-head sort of way. My eyes were bloodshot from our late night and I could see a faint hint of dark circles beneath my eyes. I quite simply looked exhausted.

There was a large part of me wanted to postpone getting married, no second thoughts, just so I wouldn't look like hell on my wedding day. I found Carter's shirt from last night draped over the vanity and pulled it on over my bra and panties. I had a flashback of the first time I'd worn Carter's shirt and my heart swelled with love. It had only been a few short weeks ago. I snuggled into his scent at the neck of the shirt and my heart skipped a few times in my chest. I loved him so much. I loved everything about him. Our good times far outweighed the bad times. I closed my eyes as a shiver of excitement ran through me. I would get to go to bed with Carter every single night of my life and wake up with him each morning.

A small tap sounded at the bathroom door and I turned to find Carter peeking in.

"Everything okay in here?"

He looked deliciously sexy leaning against the doorjamb in a pair of jeans and a plain white shirt. I wanted to wrap my body around his and never let go.

"Yes." I walked to him, placing a kiss on his lips and then taking my coffee cup from him. "I love you." I dusted my nose along his affectionately. He wrapped a heavy arm around my waist and placed his hand on my lower back, pulling me in for a warm hug.

"Drink up, lady. We've got so much to do today. And number one on your list is finding a dress." I coughed on the hot liquid.

"Where am I supposed to find a dress? I thought we would just go to the Justice of the Peace for something." My eyes searched his for answers.

"Justice of the Peace? Not nearly good enough for my girl." He grinned. "A dress designer from Denver will be here at ten. They're bringing everything they have in your size. I've got to take care of a few things in town, but I won't be long." He led me out of the room by one hand and we went downstairs.

We stepped into the beautiful kitchen with vaulted ceilings and a large rich wooden island surrounded by plush stools. There was a small breakfast nook with views of the mountains. I was beginning to think this house boasted a view from every room. The dark granite counter top contrasted beautifully with the rich wooden cabinets, limestone backsplash and cream walls.

"Eggs...pancakes...? I think that's about the extent of my culinary offerings in the morning." He gave me a smile.

"I remember your talent in the kitchen, all right." I set my coffee cup down on the counter and wrapped my arms around his waist tightly. "And it has nothing to do with food." I squeezed his behind playfully. He rolled his eyes at me and then scooped his head down to brush my lips with his own. I slid my hands up his chest and pulled on the fabric of his shirt to bring him closer to me. A small moan escaped my throat as he deepened the kiss and ground his hips into mine suggestively.

I wrapped my hands around the back of his neck and pulled his lips tighter to mine, grinding my hips against his in a rhythmic motion. I pulled away to take a quick breath as I tickled along the sensitive skin under his ear with my lips. I closed my eyes and inhaled his luscious scent, leaving me intoxicated with lust.

He tightened his grip on my hips and pushed me back gently. "Not happening, Evangeline."

I pouted and looked up at him through my eyelashes in the hopes of changing his mind.

"Are you sure about that, Mr. Morgan?" I purred and slid my hand across his arousal hidden beneath the denim of his jeans. He sucked in a quick breath and his eyes darkened. I bit my lip and my heart rate sped up to see the look of lust in his eyes.

He closed his eyes and ran a hand through his messy hair. "Breakfast, Evangeline." He flicked his eyes open to meet mine with a new look of determination.

I huffed with sexual frustration. "Stubborn heel," I mumbled under my breath.

His eyes shot up with surprised amusement.

"What was that, Miss Austin?" He dug his fingers into my hips and tickled. I tried to squirm away but he was having none of it.

"Carter," I pleaded through giggles.

"Did you say something, Evangeline?" I tried to squirm out of his grasp. He arched an eyebrow in challenge.

"I said, you Mr. Morgan, are a stubborn heel," I pushed back on his chest still trying to escape. His mouth spread into a wide smile. He spun me around and lifted me up on the island, nudging himself between my legs. One hand ran up my back, fisting my long hair in his hand as he tugged softly.

"Watch your mouth, Evangeline. I don't take well to teasing." He pushed his hips into my core firmly.

"Neither do I." I wrapped my arms around his neck and shimmied closer to him seeking more friction. He ran one finger down the curve of my neck, his other hand still holding tightly to my hair and arching my head to the side. He skimmed his lips along my throat and continued to grind his arousal into my core. A soft moan escaped my lips.

"I know you don't." His lips pressed soft kisses underneath the sensitive flesh beneath my ear. "What do you want for breakfast?" He breathed softly into my ear and then pulled away from me with a devilish smile.

My eyes shot open and I heaved a disappointed sigh. I pressed my lips together and regarded him for a moment before hopping off the island.

"Well, since I'll very nearly starve if I'm to rely on your skills, I think I'll fend for myself." I opened the door to the pantry and my eyes widened for a moment when I realized it was a walk-in. Practically the size of my bedroom at home. The shelves were stacked floor to ceiling with boxed and

canned goods, bottles of water, and more.

"Ready for the apocalypse?" I frowned and then my eyes lit on what I was looking for.

"Pop-Tarts, Evangeline?" Carter frowned.

"They're in your house. Toaster?"

"I would imagine they were left by my brother. He's got an affinity for junk food." He grinned.

I scoffed at him in mock offense. "Shut it and point me to the toaster."

He laughed and pointed to a cabinet under the counter. I pulled out the toaster and threw the Pop-Tarts in. I leaned my upper body on the counter top and crossed my legs at the ankle, swaying my hips back and forth waiting for my breakfast to pop up. I could feel the fabric of Carter's shirt riding up my thighs and the huff from across the room told me he had noticed too. Just then strong hands circled around my waist and I felt his hips press into my bottom. He held my hips still with one hand and with the other ran it up the curve of my spine underneath the shirt. He stroked softly as he pressed his hardened arousal into me. I pressed back against him and closed my eyes. My breathing became ragged and I willed him to break his promise of abstinence.

He stroked back down my back and then slid his palm up on top of the shirt to reach into my hair. He brushed his fingers through it tenderly, and then tightened his grip and gave a soft tug.

"You. Drive. Me. Insane," he leaned over my body and said in my ear in a throaty whisper. A smile played across my lips as I pushed back into his arousal eagerly wanting to take the next step.

"Oh no, Evangeline. Not until after you marry me." And just like that Carter's body pulled away from mine, breaking all contact. I whimpered in disappointment just as my Pop-Tarts popped up. Carter set a plate down on the counter next to me and I flopped my breakfast on the plate and turned to him with a huff and a glare. He smiled, downed the rest of his coffee and then walked out of the room.

"Thirty minutes, Evangeline," he tossed out behind him. God help me but I love that infuriating sexy man.

Thirty minutes later the dress designer, who introduced herself as Nanette, arrived with an entourage of assistants pulling in racks of white dresses. I raised my eyebrows and chewed on my bottom lip, hating that I had such a short amount of time to make such a monumental wedding-dress decision. In fact, Carter had said very little about what he was planning, so I had no idea what to expect. Not that I was terribly disappointed, I was notoriously indecisive; in fact, my feelings about our relationship the past few weeks had proven that, so I was happy to leave the details of our wedding in Carter's very capable hands.

Carter noticed my unease and rubbed my shoulders reassuringly. "You're going to be beautiful no matter what, Evangeline."

I rolled my head back and closed my eyes, trying to relax.

"Take your time, beautiful girl. I'll be back in a few hours." He kissed me softly on the lips and then left me with a mountain of white dresses.

I stepped into the spare bedroom Nanette and an assistant had set up in. She was eager and friendly, no doubt Carter had offered her ungodly amounts of money to make a house call. She was pleasant, asking me questions and making conversation. One of the assistants on the other hand was standoffish and even bordered on rude.

My heart thudded in my chest as the realization hit me that I was getting married tomorrow, to a man that I hardly knew, and who sometimes drove me insane. Maybe I was the insane one to be doing this. But I also knew that I'd never felt like this with anyone else. Carter and I had some irresistible

connection—a pull to be together, something that couldn't keep us apart. While butterflies were fluttering in my stomach, I knew now, more than I had yesterday; I had a feeling, stronger than ever that this was right.

Nanette had me sift through the racks of dresses and pull any that I wanted to try. I pulled the first few away from the rest of the bunch and shook my head immediately. They were beautiful and elegant, but too simple. I knew I was looking for something a little more romantic. A big princess gown was certainly out, so there went nearly half of the dresses they'd brought. I began to worry that I wouldn't find something that I loved after all. I fingered through a few more dresses and separated them from the bunch tentatively. I found myself drawn to the simple A-line dresses with small and beautiful details like beading and lace. I smirked to myself when I pulled out a few lace dresses that Carter would love.

I picked a few more out of the bunch and then nodded that I was ready to try on a few. The assistant helped me into the first dress and it was an immediate no. The drop waist wasn't flattering. The second dress was strapless, which I didn't love either; it wasn't the most flattering cut for my slightly curvy figure. I skipped over a few dresses that were strapless and landed on an intricate lace and beaded A-line with a halter neck. The assistant zipped me into it. It was beautiful, but it felt too fussy in some ways, and I said so. I turned in the mirror with a frown.

"Well, when you get yourself into a situation that requires buying off the rack, options are limited." The assistant looked pointedly at my tummy. Realization dawned that she was insinuating that I was pregnant and this was a shotgun wedding. I glared at her.

"That is not the situation, actually. If you aren't willing to be helpful I'd be happy to take my business elsewhere." I held her gaze in the reflection of the mirror. Her eyes flickered for a moment before an apologetic smile crossed her face.

"Of course, I'm sorry."

Nanette shot the assistant a warning glance then proceeded to unzip the dress.

"We'll find something you love," she said with a genuine smile. She pulled another dress I'd picked off of the hanger and helped me step into it. She pulled the soft white fabric over my body and then turned to fasten the buttons on the back. I turned in the mirror to look at myself, catching my breath. Tears sprang to my eyes as I ran my hands over the white lace of the dress. It was intricate and stunning. Lace covered the dress from top to bottom, extending over a sweetheart neckline and up to my collarbone where it was sheer and romantic. The dress fell in a slight A-line with delicate lace cap sleeves giving it a vintage feel.

I turned in the mirror to see the back. While the front was covered fully, the back was almost entirely open. The fabric dipped down to my lower back, that favorite place that Carter liked to interlock his hands when he hugged me close to him. The curve of my back was on display up until the lace met the cap sleeves and connected at the top of my shoulder blades with a few delicate buttons. The dress had a small lace train that drifted behind my feet. It was stunning and intricate and sexy and simple; it was everything I was looking for.

Tears choked my throat as I nodded my head at Nanette.

"Perfect." Her reflection was beaming behind me.

"Yes," I whispered as I wiped a tear from my cheek. "It's perfect." I smiled and twirled in the mirror again. And Carter would love it.

"I love it too. It was made for you." Nanette smiled happily. "We'll just take a few measurements to check the length, make sure it doesn't need taking in. Do you have the shoes you'll be wearing?"

"No." My eyes flashed in disappointment. I'd completely forgotten about shoes.

"No worries, dear. I've brought along some samples, I've got a pair in mind that will be absolutely perfect with this dress." She gestured to the assistant. "The Manolos." She waved her off before

dropping to her knees and busying herself with a tape measure.

~~I watched my reflection in the mirror as my hands slid over the fabric. I imagined Carter's~~ reaction the first time he would see it. I imagined him waiting for me at the end of some sort of makeshift aisle, since I wasn't even sure what he had planned.

I was never sure if marriage was necessarily in the cards for me, I knew from a young age that children certainly wouldn't be, but when Carter said those words to me, kneeled before me, I completely surrendered to the fact that my future was with him.

My heart swelled at the memory. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair for the rest of my life. Gaze into his steely blue eyes, wake up to that crooked smirk. I loved him with my entire heart, fully and completely. I couldn't stay away from Carter because I wasn't meant to. He had consumed me from day one and I had consumed him—we were meant to live our lives with each other. It had been rocky, and I was sure we would continue to face bumps in the road, but I also knew that living without him in my life wasn't an option anymore.

The assistant came back holding a pair of white satin pumps with delicate crystal beading that stretched across the toe. They had a beautiful vintage vibe that would be perfect with the dress. She slipped them on and she took a few more measurements for the hem.

"All done. I'll just shorten the length and it will be perfect. It'll only take me an hour." She smiled at my reflection in the mirror. I nodded and the assistant helped me out of the dress. Truth be told, I wasn't ready to take it off, I wanted to wear it for days—it was so beautiful. I sighed wistfully and stroked my fingers along the dress one more time before leaving the room.

I made my way into the kitchen to grab a bottled water before realizing that I didn't even know the price of the dress. I'd been so caught up in its beauty, I hadn't even looked at the tag. My stomach did a few nervous flips remembering some of the other price tags. I could afford the low end of five digits if I put it on my credit card, although I would be paying for it for months and months, however it would be so worth it. But what if it were the high end? I knew designer wedding gowns could be \$25,000 and more. I bit my bottom lip and prayed that wouldn't be the case.

I darted back into the guest bedroom where the designer was working. "Excuse me, I forgot to ask, how much for the dress?"

Nanette lifted her eyes in a reassuring smile. "Not to worry, Miss Austin. It's been taken care of."

"Oh, well, how much was it anyway? Just so I know?" I could find another dress that was in my budget if need be.

"I've been told to keep the total to myself, Miss. Something about there was to be no limit on price, and that you weren't to know the total because, and I quote, 'she is stubborn enough to walk down the aisle naked if she thinks the dress is out of her price range.'" The woman smiled politely.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes that Carter had managed to stay a step ahead of me. Now I would never know if the dress was way under my budget, or through the stratosphere over it. I gritted my teeth and vowed to make him pay for embarrassing and outwitting me all in one go.

"Well, thank you, I guess, for your help." I smiled at her.

"No, thank you, Miss Austin." She beamed. I clenched my teeth and knew in that instant that the dress was way over my budget.

## Chapter Four

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After the dress designer left I wandered up to the master suite Carter and I were sharing and rifled through my purse for my phone. When we rushed out of the apartment, Cate knew we were away for the weekend but had no idea about the proposal or that we were running off to get married.

I dialed her number. I had no intention of revealing that small slice of information now, but I was going to touch base and let her know we'd made it here safely.

She answered on the first ring and we talked for a while. I told her about the gorgeousness that was Carter's home in the mountains. She asked if we were having fun, and I knew she was referring to the hot sex we usually had. I mumbled that he had actually put a halt to that situation.

"What?" A shriek came over the phone.

"He wants to... abstain until we work some things out." I fibbed. I figured I would meet with some resistance from her about our decision to get married, and I wasn't willing to discuss it from a thousand miles away. It would be easier to break the news when I got home and there was no changing the situation. It wasn't that I was afraid that she could talk me out of it, I knew she couldn't, no one could—and for that reason I wasn't willing to defend myself to someone else.

We chatted for a while longer before she wished me a good vacation and we hung up. I felt immensely guilty for not sharing the biggest news of all with her, but it was the way it had to be for now.

I heard Carter come home a short while later and I wandered downstairs to greet him.

I hit the bottom of the stairs, searching for him. The house was silent. I made my way around the main floor in search of him. Off of the great room I found a small study with the door ajar. I peeked my head in to find Carter on the phone. When he looked up I gave him a smile and a small wave before I could leave he gestured me in to sit on his lap.

I sat down as he continued his phone conversation. His warm hand smoothed up and down my back as I listened to his deep voice talk to the caller on the other end of the line.

Carter continued a few more minutes before finishing his phone call and then placed a sweet kiss on the back of my neck.

"Did you have lunch?" I asked him.

"No, I have a few more calls to make and then we'll find something."

"I'll leave you then. I just wanted to check in." I started to get off his lap before his hands slid my hips and held me firmly.

"Stay here, I won't be long." He ran one hand up my back and rubbed. I smiled and nodded before his phone rang again.

He answered the phone in a clipped voice.

I fingered through some of the paperwork on his desk absentmindedly as he stroked up and down my back softly. A framed picture sat on his desk and I picked it up to inspect it.

It was Carter and I assumed his parents and siblings outside the Aspen house. An attractive older woman that I assumed was his mom was strikingly beautiful with a warm smile on her face. His father was handsome with salt-and-pepper hair and a charming grin. Carter had one arm wrapped around his mom, and another wrapped around what I figured was his younger sister, who was petite with the same dark hair and bright smile as her mom. Next to her was who I assumed was his brother; a guy who looked similar to Carter, except taller and with the same dark hair as his mom and sister. He had a free-spirited grin spread across his face.

The warmth and happiness on Carter's face warmed my heart. He wasn't a controlling CEO, businessman, or playboy, he was at home with his family, carefree and loved. Maybe the only place I felt happy and comfortable. They were clearly his soft place to fall. I hoped that I would be that for Carter someday. Our relationship had been so tumultuous, a thought dashed through my brain that maybe we would only ever cause each other pain.

I set the picture down and took a deep breath, never averting my eyes from the beautiful smile on Carter's face that was frozen in time.

Carter and I had the spectacular moments too; we just had to find a way to work through the rough ones. Carter must have sensed my unease because he slid his hand up underneath my shirt to make contact with my skin. His fingers slid past the delicate straps of my bra and up to the back of my neck where he ghosted his fingertips and then began to rub in small circles. I sighed deep and closed my eyes. There was nowhere I'd rather be in that moment than perched right on this beautiful man's lap.

I turned to face him and snaked both of my arms around his waist and slid my hands beneath his shirt to touch his velvety soft skin. I laid my head on his shoulder and snuggled into his neck while he continued to talk on the phone. His other hand tightened around my waist and dipped underneath the waistband of my jeans to tease the flesh.

Carter finished his phone call abruptly and then placed his other hand on my thigh.

"Are you okay, beautiful girl?" He slid an arm around my body and rubbed my back.

"Yes," I whispered. He brought one palm up to stroke down my long hair lovingly.

"Promise?"

"Yes. I love you." I pulled back to look in his eyes. "I just want to make sure we're right doing this. That you're not having second thoughts. We've fought so much..." I trailed off, worried that he would change his mind.

"I'm right here with you. There's nowhere else I would rather be but here, marrying you tomorrow. If you're still with me." He tilted my chin up with his hand. "Are you with me?" he whispered.

I nodded as tears sprang to my eyes.

"No tears." He smoothed one away with the pad of his thumb. "We're going to be so great, Eva. I promise. There's no one else for me but you." He kissed me reassuringly and his hand snaked around my neck to hold me gently against him.

"I love you." He pulled away.

"I love you, too." I rested my forehead on his with a smile.

"Good. Now let's go eat." He gave me that sexy, crooked grin and stood, grasping me firmly by the waist. I wrapped my legs around his waist and clung to him as he carried me out of the office and into the kitchen, teasing my lips with his own the entire way.

Later that night we sat in the hot tub on the terrace off the master bedroom. The air was chilly but the water was warm and soothing and just what my body needed. We had a sweeping view of the valley with the city lights of Aspen nestled in the center and the mountains in the distance. We'd had pizza delivered for dinner and now Carter poured us wine and insisted we needed to relax before the big event tomorrow.

He'd spent the afternoon making calls and coordinating a venue and photographer for tomorrow. I'm sure he was paying out the ear for the last minute arrangements, but he was adamant that we would have the perfect day. I tried to tell him it would be perfect no matter what, but he wasn't hearing anything of it.

He'd also teased me incessantly about seeing my dress. While we may not be having a traditional wedding, I wanted to keep a few of the traditions intact, and that was one of them. I knew he would love the lacy dress, so I wanted the first time he saw it to be when I was walking down the aisle to marry him.

Something had been nagging at me all day, but I didn't want to ruin Carter's good mood. It had been a sore spot for us, and maybe still was for him, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything." He reached for my hand under the water.

"Why did you and Madeleine break up?"

He assessed me quietly for a minute, probably to determine if this was still a sore subject for me.

"I was young. She was... demanding. We dated for a year and she had been hinting for a while that she wanted to take the next step. I think even then I knew I didn't love her, not really, but I knew I didn't want to lose her. So many people in my life, they're not real friends, not trustworthy, other than my family, I didn't let people in my inner circle, until Madeleine. So when she pushed I decided to settle. I thought it was better than losing her."

"How long were you engaged?"

"Only a few months. She got worse; I think since she thought she'd gotten her way on marriage she could demand other things. And I'm not really one to take orders." He shot me a half smile. "I quickly realized that I didn't love her, not really. So I broke it off." He shrugged.

"How did she take it?"

"Surprisingly well. I don't think she loved me either. She's with John now; I introduced you at the gala, he's much older, rich, and lets her do whatever she wants, I think she's happier that way."

"I saw the picture of your family in the office. They seem lovely."

"They are. They're great; the best thing that's ever happened to me, before a beautiful girl spilled champagne on my suit, anyway." He squeezed my hand with a smile. "They'll love you."

"Tell me about them." I took another sip of my wine.

"Derek, my brother, is hilarious. Wild and inappropriate, popular with the girls; sometimes raunchy, but never in a mean way. Emma is the sweetest. She's the youngest and full of life, she loves to shop, so you'll have that in common."

I rolled my eyes.

"I've told her about you. She can't wait to meet you."

My eyes widened in surprise.

"In fact she wanted us to come to my parents' house this weekend, but then so much happened..." he trailed off. "Anyway, she wanted to know all about you. I never really talk about the women I date, much less bring them home to meet the family. She knows you're special." He gave me that delicious, panty-melting grin.

"And my mom, Kara, she's amazing. She's warm and understanding, nurturing." He gazed out over the lights of the town and took a sip of his wine. He stared thoughtfully for a few moments and then started again. "When I was little, it was hard. For her the most. They weren't married, she was just out of high school. They had a summer fling and then I happened." He shrugged sadly. "So he just disappeared one night when I was a few months old. Things were already tough when he was around; he drank a lot, and couldn't keep a steady job. He went out drinking with his friends one night and never came back." He finished softly.

"I'm sorry, Carter." I held his hand tightly under the warm water.

"So after a few days, once she realized he wasn't coming home, she moved back in with her parents. We lived there for a few years; she worked, but they were hard on her. They were

disappointed. So she worked two jobs and finally saved enough to start a small catering business. ~~started to do well enough that she could move out. Her goal was to be self-reliant, to get out from~~ under the umbrella of my grandparents. She was determined to overcome the odds, and she did. She was miraculous. I grew up with her cooking and baking all hours of the day and night. It was great. Even then, when things were hard and the months she wasn't sure we could make rent, she had such high spirits. She was an inspiration—is an inspiration.

When I was five she met James while she was catering a party at the golf club. He instantly fell for her. And he took me in. He took me fishing, played softball with me; a year later they got married and a year after that Derek was born; Emma came another year later. James saved her; she was great those years it was just the two of us, but I could tell she was sad. James is so good to her; he makes her happy." The corners of his mouth lifted in a sheepish smile.

"We struggled so much when I was little, I swore I would never be in that place again. That's why I'm a little on the controlling side. I refused to ever be faced with the possibility of not being able to afford food or a place to live. We didn't have to worry once my mom married James, but even then she still worked because she liked to." He paused for a moment and swirled the wine in his glass.

"The need to control, it just makes me feel better. When things are out of my control I live in a constant state of anxiety. When I was a kid I was plagued with this idea that I wasn't good enough for my dad to stay. I have this thing about the people I love leaving me..." He trailed off thoughtfully.

"I haven't heard from him since, he never tried to find me. That's why I don't let many people close—if I care too much—I have this ridiculous fear that it's inevitable that they'll leave. It keeps me up at night sometimes. Believe me, I've had a lot of sleepless nights since we've been together. So there it is, my life story." He gave me a wry smile.

"From day one I've gone after the things I've wanted, and since then it's always worked out for me, in business and pleasure." He grinned at me out of the corner of his eye. I sloshed some water into his glass and handed him with a grin.

"Wait a minute." I narrowed my eyes at him. "Did you know I was at the coffee shop that day after the party? You didn't just happen to wander in for coffee did you?"

He arched an amused eyebrow at me. "No, Evangeline. There's an espresso bar on the main floor of The Hancock. I don't need to leave the building to get my coffee." A smirk flitted on his lips.

"So, how did you know? If you were watching me, that's seriously creepy, Carter. Like full-on stalker, creepy." I gave him a pointed look.

"No, I wasn't staked out outside your apartment." He laughed and then brought his hand out of his pocket and touched it to my bottom lip.

I closed my eyes as my body shivered at his touch.

"I did go to your apartment, though. I wanted to take you to lunch. I was going to insist you go out with me in repayment for staining my favorite suit." He gave me a gorgeous grin. "But you weren't there. And Cate was happy to tell me that you were at the coffee shop down the street." I had no doubt he'd charmed that information out of her, and I knew it wouldn't have taken much considering Carter was just as affected by him as every other female.

"How did you know where I lived?" I breathed softly.

"Research, Evangeline." He traced his thumb around the curve of my lips. "When I saw you that night at the party, something hit me. When I looked in your eyes, my whole world froze. You were beautiful. Your smile lit the room. And when you laughed your eyes crinkled." He tenderly traced his thumb across my cheekbone and over my eyelids. "And when our eyes met across the room it was like I was hit straight in the chest. Your eyes were so soft and genuine. You captivated me." He leaned in and skimmed my lips with a featherlight kiss. "I knew I had to have you."

My head swirled with emotion and it felt like my body would melt into a pool of liquid love.

the bottom of the hot tub. "You affected me too," I whispered.

~~"I know. I could see it. I could feel it." He ran his hands around my neck and twisted in my hair.~~  
"I knew I could never get you out of my head until I had you." He brushed his nose along mine lightly.  
"And then after that night at the club, you made me so angry, but I think I fell for you right there. No matter what I said you refused to listen to me. My beautiful, stubborn girl. You make me feel so out of control, but I couldn't stay away from you. You're exciting and intoxicating and infuriating and unlike anyone else I've ever met. I can't control you, and I like that you're sassy and sweet and loving. I love you, Evangeline, you're my drug, I can't get enough of you." He slid one hand up my thigh suggestively.

I smiled at him. "I don't think so, Mr. Morgan. We're being chaste until our impending nuptials. Remember?" I gave a soft tug on his hair.

"Right." He worked his fingers up to snap the leg of my bathing suit.

"Thank you for telling me." I set my wine down and crawled up into his lap to wrap my arms around his neck. "It helps knowing why you're a crazy stalker." I kissed him on the nose. "I'm sorry things were so rough when you were little." I ran my thumbs along his cheekbones softly. "I'm glad you had such a great mom." I played with the hair at the nape of his neck.

"Me too," he whispered. "I can't wait for you to meet her."

"I can't wait to meet her either, and thank her for raising such an amazing loving son that's stolen my heart." I kissed his lips lovingly.

His arms wrapped around my waist and his palms spread out on my lower back. I could feel his muscles harden against my thighs and smiled. I curled a hand around his neck and nibbled along his ear as he rocked my hips into him slowly.

"Evangeline," Carter groaned.

"I know, I know. Chivalry and all that." I grinned, giving him one last kiss and then slipping out of his lap. I reached for my wine glass and slipped further down into the warm water and sighed deeply as my head swirled from the wine and all of the new information Carter had just shared. If this was what my life with Carter was going to be like, I had no doubt that it would be beautiful.

## Chapter Five

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"Up and at 'em, beautiful. It's your wedding day." Carter brushed the hair off of my face and placed a kiss on my forehead. I groaned, wedding day or not, mornings would never be my thing.

I sighed deeply and then the smell of hot coffee hit my nostrils and I immediately rose out of bed.

"Coffee," I mumbled. Carter laughed at me. I took a sip and instantly felt a little more energized. I sipped some more and then sat my mug down to head to the bathroom.

"I'll be in the kitchen," Carter tossed behind his back as he left the bedroom.

I did my business and then stood in front of the mirror reflecting. I brushed my fingers through my hair and a small smile played across my lips. I was marrying Carter today. I brushed my fingers over my lips and thought about how the day would play out. Carter hadn't revealed a single detail. I trusted that it would be beautiful and over the top; everything Carter did was. I leaned my neck to the side to expose my flesh and my fingers touched the soft bruise where Carter had bitten me from our steamy romp in the shower. My stomach flopped a few times at the memory. It felt like ages ago, but it had only been on Friday.

I wrapped up in a robe that was hanging on a hook by the door and grabbed my coffee cup and made my way down to the kitchen.

"Eat up. Thirty minutes and your entourage will be here."

"My entourage?" I watched Carter standing at the stove with a spatula.

"Makeup artist and hair stylist. Not that you need any of that."

I stepped closer to him and he placed a soft kiss on my lips.

"So can I expect that your scrambled eggs are better than your omelets?" I smiled as I scooped some onto a plate.

"Watch it." He tried to smack me with the spatula in his hand. I giggled and dodged away.

"Thank you." I smiled.

"How much time do I have?" I asked him.

"We're out the door in two hours." He continued to poke at the bacon in the skillet.

"That's not much time for me to get ready." I frowned.

"Since when are you so high maintenance, Miss Austin?"

"Since it's my wedding day." I threw a piece of toast at him from across the kitchen. He dodged with a smirk.

"You're beautiful. You don't need time to get ready. Just put on the white dress and you'll be perfect."

"Who says it's white?" I grinned.

"It better be. I'm a man who likes tradition." He cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Could have fooled me," I mumbled as I scooped more scrambled eggs into my mouth. His lips lifted at the corners in a playful smile.

Thirty minutes later I was out of the shower and the makeup artist and hair stylist were waiting in the master bathroom. Carter had moved to a guest bedroom to get ready and promised to give me privacy. The hair stylist, Clyde, was raking a brush through my long dark hair and talking effusively to Rachel, the makeup artist. He was telling her all about a date he'd been on last night that apparently

hadn't gone well. They laughed and giggled and were entertaining to listen to, but it made my heart hurt a little bit wishing for Cate.

I had so many issues with my mom, and I wasn't especially close to my dad, but if there was one person I wished could be with me on my wedding day, it was Cate. She'd always been there for me and she was going to slay me when she found out I'd gotten married without her. We'd fantasized about our respective wedding days since the fourth grade. I heaved a deep sigh thinking about her smiling face.

"Why so sad on your wedding day dear?" Clyde noticed my moment of melancholy.

"Not sad, just missing my best friend. I wish she could be here." I sat still as Rachel sponged foundation onto my face. I prayed she wouldn't make a comment on the bruise left by Carter.

"Why isn't she?" he asked.

"This is sort of a last minute thing, I guess."

"This isn't a thing, honey, this is your wedding day. You should have exactly who you want here."

"Oh I know, it's just, our whole relationship has been a rush. It's not a big deal, he's who I want..." I trailed off because the more I spoke and the more I tried to explain it to them the worse it sounded in my own head. But that didn't matter; I didn't need to justify our decision to them. It was right for us.

"And I'm not pregnant..." I trailed off and then bit my lip embarrassingly with the word. "It's just everyone thinks we're rushing because I'm pregnant, and I'm not." I twisted my fingers in my lap. I just needed to shut up now. Clyde shook his head in the mirror.

"It's okay, sweetheart. We love who we love. It doesn't matter a damn what anyone else thinks." He smiled reassuringly.

An hour later and I sat in front of the mirror, Clyde and Rachel's handiwork staring back at me. I looked beautiful, and fresh—natural, like me. They'd given me exactly what I'd asked for. My hair was down and in soft waves around my shoulders; my makeup was light—a warm glow across my cheeks, a little shimmer dusted on my cheekbones, peach eye shadow with warm brown eyeliner for definition. I looked like myself after a summer day spent at the beach. I felt beautiful and natural and I knew Carter would love it.

"Time for the white dress." Clyde air kissed both my cheeks and Rachel gave me a quick squeeze and wished me good luck. I assessed myself in the mirror for a few more moments before stepping out into the bedroom. The dress designer was here to personally help dress me along with her assistant from yesterday.

"You look so beautiful." She smiled when I walked out. I gave her a nervous nod. The dress designer unzipped the garment bag and my breath caught. The dress was so beautiful.

"Ready, dear?" She gave me a reassuring smile. I nodded again, too choked up to speak.

"Off these go, then." She tapped my hip to indicate my shirt and yoga pants.

I slid the fabric of the pants over my hips and stood in front of the mirror in a pair of panties, my arms covering my chest. Because of the open back of my dress, I couldn't wear a bra. The dress was structured enough through the bodice to provide support, but it was awkward standing in front of two strangers almost nude.

Cate would shrug it off with an unabashed grin. I wished again that she could be here to share this with me. As excited as I was to marry Carter, there was a little piece of me that was the slightest bit sad to admit that I was also a little lonely.

Nanette held the dress open for me; her assistant held onto my elbow as I stepped into the

delicate lace. They slid the fabric over my body and I slipped my arms through the cap sleeves. I closed my eyes as Nanette moved my hair out of the way and hooked the few buttons at the back of my neck. She slid her hands down the fabric and held them at my hips.

"You look beautiful."

I looked up at the mirror in front of me. The designer was beaming behind my shoulder. My eyes slid to my form in the mirror and a smile broke out across my face. The dress was somehow more beautiful than it had been yesterday. Dark waves of my hair cascaded around my shoulders, and the lace of the high neckline and cap sleeves peeked out. The effect was overwhelmingly romantic, in a modern and elegant way. It felt perfect for the understated affair that would be our wedding.

"Are you ready dear?" Nanette smiled. I took a deep breath and gave her a bright smile.

"I am."

Her assistant reached for my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. I walked over to the door of the bedroom and butterflies jumped into my throat as my fingers touched the doorknob. Outside the door was the rest of my life with the man I loved. I had the white dress, the beautiful shoes, and the stunning and sexy groom waiting for me. I was ready.

I stepped out of the bedroom door and walked to the top of the stairs. I glanced down to the front door and was saddened that instead of Carter, I found the driver that had been with us the past few days. I frowned and walked down the stairs slowly attempting not to tumble with the high heels and the train of lace behind me.

"Miss." The driver tipped his hat. "We'll be meeting Mr. Morgan at the venue." He opened the door for me. I walked into the bright sunny afternoon and inhaled the fresh autumn air. The weather was unseasonably warm and I wasn't at all chilled in the gown.

I lifted the train of my dress and stepped into the back of the car. The driver shut the door and then slipped into the front seat.

"How far are we going?" I was anxious to see Carter.

"Not far." He gave me a small smile in the rearview mirror. We pulled out of the driveway and drove for a few minutes before we pulled into a narrow twisting road that climbed farther up the mountain. It felt like miles as we made our way through the sunlit aspens on the gravel drive, but after a few minutes the car came to a stop. The driver came around and offered me a hand out of the car. I stood up and frowned in confusion. It was desolate. We were somewhere high in the mountains, birds chattered around us, and there was a calm breeze, but no sign of Carter anywhere.

The driver offered me his elbow. "This way, miss." He led me to the edge of the gravel drive and a small path that curved around a small group of evergreens. We turned the corner and the view opened up before us.

The grassy clearing was small, around fifty yards in diameter, and on the opposite edge it fell away into a sloping grass-covered mountain. Across the valley the sun glinted off the yellow and orange leaves that led up to the snow-peaked mountains. The view was breathtaking, and standing in the center of that fantastic view was the man of my dreams.

Carter stood at the end of the path that was lined on either side with dozens of vases overflowing with deep purple calla lilies—a reminder of the first time he'd sent me flowers that morning a few weeks ago when he'd given me the Tiffany watch.

My eyes traveled up the grass path to Carter. He wore a light tan suit and a striped white and deep purple tie. He also had a small lily pinned to his lapel. His hair was perfectly floppy and the sun's rays glinted off of the toffee-colored strands. He was breathtaking. A wide smile spread across his face and I'm sure my own equally bright smile met his. When we locked eyes I was lost in his steely blue depths.

A photographer came up with a camera in one hand and a bouquet of the same deep purple calla

lilies interwoven with sprigs of baby's breath. It was all so beautiful and romantic, and the fact that Carter had orchestrated all of it brought tears to my eyes.

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The driver led me part of the way to Carter and then let go once he saw that I was well on my way to the beautiful man I'd locked eyes with.

I walked slowly with a smile on my face up the path to where Carter stood, never breaking eye contact. The officiant stood next to him waiting patiently to start the ceremony. When I stepped up just out of arm's reach of Carter, he mouthed the words, "You are stunning."

I smiled and took the last steps to him, reaching my hand out for his.

His hand was so warm and comforting in my own, all of my fears from the past forty-eight hours slipped away. I was right where I was meant to be, at the top of this mountain, on a beautiful autumn day, marrying the man who made me so happy it felt like my heart could burst. I melted into him for a hug; breaking convention or not, I needed to feel him, to reassure him that he was my dream come true. He squeezed me back and kissed the top of my head.

"I love you," he whispered so only I could hear.

"I love you," I whispered back. I finally pulled away from him and looked at the officiant with a sheepish smile on my face. He smiled back reassuringly and then Carter nodded for him to start.

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