

CRUSH: A *GODS OF THE GATES* BONUS STORY

CRUSH SEASON IS HERE! read the sign near the upscale Napa Valley winery's entrance, stenciled grape clusters bordering the words. A HARVEST CELEBRATION OF WINE AND LOVE, OPEN DAILY 10-5.

Her small suitcase at her feet, Carah paused for a moment to study the tidy rows of fruit-heavy vines carpeting the property's rolling hills. The leaves on the vines remained mostly green, but had begun turning rusty at the edges. A reminder that time was growing goddamn short. Three or four more weeks, and the harvest would be over.

Soon *Gods of the Gates* would finally be over too, its terrible last episodes done airing. Its terrible showrunners on some new set, fucking up some new project. Its absolutely-*not*-terrible cast and crew scattered to the four winds. She'd still be working with Alex on *Unleashed*, their new travel show for StreamUs, but her other former coworkers? Maybe they'd appear in an episode or two of *Unleashed*, and maybe the cast chat would keep going strong. But it wouldn't be the same as seeing them nearly every workday. It couldn't be.

Seven years. Seven fucking years on the same set, and she hadn't had the fucking guts to

do what was necessary. To ask for what—for who—she wanted. And now it was too late, probably.

Crush season was fleeting. It left behind nothing but shriveled leaves and empty vines.

Absently, she rubbed the spot where her chest ached.

“An appropriate pairing, wine and love,” a soft, sweet, wonderfully—agonizingly—familiar voice said from behind her left shoulder. “In my admittedly limited experience, I’ve found that a glass or two of wine greatly facilitates romantic overtures.”

Summer Diaz. The *Gods of the Gates* co-star Carah had texted upon arrival in the vineyard’s parking lot. Their quietest, canniest castmate. The woman with whom she was sharing a suite in the winery’s attached inn.

The object of Carah’s years-long, unrequired longing.

Carah turned.

The golden afternoon sunlight limned Summer’s bronze hair and set her lightly tanned skin aglow, but it couldn’t outshine the wide, crooked smile on her elfin face. In the warmth of this early-October Saturday, her floaty sundress danced around her knees and molded against her slim, elegantly angular body in the breeze. Her cropped mustard-yellow cardigan was cashmere, probably. Didn’t fucking matter. No way it could be softer than her skin.

She was so fucking gorgeous, she might have been a goddess newly sprung from a fucking seashell. Which was ironic, since she was one of their few costars who *hadn’t* played an immortal, and according to canon, her character was considered unattractive.

Ron and R.J., their asshole showrunners, had simply put her in mud-brown costumes, scraped her hair back tightly and given her little or no makeup, as if that was enough to make her anything less than lovely. They were fucking idiots.

Carah took a steadying breath. “‘A glass or two of wine greatly facilitates romantic overtures,’ huh? Is that a smart-person way of saying when people get absolutely fucking sloshed, they do shit they normally wouldn’t?”

Summer’s laugh contained a husky little catch, as always, and it caught at Carah’s throat too, leaving her too damn short of oxygen. As always.

“Yes.” Her thin lips pursed, her smile turning a touch sly. “Also *people* they normally wouldn’t.”

If only.

Unable to resist, Carah opened her arms wide. Summer walked into them without hesitation, and Carah might as well have embraced a live wire. Even the smallest contact with the other woman left her smoldering and singed, every time.

Summer’s arms tightened as her pointy chin dug into Carah’s collarbone. Her warm breath washed over Carah’s neck.

Carah shivered and tugged her closer.

The hug lingered. And kept lingering. Sooner or later, Summer was going to drop her hands and step back, but Carah certainly wasn’t letting go before then.

“I’m sorry the *Unleashed* filming ran so goddamn late.” Relaxing fully into the embrace, she ducked her head to rest it carefully on Summer’s delicate shoulder. “Where’s everyone else?”

Like their other castmate friends, Carah had intended to arrive Friday evening and take full advantage of the wine-tasting weekend retreat Peter had won in a silent auction earlier that year. But since Alex was congenitally incapable of shutting up, they’d had to spend an extra day filming in Seattle. Now she’d only share a suite with Summer for one night, rather than two.

If she didn't love Alex so much, she'd have shoved him off the fucking Space Needle.

"For an excursion to a winery, there's been very little actual wine-drinking thus far."

Summer's soft snort jostled her gently against Carah's body. "Right now, Peter and Maria are getting a couples massage with various grape-related add-ons. A back scrub with crushed grape seeds, a vinotherapy bath, and some treatment with the vines that sounded a wee bit kinky."

Huh. "I *knew* people did weird shit with grapes. Didn't I fucking say so?"

"You did." Something warm pressed against the crook of Carah's neck for the briefest moment. "Mackenzie is getting a more standard couples massage, assuming it's standard that the other half of the couple is her cat. The spa had to bring in a local feline massage specialist for Whiskers."

Carah snickered. "That's a big fucking assumption, Summer."

"April is chatting with one of the employees about the winery's soil, while Marcus listens and makes heart-eyes at her every time she uses a three-syllable word. Alex and Lauren arrived about an hour ago, and heaven only knows what they're doing. I assume wreaking havoc, as is Alex's custom." She paused. "Upon second thought, there were odd bobcat sounds coming from the hotel about half an hour ago, so maybe I have a small inkling as to their current activities."

After one final, fierce squeeze, Summer moved away. "We only have an hour or two before everything closes, so my suggestion is that we drop your suitcase off at the front desk and get going."

"What have you already done?" Carah's arms suddenly felt as empty and desolate as those post-crush season vines. "Picked grapes? Crushed grapes? Bought grape-related shit from all the vendors? Joined a grape-worshipping cult? Gotten a tattoo sleeve that's nothing but grapes, in a sign of true fucking commitment to grapekind?"

Summer laughed. “None of the above. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“I’m sorry.” Carah winced. “I thought you might have given up by now.”

“Of course not.” Summer’s warm brown eyes crinkled with good humor. “Giving up was never an option. I can be patient, especially when I want something very much.”

Carah blinked at her, confused. “Something like...my company this weekend?”

Summer merely grinned in response, then grabbed Carah’s suitcase and wheeled it toward the inn. “If you want to freshen up, there’s a bathroom and lounge off the reception area. I’ll take care of getting your bag tucked away behind the desk and meet you back outside.”

As Carah used the facilities and tried to get her windblown hair in order—she adored convertibles, but those motherfuckers could ruin even the tightest, sleekest ponytail in seconds—she thought about the only two scenes she’d actually shot with Summer over the years.

Dido’s bizarre murder attempt from the final season, of course. Then there was Aeneas’s dream sequence several years ago, where he’d agonized over whether he wanted Lavinia more than Dido or vice versa. Which was patently ridiculous, since the two women were each worth a dozen of him. Fuckboys were fuckboys, even those immortalized in epic poetry.

She and Summer had rarely shared the same scene. They’d usually filmed on adjacent studio sets, though, and hung out at various conventions and press junkets. They’d spent endless hours chatting off-camera.

Their next sets wouldn’t share a studio. Hell, their next sets might not even share a *continent*. And sure, she and Summer both had homes in the LA area, but...

She needed to gather her goddamn courage and take advantage of today. Of tonight. Not just because it might be her last real chance to make something happen between them, but also because Summer seemed different this afternoon. Less guarded. More touchy-feely.

Almost...flirty?

Carah's various Google-stalking sessions over the years had unearthed only one of Summer's exes: the very handsome, very well-spoken, very cishet male head of a non-profit. But that didn't mean she hadn't dated other people, possibly including other women. For an actor, Summer was surprisingly attention-averse. She guarded her privacy fiercely, and she tried to keep her personal life out of the press, if at all possible. On set, while her noisier castmates hogged the spotlight, she preferred arranging things to her satisfaction quietly, from the sidelines and shadows, in subtle ways most people didn't even notice.

Carah had noticed. She might be an indiscreet, all-caps-using loudmouth, but no one had ever called her unobservant. From the moment their eyes had first met across a conference table, she hadn't been able to look away from the elegant woman with bronze hair and sharp brown eyes and velvety skin.

It was probably good they hadn't shared more scenes over the years. Viewers would have eventually noticed how Dido kept eye-fucking her ostensible nemesis.

All this time, Carah had wondered whether Summer was bi too. And today, she intended to find out. Assuming she didn't chicken out, like the insecure little bitch she was.

After one final, nervous flick of her now-smooth bangs, she reentered the lobby and strode outside. As promised, Summer was waiting patiently near the entrance. Unable to find words, Carah settled for a heartfelt smile, which Summer returned.

In silent harmony, they walked toward the winery's various crush-season activities, and Carah cautiously veered close enough that their shoulders brushed a little with every step.

Summer didn't edge away. If anything, she moved closer.

"Our private wine-tasting event is tomorrow, so why don't we focus on the other

activities today? Starting with the ones that end earliest.” Summer’s gaze skimmed over their options. “Let’s stomp some grapes first. That is, if you’re willing to get a little wet and dirty with me, Ms. Brown.”

That *had* to be flirting, right? Summer might be quiet, but she was no innocent.

She wasn’t making eye contact, though, so...dammit, Carah still wasn’t sure.

Whatever. Either way, her answer was the same. “If getting wet and dirty with you is an option, I will literally always choose that option. You don’t even have to fucking ask.”

“Ah.” Summer’s wide mouth curled into another satisfied smile, even as she continued facing forward. “Good to know.”

They stopped near a large, round wooden barrel, maybe three feet in diameter and as high as Carah’s knees. It stood on a non-slip rubber mat, a coiled hose waiting by its side.

The barrel was partially filled with grapes, of course. Picture-perfect ones. Purplish-black and fresh from the field, their plump surfaces clouded with a whitish bloom.

“That’s some *I Love Lucy* shit right there,” Carah declared.

“Everyone says that. Although not in those exact words, perhaps.” A fifty-something woman with a graying bun and purple splatters all over her tee and leggings walked over from a nearby table and smiled at them both. “I’m Marguerite, this vineyard’s owner and winemaker. You two came just in time to stomp all over my last batch of zinfandel grapes for the day.”

Summer politely shook her hand. “Delighted to meet you, Marguerite. I’m Summer, and my lovely companion is Carah.”

“Oh, I know,” Marguerite said. “I’ve been watching *Gods of the Gates* since season one. For years now, I’ve been wondering why Dido wants Aeneas so damn much when she could pursue Lavinia instead. It makes zero sense to me.”

Summer grinned. “You’re not alone.”

Definitely not alone. Thousands, if not millions, of people could join that particular club, if all the Divinia fanfic Alex kept sending Carah was any indication. But when it came to criticizing the show, he’d already gotten into enough trouble for the entire cast. Carah, for once, would stay discreet and make no further comment.

“So you’re the boss bitch at this gorgeous place,” she said, surveying the expansive, impeccably maintained property. “Nice. *Very* nice.”

Marguerite chuckled. “I think so.”

“What do we need to do?” A tip of Summer’s head indicated the barrel. “Do we just climb inside, or...?”

“Leave your shoes in the grass, and I’ll help you get in.” Marguerite considered them for a moment, her head tipped to the side. “It’s just large enough for two people, if you’d like to squeeze in there together.”

“We would,” Summer said.

With her typical precision, she removed her strappy sandals and placed them neatly in a pair, precisely parallel to the mat, while Carah haphazardly rolled up the legs of her jeans before unlacing her Chucks, stripping off her socks, and kicking them...somewhere. Hopefully nearby.

She dug in her pocket for her phone, intending to record the experience and use it somehow in her next food-reaction video, but then she looked up and saw Summer.

Specifically, she saw Summer climbing inside the barrel with Marguerite’s help, that gorgeous fucking sundress rising high on golden thighs, her feet narrow and arched and pretty enough to make a bitch weep in longing. As Summer sank into the grapes, she gasped and laughed, her free arm flying out for balance like a wing, and the sunshine made a motherfucking

halo of her hair. As if Carah didn't already know she was a goddamn angel.

As soon as Marguerite let her go, Summer met Carah's gaze and stretched out a hand.

"Come here," she murmured.

Carah promptly dropped her phone on the grass and obeyed.

Summer's fingers were strong, her palm warm and soft. She steadied Carah without difficulty, even when Carah stepped inside and instinctively jerked at the feel of smooth, wet globules shifting and squishing between her toes.

"Holy shit," Carah breathed. "It's like reaching into a bowl of peeled-grape eyeballs on Halloween and smushing them, only with your feet."

Both other women laughed, and then Summer's hand slid free of hers. Before Carah could protest, though, Summer wiggled herself under Carah's armpit and cuddled close, both arms wrapping around Carah's waist.

Her happy little sigh pushed a small, perky breast against Carah's ribs. "There. We can steady each other."

Oh, fuck, a nipple. That was definitely a hard goddamn nipple poking into Carah's side.

Tentatively, she closed her own arms around Summer and hitched the other woman closer, marveling at the glory of it all. Wondering at the way their bodies fit so perfectly together, even though Carah was so much taller and more muscular. Also so much softer, now that she was no longer training constantly to portray a demented warrior queen.

Before now, she'd worried about touching Summer with even a fraction of her actual need, for fear she might simply snap her castmate in two. But for all Summer's spare angularity and seeming fragility, her grip was fucking tight, her body strong and lithe against Carah's.

"You won't break me," Summer said, her voice too soft to carry to Marguerite's ears.

“Hold me as tightly as you want.”

How did she know? How *much* did she know?

Had Carah’s longing been transparent to Summer all along?

“You two, uh…” Marguerite’s voice shook slightly, and when they jumped in startlement and turned to face her, she bit her lip for a moment. “You might want to start, um, stomping the grapes at some point? No hurry, I suppose, but we’re only open so late.”

“Oh.” Carah glanced down at the entirely intact grapes at their feet. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

With a snort, Summer began stomping in earnest, and Carah did too, trying her best to ignore how their movements rubbed them against one another in an extremely distracting way.

Despite her preoccupation with stiff nipples and gently curved hips and soft, soft skin, Carah somehow managed to remember the question she’d intended to ask the winemaker.

“So…are we supposed to drink the juice we smush out of the grapes? Because that seems like a good way to contract a terrible fucking disease.”

“Yes.” Summer nodded emphatically, and the brush of her hair prickled Carah’s skin into goosebumps. “Something fungal, I imagine.”

“In theory, any germs should be killed by the alcohol produced during fermentation, and we will in fact bottle the juice you’re making and send it home with you.” When Carah opened her mouth, Marguerite raised a staying hand. “That said, commercial wineries are bound by all sorts of regulations, and since there *is* a slight chance of contamination, your bottle will very clearly tell you *not* to drink its contents.”

“I don’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed.” Carah considered the issue as she kept stomping and squishing. “Our foot-wine would have made a great food-reaction video for my channel, but…yeah. I know where my feet have been. I don’t mind eating bizarre shit,

obviously, but better not to risk death-by-toe-juice.”

“Alex will definitely drink it anyway, label or no label,” Summer pointed out.

Of course he would. “Once we’re done, we should text Lauren and tell her to keep him far away from the grape-smushing.” Carah turned back to the winemaker. “Hey, Marguerite. People do other weird shit with grapes, right? I mean, I’m sure you know that better than I do.”

“Right,” the winemaker said slowly. “Well—”

“So maybe you can help me. If I shouldn’t drink liquid toe-jam, what else can I do for my food-reaction video? You don’t grow those grapes that taste like candy corn or whatever, do you? Although those grapes freak me the hell out, honestly.”

“It’s witchcraft,” Summer affirmed. “Cotton candy rather than candy corn, but definitely witchcraft nevertheless.”

“*Thank you.*” Absently, she stroked a strand of Summer’s silky hair away from her castmate’s forehead. “Anyway, I could use your help, Marguerite. If your grapes don’t taste like fucking Oreos or eggplants or some other shit, I’m not quite sure what to do in my next video, and I’d like to feature this winery somehow. If you’d like that too, obviously. If not, no worries.”

“My grapes taste like grapes. But since I’d love for you to feature my winery…” Her broad forehead furrowed in thought. “How would you feel about trying semi-fermented grape juice? It’s cloudy, sweet, and fizzy, and since the alcohol content is unpredictable and goes up hour by hour, it can make you tipsy very, very easily. Which is one of several reasons we can’t package and sell it commercially. At our winery, we usually just share it with workers and their families, and it’s only available for a brief time.”

“Sold,” Carah mentally reviewed her schedule over the next twenty-hour hours. “Could I try it tonight? Maybe after—”

“Tomorrow,” Summer interrupted. “Tomorrow, not tonight.”

Carah frowned down at her, confused.

Summer’s palm slid slowly over Carah’s hip. “We’re busy tonight.”

Other than an early group dinner, Carah didn’t remember any particular commitments they’d...oh. *Oh*.

Holy fuck. Did she mean—

“Tomorrow, then.” Marguerite nodded firmly. “We’ll work out the details later. For now, though, would you two like to take a commemorative photo of your grape-stomping adventure? Your admission today includes a free copy of any picture from the official winery camera, but I’m happy to snap some on your phones too.”

Summer’s cell, of course, was easily located inside the purse she’d placed next to her shoes. Finding Carah’s proved more of a challenge, since her telling Marguerite “I’m pretty fucking sure it’s in the grass...somewhere” while gazing at Summer in hopeful confusion didn’t exactly provide optimal cell-location guidance.

As the very patient winemaker searched for Carah’s phone, Summer somehow managed to snuggle closer, which Carah hadn’t thought was physically possible.

“Wow, you smell good. Woodsy.” Her nose nuzzled against Carah’s neck, and she inhaled deeply. “And you’ve always been gorgeous, but I can’t get over how soft you are now. I love it.”

She leaned back an inch or two, her gaze dropping down to where Carah’s tits—now a cup size larger than before—were straining the fabric of her soft knit tee.

Carah’s mouth went so dry, she couldn’t even reply.

“Got it!” Marguerite called, and strode back toward the barrel. “We’ll start with the

winery camera. On the count of three, ladies. One...two..."

Right as Marguerite said *three* and snapped the picture, Summer rose on tiptoe to kiss Carah's cheek. Which promptly heated in a scalding flush even the autumn sun couldn't explain, because—Jesus Christ. Summer *fucking* Diaz had *kissed her*.

Yes, not on the specific cheek Carah might have preferred, but still. It was their first kiss. It was the best kiss of her entire *fucking life*, though she hoped that record wouldn't stand for long.

"Perfect." The winemaker smiled at whatever she saw on the display. "Now your cell phones."

For the first cell phone photo, Summer kissed the very corner of Carah's mouth. For the second, Carah's sensitive earlobe. Each brief, soft caress dizzied Carah and turned her knees to motherfucking *pudding*, and by the time all the photos had been taken, she found herself relying on Summer's unwavering support to remain fully upright.

She still couldn't speak a word. Not even obscenities. She also wasn't certain she'd actually looked at the damn camera for any of the photos, since she was too busy staring in wonderment at Summer's smile. Her lips. Those warm, knowing brown eyes.

"This is a special barrel, you know." Marguerite's own gaze was unfocused, her lips curved in a pained smile. "When my parents met, my mother's family owned the winery, and my father was their new viticulturist. He fell for her immediately. They'd only been courting a few weeks when crush season began, and he'd intended to wait to ask her to marry him, but...instead, he got down on his knees in that barrel and offered her a ring and his heart."

Carah's eyes prickled. "I assume she said yes?"

"She said he was a damn fool to kneel in grape juice, and if he wanted a wife who'd

remove those stains for him, he should propose to someone else.” Marguerite laughed. “Which was very much my mother. He assured her all stain removal would be his job, now and forever, and *then* she said yes. They were mad about each other for the rest of their lives. And ever since his very messy proposal, crushing grapes in this barrel together has brought luck in love to any couple with honest, loyal hearts.”

Oh, we’re not a couple, Carah expected Summer to protest.

Instead, Summer crouched down and gently patted the side of the barrel. “We’re honored you let us use it, Marguerite. Thank you.”

The winemaker blinked away the extra brightness in her eyes, then held out a hand. “You’re welcome. Let me help you out, and we’ll rinse off your ankles and feet.”

Before Carah could shake off her daze and assist Summer, her castmate was already safely standing on the rubber mat. Without a word, Summer interlaced their fingers and supported Carah as she climbed over the edge of the barrel too.

Their hands fit together as if they’d been created from one mold, then cruelly cracked into two pieces. Only to slot neatly into place again, decades later, like they’d never been separate. Not for a minute.

Even once Carah was out, feet planted on the mat, Summer didn’t let go.

When Marguerite hosed off their lower legs, Summer didn’t let go.

While they thanked the winemaker and said their goodbyes, Summer didn’t let go.

As they clipped grape clusters from the vines and savored sips of the year’s wines from the vineyard’s tanks, Summer didn’t let go.

Carah might be nervous and overwhelmed and lust-drunk. She wasn’t a fucking dunce, though. It had taken her seven goddamn years spent pining for Summer, but she knew now. She

finally knew for certain.

No way that woman was entirely straight. If Summer *wasn't* either bi or pan, Carah would chug their fungus-riddled foot-wine and deserve every terrible disease she got.

Also: No way this was only a crush. Not for her. When their hands had joined, something crucial, something life-changing, had slotted into place in her heart too.

Also also: No way Summer wasn't interested in her too, at least sexually. Maybe for Summer it *was* only a crush, but...maybe not.

And they were about to share a hotel suite. Just the two of them.

Holy *shitballs*.

As soon as they walked into their shared suite after dinner, Carah turned to Summer. "I really need a damn shower. Give me ten minutes, babe."

Without waiting for a response, she squeezed Summer's hand, then wheeled her bag directly from the large living area into the bathroom, because after a day spent traveling and doing random shit with grapes, a shower wasn't merely an option. It was a fucking *imperative*. For her own sake, but also for Summer's. Hopefully. If Carah had read the signs correctly.

She didn't dilly-dally in there, because she didn't intend to wait much longer for whatever might happen next. And once she was clean, mostly dry, and clad in her favorite wine-red pajamas, she finally let herself peek into the generous bedroom from the doorway in the living area.

The room contained a king-size bed. *One* king-size bed.

Summer came up behind her and rubbed her cheek against Carah's cotton-clad upper arm. Carah immediately reached that arm back, and Summer reclaimed her hand.

Together, they wordlessly contemplated the solitary, single, lone, *enormous* fucking bed. Its sheets looked soft, and there were lots of pillows that could be either pushed out of the way or...utilized. Creatively.

“You know this is Alex’s second-favorite trope,” Carah said, in lieu of lighting candles in heartfelt thanks to whatever deity had arranged this circumstance. “If we tell him we only-one-bedded it in real life, that motherfucker will *explode* from fanboy joy.”

Summer’s hand squeezed hers. “Who do you think gave me the idea?”

“Oh.” Carah swallowed hard and turned to face her. “So you...did this on purpose?”

Was this her goddamn *birthday*? Was she about to wake up in her own LA bed and realize it was all a dream? Like that show with Bobby Motherfucking Ewing, only with less vehicular homicide and more potential finger-banging?

“When I made our reservation, the inn had a suite with two beds as an option.” Summer paused, her grip on Carah’s hand loosening. “I can call the front desk and ask whether it’s still available, if you’d prefer th—”

“No,” Carah interrupted. “*Fuck*, no. I just want to be absolutely certain about what’s happening before I...before we...”

Summer nudged her aside, so they could both fit in the doorway, and brushed a lingering, spine-melting kiss over her jaw. “I’d hoped my intentions would be obvious. But just to be crystal-clear, I packed my skimpiest nightgown for this trip, in hopes you’d strip it right off me.”

Okay. Okay. *Fuck*. This was actually happening? Like, in reality?

“I wasn’t sure you dated women.” Carah bit her lip, worrying it with her teeth for a moment. “Even if you did, I thought you might want someone more like your ex. Someone more like you. Classy. Well-spoken. Calm. Not an overly loud, profanity-riddled, insecure bitch like

me.”

Summer directed a stern look her way. “You can quit being unkind to yourself right this second, Carah Marie Brown. I’ve always wanted you for exactly who and what you are.”

“What am I, then?” Carah whispered, hope and joy burgeoning within her.

“An enthusiastic, hilarious, incredibly talented woman with the biggest heart and most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. Not to mention the sexiest damn body.” Summer’s eyes swept her from head to toe, lingering on several key spots. “I would have made a move years ago, but the potential awkwardness of getting involved with a coworker concerned me. Now that filming is done, though, all bets are off.”

If, by some miracle, Summer did in fact want Carah exactly as she was...so be it. Summer could have all of her. Her heart. Her vulnerabilities. Her filthy mouth.

Her hunger and possessiveness.

“In that case...” Freed from her doubts at long last, Carah slid a slow hand down Summer’s cashmere-covered back. Lower. Lower, until she was cupping that gorgeous little ass. In a quick, firm movement, she hitched Summer tighter, closer, nudging her own upper thigh against the seam of Summer’s legs. “Show me your nightie, darling.”

Summer’s brow crinkled in amused confusion, even as her legs parted. “I could just get naked, you know. No nightgown necessary.”

“Of course you could, but...” Carah bent down and whispered in Summer’s ear, her lips brushing the sensitive lobe with each word. “I want to make you come while you’re wearing it. So you can never slip it over that pretty head again without fucking thinking of me.”

As Carah’s tongue traced the delicate rim of Summer’s ear, Summer rubbed up harder against Carah’s leg, her lips parting in a silent gasp. Both her hands now on Summer’s butt,

Carah rocked her thigh to provide more pressure. More pleasure.

She lightly sucked a spot just below Summer's firm jaw, where the skin was thin and shadowed and deliciously salty. "Without thinking of fucking me."

Because there were no guarantees here, much as that acknowledgment hurt. This could be the rest of their lives, or this could be a single night. And if they only had this one time together, Carah intended to make it fucking *count*.

When she lifted her hands from Summer's ass and stepped back, Summer made a tiny little sound of protest, her pupils blown wide.

"Go on," Carah told her. "Get ready."

"So bossy," Summer tsked, her grin crooked and beautiful. "I like it. Be right back."

After plucking something satiny-looking from a drawer, she disappeared into the bathroom and took the world's shortest shower while Carah turned down the bed and propped herself against the pillow-piled headboard and tried not to hyperventilate.

Maybe three minutes later, max, Summer reappeared in the bedroom doorway, looking like an angel of both the celestial and Victoria's Secret varieties.

Her nightgown was a wisp of cream silk, a slip of fabric that slid over her golden skin like a waterfall and barely covered that small, perfect ass. One quick move, one slow bend, and Carah would be able to see...everything. Like a sinner unexpectedly ushered into paradise.

"You are...so goddamn beautiful." Carah held out both hands. "Come here, Summer."

Taking her time, Summer climbed up onto the end of the bed and slowly, slowly moved forward on her hands and knees, letting Carah get a nice, long look down the sinuous length of her body through that now-gaping neckline.

Straddling Carah's raised knee, Summer urged her against the pillows, sank her hands

into Carah's loose, damp hair, and kissed her. Not a tentative brush of mouths, but a hungry, open-mouthed claiming of lips and tongue and teeth, vibrating with her hum of relief and pleasure.

Summer's fingers curled, their grip greedy as she gathered handfuls of hair in her fists, and Carah moaned at the light tug against her scalp, the sliding stroke of tongue against tongue, the firm pressure of Summer's bare thigh against Carah's cotton-clad pussy.

The silent message might as well have been written on a billboard, in letters twenty damn feet high: Summer Diaz wasn't fucking *fragile*. On the contrary. She was strong and confident and absolutely everything Carah needed, inside and out.

Disentangling one hand from Carah's hair, Summer went exploring. Knuckles trailing lightly down Carah's neck, leaving behind goosebumps and shivers. Palm slipping lower, to the swell of an aching breast. Thumb rubbing sweetly, relentlessly, over the thin cotton covering a hard nipple. Teeth sinking into the crook of Carah's neck as Summer sucked and licked and resumed the slow slide of her hand downward.

No. No, not yet. Carah had made a vow she intended to keep.

Capturing that wandering hand, she ignored all protests and tugged Summer closer, urging her to straddle both Carah's thighs.

There. There. Summer's warm weight in Carah's lap. Summer's legs tight against Carah's hips. Summer's thighs wide-fucking-open, pushing her hem so high the tiny fucking nightgown became a tiny fucking shirt.

Neat bronze curls. Fluted flesh, flushed rosy-brown. Beautiful.

And wet. Already so goddamn wet.

"You can lie back if you want, darling." Leaning forward, Carah chased the thin strap of

that nightgown down Summer's arm with her mouth. One side, then the other. Raising her head, she murmured, "Or you can watch."

Apparently Summer wanted to watch, because she stayed upright. Trembling now, breathing fast, but upright.

Carah laid her right hand on Summer's knee. Let it rest there for a few heartbeats, before gliding up that strong, slim thigh, inch by inch, until her fingertips brushed the warm silk of Summer's belly.

Lightly, teasingly, she petted the sweet tangle of hair between Summer's legs, then slowly traced the open, slick seam of her body with a deliberate, unhurried thumb. When Carah swept over the taut swell of Summer's clit, they both stopped breathing for a moment. Summer's next exhalation was a moan, followed by a broken gasp as Carah sank that seeking thumb inside her.

Fuck. *Fuck*. Given half a chance, she'd spend the rest of her life worshipping that hot, slick cunt quivering and squeezing tight around her thumb.

Summer's hands reached behind Carah, grabbing the headboard in a white-knuckled grip, her head bent low as they both watched the easy glide in and out. Once. Again.

When Carah moved her thumb away, Summer choked out a harsh *no*.

"Shhh. It's okay. Yes. There you are." Now wet, her thumb circled Summer's clit around and around, each sweep almost frictionless as her fingertips explored all those lovely furrows below. "So soft. So damn pretty. Summer, darling, would you like me to fuck you with my fingers?"

Summer's hips hitched higher. "God. Yes. Please."

A single crooked, rubbing finger sinking deep inside Summer only made her plead for

more, so Carah slowly added another. Then another, as Summer ground down onto all three fingers and pressed against Carah's gliding thumb and panted out frantic little sounds, her hair tickling her shoulders with each buck of her hips.

"That's it," she told Summer. "Look at you. Look how beautiful you are when you get fucked."

When Summer sobbed in response, Carah stroked her free hand down that silky fall of bronze hair, the gesture soothing. At least until she wound the hair around her fist and tugged. Summer's head fell back as her mouth fell open, her upper body formed a gorgeous, deep arch, and when she came, her elegant throat worked in a rough cry.

Carah had never seen anything so goddamn lovely. Never.

She bent forward, rested her mouth against that long, graceful throat, and reveled in how Summer's moans vibrated against her lips, against her slow, tender, sucking kiss. As long as Summer kept coming, kept clamping around her fingers and pulsing against her thumb, Carah kept fucking her, slow and deep and steady.

Summer whimpered faintly. "Holy shit. Carah...*god*."

Carah had wondered whether Summer ever swore. Now she knew.

The twitches slowed at last, and Carah licked all that gorgeous wetness from her fingers and palm, then used her fistful of Summer's hair to urge her upright and seal their mouths in a lazy swirl of tongues and teeth and lips.

The kiss lasted for several heartbeats before Summer used her grip on the headboard to push away from Carah, the movement near-violent.

"*Summer*." Carah let go of her hair immediately, concerned. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you? If I did, I'm so s—"

“Take off your damn pajama top.” Summer scooted to the side and began yanking the pants down Carah’s legs. “Then lie back and lift those pretty knees high, Carah. I want to know how you taste. I’ve wanted to know for years, and I’m done waiting.”

As soon as Carah threw the top across the room and kicked off the matching pants, Summer palmed her knees and spread them wide.

“Get comfortable, babe,” she said, her mouth poised a bare inch above Carah’s bare cunt, her breath a tickling tease against Carah’s clit. “Because I don’t plan on lifting my head again for a long, long time.”

And Carah didn’t intend to interfere with that plan. “Thank fuck.”

Her happy sigh hitched into a moan with the first long lick through her vulva, the first lingering swirl of Summer’s agile tongue around her clit, and she gathered the silky hair back from Summer’s face with shaking hands.

“No.” Summer’s thumbs stroked her open even further, leaving her totally exposed to the chilly hotel room air and Summer’s hot, hungry mouth. “Thank *me*.”

Over the next hour or so, Carah did. Repeatedly. Fervently. Lovingly.

With no fucking clue whether that love was returned.

Later that night, the two of them came up for air and something to eat besides pussy.

“I’m sure we can still get a pizza delivered. But what’s there to drink around here?”

Carah flopped bonelessly against their pillows and glanced at the bottle Summer must have placed on the nightstand at some point. “Besides our feet-wine, obviously.”

Summer’s perusal of the mini-fridge’s contents paused for a moment. “Have you looked at the label they put on our bottle, hon? Because it’s pretty amazing.”

Sitting up with a reluctant groan, Carah grabbed the bottle and studied it under the lamp's light. To Marguerite's credit, there was no missing the DO NOT DRINK message on the label, since she'd used what appeared to be zillion-point font. But below that—

“Oh,” Carah said softly.

Below that, in an oval surrounded by little line-drawn clusters of grapes, was the photo Marguerite had taken at the barrel earlier that day. In the snapshot, Summer cuddled close to Carah's side, rising on tiptoe to kiss her cheek, while Carah stared wide-eyed at the camera, longing and desire and love evident in every pixel of her expression.

“They printed our photo on the label.” Carah swallowed hard, wondering whether Summer recognized that expression. Recognized everything it contained. “It's a nice souvenir. Do you want to keep it, or...?”

“We can share it.” Summer stood, a bottle of non-foot-based wine in hand. Her sharp brown gaze studied Carah's reaction to her words, and Carah got the definite sense the two of them were now discussing more than just toe-juice. “At least, that's what I'd prefer.”

In an ideal world, Carah would know exactly what that meant. In an ideal world, she wouldn't have to puzzle out what Summer wanted and intended. However, since they lived in *this* world, which was far from fucking ideal, she'd have to gather her goddamn courage and actually fucking *ask*.

“Summer...shit. I don't want to pressure you, and I'm sorry if I'm being impatient or too intense or whatever, but I need to know.” The foot-wine bottle clinked when she set it back on the nightstand. She barely heard it over the rapid *thump-thump* of her heartbeat in her ears. “Is this weekend a one-time thing for you? Your last chance to act on a little workplace crush before it's too late? Or do you want more?”

Summer's brow furrowed, and she flicked a hand toward the bed. "Of that?"

"No." Carah hesitated. "Well, yes, obviously, but not just that. Not just more sex."

Bracing herself, she met Summer's eyes. "More me. More...us."

Summer's breath hitched audibly. "Is that what you want? More us?"

"Yeah." Carah clasped her shaking hands together. "It's what I've wanted for years.

Sometimes, it feels like all I've ever wanted. I fucking *love* you, Summer. I love you so damn much, it fucking *hurts*."

Slowly, Summer's lips curved into that glorious smile of hers. Crooked. Bright and warm enough to rival the autumn sun. Beloved.

"I hate to be stereotypical," she said, "but I could have a U-Haul to your place by the end of the week."

Carah stood very, very still. "Really?"

"Yes, really." In half a dozen strides, Summer was there, only a whisper away, tenderly clasping Carah's hands like they were precious. Like *Carah* was precious. "I've loved you for so long, although I didn't realize it until filming ended. Suddenly, you weren't there every day, and not being able to see your face, not knowing how or where you were, felt like trying to breathe underwater. It's crushing me, Carah. I've been so damn miserable without you."

Oh, thank fuck. Thank Summer. Thank the gods and goddesses or the pixies or the moon or whatever the hell had gifted her this moment, this incandescent joy.

"Bring on the fucking U-Haul," she told Carah, and sealed the words with an open-mouthed, open-hearted kiss. The best of her entire life, yet again.

Over the decades to come, that record would be re-broken a million times over. And each time, Carah could only marvel at Summer, at fate, and at how quickly—with honest, loyal hearts

and a liter or so of foot-wine—a single crush season could turn into forever. And ever.

A-fucking-men.