

Chapter Eight

Ava

My hand is shaking so badly that I can't hold the eyeliner pencil steady to put on my makeup. Frustrated, I toss it back in my makeup bag and sink down onto the edge of my mattress to try to pull myself together.

When I left Aspen back in April, I never thought I'd see Garrett Von Horton again. I certainly never expected him to show up at my work and profess his undying commitment to take care of me and my unborn baby.

I mean, who does that?

He's supposed to be picking me up in half an hour, and I still have no idea what I'm going to wear for our date. Most of my clothes are packed away in cardboard boxes, which are stacked precariously in my closet.

My lease ends in two weeks, at which time I'll officially be homeless.

Before I came here, a short sublease made sense because I was headed to Vietnam. But with a baby on the way, I can't exactly go traipsing all over Asia.

Every cent I've saved these last six and a half years will go toward supporting me and the baby until I can figure out childcare — or muster up the courage to ask my mom for help.

She and I talk almost every week, but our conversations are always surface-level. I can't ask her to help me raise a baby. She's sacrificed too much as it is.

I've been apartment hunting on my days off, but the cost of even a one-bedroom in Denver is more than I can afford on my own. It was pure luck that I landed this place. Until a few weeks ago, I was sharing it with two other girls, but I can't see any potential new roommate being cool with a crying newborn.

A fresh sense of hopelessness swamps me as I stare at my barren closet. I haven't been on a date in years, and I haven't gone out since that fateful night that Jules lent me her dress.

On top of that, I'm really starting to show, which means that none of my clothes fit. Jeans have been a no-go for weeks. I've been living in leggings and managing at work by using a hair tie to secure the top button of my uniform pants, but I'm not going on a date with Garrett in pants that don't even button all the way.

A knock at the door pulls me out of my misery, and I glance at the clock. It's too early for Garrett to be here.

Shuffling over to figure out which of my neighbors' Amazon packages I've received by mistake, I'm surprised to find a plain white box wrapped in a pink ribbon.

Tucked underneath the bow is a note. It's scrawled in a messy yet elegant penmanship that must be Garrett's handwriting.

The note just says, "For tonight," and I let out an audible groan.

It feels like one of those department-store boxes, but it's not big enough for a fancy dress.

The knots in my stomach wind tighter at the thought that Garrett dropped off some sexy lingerie. Doesn't he know I'm fucking pregnant? Do they even make maternity lingerie?

As I shut the door, I have the impulse to throw the box directly in the trash, but part of me is curious what Garrett picked out. If it is something sexy, at least it will give me an idea of what he's into. My heart beats faster at the thought.

Swallowing to wet my parched throat, I undo the ribbon, open the box, and peel back the layers of tissue paper.

An ungraceful snort sneaks out of my nose when I see what's tucked inside. It's a comfy-looking white sweatsuit — Fendi, of course — that's plenty roomy for my baby bump.

A wide grin spreads across my face as I slip out of my pajama bottoms and into the sweats. They're probably the softest thing I've ever put on my body, and paired with the matching sweatshirt, I don't even look like a sloppy pregnant girl.

Buoyed by the thoughtful gift, I return to the mirror to finish my makeup and run a comb through my hair. Garrett arrives at six on the dot, and I have to stop myself from sprinting across the apartment to let him in.

When I finally throw the door open, I can't help but laugh. My suave, sexy date is also in a sweatsuit, though considering that the pants alone probably cost more than my entire wardrobe, I'm not sure it counts.

"You look beautiful," he says, those intense midnight-blue eyes of his sparkling as they study my face.

"Thanks for the sweats," I say, self-consciously slipping my hands inside the pockets. "I . . . wasn't sure what to wear."

“Well, I promised I’d cook you dinner, and since I’m only ever in Denver on business, I have a very strict dress code at home.”

“Sweats?”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “When I’m here, I spend all day in mind-numbing meetings wearing a suit and tie. Sweats are the only acceptable evening wear, other than birthday suits.”

“Good to know,” I say, unable to hide my grin.

Garrett seems strangely nervous as he places a hand on the small of my back and guides me down the steps to his car. At least, I think it’s his car. I certainly would have noticed if anyone else on my street drove this thing.

It’s an old-timey silver-and-red jalopy that looks as though it dropped straight out of the nineteen twenties. It also appears to be in mint condition, which is no surprise if it’s Garrett’s.

“This is your car?” I ask as he opens the passenger-side door.

Garrett scoffs. “The Roadster is not just a car. She’s my pride and joy.”

I grin and slide into the scalloped red leather seat, admiring the polished wood interior and all the gauges mounted along the dash. I reach up behind me to pull down the seat belt — only there isn’t one.

“Not a lot of room for a car seat,” I observe dryly as Garrett climbs in beside me.

There’s actually no back seat whatsoever, in addition to being completely without seatbelts.

“Noted,” says Garrett in a casual tone. “Although it is a convertible, so we could just strap the baby to the top of the back seat.”

My horror must show on my face, because Garrett throws his gorgeous head back and laughs. “I’m kidding.” He puts his hand on the back of my seat and reverses out of the parking spot with the fluidity and grace of someone who lives to drive. “I’ll buy us the safest family car on the market, angel — though I draw the line at minivans.”

“Agreed,” I say, feeling myself relax as we fall back into our easy banter.

Garrett zips us easily through the heavy traffic, and I quickly lose track of where we are. I’m new to Denver, so I’m not familiar with every area, but the houses here are a million times nicer than any in my neighborhood.

A long stone wall appears in my periphery, and Garrett follows it to a ten-foot-tall wrought-iron gate. He punches a code into the keypad, and the gate swings open to let us through.

If I hadn't already seen Garrett's ski chalet, my jaw would have hit the floorboard. A gigantic cream stucco house with a white brick porch is situated on an immaculate green lawn. Huge glass lanterns are glowing in the dying light, and Garrett zips into the circle drive and hops out to get my door.

He leads me through the front entrance, and for the first time tonight, I feel seriously underdressed.

While his chalet in Aspen was all heavy exposed wooden beams, stone, and expensive old rugs, this house is light and airy — all crisp lines, minimalist furniture, and a tasteful mix of cream and beige. The house feels both modern and classic, though oddly sterile.

"This is your house?" I ask, thinking it could be a rental with how impersonal it seems.

Garrett gives a careless shrug. "It's my family's Denver house. It's where I stay when I'm here on business."

I let out a low whistle and look around. "Should we be expecting them anytime soon? Your family, I mean."

"No," says Garrett, a hard edge to his voice. "We have the place to ourselves tonight."

At those words, I get a little flutter in my belly that's completely different from the baby wiggles I've been feeling for the past two weeks.

Garrett, too, seems suddenly self-conscious as he watches me take in his house. He's got his hands in his pockets, and his shoulders are raised and tense. It's almost as if he's waiting for something — to see if I like it, maybe?

"It's beautiful," I tell him in earnest.

"Eh. It's all right," he says, though I can tell he's pleased. "I like this place better than the Aspen house, though it could use a woman's touch."

"What's wrong with the Aspen house?"

He wrinkles his nose. "I don't know. It's just a little . . . medieval dungeon."

I snort.

"Are you hungry?"

"These days, I'm always hungry."

Garrett grins and takes my hand, leading me into the dining room. Floor-to-ceiling windows fill the wall, and a set of French doors leads out to the terrace. The long glass table is already set for two, and he deftly pulls out a chair for me so I can sit down.

“What can I get you to drink? Sparkling water? Iced tea? I do a mean mocktail . . .”

“Water’s fine,” I say, my nerves ratcheting up a notch. This room, the table — it all feels very formal, considering I’m wearing sweats.

Garrett brings me a glass of water and scurries back to the kitchen in a hurry. He reappears a moment later with a ceramic dish full of crab dip, along with a plate of freshly baked bread and cut veggies.

“The appetizer,” he announces with a little flourish of his hand.

My stomach rumbles at the sight of his spread, and I have to restrain myself from pouncing on the appetizer like a starving animal. Garrett takes the seat beside me, and I put my napkin in my lap before serving myself a scoop of crab dip in a very ladylike manner.

“Mmm,” I say as I take the first bite. It’s hot and gooey and just a little bit spicy, and I immediately want to eat it with a spoon. “I didn’t know you could cook.”

“Well, my family has employed Michelin-star chefs since I was a boy,” he explains. “I bribed one of them to give me some recipes for tonight that I couldn’t possibly screw up.” He winces. “Well, technically, I did screw up our entrée, but I think you’ll find the replacement more than satisfactory.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “I’m sure I will.”

“Wait — crab isn’t going to make you feel sick, is it?” he asks, looking suddenly panicked. “I know that being pregnant can make you queasy.”

I shake my head. “I was a little sick during the first trimester, but I’m past that now. I’m good with crab.”

Something like hurt flickers in Garrett’s eyes, but it’s quickly replaced by relief. “Good.”

Unease oozes into my stomach, and I surreptitiously study his face on the pretense of getting more bread. Garrett looks totally content now, but I can’t ignore what I saw.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the baby,” I murmur. “It was pretty shitty of me.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t blame you for just . . . trying to move on.”

“I should have told you,” I whisper. “I just . . . I’d already left town when I found out, and I didn’t think you’d want anything to do with it.”

Garrett presses his lips together in a tight line. I can tell he wants to say something, but instead he gets to his feet and heads back into the kitchen.

I slump back in my chair with a sigh, feeling as though I said the exact wrong thing. I don't know Garrett — that much is clear. Somebody who sends me Fendi sweatpants and painstakingly cooks a beautiful meal doesn't fit with the image I had in my mind of the playboy billionaire.

A moment later, Garrett reappears with two square plates. He sets one down on the table in front of me, and I can't help but laugh with delight.

Before me is an expertly plated dish. A bundle of grilled asparagus tied with bacon is propped on an artful pile of what is unmistakably white-cheddar mac and cheese.

"I burned the beef Wellington," he confesses. "But I figured mac and cheese fit the theme of our sweatpants night."

"It looks . . . delicious," I say, mouth watering at the sight of the gooey cheese sauce dripping from the outer noodles.

Being pregnant has turned me into a ravenous beast, and it takes all of my self-control to handle the meal one dainty bite at a time. The mac is perfectly salty and creamy, and the crunch of bacon tossed in the sauce adds an extra decadence to the concoction. The asparagus is cooked to perfection, as well, and I quickly clean my plate.

"There's plenty more," says Garrett, who has also polished off his serving. He's sitting with one elbow propped on the table, head in his hand, staring at me with an amused expression.

He takes in my eager, hungry face and gets up from the table with a chuckle. He returns with a glass dish full of the stuff, which he sets informally between us.

"Now that I've proven I can be civilized, we can just dig in," he jokes.

"Fine with me," I say, stabbing a few noodles onto my fork.

Garrett pops a hearty bite into his mouth, and I catch him watching me again.

"This is wonderful," I tell him earnestly, reaching across the table to place my hand over his. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he says, his eyes smoldering as he takes me in. "Thank you for giving me another chance."

Guilt burns my insides, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat. "I should have given you a chance before."

“Why would you?” he asks. “I took your virginity and knocked you up without ever taking you on a date.” He sucks in a sharp breath, looking suddenly troubled. “And if you looked into my family at all, you probably gathered that they’re not . . . welcoming to outsiders.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “And . . . what would they say about me?”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Garrett, flipping his hand palm up to capture mine in his grip.

“Yes, it does.”

Garrett glances away, clearly frustrated, but doesn’t release my hand.

“Really, Garrett. What would they say if you told them about me? I assume you haven’t told them.”

He doesn’t answer me right away. He just lets out a long breath, looking as though he’s fighting some great internal battle.

Finally, he meets my gaze, and the pained look in his eyes steals my breath away. “They’d say you were just some trashy one-night stand. They’d try to pay you to get an abortion — to use their money and influence to make this whole thing go away. When that didn’t work, they’d resort to threats. They’d try to use you to manipulate me so that I could manipulate you.” He rolls his eyes. “And when that didn’t work, they’d threaten to disown me.”

I drag in a shaky breath, caught off guard by his honesty. “And would they? Disown you, I mean.”

Garrett shrugs. “Some days, I think my father has already disinherited me — that he only keeps me around for the sake of appearances.”

I raise my eyebrows. I’ve known lots of people with imperfect upbringings, but I’ve never heard anyone describe their own family in such stark unemotional terms.

“Do you . . . plan on telling them?” I ask, suddenly wishing the two of us could escape to some deserted island.

“No,” he says quietly. “But they’ll find out eventually — if they don’t already know.”

My panic and dismay must show on my face, because Garrett looks angry with himself. He leans forward and grabs the leg of my chair, pulling me around so that our knees are almost touching and taking both my hands in his. “It doesn’t matter what my family says, Ava. I want you, and I want our baby. There’s nothing they can do to change that.”

Even though there’s a little voice inside my head telling me this isn’t going to end well, the way he says “our baby” makes my eyes sting with tears.

Stupid pregnancy hormones. Lately, I've been tearing up at dog-food commercials, and Garrett's willingness to lay it all on the line for us is almost more than I can handle.

"I am all in," he whispers, squeezing my hands tightly in his. "I want to go to all the baby appointments and take the cheesy birth classes . . . I want to get one of those ugly front carrier things with all the straps like Vin Diesel wears in that movie about the kids . . ." He gestures around his chest, and I smile through my haze of tears.

Garrett means it. He actually means it. He wants to be a part of our lives, and I feel as though I could burst with happiness.

Without thinking about what I'm doing, I lean forward and brush my lips against his. His lips are just as soft and kissable as I remember, and as soon as I taste him again, that electric feeling I got in the club comes rushing back with a vengeance.

For a moment, Garrett just sits perfectly still as I explore his mouth. Then a pained noise escapes his throat, and he threads his fingers through my hair.

It's been so long since any man has touched me this way. Garrett was the last. A new hunger awakens in my body, and a tiny moan slips out of me.

That little noise seems to rouse him, and he finally kisses me back.

Garrett's lips are firm and demanding as he ravages my mouth. He kisses me with an all-consuming possessiveness that sets my whole body on fire. His hands come down to clutch my waist, hauling me into his lap.

I gasp as I land with my legs splayed around him, his hardness pressing into my thigh. Opening my mouth wider for him, I thrust my fingers into his burnished chestnut curls, delighting in the scrape of his stubble against my tender skin.

Garrett kisses with a fierce urgency that unlocks something wild inside me. I can taste his barely restrained need, and it stokes my own burning desire.

His hot, wet tongue enters me with a purposefulness that sends a surge of heat gushing between my legs.

I need to feel him, skin to skin.

Reaching down to capture the hem of his sweatshirt, I tug it up over his head.

Fuck.

I'm sitting in the lap of a Greek god with sculpted pecs, bulging biceps, and an actual freakin' eight pack.

Garrett goes still as I look him over, torn between intimidation and the insistent hum of desire coursing through my body.

“Like what you see, angel?” Garrett rasps, his cocky bravado somewhat tempered by the hint of nerves in his voice.

I don’t answer him right away. Garrett is the only man who’s ever been inside me, and now that I’m straddling his lap, my body feels as though it might explode if I don’t seat myself down on his cock — and fast.

I dip my head and flick out my tongue to tease his nipple before licking a trail down his ribs toward his waistline. Sliding out of his lap, I lift the hem of my sweatshirt and pull it over my head. It lands on the floor next to his, and I shimmy out of my pants.

I kneel before him in a pink bra that barely contains my swollen breasts and a matching lace thong. Garrett’s swollen red lips part as he takes me in, and his perfectly straight upper teeth come down to bite his lower lip.

Feeling emboldened, I reach for the waistband of Garrett’s pants, and his eyebrows shoot up. “Angel, you don’t have to —”

“I want to,” I say, my voice coming out husky with need.

Lifting his hips, Garrett helps me by sliding off his sweats, and his erection springs free.

Immediately, I’m second-guessing my decision. His bulging cock is so thick I can’t get my fingers all the way around it, and a sticky bead of precum is glistening at the tip. But I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge, so I lick my lips and grip the base of his shaft before taking him into my mouth.

He lets out a soft hiss as I wrap my lips around him, his eyes fluttering closed as he tilts his head back. I gag when the tip of him hits the back of my throat, and Garrett’s eyes fly open.

“Sorry, angel.”

I blink to clear the tears from my eyes and try to relax my jaw, taking more of his thick length into my mouth.

It takes me a few minutes to find my rhythm, using my hands and tongue to make him come apart. Finally, I manage to open my throat and take in all of him at once.

“Fuck, Ava!” Garrett rasps, his dick twitching against my tongue. He’s gripping the sides of his chair for dear life, his pecs bulging as he tries to hold back.

My chest swells with pride that I'm having that effect on him, but after a couple more thrusts, he stills me with a gentle hand on my cheek.

I look up to find him staring at me with those midnight-blue eyes ablaze. "Oh, no, angel. It's been months since I was inside your sweet virgin cunt. Tonight, I'm gonna make you come until you scream my name, and then I'm going to fuck that tight little pussy."

Heat singes my cheeks at the filthy words coming out of Garrett's mouth, but I don't have time to feel self-conscious. He leans forward to capture my lips in a scorching kiss, pulling me to my feet.

He clears the table with a sweep of his arm, sending dishes and glassware flying. My water glass shatters into a million pieces, and chunks of leftover macaroni scatter all over the rug.

Garrett pretends not to notice as he lifts me up onto the table and yanks my soaking-wet panties to the side. I moan as his hot, wet mouth engulfs my pussy — his tongue thrusting inside me with all the skillfulness he displayed with his kiss.

"Mmm. You taste so good, angel," he rumbles against me, the vibration of his words sending little bolts of lightning shooting through my crotch.

Parting my slick folds with his fingers, Garrett spreads me apart and dips down to lick me from ass to clit.

I squeak as he teases my back entrance before brushing up against that sensitive bundle of nerves between my legs. It's been such a long time since he's touched me — even since I've touched myself — that I feel like a powder keg about to explode.

"So sensitive." I can hear the chuckle of delight in Garrett's voice and snap my thighs together automatically.

"Oh, no," he teases, spreading me open like a book and planting a trail of soft kisses along the inside of my thigh until he reaches the spot that makes every muscle in my body seize with pleasure. "You ran away from me, angel. Now I'm going to make you pay in orgasms."

A little whimper slips out of me as Garrett wedges his tongue beneath the hood of my clit and licks me with slow heavy strokes. I can feel the pressure building deep within my core, and when Garrett thrusts two fingers inside me, a surprised scream rips from my throat.

The abrupt feeling of fullness is almost too much, and he's just using his fingers. Little spots dance in the corners of my vision as he sucks my clit into his mouth while pumping forcefully in and out.

I moan and slide down onto his fingers, taking as much as he will give me with every thrust. I grip his hair, and Garrett slows his pace, gently stretching my inner walls as though he's playing an instrument.

Cream drips out of me with every touch, every loving flick of his tongue. Hot tears well up in my eyes as I explode around him. The sensation is warm and overwhelming, and I want to feel it again and again.

Garrett's face is slick with my juices as he pulls back to meet my gaze. His eyes look almost more silver than blue in the dim light of the dining room. "That's one."