

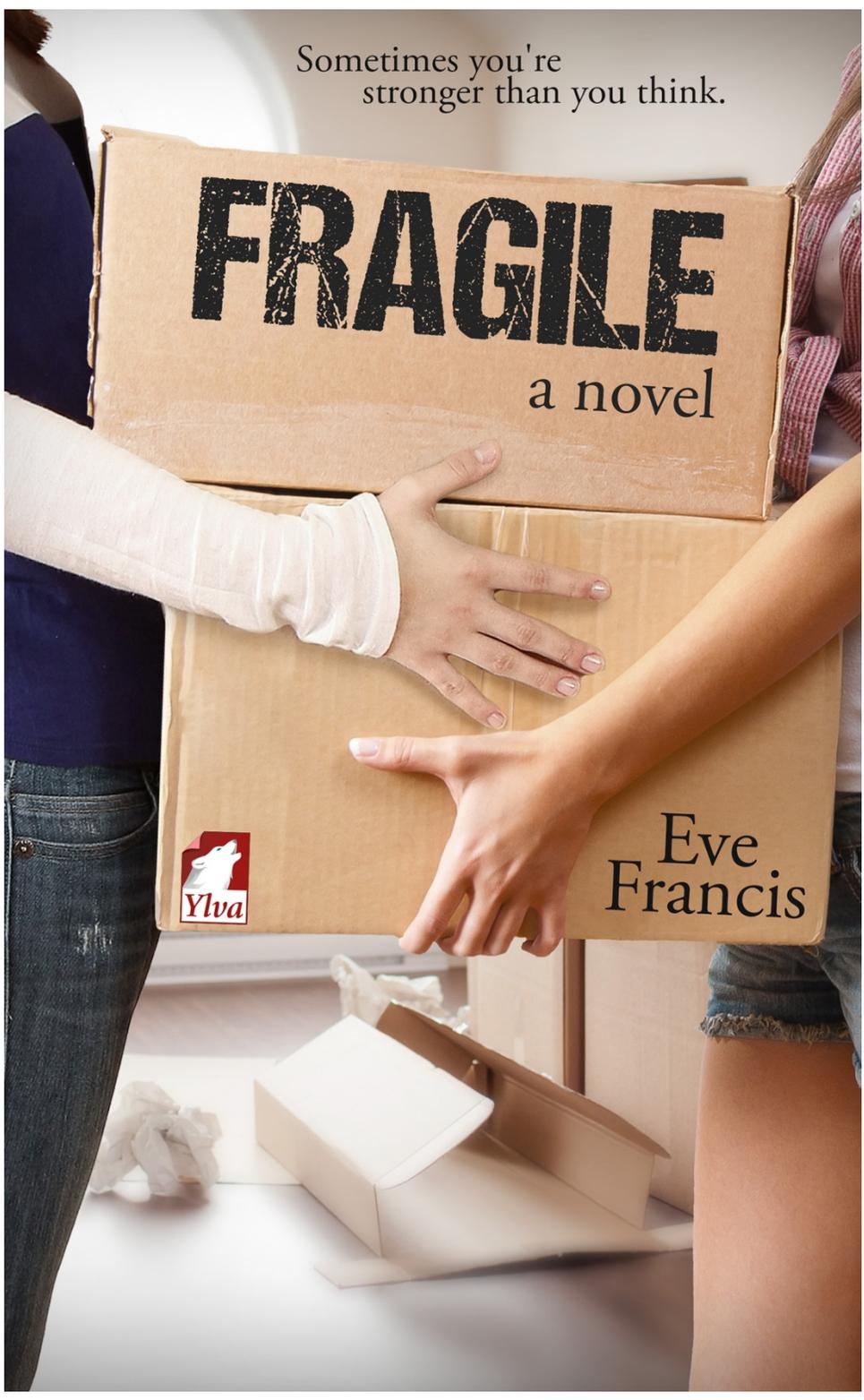
Sometimes you're  
stronger than you think.

**FRAGILE**

a novel



Eve  
Francis



# CHAPTER 1

The shipment was late. Carly Rogers crouched down next to her coworker, who was nestled inside a bunch of knockoff Gucci sunglasses.

“Hi,” Carly said. “I think the manager told me to help you until the truck gets here. What are we doing?”

“Hi. Um. I think we’re mostly putting sensors on these sunglasses. Just loop it around, like this.”

The woman demonstrated with the small device. She threaded the pointy end of the sensor through the nose of the Gucci sunglasses and then locked it into place with the ink pack on the other end.

“Then hang ‘em up.” The woman slotted the sunglasses onto plastic notches on the large board in front of them. In front of the woman’s thin legs were two buckets, one of sunglasses and the other full of sensors.

Carly nodded. “Sounds easy enough.”

The woman smiled and brushed a strand of brown hair away from her forehead. She wore a pink top with cinched sleeves and jeans. When Carly looked at the edges of her jeans, she noticed the quick hem job so they could fit over the woman’s small body. Carly and the woman both wore their blue aprons for Marshalls, but the woman had pushed hers off to the side so she could sit down without dragging the apron over the dusty warehouse floor. Carly followed suit as she sat down next to her. She spotted the woman’s nametag hanging off the side of the sunglasses display. *AMBER* read back at Carly.

“So, Amber,” Carly said. “Are you a newbie too? Or have you been poached from another store?”

“No, I’m new. But I’ve been trying to get a job at Marshalls or Winners for the past few years. Makes it easier to buy baby clothing at a discount, especially when I don’t like Walmart.”

“I hear you there.” Carly slipped a pair of sunglasses with red frames over the stand. Amber’s small confession of kids made Carly pause, especially since this woman didn’t look much older than Carly’s twenty-four years. She barely looked as old as Carly’s kid sister. But Carly was getting used to not trusting her first impressions, especially in a grand store opening like this.

Marshalls, the retail outlet that provided cheap and discount knockoff clothing to its patrons, was opening up in the new strip mall across from where Carly lived. It was going to be the biggest Marshalls store on the West Coast, so the company had started hiring early—and aggressively. Lots of signs, ads in the newspaper, and even takeaway application forms at all the other stores that T.J. Maxx owned in the area. Carly needed a job and her mother had been more than helpful in taking several application forms home to her and reminding her to complete them every other day.

Carly procrastinated with the whole thing, knowing that like with any minimum wage job, she would get it—so long as she took her college degree off her resume. So, for a while on paper, Carly Rogers had become just like any other high school graduate who had hopped around at minimum wage jobs, from coffee shops to waitressing, to being a phone person in a telemarketing place, and the seasonal help in her stepfather’s law office. Carly received a call back the day after she handed in her application form for Marshalls. An interview later, the job was hers. *Surprise, surprise.*

The next two weeks were full of large conference halls where the T.J. Maxx and upcoming managers for the new store trained and talked to their new employees. Everything was being done on a mass scale, to the point where Carly could blend in and not respond to anything. So long as she handed in her banking information, signed a few forms, and showed up, no one bothered her. She clung to her red purse—filled with her cell phone, iPod, and a book—and was able to disappear.

Today was the first day of actual training inside the new store front. The near empty building was next to a Best Buy and down the street from a liquor store. A bus route passed through the strip mall and constantly made Carly jump each time the bus honked its horn. The new staff had been divided and allotted to separate areas. Carly should have been in women’s wear along with

a handful of other workers. They were supposed to get the racks filled with clothing and covered in plastic from the back, take them to the already labeled sections in the store, and put the clothing out.

But the shipment was late.

At first, Carly had been cleaning around the back dock as they all waited. She pulled out the broom and began to clean, trying to fight her way out of the boredom and tedium of minimum wage work. Most other people chatted with one another. When two hours had passed and there was still no truck, the day manager sighed between her gapped teeth and told them all to get out. The first truck had come earlier, so there was still work to be done. That was when Carly had been pulled away from her delightful solitude and forced to find someone else to work with. Carly had almost missed Amber entirely behind the large sunglasses rack, as she wandered around the store. But Carly figured that a small, girl-child would be the best bet to keep her company for another two hours, until she could go to lunch and hide again.

“And you?” Amber asked, tilting her head to the side. “Do you have kids?”

“Oh, no, no,” Carly said, with a shake of her head. “I am just...between jobs at the moment.”

“Oh, okay. Well, don’t worry. They’ve been telling us that if we do well as sales associates, there is opportunity in management.”

“Ah, yes. Management. Very important,” Carly echoed, with a slight roll of her eyes.

The last job Carly had before this was at a used clothing store. She had been on the way to official sales manager status, when she pretty much threw in the towel and quit. There was more to life than sorting out donation bins and bickering over quarters from the patrons she had tried to tell herself and other people. She had only taken the job in desperation and didn’t want to dwell on it too much more. There had been other reasons for her quitting, Carly knew in the back of her mind. But no one really wanted to hear that her boss made her uncomfortable and got too close during training sessions. It was much easier to tell people that Carly wanted a life with *meaning*.

“This is my second job,” Amber commented, sliding a sensor onto another pair. “So I figure I’ll have to settle for whatever they give me. But hey, there’s

## Eve Francis

always hope that something small here could lead to something good. That's the dream, right?"

"The American way, yes." Carly sighed, sliding on another sensor and putting the sunglasses on the rack. When she touched the next pair, the white frames and wide lenses pulled her in. Playfully, she slid them over her nose and turned to Amber.

"How do I look?"

"Good, good," Amber said, smiling and laughing in the same childlike way from before. "You know, I think we get some kind of discount on even this stuff. It's going to be pretty nice, for a while. Pretending, you know. I mean, why would I even need Gucci?"

"Yeah, I know." Carly slid a sensor on the white glasses and hung them up. "Pretending can be fun."

The two of them continued to work, diminishing half the bucket of sunglasses long before they reached the end of their bag of sensors. The entire rack was almost filled with sunglasses, top to bottom. Carly noted there were still nobs on the side of the rack, thicker, and definitely not meant to hold sunglasses.

"What's this for?"

"Scarves," Amber said, not needing to think about it. She turned around, regarded some of the boxes from the earlier shipment. She spotted a skid in the middle of the aisle with a small tip of a leopard fabric pointing out of it.

Carly nodded, understanding. "I'll grab it. Bring it over. Yeah?"

"Sure! Thanks."

Amber went back to work as Carly approached the skid that was taller than her. The box of leopard scarves was halfway up the tower and covered in plastic wrap. *How on earth am I going to get this down?* Carly glanced around the store. Other workers walked back and forth under the hot lights. The sales floor seemed crowded ever since half the staff was kicked out of the shipment room. The store, from shoes to men's ties, was still empty of merchandise and waiting for the shipment to come.

"Do you need some help?"

Carly turned around to see a woman with short hair. She stood with a similar apron around her thin frame and held an X-acto knife in front of her.

"Yes! That would be perfect. I need scarves from here."

“Let me get that for you, then. Probably easier since I have this.” The woman held up her X-acto knife.

“Yeah, probably.”

The woman took a step closer to Carly, their shoulders brushed. Carly tried to see the woman’s name tag as she moved, but she was too fast, already cutting away the plastic wrap and freeing the boxes underneath. She stepped away from the skid after grabbing a box of scarves and handing them to Carly.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Carly stated. “This is a relief.”

“Not at all. It’s nice to actually have some work.”

Carly was about to ask the woman’s name when she turned around. Her legs moved kinetically down the aisle and back into the shipment room. Carly walked back over to Amber, who had begun to organize a new pile of sensors for their next task. Each one now was a solid hoop, with a tiny ink pack attached.

“Has the new shipment come in?” Amber asked, noticing as a few more people moved to the back of the room.

“I have no idea.” Carly placed the box of scarves down. Amber peeled back the old Scotch tape and began to take out the leopard print. She knotted the scarf around the loop before she hung it on the side of the rack. Carly tried to imitate, failing miserably her first few times. Amber tried to show her, looping in and out, and holding Carly’s hands as she did it. Carly’s face flushed and she tried to push any thoughts away. *This woman with kids*, she thought, *and probably with a husband at home*. The definition of unattainable.

Carly kept looping the scarves, finally getting the hang of it.

“Are you going to leave when the shipment comes in?” Amber asked. “I don’t mind, because you gotta do your job, but it’s been nice having someone around.”

“Probably,” Carly said. “But I like being out here too. Easy work, even if it is a bit dull.”

“Yeah, exactly. Another person spices it up a bit,” Amber said, with a playful wink.

Carly hung up another scarf. She watched as the employees moved around. One man was sweeping, pushing a large broom up and down the aisles. She

spotted the woman with the box cutter again, moving around and taking stuff off other people's skids. Aside from the dull murmur of people talking, the pushing of brooms, and peeling back of tape, things were quiet. If a shipment was there, they would know. The beep-beep of trucks backing up would be almost deafening.

"Maybe the shipment will never come," Carly said aloud. "Maybe this is just like an odd, modernist play. We could be on stage, walking back and forth, and waiting for someone named Godot who would never show."

"What?" Amber asked. "What do you mean?"

Carly glanced down at the scarves, her cheeks slightly red as she laughed at herself. *Carly, your college is showing. Carly, your pretentious English major is showing. Forget Waiting for Godot for one moment. You and Amber are hardly Vladimir and Estragon, and the boy is hardly the butch woman with the X-acto knife.*

"Oh, nothing." Carly hung up another scarf and then unfolded the next one against her neck. "Just pretending to pass the time."

## CHAPTER 2

Soon, it was lunch. No shipment had arrived yet. The manager got on over the loudspeaker and announced in a clear, calm voice. “Okay, Marshalls staff. We appreciate all the work you’ve done so far. They say Rome wasn’t built in a day, but apparently, they never had shipment or traffic issues. The first half of the staff, I want you guys to take your lunches now. Forty-five minutes, be sure to clock out. The second half, you’ll go as soon as they get back. And maybe, just maybe, we will have a shipment to unpack.”

The woman’s voice seemed shaky, as if she was holding together her positive attitude with nothing but the flimsy tape they had all been given in the back. Carly’s stomach rumbled as soon as the prospect of lunch was offered. She got up, turning to Amber with a tilt of her head.

“You coming?”

Amber shook her head. “I’m technically in section B for my lunch hour. I’m still out here.”

“Oh,” Carly said. She could not help but feel slightly disappointed. She hoped it didn’t show on her face. “How can you tell?”

“A-M is shift two, N-Z is shift one.” She hung up a few more scarves, grasping the last at the bottom of the box. “It’s a bit backward, but makes sense, I suppose.”

“I’m an R,” Carly said.

“Then go!” Amber waved her arms in a command, then flattened a cardboard box. “I’ll hold down the sunglasses hut here. It won’t be too long. But you should go before the lineup is too much.”

“Right. Good point.” Carly wanted to thank Amber for being an unofficial tour guide. It had been a long time since Carly was lost in the crowd, to the point where it was detrimental. She turned around suddenly, realizing the mass

rush of people toward the back of the Marshalls storeroom. She left without a wave, passing by some of the larger men on staff who got out of her way as soon as she approached.

*Not too bad*, Carly figured when she arrived at the punch card system. There were only a few people ahead of her. Including, she thought she saw from the back of her head, the woman with the X-acto knife. The woman removed her blue apron, as soon as her card went through, and then double backed toward the bathroom. Her eyes caught Carly's once again, nodding slightly, with a careful grin, before she walked right by.

Inside the break room, Carly made a mad dash for her locker. She grabbed her red purse quickly and then tossed it in the closest seat. She was right next to the window, still covered with thick blinds that did not allow the spring sunshine to come through, far away from the kitchen microwave. Carly had learned long ago to always avoid that spot, unless you wanted a smorgasbord of unappetizing food stench around you at all times. Carly pulled out her phone and responded to a few messages from her sister and her friend, Landon, before she took out her book and hid her face. She nibbled on her bagged lunch between the pages. Generally, with enough concentration that she had honed with years of customer service, she could forget she was in the room at all.

There were enough people there so that every single spot was filled, including some of the stray chairs in the back of the locker room. A tall, black man with a weary gait sat next to Carly, seeming equally eager not to talk. A woman with salt and pepper hair sat to her right. Some people chatted with one another; most people minded their own business.

When the butch woman from before came in the room again, Carly didn't even have to lift her eyes from the page to see her. The woman's short hair, masculine clothing, and friendly attitude pulled Carly in. *Please be gay. Please, please.* But so many of these traits didn't necessarily signal any type of queerness. Carly had fallen for so many girls with pixie cuts and who wore ties only to find out that they were as straight as anything else. Carly knew that she couldn't assume—or else she would start to fall for women with children and the proverbial straight girl again. Using her book as a cover, Carly merely watched. The woman moved toward the fridge, pulled out a can of Coke, and

swallowed some of it down in a quick gulp before glancing at the lunch room again.

Carly shifted her eyes back to her book. She read the same sentence again and again, trying to remember the world between the pages and not the hope in the back of her mind. *Besides—what else could I really do in Marshalls break room of all places? Forget about it. You are just pretending again.*

Carly finished her sandwich and threw the Ziploc back into her purse. She finished the current chapter she was on and then took a drink from her water bottle. Between the movements, the woman appeared again. She walked behind Carly, close to the window. She peered over the man who sat next to Carly and then straight at her.

*Well, not quite at me,* Carly realized. The woman was looking at the cover of her book.

“*The Edible Woman*, huh?” the woman said, smiling with one side of her mouth.”

“Yeah. I like Margaret Atwood.”

“You should try *The Handmaid’s Tale*, then. I read it last year and liked it a fair bit.”

Carly’s shoulders relaxed. She realized she had braced herself for a slew of ignorant comments that she had heard at previous jobs about reading. But this woman was okay, definitely.

“I read that when I was in high school, actually,” Carly answered. “I even saw the terrible movie version of it.”

“Oh, really? I’ll have to see that, then. I love bad book-to-movie translations. Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Have you seen that? Terrible, my God. It was just awful.”

“The book was really good, though,” Carly said. She folded *The Edible Woman* over her hands, using her fingers to mark her place. “Have you read that?”

“I’ve read most of Vonnegut, actually,” the woman said. “Though most of my brothers made fun of me while I did it, since there were pictures in at least half of his books. They said I was reading kiddie books.”

“I can see where they’re coming from, but I doubt many kid books have tombstones drawn in them.”

The woman laughed again—light and airy. Carly felt like she could listen to it for a long time. “*Catch-22*,” the woman added.

“What?”

“*Catch-22*. It’s another book that’s really good, but the movie comes up short,” the woman remarked. “It’s kind of not fair, though, you know. Since so many of what we’re talking about are classics, and the movie industry just didn’t have time to catch up.”

“Good point.”

That was another thing, Carly realized, about this whole conversation. They weren’t talking about *The Hunger Games* translation from book to movie, not even something like *The Fault in Our Stars* or *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. They were talking about classics and oldies, stuff that most people here would have no concept of unless they were forced to read it in high school or had jobs in libraries in the past. Carly had almost forgotten how much she liked to talk about books with someone who had a better grasp of them and their nuance than her sister, or even Landon, who tended to stick with how-tos or novel adaptations of *World of Warcraft*.

“I’m Carly,” she said, her heart beating too fast.

“Very nice to meet you Carly.” The woman stuck her hand out, waiting for a shake. “I’m Ashley.”

Carly shook her hand. She noticed how warm and dry Ashley’s fingers were from the dust and the unpacking the workers had been doing.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Carly echoed. Before Ashley could respond, the man next to Carly got up from his seat and gathered up his lunch.

“Hey, sir,” Ashley called. “Do you mind if I steal your seat?”

He waved his arm in the air. “Knock yourself out. I’m going out for a smoke, and maybe, just maybe, the truck will come.”

“Good luck,” Ashley said. “But a watched truck will never come.”

The man didn’t seem to notice the remark. Carly could not help but smile in spite of herself.

“The joke wasn’t that bad, was it?” Ashley asked, squinting her eyes as she sat down.

“I’ve heard worse.”

“Well, then, at least I’m not the worst.” Ashley smiled before she nudged the book cover. “So tell me more about this book. Why is the woman edible?”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure yet. Atwood’s stuff always takes a while to develop. So far, this woman just has a hard time eating when she starts to feel used by those around her. She feels exploited by her boyfriend and then suddenly she can’t eat meat. I’m at the part where her friend is talking about pregnancy and now she can’t eat eggs.”

“Sounds heavy.”

“Yeah,” Carly agreed. Relief flooded her system that Ashely didn’t make a joke about the title referencing eating a woman out. *Or maybe I want that kind of joke?* Carly brushed by the thought. “I picked it up from a pile of discards at the library. I paid like a quarter for it, nothing much.”

“That sounds like a great deal. What library?” Ashley asked, with genuine interest. She pulled out her phone and began to scan through an app that pulled up a map of their city.

“The city library by Rolland Street. It’s just by my house, actually.”

“Oh. You have to be careful about who you give your address out to.”

“I can’t be too careful. You already know where I work.”

“Hah. That I do.” Ashley scrolled through the map on her phone, locating the library and marking it with a star on her interface. “I’m actually envious you live so close to the Marshalls. I have to wait through buses to get here—or beg rides.”

Carly was struck by this for a second. She thought, judging from Ashley’s tall physique and her energy, that she was older than Carly. Surely old enough to know how to drive, even if she didn’t have a car. Then again, Carly didn’t want to push asking for anyone’s age, considering the mishap that had happened with Amber earlier.

“So, tell me more about books,” Ashley requested. “What else do you like?”

“Um,” Carly said. “I just honestly read whatever I find around the house.”

“Not true. If you read whatever you found, I would spot some Harlequins.”

Carly smiled wider. “Oh, when I was a kid. Didn’t we all?”

Ashley raised her eyebrows and winked. “Until we found the good stuff.”

The supervisor came in, holding up her hand, as she announced they only had ten minutes of their lunch left. “And then the second crew has to come in, guys. So let’s leave this place somewhat clean for them. Remember to punch your cards when you get back on the clock, too.”

The lunch room murmured. Some people left, freeing up more seats as they went to clean out their Tupperware containers. Carly was relieved when Ashley still remained seated next to her. She leaned in closely, sipping her Coke, but otherwise paying attention. Carly curled her fingers around the edge of her book. She looked for her bookmark and then settled for dog-earring the page. She watched as Ashley hissed with disapproval.

“What?”

“The book. You should be nicer to it. Even if you only paid a quarter.”

“I don’t have a bookmark.”

Ashley held up her hand and then went to dig through her pockets. She pulled out a few receipts and then found an old stamp card for a coffee place. “Here,” she said, passing it forward.

“But there are four out of five cups stamped. Don’t you want this?”

“Nah, you keep it. Coffee makes me jittery. Besides,” Ashley said. “I know where you work.”

“And sort of where I live.”

“Right. Maybe I’ll see you at a library sale.”

“Maybe.” Carly grinned

The sudden screeching of chairs backing up and punch cards echoed inside the room. Ashley got to her feet, and Carly reluctantly followed. When Carly turned the corner to put her book back in her locker, along with her purse, she noticed Ashley lingering close by.

“Thanks again,” Carly said.

Ashley nodded, still gazing around the room. “Where are you working?”

“In sunglasses. You?”

“In shoes. They seem to like putting me there. I was supposed to be helping to unload the truck, but it’s looking like that’s not going to happen at all today.”

Carly nodded. A sudden thought came to her. “Hey, so... This probably sounds odd, but have you ever read *Waiting for Godot*?”

“Definitely,” Ashley said with a smile. From the way she raised her brows and laughed a little, Carly could tell that Ashley got the reference.

“Well, I’ll see you out there,” Ashley stated. “Hopefully I won’t have to wait too long.”

“You too.”

As she watched Ashley walk away, Carly felt her body tremble with excitement. She would make sure that the two of them had coffee and talked more about books, no matter the cost.



“You look happy,” Amber remarked.

“Hmm?” Carly walked over toward the sunglasses rack, only to find Amber trying to take down a box at the top of the skid in the aisle. Carly helped unload another couple boxes of scarves, purses, and general accessories. In the time since she was gone, more white and silver racks had been added to Amber’s work space for her to fill. She was in the middle of adding stuffing to each purse, puffing it out so it could display well, in addition to adding more anti-theft devices to them.

“I said you look happy.” Amber undid the zipper on a lime-green Coach bag and threw in some brown paper. “Lunch always does a body good. Anytime my kids are mad for no reason, I give them a granola bar. Cheers them right up. Blood sugar does a lot.”

“Yes, I guess it does.”

Carly picked up a purse, only to watch as Amber grabbed another one too, seemingly unaware that she herself also needed lunch to improve her mood.

“You need to go,” Carly chastised her. “Come on, I got this now.”

Amber nodded, her small eyes revealing tiredness now that it was permitted. She undid her ponytail, running her hands through her thin hair to redo it.

“Thanks, sweetheart. You’re great. Everything is easy right now, so I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

With Amber gone, Carly stuffed the purses and appreciated the time to herself. She was about to wonder what Ashley was doing, and if she’d come over to see, when the recognizable beep-beep sound echoed from the back of the room. A small crowd of people, including Ashley, began to make their way to the back.

“The truck,” Carly said, laughing a little under her breath. “I guess we’re no longer waiting.”

## CHAPTER 3

“How was your first day at work, sweetheart?”

“It wasn’t technically my first day,” Carly corrected. “I’m getting paid for all those training sessions.”

“Yes, but this was the first time in the store. Doing real work and not having to listen to people talk.”

Carly rolled her eyes a bit, out of the range of her mother’s vision. *If you had heard some of these people’s voices, you would change your mind about real work.*

“It was fine, you know. It’s retail.”

“It’s a job,” Jillian corrected sternly. “And jobs are good. Even if it’s only for the time being. But that doesn’t mean I want you to quit—not like the last one. You were doing so well there...”

Jillian leaned into the mirror and checked her makeup as she trailed off.

“Well, considering I went from a used clothing store to an outlet type of mall, I guess I’m moving up in the world,” Carly said, feeling uncomfortable. She hadn’t bothered to tell her mother the real reason why she had quit her last job. Even if Jillian did know about the manager’s awkward advances, she probably would have thought it was “harmless fun.”

“Maybe soon you’ll be in fashion boutiques.”

“What a time to be alive,” Carly quipped. “If only.”

Jillian spotted Carly in the mirror and smiled at her with a strained glance. Though Carly was still silently angry at her mother’s assumptions, she couldn’t deny her mom’s beauty. Jillian was barely fifty years old, but still able to turn heads. Her dark hair was curled behind her ears, and she wore a dark, burgundy top over her black, A-line skirt. Her makeup matched her dark clothing and was different than what she had worn to her law office in the morning.

“Well, thanks for giving me an update. I always like to know what’s going on with you,” Jillian said quickly, before moving on. “I’ll be back soon. Tonight, I’m just seeing Richard at his place. Just dinner.”

Carly nodded. “Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.”

“And Cynthia?”

“Cyn is getting old now, you know that, right?”

Jillian gave Carly a patronizing glance from the mirror again.

“Yeah, I’ll look after Cyn, too. I’ll also probably see Landon tonight,” Carly added. Her voice went high at the end as if she asked a question. For a moment, she still felt like she was Cynthia’s age and had to report for curfew.

Jillian nodded, though Carly could detect the slight veil of annoyance at the mention of Landon’s name. Since Jillian was running out without much warning and without making dinner, Carly figured she would let this indiscretion pass. As much as Jillian liked to argue and meddle, she was a lawyer and she knew when to take her chances and when to back off. She turned from the mirror and folded her hands together in front of her body.

“Thank you, Carly. I really appreciate you taking care of stuff like this. Sometimes, I just don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Yeah. Sure. No problem...” Carly waited, as her mother slid her leather purse strap around her shoulder. Jillian gave herself a final check in the mirror. She smiled, once more, through the pane of glass and then left.

After the door was shut, Carly let out a breath.

“Fuck,” she said, to no one in particular. “Fucking fuck fuck.”

Carly felt fifteen all over again, twisting and shouting words and hoping it was enough. Her mother angered her so much some days, but it was never enough to actually fight about. She understood her mother’s want and need for free time. Her attractiveness, her success, and her ability to thrive with and without high-powered men in her life. Carly was even jealous of it some days, because she knew that secretly, it was what her mother wanted for her. Jillian wished that Carly could have an “easy life”—one where she could be loved and successful. But Jillian wanted that life for Carly *her* way, through *her* rules. And Carly knew that the life her mother had would never make her happy, even if she had been allowed to live it with high-powered women, instead of the many

men Jillian courted. *And you're always so mad at her*, Carly chastised herself, *because you know she's disappointed.*

With another sigh, Carly moved back to the kitchen and looked inside the fridge. There were some packages from the Chinese place around the corner, left over from a few days ago. Old banana bread, some tuna salad, but nothing really that appetizing. Carly got down on her knees, digging through the bottom shelf, until she came across the whole wheat pitas and cheese.

"Hey, Cyn," she called upstairs to her sister. She listened closely as Cynthia's music was shut off. "How do you feel about pizza tonight?"

"Yes, please!" Cynthia shouted. Her music cranked back on at the end and was switched to a more celebratory song. Carly laughed when she realized it was the song "Gimme A Slice" by the Sand Witches, a riot grrrl band singing about pizza. *Of course. How appropriate.* Carly waited until the two minute song was over before asking Cynthia to come downstairs and help.

"It'll be pita pizzas tonight, so you can choose your own toppings."

"Sweet!" Thudding sounds came from the stairs and Cynthia barreled down. Carly began to take out all the things she could find for small pizzas, including the whole wheat pitas at the back, and laid them down on the counter.

In the last two years, ever since watching the film *Whip It* when she was thirteen, Cynthia had completely changed. She became the punk rock, feminist, Roller Derby wannabe Carly now saw on a regular basis. A week after watching the film, Cynthia cut her long hair into a sharp pixie cut that made Jillian swallow her gum when she first saw it. Cynthia's hair was curly, and the short styles made her hair curl even more, puffing into a near Afro. Since then, Cynthia allowed her dark hair to grow back, keeping it tamed by adding more barrettes and sometimes dying sections of her hair different colors. She listened to anything that Kathleen Hanna fronted, and read third-wave feminist zines that Landon brought her from the queer library he worked at one summer.

Those zines were really one of the first things that put Landon in the bad book with Carly's mother. The actual first straw, Carly knew, was the fact that Landon used to be Lisa, the small girl that Carly had grown up playing with at school.

The summer he was nineteen, Landon began his transition from female to male. While Carly—and especially Cynthia—accepted Landon, Carly knew her mother couldn't stand the change. It made her uncomfortable on the most visceral of levels. She never said bad things, not really, but Carly saw her twitch each time Landon was mentioned. This prejudice was always so bizarre to Carly. Her mother had accepted when Carly came out as gay when she was fifteen (though there was initial hope that it was going to be a phase). Nearly ten years later, Jillian had grown into the fact that her daughter was always, and only, going to bring home women to the kitchen table. That had been fine. She had learned to deal with that. But Landon was another creature to Jillian. Carly knew her mother's insults extremely well, even when they were silent.

Cynthia's footsteps knocked Carly out of her thoughts. She sat down at the kitchen island and smiled wide, baring one of her chipped teeth.

"Has Mom not fixed that yet?" Carly said, leaning in and looking at the small damage on the front tooth.

Cynthia shrugged. "I kind of like it. I think Mom told me she wasn't going to get it fixed until I stopped skating."

"So, you're going to be a toothless old woman by the time she gets around to doing it?"

"Yeah! "I think it's becoming."

"You know what? Good for you. Whatever makes you happy."

"At least someone thinks so."

Cynthia grabbed garlic and jalapeno peppers, and started to chop. It took Carly a moment to even register Cynthia's disappointment. Even if Jillian knew when to pick battles, she was still too cold for both of them. *Not just me.* Cynthia could cut her hair and dye it, wear ripped jeans, and skate all the time; while Carly could laze around the house, go to college for English, and date women. But there was always a small, unspoken antagonism inside the house. Carly was never quite sure what she could say or do to relieve it, so she got used to treading the fine line between approval and apathy.

"You know Mom," Carly said. "She says she'll be back tonight, later than usual, but she'll be here."

Cynthia nodded, eating some of the hot pepper without even thinking about it. When she gagged on it, she moved over toward the fridge and drank soy milk right out of the jug. Carly laughed, poking her sister in the side as she struggled to get her hot tongue under control. Carly shredded some more cheese and handed it off to her sister, who ate some sections of it slower than before.

“What will you be doing tonight?” Carly asked.

“Skating,” Cynthia said, not raising her eyes from the cutting board. “The usual. You know.”

“Done your homework?” Carly asked. It was late spring, and though the concept of having homework, or even classes to attend, seemed like a distant memory to Carly, she often tried to remember those days when she was around her sister.

“Yes, *mom*, I will do my homework. Jeez. I swear you ask me more than she does.”

“I’m around more. And probably can actually help you with your homework if you did need it.”

“Even trig?”

“I stand corrected.” Carly added more toppings to her pizza, as Cynthia continued to make large red dots with the sauce.

“Well, I’m fine. It’s only my junior year and most teachers there already think I’m smart. They grade on a curve, you know? So even though I know my answers are really shitty half the time, I’ve done the most work and put the most thought into most projects, so they let me get away with it.”

“Well done. Play that curve. It will be the one way you survive.”

“Even in college?”

“*Especially* in college,” Carly emphasized with a laugh.

Often, Carly forgot that Cynthia was still just fifteen years old. She still seemed like a young girl, impressionable and very consumed with the movie that pretty much shaped her whole life so far. In their small city inside of Vermont, there wasn’t much to do with the Roller Derby life that was pictured in the film. But that still hadn’t stopped Cynthia from buying her first pair of Rollerblades and seeking out any place that was vacant enough to skate on, at all

hours of the day. After a couple months of searching, Cynthia had found a local skateboarding park she'd often sneak out to visit, though Jillian always hated it. So long as Cynthia got good grades though, there was almost nothing Jillian could argue with. Cynthia seemed to know that point more than anything and had planned her success since the first day inside high school, analyzing the grading system and using it to her advantage. More time without homework meant more time outside. Now that spring was finally here again, Carly knew that Cynthia was itching to get out there again.

"I'm heading out with Landon tonight," Carly said.

"As ever."

"Well, true. Can you be back before I am? So that Mom doesn't get any ideas about your proclivities for tonight?"

Cynthia grinned as she ate another bit of cheese from their pizzas. "Of course, big Sis. Have I ever let you down before?"

"No," Carly said. "And you're about the only one who hasn't."

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