Love & MMA

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Love & MMA

by DevlinGrace

Summary

Carmilla was only looking for a training partner. Instead, she found not only a soulmate but an ally in the fight against her evil stepmother. More 'inspired by' than 'based on' the web series. Very AU and all human cast. Trigger warning: talk of child abuse but rarely shown. Enjoy. Part 1 of 3
Carmilla was really good at exactly three things; Sex, massage and fighting. Two were recreational and she intended to keep it that way. The last was what kept her sane. Ten years ago her father died... she'd managed seven years under her mother's thumb before she'd run away. That was three years ago. She smiled. Last year she'd turned twenty-one and the money her father left her was finally hers to do with as she saw fit.

She looked up from her wrist wraps and surveyed the gym, her gym. She smiled again, sighed deeply, then returned her attention to her wraps. She'd come here looking for a job, she'd found a new home instead. She'd planned her escape from her mother well, saved enough money from the joke of an allowance she was given. Her father had been worth millions before he died, her mother would have squandered more if her father hadn't had the foresight to plan trust funds for both her and her brother Will.

A couple thousand dollars didn't last long for two kids in Vancouver and they found themselves homeless and were down to their last ten dollars when she'd noticed the help wanted sign in the gym's window. She'd walked in with all the confidence she could muster despite the growling of her stomach and located the gym's owner.

"What kind of help are you looking for?" she'd asked.

"What does a skinny runt of a kid like you know about fighting?" he'd countered gruffly.

"More than you know," she'd thought as she surveyed the gym. She found a kid, maybe eighteen, about her size, and pointed him out."If I can last five minutes with him will you give me the job?"

The man looked from the boy and back to her.

"You're serious?" he asked, his tone unreadable.

"What have you got to lose?" she countered.

"Hey Dark!" he yelled, the boy in question turning to face her; "Feel like a minute or two of sparring?"

"Who with?" Dark called back as he made his way over.

"Her," the man replied with a jerk of his thumb toward her.

"Her," the man replied with a jerk of his thumb toward her.

"You're joking," Dark laughed.

"No joke, little man," Carmilla replied, her words having the intended effect as he tried to make himself look bigger. "What? Afraid of a little girl?" She taunted.

"Bring it," he growled and walked towards the ring.

"Alright then," the owner said as he turned to her; "You'll need a pair of gloves and at least a mouth guard..." he smirked; "Pretty face like yours... no reason you should lose some teeth trying to prove something."

Bob had given her the creeps a bit that day, but less than ten minutes later he'd redeemed himself.
It had taken her less than two minutes to knock Dark out cold. Unfortunately it had taken her precisely fifteen more seconds to pass out from low blood sugar. She'd woken to an extremely scared Will and an anxious Bob.

They'd spilled their guts to him over burgers and fries he'd bought them in a diner down the street. By the end he not only offered Carmilla a job but the apartment above the gym in addition to her salary. He had only one condition; when Carmilla got access to her money she'd buy the gym from him so he could finally retire. When that day finally came he'd surprised her again with the deed and; "Paid in full," written in the amount.

"No," he'd said; "You think I saved your life the day I gave you a job and a place to live?" He shook his head. "You turned this place around... you've helped me make more than enough money to retire, kiddo, you deserve this... just..."

"Ah... the catch..." she'd teased.

"I know this isn't what you want to do forever," he admitted; "But train Brody to take over for you, okay? He's a a good kid but he's not going to make it far in the fight game... I want him to have this when he's ready..."

"Sure, Bob," she'd replied without hesitation,

To this day she still occasionally regretted agreeing so quickly. She laughed under her breath and pulled on her gloves... she needed to hit something. Hard and repeatedly.

It was stupid. She knew she was being stupid. She'd been really stupid. She'd managed to chase away the one person she'd shared most of her secrets with even if they'd never met in person. It had hurt, more than she'd expected, when her crush had admitted she didn't feel the same and never would. That's when she should have walked away. But it bugged her... why the fuck not? But no, her 'friend' insisted on sparing her feelings and never told her why. And then two days ago an innocent post online had hit a nerve, and when she exposed it she got a reaction she hadn't expected. An insult and then blocked... no nothing. She panicked and found another way to contact her. She blocked her there too.

Slowly the truth began to sink in... her crush couldn't have been the friend she thought she was if she could so easily just write her out of her life. She hit the heavy bag with everything she had.

THWACK!

"Who needs friends like that?" she thought.

THWACK!

"I mean, really, who fucking does that?"

THWACK!

"I wouldn't..."

THWACK!

"At least a "Sorry I can't do this anymore... have a nice life..."

THWACK!
"Carm!"

THWACK!

"CARMILLA!"

"What!" she shouted back at Kirsh who was standing by the counter with a girl.

"Laura here says she wants to be your sparring partner," he supplied as she walked over.

Carmilla sized her up; she couldn't weigh more than a hundred and ten soaking wet but it was hard to tell because of the baggy sweats she was wearing.

"What do you know about fighting?" she asked her.

"I did a couple years of Krav Maga," she shrugged and blushed; "and, um, watched a lot of UFC..."

"And you think you can spar with me?" Carmilla replied, trying to stifle a laugh.

"Give me five minutes to prove it?" she challenged.

"You're on Creampuff..."
"Well," Carmilla thought," at least she'll be a distraction and I could really use one of those..." She forced a smile and turned to Kirsh; "She'll need... a mouth guard, kids large... gloves, women's small... and shin guards..."

"Wait..." Laura interrupted, "I have my own gear..."

"Do you now?" Carmilla replied and reached for Laura's bag. "Let's see what you've got..." she said as she began taking things out and laid them on the counter. "Hope you kept the receipt..."

"Why? Isn't it a good brand?" Laura asked.

"It's not bad," Carmilla replied; "but none of this will fit you properly and it's way overpriced..." she replied as she put everything back in the bag. "Besides... if manage to last five minutes this stuff comes with the job..."

"But..." Laura picked up the gloves Kirsh had put on the counter; "this stuff is way more than I..."

"If I don't hire you..." Carmilla shrugged; "I need a second set for myself anyway..."

"You'll learn pretty quick when not to argue with her," Kirsh interrupted before Laura had a chance to object further.

"A lesson you still haven't learned," Carmilla teased him.

"Oh I know," he laughed; "But it's fun pissing you off..."

"Careful what you wish for..." she warned as she waved Laura towards the back of the gym.

"Is this a regulation octagon?" Laura asked as they passed it.

"Yup," Carmilla replied proudly; "Got it last week..." she turned and walked backwards as she continued; "I want this place to be somewhere someone can come and have a really good work out or train for an actual fight..."

"You talk like you own it," Laura said with a smile.

Carmilla stopped and studied her a moment; was there a chance this girl had no clue who she was?

"Well I do," she replied finally; "Kirsh's dad gave it to me for my twenty-first birthday... but technically I co-own it with Kirsh..." she studied her a moment longer; "Where do I know you from?"

"I... you... you saw me?" Laura stammered and blushed her reddest yet; "Oh Merlin, you probably think I'm a creepy stalker or something..."

"What are you talking about?" Carmilla asked, trying not to laugh at the girl's discomfort.

"I saw you a couple of weeks ago..." Laura started; "Kirsh's fight?"

Carmilla thought back and smiled... yes, she remembered her now... she'd been cornering Kirsh's fight when she spotted Laura over his shoulder and completely lost her ability to speak. She'd managed to give him some sort of advice, which seemed to work, as he'd won... to be honest she
couldn't remember the rest of the fight... all she could think about was the girl in the stands and she could have sworn she felt her eyes on her the whole time... unfortunately she'd lost track of her after the fight and hadn't thought anything more of it.

"So how did you end up here?" Carmilla asked as she watched, and approved of, the way Laura was wrapping her wrists.

"Well my friend, LaFontaine, dragged me to the fight and a few days later they saw an ad for your gym and they were teasing me that I should check it out..." Laura seemed to concentrate even harder as she worked on her wraps; "And then I saw the ad for a sparring partner and I knew you might be here but I didn't know it was you I'd be sparring with or that this... oh god... wait... you're not that Carmilla Karnstien, are you?"

"And there we have it ladies and gentlemen..." Carmilla said sarcastically; "Might be an all time record..." she shook her head sadly; "You know my name, Cupcake, and maybe you think you know my story from the papers... but let me assure you... you don't know me or even a fraction of the truth..."

There was a very good reason Carmilla didn't venture far from home... her mother and the lies she'd spread when she ran away. The longer they stayed away the wilder and weirder the stories got. Her mother had done everything possible to discredit her... trying to find any way to deny her trust fund. Bob had put an end to that: he applied for, and became, her and her brother's legal guardian. Her mother had tried to twist that too. In the end Bob's lawyer, who was actually her father's lawyer, put an end to all of it and her mother was forced to leave them alone. She still couldn't claim her money until she was twenty-one, but at least she no longer lived in fear.

But what all that meant is everyone in Vancouver knew her name and thought they knew her story. Sometimes she thought of leaving, starting over somewhere new, but then she realized it was a far better punishment for her mother if she stayed and proved her wrong at every turn.

"Should I go?" Laura asked uncertainly.

"No..." Carmilla sighed, it wasn't Laura's fault she'd hit a nerve or that she was already raw from something that had nothing to do with her; "I'm sorry... I'm just Carmilla, okay?"

"Um... for the record... I didn't know that when I came here..." Laura stammered as she pulled on her gloves; "like I said, I saw the shirt you were wearing... I thought maybe you worked or trained here..."

"So you did come here hoping to see me?" Carmilla said, blushing a little herself.

"Maybe..."

"You won't need the mouth guard yet," Carmilla interrupted as she tried to get the situation back into familiar territory; "I'm just going to have you hit some pads to warm up before we spar..."

"But that will take more than five minutes..."

"True," Carmilla agreed; "but if I don't like what I see with the pads we won't bother sparring..." she led her over to the octagon and waved her inside. She threw her own gloves aside and slipped the pads onto her hands. She held them up and smiled; "Don't hit them too hard to start with... I want to evaluate your form..." she said as she took the time to appreciate that Laura had, at some point without her noticing, removed her baggy sweats and now wore tight shorts and a black tank top; "and then we'll see how hard you hit..." she said, her voice somehow steady despite the new
fluttering in her stomach.

Over the next fifteen minutes Carmilla found herself feeling guilty for ever having prejudged Laura... yes, she made a few corrections to her form, but really, she had more of the basics than she expected.

"Okay... start hitting with all you've got," she instructed.

After only a few punches Carmilla waved her off as she could no longer contain her giggles.

"What?" Laura asked.

"You..." Carmilla started, shaking her head and laughing; "you hit a lot harder than I expected but..." she grabbed at a stitch in her side; "you looked like a pissed off Pomeranian and just about as hard to take seriously..." Laura looked crestfallen; "No... no sweetness... we need to work on your game face, that's all..." she stepped in front of her; "No really... you have potential and Laura?" She knew using her name would get her attention and she looked up; "I haven't laughed that hard in a really long time... thanks..."

"You're welcome?"

"Now we spar..." Carmilla said as she stepped back; "Mouth guard in..." she smiled as Laura looked a little worried; "Don't worry... I'm not going to hit you... we go at half speed and we don't really hit each other... not hard anyway..."

"I've sparred before..." Laura said defensively.

"Alright then..." Carmilla replied and looked over to Kirsh; "Hit the timer!" she yelled to him and turned back to Laura as they waited for him to jog over. "Let's see what you got..."

The timer sounded and they spent the next minute circling each other, neither willing to engage. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know how to attack," Laura replied, slightly muffled by her mouth guard; "I always fight back..."

"Okay..." Carmilla smiled; "then fight back..." she growled as she rushed her. A flurry of punches that stopped just short of her face and midsection and Laura finally fought back... unfortunately she had yet to learn how to pull her punches and connected with a hard uppercut to Carmilla's chin and sent her flying backwards onto her ass.

"Oh god... I'm so sorry..."

"What part of..." Carmilla spat out her mouth guard; "of not really hitting did you miss?"

"You scared me and I reacted," Laura said, her eyes glistening.

Carmilla stared at her... she looked like she was about to cry she was so upset.

"It's okay, Creampuff, you caught me, that's all..." Carmilla said, trying to console her; "It was bound to happen eventually..."

"Does that..." Laura sniffed; "does that mean I get the job?"

"You really want it?" Carmilla asked.
Laura looked up, and biting her lower lip, nodded.

"I have a fight in six weeks and the training is going to be intense," she said, she had no idea why Laura wanted to do this but she didn't want to question it. Not yet anyway. Maybe she was seeing something that wasn't there; she did seem to have a bad habit of that... but what if she wasn't? She mentally shrugged. She needed a sparring partner... yes, Laura was a little small but she was strong and fast and she could work with that. But, she needed to know what she was signing up for. "It's a really important fight for me... as long as I do well I might get a shot at the next season of the Ultimate Fighter..."

"Define intense..." Laura said, a bit uncertainly.

"I want you to train alongside me for the next few weeks..." Carmilla started as she led her from the cage and towards the nearby juice bar. "What flavor?" she asked as she pulled a sports drink from the fridge for herself.

"Green, whatever green is," Laura replied, blushing again.

"How's your availability?"

"I'm sorry?" Laura stammered.

"How much time do you have to work with me," Carmilla rephrased.

"I'm pretty much all yours for the summer," Laura replied and blushed deeply as she realized what she'd said; "Um... classes are over and I don't feel like going home for the summer but I told my Dad I have a job and that's why I'm staying on campus for the summer and..." she took a deep breath; "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"A little..." Carmilla replied with a laugh; "My schedule is cardio and strength training three days a week with one of those days being a high-ish altitude run..."

"Where do you run?" Laura interrupted.

"Buntzen lake, the Grouse Grind..." Carmilla shrugged; "Sometimes I head up to Whistler for a few days..." she looked down at her fingers a moment and back up; "You don't have to join me for those if you don't want..." she smiled; "and then two days of fight training... sometimes it's wrestling, others, boxing... whoever is around really..."

"You don't have set trainers?" Laura asked.

"Yes but they don't have set schedules," she replied. "Most days it's pretty quiet... we get the before work crowd from six to ten and the after work crowd from six to ten..." she looked around the mostly empty gym; "That crowd pays the bills but the rest of the time it's fighters mainly... how busy it is depends on how many of them have fights coming up..." she looked back to Laura; "I want you to train with me for the first couple of weeks so you'll be a better sparring partner... think you're up for it?"

"I'd like to try," Laura replied.

"Then go return that gear," Carmilla said, businesslike once more; "Then I want you to go home, take a hot bath, stretch, take a couple of ibuprofen, and get some rest..."

"Yes ma'am," Laura replied with a mock salute.
"Hey, listen to me," Carmilla said, her tone softening; "There are few things I know a lot about and training is one of them..." she smiled; "There's a reason my gym is popular outside of the fighting crowd... we know how to train so we don't hurt ourselves..." she smiled again; "I need you healthy, Cupcake, you're no use to me if you're all stiff and sore tomorrow..."

"Oh c'mon, we barely..." Laura started defensively.

"But we did things your body isn't used to," Carmilla blushed very deeply and dipped her head. "Oh my god, I really just said that!" She thought. "You'll be sore... trust me..." she said as she regained her composure and looked up. "Ten tomorrow morning?" She asked.

"Sure..." Laura smiled; "Sorry bout the chin..."

"Don't worry, Cupcake..." Carmilla smiled mischievously; "payback's a bitch though..."
Negotiations

Chapter Summary

A/N: I'm hoping to keep to a weekly posting as time allows. Enjoy! Also, Carm's best friend is somewhat loosely based on mine.

Carmilla woke up the next morning, looked at the clock, and groaned: it was too early to be awake but too late to try to go back to sleep. She sat up, turned off the alarm and stretched with a yawn followed by an; "Ouch," as she realized her jaw was a little sore from when Laura had clipped her the day before. She shook her head and smiled; what was she going to do with her?

Once she used the facilities she stared at herself in the mirror; there was a shade of a bruise on her chin. She chuckled and washed her hands. Would Laura have been her first choice of a sparring partner, no, but as no else had yet to answer the ad, she'd have to do. Carmilla had been around the fight game long enough to know when someone had potential and Laura had it in spades. No, she'd likely never be a fighter, but with a little training, she'd make a decent sparring and training partner. She still had another two weeks of working on her own before her trainers showed up and she intended to help Laura along so they wouldn't outright laugh when they met her. Hell, it had been hard enough to find boxing, grappling and Jiu-jitsu trainers for herself let alone a novice partner.

She made herself a coffee and went to sit at the computer. Her internet browser opened to her email and she sighed. Nothing. She checked Facebook. Nothing. She sighed again and wiped away the tears angrily. "She's not worth it..." she said quietly as she brought up the gym's cameras. She noticed Kirsh talking to someone at the counter and brought that camera to full screen and smiled; Dark was back.

Dark had been a scrawny nineteen year-old when they met. It seemed the sting of being knocked out by a girl was lessened somehow when he came to to find she'd passed out. After Bob had helped them move their meager belongings into his apartment upstairs, she'd gone up to check out the roof and found Dark sitting alone smoking a joint. She'd teased him about it, of course, if he wanted to be a real fighter it was a habit he'd have to break. He'd shrugged and laughed as he offered her the joint; she shrugged as well and accepted. The two had then talked late into the night and become fast friends.

Dark's life had taken a tragic turn for the worse not six months later when he hit his first growth spurt. His doctors had prescribed Tylenol threes to help with the pain not knowing he was allergic. He still might have been okay had he not lost track of how many he'd taken in an effort to numb the pain and stepped off a bridge. He should have died and would have died had a branch not caught his mouth and not only slowed his descent but righted him so he landed on his feet. He broke just about everything from the waist down, as well as most of his ribs and his jaw, but he was alive. Through it all, Carmilla stayed by his side and it only brought them closer.

The fall, however, had ended any hope he had of ever fighting professionally. Even though he recovered he would be forever plagued by pain and only coped with a steady diet of painkillers and weed; those two things alone would keep out of the fight game as they tested extensively.

She smiled as she saw him make his way over to the elevators... he had a bad habit of trying to scare the crap out of her and she was betting he thought she was still in bed. She closed her laptop
and ran over to the door, grinning madly as she heard the elevator open and then his keys in the
door just after. As the door started to crack open she pulled it open completely and yelled; "Boo!"

Dark squealed like a girl and fell over backwards.

"Karma's a bitch, eh babe?" She joked as she offered him a hand up.

"Or maybe it's just you," he teased as she helped him up and then wrapped his arms around and
gave her a bear hug. "But I deserved that..." he leaned back and studied her; "You've been crying
again..." he turned her head to the side as he noticed the small bruise on her chin; "Kirsh told me
you got knocked on your ass... I'd have paid to see that!" He said with a laugh as Carmilla led him
inside. "Still no word from El?" he asked as he pointed to her closed laptop.

"No..." she replied with a sigh as she poured him a coffee. "Looking back over our chats..." she sat
down across from him at the kitchen counter; "I can see why she did what she did, I just..."

"Don't understand how she could do it because it's not something you'd ever do?" he asked.

"I get it though..." she looked to her coffee cup as tears threatened again; "I mean it's really quite
simple... she was a bigger part of my life than I ever was of hers..." she looked off and out the
window; "So really, not that big a deal for her to cut me out of her life..." she looked back at him; "I
hate that I can't fix this... that there's nothing I can do..." she shook her head; "I'll never understand
unless she chooses to explain but I'm not holding my breath..."

"Why would you even want her in your life Carm?" he asked.

"You know what she means to me... she listened when things got bad after Bob died..."

"You could have talked to me," he reminded her.

"It's not the same," she sighed; "You, Will, Brody... you were all dealing with his death too... I
needed someone outside of that," she downed the rest of her coffee and poured another. "I'm angry,
don't get me wrong... not so much for what she said but for what she did... but..." she sighed deeply
as a tear escaped; "I'm still going to miss her... you know? I mean, we talked almost every day..."

"Yes, but Kirsh tells me you have a real life girl, here, who is really cute and seems to be into
you..."

"Who? Laura?" she said with a watery laugh. "She's too cute... too young and way too straight..."

"Are you sure?"

"Probably," she shrugged like it didn't matter, but it did and it was already scaring her. "And even
if she isn't she probably already has a girlfriend..."

"Why are you talking yourself out of something you don't even know is there yet?"

"Yes because not doing that worked out so well for me last time," she replied bitterly.

"Hey..." he said as he got up and hugged her; "You're not the asshole in this scenario..."

"She's not an asshole," Carmilla said defensively; "she just did a really asshole-like thing because I
pushed her to it..." she shook her head and pushed him away. "I'll get over it, I will... I just..."

"Hate not having closure?" he offered and she nodded. "Sometimes we have to accept that we don't
always get the closure we think we deserve and sweetie? You deserve to be treated way better than
she treated you. Now..." he smiled; "got any video of this Laura girl?"

"Probably..." Carmilla replied and blushed despite herself.

"You do like her!" he teased as he poked her in the side.

"I did admit she's cute," she replied noncommittally as she opened her laptop again. She was about to rewind the counter camera when she stopped, looked at the time, and then back to the live video; it wasn't even nine yet and Laura was already here. "That's her..." she said quietly.

"Can't you zoom in or something?" he asked as he squinted at the screen.

"Not that good a camera," she replied with a laugh.

"Well I guess I'll have to take a look for myself while you get dressed..." he said mischievously.

"So help me god, Dark, if you fuck this up for me..." she warned.

"So you are interested..."

"No, I'm not, but it's hard finding a decent sparring partner my size..."

"Yes, fighting midgets are few and far between," he teased, 'midget' was one of his favorite nicknames for her.

"Oh fuck off!" she said and then added; "And stay here..."

"But you just told me to fuck off!" he said laughing; "So which is it? Stay or fuck off?"

"Stay here 'cause I don't trust you!" she yelled as she entered her room to get dressed. "But fuck off!"

... Carmilla got changed quickly; as much as she loved her best friend he had a really bad habit of saying the wrong thing at the worst time. "Yes, Laura's cute..." she thought and blushed; "Okay maybe more than just 'cute'..." she amended as she took a little more care than usual picking out what she wanted to wear. She pulled on a clean pair of underwear and a pair of board shorts along with her best sports bra and a tight 'K&K MMA' t-shirt. She chanced a quick glance in the mirror and stopped dead; she looked like crap... not surprising really, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a good night's rest and to add it she'd cried herself to sleep the night before.

She picked up her cell and sent a quick text to Kirsh asking him to get her breakfast ready, and if Laura hadn't eaten yet, to fix her a bowl too and send her up to the roof to meet her. She smiled and reached for her sunglasses... at least she could do something about the puffy eyes.

"Make me another cup of coffee?" She asked Dark as she walked over to her laptop to print off the paperwork she'd compiled for Laura the night before.

"Yes, Mistress..." he replied sarcastically.

"Please?" she added sweetly.

"Should she bring her gear?" texted Kirsh.
"Sure," she replied; "Ask her if she wants a coffee."

"She's says; "Tea, Earl Grey, if you have it?"

Carmilla chuckled under her breath; "Throw the kettle on please?" she asked Dark as she walked over to the printer. She shuffled through the papers and shook her head; "Hope this doesn't have her running for the hills instead of running in them with me..." she thought. Her lawyer, her father's best friend, was determined to keep her out of trouble. She'd mentioned she was looking for a sparring partner and he insisted on a Non-Disclosure Agreement. She'd reluctantly agreed as her mother had a bad habit of 'influencing' her friends to get information or, when that failed, turning them against her. Hence the reason she had exactly one close friend... Dark. Yes, she had her brother, Will, and Kirsh, who she thought of as a little brother, but there were things she wasn't comfortable talking to them about.

The kettle whistled at the same time she heard the elevator pass her apartment on its way to the roof. After putting the paperwork on top of her laptop she walked over to the cupboard and took down a teapot and a couple bags of Earl Grey and then put them on a tray Dark had ready for her along with little bowls of cream and sugar.

"So..." he said as they walked over to the elevator, him carrying the tea and she her laptop and Laura's contract; "can I come up and meet her?" he asked as she put on her sunglasses.

"That depends..." she started; "think you can behave?"

"I promise not to ask her about the penguins," he replied earnestly.

"Just..." she hesitated; "try not to embarrass me?"

"I'll do my best," he replied and she almost believed him. Almost.

When they reached the roof they found Laura at the railing looking out over the city. Her gear and their breakfasts, granola with fruit and yogurt, were on the table. She and Dark deposited what they were carrying on the table and went to join her.

"Well aren't you bright eyes and bushy-tailed?" Carmilla asked as she appreciated the view; Laura was wearing, what looked like, brand new yoga pants, a hoodie and shiny new runners. As she turned to face them Carmilla felt her breath catch a little. "Okay... maybe definitely more than just 'cute'," she thought.

"This is a beautiful space you have here," Laura commented.

"Thanks," Dark replied warmly; "We're quite proud of it."

"I had the roof professionally reinforced, but Dark and I did the rest..." Carmilla added. She was actually proud of it as well and it had quickly become her favorite place. After the deck they'd built seating all around the edge and the hot tub had been installed a few weeks earlier. There was also a shed that held a couple of treadmills, a portable heavy bag, and various other seating. Her next goal was getting a BBQ and a small fridge.

"It's amazing," Laura replied, sounding suitably impressed.

"This is Dark," Carmilla said, indicating her best friend; "Dark... Laura...""It's a pleasure to meet you," he said politely, overly so Carmilla thought, as he took her hand and kissed the back of it. He examined her hand a moment and then looked to Carmilla; "Looks about
Carmilla smacked his shoulder; "Go get started on number three... the floor is being installed next week and I want the painting done before then," she told him, she wasn't really annoyed with him but best to nip it in the bud before he got her in any more trouble.

"Yes boss," he replied with a wink and then turned to leave.

Carmilla shook her head and motioned Laura over to the table.

"You and Dark been together long?" Laura asked as she sat down.

Carmilla laughed and shook her head.

"I didn't know how you take your tea," she said finally as she indicated the waiting teapot; "And we're not 'together'..." she laughed again at the thought; "since he's slept with way more boys than I have and I've been with way more women than he has..."

"Oh..." Laura said, blushing deeply as she reached, her hand shaking ever so slightly, to add the teabags to the teapot. "I'm, uh... me too..." she admitted quietly. She looked to Carmilla when she didn't reply. "I mean... I don't if you are, but I'm gay..."

"No, Cupcake, that's one of the few things the papers got right," Carmilla replied and took a sip of her coffee before starting her breakfast. "So... paperwork..." she said as she handed it to her.

As Laura read through the dozen or so pages and made her tea while also eating her breakfast, Carmilla took the chance to really study her. "She's beautiful..." she thought and blushed; "Must have a girlfriend though..."

"Okay... I understand most of this stuff," Laura said as she shuffled through the papers; "But why the Non-Disclosure Agreement?"

"It was mostly my lawyer's idea..."

"You have a lawyer?" Laura interrupted.

"You know a bit about me," Carmilla started, her tone gentle somewhat, "My mother..." she sighed; "She still hasn't given up on trying to ruin my life... the more successful I am, the harder she tries..." she shook her head; "Don't take it personally... I mean, it's not that I don't trust you, but..." she took a sip of her coffee to try to gather herself; why was she so flustered all of a sudden? "It's also a training thing..." she smiled; "Wouldn't want you giving away all my secrets to an opponent..."

"Fair enough, I guess..." Laura said her tone unreadable as she shuffled the papers again. Finding what she was looked for, she asked; "Do I have to follow the "meal plan'?"

"Did you take a good look at the contract?" Carmilla asked and then watched as Laura flipped to it and her eyes grew large.

"This is too much..." she said once she found her voice; it was more than fair as it included all costs associated with training, and twenty percent of any money Carmilla won in her fights and five hundred, cash, per week.

"It's all about one thing, Creampuff," Carmilla replied seriously.
"And what's that?" Laura asked.

"Making you the best training partner possible," Carmilla shrugged; "The better you are, the better I'll be..." she nodded to the papers in Laura's hands; "I've given this a lot of thought... I want you to be able to completely, one hundred percent, be present whenever we train... I'm putting Will through school right now and I know both how expensive it is and how shitty he eats..." she smiled as Laura blushed; "The better you eat, the better you'll feel, the better your training will be... if you're not worrying about money you'll be more focused..." Laura nodded slowly. "Did you keep the receipt for the new gear?"

"No I returned it," Laura replied neutrally.

"They made you take 'store credit, didn't they?"

"How did you know?" Laura asked in surprise.

"They're not happy we started selling our own gear," she explained.

"But your stuff is way more expensive," Laura countered.

"Yes, but not only do we have different price ranges of gear, all of our gear is better quality than what they sell," Carmilla reasoned. "Did you keep your receipts?" She asked again.

"It's okay."

"No, it's not," Carmilla replied; "You shouldn't have to spend money for a job..." she sighed; "Besides, better gear means you're safer... everything in that contract is about making you the best you can be... you don't have to do everything..."

"But you suggest that I do?"

"It's for your benefit which, ultimately, is for mine... make sense?" Carmilla asked.

Laura put the paperwork aside and sat back in her chair with her tea held to her lips as she met Carmilla's eyes, or tried to as she was still wearing her sunglasses.

"I warned you it was going to be intense," Carmilla said to break the silence. "It's all about keeping you safe and focused..." she added when Laura still sat regarding her.

"I have one condition," Laura said tentatively; "I can accept Cupcake, but Creampuff?"

"What's wrong with Creampuff but not Cupcake?" Carmilla asked with a laugh.

"I don't much like either, but at least I can, sort of, take 'Cupcake' as a compliment... I mean Miesha Tate doesn't seem very nice but she's a gutsy fighter..." Laura reasoned.

"Would you prefer I call you 'Pop'?" Carmilla asked, deadpan.

"Pop?"

"Pissed off Pomeranian," she teased.

"Oh stop!" Laura said, surprising them both when she playfully slapped Carmilla's shoulder. "Was it really that bad?"

"Let's see if I can't show you," Carmilla replied as she reached for her laptop, opened it and pulled
up the gym's cameras. While the cameras focused on the common areas weren't of the highest quality, she'd made sure the ones installed around her new octagon were because sometimes there was no better training tool than watching video of yourself training to find your own mistakes. She quickly found the right time and sorted through the dozen cameras for the best view of Laura's face.

"See for yourself Creampop..." Carmilla teased as she turned the laptop towards her and hit play. Laura watched the video, seemingly trying to maintain a straight face, but couldn't help it and laughed at herself.

"One more thing..." she said when she finally caught her breath; "it won't be easy to follow the meal plan..."

"Suggestions... and why?" Carmilla interrupted.

"I live in a dorm and don't really have a kitchen," she supplied.

Carmilla sat back in her chair and studied her a moment, unsure how she would take her next idea.

"There's four apartments on the second floor," she started; "I think you should move into one of them..." at the look of shock on Laura's face she amended; "At least for the next six weeks..."

"But..."

"After Bob died I bought the building," Carmilla explained; "My dream is to make this place an all in one training stop," she continued; "Me and Brody share the top floor and those four apartments are meant for fighters and their trainers to use while they use the gym to train..." she smiled as Laura look impressed. "My ultimate goal is to open a second gym at altitude... a whole fighters resort in the mountains..."

"Wow..."

"There's six apartments in total but two aren't finished yet," she continued; "I was just thinking that it would be more convenient for you and you'd have a real kitchen and everything..." Laura was looking a little stunned. "What do you think?"

"Why are doing this for me?" Laura asked finally. "I mean... this is... it's potentially a lot of money..."

"I'm not doing it for you," Carmilla replied seriously, "I'm doing it for me..." she shook her head; "I don't want to fight for the money..." she laughed; "The gym pays for itself and I have excellent financial advisers who make sure I'm making enough money to support myself without really touching the money my dad left me..."

"Then why?"

"That's..." Carmilla sighed and shook her head again; "not something I want to get into right now..." She had her reasons, reasons that she hadn't shared with anyone. "But if I do well so does my gym..." she sighed. "Just think about it? Let's work out today and then take the weekend to think about it and give me your decision on Monday... okay?" Laura nodded and Carmilla started breathing again. "I have some homework for you too..." she smiled as Laura chuckled under her breath; "A few of my fights, the chick I'm fighting in six weeks and a few I might be facing if I make it onto the Ultimate Fighter... I'll email them to you?"
Laura nodded again and gave her her email.

"Carmilla?" She said quietly to draw her attention away from her computer.

"Yeah Creampop?"

"Thanks... for giving me a chance..." she said sincerely.

Carmilla studied her a moment.

"Someone gave me a chance once..." she smiled; "Figure it's time I return the favor..."
Carmilla was surprised by a knock at the door; one of the advantages of, not only owning the building, but sharing the floor with only one person, meant she didn't often get unexpected guests at her door. When she opened her apartment door it was to receive yet another shock as the woman whose picture she'd only seen online stood there, her head slightly bowed, an uncertain smile on her face.

"El?" she asked, the shock clear in her tone; "What the fuck are you doing here?" she added, an edge now to her voice. Before El could respond though, she continued; "How could you do that?" Her voice started to rise; "Just say something incredibly hurtful and then block me? How did you think I'd react?"

"Carm... please..." El all but pleaded.

"What?!!" She all but screamed; "You cut me out of your life and you think flying across the country means I have to listen to you? That I have to accept your apology?" She laughed humorlessly. "Too late!" She said as she went to slam the door in her face.

"Carm... wait..." El stuttered as she forced her way inside. "Please... I came all this way... please, just hear me out... I..."

"Why?" Carmilla asked. "Why should I listen to you when you didn't extend me the same courtesy?"

El had no reply so instead grabbed Carmilla forcibly by the face and kissed her.

"Stop!" Carmilla screamed as she pushed her away... only it wasn't El, it was Laura and they weren't in her apartment but the gym's octagon. "Laura?" She said uncertainly as the shorter girl smiled, gently took her face in her hands and kissed her softly.

"But you didn't have to cut me off
Make out like it never happened and that we were nothing
And I don't even need your love
But you treat me like a stranger and that feels so rough
No you didn't have to stoop so low
Have your friends collect your records and then change your number
I guess that I don't need that though
Now you're just somebody that I used to know
Now you're just somebody that I used to know
Now you're just somebody that I used to know"
Carmilla slammed the off button on her radio alarm clock. "What the fuck was that about?" she muttered as she rubbed her face. It was Monday morning and she hadn’t heard from Laura since she’d left the gym Friday afternoon with a promise to return. Both Dark and Brody had given her a hard time about how she had treated Laura during their workout. Yes, she'd pushed her, probably harder than she should have, but something she realized quickly about her new training partner was that she was proud. Proud and incredibly stubborn. Neither were bad traits but she decided the best way to teach Laura the right way to train was for her to realize for herself that she was doing it the wrong way. She just hoped she hadn't scared her off.

She'd spent most of Saturday painting one of the fighter apartments with Dark but by Sunday the thoughts she'd been trying to ignore had surfaced again. The painting was finished and so she decided to cook Chili for herself, Dark and Brody. Once they'd eaten and both boys sent on their way with 'doggie bags' of Chili she'd wandered down to the apartment that would be Laura's if she choose to accept it.

She'd turned the TV to some cooking show to keep her company while she went around the 'executive suite', as it was jokingly referred to, getting things ready; if Laura did accept she didn't want to leave everything to the last minute; she wanted the place 'move-in ready'. First she unwrapped all the new sheets and blankets and then threw them in the apartment's washer. Next she un-boxed all the dishes and cutlery and put them in the dishwasher. While she waited for the washers to finish she unpacked and put away all the dried goods.

By the time she finished everything, including making the king-sized bed with fresh sheets, dusting, and putting away the dishes, it was going on two in the morning. She'd taken one last look around the apartment, smiled, and as her she felt her mind was finally calm enough to sleep, returned to her apartment and fallen asleep, fully clothed, on top of her blankets.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and went to open her laptop, smiling for the first time in a long time at the opening of her email; she had an email from Laura sent the night before.

"Hi Carmilla, I would like to accept both the position of sparring/training partner and the apartment. P.S. Thanks for the Chili, it was yummy. :-)

"What the..." she muttered as she reached for her phone to call her best friend.

"What?" he answered sleepily.

"What did you do?" She demanded.

"Huh?" he answered, still clearly not awake; "Carm?"

"Dark..." she growled; "What. Did. You. Do?"

"You'll need to be more specific," he said, clearly more awake and stalling for time.

"Did you or did you not take Laura some Chili last night?" She asked as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I might have," he replied carefully.

"And why would you do that?" She asked and then added; "More importantly does she know I had nothing to do with it?"

"Why?" he countered; "Because you were being kind of a bitch to her on Friday and you did comment that you'd take her some yourself but you didn't want her to think you were checking up
"And how did you explain randomly showing up at her dorm with Chili?" She asked neutrally.

"I told her it was a peace offering..."

"Damn it, Dark..." she interrupted.

"Don't get all pissy at me for doing something you were to chickenshit to do yourself," he interjected. "Carm..." he continued consolingly; "I did it for your own good... she's nice, smart, beautiful and funny... why won't you give her a chance? She's clearly into you."

"Because having a decent training partner is more important to me right now than romance and ultimately having my heart broken again," she replied tersely as her phone beeped to let her know she had another call. "Hold on, I have another call..." she said before taking the phone from her ear to check the caller id.

"I'm going to have to let you go, Laura's on the other line and this isn't over!" she informed him before clicking over to Laura's call.

"Good morning!" Laura said brightly when she answered.

"'Morning pup, what's up?"

"Pup?"

"Well... calling you 'Pop' didn't feel right so I've amended it to pup, as in a cute little pissed off Pomeranian puppy..." Carmilla joked.

"You're never letting me live that down, are you?" Laura asked with a groan.

"Not anytime soon," she replied with a chuckle; "So what's up?" She asked again.

"I was calling to let you know I'm running late..."

"It's only nine thirty..." Carmilla interrupted.

"I know, but I called a cab because..."

"Why did you call a cab?"

"Because I didn't... never mind it's here now... I'll see you soon?"

"Sure... give me a call when you're close and I'll come out and help you in with your stuff?" Carmilla offered.

"Sure, thanks... um, bye then..." Laura replied before ending the call.

Carmilla looked at her phone and considered calling Dark back to find out all he'd done and said on her behalf the night before and then, after realizing she had just enough time to get changed out of her slept in clothes and eat before Laura arrived that she'd wait until she saw him in person to question him further so she could smack him if needed.

As she changed she considered calling and emailing the local grocery store with her list for Laura for delivery but opted against it as she worried that Laura might think her too controlling. It wasn't really though as the 'executive suite' was a dry run for the rest of the apartments on the second
floor. It was her intent to have all the apartments be all inclusive and was aiming for something of an 'Ultimate Fighter' house type experience where all the fighters and trainers would have to worry about was training. Of the other five apartments two were meant for trainers and were only a bit smaller than Laura's apartment with all the same amenities. Amenities which included a washer, dryer and dishwasher along with a big screen TV complete with cable and 'Netflix' as well as a couple of game systems and variety of games. They also came with bedding, towels and dishes and would have regular grocery deliveries. Outfitting Laura's apartment let her see how much it would cost.

She texted Brody on her way down to the gym and sent Laura one as well, both with regards to the same thing; breakfast. Brody to make it and Laura to see if she'd eaten already. Laura replied that she hadn't and Brody replied that he already had two bowls ready and that their new t-shirts had arrived. She smiled; it had been a struggle to get Brody to agree to change the gym's name from 'K&K MMA' to 'Karma MMA' or, as the logo would read; 'Karmma'. Most people wrongly believed the second 'k' was for her but no, it was short for 'Kirsch and Kirsch', hence Brody's reluctance to change the name. While Carmilla understood where he was coming from the gym was unrecognizable from what it was before Bob's death and she felt the gym's name should reflect that.

When the elevator arrived on the first floor Brody was walking towards her, the shopping cart they used for deliveries stacked high with boxes. "Can you bring the cart back out when you're done? I don't know how much stuff Laura has and I'd rather make only one trip..."

"Sure boss..." he replied with a smile; "Guess it's true what they say about dykes and U-hauls on the second date..." he joked.

"First off..." she said, smiling; "We're not dating..."

"Not yet..." he teased.

"Second, it's merely for convenience," she added in a more dignified tone as her phone vibrated. She checked it to find a short text from Laura informing her she was ten minutes away. "Now hurry up and when you're done can you please make us a couple of protein shakes?"

"Sure thing," he smiled; "Want me to bring them up the roof when they're ready?"

"Yes please," she replied as she made her way outside to wait for Laura. She hurriedly ran her hands through her hair, realizing she hadn't brushed it since she'd gotten up, and then checked her reflection in the mirror. She sighed; she still had bags under her eyes but at least they weren't red and puffy.

She spotted Laura's cab as Brody joined her with the shopping cart and their breakfasts sitting in the place a kid normally would.

"Thanks little brother," she said affectionately before ushering him back inside.

As the cab pulled up she reached for wallet and got the driver's attention. She walked over to him; "How much?" she asked.

"It's okay, I..." Laura tried to interrupt.

"Training related cost', Cupcake," Carmilla informed her and looked to the driver again; "How much?"

"Forty-seven fifty," he replied, amused by the interaction between the two girls.
Carmilla fished out a fifty and a twenty and handed him both.

"Thanks," he replied, smiling as he went to open his door; "Let me give you hand with that stuff..."

"It's okay, we got it," Carmilla replied and handed him a second twenty; "But thanks for the offer..."

"This is too much," he said as he tried to give the second twenty back.

"I'm going to need someone reliable in a few weeks to ferry a couple of fighters around," she replied, surprising both him and Laura; "I'll always tip well as long as you get them to and from their destinations in the most direct way possible," she smiled; "I know other drivers who would have just as easily taken my friend the longest way possible, charged her double, charged her because she has so much stuff and then expect a generous tip on top of it..." she smiled again as the man flushed slightly; "You seem like an honest man and I need a reliable driver... you up to it?"

"I appreciate the offer, Miss, but I already work full-time," he replied.

"Take my card and think it over," she countered; "You could still keep your job as it wouldn't be more than a few hours a day nor would it be consistent, but I promise to make it worth your while."

He looked down at the card she given him and then back to her.

"I'll think about it, thank you Miss Karnstein," he replied warmly as she went to shake his hand; "You're not at all like I thought you'd be..." he confided and then quickly added to cover his slip up; "My name's J.P."

"It's nice to meet you," Carmilla replied as she let his hand go; "Email me and I'll send you a formal job offer."

"Thank you," he replied with a grin.

"You got all your stuff?" she called to Laura as she had been taking her stuff from the trunk while she talked to the driver.

"Yup," Laura replied as she held a vase of fresh flowers to her chest.

She turned back to J.P; "I'll hear from you soon?" she asked and received his nod before he drove off. She looked back to Laura and noticed she was staring at the shopping cart a little sadly; it was filled with garbage bags with a couple of boxes balanced on top and a large wheeled suitcase beside it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Huh?" Laura said as she shook herself from her thoughts; "Oh... I was just thinking it's kind of sad that everything I own can fit into one shopping cart and a suitcase," she supplied.

"Tell you a secret?" Carmilla asked conspiratorially and received Laura's nod; "That same cart once held everything me and my brother owned."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Carmilla replied and motioned her inside; "I kept it as a reminder of what rock bottom feels like and why I never want to be there again."

"Hey Carm!" Brody called as they made their way to the elevator.
"What's up?"

"Home Depot just called," he replied as he walked over with two protein shakes; "They said they'll be by in an hour..."

"Excellent," she replied with a grin as she accepted her shake from him; she'd be waiting on her new BBQ and fridge for the roof. "Send them up to the roof when they get here," she asked him.

"Sure thing boss," he replied with a wink to Laura as she accepted her drink.

"C'mon..." Carmilla said, ushering Laura towards the elevator.

The two stood in awkward silence as they took the elevator to the second floor.

"So what made you decide to accept the apartment?" Carmilla asked conversationally as they exited and made their way to the end of the hall.

"I fell asleep on the Skytrain and woke up in Surrey," Laura replied with a laugh; "Took it back the other way, fell asleep again and woke up back downtown..." she shook her head; "It took me close to three hours to get home..." she trailed off as Carmilla opened the door to her new home; "Wow..." she said in awed voice as she looked around; "Are they all like this?"

"No," Carmilla replied; "The others will be included in the training packages we're offering but this one will cost them a little extra..."

"Then I should take one of the others," Laura suggested.

"No," Carmilla replied; "The others aren't completely ready... no furniture, dishes, linen or anything yet..." she smiled as Laura seemed to realize what 'all inclusive' meant. "Let me show you around?" she offered and led her towards the bedroom.

"That's a huge bed," Laura commented.

"Well, most fighters and trainers are rather large men," Carmilla countered; "I washed all the bedding and dishes last night so everything is ready for you..." she motioned Laura back towards the kitchen; "You're already stocked up with dry goods but I'll take you grocery shopping this afternoon for the rest," she turned to Laura; "Do you drive?" she asked, Laura nodded. "Do you drive standard?"

"No, why?" Laura replied.

"Cause my Jeep's standard and I was going to offer to let you borrow it anytime you need to," she replied to Laura's visible surprise; "We're kind of isolated and nothing is in walking distance..." she thought a moment; "I'll teach you this weekend?"

"Um, okay," Laura replied hesitantly.

"Let's head up to the roof and eat our cereal before it gets soggy," Carmilla said to cover the awkwardness. "Nice flowers," she commented as they made their way out.

"Thanks," Laura replied with a blush and a smile; "And for the Chili too..."

"Shit," Carmilla thought with a frown; "He brought her flowers too?"

"Is something wrong?" Laura asked as they boarded the elevator again.
"No," Carmilla replied with a sigh; she knew Dark's intentions were good but she still intended to smack him later.

"Wait..." Laura said, a hand on Carmilla's arm that she quickly removed; "You didn't know about the Chili or the flowers?"

"No, I didn't," Carmilla replied reluctantly as she noticed Laura's face fall a little; "But I was thinking I should you bring some Chili and I was going to get some flowers for your apartment..."

"Really?" Laura asked.

"Yeah, really..." Carmilla replied as she playfully bumped their shoulders together; "How are you feeling, by the way? Physically I mean?"

"I was a little stiff yesterday but I don't feel too bad today," Laura replied as they took their seats.

"That's because you overdid it on Friday," Carmilla informed her; "You don't have to keep up with me..." she saw a bit of defiance in Laura's eyes and put a hand on her forearm; "You have to remember I've been training full-time for over a year... I'm used to it..."

"Why didn't you correct me then?" Laura asked.

"Because sometimes the best way to learn how to do something right is to do it wrong first," Carmilla explained and went back to eating her cereal; "If I thought you were hurting yourself I'd have told you so..." she offered. "We'll start with a run..." she nodded towards the shed; "I have a couple of treadmills up here..." she said between bites; "After we put the new BBQ together... and then some stretching and weight training... sound good?"

"Sure..." she studied Carmilla a moment; "What was the deal with cab driver?"

"I need a driver for the trainers and fighters coming in a couple of weeks," she replied with a shrug; "He could have easily taken you the long way but he didn't..." she smiled; "Look... it wasn't too long ago that I struggled with everything, money-wise... now that I have more than enough?" She shrugged again; "I like having good people around me... people I can trust and won't judge me for what they think they know about me... are you one of those people?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Laura replied.

"Can I trust you?" she clarified, Laura nodded. "Good... and I want you to trust me..." she sighed. "I know I might have come off as a bit of a bitch last week..."

"It's okay..." Laura said, staring at her bowl of cereal; "Dark mentioned you're going through something personal..."

"Did he say what?" Carmilla asked tersely.

"No..." she replied with a shake of her head.

"I don't want to talk about it," she informed her; "But when it comes to training I expect you to listen to me and do as I ask..." Laura met her eyes again; "Kindly assume 'pleases' and 'thank yous' are implied and I promise that, by the time I fight in six weeks, you'll be in almost as good of shape as me..." she smiled as Laura blushed further; "All without injury..."

"I feel like I'm getting the better end of this deal," Laura joked; "I mean, surely, you could have found someone more qualified?"
"You're the only person that answered the ad," Carmilla replied with a laugh; "But I learn from teaching and you're already pushing me to work harder..."

"I am?" Laura asked in shock.

"Sure are, Pup..." she replied with a smile as Laura blushed again; "You kept up with me a little too easily for my liking..." she joked. "But, just so you know, everything that I'm including in your benefits I would've done for anyone who agreed to be my training partner..."

"Really?" Laura asked.

"Pretty much," she shrugged again; "I'm no prize Cupcake, I can be moody and grouchy..." she smiled; "I think you'll think you're underpaid soon enough..."

Chapter End Notes

Italics will, more often than not, indicate dream sequences but I don't know, at this point, how many there will be. Also, a question, should I include Laura's POV? The song that was playing on the radio when Carmilla woke up is; "Somebody That I Used to Know," by Goyte. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
Carmilla sat starring at the screen of her laptop, an email listing all the alcohol she wanted for the night's party, open on the screen. She smiled and added two more things before hitting send; a very expensive bottle of Patron Gold Tequila and a much cheaper, but still not cheap, bottle of wine. She and Laura had worked very hard the last couple of weeks and her little brother coming home for the summer was not only the perfect excuse for a party but a chance to blow off a little steam.

Her trainers and their respective fighters were arriving on Sunday and the real work would begin. Each of the three fighters had fights coming up in the next month, the last on the same card as herself. She hit send and then waited the requisite ten minutes before calling the liquor store to see how long it would take to put her order together.

As she listened to phone ring on the other end there was a knock at the door.

"Hello?" a voice answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Carmilla said with a shake of her head as she went to answer the door; "It's Carmilla Karnstein, did you receive my email?"

"Just a moment, let me check," the voice replied, a little friendlier than last time. "Yes..." she paused; "we have everything and we're not too busy... um, give us half an hour?"

But Carmilla had barely hear a word; in the doorway stood Laura, looking, well, more breathtaking than ever. "Um... yeah..." she managed to answer; "I'll see you then..." She looked to Laura and smiled; "What's up, Pup?" she asked, her voice somehow even as she suddenly felt wholly under-dressed in her sweat pants and tank top.

Laura was wearing a pretty white sundress with matching low heels and her hair still wet from the shower. She was looking down her hair covering her face then peered through it; "Kirsch mentioned you might need a hand at the liquor store?"

"A little over-dressed for a beer run, Cupcake," Carmilla teased when, what she really wanted to say was; "Fuck me..." because she was definitely seeing Laura in a new light. Yes, she'd already admitted to herself that Laura was beautiful but the last two weeks of training was starting to show. "I mean..." she reached out, her index finger extended to run down Laura's well-defined bicep; "if you didn't have more definition than when I met you I'd almost say you look like a virgin sacrifice..."

"Oh stop..." Laura said as she blushed and looked down again.

"Come in," Carmilla said as she stepped aside let her hand trail down to Laura's elbow and led her inside.

"Wow..." Laura said, awestruck; it was the first time she'd been in Carmilla's apartment.

"I don't really need the help, Pup, but you're welcome to come for the ride," Carmilla said. She tried to see the apartment through Laura's eyes; she and Dark had done most of the work themselves and even though it took half the second floor they somehow managed to keep it cozy and warm. The main room was a combination living room, dining room and kitchen with her
bedroom and bathroom off to the right and a guest bedroom, office and second bathroom off to the left. Directly ahead was what currently had Laura's attention; the almost floor to ceiling windows that overlooked Burrard Inlet and the city on the other side. While Carmilla preferred the view of the mountains that the roof afforded her, she loved this one almost as much.

"Huh? Oh..." Laura said, blushing again as she tore her eyes from the window; "Um, yeah..."

"Make yourself comfortable," Carmilla said, motioning to a couch, "I need a quick shower, or come back in twenty?" She smiled. "Or wait here, I won't be long..."

"I'll wait... wait, you have a balcony?" Laura asked and Carmilla nodded. "I'll wait out there..."

Carmilla took one last appreciative look as Laura walked out onto the balcony, shook her head and then went to her room to shower and change. She'd already laid out the clothes she wanted to wear; a fitted black short sleeve shirt and ripped black jeans. She briefly considered changing out the shirt for something lighter in color but remembered why she'd picked out the clothes that she had; there was a very good chance her mother was going to show up at the airport. Although she and Will had a restraining order against her that kept her at least ten miles from the gym, her mother being who she was, convinced the judge that public spaces should be neutral ground. Most of the time it wasn't a problem, her mother rarely ventured out of downtown and Carmilla rarely left the North Shore, but she knew Will had plans with her for lunch the following week. They were both fully aware their mother, with her resources, could easily find out what flight he was coming in on.

She sighed... would it always come back to that bitch? Live in defiance, live to prove her wrong... she shook her and smiled again as she walked into the bathroom; if everything went to plan she wouldn't have to deal with her for much longer.

She turned on the shower and tied back her hair so it wouldn't get too wet and then stepped under the slightly cool water. What most people didn't know was that Deanna wasn't her and Will's real mother. Her mother had died shortly after Will was born and she was three. The only memories she still had of her were the few pictures she managed to salvage before Deanna burned the rest. Her real mother had been killed by a drunk driver; to this day Carmilla wasn't entirely convinced Deanna hadn't had something to do with it.

Her father had been devastated by her mother's death and Deanna, his secretary at the time, had swooped in shortly after. At first she'd been nothing more than a shoulder to cry on and helped him keep going, but it wasn't long before she'd sunk his hooks into him. He'd been successful when they met, but relatively unknown, she changed that too and pushed him to an early death. Another death Carmilla wasn't entirely certain Deanna had nothing to do with however she'd been too young, too powerless at the time, to do anything about it.

"Patience, Karnstein, she'll get hers..." she reminded herself and turned off the water. She had a plan, a plan only Will knew about, and if everything went as she hoped it would not only would Deanna be destroyed financially she was going to spend the last of her years in jail. Carmilla chuckled as she imagined the homophobic Deanna made into some big ole' bullydyke's bitch.

She'd already dressed and was applying her makeup when she heard Laura talking to someone and figured she was talking on the phone when she heard Dark's voice. She quickly finished up, snapped a studded leather bracelet on each wrist and grabbed her boots before going to join them.

"'Bout time..." Dark said and then, as he turned to face her, continued; "Doesn't Laura look ravi..." he smiled widely and walked over; "Don't you clean up nice?"

"Thanks..." she looked down and straightened her shirt; "It's not too much?"
"Considering?" he asked as he reached for and undid her top two buttons. "No..." He studied her a moment; "Sure you don't want me to come with?"

"Laura's coming with me," she shrugged; "I'll be fine but could you run to the liquor store for me? I'm running late..." He nodded. "The Tequila, the expensive one, and the wine are mine... got it?" she added, teasing him a little. He smiled and nodded again. "What are you doing up here anyway?"

"Came to use your laptop to check my email..." he shrugged; "Kirsch is hogging the computer downstairs again..."

"Which reminds me," Carmilla said with a grin as she walked over to the coffee table and grabbed three wrapped boxes. "Happy early birthday and thanks for all the help..." she said by way of explanation as she handed him one.

"You didn't..." he gasped.

"I might have..." she laughed as he tore through the paper; "I'm tired of the three of you hogging my computer..." she joked as she sat to put on her Docs.

"Thank you Carmy!" Dark exclaimed as he hugged her.

"You're welcome, honey," she replied sincerely; "Take Kirsch his before you leave?"

"Sure, babe," he replied; "You do look really good... doesn't she Laura?" he asked as he turned to the thoroughly bemused Laura.

"She..." she cleared her throat; "You really do, Carmilla..."

"Yes... but do I look 'fierce'?" They both smiled and nodded. "Good," she thought; "Fierce is exactly what I need..."

"And doesn't Laura look really amazing too?" Dark prodded.

"She really does..." Carmilla replied and blushed slightly.

"Thanks..." Laura muttered and blushed as well.

"You ready to go Cupcake?" she asked Laura, who nodded again.

She picked up her keys and wallet, which she slipped into her back pocket, and motioned them out. "And put a half dozen of the Coronas in my fridge?" she asked Dark as they took the elevator down.

"How about a dozen?" he joked; "I have a feeling you'll need it..."

"What do you think the Patron is for?" she asked; "Go give him his laptop and I'll see you later..." she added as she opened the back door for Laura and then followed her outside.

Laura remained quiet as she watched Carmilla take the Jeep's roof off, and then helped her fold it before opening the trunk for Carmilla to put it inside.

"Thanks..." Carmilla said, as she got in the Jeep.

"No problem..." Laura replied as she did up her seat belt; "So we're going to pick up Will?" she asked.
"Yeah..." Carmilla replied with a smile; "He might be a pain in the ass but he's still my little brother..." she shrugged and put on her sunglasses; "He's the only family I've got..."

"That's not true..." Laura interrupted; "You've got Kirsch and Dark..."

"Yeah..." Carmilla laughed and started the car; "My boys'..."

"And I know your mother is kind of a cow, but she's still family, right?" Laura asked innocently.

"My mother died when I was three," Carmilla informed her coldly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"No, I'm sorry, Laura..." she sighed, her tone softening as she added; "Not many people know that..."

"Thanks for trusting me?" Laura replied as she reached over and took Carmilla's hand briefly.

"There's something I should tell you," Carmilla replied as she put the car in reverse and backed out.

"Your step-mother might be at the airport?" Laura deduced.

"Yes, but no, there's something else," Carmilla answered vaguely as she slipped the car into first. "My lawyer, without my consent or knowledge..." she sighed; "he did a background check on you..." she chanced a glance at Laura to gauge her reaction; "I didn't look at it but he did tell me he found no connection between you and Deanna..." Laura nodded; "I'm sorry... he was my father's best friend and he's a little over-protective since I told him everything she did..." she stopped the car before pulling onto the road; "Laura?"

"It's okay, I understand..." she said quietly; "But there's something I should probably tell you too..." she trailed off at the honk behind them; they'd taken long enough that Dark was behind them in the black 'Karmma' vintage Ford truck.

Carmilla stuck her right arm up and flipped him the bird before pulling out onto the street, causing Laura to laugh.

"What?"

"The friendship the two of you have..." Laura supplied; "I don't think I've ever seen anything like it..."

"We've helped each other through a lot of shit," Carmilla explained; "He'd do anything for me and vice versa..." she looked to Laura as they stopped at a red light; "What did you want to tell me?"

"Light's green..." Laura said, continuing again when they were moving; "You're, kind of, the reason I came to Vancouver..."

"I'm sorry?" Carmilla replied in shock as she looked at her briefly.

"When all the stuff starting showing up about you in the newspaper... well, I was just starting to accept that maybe I wasn't so straight... anyway, growing up in a small town, I just sort of, latched onto the only lesbian I knew... you..." she trailed off as Carmilla came to a stop at another light and met her eyes; "And you're kind of the reason I got into journalism... I knew there had to more to the story..."

"So you came to my gym looking for a story?" Carmilla asked, unsure of how to feel about that.
"No..." Laura said in a rush as she reached for her hand unsuccessfully as the light had changed and Carmilla had to put the car in gear; "I really didn't recognize you at Kirsch's fight..."

"You mentioned a friend dragged you there?"

"I..." Laura stammered at the change of subject; "I used to know someone who was fighting that night and I didn't want to see her... that's why we left right after his fight..." Carmilla felt her take her hand again; "Are we okay?"

Carmilla turned her hand over; squeezed Laura's and then let it go to change gears.

"I mean, I did go to the gym hoping to meet you..." Laura admitted when she didn't answer; "but I didn't know you were you and you're really nothing like I expected..."

"And what did you expect?" Carmilla asked neutrally.

"I'm not sure exactly," Laura replied tentatively; "But not... you're one of the smartest, kindest, most generous, and loving people I've ever met..."

"When you've gone as long as I did without people who were worthy of those things you tend to treat them well when you find them," Carmilla replied; "I always had Will, of course, but since I, pretty much, raised him it's not the same as Dark, or even Kirsch..."

"What do mean?"

"Those two had no reason to befriend me," she replied as she pulled onto the highway; "The first time I met Dark I knocked him out and Kirsch? Well he could have easily resented me for becoming Bob's right hand girl..."

"I think he's happy to have you run the gym," Laura observed.

"He is... he doesn't want the responsibility," Carmilla affirmed; "But it doesn't change the fact that he could have still hated me for it..."

"I suppose..." Laura said; "So... are we? Okay I mean?"

"We're fine, Pup," Carmilla replied as she reached over and squeezed her thigh; "So... I guess you know everything about me?"

"You told me yourself most of that was lies," Laura countered defensively; "And everything I've seen in the last two weeks has me convinced you're not the person your step-mother painted you to be or that you could have done any of the things she said you did..."

"I did some of them," Carmilla admitted. She chanced another glance at Laura; "I should warn you though she'll probably assume you're my girlfriend..."

"So, um... maybe if she's going to assume anyway..." Laura replied hesitantly; "Maybe I should be?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Pretend, I mean..." Laura clarified; "to be your girlfriend..."

"You sure you want to do that Pup?"

"Why not?"
"Because, as lovely as you look, Deanna is sure to find something wrong with it..."

"Is that why you're dressed the way you are?" Laura asked.

"I was never the perfect little frilly dress girly girl she wanted me to be," Carmilla replied as she turned off the highway; "In her eyes nothing I ever did was good enough..." she shrugged; "Usually I wear what's comfortable and if it happens to be in style, bonus..." she shook her head; "But I can't deny wearing certain clothes gives me more confidence and she has this way of making me feeling like I'm two inches high... I could show up dressed like you and she'd still find fault with it so why not wear what I want, what makes me confident, than even try to impress her?" They came to a stop at a light so Carmilla turned to her; "Don't let her get to you, okay?" Laura nodded. "Because you really do look very pretty and I'd be lucky to have a girlfriend like you..." she smiled and blushed despite herself.

They drove the rest of the way in silence until they reached the airport and pulled into the long term parking. "Why are we parking here?" Laura asked as Carmilla turned off the car.

"Because I know the attendant and he'll keep an eye on my car while we're inside," Carmilla replied.

"And that's a concern?"

"Mostly because I'm too lazy to put the roof back up for the half hour we'll be inside," she replied as she got out; "But also, if I park here, there's less chance of running into her..." Carmilla trailed off as Laura took her hand and laced their fingers.

"In case she's watching," Laura explained and kissed her cheek.

"Laura?" Carmilla replied; "Thanks for this..."

"You're welcome, sweetie," Laura replied brightly and kissed her cheek again, lingering a moment to whisper; "and I think I'd be the lucky one if I was really your girlfriend..."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah..."

"Miss Karnstein, it's nice to see you again," a voice called.

"Damn it..." Carmilla thought, she was pretty sure Laura was about to kiss her. "Hey Tony," she greeted; "We won't be long... just picking up my little brother..." she informed him as she slipped him a twenty.

Her phone beeped signaling a new text message; "Will's plane just landed, we're in position..."

"Excellent," she said and lacing her fingers with Laura's again, she made for the airport. "Whatever you do don't give her your real name..." Carmilla advised her as she slipped on her on sunglasses.

"Okay."

They walked inside in silence, Carmilla on high alert as she watched for Deanna.

"You don't have to do this, you know..." Carmilla said quietly as she checked the incoming flights to find out where she had to meet Will.

"I know, but..." Laura squeezed her hand to get her attention as they made their way to his gate;
"after all you've done for me..." she shrugged; "I guess I want to do something to help you..."

Carmilla pulled her to stop when they reached their destination. She took off her sunglasses and turned to study her a moment; "Deanna's watching..." she whispered into her ear; "I'm going to kiss you now... okay?"

She pulled back enough to give Laura a chance to stop her and then leaned in and kissed her softly.

"Must you?" a snide voice asked.

Carmilla kissed her again and then pulled away to face Deanna.

"Deanna..." she replied coldly.

"Why do insist..."

"Because you're not my mother and to call you that would be insulting the memory of the woman who was," she replied tersely; "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to meet Will," Deanna replied happily; "We're going to lunch..."

"Yeah, I know," Carmilla replied; "Next Friday..."

"But I was sure..." Deanna said, feigning confusion as she took her phone from her purse to check her calendar.

"I'm sure," Carmilla interrupted; "I know because I made the reservation for him." Deanna looked up from her phone and met her eyes; "As for showing the girl I adore just how much I adore her..." she smiled as Laura blushed; "I'm not about to let anyone, let alone you, dictate when and where I do that..."

"Well, introduce me your little friend..."

"Girlfriend..." Laura corrected.

"She speaks!" Deanna joked. "And what's your name dear?"

"Hermione," Laura replied deadpan.

"Well it's nice to meet you Hermione..." Deanna replied her hand out to shake Laura's.

"I'd say the same," Laura replied as she eyed the hand Deanna still had stretched out to her as though it were covered in slime; "but since you've taken lying to an art form I doubt you'd recognize the sarcasm even if I held up a sign saying I was being sarcastic..."

"Oh dear girl," Deanna laughed; "You can't believe everything my daughter tells you about me."

"If I only believe a third it's still enough to keep her as far away from you as possible," Laura countered.

"I like this one, Carmilla; she's got a backbone..." Deanna replied as she eyed Laura up and down; "Even if her entire outfit couldn't cost more than fifty dollars..."

"And expensive clothes," Carmilla replied as calmly as she could; "don't make the bullshit look, or smell, any less like bullshit..."
"Language..." Deanna admonished.

"Fuck you," Carmilla and Laura both replied.

"Carm!" Will called, forestalling any more trading of insults, as he ran over to hug her; "And you must be the girl Kirsch and Dark were telling me about..." he said as he let his sister go to check Laura out; "Nice catch, sis..." he teased as he held his hand out to Laura; "Nice to meet you..."

"Hermione, it's nice to meet you to Will..." Laura replied warmly. If Will recognized the obvious faked name he didn't let it show as he turned to Deanna.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I thought we agreed I'd pick you up and take you to lunch," Deanna replied.

"As it's going on four..." he said as he looked as he watch; "and I told you, quite clearly, I'd meet you for lunch next Friday..." he shook his head; "You never give up do you?"

"Whatever are you going on about?" Deanna asked, her cool exterior starting to give way; "I made a simple mistake..."

"Yeah, well it'll be your last..." he warned as he spotted a police officer walking towards them; "I don't ever want to see you or speak to you ever again... which is what I was going to tell you next week..."

"Is there a problem here?" the officer asked.

"Yes," Carmilla replied; "This woman is currently in violation of a restraining order against her..."

"I'm allowed to be in public spaces..." Deanna countered.

"True," Carmilla allowed; "but unless you're on your way somewhere you have no reason to be here..." she looked to the officer; "Nor is she supposed to talk to us if she sees us..."

"You..." Deanna muttered.

"Mrs Karnstein, if you'll follow me..." the officer ordered; "I wouldn't want to have to taze you to make you comply..."

"Oh, I'd pay to see that!" Carmilla exclaimed.

The officer eyed Deanna and then looked back to Carmilla; "Sorry, Miss, she's hardly worth the paperwork..." he replied as he took her elbow; "Now, if you please, Mrs Karnstein..."

"This isn't over..." Deanna warned.

"Oh, but it is mother and so help me god, if you try to contact me again I will tell the authorities exactly how depraved you really are..." Will threatened.

"Whatever are you talking about?" Deanna replied feigning innocence.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about you shriveled up hag," he replied, clearly enjoying the upper hand; "And if you think I don't have proof, think again..." he added, the older woman paling slightly, "Now if you'll excuse us I have a party to get to..." he said, taking Carmilla's free hand and leading them away.
"You'll regret this!" Deanna called after them.

"Keep walking," Carmilla hissed; "We got what we needed..."

"Wait... all that was planned?" Laura asked quietly.

"Most of it," Will replied with a laugh; "I take it you're the 'training partner'?"

"And friend," Carmilla corrected and leaned over to kiss Laura's cheek; "You were awesome, thank you..."

"Anytime..." Laura replied, a little flustered.

They listened to Will complain about his flight on the way back to the car, Carmilla still holding onto Laura's hand; she was losing the battle against the panic attack she'd been trying to ignore most of the day and was starting to tremble slightly as they reached the car.

As Will threw his stuff in the Jeep and climbed inside Laura clued into Carmilla's current state and turned to face her; "Hey... you okay?" she asked, reaching up with her free hand to stroke Carmilla's cheek.

"No..." she replied shakily.

"Can I... would it help if I gave you a hug?" Laura asked shyly.

Carmilla didn't reply and pulled her into her arms; "I don't know what I'd do without you..." she whispered.

"Well you're not about to find out anytime soon," Laura replied earnestly; "You're stuck with me..."

"Oi! Lesbians!" Will called; "I'm thirsty..."

"You okay?" Laura asked again as she let her go and studied her eyes; "Want me to drive us back?"

"And you think your driving would help stem the panic I'm already feeling?" Carmilla teased her; she'd tried to teach Laura how to drive stick. Tried being the operative word.

"Oh c'mon, I wasn't that bad..."

"No you weren't," Carmilla replied kindly; "But I just want to get home and get very drunk..."

... It was a few hours later and Will's party was in full swing up on the gym's roof. Carmilla was attending to the barbeque when she heard the elevator open. She turned to see who was the late arrival and stopped in the middle of flipping a burger.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" she thought as she saw Will go over to greet the new arrival.

"Dark!" she called and then waited for him to join her; "Mind the grill... I have an annoying redhead to kick to the curb..."

"Carm..." he started and then thought better of it at her look of anger; "Fine..."

Carmilla stalked over to where Will was taking to a taller redhead; "Lawrence."
"Karnstein," the redhead replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"I invited her," offered Will; "Look, Carm, I know you had a falling out but..."

"No, Will, she was banned from the gym for a reason..." she informed him and looked back to the redhead; "You're not welcome here. Leave. Now."

"Carm..." Will whined.

"Fine..." Carmilla replied edgily; "It's your party but if she stays, I go..."

"Don't be like that, Carm..."

"Thank you," she said to Dark as he handed her a plate of food and a beer. "Later little brother..." she added as she went to make her way toward the elevator.

"Laura?" she heard the woman say in surprise; "What are you doing here?"

"Spending time with my girlfriend and welcoming her little brother home," Laura replied as she took Carmilla's free hand.

"Girlfriend?" the redhead asked in shock, which, ironically, mirrored the shock Carmilla was feeling. "Oh c'mon Laura, you can do so much better than..."

"Who?" Laura asked as he she squeezed Carmilla's hand; "You?" she asked; "Don't make me laugh..." she kissed Carmilla on the cheek; "C'mon sweetie, let's not ruin your brother's party..." she added sweetly as she tugged her towards the elevator.

Carmilla was too stunned to react as the two made their way back to her apartment in silence. "How do you know Danny?" Laura asked as she sat at the table with Carmilla.

"She started working out at my gym a few months ago... we started talking and one day she asked me out for a drink..." she shook her head again and laughed; "I had no idea she was into me until she tried to kiss me..."

"Why would that surprise you?" Carmilla asked sincerely; "You're beautiful..."

"Can I tell you a secret?" Carmilla nodded; "I'm only wearing this dress because none of my other nice clothes fit me right anymore..." she shook her head again; "Anyway, she didn't give it up... kept bothering me... I finally left the gym altogether cause I didn't want to deal with her anymore..." she paused as she accepted her wine from Carmilla and took a sip; "This is really nice,
"thanks..." she looked at the glass a moment; "Um... should I really be drinking though... you know, with training and everything?"

"Like I said, you've earned it..." Carmilla reiterated as she took her seat again; "Besides, fighters drink and it's not a problem as long as it's done in moderation..." she sighed before taking a sip of her own wine; "Besides... between dealing with Deanna and now Danny?"

"So what's your Danny story?"

"It's quite simple, really," she replied; "The gym has a rule... hurt someone on purpose and you're banned from the gym for three times as long as it takes the person you hurt to recuperate... cost someone a fight and you're banned for at least a year, if not for life..."

"She hurt you?"

"No... Brody..." Carmilla replied; "He had her in an armbar and she got frustrated when she couldn't get out of it..." she smiled; "Seen the movie 'Here comes the Boom'?" Laura nodded. "You know at the end, when Kevin James is stuck in an armbar and slams the guy?" Laura nodded again. "Yeah, well, that's what she did to Brody and it cost him a fight..." she sighed; "Sorry Pup..."

"What for?"

"If I hadn't kicked her out of my gym she never would have showed up at yours," she offered.

"And if she hadn't I'd have never met you," Laura replied.

Carmilla looked up from her plate and met her eyes again.

"And I'd call that a win," Laura added quietly.

Carmilla was about to lean in to kiss her for real when Dark came bursting in.

"Hey... oh, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt..."

"Excellent. Leave. Now. Lock the door..." Carmilla all but growled.

"Um... we need you..." Dark replied uncomfortably.

"Whatever for?" she drawled.

"Kirsch and Danny got into it and he's bleeding pretty good..." Carmilla got up from the table in a rush and went to help him; "He's in his apartment..."

"What did that stupid bitch do?" she asked as she went to grab her first aid kit.

"He went to ask her to leave, took her by the arm to force her into the elevator, she pushed him..." he shrugged; "It was mostly his own fault... he's kind of drunk..."

"Is she still here?" Laura asked.

"No... she left when I threatened to call the cops if she didn't..." Dark replied.

"Thanks..." Carmilla sighed and looked to Laura; "Stay here, this shouldn't take long..."

"I'm not going anywhere..." Laura replied with a smile.
"Good to hear..."

Chapter End Notes

So a couple of notes. I named Carmilla's mother Deanna for two reasons. First as a play off 'the dean' and second as a nod to one of my favorite shows, 'The Walking Dead.' The other thing that should be noted, as it will play an important factor in coming chapters, Danny is only about half a foot taller than Carmilla.
Drama and angst follows... beware and enjoy! Please forgive any mistakes I've made, I'll fix them in a few days.

It was almost two weeks later and every single day Carmilla regretted missing her chance to really kiss Laura. She even knew what she meant to say as she leaned in; “Maybe we should stop pretending then?” But no, that isn't what happened, instead Dark had interrupted with a minor emergency. He wasn't kidding when he said Brody was bleeding pretty good. In the end she got him cleaned up and bandaged enough to send the two of them to the hospital for stitches.

When she returned to her own apartment Laura was staring into her glass of wine and then gasped when she saw the amount of blood she was covered in. “Scalp cut...” she explained; “they don’t have to be bad to bleed like a bitch...”

“Is he okay?” Laura asked as she watched Carmilla take a long swallow of her wine.

“He’ll be fine, I sent him and Dark to the hospital in a cab...” she looked down at herself and sighed; “I need a shower... maybe we should call it a night?”

“I don’t mind waiting,” Laura replied.

Carmilla studied her a moment then looked to the wine bottle, judging by how much was left, Laura was on at least her third glass. She walked over and went to stroke her cheek but realized it was covered in blood.

“Give me five minutes to clean up and I’ll help you home?” she offered.

“I’m not that...” Laura answered defiantly as she tried to stand, wobbled, then promptly sat back down and giggled. “Okay... maybe I am...”

“Lightweight...” Carmilla teased.

“I am not one hundred and fifty five pounds, thank you very much!” Laura replied, any edge completely ruined by her giggles.

“You can crash on the couch if you prefer,” Carmilla offered, she wasn't sure she’d still be awake by the time she came back.

“No...” Laura replied with a smile and then sipped her wine; “I’d rather change before bed...”

Carmilla smiled and went to the fridge to grab them both glasses of water. She walked back over to Laura and exchanged her wine glass for the water only to see Laura pout for the first time.

“You’ll thank me in the morning,” Carmilla informed her. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Laura nodded over her glass of water.
Carmilla smiled and ran to her room, stripped off her bloody shirt and jeans, then went to quickly rinse off the rest of the blood in the shower. She towelled herself off on the way back to her bedroom, put on sweatpants and a t-shirt only to return to Laura and find her asleep with her head on the table.

“Lightweight...” she sighed and went to open her apartment door and then called the elevator. When she got back Laura was snoring softly. She gently picked her up and carried her home to her own bed. Laura never stirred once. Not even when Carmilla laid her on the bed.

She stood up and studied her a moment in the faint light coming from the hallway; she looked so young, so innocent... she shook her head and took off Laura's shoes for her. She considered changing her into something more comfortable but blushed at the thought. She went to the kitchen instead and grabbed her a glass of water and then returned to the bedroom and placed it, along with two ibuprofen that she grabbed from her own bathroom, on her bedside table.

“God, Hollis, you're going to be the death of me,” she said in a whisper and then leaned down and softly kissed her forehead; “Sweet dreams beautiful...”

Carmilla smiled at the memory and returned her attention to the task at hand; it had taken her almost two weeks but she had finally worked up the nerve to ask Laura to go to Buntzen Lake with her.

Thursday morning her trainers informed them they were being left to their own devices until Monday as one of the two remaining fighters was fighting Saturday night and the other was going with them in support. Shortly after they left Carmilla suggested they do a little sparing; the gym was nearly empty, being the middle of the day, and she was hoping the close quarters of the octagon would give her the chance to ask.

They'd been sparing when Carmilla trapped her up against the fence, their faces only inches apart. “God she smells good...” she thought as she caught the scent of her shampoo. She dropped down and wrapped her arms around Laura's waist, she planned to pick her up on her shoulder and then lay her gently down on the mat when Laura did the unthinkable and tickled her. Before she knew what happened Laura had climbed on her back and sunk in a rear naked choke. Before Carmilla could even tap everything went dark.

The next thing she knew she was staring up at the gym's bright over head lights, Laura in tears and Brody looking on anxiously.

“What the hell was that, Pup?” she asked, but ruined her attempt at angry and laughed; “Since when is tickling a part of the game plan?” she teased.

“You're not mad at me?” Laura asked as she knelt beside her.

“God no, Laura,” Carmilla said and took her hand; “Now I know I need to work on my choke defense...” she laughed; “You have a nasty habit of catching me off guard...”

“You're were going to put me over your shoulder!” Laura accused.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I picked you up...” Carmilla teased.

“Um, Carm...” Brody interrupted; “You going to be okay?” She nodded. “Okay... maybe take the rest of the day off?”

“Sure...” she looked to Laura; “Hot tub?”
“Meet you there...”

It had taken her another hour to ask Laura to the lake. But she had a plan, on the way up she was going to make it clear that it was just the two of them; no more playacting in case Deanna might find out, and no training partner dynamic, just two girls out for a hike in a beautiful place.

She was nervous and noticed her hands were shaking slightly as she packed her bag. Their plan at the airport had gone off better than expected: for the first time since she and Will had fled their home, they had finally cast doubt on Deanna’s character. For more than the last three years Deanna had haunted their every move, any indiscretion soon found it’s way into the papers. It wasn’t long before Carmilla no longer felt comfortable in public. While the lies were mere exaggerations of the truth, she couldn’t go anywhere without snide comments or remarks.

She sighed deeply and sat at the table, her head in her hands; she was scared. Deanna had been notoriously quiet in the last two weeks and Carmilla was worried she was busy working out Laura’s identity. Once she'd done that?

“I need to tell her...” she said and sighed deeply. For better or worse she’d know where she stood with Laura. She wasn't sure which outcome scared her more. Ever since the airport Laura would offer to go on errands with her, the minute they were in public she'd take her hand and become affectionate. The first time it happened she’d played along but questioned her the moment she had the chance. Laura had, quite calmly, explained that they needed to keep up the charade.

It wasn't long before Carmilla started creating errands just to spend time alone with Laura, even it was only an act. “But...” she thought; “it's not only when we're in public...” she sighed again; “Even if Laura does feel the same, will she run away once she knows some of the truth?”

She was drawn from her musings by a knock at the door followed by Laura carrying two bowls of cereal. “Kirsch is making our protein shakes and I've already taken the roof off the Jeep... ready to go?” she asked as she handed her a bowl.

“We're in no rush,” Carmilla managed to say; “Sit... eat...” she said and smiled as Laura sat beside her. “You're awfully... perky... this morning...”

“I was looking at pictures of the lake last night,” Laura admitted; “It's looks really beautiful and... I'm, um...” she shrugged; “looking forward to a day off...”

“One of the best things about this city is that you don't have to go very far to leave it all behind and forget it exists for awhile,” Carmilla replied and smiled.

“Is that why you go there?”

“It's a special place for me and Will,” Carmilla admitted; “My Dad used to take us up there fishing whenever he could...” she sighed; “After he died Deanna forbade it, of course, and then Bob wouldn't let me go up alone until I took, and passed with flying colors, thank you very much, a level three first aid course... and always promised to carry a fully charged phone and be back by a certain time,” she smiled; “I like to go up when it's quiet but if I got hurt it could be hours, or longer, before someone found me...” she chuckled; “My first hike alone I ended up putting my shiny new license to use...” she paused for effect; “I found a hurt hiker and helped them out...”

“You're amazing, you know that?” Laura said, blushing slightly. “It's not that you've done these things... or that I see you do really nice things for random strangers every day...” she shook her head; “But that it's no big deal to you...”
“Because it's not,” Carmilla replied seriously. “It's all about Karma... when I help someone it's because, I hope, if I ever find myself in a similar situation, that someone would do the same for me...” she smiled and reached for Laura's hand; “I firmly believe what goes around comes around and that's why I treat others the way I want to be treated...”

They finished their breakfast in silence and then wandered down to the Jeep. Carmilla had to check in with Brody on the way by and let him know they'd be back in time for dinner. They'd just pulled onto the highway when their hands collided on the way to the radio. The song; “Somebody That I Used to Know,” had started playing and it still struck a nerve.

“Sorry...” Laura stammered; “I want to talk and it's hard enough with the roof off...”

“No, that's okay,” Carmilla replied; “I was just going to change the channel...” She chanced a glance at Laura; “What's up?”

“Is everything okay?” Laura asked.

“Could you be a little more specific?” Carmilla asked, there were a great many things not okay in her life and she wasn't sure where to start.

“I don't know...” Laura shrugged; “You've seemed... I don't know... off lately...” Carmilla felt Laura's hand on her wrist; “Does it have something to do with that song?”

Of the many things on her mind, strangely enough, El hadn't been one of them. Yes, she was still disappointed that her former friend hadn't contacted her, but now when she noticed there was no email, it stung less.

“It doesn't matter anymore,” Carmilla replied finally.

“Clearly it does if you were going to change the channel,” Laura replied and took her hand away; “But if you don't want to talk about it...”

“Her name was El...” Carmilla started; No, she didn't really want to talk about it but if it would put off the inevitable 'Deanna' discussion a little longer, she would. “We met online, she's in the States...” she sighed; “I met her just before Bob died and after?” She smiled; “Some days she was the only reason I smiled at all... we got to know each other, well, as well as you can get to know someone online...” she shrugged; “She flirted with me, sent me pictures... somewhere along the way it started to mean more to me...” She stared at her hands on the steering wheel a moment and then continued; “Then one day, out of the blue... well, to me anyway... she took offense to something I said and made it clear she didn't return my feelings and never would...” She looked to Laura briefly and then returned her attention to the road. “It hit me a lot harder than I thought it would... broke my heart a little, to tell you the truth...” she shook her head; “Somehow we managed to stay friends but it bugged me... she never really told me why...” She had to speed up to pass a car and then continued; “And then, about a month ago, she posted something online and it hit a nerve...” she chuckled slightly; “I was actually working up the nerve to tell her I was going to stop following her posts until it stopped bugging me but the conversation got away from me and the next thing I knew she insulted me and then blocked me...” she looked to Laura; “and I haven't heard from her since...” she looked back the road; “Does it still hurt?” She shrugged; “A little... but more because I realize now how little I meant to her if she could so easily cut me out of her life... but I get it... the desire to remove a negative influence in your life... but, even if I didn't return
someone's feelings, I could never hurt someone who I know has feelings for me...”

“Do you still have feelings for her?” Laura asked, her tone unreadable.

“No,” Carmilla stated and realized it was true.

“Thanks for trusting me,” Laura said as she took her hand.

“Always have,” Carmilla replied as she turned her hand and laced their fingers.

“Of course...” Laura replied testily and pulled her hand away; “Your lawyer's background check...” she added as she put both feet on the dash and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Laura?” Carmilla said, the hurt was clear in Laura's tone and posture. She looked around frantically and then pulled the car over onto the curb. “Hey...” she said calmly as she reached for Laura's arm; “I never read it, remember?” Laura nodded. “But I didn't need it anyway...” Carmilla smiled as Laura relaxed marginally. “I knew I could trust you the minute you admitted to knowing who I was...”

“I don't...”

“Deanna...” Carmilla replied with a sigh, they'd reached what she didn't want to talk about a lot faster than she'd expected. “We okay?” she asked. Laura smiled a little and nodded; “Cause I should get back on the highway...” Laura nodded again.

Carmilla turned her attention on the road behind them and then pulled back into traffic. “Anyway, Deanna, once she figured out I was into girls... she started setting me up... to get information or to break my heart...” she shook her head; “I honestly think she was trying to get me to off myself...”

“That's horrible...”

“That's not even the worst of it...” she admitted with a heavy sigh; “but the point I was making is that each and every one of them pretended to have no clue who I was...” she reached over and took Laura's hand; “You've been honest with me from day one...” she looked over to her; “After everything Deanna put me through...”

“And this internet chick...” Laura interjected.

“Yeah...” she shook her head, damn if the girl wasn't perceptive; “Your honesty means a lot to me...”

“So is this internet chick the reason you've been acting weird?” Laura asked as she laced their fingers.

“No...” Carmilla laughed, she hadn't really thought about El since she'd kissed Laura at the airport, too preoccupied both with the kiss itself and Deanna's inevitable retaliation over their stunt. “I'm worried about you Laura...” she admitted reluctantly.

“Me?” Laura asked in surprise.

“As much as I loved the name you choose to call yourself, she had to know it was a fake,” Carmilla replied. “It took my lawyer, by legal means mind you, to have a full background check on you done in days...” she let Laura's hand go as she pulled off the highway; “Her means are less reputable but none the less effective...” she sighed; “She's gotten to people I'm close to before and...”
“You’d think I’d betray you to anyone? Let alone her?” Laura asked defensively.

“No... I know you wouldn't,” Carmilla replied; “As much as I loved what you did at the airport you painted a very big target on yourself and the last two weeks?”

“It was too much wasn't it?” Laura asked, her voice barely loud enough to be heard over the wind.

“No... you've been amazing but...” she looked to her; “I've never been seen with the same girl twice... the longer we're together the more of a threat you become to her...” Laura met her eyes but she had to look back to the road; “She's afraid I'll tell you what she did... she's even more scared that you'll believe me...”

“So what I said at the airport?”

“Was more dead on than you can imagine,” Carmilla replied. “We planned some of that... Will and I... had people listening and an officer waiting to escort her away...”

“You knew the cop?” Laura asked in surprise.

“Not him personally, but he was sent by someone I do,” Carmilla answered; “He believes me but she's got too much pull... people are too afraid of her... what we did at the airport?” She looked to her; “That was just the start... something to put a little doubt in people's mind...”

“Wait!” Laura exclaimed; “That's why you want to get on the Ultimate Fighter!” Laura laughed; “You're going to use the fighter confessional to out what she did...”

“Well done Lauronica Mars...” Carmilla teased, she was actually impressed with Laura's deductive reasoning. “I'm hoping, once I expose her on national TV, people will have to listen... I mean, considering what I'll be saying...” she sighed, this was part of the story she really didn't want to get into today; “why would I lie?”

“But Will said he had proof...”

“We both do,” Carmilla replied; “but it's about so much more than what she did to us...” she trailed off as she pulled into the parking lot of the lake and put the car in park; “I'm trying to break her like she tried to break me...” she turned to Laura; “I'm trying to trick her into confessing she murdered both my parents...”

“You really think...”

“I do, but I have no proof,” she shrugged; “I was three when my Mom died and turned eleven just after my dad died...” she looked down at her hands as Laura reached for them; “But I've been doing research since we got out and... it adds up...” she looked up to meet Laura's eyes; “I'm scared for you Laura... this...” she took a deep breath; “I'm about to throw a whole lot of shit at very big Deanna-sized fan...”

“And you're worried I'm going to get hit by it?” Laura asked with a smirk.

“It's not funny...”

“No, but the image was,” Laura replied gently; “Carm?” She said softly, Carmilla trying to hide how hearing Laura call her my her nickname for the first time made her feel as she met her eyes; “I meant what I said... I'm not going anywhere, okay?”

“That might not be a bad idea, actually...” Carmilla said quietly and looked down again; “She can't
I can take of myself,” Laura assured her, Carmilla looked up again the uncertainty, she was sure, had to be clear on her face; “She can't go near the gym, right?” Carmilla nodded; “So when you get on the show I'll just stay there as much as I can and if she starts harassing me at school we'll just have your fancy dancy lawyer whip us up a restraining order to keep her away from me too…”

“Tenacious aren't you?” Carmilla teased.

“I fight for the things I care about,” Laura said and blushed; “You... all of you really... you've made me feel at home...” she smiled; “Welcomed... like part of the family...” she looked down; “I'm an only child and...” she sighed; “I lost my Mom when I was young so it was just me and Dad...” she wiped away a tear as she met Carmilla's eyes again; “I didn't know I was missing feeling a part of a family until I felt it again...” She took a deep breath; “I know Deanna is scary... but I refuse to let her frighten me away from you...”

“It's going to get a lot worse...” she warned; “Are you sure you're up for that?”

“You'll be back by the time it airs,” Laura reminded her; “If I can't take care of myself you'll do it for me...” she smiled shyly; “I mean, you've been taking care of me since the day we met...” she shook her head; “I know it's just because you want me to be the best training partner possible but...” she sighed; “I still appreciate it...”

Carmilla didn't know what to say; Laura had given her the perfect opening to tell her how she felt but her courage failed her... and so she changed the topic.

“I don't want to talk about Deanna any more today, okay?” Laura nodded. “But I will tell you before I leave...” she searched her eyes a moment; “If you're going to be pulled into this fight you deserve to know the truth first...”

“You don't have to tell me...”

“No, I want to...” Carmilla replied; “But...” she smiled; “I want to forget about it for the day...” she leaned her head back and inhaled deeply of the fresh mountain air; “Let's just enjoy this beautiful place together and forget the darkness for a bit...” she met her eyes again; “Okay?” Laura nodded. She pulled her hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles. “Okay...” she affirmed and nodded.

Before she gave into the urge to kiss her she let her hand go and turned to get out of the Jeep, but she didn't miss Laura's heartfelt sigh; Maybe... maybe it was more than a act?

They put their backpacks on and secured the Jeep before making for the trail that would lead them to the north beach. A few minutes into their walk Laura stopped to take a camera from her bag and started taking pictures as they continued on their way.

They reached the crest of a hill when Laura pulled her to a stop.

“I want to take your picture... if that's okay?” she said tentatively.

“I don't know why you'd want to...” Carmilla countered.

“Maybe...” Laura replied slowly; “because even this beautiful place pales in comparison to you?” she finished quietly as she stepped closer; “I always thought you were beautiful...” she admitted as she looked at Carmilla's lips and then met her eyes again; “you know... from the newspaper, but...” she paused as Carmilla reached up and put a strand of hair behind her ear; “getting to know you?” She shook her head and looked down; “You take my breath away sometimes and you don't even
know it..."

Carmilla was stunned silent; if that wasn't Laura admitting her feelings she didn't know what was. She slowly moved her hand from Laura's ear to her chin and went to tilt her face up when they were both distracted by a loud crashing to their left followed by a medium sized black dog barreling towards and then past them. They watched it a moment before hearing, again from their left, a desperate cry of; “Chip! Get back here you stupid mutt!”

“Stay here...” Carmilla said as she shrugged off her bag and knelt beside it on the ground. She found the length of rope she was looking for and stood again; “I'll go after the dog, you wait for the owner...” she leaned forward and kissed her cheek; “I'll be right back...” she said and took off down the hill at full speed.

“Be careful!” she heard Laura yell after her. She'd have laughed if she weren't concentrating so hard on what she was doing; she'd run this trail hundreds of times, she knew she'd be okay.

As soon as she reached level ground again she sped up... she loved running this trail. The exhilaration of feeling like you were going so much faster than you really were as the trees sped past... it was the only high she allowed herself these days and she was enjoying every minute of it.

About ten minutes later she finally caught up to the black dog as it had stopped to bark at something in a tree. “Come here Chip...” she called to get his attention but he was still focused on the tree. She unraveled the rope and crept toward him carefully, the dog only noticing her as she grabbed his collar. She held her breath a moment and hoped he was friendly when he knocked over and started licking her face. “Get off me you stupid mutt...” she laughed as she wrestled him off and then tied the rope around his neck. “C'mon, let's get you back to your idiot owner...”

As much as she'd enjoyed her run the fact remained that the stupid dog had ruined a perfect moment and she was annoyed as all hell. She started walking faster as she hoped the moment hadn't passed completely when she heard an almighty crash and a loud yelp of pure pain. She wrapped the makeshift leash around her hand and started running full out back along the path.

“Fuck...” she thought as she found the source of the yell; Laura was crumpled near the bottom of the hill and seemed to be cradling her left arm. “Fuck...” she muttered again when she saw the blood. “What did you do?” she said as she ran over and knelt beside her.

“I fell...”

“I see that...” Carmilla replied tersely and looked up the hill; “Well don't just stand there!” she called to the top of the hill when Chip's owner stood paralyzed. “Come get your fucking dog and bring me my bag!”

“Carm... relax, I'm okay...” Laura assured her; “It's not her...”

“You're not okay,” Carmilla replied and looked back to her, what she saw worried her; Laura was pale, and when she held the back of her hand to her forehead she found it cool and clammy... Laura was in bad shape and already showing signs of going into shock. “Listen...” she said as she cupped her cheek; “This is bad... and I need you to listen to me and do as I ask... okay?” Laura nodded uncertainly. “You'll be okay but we have to get you to a hospital as fast as we can...”

“It's just a broken...”

“No, it's not...” Carmilla informed her, trying to keep her own rising panic from surfacing as she looked back at her arm; already the blood was soaking Laura's shorts so, without thinking, she
reached for Laura's arm and cut off the blood flow to the rest of it by applying pressure to the large artery in her bicep.

“Ow...” Laura complained and tried to jerk her arm away.

“I know it hurts but...” she looked up to track the woman's progress; “Would you hurry the fuck up!!?” She yelled.

“Carm!” Laura hissed; “Calm down, I'm fine...”

“No...” Carmilla spat back; “You're not fine!” She took a deep breath to marshal her anger, she need to stay focused; “You've got a compound fracture... the bone is sticking out of your arm,” she explained at Laura's confusion; “Which already puts you at a huge risk of infection but...”

“But?” Laura asked fearfully.

“You've nicked an artery and you're already going into shock...” she watched as Laura paled visibly; “Yeah... it's bad baby, and that chick is going way too...” she looked up at the sound of heavy breathing coming close.

“Sorry...” she said as she tried to catch her breath; “I figured... I was... of no use... if I got hurt too...”

“Grab the first aid kit out of my bag and then come here and take over this pressure point for me,” Carmilla ordered.

“Whatever you need...” the woman muttered as she opened Carmilla's bag, located the kit and handed it to her; “The stupid dog isn't even mine... you saved my ass dude...”

“And if it wasn't for your stupidity my girlfriend wouldn't have gotten hurt in the first place...” she hissed angrily; “'C'mon... put your fingers over mine and then press down hard, like I am...” she nodded as the woman did as she was told; “Like a vice... right...” she looked back to Laura's wound and found the blood flood had reduced significantly.

From there on she went into first aid mode; “Cover the wound...” she thought and took out bandages and saline. She opened the saline and dumped the whole bottle over Laura's arm; she knew she couldn't clean it properly but she had to get the gross contaminants out at least. She grabbed a piece of sterile gauze and dried her arm the best she could before wrapping it.

“You'll be okay but we need to get you to the hospital,” Carmilla informed her as she scanned the ground for something to brace her arm. She spotted a long flat stick and reached for it before continuing; “Are you hurt anywhere else?” she asked.

“I don't think so...” Laura replied weakly causing Carmilla to look at her in fear.

“Think you can walk?” she asked gently.

“I'll try...” Laura offered.

“I can help...” Chip's owner offered.

“No offense but you'll only slow us down,” Carmilla replied evenly, her anger at the woman hadn't dissipated. She took her phone from her pocket and called 911. She handed it to Laura to hold for her and hit the speaker button as she waited for an operator to answer.
“Police, fire or ambulance?” an efficient voice asked.

“Ambulance for Port Moody, Buntzen Lake,” Carmilla replied as she started splinting Laura's arm.

“I'll put you through, please hold...”

“Like I have a choice...” Carmilla muttered and checked Laura to see how she was doing; “Stay with me, Laura... I need you awake...”

“What's your emergency?” a voice asked.

“I'm a level three OFA so please just listen a moment,” Carmilla informed them; “My girlfriend has a compound fracture of her left arm... it's bleeding badly but I've got it controlled with a pressure point and have just finished bandaging and stabilizing it...” she studied Laura again; “She's conscious but fading fast and showing signs of shock...” she looked up the path to judge how far along they were; “We're about fifteen minutes from the trail's entrance...”

“Understood,” the efficient voice answered; “We have two rigs on their way to you now... start making your way out and they'll probably get there around the same time...”

“Thank god...” Carmilla muttered.

“What's her vitals?”

“I haven't checked them yet,” Carmilla muttered and reached for the pulse in Laura's neck as it was closer. She stared into her eyes a moment and then focused on her watch; “Pulse is seventy, strong and regular...” She trailed off and counted her breathing; “Breathing is twenty and easy.” She reached up and put the back of her hand to Laura's forehead again; “And definitely showing signs of shock...” she added, the worry clear in her tone as she reached into her bag for a sweat shirt.

“Is she hurt anywhere else?”

“Not that I can see and not that she's noticed,” Carmilla replied as she helped Laura into the hoodie. She shook her head... what to do about the pressure point? “I'm going to have to tourniquet the arm,” she informed both Laura and the operator. “This is going to be uncomfortable but necessary, okay?” Laura nodded.

She reached back into her kit and grabbed a rubber hose, wrapped it just below the woman's fingers and tied it tightly. “I'm going to hang up now... I want to save my battery...”

“Okay... call back if she gets worse... good luck,” the operator replied and hung up.

“Are you sure I can't help?” the stranger asked.

“Carry our bags back,” Carmilla replied; “We'll probably still be there by the time you catch up...”

“I'm sorry...” she muttered as she reached for Chip's collar and leashed him; “I stopped to...”

“Save it...” Carmilla replied quietly as she put Laura into a sling and then used a second triangle bandage to secure her arm to her body. “But thanks for the help...” she added more warmly.

“Least I could do...” she replied; “You're a lucky girl, Laura, you're girlfriend seems to know what she's doing...”

“She does and I am,” Laura replied softly.
Carmilla looked up and met her eyes; she was again rendered speechless by the look Laura was giving her and by how pale she'd become.

“We need to get moving...” she said quietly as she closed and then attached the first aid kit to her belt. “Help me get her standing...” Carmilla asked as she zipped up the hoodie and used the empty sleeve to further stabilize her arm. She carefully reached under her hurt arm while the other woman positioned herself on her other side; “Slow and steady... on three...” the other woman nodded and waited for Carmilla to count them off; “You ready?” she asked Laura and received her nod. “One, two...” and they both lifted her to her feet on three, Laura reached for Carmilla's shoulder the moment she was standing.

“Hey... you okay?” Carmilla asked as she wrapped her arm around Laura's waist.

“Dizzy...” Laura muttered.

“Okay... take a minute...” Carmilla assured her as Laura put her good arm around her shoulders. “I'm sorry... what's your name?” she asked Chip's owner.

“Jenna...” she replied; “And you're Carmilla...”
Carmilla nodded and looked to Laura.

“You ready to try and get up this hill?” she asked.
Laura looked up the hill and then over to her.

“I am if you help me,” she replied.

“Okay... slow and steady then...” Carmilla replied and started them up the hill.

“Carm?” Laura said about halfway up; “I'm sorry...”

“Safe your strength baby, you've nothing to be sorry for...” she replied and then rushed to add to cover the use of the endearment; “If anything it's my fault you got hurt...”

“How do you figure that?” Laura asked, a small laugh under her breath.

“You wouldn't have tried to run down that hill if you hadn't see me do it...” she admitted ruefully.

“You did make it look easy,” Laura joked.

“Because I've run this trail hundreds of times,” Carmilla replied seriously; “I don't do anything without knowing the risks... I can't afford getting hurt...”

“And that's why I'm sorry...” Laura interrupted, the regret and sadness almost breaking Carmilla's heart; “I won't be able to keep training with you and I guess all hope of getting on the Ultimate Fighter is lost...”

“What are you talking about?” Carmilla asked as the reached the top of the hill and stopped to catch their breath; “This...” she pointed to Laura's arm; “it won't stop me...”

“I wasn't talking about you...” Laura admitted and look down in embarrassment; “I, uh... applied too...”

“What?”
“I guess my video was pretty convincing ’cause they agreed to let me try out...” Laura laughed and urged them forward to cover her discomfort.

“Why would you do that?” Carmilla asked.

“I started thinking about you being gone and...” she trailed off and went limp at her side.

“Laura?” Carmilla said as she lowered her to the ground; “Fuck! Laura!” she yelled; “Wake up, baby...” she urged but it was no use, Laura was out, the climb up the hill must have sapped the last of her strength. “Fuck...” Carmilla muttered as tears stained her face and she reached for her phone. She dialed 911 again and placed the phone under her bra strap so she could talk to the operator as she lifted Laura up and held her close to her chest.

“911, police...”

“Ambulance, Port Moody...” Carmilla interrupted and picked up her pace. Laura wasn't very heavy and they weren't all that far from the entrance.

“Miss Karnstein... what's going on?” a worried voice asked.

“She's passed out and I can't wake her,” she replied between breaths; “I'm carrying her out but I'm borderline hypoglycemic... I can already feel myself crashing...”

“Understood... stay on the line until you get out okay? I'll update the Emt's...” the line went quiet for a few minutes; “They're just a few minutes out... are you okay?”

“Almost there...” Carmilla managed to answer; it had been a few months she'd run at the lake and the slight change in elevation was affecting her breathing.

As she all but stumbled into the sunlight she felt relief wash over her as she heard the sirens off in the distance. She lowered Laura to the ground as carefully as she could and noticed immediately that her sweatshirt was now stained with blood.

“Fuck...” she muttered.

“What's wrong?” the operator asked, startling her slightly as she'd forgotten she was there.

“She started bleeding again,” Carmilla replied as, with her hands shaking badly from the drop in her blood sugar, unzipped the hoodie and found the rubber tube had come undone. With the little strength she had left she reapplied the pressure point as she felt new tears running down her face.

“What's her vitals?”

She reached her free hand to Laura's throat and checked her pulse; “Seventy but weak...” she replied, she knew what the operator was doing, she was trying to keep her focused so she wouldn't panic, or worse, pass out; “Breathing is... sixteen but regular...” she pressed harder on the pressure point until Laura tried to ineffectively bat her hand away; “Reacts to pain but didn't wake...”

“Okay... just hold on, honey, they're almost there...”

“I can hear them...” Carmilla replied in relief as she heard them get closer; “I'm going to hang up again, I have calls to make...”

“Miss Karnstein?” the operator interrupted; “You did good kid... you'll both be okay...” she added and hung up.
Carmilla shook her head and then placed it on Laura's chest, her ear to her heart to confirm it was still beating. “I'm not okay...” she thought; “I failed...” she turned her other ear to her chest so she could look up at her face; “I promised to keep you safe...” she choked out.

“Not your fault...” Laura said, her voice barely a whisper, and her eyes still closed.

“Save your strength...” Carmilla said as she tried to sit up but felt Laura's good hand tangle in her hair and hold her close.

“Stay...” Laura whispered; “Feels good... having you here...”

Carmilla reached for her hand and slipped it away, the sirens had gotten their loudest yet and then stopped; they were finally here. She sat up and turned to the heavy breathing that was Jenna along with Chip and their bags.

“Get me the juice and chocolate bar out of my bag?” she asked her.

Jenna was still trying to catch her breath but nodded and did as she was asked.

“You okay?” Laura asked softly.

“No worse than you,” Carmilla teased as she watched Jenna open the juice before handing it to her. She looked to the parking lot to see four Emt's and two stretcher's coming their way. She gulped down the juice and tore into the chocolate bar as they approached, her head already starting to clear from the sudden rush of sugar to her system.

“We'll take it from here, Miss Karnstein...” one of them said as he knelt beside her and placed a gloved hand over her own on Laura's bicep. “You've done amazing but you need to sit back and let us do our job...” he said soothingly and nodded to the forgotten chocolate in her hand; “Finish that and we have a bag of sugar water ready for you if you need it...” he started to gently pry her fingers loose; “Go on...” he urged her; “We've got her...”

She felt a pair of hands on her shoulders and looked up to one of the other Emt's; “C'mon...” he said as he put a hand under her armpit to help her up; “She'll be fine but we need to make sure you are too...”

“I'm...” she said as she let Laura's arm go and went to stand, faltering as a wave of nausea washed over her.

“Not fine...” he finished, led her a few feet away, and helped her sit; “You there... grab the oxygen tank from the stretcher...” Jenna nodded and did as she was asked. He slipped the bag from his shoulder and got Carmilla's attention as he checked her pulse; “You with me?”

“Is she going to be okay?” she asked.

“Thanks to you?” he countered; “Probably...”

“Good...” she answered before everything went black.

Carmilla woke several hours later to the glare of hospital lights and every bone and muscle in her
“Whoa there, hero... slow down...” Dark said calmly as he went to stand next to her.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You passed out,” he replied as he helped her sit up.

“I know that... how's Laura?” she asked as she pushed his hands away impatiently.

“Still in surgery...” he replied and retreated to grab a bag; “I brought you a change of clothes...”

“How did you even know what happened?” she asked.

“The Emt who was taking care of you noticed your phone and called the second most dialed number,” he replied.

“You?”

“Me,” he replied with a nod; “I called Doctor Coughlin and he met us here...” he looked to the IV bag that was attached to her arm; “I think that's just sugar water...”

“They must have given me something at the lake...” she sighed; “Get the nurse... but give me my phone first...” she had to call her lawyer, if there was any chance she was given something considered banned by the fighting commission she needed to get ahead of it before it became a problem. “Why can't anything ever be easy?” she thought as she listened to the phone ring. “Frank?”

“Carmilla relax...” he rushed to answer; “I've already talked to the Emt's and gotten a written statement that they gave it to you without your knowledge but you should be okay either way...” he paused at Carmilla's audible sigh of relief; “If I'm not mistaken you have pure saline attached to your arm to help flush some of it out so the effects should be gone soon as well...”

“Thanks Frank...”

“Don't thank me, thank Dark... he called me in a panic...” Frank interrupted; “Just take care of yourself, kiddo... you've got a big fight coming up...” he reminded her before hanging up.

She looked down at her phone and then at her hands; she was still covered in Laura's blood. She sniffed and wiped her nose; her tears had started again. She looked up at the opening of the doors and quickly wiped the tears away as Dark had returned with a nurse.

“Can you disconnect this so I can get changed?” she asked and looked back at her hands; “And maybe wash up a little?”

“Sure thing...” the nurse replied; “And cheer up...” Carmilla looked up; “Your girlfriend's out of surgery and she's going to be just fine...” she sighed in relief, the tears flowing again.

“Doc Coughlin is washing up and he'll be in to talk to you as soon as he's cleaned up,” Dark offered as he watched the nurse disconnect the IV; “You should have enough time to clean up and change...” he added as he rubbed her back.

“Thanks for calling him and Frank,” Carmilla replied.

“I knew you'd want the best for your girl,” he teased.
“She's not...”

“She's as good as,” he countered. “Did she tell you about her plan for the Ultimate Fighter?” he asked, smiling at her look of surprise; “She wanted to do it because she was afraid you'd meet someone else while you were there...” he could she still wasn't getting it; “She's already afraid of losing you...” he supplied.

“Yeah?” she asked weakly, trying to believe what he said was true.

“Yes... now hurry up and get changed so you can be there when she wakes up,” he urged.

She nodded and pulled him into a hug; “Thanks Dark...” She let me him go and slid off the bed; “Where's my Jeep?”

“Oh, of course,” he joked; “Your second lady love...” he smiled as she slapped his arm weakly; “Will and Kirsch drove up to the lake to get it...” she groaned; “Oh c'mon, Will's gotten pretty good at driving standard...”

“He's just hoping for a sports car for his birthday,” she replied with a laugh as she made her way to the bathroom.

“Well you are right... an automatic sports car is just a crime,” he teased as she closed the door behind her.

She turned the water on full and then chanced a look at her face in the mirror; she was a mess. Not only was her face tear stained and her eyes puffy but she also still had traces of Laura's blood on it. She shook her head and ran her hands under the water, noticing for the first time that the nurse had removed the IV completely. She undid the hospital gown, took it off and then soaked it in the water to wash her face and her chest... she was covered in blood and would have to take a shower when she got home.

She took a handful of paper towels and dried off as best she could before slipping into the sweats Dark had brought her. She looked back to the mirror again and ran her hands through her hair, her arms protesting the motion entirely.

“Fuck...” she thought, she hurt everywhere.

She shook her head again and made her way back to a joking Dark and Doctor Coughlin.

“How you feeling kiddo?” he asked affectionately.

“How's Laura?” she interrupted.

“She lost a lot of blood but she would have lost a lot more if you hadn't done everything right...” he took her hand and squeezed; “There's still a risk of infection but I'm confident, thanks to you, that the chances are minimal...” he assured her and smiled again as Carmilla relaxed; “We repaired the artery and fixed her bone with a metal plate...”

“When can I take her home?” she interrupted.
“We'll take some blood tests when she wakes up and if they look good you can take her home tonight, okay?” he offered.

“Thanks Doc, for coming, for taking care of her...” she said as she hugged the surprised man.

“Dark told me how much she means to you,” he replied as he gently pushed her away; “I might have put her back together, but you not only potentially saved her a lot of recovery time, you might have saved her life...” he trailed off as her phone rang.

Carmilla looked at it and frowned; why was her manager calling her?

“I'm sorry... I have to take this...” she explained and hugged the doctor again briefly; “Thanks again, Doc...”

“I'll be in to check in on her in a bit,” he said as he stood, Carmilla's phone going silent in her hand; “She'll be awake soon...” Carmilla nodded and looked to Dark; “I need a smoke... come outside with me?”

He nodded and led her outside.

“You sure you want to do this so close to fight time?” he asked as they crossed the street and offered her a cigarette.

“By the time I can move normally again it won't matter,” she replied as she took it from him gratefully.

“You're that sore?” he teased.

“I carried her for more than ten minutes at a fast jog,” she informed him tersely; “Yeah, I'm that fucking sore...” she added before lighting her smoke and inhaling deeply; “My nerves are fried and...” she frowned as her phone rang again; “And now Perry is calling me...” she answered the call; “What?” she asked.

“Carm... I've got some bad news...”

“How can they already know?” Carmilla asked angrily.

“Know what, darling?” Perry asked.

“Never mind, what's the bad news?” she asked.

“Your opponent is pulling out...”

“What! How come?”

“Injury...” Perry hesitated; “They have a replacement, but you're not going to like it...”

“Who?” she asked.

“Danny Lawrence,” Perry replied calmly.

“Fuck...”

“Precisely,” Perry replied; “Do you want the fight?” she asked, continuing when Carmilla didn't reply; “I've heard from Invicta's president... she's coming to the fight and there's a chance she needs a replacement for their next card... do well and it's yours...”
“You're joking,” Carmilla gasped.

“It gets better,” Perry said; “Win or lose; that fight gets you on the Ultimate Fighter...”

“I'm in...” Carmilla interrupted.

“Are you sure? The Invicta fight is at a hundred and fifteen... that's at least twenty pounds you'll have to drop in two weeks...” Perry reminded her.

“Less than,” Carmilla replied; “I'm only one twenty now...”

“You need to bulk up to fight Lawrence...”

“I will,” she sighed; “Thanks Perry...”

“I'll send the new contract over in the morning,” Perry replied and hung up.

“Fuck...” she sighed and looked to Dark; “I knew fighting up a division was going to bite me in the ass...” she took a long drag from her cigarette, coughed and threw it away; “I'm fighting Danny in two weeks...”

“Shit Carm... she's huge...” he stammered.

“Yeah, but she has to cut weight for one twenty five and I don't...”

“She's still huge...”

“Yes, but slow...” she shook her head; “I'll just have to finish her fast...” she said with a shrug to his disbelief; “Invicta's president will be there and if I get away without injury I might get to fight on their next card...” she informed him to his ever growing grin; “Do well there and phase two of our plan is a go...”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously...” she trailed off as he gave her a bear hug; “Ouch... get off...” she said as she pushed him away; “Let's go see if Laura's awake...”

“Have you told her yet?” he asked carefully.

“Told her what?” she asked as they crossed the road back to the hospital.

“That you're in love with her?” he asked.

“I...” she shook her head, she was going to deny it but he was right; she wasn't just in love with the younger woman, she was head over heals. “I tried...” she admitted with a sigh; “But we got interrupted...”

“You chickened out you mean...” he teased.

“The first time, yes, but the second time I ended up running after a dog...” she replied to his laughter; “I know... I'm an idiot...” she admitted, the guilt clear in her tone.

“Hey...” Dark cooed; “It was an accident...”

“You don't even know what happened...” she countered and wiped away new tears, the image of Laura laying hurt at the bottom of the hill still fresh in her mind.
“Doesn’t matter...” she looked up and met his eyes; “What matters is you’re both okay...” she nodded and wrapped her arms around him. “Now, girl the help up Karnstein and go in there and make it official...” he pushed her away and tilted her face up; “She loves you too...” he told her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...” he smiled and kissed her forehead; “Who wouldn’t?”

“Lots of people...” she replied with a watery laugh.

“Not her and not anyone I know,” he countered adamantly; “You deserve this, Carm... time you start believing that you’re worthy of it...”

“I...”

“Go on,” he urged as he pushed the door open for her.

She stopped a few feet inside the door; Laura was awake and having blood taken from her uninjured arm.

“Hey...” she said softly to get her attention.

“Hey...” Laura replied and smiled.

“Can you hold this for her?” the lab technician asked. Carmilla nodded and went to hold the gauze on Laura's right arm. “Thanks... the doctor will be in a few minutes...”

“Thanks...” Carmilla and Laura replied together.

They watched him leave and returned their attention to each other.

“You okay?” Laura asked.

“Me?” Carmilla laughed as she took Laura's hand with her free hand; “Have you seen you?”

“I’m not the one with the fight of a lifetime in a couple of weeks,” Laura replied seriously; “I’d never forgive myself if...”

“Stop...” Carmilla interrupted; “I’ll be okay and so will you...”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...” Carmilla replied with a smile; “Laura...” she sighed and worked up her courage; “I think...” she looked down a moment and then up again; “I think we should stop pretending...”

“I knew I was pushing it...” Laura said sadly and tried to take her hand away.

“Laura... no...” Carmilla replied and held her hand all the tighter; “I mean...” she shook her head and smiled; “I know I come with a lot of baggage but...” she took a deep breath; “I don’t want you to pretend to be my girlfriend anymore cause I want you to be my girlfriend...” she said in a rush; “For real...” she added, so there’d be no confusion.

“Carm?” Laura said softly and waited for her to meet her eyes; “I stopped pretending awhile ago...”

“Yeah?” Carmilla asked, smiling when Laura nodded. “Me too.” Laura tried to pull her closer; “Oh baby I’ve wanted to kiss you again ever since the airport...” she smiled as she saw the the blush she
felt on her cheeks mirrored on Laura's; “But if I kiss you now I won't want to stop and we're bound to be interrupted... again...” she leaned forward and kissed her forehead instead; “and I probably taste like an ash tray cause I just had my first smoke in over a year...” she admitted as she pulled away.

“I don't care,” Laura countered.

“Well I do...” she smiled and kissed her cheek; “I've waited this long to really kiss you...” she whispered into her ear; “I can wait a little longer to make sure it's perfect...”

“Carm?” Laura said softly; “You know the thing about baggage?”

“What's that?” Carmilla asked as she ran her finger's along Laura's cheek.

“It gets lighter the more people you let help carry it,” she replied seriously.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got a little away from me and I suspect the following ones won't be quite as long. I try to not to have multi-chapter days though... hope you enjoyed!
Carmilla and Laura were just staring at each other... now that they could say anything it seemed neither could find the words. They were spared the need, however, when a nurse entered with another bag of blood for Laura.

“You got her test results back?” Carmilla asked.

“Must have,” the nurse replied with a shrug; “I think they’re looking for a second...”

“What blood type are you?” Carmilla asked Laura.

“She's B positive...” the nurse replied; “Normally we have more than enough but...”

“They used a few in surgery?” Carmilla asked tersely, Doc Coughlin was keeping something from her. She looked back to Laura, saw her concern, then leaned over and kissed her forehead; “I'm going to go find out what's going on...” she told her, kissed her forehead again and left to find the doctor.

She didn't have to go far as he was at the nurse's station talking to Dark.

“Doc?” Carmilla said to get his attention. “Laura and I haven't eaten since this morning... can she eat?”

“What were you thinking?” he asked.

“Pizza?” she suggested.

“Okay, but not too much for Laura,” he replied; “She's on a lot of medication and I don't know how she'll react...”

Carmilla frowned and looked to Dark.

“What happened to mine and Laura's bags?”

“The Emts brought them back,” he replied; “They're in the van...”

“Good... grab my wallet and go get us three extra large pizzas... one all dressed and two half all dressed and half veggie for the Emts and staff here...” she asked him and then added; “Heard from Will and Brody?”

“They were here but I told them to go home,” he answered.

“Can you stick around when you get back? Take us home?”
“You bet,” he replied and gave her a hug; “Pop?”

“I've got Sangria in my bag but grape soda for Laura,” she replied; “Now go on... I'm starved...”

Dark nodded and as he walked away she looked back to the doctor.

“What aren't you telling me?” she asked evenly.

“You saved her life,” he replied and shook his head sadly; “She asked me not to tell you...” he offered.

“What happened?”

“There was a second artery trapped by the broken bone,” he explained; “We repaired the first while we were waiting for the x-rays but as soon as we went to reset the bone the second artery burst and she almost bled out...” he looked over to a nurse who was they phone.

“Still on hold...” she informed him.

“I'm O negative,” Carmilla said quietly; “If it'll save time...”

The doctor studied her a moment, he hadn't seen the young woman so broken since he'd spent the night working on Dark.

“Carmilla...” he said gently as he took her upper arms in his hands; “If you hadn't bandaged her up as well you did...”

“She'd have bled out before ever getting to the hospital...” Carmilla choked out.

“I'm sorry...”

“What are you sorry for?” she asked him and laughed.

“I'm the reason the Emts knocked you out at the lake...” he faltered at her look of anger; “No listen to me... I saw how you were when Dark got hurt... I couldn't let you go through that again...”

“And if costs me a fight?” she countered angrily.

“It won't, I promise,” he replied adamantly; “I'll put my license on the line if I have to...”

“That wasn't your choice to make,” she said bitterly.

“And you'd have been of no use to Laura as a basket case,” he countered.

“Wait... why did you tell me if she asked you not to?”

“She told me to tell you if you asked,” he replied with a smile; “That young woman in there...” he shook his head; “I'm trying to tell her what happened and all she kept asking was if you were okay...” He studied her a moment. “Are you okay?”

“I will be...” she sighed as her phone rang; “What now?” she thought. “I have to take this...” the doctor nodded. She answered the phone as she walked away to find a place to sit; “What's up Rick?”

“Deanna's at it again,” he replied.
“How the fuck...”

“I don't know,” he cut her off; “ Luckily we nipped it the bud...” he laughed; “She called in an anonymous tip that it was you that hurt that Laura at the lake...”

“I don’t see how that's funny...” she interrupted angrily.

“That's just it,” he replied; “The guy who took the call got off the phone and then came over to see what we were all watching... I guess someone recognized your name and called the TV station... anyway, they were interviewing the woman whose dog you ran after...”

“If that stupid woman had just kept control of her damned dog...” Carmilla muttered.

“Look there's a chance she caught wind of it some other way...”

“Fuck...” Carmilla muttered.

“What?” Rick asked in concern.

“I have a theory...” she sighed; “Look... keep an ear open for me... Deanna's been too quiet since the airport and she's gotta be desperate if she's manufacturing stories without all the facts first...”

“Agreed,” Rick replied; “I hope you don't mind but I went ahead and called Frank... told him to start working on the paperwork to keep her away from Laura...”

“Thanks,” Carmilla replied; “Tell him to start working on the same thing for Danny Lawrence...”

“Who's he?”

“She...” she corrected, “is my next opponent and I'm not sure why she did it but I think she's the reason Deanna knew part of the story but not the whole thing...”

“I'll look into it...”

“Quietly though...” she interrupted; “If I'm wrong I don't want to be accused of trying to throw her off her game...” she shook her head; “For all I know maybe she thought she was doing me a favor calling to tell her my girlfriend was hurt at the lake...” she sighed as she spotted Dark returning with pizza and then handing one off to the assembled staff. “Give me a couple of days... I need to talk to Will...”

“Alright...” he replied; “I'll let you know if I hear anything...”

“Thanks Rick...”

“Anytime kid...” he replied affectionately before hanging up.

Carmilla smiled; while Deanna might have spies everywhere, she had friends who cared and happened to be in influential positions. Rick had only been a regular cop when he came to take her statement at the hospital the night she and Will ran, but he had quickly worked his way up the ranks. More importantly, he not only believed them, he had worked tirelessly helping them build their case against Deanna.

“You okay?” Dark asked.

“Not really,” she replied vaguely.
“Well c'mon, pizza'll cheer you up...” he offered; “and if that doesn't the Sangria will...”

“I can't drink it...” she sighed; “I need to eat so I can donate some blood for Laura...” she wrapped her arms around him as she felt tears threatening; “Her blood type is relatively rare but they still normally have enough...” she looked up to him; “She almost bled out on the table...” she confided and then sobbed into his chest. “I... I almost...”

“But you didn't...” he soothed; “She's going to be okay...” he cooed as he rubbed her back; “Pity though...”

“What?”

“There's still no cure for midgetitis...” he joked.

She laughed and hugged him again.

“C'mon, you need to eat...” she nodded against his chest, gave him one last squeeze and then let him go to wipe her nose; “It's been a long day... maybe you...”

“I'm not leaving her side until she's home safe in bed,” Carmilla informed him. “Can you call Will? Find out if he talked to Danny?”

“You don't think she'd...”

“I do but I'm not sure why,” Carmilla shook her head; “C'mon...” she sniffed and wiped her nose again; “I really need to eat...”

“Do you think she'd...”

“In the hospital? Really?” he joked; “Can't you two wait until you get home?”

“Stop!” she laughed and smacked his arm, as they entered. “Put the pizza on the table and go call Will...” she asked as she looked through Laura's bag for her phone. Dark nodded and took his phone out as he walked back out to the hallway.

“What's wrong?” Laura asked as Carmilla handed Laura her phone.

“Deanna,” she replied and sat, the drama of the day taking it's toll; “She tried to have me arrested for hurting you at the lake but Jenna was too busy enjoying her fifteen seconds of fame telling the world what really happened on the news,” she looked to her phone; “Call your Dad... there's a good chance someone called him...”

“Shit...” Laura said with a sigh; “You know that means he's probably on his way down here?” She smiled. “You ready for big bad Papa Hollis?”

“I'd rather meet him than have him worry,” Carmilla countered and got herself a slice of pizza. “You can have a slice once you call him...”

“Brat...” Laura said and stuck her tongue out at her. She looked down at her phone and called her dad. “Hey Dad... no no no... I'm fine...” she said and took the phone from her ear; “He wants to talk to you...” she told her and put the phone on speaker; “Go ahead dad, she's right here...”

“Miss Karnstein?” a gravely voice asked; “Is it true you carried my daughter to safety?

She swallowed her pizza past the lump in her throat.

“Yes sir,” she answered.
“You care about her that much?” he asked.

“She saved my life, Dad, more than once,” Laura informed him and reached for Carmilla's hand.

“Carmilla?” he said; “Are you dating my daughter?”

“I think so,” she replied and blushed.

“We are, Dad, as of about an hour ago...” Laura informed him and squeezed her hand; “Thanks for the advice...”

“I'm coming down to see you tomorrow...”

“Dad...” Laura whined.

“No, young lady, it's my prerogative to come see my daughter when she nearly dies to make sure she's okay and to make sure the young lady that has stolen her heart is a good person... got it?”

“Yes sir...” Laura answered.

“Thank you for taking care of my girl,” he said warmly.

“Sir?” Carmilla started tentatively; “Did anyone call you?”

“The hospital a couple of hours ago and some woman...” he replied; “said you were the reason she got hurt...” Laura shook her head as Carmilla went to speak; “Anyway... I'll see you both tomorrow...”

“Let us know when you're getting in and I'll have someone pick you up at the airport,” Carmilla offered.

“I'd appreciate that, thank you,” he paused; “Laura honey? Take me off speaker...”

Laura frowned but did as he asked, smiling as she listened.

“Okay daddy... I'll see you tomorrow...” she said and then hung up.

“Pop?” Carmilla asked as she opened a grape soda for her.

“Thanks,” she replied and took a sip; “What did the doctor have to say?”

“Why did you tell him not to tell me?” Carmilla asked quietly as she put a slice a pizza on a plate for her.

“Told who what now?” Laura asked in confusion.

“You almost bled out on the table...”

“Because you're already feeling guilty, for some reason, and I thought it'd only make it worse if you found out that I...” Carmilla looked to her in alarm.

“That you what?”

“I think I died...” Laura admitted and looked down, seemingly studying the slice of pizza in front of her. “I saw a bright light...” she shook her head and sniffed; “but then...” she met her eyes again as she put her hand over her heart; “I felt this weight here...” she tapped her chest; “Like your head
was there... like at the lake..."

“You remember that?” Carmilla asked quietly as she placed a hand on Laura's thigh.

“I do... I remember feeling...” she blushed and looked down; “loved...”

“Laura?” Carmilla said, somehow the fact that had she almost lost her superseded her desire for their first real kiss to be perfect; she moved, probably quicker than she should have, tilted Laura's face and kissed her softly.

It took Laura only a moment to respond, her good hand coming up to tangle in her hair as the kiss deepened. They didn't stop when they heard the door open, a quiet; “Oops...” and then the door closing again, but giggled when it did.

Carmilla pulled away first but only far enough that she could meet Laura's eyes; “I think I do...” she smiled; “I do love you...” she reached up and studied her eyes; “And you are stoned out of your tree, aren't you?”

“What?” Laura giggled; “No... I'm...”

“Your pupils are completely blown out...” Carmilla informed her as she went to check Laura's IV to see what that had her on. “Morphine...” she sighed and kissed her again briefly; “We need to talk about all this... but not tonight okay?”

“Okay... but why?”

“Because I doubt you'll remember half of it and I don't feel like repeating myself,” Carmilla teased.

“Carm?” Laura said, the nickname again warming her to her very core; “I had a crush on you before I even met you...”

“Oh please tell me you don't have a wall of photo clippings!” she teased.

“A... uh... scrapbook,” Laura admitted and looked down.

“Really?” Carmilla asked as she sat and took her hand again; “Me too...” she admitted when Laura finally nodded.

“You're joking...”

“Nope... I saved all the articles and then wrote out my side of the story for each,” Carmilla replied; “There were so many lies going around at one point it was the only way I could keep any of it straight...”

“Carm...” Laura said softly again; “You swept me off my feet without even trying...” she laughed and threw her head back; “That stupid dog...”

“I know!” Carmilla laughed; “I was so working up the nerve to kiss you...”

“So was I...” Laura laughed; “Oh Kitten... you'd have thought between the two of us we'd worked up the nerve long ago...”

“Kitten?” Carmilla said as she choked on her Dr Pepper.

“Well if you insist on calling me 'Pup' I'm calling you 'Kitten', kitten...” Laura teased back.
“Is it safe to come in?” Dark called from a crack in the doorway.

“No...” Carmilla called but Laura had called yes.

“Yes... he talked to her,” he informed Carmilla as he took a slice of pizza and perched himself at the end of Laura's bed. He looked to the pizza and then back to Carmilla; “Eat up... they're coming to do your blood tests soon...”

“Why are you doing blood tests?” Laura asked, her pizza halfway to her mouth.

“Because you used most of their supply in surgery,” Carmilla replied as she placed her free hand on her thigh again and stroke it with her thumb. “I'm O negative...”

“Universal donor...” Laura laughed; “Somehow that figures...” she shook her head and smiled; “You don't have to...”

“If it'll get us out of here faster...” Carmilla countered; “Look... we're both exhausted and all I want to do is go home, take a very long, very hot, bath and then crash...”

“You're really that sore?” Laura asked in concern.

“Remember what I told you the first day we met?” Carmilla asked with a smile; “I did something today... carrying a hundred and twenty pound human at a fast jog... that my body has never done before...” she sat up quickly and kissed away Laura's frown; “I'll be fine... it's nothing a trip...”

“Or three...” Dark piped up.

“Or three...” she agreed; “trips to the physio and chiro can't cure...”

“You have a physio appointment tomorrow and chiro at noon Monday,” Dark informed her.

“Seriously?” Carmilla asked.

“I knew you'd be sore and you have a fight in two weeks,” he replied with a smile.

“Thank you...” she said with a huge grin. She was lucky to have some of the best doctors in Vancouver and she knew, with their help, she'd be fine in days.

The three ate in silence for awhile, Carmilla only breaking it when she noticed Laura's raised eyebrow when she went to grab a third slice of pizza.

“What?” she asked; “I haven't eaten since this morning... I'm hungry...”

“Yes... but you have a fight in two weeks,” Laura replied.

“You calling me fat, Hollis?” she teased.

“God no... you're...” Laura blushed.

“Wait...” Dark interrupted; “You never told her?” he asked.

“No... I didn't want her to know she's too small...” Carmilla replied.

“Hey.... right here!” Laura interjected to their laughter; “What are you two talking about?”

“I only got the fight cause someone dropped out but it's up a weight class,” she admitted.
“Go on... tell her the rest...” Dark prodded.

“I... shit, Laura...” Carmilla sighed and rubbed her face; “My opponent dropped out... I'm fighting Danny in two weeks...”

“Danny? As in Danny Lawrence?” Laura gasped; “Carm... she's huge...”

“That's what I said!” Dark laughed.

“Yes and as I told Dark...” she said calmly; “it means she'll have to cut a lot of weight, whereas I...” she took a huge bite of pizza and then talked around it; “still need to gain about ten pounds...”

“Do you really think you can beat her?” Laura asked carefully.

“I do...” Carmilla replied to her obvious surprise; “I've trained with her... I know her weaknesses...”

“And she knows yours...” Laura interrupted.

“Yes, but I've improved on mine, thanks in part to you,” she said as she squeezed Laura's thigh; “and I doubt she has...” she shook her head; “She's big... and I'd thank you for both if you'd stop reminding me of that fact... but she's slow and she hasn't figured out how to use her reach yet...” she could see Laura wasn't convinced; “As long as I can stay out of a grappling match with her I'll be fine...”

“But...”

“Laura...” she smiled; “I can do this and if I do it without getting hurt there's a good chance I'll be fighting on the next Invicta card...”

“At one fifteen...” Dark reminded her.

“It'll be worth it if it gets me on the show...” she countered and looked back to Laura; “If I take that fight it pretty much guarantees me a spot...”

“Seriously?” Laura asked.

“Yes... seriously...” Carmilla shrugged and downed the rest of her pop; “Besides... not gonna lie... kinda looking forward to kicking that girl's ass...”

“You don't really think she tipped off Deanna, do you?” Dark asked conversationally.

“It would be a simple explanation as to know when Will was flying in,” she countered. She looked to Laura; “I don't think Deanna ever gave up getting Will back under her thumb...” she shrugged; “There's a chance she has Danny convinced she's actually helping him...” She slapped her forehead. “Which is why Danny showed up at the party... she wanted to find out who you were... fuck...”

“Which means she already knows who I am...” Laura said quietly.

“It'll be okay,” Carmilla said in an effort to assure herself as much as Laura; “My lawyer, Frank, is already working on the paperwork to keep Deanna away from you...” she looked to Dark; “Thanks again... you saved my ass today...”

“And you've saved mine more than I can count,” he replied with a smile; “It's what we do, right?” She nodded. “Let me see if I can't go track down that cute nurse and get your blood taken...” he grabbed another slice of pizza and headed for the door.
“What are you going to do about Danny?” Laura asked.

“Aside from kick her ass in two weeks?” Carmilla replied; “Talk to Will...” she sighed and sat down again; “I want to give her the benefit of the doubt but I think she's pissed I'm getting a chance she missed out on...”

“She tried out for the first women's show?”

“Didn't make it that far,” Carmilla corrected; “I'd just started training and I noticed a mistake she kept making...” she sighed and took a bite of her forgotten pizza; “I tried pointing it out to her but she didn't listen and ended up getting hurt in her next fight...” she shrugged. “Somehow I think she blames me...”

“Carm?”

“Hmmm?”

“Why did you pass out at the lake?” she asked.

“My blood sugar crashed and good ole Doc Coughlin told the Emts to knock me out,” she replied.

“Oh... is that why you're always snacking?” Laura asked.

“Pretty much,” Carmilla replied and blushed, she hadn't thought Laura had noticed. “I'm borderline hypoglycemic... normally I keep it controlled with diet but between the adrenaline of running after that stupid dog and then finding you...” her voice caught as she again remembered the yelp of pain that had come from Laura. “Why did you come after me anyway?”

“We heard Chip barking and it sounded like you weren't far off...” Laura looked down shyly; “I thought I'd catch up to you and kiss you for running after a stranger's dog but...” she sighed and laughed; “I started running down the hill and all of sudden I was going too fast and then I slipped...” she looked up and smiled; “And then you came running back and I knew I was going to be okay...” she shook her head; “You were incredible... it was like switch flipped...”

“Tell you a secret?” Carmilla interrupted quietly; “I was scared out of my mind...” she admitted; “Everything I've been through and I've never been as terrified as I was in that moment...” she wiped away a tear roughly. “I couldn't lose you... not like...”

“I'm not going anywhere, Carm... don't you get that yet?” Laura asked, her voice choked with emotion. “All this shit with Deanna... fighting Danny... all of it... it's just shit and you don't have to deal with it alone anymore... okay?”

“I'm sorry, Laura... I...” she leaned forward and kissed her briefly; “I'm still getting used to the idea that you like me back...” she admitted; “The rest?”

“I know...” Laura said softly and kissed her again.

“We've got plenty of time to talk about it the next few days...” she kissed her forehead; “I, for one, plan on spending a lot of time in the hot tub...”

“Sorry to interrupt...” a voice said from the doorway; “Ready for more blood tests?” The two turned to him and nodded, Carmilla taking her seat at Laura's bedside again.

“How long until you know if it's okay?” Carmilla asked.
“Probably have you drained by the time she's ready for the next one,” he joked; “Oh, and thanks for the pizza... none of us have been able to get out because...”

“Shit... the vultures have already assembled?” Carmilla asked edgily.

“Vultures?” Laura asked.

“The local press,” the nurse supplied.

“Oh god Laura...” Carmilla rushed to kiss her as she pouted; “you won't be a vulture...” she looked to the nurse; “She's studying journalism...” she trailed off as he motioned for her to sit and give him her arm.

She looked back to Laura as the needle entered her arm.

“It's okay... I think 'vultures' is a pretty apt description from what I read,” said Laura who was watching as the nurse came to take her blood next; “Maybe I should just have a tap installed?” she joked.

“It would make my life easier,” he replied; “But I think they're hoping you won't need another unit...”

“Alright... take more blood to see if I need more blood...” Laura joked as she offered him her good arm.

As it turned out Laura didn't need another unit and a little while later the doctor returned to tell them as much. “Now Laura...” he explained; “understand that you're going to feel fairly weak the next few days... you need to take it easy...” He looked to Carmilla; “And you need to make sure she does... and takes all her meds...”

“Don't worry...” Carmilla assured him; “I won't be up for much myself in the next few days...”

“Good... what you both need most right now is rest,” he replied; “I'm going to send you both home with prescriptions...”

“Doc... I...”

“No Carmilla, you need rest and I can tell by how you're moving you won't get much sleep tonight without help,” he held his hand up as she went to interrupt; “It's a mild sedative and I already to check to make sure it's safe...”

“Fine...”

“And Laura you're going to want to take the pain meds every few hours and make sure you take all the antibiotics...” he looked to Carmilla; “You did an awesome job but compound fractures always run the risk of infection...”

“But it doesn't hurt...” Laura interrupted.

“'Cause they've had you on a steady dose of Morphine since you woke up,” Carmilla supplied.
“And it's not just your arm that's going to be sore... you had to have fallen pretty hard to break your arm like that...”

“She's got a point Laura,” the doctor added. “Truth is I'd rather you stay the night in the hospital but...” he trailed off at the looks on both girls' faces; “I have a feeling you'll get more rest at home...”

“Thanks doc...” Carmilla sighed; “Think you can do anything about the idiots outside?”

“Back door?” he suggested.

“Carm?” Laura said and waited until she had their attention; “Don't run from them... that's what they expect and what Deanna wants...” she reached for her hand; “We've got nothing to hide... it was a stupid accident... that's all...” she smiled; “Besides... it'll piss her off, right?”

“You sure you're up for this Hollis?” Carmilla asked.

“They can get nasty,” Dark added.

“I'm not afraid of Deanna and neither should you be,” Laura replied.

“And you're still stoned,” Carmilla teased.

“Be that as it may,” Doctor Coughlin interrupted; “She's not wrong...” he met Carmilla's eyes; “It's time you stopped running from her and face her head on...”

“Easier said then done...”

“Small steps then,” Laura offered. “Besides... I'm proud as hell of the woman who saved my life and I have no problem telling the world that...”

“Oh stop...” Carmilla laughed and kissed her forehead.

“Not until you start believing it,” Laura countered quietly.

Carmilla studied her eyes a moment; maybe she was right. Maybe it was time to stop running from Deanna and the stories she might tell... maybe it was time for the world to start seeing her for who she really was. And who she was at this moment was a young woman rapidly falling in love with someone who was far too good for her.

“I don't deserve you,” Carmilla said with a sigh.

“You're right,” Dark said, reminding both girls they weren't alone; “You deserve her and so much more...” he smiled as they both looked at him; “Now let me go track down that cute nurse again so we can get that IV out of you and get you both home already...”

“Dark?” Carmilla said, causing both him and the doctor to stop on their way out; “Did you bring Laura a change of clothes too?”

“I did,” he look embarrassed; “Sorry for going through your stuff without asking...” he said apologetically to Laura, “It's in the same bag your stuff was in...”

“Thanks Dark,” the two girls said together.

Carmilla kissed her softly once they were alone again and the backed away to stroke her cheek. “What am I going to do with you?”
“In time...” Laura replied, her voice lower than usual; “anything you want...”

“Oh really?” Carmilla said, blushing deeply; “I hope you don't mind if we take it slow...”

“It's true what they say about fighters not having sex before a fight?” Laura asked.

“I wouldn't know,” Carmilla admitted as she busied herself getting Laura's clothes ready; “No basis for comparison...”

“You're not...”

“A virgin?” Carmilla supplied and met her eyes; “Contrary to popular belief... um... mostly?”

“How can be 'mostly' a virgin?” Laura asked.

“Well...” she sighed; “Of the three women I've had sex with none of them, um... 'returned the favor'... so to speak...”

“By your choice or theirs?” Laura asked.

“I don't want to get into this tonight,” Carmilla responded; “But for the first time...” she walked back over to her, put her clothes on the end of the bed and went to take her hand; “sex... this means something to me and I don't want to mess it up...”

“Carm?” Laura said quietly; “It'll be my first time too but...” she smiled when Carmilla met her eyes; “What you said earlier, about wanting our first kiss to be perfect?” Carmilla nodded. “It was... not because of the place or the timing... but because it was you kissing me...” Carmilla kissed her softly. “Look... I know, cause of this...” she indicated her casted arm; “it'll be awkward but I don't care... as long as it's with you...”

“I still want to take things slow...” Carmilla smiled; “get to know you... you know?”

“You know... before I met you... I thought you were this big callous bad ass without a care for anyone but yourself,” Laura said thoughtfully; “But now that I know you?”

“You realize I'm just a big basket case full of doubt and insecurity?”

“Well yes...” Laura laughed; “But I was going to say you're a romantic...”

“Maybe, for the first time, I have a reason to be?” Carmilla countered as Dark and the nurse returned.

While the nurse took out Laura's IV Carmilla grabbed her knife from her bag.

“Are you overly attached to this sweatshirt?” she asked Laura.

“Not overly, why?”

“Because I'm going to take the sleeve off to make it easier for you to wear,” she replied and used her knife to rip the sleeve off.

“I'll go grab your 'scripts and a wheel...”

“I don't need a wheelchair, I can walk,” Laura interrupted Dark.

“Doctor's orders,” Dark replied; “Besides... you should save some strength for when you get
home...” he teased and left.

“There you go...” the nurse said, getting there attention again; “Thanks again for the pizza...”

“I know how hard you guys work, and that you rarely get thanked for it,” Carmilla replied; “I appreciate everything you guys did for us so consider it my way of saying thanks...”

“We're just doing our job,” he replied with a shrug.

“Well thanks for doing it so well,” Carmilla replied warmly.

“Thanks for noticing,” he replied with a wink before leaving.

Carmilla helped Laura sit up and turn so her legs hung off the bed. She took her sweatpants and knelt to pull them over her feet and up her legs. “C'mon... stand up...” she prodded. Laura tentatively put her feet on the floor and then used her good arm to steady herself with Carmilla's shoulder as she stood. Carmilla pulled the sweats up over her behind and then carefully wrapped her arms around her and hugged her properly.

“Carm?”

“No... just let me hold you a minute...” Carmilla said, it had hit her again just how close she'd come to losing her.

“Hey...” Laura cooed as she pushed her away gently and then sat on the bed again; “I'm going to be okay...”

“I know it's just...” Carmilla started as she motioned for Laura to turn so she could undo her hospital gown; “When I was a kid Deanna got into birds for a little while...” she shook her head and laughed; “We had more than twenty in the house at one point... mostly budgies and canaries...” she pulled Laura's gown forward so she could hold it with her good hand while Carmilla helped her into her sweatshirt; “At one point she had enough canaries and budgies that she an avery built... you know, a big cage? Canaries on one side and budgies on the other...” she carefully helped Laura put her hurt arm through the hole where a sleeve used to be and then started on her second arm; “For some reason she decided to put a cockateil in with the budgies... they were all afraid of him except for one that stood up to him...” she did up Laura's zipper and then pulled the gown out from under it; “and they became the best of friends...”

“Sweetie, this a really cute story but...”

“I'm getting to my point...” Carmilla said and kissed her softly. “I came home from school one day and the budgie was dead at the bottom of the cage, the cockatiel beside him and I swear, he was crying... he was never the same after that...” she took Laura's hand and kissed her knuckles; “You all keep saying I saved your life but...” she looked up and met Laura's eyes; “I'd have never been the same if I lost you...”

“Well you didn't...” Laura replied and pulled her close for a kiss. “And now that I've got you I'm never letting you go... got it?” she whispered into her ear as Dark returned.

“Got it...” Carmilla replied with a smile; “Ready to face the press?”

“Look Carm... I know running sounds like the easier plan but...” Laura said as she stood and then sat in the wheelchair; “Won't Deanna seeing us happy and in love piss her off even more?”

“More than having her rumor squashed before it ever got a chance?” Carmilla laughed. “I knew
there was a reason I liked you...” She looked to Dark; “Go bring the van around front...”

“You sure?”

“No...” she smiled and ran her thumb down Laura's cheek; “But I finally have a real life girlfriend and I want to show her off...”

“I must look like hell though...” Laura joked.

“No worse than me,” Carmilla countered.

Dark went off ahead while Carmilla wheeled Laura towards the hospital's main entrance. They could hear the reporters before they saw them, apparently some of them had recognized Dark and had tried to pester him with questions.

As soon as the door opened and they realized who was standing there, all eyes turned to them.

“Miss Hollis! Is it true Carmilla Karnstein pushed you down a hill when you rejected her advances?” one of them shouted.

“No!” she laughed; “The truth is...” the all grew quiet; “that my wonderful girlfriend took off after an errant dog and I, being the huge clutz that I am, fell down a hill when I tried to catch up to her...” she looked up to her as Carmilla put her hand on her shoulder and squeezed; “She patched me up and carried me out to safety... she saved my life...” she told them, her voice catching; “Now if you'll excuse us, we're both exhausted and just want to go home...”

Carmilla looked around at them, challenging them with a look to continue bothering them. “You heard her...” she said calmly; “It's been a long day and we want to go home...”

“So you're living together?” someone asked.

“None of your business,” Carmilla replied tersely, the 'Karma' van having pulled up behind the reporters; “But if you can get out of our way?” she asked and started pushing Laura through them as they slowly parted to let them pass.

“Is there any truth to the rumor you paid off your opponent so you could fight Danny Lawrence instead?” a voice asked. Carmilla stood up straight and looked around until she figured out who had spoken.

“I found out a few hours ago that my original opponent dropped out,” she shook her head and laughed, much to the assembled surprise. “Have you seen her? She's huge... why the fuck would I choose to fight her?”

“Cause you stole her girlfriend,” he countered.

“First off...” Laura said as she stood and faced them, her hand on Carmilla's shoulder to steady herself; “I was never Danny's girlfriend... secondly: don't you people have better things to do than bother the two of us?”

“C'mon babe, let's get out of here...” Carmilla prodded as she opened the door to the van.

“No... I have something to say,” Laura stood a little straighter; “You... you're all responsible for making the woman I love into some sort of villain... someone who only cares about herself and her own goals...” she shook her head and looked to Carmilla. “She's not... yes, it's partly her fault I got hurt...” the crowd got very quiet; “because she ran after someone's dog for them and I missed her so
I took off after her...” she looked back to the reporters; “There’s no story here for you tonight... it was an accident, I got hurt, Carmilla saved my life and we’re both okay... end of story...”

Laura looked to Carmilla and took her hand as she helped her into the van. Carmilla followed her inside, slammed the door behind them, and then reached across Laura to do up her seat belt.

“You're amazing...” Carmilla said and kissed her cheek; “You okay?” she asked as Laura was sitting with her eyes closed.

“Shouldn't have stood up so fast,” she admitted; “Can you make the van stop spinning?”

“Dark?” Carmilla called and waited for him to turn; “Pharmacy and then home?”

“Sure thing, Mistress...” he teased.

Carmilla laughed and did up her own seat belt before slipping the belt off of Laura's shoulder and pulling her down into her lap.

“Better?”

“Better...” Laura replied with a sigh.

“You rest...” Carmilla said quietly as they pulled away from the hospital; “We’ll be home soon...” she trailed off at the sound of; “Taking Care of Business,” playing.

“Shit... that's my dad...” Laura mumbled and struggled to get to her phone.

“I'll answer, you rest...” Carmilla said as she dug through Laura's bag for her phone just as it stopped ringing. She called him back and waited for him to answer.

“Hi... Mr Hollis, it's Carmilla...”

“Why isn't Laura answering her phone?” he demanded.

“Because we're finally on our way home and she's passed out in my lap,” Carmilla replied calmly.

“She's okay then?” he asked, relief clear in his tone.

“She'll be fine,” Carmilla said with a smile as she ran her free hand through Laura's hair.

“I thought... when she didn't answer...” he sighed; “I thought something happened... some complication, you know?” She could have sworn she heard him sniff before he continued: “My flight will be in at six...”

“Okay we'll pick you up,” Carmilla replied.

“I don't know North Vancouver very well, are there any hotels nearby?” he asked.

“Don't be silly,” Carmilla replied; “We have an empty suite, fully furnished mind, on the second floor you can use as long as you're here...”

“That would be perfect,” he replied; “Thank you... for taking care of my girl... she really thinks the world of you...” he paused a moment; “Just... don't hurt her, okay?”

“Wouldn't dream of it...” she replied sincerely.
“Good... I'll, um, see you tomorrow,” he said; “Tell her I love her and both of you get some rest...”

“Yes, sir, have a good night,” she replied.

“You too,” he replied and hung up.

“Since when do we have an empty apartment?” Laura asked quietly.

“He can stay in yours and you can crash in my spare bedroom,” Carmilla offered.

“Rather stay in your bedroom,” Laura countered.

“That might not be a bad idea,” Carmilla replied thoughtfully; “The bathroom is closer...”

“No...” Laura laughed and pushed herself up; “If I'm going to stay with you I want all the benefits...”

“Benefits?” Carmilla asked with a laugh.

“Yes...” Laura replied with a smile; “like falling asleep in your arms...” she added and laid her head back down in Carmilla's lap.

“I thought I'd have more of a fight on my hands,” Carmilla admitted; “You know... suggesting you stay with me until you're feeling better...”

“Oh...” Laura said sadly; “You want to take care of me...”

“Of course I want to take care of you,” Carmilla replied; “Why is that a bad thing?” Laura turned so she could look up at Carmilla; “I like taking care of you...” she smiled and blushed; “and that will be easier to do if you're staying with me...” Laura closed her eyes; “but I'd have asked you to officially move in eventually...”

“Yeah?”

“Well, yeah... I might need your apartment for someone important someday...” she teased.

“Why are we stopping? We can't be home yet...” Laura asked.

“Dark's going to run in and grab our meds...” Carmilla replied.

“Thanks Dark!” Laura called as he opened the door.

“Be right back,” he said and looked to Carmilla; “No hanky panky while I'm gone...” he joked and closed his door before she had a chance to reply.

“Carm?”

“Yeah baby?” she answered affectionately as she stroked her cheek.

“That bath you were talking about sounds like a great idea...” she blushed.

“I can help you take a bath but I don't know if I'm ready to join you for one yet,” Carmilla replied and looked to her watch; “We've only, technically, been together for a few hours...”

“You have a whirlpool tub like mine, don't you?” Laura asked, Carmilla nodding although she had no clue where Laura was going with her line of questioning. “You can close your eyes, help me get
undressed and into the tub and then I'll close my eyes while you get in... deal?"

"You're going to be the death of me, Laura Hollis..."

"What?"

"I'm already have a hard time resisting you..."

"Yeah?"

"Are you kidding? Do you have any clue how many times I've almost kissed you in the last two weeks?" Carmilla admitted; "And as tired and sore as I am I don't know if I have the willpower to resist a naked you..."

"And what would be wrong with that?" Laura asked as she turned her head and kissed her palm.

"Because I've waited this long..."

"But..."

"But nothing... it's not because I want it to be perfect..." she smiled and pulled her up so she could kiss her; "Because you're right... it could be the most awkward unsatisfying sex in the history of sex and it'd still be perfect because it's with you..." she smiled as Laura kissed her hand again; "I'd just... I'd rather wait until we both have the energy and don't hurt everywhere so we can concentrate on each other..."

"Carm... I don't think today went the way either of us planned..." Laura smiled as Carmilla chuckled; "and yes, taking a bath with you and then falling asleep in your arms was beyond my wildest dreams..." she reached up and stroked her cheek; "But after the day we've had?"

"We deserve it?"

"We do..." she smiled; "I'm not saying we should rush things but..."

"A hot bath and you in my arms as I fall asleep does sound pretty good..."
Carmilla laid her head on the back of the van's seat: so many things were running through her mind. Despite Jenna's interview she worried that Deanna would still try to find a way to twist what happened. She could see it now: she must have paid Jenna to say the things she did and she was now forcing Laura to say the things she was. She sighed audibly and rubbed her temples.

"Everything okay, Midget?" Dark asked.

"No," she replied and looked back down to Laura, "and yes..." she added with a smile as she ran her fingers lightly across Laura's forehead. "What time's my appointment tomorrow?"

"Yours is at four and Laura's is at four-thirty," he answered.

"Why do I have an appointment?" Laura asked.

"I thought you were asleep," Carmilla commented; "You okay?"

"I think the meds are starting to wear off," she replied; "You didn't answer my question," she prodded as she pushed herself up to a seated position.

"Because Dark knew I'd want to know the best way to help you heal from this accident," Carmilla explained.

"But it's not like I can do anything," Laura countered.

"I know," Carmilla agreed; "but I won't be here when you get your cast off and I'd like to be there for your first appointment so I can make sure we get everything you need," she explained as Laura took her hand and laced their fingers.

"What did my Dad have to say?"

"He'll be in at six so we'll have plenty of time to pick up him after our appointments," she answered as Laura looked out the window. "We'll be home soon..."

"Can we stop at my place and grab a couple of things?" Laura asked.

"I can grab them, if you like?" Dark offered.

"No... as much as I appreciate the sweats I don't know how I feel about you pawing through my undies," Laura teased.

"Fair enough," he replied. "Carm... I grabbed you some Gravol and a better sling for Laura, hope
you don't mind."

"Thanks," she said with a smile, "for everything today Dark…"

"I've learned how you think, I knew what you'd need done," he shrugged; "I figured you'd have enough on your mind."

"True enough," she sighed and looked to Laura again when she kissed her cheek and laid her head on her shoulder. "At least, for once it's not all bad," she thought as she kissed the top of her head.

"You really think Danny is working for Deanna?" Laura asked quietly.

"Did Will mention if he called her or vice versa?" Carmilla asked Dark.

"He said she called when he and Kirsch were on the way to pick up your Jeep," he replied as he pulled into the gym's parking lot; "She wanted to warn him that she was offered the fight."

"And he mentioned Laura was hurt?" she asked tersely.

"We didn't really get into it," he replied as he parked the van. "Want me to grab the wheelchair?"

"I can walk," Laura replied before Carmilla had the chance, "It's not like it's far…" she added.

"Alright," Dark replied; "if you're sure."

"I am," Laura replied as she tried to undo her seatbelt.

"Here," Carmilla offered as she undid it for her.

"Why did they have to give me such a big cast?" Laura sighed.

"Because they want to make sure your arm heals properly," Carmilla answered as she undid her own seatbelt.

"But my left arm is useless," Laura whined.

"Good thing you're right handed then, isn't it?" Carmilla countered as she climbed from the van. She grabbed the bag from the pharmacy along with her backpack; "Do you need anything from your bag?" she asked Laura as she followed her.

"Just my phone and my camera, I don't feel comfortable leaving it out here," she said as she took Carmilla's proffered hand. "Shit…" she muttered as she let it got to hold her head.

"Still dizzy?" Carmilla asked in concern. Laura nodded. "Probably the combined effect of the drugs and the blood loss," she said as she took Laura's camera from her bag and put it in her own.

"Why did Dark get you Gravol?" Laura asked as she leaned back against the van.

"Because I try to avoid taking anything stronger than ibuprofen," she replied as she let Laura take her hand and pull her close.

"Because of your training?"

"Partly," Carmilla sighed.

"That part of the story is true then?" Laura asked carefully as she studied her eyes.
"It was her fault, Deanna's…" Carmilla shook her head; "No… I don't want to talk about anything dark tonight…" she stepped closer and placed her hand on Laura's cheek, her thumb caressing it; "I doubt you'll be awake for much longer and I'd rather just enjoy the fact that you're mine…"

"I've been yours since our eyes met at Kirsch's fight," Laura admitted as she held her gaze; "There was just something about you… something in your eyes…" she reached up and mirrored what Carmilla was doing; "There was this intensity, yes, but also this sadness…" she smiled shyly; "I just wanted to hold you and make you smile…"

Carmilla interrupted her with a kiss, taking first her bottom lip and then her top between her own before her tongue met Laura's and she let a small moan escape her throat. Laura pulled her closer, her hand tangling in her hair as she broke the kiss to kiss along her jaw to her throat.

"Do you know…" she started between kisses; "just how long I've wanted to kiss you?" she whispered into her ear.

"Not as long as I've wanted you to kiss me," Laura answered with a sigh.

"Oh really?" she asked as she pulled away to meet her eyes.

"I know it sounds cheesy but I swear it was love at first sight for me," she answered and blushed; "But I started falling for you when I came into the gym for the first time."

"The day you knocked me on my ass?" Carmilla teased as Laura tried to stifle a yawn unsuccessfully. "C'mon, let's get you cleaned up and into bed."

"What about our bath?"

"As good as that sounds," Carmilla said as she stepped away and put her arm around Laura's waist; "I don't think I'd be able to get you back out of the bath if you fell asleep on me…” she started them towards the back door of the gym; "How about a compromise?" she offered.

"As long as whatever you're about to propose ends with you holding me as I fall asleep, I'll probably agree," Laura answered.

"Sponge bath?"

"How is that fair?"

"Fair?" Carmilla laughed as she let them inside and locked the door after them.

"Yeah, you'll get to see me without clothes…"

"Who said anything about you being completely naked for a sponge bath?" Carmilla countered as she called the elevator.

"Why do you always take the elevator?" Laura asked once they were inside it.

"Because staircases give me flashbacks of Will lying at the bottom of one, broken and bleeding," she thought but replied instead; "Have you seen our stairs?" Laura nodded. "Well they creep me the hell out…” which wasn't a complete lie but made her feel guilty nonetheless. "There's a lot we need to talk about…”

"But not tonight?" Laura finished for her as the door opened on the first floor. Carmilla nodded. "Just so you know there's nothing you can tell me that's going to scare me away."
"You sure about that, Pup?"

"I am, Kitten," Laura replied. "Everything that happened before we met only matters to me insofar as it's made you the person I'm falling for..." she frowned; "My keys are in my bag..."

"Just a sec..." Carmilla replied as she shrugged off her backpack; "I have keys for all the apartments on my set..." she explained as she went to open Laura's door for her. "Is that weird? That I have your keys?" Laura laughed and shrugged her right shoulder. "I just never thought to take them off I guess..."

As they wandered into Laura's bedroom Carmilla asked; "Do you have a bag or something to carry your things?"

"There are plastic bags in the kitchen," Laura answered as she went to her dresser; "But I don't plan on taking much with me tonight, just something to sleep in, my pillow and my toothbrush..."

"I have pillows you know," Carmilla joked as she grabbed the large yellow pillow from her bed.

"I gathered," Lara chuckled; "but it's kind of like a security blanket and I can't sleep without it."

"I somehow think sleeping isn't going to be much of a problem for you tonight," Carmilla replied.

"True," Laura answered and turned to smile at her; "What did the Doc give me anyway?"

Carmilla opened the bag from the drugstore and sighed when she saw what Doc Coughlin had given her; Oxycodone: at least it wasn't its more addictive cousin, Oxycontin.

"This stuff is going to knock you on your ass, Pup," Carmilla informed her; "Best take it after we clean you up a bit."

"Okay, I'm ready to go," Laura said as she returned from the washroom with her toothbrush.

"So what was your plan for today?" Carmilla asked as they made their way back to the elevator.

"I don't know that I had a plan, per se..." she replied as she leaned against the wall of the elevator; "I guess I was hoping to find out if you felt the same..." she shrugged; "After that?" she smiled crookedly; "I thought maybe I'd make you a nice dinner and then go up to the roof to cuddle and talk..." she pushed herself off the wall and followed Carmilla from the elevator. "You?"

"I hadn't really allowed myself to think that far ahead," she admitted as she opened the door to her apartment.

"You? Really?" Laura said with a laugh.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's not a bad thing," Laura said consolingly; "You just always seem to have a plan. Like you're always thinking ten steps ahead..." she clarified as she followed Carmilla to the bedroom.

"I didn't want to get my hopes up," Carmilla said as she put Laura's pillow on her bed and removed her backpack. She held her hand out to Laura and led her into the bathroom. "Sponge bath?"

She took her over to the twin sinks and motioned for her to lean against the counter before turning the water on in both sinks. She took a moment to admire the beautiful girl that was now officially her girlfriend and smiled. "How did I get so lucky?" she thought as she helped Laura out of the sling the hospital had provided. Next she took Laura's tank top and placed it over her head and then
unzipped her hoodie for her. Laura seemed to understand what she was planning and used her good hand to pull her top down over her chest as Carmilla helped her out of the sweatshirt.

"Wow," Laura said as she looked down at her chest; "I didn't realize I was covered in blood…"

"You were bleeding pretty badly," Carmilla replied as put her sweatshirt aside and grabbed a facecloth. She soaked it in the warm water and then soaped it up. She met Laura's eyes and then tentatively washed her chest and then her stomach as Laura held her shirt up for her.

"I'm sorry this happened, Carm, that I won't be able to help you finish your training," Laura said sadly.

"Or join me on the Ultimate Fighter?" she teased as she made her turn around so she could wash her back.

"Dark told you?"

"You did, just before you passed out at the lake," she corrected and then asked; "How much do you remember?"

"Bits and pieces," she answered as Carmilla turned her back around and washed her right arm and then her left arm from just above where her cast reached halfway up her bicep. She kissed the bruising from having applied a pressure point to stop the bleeding ringed around her arm; "Sorry about the bruise."

"It saved my life," Laura stated.

"True," Carmilla said with a sigh as she knelt in front of her pajama bottoms. "What did you put in your application that made you think they'd consider you?" she asked in an effort to distract herself from the fact that she was pulling down her sweatpants when she knew she wasn't wearing underwear.

"Brody and Dark helped me put a video together of the two of us training," she replied as Carmilla washed her legs and she stretched her shirt to preserve her modesty. "And I guess my plot pitch was pretty convincing…"

"Oh really?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she said as she stepped into her waiting pajamas. "Imagine, if you will, two women, training partners, both get on the show… one, me, in love with the other and having no idea if the feelings are mutual…" she smiled as Carmilla stood back up and put her hands on her waist; "We both get on the show and sometime during the course of it we end up together…” she smiled as Carmilla stepped closer; "I even knew how it would play out…”

"Yeah?"

"With our luck we'd probably end up having to fight each other," she continued as Carmilla led her back into the bedroom; 'I'd have stepped forward, knelt down and tapped then canvas. When you'd have asked why, I'd have replied; 'Because you want this Carm, and all I want is you…'"

"Did you happen to read the eligibility requirements?" Carmilla asked as she sat Laura on the bed.

"No, why?"

"You have be twenty-one," Carmilla replied and then laughed as she realized something; "You're
"the reason I'm getting on the show..." she kissed her; "Perry told me they started hearing rumours a week ago..."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Laura asked.

"Didn't want to get my hopes up," she replied.

"Why do you do that?" Laura asked thoughtfully; "Always assume the worst?"

"Because when I haven't, when something seemed too good to be true," she shrugged; "Turned out I was right..." she smiled and kissed her. "How do you usually sleep?"

"On my stomach but I don't see how that'll be comfortable," Laura replied.

"How about," she started as she pulled back the covers, "you sleep on your right side, use your pillow to support your arm and I'll cuddle up behind you after my shower?"

"All that sounds good except for the part where you're not holding me as I fall asleep," Laura replied, pouting a little.

Carmilla stood and held Laura's face in her hands; "Okay," she said and kissed her; "I'll go grab you a glass of water so you can take your meds," she kissed her again as she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She resisted the urge to sigh deeply as she left Laura to fetch her water and took her phone from her pocket the moment she was out of the room. She soon found herself resisting the strong urge to whip her phone across the room when she read the message from Frank; "It won't see the light of the day, but in the off chance that it does, I thought you should know."

"Fuck," she muttered as she hit the internet link. There was a very good reason Carmilla always thought ten steps ahead: survival. Deanna was a master manipulator and the only way Carmilla was going to win was by being subtle. No, Deanna was many things but stupid wasn't one of them. At the moment, however, Carmilla was thanking her foresight in getting the new editor on her side. Yes, she'd promised exclusive rights when the story went public, and it meant only stories she approved of made its way to print. Unfortunately they sometimes made their way into the public eye anyway.

She finished the article and sighed: Deanna was becoming far too predictable in her attacks and she could have written the article herself. She put her phone down and turned to pour Laura's water. "What to do?" she thought; "Kill it or not?" She smiled as Laura's words came back to her. She put down the water and replied to Frank's text; "Kill it but get me an interview for after my fight."

"I'll see what I can do," he replied almost immediately.

She grabbed Laura's water and turned her phone off before plugging it in: there was a good chance the article would still find its way onto the web but she wanted to enjoy the peace as long as she could.

"Carm!" Laura called.

"What?" she asked with a smile as she opened the door to the bedroom and then handed Laura her water. "You should try to drink all of that." She open the bag from the pharmacy and took out one of her pain killers, stared at it a moment and turned back to Laura as she took a mouthful of water and then exchanged the glass for the pill in Carmilla's hand. "Finish that and then get comfortable..."

"Where are you going?"
"Nowhere," she assured her, knowing it meant so much more; "I'm going to change into a tank top in case I fall asleep..." she stepped closer and ran her thumb over her cheek; "You're a little furnace and I'm used to sleeping naked," Laura blushed; "Go on..." she kissed her softly; "Get comfortable."

Laura nodded, the effects of the day and the drugs still in her system, taking their toll. She helped her lay down and then walked over to the dresser and took out the first tank top from her drawer. Without thinking she took off her sweatshirt and heard a small gasp from behind her.

"Did she do that? Deanna?" Laura asked, the anger underlying her concern making Carmilla turn to face her the moment her top was on. She searched Laura's eyes before she could answer.

"Yes," she replied reluctantly; "But..." It had been a long day and the last thing she wanted to do was explain the scars covering her back.

"No," Laura shook her head; "Not tonight," she added as she beckoned her forward.

"Thank you," Carmilla sighed as she went to turn off the bathroom light.

"It's not that I don't want to know," Laura replied evenly; "but that I'm not going to let that woman ruin what's left of our day," she stated adamantly.

"Agreed," she replied, her own voice catching subtly.

"I won't ask," Laura said quietly as Carmilla pulled herself close to Laura's back; "You can tell me when you're ready," she turned and kissed Carmilla's right arm once it was under her head; "But can I ask one thing?"

"Only one?"

"For tonight," she replied with a small laugh, taking her left hand and pulling Carmilla's left hand to her lips. She kissed her palm and then placed it over her heart; "Have you ever considered just running away and starting over somewhere new?"

"Every day since the moment my father told me he intended to marry her," Carmilla replied and pulled Laura closer; "But..."

"You're worried about Will?"

"Not only..."

"We could take him with us," Laura suggested.

"We?" Carmilla said and kissed her shoulder; "I like the sound of that..." she sighed; "I wish it were that simple..." Laura nudged her; "What?"

"Move so I can lie on my back while we talk," she said as she pushed her again.

Carmilla did as Laura asked and then lay on her stomach propped up on her elbows.

"Laura..." she shook her head and put rubbed her face.

"I can understand why you want revenge but..."

"It's not just that," Carmilla interrupted and met her eyes; "My stopping wouldn't stop her..." she shook her head; "That was the plan the night we ran... we were going to tell her we wouldn't tell
anyone the truth if she just left us alone…” she felt tears threatening as images from that night flited through her memory; "She won't stop unless I make her."

"We," Laura corrected and continued when Carmilla met her eyes; "I might not remember everything we've talked about today but don't doubt that I have your back," she informed her fiercely; "Or that I haven't meant every word I've said…” she ran her hand along her cast. "Maybe this was a blessing in disguise…” she continued quietly as she met her eyes again; "Forced us to admit how we feel," she took a deep breath, "I know you have trust issues and I'm starting to understand why, but I am falling for you Carm, I hope you believe that."

"I'm starting to," she replied and kissed her; "But you didn't have to go falling head over heels down a hill to prove it," she teased.

"And you didn't have to save my life to prove it to me," she replied quietly; "but you did…”

"I was so scared," she admitted as she studied Laura's eyes.

"Did you know it was as bad as it was?" Laura asked.

Carmilla could only nod.

"Is that why you carried me out?"

"I knew I could get you to the Emts quicker than they could get to us," she replied and kissed her again. "But you're already fading…” she smiled as Laura stifled a yawn; "You're not used to such strong drugs so they're going to hit you pretty hard," she explained as Laura turned back on her side.

They spent a few minutes adjusting themselves until it felt as though it wasn't the first time they'd cuddled this way when Laura quietly asked; "So what's the plan?"

"The plan?"

"For when all this over?"

"Start living my life," Carmilla replied; "Travel for a while…” she offered; "If I don't find somewhere I like better than here, come back, rebuild my life…” she kissed her shoulder; "Maybe build a life with someone I love… settle down…” she moved her hair aside and kissed under her ear; "Raise a… shit…” she sighed, Laura was already sound asleep.

She settled down behind her and got comfortable; No, this certainly wasn't how she'd hoped her day would go. Despite near fatal tumbles down hillsides, meddling stepmothers and ex-training partners, it had been a pretty amazing day. She smiled and laughed softly; it was certainly a memorable first date at least.

She closed her eyes and tried to distract herself with planning an official first date, only making it to deciding on what they would eat, before sleep finally claimed her as well. A small smile on her face, her last thought as she fell asleep was; "So this is what content feels like…” Yes, there were hurdles yet to face and hills yet to climb, but for once in her life, she wasn't doing it alone. Laura may not have known the fight she was signing up for, but she had given Carmilla even more resolve to win.
Meeting the Dad

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning!!! We get into Carmilla and Will’s childhood a bit. You needn't worry, however, I don’t go into great detail nor will I ever. Those who are familiar with my writing know I don’t enjoy writing this stuff and only include as much as is necessary to give the reader an idea of where my characters are coming from. Sadly I can’t guarantee a chapter next week. I’ve been neglecting my other story in favour of this one and I need to make some progress on it. As always, thanks for the continued support and comments… they make my day and inspire me to keep writing. Enjoy!

When Carmilla woke the next morning she was surprised to find herself hugging Laura's pillow instead of Laura. She sniffed the case and then rolled to her back to stretch; she wasn't nearly as sore as she thought she'd be.

"'Bout time you woke up…" Laura teased from where she sat by Carmilla's feet.

"How long have you been up?" Carmilla asked as she sat up and accepted a kiss from her.

"A couple hours?" she replied with a smile; "I got up to go to the bathroom and you were snuggling my pillow by the time I got back and I was wide awake so I decided to get a few things done."

"I think I might have just found the first thing I don't like about you," Carmilla teased; "You're a morning person aren't you?"

"Not usually," Laura replied; "but I got to thinking about getting stuff ready for my Dad getting here and then I realized I was all hot and sweaty so I called Dark and asked him to help me wrap my arm so I could take a shower and…"

"Go on…" Carmilla prodded as she smiled; "you're cute when you ramble."

"Stop…" Laura said as she blushed and looked down.

"Laura?" Carmilla said softly as she pulled herself closer. She tilted her chin up with a finger; "You're beautiful…" she smiled as Laura's blush deepened; "and smart and sexy and fierce…” she moved some hair from her forehead; "You're everything I never knew I needed and so much more."

Laura searched her eyes a moment and then leaned in to kiss her when her phone rang.

"Fuck…” Laura hissed as she reached for her phone. "It's Danny," she informed her.

"Well…” Carmilla drawled; "let's see what tall, red headed and annoying wants."

"Speaker?" Laura asked, smiling when Carmilla nodded and leaned back toward her.

"Laura, my god, are you okay?" Danny asked.

"I'm fine, Danny, what do you want?"
"Is she there? Is that why you sound weird?" Danny questioned.

"I sound weird cause I just woke up," Laura replied tersely; "And Carm's still asleep but I wouldn't answer any differently even if she was here," she sighed; "What do you want Danny?" she repeated.

"What happened yesterday?"

"Carm was really sweet and ran after a stranger's dog for them," she explained patiently; "By the time the dog's owner caught up I could hear him barking and it sounded like she wasn't far away so I went after her and fell down a hill... it was an accident, end of story." She paused and looked to Carmilla. "Did you call my Dad?"

"I did, I'm worried about you Laura, you don't know Carmilla like I do..."

"You had no right to go worrying my Dad like that," Laura said angrily. "And you don't know Carm like I do... she saved my life, Danny, more than once yesterday..." she paused; "Leave me alone, okay?"

"Laura please," Danny pleaded; "just because you don't care about me the way I..."

"Caring?!" Laura said with a laugh; "You call calling my father and telling him lies 'caring'?"

"Laura, I..."

"No," Laura cut her off; "You're trying to turn me against her, trying to get me back when you never had me to begin with... I don't want to hear from you again and the next time I see you better not be until my girlfriend is kicking your ass in the ring," she said and ended the call.

"Damn, Hollis, you're quite the spitfire," Carmilla joked.

"I was tempted to ask her about talking to Deanna but I thought, if she is, maybe we could use it to our advantage," Laura offered. "And, um, Frank called," she shrugged; "Guess your phone was off..." she said as she handed Carmilla her phone.

"I turned it off for a reason," she sighed; "I wanted to try to ignore reality for a bit." Carmilla smiled and pulled Laura close to kiss her; "Not that my reality is all bad at the moment," she thought.

"Coffee?" Laura offered when they parted; "I noticed your coffee machine start itself this morning."

"Please," she replied and kissed her again; "I'll be right out," she added as she climbed from the bed and headed to the bathroom. "What the hell does Frank want at this time of the morning?" she wondered.

After using the facilities she splashed some cold water on her face as she waited for her phone to start up. When it did she sighed at the dozen missed calls; half of them from Frank, three from Dark, one from Danny and two from unidentified numbers.

She dialed Frank's number as she joined Laura in the kitchen and took her coffee from her.

"Let me guess," she stated when he answered; "it made it to print?"

"One of the local free papers," he replied; "Not just that, Carmilla, I've heard from our friend at the airport..."
"Damn it," she replied.

"Calm down," he soothed; "I've already talked to Mr Hollis and gotten him on an earlier flight arriving in Abbotsford."

"Like that will stop them," she muttered.

"True," he agreed; "but there should only be a few as opposed to the dozen or so already camped out at YVR."

"What time does he get in?" she asked as she checked the time.

"Three hours," Frank informed her.

"Thanks, Frank, I should let you go, I have some calls to make," Carmilla answered and then looked to Laura; "Well, Pup, there goes our day."

"What's going on?"

"We've got about an hour and half before we go pick your Dad in Abbotsford," she informed her as she pulled her into her arms; "Pity you already showered…" she sighed.

"What happened to taking it slow?" Laura asked before kissing her softly.

"I was only suggesting we shower," Carmilla said, her forced innocence betrayed by the dip in her voice. She took Laura's face in her hands before the kisses and nips along her neck become too much of a distraction. She kissed her. Kissed her like she had never kissed anyone before her. All the longing of the last couple of weeks, all she had suffered in the time before, all of it poured into one kiss. "But just because I want to take things slow doesn't mean I don't want you," she kissed her softly; "Or why I always have to take a bathroom break after we spar," she smiled as Laura sighed, she'd found a sweet spot just below her ear; "I want you Laura, I do…"

"But?" Laura said as she leaned back to meet her eyes; "Please tell me you're not going to make us wait until after your fight."

"It's only two weeks," Carmilla replied seriously.

"Carm…" Laura whined.

"A compromise?" Carmilla offered. "Once your Dad has left?"

"But I have no idea how long he's planning to stay," Laura countered; "Annnndddd… he'll be in my apartment and wouldn't have to know…"

"I'd know," Carmilla replied; "Look, Laura, you're my very first girlfriend and I want to do this right."

"There's no right or wrong, Carm," Laura assured her as she stepped closer; "There's just us…" she kissed her; "We've spent the last two weeks being affectionate… if we'd really been dating?"

"And you have a basis for comparison?" Carmilla teased; "We haven't even had an official date yet and I don't think your Dad would appreciate me stealing you away for a night when he's coming all this way to see you."

"I'm not winning this one am I?" Laura asked.
"Maybe you're fighting with the wrong weapons, Cupcake," Carmilla teased and kissed her nose when she pouted. "I'm going to take a shower. Can you call my Physio and change our appointments to Monday and call the car rental company I have saved and get us a sedan for the day?"

"Okay," Laura replied as Carmilla handed her her phone; "Why are you renting a car when you own three?"

"Because two are too recognizable and the Jeep's back seat isn't very comfortable," she smiled and stepped closer to her again; "Besides, if you get us an automatic I can hold your hand all the way to the airport."

"You're such a sap…” Laura teased and kissed her again.

"Yes," Carmilla laughed and looked down; "maybe I am…” she met her eyes; "but I'm your sap, just…”

"Don't tell anyone?" Laura laughed; "Who would believe me?"

"You have a point there Pup," Carmilla laughed and looked at the time. "Have you taken your meds yet?"

"No," Laura replied as she followed Carmilla back to the bedroom. "I wasn't sure if I was supposed to take them on an empty stomach or if I should eat."

"Eat," Carmilla replied as she checked the labels; "C'mon I'll make you a bowl of cereal before I shower."

"I think I can manage a bowl of cereal," Laura said petulantly; "I did manage to shower and get all the stuff I wanted to bring down moved into your spare bedroom by myself."

"And that's because you still have Oxy in your system," Carmilla replied as she took a bowl down from the cupboard; "The stuff is amazing at making you feel better than you really are." She poured some granola into the bowl and then took Laura's favourite flavour of yoghurt from the fridge. "Trust me, you don't want to overdo it," she said as she handed Laura a spoon. "You won't even know how sore you really are until later tonight and then tomorrow?" Laura paused with the spoon halfway to her mouth; "I doubt you'll make it out of bed…"

"That almost sounds like a promise," Laura joked.

"And that's the other reason I want to wait," she kissed Laura as she pouted again; "I don't want to be worrying about how sore I am, or how sore you are, while I'm trying to make you feel good."

Carmilla shook out one of her antibiotics and one of the pain pills. She reached for a knife and cut the Oxycodone in half.

"Why only half?"

"Because this way it's enough to help with the pain but not knock you on your ass," she put half the tablet back in the bottle. "I never liked Oxy myself," she shook her head; "Yeah it's great for pain but it makes me uncomfortably stoned, no," she sighed; "Morphine was what I liked."

"You said it was her fault, Deanna's?"

"The scars on my back," she started, figuring she might as well get the details out of the way; "I got
the day we buried my Dad," she picked up Laura's bowl and led them over to the table; "Will still
didn't know she isn't our mother and Deanna was afraid of the questions he might ask if he noticed
my mother's gravestone," she smiled, "She had him cremated but we still buried him next to my
mother. Anyway," she shook her head; "the housekeeper, Mrs Connors, made us something to eat
when we got home. She asked if I was okay, I told her I was but she pressed, said that my father
was in a better place now," she looked up and met Laura's eyes; "I looked Deanna in the eye and
then turned to Mrs Connors and said; 'I know he is, he's finally back with the only woman who
ever loved him', Mrs Connors didn't know what to say. Neither did Deanna, at first," she sighed;
"She took her check book from her purse, wrote an obscenely high amount, I have no doubt, and
then told her her services were no longer required." She shook her head again. "The minute we
heard the door close she backhanded me off my chair," Laura stifled a gasp; "The next thing I
remember is waking up in the hospital as they removed shards of glass from my back and I listened
to her lie about what happened…"

"But surely they…"

"Maybe they did," Carmilla shrugged; "but none of them were willing to risk their careers over it."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because she threatened me before I had the chance," Carmilla replied, sounding again like the
scared eleven year old she'd once been; "told me if I didn't lie that she'd do it again and worse…"
she took a shaky breath; "And then she threatened Will…"

"Carm…"

"This," she said, pressing on, now that she'd started taking the band aid off there was no stopping;
she turned her right arm over to show Laura a long thin scar on her forearm; "happened when I was
fifteen," she smiled; "That's when I met Doc Coughlin," she shook her head; "I 'fell' down the stairs
over the Christmas holidays and broke it almost as badly as you broke yours only mine didn't break
the skin. She sent me back to school and it was only a few days before the teachers realized
something was wrong," she shrugged; "I could barely move my arm let alone write. They sent me
to the hospital and I was in surgery before Deanna even knew I was there. He knew something was
wrong with our story, that we were lying about how I got hurt, but he was too afraid," she sighed
again; "Apparently one of the nurses who was in surgery with him noticed the other bruises on my
body and had questioned Deanna about it. She was fired the next… shit…" she sighed.

"What?"

"The Doc…" she stood up; "he knows how I feel about drugs, especially this close to a fight…"
she sighed; "His son's an emt, must have been one of the ones there and he gave me the drugs
without being told to…"

"Or his son recognized your name and called him before Dark did?" Laura offered.

"Maybe," she shook her head; "Anyway he gave me Morphine for the pain and Deanna somehow
managed to keep my bottle filled without me knowing it," she shrugged; "Guess if I was stoned out
of my tree ninety percent of the time I wasn't much of a threat." She held up her tank top to show
the Laura the last of her scars, a long thin one along her ribs and then a second, deeper scar barely
visible as it went into her hairline. "That happened the night we ran away," she told her; "She broke
a rib that they had to repair so it wouldn't pierce my lung…"

"Enough…" Laura said quietly as she went to stand in front of her; "It's not that I don't want you to
tell me but this…" Laura took her hand and waited for her to meet her eyes; "You talk like this
happened to someone else, like it doesn't affect you… but I know it does," she kissed her briefly. "I didn't understand it at first… how this women I've come to admire for her strength, for how she saved my life without ever letting on how she scared she was..." she shook her head; "You were fighting a panic attack just from talking to her..."

"I don't want your pity, Laura, nor your sympathy," she shrugged and looked down again; "it's just something that happened to me... something I want to forget ever happened but every time I..." she smiled and kissed her briefly; "Wait here..." she noticed her half eaten cereal; "better yet, finish your breakfast..."

"Yes, dear..." Laura replied with a pout, which of course earned her another brief kiss.

"Don't 'yes, dear,' me, young lady," Carmilla scolded, albeit playfully; "You need to keep your strength up." She kissed her again. "I'll be right back."

She crossed the apartment to her office and opened her safe. She hated talking about her past because of the nightmares and flashbacks it inevitably brought. Already she was worried about the dreams she might have from the little bit she'd shared so far. She took from the safe a leather bound journal. There were two, this, the first, covered what she remembered from about the age of eight until fourteen. The second covered the rest along with the scrapbook of newspaper clippings. She couldn't relive it. Not even for Laura. But she wanted her to understand. What exactly, she wasn't sure, but it was important that she did.

She walked back out to Laura to find her talking to the car rental company.

"That'll be fine... half an hour?" Laura smiled as Carmilla sat beside her; "Wow... I bet she is..." she laughed as she hung up. She kissed her briefly and went back to eating her cereal. "So you're their best customer, eh?"

"I guess," she replied as her hand caressed the top of the leather bound book. "Look... I can't..." she sighed; "I want to tell you what happened but every time I talk about this stuff I get nightmares..." she pushed the book towards Laura; "This... well, it's meant to be my 'memoirs', if the whole Ultimate Fighter thing doesn't pan out..." she stood and kissed Laura's temple; "Start with that one and I'll give you the second when you're done."

"Carm... you don't..."

"But I do," she said with a smile. "You said you had my back, yes?" Laura nodded. "Then you deserve to know the truth even I'm not strong enough to tell you."

"I don't know," Laura said, going to stand in front of her again; "it takes a lot of guts to let me read an unedited version of your life."

"Maybe," she replied, but even to her own ears it wasn't convincing; "I need to shower," she sighed and kissed her again; "Call the physio? Re-book our appointments for twoish on Monday?"

"Sure," she kissed her; "And Carm? There really is only one thing you can say that would ever make me leave you."

"And what's that?"

"If you told me you don't feel the same," she looked down and took her hand, playing with her fingers as she looked up again; "and told me you don't want to be with me..."

Carmilla interrupted her with a kiss.
"Not going to happen," she whispered.

Carmilla let the warm water wash away the last traces of Laura's blood from her body along with the tears that had started anew when she realized just how much blood there still was. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd almost lost her. Had she'd known it was as bad as it was? No. She knew it was bad, yes, but not necessarily life threatening.

She wiped away her tears roughly and smiled; "No… this is supposed to be the good part, the easy part..." she thought. Wasn't that how all those cheesy romantic comedies went? The two leads realize their feelings and live happily ever after? "And when has my life ever been simple or easy?" she thought. No, instead of relishing her newfound love and all that comes with it she had to contend with nosey reporters, over-protective fathers, not to mention, the biggest fight of her life in two weeks.

"Fucking Danny..." she muttered. Of all the fighters, why did it have to be her? "Because Deanna planned it that way..." she sighed. She'd long suspected her stepmother of getting close with a few of the local fighters, Danny, of course, being one of them. Truth be told she was glad when Danny hurt Brody and gave her the perfect excuse to ban her from the gym. She still wasn't sure how she'd ended up friends with Will. She shook her head and turned off the water. "One thing at a time..." she reminded herself. So what if Deanna had somehow paid off her intended opponent and made sure Danny got the fight instead? What did it matter? Win the fight and it was an amazing underdog story. If she lost they'd blame the last minute opponent change to a much larger fighter. It was a win-win situation but Carmilla intended to win. In fact she looked forward to it.

She toweled herself off and went into her bedroom to get dressed. She couldn't help but smile, fighting Danny would be the first time she actually disliked the person she was fighting. Every time before she'd imagine she was taking out her rage on Deanna, this time it was personal. For the first time she'd be in control. Yes, imagining she was pummeling Deanna was satisfying and it had led to some truly spectacular knockouts, but she also runned the risk of blacking out, of letting the rage consume her.

She put on one of her nice bras and panties to match; sure, she meant it when she said she wanted to take things slow with Laura, if there was any chance at all she might see her, however? She smiled and blushed as she went to take out a white, short sleeved fitted shirt and cargo shorts from her dresser. She wondered if Laura fully appreciated just how many 'firsts' they'd be sharing. Yes, there was the very obvious 'first' but the little things, like meeting her girlfriend's father, was a big thing to her. She couldn't help wishing it were under better circumstances.

"Fucking Deanna..." she muttered. The stupid woman was even ruining something that should have been simple. No, instead she had to drive all the way to Abbottsford and deal with the press.

She walked out of the bedroom to find Laura and Will talking, their morning protein shakes on the table.

"Phone," she demanded of Will.

"What? Why?" he asked in confusion.

"Phone," she repeated her hand out waiting for it.

"And good morning to you to Sis," he joked as he handed it to her.
"Damn it, Will, what are you trying to do?" she asked, the last number dialed was Deanna's.

"I saw the article and I called to tell her to back off," he replied defensively.

"What article?" Laura asked.

Carmilla opened her laptop and called it up for her before turning on Will again; "And what did she have to say?"

"That Laura must be as brainwashed as the rest of us," he replied; "C'mon, I was just trying to help…"

"Help?" Carmilla laughed; "I have reporters stalking the airport and you think you're helping? God damn it Will…" she said as she saw the several calls he'd made to and from Danny. "She's using you, Danny, for information…"

"What?"

"She called Deanna and Laura's father," she informed him as she slipped his phone into her pocket.

"Hey..." he tried to protest.

"You can have it back once I've had the number changed," she told him.

"I hate to say it, babe, but whoever wrote this…" Laura said shaking her head; "they're good… I mean, there's just enough of the truth to make it believable…" she met Carmilla's eyes; "The Doc did say he'd rather I stayed overnight so technically you did bring me home against his wishes…"

"It also means we can't trust anyone," Carmilla clarified and then looked back to her little brother; "Look it, I have worked too damned hard to make sure she doesn't get her claws into you but if you're so damned determined to keep messing up my carefully laid plans…" she studied him a moment; "Do you want to go back, Will? Become her boy toy?"

"It would be easier," he said quietly; "She said she'd leave you both alone if I did."

"And you believe her?" Laura asked; "I'm sorry, maybe it's not my place, but Deanna, she won't give up Will." She got up and went to take Carmilla's hand. "She's convinced herself she's right and worse, convinced others…" she kissed Carmilla's cheek. "Danny… she's not a bad person but I could see Deanna convincing her that she's just worried about me."

"Will, you need to be careful, at least until I get on the show," Carmilla said as she went to ruffle his hair with her free hand; "We always knew it was going to get worse before it gets better."

"And the only way through it is through it?" he asked with a sigh.

"Maybe you should have stayed in Montreal for summer," she said sadly.

"No," he shook his head and then stood up to hug her; "Yes it's easier but it gets so damned hot."

"True," Carmilla laughed; "Is the rental here yet?"

"Yeah, I brought up the keys with your shakes," he replied.

"Thanks," she looked to Laura; "We should probably get going," she said as she grabbed their shakes.
He walked with them to the elevator and then, after another quick hug from his sister, made his way down to the apartment he shared with Brody. She hated being hard on him but she wouldn't let anyone, not even him, derail her plans.

"You okay?" Laura asked quietly once they were in the car.

"I will be," Carmilla replied with a sigh as she reached over and did up Laura's seatbelt for her. "How much did you read before he got there?"

"Enough to understand why you don't think you deserve to be happy," Laura replied sadly.

"What she did to Will was worse, in a way," Carmilla replied as she started the car. "I didn't see it at first, too wrapped up in what she'd been doing to me my whole life to see it as anything more than an attempt to make me feel even more worthless," she put the car in reverse then aimed them towards the street. "She was always quick to insult me and praise him," she shrugged as she pulled out of the parking lot; "It changed when my Dad died… took me awhile, but I realise now, she'd been 'grooming' him from the moment he hit puberty to take my father's place…"

"That's…"

"Sick?" Carmilla supplied with a chuckle; "That's not the half of it… I think she's actually convinced herself that she's in love with him and she really is trying to save him from me and my wicked wicked ways…" she shook her head and reached for Laura's hand the minute they were on the highway. "I don't think he saw it himself until she went too far too fast… he called her on it, told her she was disgusting, how could she want that from him when he was her son…" she sighed; "She finally told him the truth, or her version of it anyway… according to her the burden of motherhood was too much for my mother so she went and got drunk and ran herself off the road. I came home from a concert, stoned and drunk out of my tree, to find him crying and demanding the truth… that's when we hatched our plan to get out and he got me off the drugs."

"He asked me about my Oxy, are he and Dark really that worried?"

"They have every right to be," Carmilla admitted; "I've only been completely clean for a little over a year."

"But you drink," Laura pointed out.

"Rarely and never to excess," Carmilla countered; "I don't like feeling out of control but every now and then it's nice to relax and feel normal and have a beer or two with my friends." She looked over to Laura and smiled; "You've got nothing to worry about Pup, I'm not nearly as sore as I thought I'd be and even if I were I'd tough it out before risking my fight."

"You really think you can beat Danny?" Laura asked quietly; "She's got, like, half a foot on you…"

"And a height advantage is only an advantage if you know how to use it," she glanced at her long enough to see she remained unconvinced. "The beauty part is I don't have to win, just get out unhurt…"

"You'll still get the Invicta fight if you lose?"

"Why do you think so many fighters, even the elite of the UFC, take short notice fights?" she asked and she noticed her shrug out of the corner of her eye; "It's always a win-win for them, both of them… granted it's a bit better for the winner but whoever loses, well, unless it's a real miss-match, they were fighting an uphill battle to win."

"I can beat her, though, and I plan on it." She smiled. "That's the advantage of being my size… fight in my own division
and I'm pretty evenly matched. Fight down, and despite the weight cut being a bitch, I'm still the bigger opponent. Fight up a division and I don't have to worry about the cut and even though I'm usually smaller, I'm faster too."

"If you knew you were fighting up a division why'd you ever agree to me being your sparring partner?" Laura asked, insecurity underlying the question.

"Partly because, as soon as I saw the way you wrapped your wrists, I knew you had more than a 'couple of years' of Krav Maga," she teased.

"My Dad signed me up when I was eight," Laura sighed; "Losing my Mom the way we did, especially with him being a cop and already overprotective…"

"What happened?"

"A mugging gone wrong," Laura replied, sniffed and let Carmilla's hand go to wipe her nose. "You said partly?" she asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"You're the right size for the division I usually fight in?" Carmilla offered and smiled when Laura took her hand again; "And you're cute as hell…"

"So I guess I'm fired?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Well I can't train with you anymore," she said, stating the obvious; "And now that we're dating I don't know how I feel about taking money from you."

"Technically you're not my employee, you're an employee of the gym," Carmilla clarified. "And that hasn't changed. Besides you don't help me just by training with me," she shrugged; "You help me by giving me something more than revenge as motivation," she turned to her as she stopped at a light; "Besides, now that we are dating, everything I have I share with you and I have more than enough."

"You don't have to support me," Laura replied.

"And if I want to?"

"Still, we've been together less than a day," Laura countered.

"We'll work it out," Carmilla offered as the light changed. "Besides, you got hurt while training, so technically I'm responsible for all your medical costs and you still get your salary."

They sat in companionable silence as Carmilla paid attention to where she was going; she'd only been to the Abbottsford airport a couple of times and she didn't want to get lost, she was already stressed enough.

"Stop worrying about meeting my Dad," Laura chided, almost as though she'd read her mind; "Yes, he's a cop. Yes, he's overprotective, but…" she squeezed her hand; "I've also talked to him almost every day since I met you and he's going to love you because I do."

"And he's not going to have a problem with me being a girl?"

"No, definitely not," Laura replied with a laugh; "I think he might be the first parent in history to be relieved to find out their only child is gay," she laughed again; "I should thank you, actually, I used
my scrapbook of articles about you to come out to him."

"Seriously?" Carmilla asked and joined in her laughter.

"Yeah, he was glad because he had no idea how he was going to talk to me about boys," she shook her head; "That's when we started watching UFC together."

"Sounds like you have an interesting relationship with him," Carmilla remarked as she parked the car.

"So what's the plan then? With the vultures?" Laura asked as Carmilla undid her seatbelt for her.

"Pretend like they're not there unless they bother us?" Carmilla replied.

"What happened to not running from them?"

"We're not," Carmilla answered as she got out of the car and then went to Laura's side to help her out. "But Frank doesn't know that which is why he changed your Dad's flight and honestly? I'm really not up to dealing with them today. If they ask questions we'll answer them but I'm hoping your happy reunion with your father will be enough."

Laura leaned back against the car as soon as she was standing.

"Still dizzy?" Carmilla asked in concern as she went to feel her forehead.

"A bit," she shook her head to clear it; "Must be the meds, right?"

"Mostly," Carmilla answered and put her arm around her shoulders while Laura put her arm around her waist. "We'll stop for lunch on the way home and then you're taking the rest of the day easy, got it?"

"Yes dear," Laura replied sweetly and kissed her cheek.

"I'm just watching out for you."

"I know you are," Laura replied and kissed her cheek again; "And I appreciate it."

"I know you can take care of yourself, I do, but I have more experience with this stuff than you do," she offered. "Do you have a passport?"

"Yeah, I asked my Dad to bring it actually," Laura replied with a smile as they entered the airport; "he wanted to come down for your fight," she added. "Why are you asking about a passport?"

"Because I want to you to come to Vegas with me before the show," Carmilla smiled and kissed a surprised looking Laura; "I'll be away from you for six weeks, so sue me if I want to spend every last minute I can with you," she whispered into her ear as she spotted the reporters. She led Laura over to the information board to figure out where to meet her father, the reporters, uncharastically keeping their distance. "That's new…" she commented.

"What?"

"They're leaving us alone," she laughed; "I wonder if they worried they'd be putting your safety at
risk if they approached us… I am, after all, keeping you hostage, apparently. They're probably shocked to see you here at all."

"Well, then they'll be absolutely floored when I do this, won't they?" Laura countered before turning and kissing Carmilla full on.

"Stop!" Carmilla said, laughing as she noticed a tall man staring at them with a small smile on his face. "That's your Dad, isn't it?"

"It is!" Laura all but squealed and walked over to him as fast as she could. "Daddy!" she greeted as he leaned over, and hugged her carefully. She stepped back and motioned Carmilla closer. "Daddy, this is my girlfriend Carmilla."

The two stood staring at each other a moment and then Carmilla held her hand out to him; "Mr Hollis."

"Please!" he laughed as he pulled her into a bear hug; "You saved my daughter's life, you've certainly earned the right to call me Mark, or Poppa Hollis, like Laura's friends do."

"Thank you Mark," Carmilla replied warmly as he let her go. "I'm sorry about the last minute flight changes, but as you can see, my 'fan club' has even followed us here."

Mark looked over to the assembled reporters, the three of them clearly confused at the reunion they were witnessing. "Haven't the lot of you got something better to report? You know, like real news?" Mark challenged them.

"So you're not here to take Laura home?" one of them had the nerve to ask.

"I considered it," he admitted; "but then I realized she's found a new home and someone who loves her almost as much as I do. Why in the world would I take her away from that?"

"Is Miss Karnstein paying you to say the things you are?" one of them asked.

"She paid for my flight here but only because she changed it to try to avoid the likes of you lot," Mark replied evenly. "Now, if you'll excuse us, my daughter suffered a terrible accident and should be home resting, not dealing with idiots." He looked to Carmilla. "Shall we?" he asked as he motioned towards the exit.

"Don't you have luggage?" Laura asked.

"I'm not staying long, honey," he replied as he indicated his backpack; "You know me, I don't need much." He put his arm around her shoulders while she took Carmilla's hand. "It really is a pleasure to meet you, young lady, I've heard a lot about you."

"I bet you have," Carmilla replied wryly.

"Oh, not just Laura's scrapbook," he laughed; "I think we've talked almost every night since she met you. I'm glad you two finally figured it out. I can already say I've never seen her happier."

"Front or back, Dad?" Laura asked as they reached the car.

"Where would you be more comfortable, pumpkin?"

"Next to Carm," she replied and blushed.

"Yeah, that's what I figured," he teased as he opened the back door.
"I thought we could grab some lunch before we head back into town, I know those private flights don't offer much in the way of food," Carmilla told him as she helped Laura with her seatbelt.

"I was too anxious to eat," he replied sheepishly.

"My Dad hates flying," Laura provided.

"I've only been to Montreal and back," Carmilla said as she started the car; "Wasn't too bad once we got over the mountains but I hear the smaller planes can get a bit bumpy." She turned to him before pulling out; "What are you in the mood for?" she asked.

"Steak," Laura replied for him. "What?" she asked as they both turned to her; "I'm craving a steak for some reason…"

"Blood loss," her father replied, his voice a little strained. "I talked to your doctor this morning, he mentioned Carmilla almost had to donate," he looked to Carmilla, "Wouldn't that have been a bad idea this close to your fight?"

"Maybe," she replied; "I just wanted to get out of the hospital."

"You saved my daughter's life, that isn't something I take lightly," he informed her as he reached forward and squeezed her shoulder; "She was the only thing that helped me keep it together when her mother died, I don't know what…” his voice caught. "I just want her to be happy and if you make her happy I'll do everything I can to help."

"Dad?" Laura said tentatively as Carmilla used her phone to find a nearby steak restaurant. "When did Danny call you?"

"This morning, just after I talked to your lawyer, why?"

"You said you got a call last night?" Carmilla asked as she pulled out of the parking lot.

"Yes, it was an unregistered Vancouver number," he replied; "Woman seemed pretty adamant that you hurt Laura," he laughed; "I considered telling her that Laura has knocked you on your ass and choked you out but I thought that might send the wrong message." He paused. "Can I assume that was your stepmother last night?"

"Her or one of her lackeys," Carmilla replied as she pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant.

"How did she think she'd get away with the lies when you have an eye witness?" he asked as they climbed from the car.

"It's all about casting doubt," Laura replied. "The more she can cast now the less seriously people might take the truth when it comes out."

The restaurant was near empty when they entered, just as Carmilla had hoped. The hostess didn't recognize her, which was a good sign, and led them to a table near the front window.

"Can I take your drink orders?" she asked politely.

"I shouldn't, but Dad, I'm guessing you're dying for a beer?" Laura replied.

"That would be nice," he replied with a smile as he accepted a menu. "Whatever you have on tap will be fine."

"You have Bellini's here right?" Carmilla asked, noticing Laura's raised eyebrow as the hostess
nodded; "We'll have two virgin Bellini's please."

"Your waitress will be by with your drinks and to take your orders in a minute," the hostess said before leaving.

Carmilla scanned the menu but glanced at Laura when she heard her sigh. Having a feeling she knew what was bothering her she kissed her temple and told her she'd be back in a minute. She tracked down the hostess and asked to speak to the chef. When she left to get him Carmilla turned to watch Laura and her father talking and laughing. She smiled and turned to the chef when he joined her.

"I was wondering if you could do me a big favour." He nodded uncertainly. "Whatever my girlfriend orders can you make it bite-sized for her? She's a little embarrassed about having to ask for help."

"Not a problem," he replied with a smile; "I'll even try to make it pretty for her."

"Thanks," Carmilla replied with an equally large smile, making a mental note to tip better than usual.

He looked over to the table and then back to her.

"I know how annoying those things can be," he joked before returning to the kitchen.

The waitress joined them at the table just as she sat down.

"Order whatever you want, honey, I don't mind cutting your food up for you," her father teased.

"Dad!" she hissed.

"Actually, Miss, the chef has informed me that whatever you order he'll make sure it's as easy as possible for you to eat it," the waitress informed her with a wink to Carmilla. "His daughter had a cast similar to yours a little while ago; he knows how restrictive it can be."

Laura blushed and placed her order, followed by her Dad and finally Carmilla.

When the waitress left Laura turned and kissed her shoulder.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, Pup," Carmilla replied and kissed her forehead.

"That's it, enough," Mark announced.

"I'm sorry, Dad…"

"Carmilla can you use your phone to book me a flight home?" he asked, surprising them both.

"I'm sorry?" Carmilla managed.

"I already knew you loved my daughter," he replied with a smile; "But going to talk to the chef to save her embarrassment?" He looked to Laura. "I can see you're in good hands here, I don't need to take care of you." He looked back to Carmilla. "Maybe book me a flight out of Vancouver for this evening?"

"You should stay," Carmilla said finally; "At least for a few days." She looked back to Laura. "I'm
going to really busy for the next two weeks, maybe it'd be nice to spend some time with your Dad? Take the Jeep and do a little sightseeing?” She looked back to Mark. "Maybe stay until her appointment on Wednesday?"

"I have an appointment on Wednesday?” Laura asked.

"Not yet but you will," Carmilla replied; "The Doc will want to check your blood work for infection and make sure you red blood count is back to normal."

"More blood tests?” Laura whined.

"When Dark had his accident they were testing him daily," Carmilla replied; "but he was hospital for more than a week…”

"You're really on top of all this, aren't you?” Mark asked.

"I've dealt with my fair share of broken bones," Carmilla replied evenly; "And I helped Dark recover when he accidentally walked off the Granville Bridge," she shrugged; "Laura's the best training partner I've ever had, it's in my best interest to make sure she heals quickly and properly."

Mark studied her a moment and then was distracted as their meals arrived, Laura's steak and salad not only cut to bite size, but artfully arranged on her plate. He took a bit of his steak and chewed it, a thoughtful look on his face.

"You know," he said finally; "I wasn't sure what to think when Laura told me she was going be training with you. Imagine what I thought when she finally admitted she was having feelings for you?” He shook his head and smiled. "I'll stay until Wednesday night, and if you'll have me, I'd like to come back for your fight in a couple of weeks."

This, Mark's acceptance, meant more to her than she realized it would. She hadn't felt a parent's approval since her father died. Maybe the day wasn't turning out as bad as she'd feared for once. She smiled and met his eyes; "You're always welcome," she replied simply, there was nothing more she could say.
Chapter Notes

Best Laid Plans

Sorry for the delay folks. As some of you know last weekend I was dealing with extreme heat and smog caused by forest fires in my province followed by a badly pulled neck muscle. I had hoped to get some writing done at work but I had a busy week. Hope you like!

Tuesday morning Carmilla woke to find herself wrapped in Laura's arms; her casted left arm under her head and her right arm pulling her close. "This is new," she thought and smiled; it felt nice being in her arms. She felt safe. Every other morning before that she'd woken to find Laura gone. Despite her assertions to the contrary, she was a 'morning person' and was not only up before her but was showered and had their breakfast ready by the time she joined her.

She looked at the time and deciding it was still early opted to stay right where she was. It had been a busy week so far, what with doctors’ appointments, training and dealing with reporters. She'd finally had enough by Monday and ordered all of them new, untraceable, phones. Somehow Deanna, and by extension, the reporters she paid, had known their every move. Getting them all, including Laura's father, new phones, was a start but she was worried. Worried what would happen when she left for the Ultimate Fighter.

The stories revolving around her and Laura were, so far anyway, predictable. They began with painting Carmilla as a young woman who was keeping Laura on a short leash, had her locked up according to some accounts, to trashing Laura as someone who was only with Carmilla for her money. Slowly, however, the stories were becoming fewer and farther between as more and more people saw them together, sometimes with her father Mark in tow, and realized that maybe, just maybe, their relationship was genuine.

She sighed and pulled Laura's hand out from under her shirt where it had come to rest on her belly. She brought it to her lips and kissed her palm.

"You're awake," Laura said quietly and kissed her neck; "You okay?"

"Sure, why?" Carmilla asked as she turned to her back and looked up to Laura.

"Because, when I got up to go the bathroom earlier I came back to find you shaking and crying in your sleep," Laura informed her and kissed her cheek; "Nightmare?"

"I..." she rubbed her face as she tried to remember what she'd been dreaming. "Nightmares aren't that out of the norm..." she admitted and looked to Laura, her eyes swimming with tears; "I keep dreaming that I've lost you... either I don't get to you in time and you bleed out, or the Doc comes out of surgery and tells me that you didn't make it," she sighed as Laura wiped away her tears; "But then I usually wake up, find you here safe with me, and fall back to sleep."

"I'm here," Laura replied and kissed her softly; "I'm safe and I'm yours."

"Yeah?"
"Hell yeah," Laura replied fiercely, and as she kissed her again, moved so the she was half on top of her. She kissed along her jaw to her neck as her good hand again snuck under her shirt. She kissed her way back to her ear and whispered; "And Dad's leaving tomorrow afternoon so maybe you'll finally let me show you?"

"I was thinking, after we drop him off at the airport, maybe we could go to dinner and maybe a movie?"

"I'm talking about making love and you want to go to dinner and a movie instead?" Laura teased.

"Well," Carmilla started as she pushed her off her gently and then sat up and stretched, smiling when she didn't feel the nagging aches she'd had since carrying Laura out of the bush; "I'm actually planning on kidnapping you this weekend and getting out of the city for a few days."

"Carm, how many times do I have to tell you the 'where' doesn't matter? That it'll be awesome no matter where we are?"

"I know, love, I do, but if I make love to all night, like I want to, I won't want to get up the next morning to train when I'd much rather just stay in bed with you all day," Carmilla explained. "And," she continued when she noticed Laura pouting; "Frank's cabin is about an hour's drive from a natural hot spring and that would do us both a lot of good."

There was a knock at her bedroom door, which frankly, scared the crap out of her.

"Breakfast is almost ready," Mark called.

"We'll be right out Dad," Laura replied as she sat up and again wrapped her arms Carmilla. "Sorry… I ran down to my place to grab something to wear for the day and he offered to make us breakfast."

"I know this is going to sound weird, but I'm going to miss your Dad," Carmilla admitted, she'd actually enjoyed his company and it was nice to feel accepted by a parental figure.

"Don't tell him that or he won't leave," Laura joked.

"Okay," she replied and kissed her briefly; "I'm going to the bathroom and I'll be right out," she told her before climbing out of bed and grabbing her phone on the way to the washroom. She turned on her phone and placed it on the counter while she was busy relieving herself, grabbing it again when she was done and had washed her hands. She scrolled the missed calls, smiling when she saw a call from the car dealership downtown.

"Good morning, Yaletown Mini," a friendly female voice answered when she called.

"Hello, I'm returning your call, my name is Carmilla Karnstein."

"Oh yes, Miss Karnstein, we called to let you know your car arrived and you can pick it up any time," the voice replied.

"Excellent," she answered; "We'll be by this afternoon, around two, to pick it up."

"Very well, Miss Karnstein, we'll see you then."

She ended the call and smiled as she dialed the car rental company; "Good morning, Budget Rentals."
"Good morning," she replied; "it's Carmilla, I was hoping someone could come by Yaletown Mini this afternoon and pick up my rental?"

"That shouldn't be a problem, around what time?"

"Twoish," she replied.

"We'll see you there, Miss Karnstein."

"Took them long enough," she thought as she ended the call and went to join Laura and her father for breakfast. She'd ordered the Mini Cooper a week after meeting Laura. Actually, she'd ordered it after finding out how bad Laura was at driving her Jeep. Yes, maybe she was being a little overprotective of her baby, but it was the first thing she'd bought herself when she'd finally gotten her money. Sure, Laura could have used either the Karmma van or pick-up, but she, who was taller than Laura, didn't feel overly comfortable driving them.

She kissed Laura's temple and sat beside her at the table, Mark setting down banana pancakes, bacon and sausage in front of her.

"Thanks Mark, but I doubt I'll be able to finish all this," Carmilla said as she poured syrup over her breakfast; "I don't usually eat this heavy before training."

"You're not training today," Laura informed her.

"I'm not?" Carmilla asked with a smirk.

"No, Doc Coughlin has me going in for blood tests at ten and an appointment at one," Laura told her; "You don't have to come with us, if you don't want."

"But neither of us know downtown very well," Mark commented.

Carmilla stood and picked up her pancakes; "I'll be right back, I have few phone calls to make," she informed them, kissed the top of Laura's head and made for her office. She called the car dealership first and told them she'd be by around eleven instead. Next, as she waited for her email to open, she called Rick.

"Morning kiddo, what's up?" he asked when he answered.

"Can you and your team be ready to go by this afternoon?" she asked as she opened a certain email confirming her suspicions. She noticed that Rick had also been sent the email.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Laura is having blood tests at ten, then we'll be picking up her new car, next its back to the Doc's for her appointment at one. I was thinking after we'd go for lunch at the Fountainhead Pub and then head down to English Bay for a walk on the seawall," she replied.

"Sounds like a plan," he answered, his tone changed subtly as they talked business; "Your escort will pick you up before you cross Lion's Gate bridge and stay with you until he's in custody," he paused at Carmilla's gasp, she'd been reading the report on the video surveillance and realized the mystery man had been following her longer than she'd known. "What?" Rick asked, sounding concerned.

"He was sighted here a few days after we picked up Will," she replied.
"Carm, don't be so hard on yourself, you've been a little distracted," he soothed.

"What do we know about him?" Carmilla asked as she rubbed her temples with her free hand.

"Nothing," he replied tersely; "The car isn't in his name."

"Should I tell them? Laura and her father?" she asked.

"I wouldn't," he replied; "tipping him off that you know he's following you will only put you all in more danger, and worse yet, we might lose our only chance to nab him," he paused a moment as if considering his words carefully; "This is dangerous, kiddo, we know nothing about this man or what he's capable of but it's as safe as we can make it."

"I'm just worried they'll be mad if I don't tell them," she admitted.

"Look, he's been following you for weeks and never approached," Rick reminded her; "Go about your day and hopefully we'll have him in custody by the end of it. I'll have two officers following you on the seawall and a team waiting in the parking lot to arrest him when you get back. I'll text you when they're ready," when his plan was met with silence he continued; "Carm, they'll take him down the second he tries anything, I promise."

Carmilla looked up at a knock on the door, surprised to find Mark standing there instead of Laura.

"Alright Rick, call me if anything changes," she said before hanging up. "Where's Laura?"

"I asked her to grab my camera," he replied as he took a seat across from her; "I don't want to alarm you but you know we're being followed, right?"

Carmilla leaned back in her chair and studied him a moment before replying.

"I do," she admitted finally; "and there's a plan in place to have him in custody by the end of the day. Does Laura know?" she asked.

"No," he replied; "I had a feeling you've dealt with this sort of thing before and would know what was best. So what's the plan?"

Carmilla watched his face, trying to get some indication of what he was thinking while she told him her and Rick's plan. He regarded her a moment; "I think I know who he is," he said quietly.

"What? How?"

"Laura mentioned something about a guy creeping her out at her last gym," he explained; "She mentioned seeing him when we were at the Aquarium yesterday."

"It's not me… shit…" Carmilla hissed as she called Rick back; "He's not stalking me, he's after Laura," she informed him.

"Which means you're the one in danger," he replied. "How do you know?"

"Mark told me Laura mentioned someone at her last gym giving her the creeps and she noticed him at the Aquarium yesterday," she informed him; "Does this change anything?"

"No. He won't try anything in public," he replied; "Park on the street, we'll save you a spot."

"Thanks Rick," she said and hung up.
"Maybe we should ask Laura about it? Maybe she knows his name?" Mark suggested.

"You know her better than I do, what do you suggest?" she countered.

"It might be good to know what kind of crazy we're dealing with."

"True," she replied; "and if we don't tell her she might just turn around and confront him and blow the whole thing..."

"Blow what whole thing?" Laura asked as she entered.

"I'll give you a few minutes," Mark suggested and stood.

"Mark, are you allowed to carry a gun?" Carmilla asked, ignoring Laura's look of shock as she waited for his answer. He nodded. She got up and went to her safe, opened it and then pressed a button inside of it to open a hidden cabinet beside it. She punched in the password for it and called Mark over. "Take your pick," she offered.

"How..." he said, stunned at the array of handguns and two shotguns she had.

"I have a hunting permit and a license to carry thanks to Rick," she replied; "However it would be better if you, who already have a reason to carry, were the one carrying it as I don't want that to come to light."

"Carm?" Laura said, getting her attention; "What's going on?"

"I'll take this one," Mark commented as he chose a gun similar to the one he used on the job.

Carmilla watched him leave then went to sit behind her desk again. She patted her lap and smiled when Laura took the hint and sat there. "Tell me about this guy who has been following you."

"It's nothing..."

"It's not," Carmilla interrupted; "He's been following us since a few days after we picked up Will."

"Seriously?" Carmilla nodded. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't notice until we drove out to pick up your dad," she explained; "Laura... there's a plan in place to have him arrested by the end of the day. You up for it?"

"Wait, if you didn't notice until a few days ago how do you know he's been following us that long?"

"I have cameras set up around the gym, two of which catch every car that comes and goes within a half block around the gym. When I noticed him at the Aquarium I told Rick and he had surveillance set up across the street. They analyzed the video and I got the report this morning."

She moved some of Laura's hair behind her ear and then kissed her neck. "Do you know anything about him?"

"Only his name," she replied quietly; "Bruce Smith."

"Sounds like an alias," Carmilla commented as she reached for her phone and texted Rick the name. "But maybe it's one he's used before."

"What's the plan, then?"
Carmilla told her the plan, leaving out, of course, the errand they'd be running between her appointments.

"You weren't going to tell us, were you?" Laura asked sadly.

"Not because I don't trust you," Carmilla rushed to assure her; "Rick thought it was the best way to keep you both safe…"

"What about your safety, Carm?" Laura asked as she stared into her eyes; "Dad's a cop, a damned good one too. Don't you think it'd be best for him to know?"

"He already did," she laughed and kissed her; "C'mon, let's get going, I need to talk to the coaches before we leave."

"Morning," Dark greeted as they re-entered the living room; "These just arrived," he said as he put a box down on the table.

"Excellent," Carmilla replied, licked the food off her knife and then used it to open the box. "Here," she said as she handed Mark his new phone.

"What's this for?" he asked as he looked it over.

"Since I don't know how Deanna's minions are tracking us, I thought I'd take one possibility out of the running," she replied as she handed Dark his new phone along with Will and Brody's; "These are untraceable," she said as she opened Laura's for her. "Please, don't argue Mark, I got them for all of us and got a good deal because I bought ten of them."

"Alright, alright…" he said, his hands in the air; "I know when I've been outranked."

"Dark?" she said to get his attention, her best friend was too busy checking out his new phone; "Try not to lose or break this one?" she teased; he had a horrible record with cell phones.

"I can't make any promises," he replied with a laugh.

"Can you take Will and Brody theirs, please?" He nodded. "Thanks, and tell my trainers I'll be down soon." He nodded again, took a couple of bite-fulls of her pancakes, stole a sausage, and then left.

"How long have you two known each other?" Mark asked.

"A few years," she replied and shrugged; "not very good years, either, so yeah, we're close."

"What happened with him and the bridge?" Mark asked.

"Unlike what the papers reported I didn't push him off if that's what you think," she joked, but it was tense nonetheless. She sighed, Mark was only asking because he wanted to know, not because he believed the stories. "His doctor gave him Tylenol threes to help with the pain of his growth spurts but didn't know he was allergic. Dark took too many because they weren't helping and walked off the bridge in, what they could only guess, was a fugue-like state," she shrugged; "We're not sure cause he was alone at the time."

"You weren't even town, were you?" Laura asked.

"Nope," she laughed; "I was up in Kamloops meeting with trainers."

Mark studied her a moment; "Why is your stepmother so intent on ruining your life?"
"Cause she's a bitch?" offered Laura, who received stern look from her father. "What? She is and trust me, it's one of the nicer names I have for her."

"Deanna is obsessed with two things; money and Will's money," Carmilla shook her head and pushed away her plate; the anxiety of their plans making her lose her appetite. "When we first left it was all about keeping us from our inheritances. Unfortunately for her, Frank is an amazing lawyer and not only kept her from the money we'd yet to receive he got us all the money she'd kept from us before we left. My Dad's will allowed each of us a thousand dollars a month for spending money, clothes and, you know, having a life, but I was lucky if I saw two hundred of that. Will was a bit better off, she liked to spoil him to make me feel worse, but Frank still got us over a hundred grand plus interest," she smiled; "It was enough to put the down payment on this place, fix it up, and get my Jeep. Bob paid off a good portion of the mortgage and I paid off the rest when I turned twenty one in April," she sighed; "Bob, Brody's dad, died a few days after he signed over the gym," she shook her head as she stood; "brain aneurism… never saw it coming," she finished and went to kiss the top of Laura's head; "We'd better get going if we want to be on time."

Carmilla stopped on her way out to talk to her coaches. While they were a little annoyed with her taking the day off she promised she'd train extra hard Wednesday morning, Thursday, and Friday until they left for the weekend. While it was true she was less than two weeks away from her fight with Danny, she also ran the risk of over-training. She'd come a long way, thanks in part to Laura, in the four weeks they'd already trained and now it was all about fine-tuning her game plan. To that end the gym would be closed, starting the following Monday, from ten in the morning to six in the evening. The last thing she needed was Danny finding out what she had planned for her.

The drove into town in silence, Carmilla's eyes flicking to her rear view mirror more than was strictly necessary. She felt her phone vibrate and fished it out of her pocket and handed it to Laura. "What does the text say?"

"They've got you both in sight," Laura read.

Carmilla nodded and gripped the steering wheel a little tighter; she was accustomed to putting her own safety at risk but she wasn't sure how she felt about having Laura and her father along for the ride. They made their way through the traffic on the Lion's Gate Bridge, and as they made their way through the trees of Stanley Park, Carmilla spotted the now familiar sedan behind them.

"There's parking in the lot beside his office," Laura read out the next text.

"How is it that you have this much support from the Vancouver Police Department?" Mark asked conversationally.

"Rick," she replied simply; "Frank and Doc Coughlin are both trying their best to help because they feel guilty they didn't help sooner. As for Rick? He feels bad he wasn't able to do more the night we ran," Carmilla replied. "She has at least two or three cops on the take inside his department so he has to be careful but he has the support of the higher ups. His boss wants Deanna as badly as we do," she shrugged; "I think he's tired of her making a mockery of his department."

"So they catch this guy and what? Hope he admits to working with her?" Laura asked, something Carmilla never heard before, lacing her tone.

"That's the best case scenario," Carmilla replied neutrally; "I'll be happy if it gets him out of our hair for the foreseeable future," she replied as she parked the car.

"I hate blood tests," Laura muttered as Carmilla reached over and undid her seat belt.
"Needles don't bother me much anymore," Carmilla admitted; "The Morphine caused some liver damage so I get tested every six weeks just to be safe."

"So, you'll come in with me?" Laura asked meekly as Carmilla helped her out of the car.

"Sure, Pup, whatever you need," she replied affectionately and kissed her cheek as she watched the same grey sedan that had followed them from North Vancouver park across the street. She rubbed her cheek along Laura's and then kissed her neck. "God, you smell good…" she commented and hugged her close, her eyes never leaving the car across the street.

"C'mon, we're too exposed out here," Mark said quietly as he ushered the two towards the building.

Carmilla received another text as they entered the elevator informing her that their stalker was waiting in his car. "He's staying put," she said quietly as she slipped her phone back in her pocket. "You both needn't look so worried, they'll put him down the second he tries anything."

"Is that why you weren't going to tell us? Because you've already got it covered? We're 'safe'?" Laura asked, again something was lacing her voice that Carmilla couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Babe? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"No, nothing is okay," Laura sighed; "but we'll talk about it tonight, okay?"

Carmilla followed Laura in for her blood tests and distracted her from the needles by telling her all about Frank's cabin. By the end, despite the needle, Laura was looking slightly happier and more relaxed.

"So what do we do for three hours until my appointment?" Laura asked as they exited the building a little while later.

"I have an errand to run," Carmilla replied; "Hope you don't mind tagging along."

"I've come to quite enjoy running 'errands' with you," Laura teased and kissed her cheek as she opened her door for her.

"Am I missing something?" Mark joked.

"When we were still pretending I suddenly seemed to have a lot of little errands to run," Carmilla replied with a shrug and then helped Laura with her seat belt.

"So what's this errand?" Laura asked once Carmilla was seated in the driver's seat and buckled up as well.

"It's a surprise," she replied with a smile.

"So you got it then?" Mark asked from the back seat.

"Came in this morning," Carmilla answered.

"Wait, you know?" Laura asked as she turned in her seat and glared at her father.

"Carmilla asked me if I thought it was a good idea," he said defensively.

"Just do me a favour and close your eyes for fifteen minutes?" Carmilla asked as she took Laura's hand; "Please?" she pleaded.
"Oh fine," Laura huffed and closed her eyes.

Carmilla winked to Mark in the rear view mirror and started the car, the dealership was only a few minutes away and they were pulling into the lot before Laura could even become annoyed about having her eyes closed. She spotted the car right away, blue matching the blue of the British flag on its roof, a fully loaded four door Mini. She pulled up beside it and asked Laura to keep her eyes closed a minute longer while she got out of the car and went to open her door.

"Alright, open your eyes," she told her in a hushed voice.

"Oh, Carm! It's so…" Laura exclaimed and then trailed off when she noticed the license plate. "Wait, it's yours?"

"Technically, yes, it belongs to the gym, but I got it for you to drive," she regarded her a moment; "Do you like it?"

"You just don't want me driving your Jeep," Laura teased as she walked around it.

"You don't seem very comfortable driving it," Carmilla countered.

"Oh c'mon," Laura laughed; "Like I didn't see how relieved you were when Dad suggested we hang on to the rental."

"So… do you like it?" Carmilla asked again.

"It's adorable, Carm, thank you but you don't have to do this."

"Do what?" she asked innocently.

"You don't have to buy me shiny things to impress me," she replied affectionately.

"I wasn't," Carmilla replied honestly; "I ordered it right after I saw how bad you drive standard," she shrugged and smiled as Laura blushed; "And aside from the van and pick-up being too obvious I'm taller than you and don't feel comfortable driving them," she kissed her softly; "Besides, I'm just being practical. I want you to keep living at the gym and you need reliable transportation to get to and from school."

"Ms Karnstein!" a friendly voice called. "So nice to see you again."

The two girls turned to face the salesperson as she approached, Carmilla noting the grey sedan parked across the street. "And you must be Laura," she continued as she drew close. "If you'll both follow me there are just a few papers to sign."

"Of course," Carmilla replied and took Laura's hand; "Mark, can you transfer our stuff into Laura's new car? They'll be picking up the rental from here later."

He nodded and took the keys from the salesperson.

They followed her inside and were listening to her explain how the insurance would work when a shot rang out followed quickly by sirens. Before Laura could stop her Carmilla went running outside to see what happened and stopped dead in her tracks; lying about ten feet away from Mark was one Bruce Smith.

"What the hell happened?" she demanded as she reached Mark.

"He, uh…" he trailed off as two officers ran over and cuffed the bleeding man. "He came over to
talk to me… told me I was to blame for Laura's deviant lifestyle…” he shook his head; "He reached into his jacket and…”

"He's carrying a gun," one of the officers called to them.

"Go get Laura," she asked Mark; "I'll deal with this," he looked to the man on the ground and then did as she asked. She watched him walk away and then take Laura in his arms when he reached her. She shook her head and turned back to the officers; they had him sitting up while one of the applied pressure to the wound on his shoulder.

"Oh, stop whining, you'll live," the officer admonished him.

"Not exactly according to plan though, was it?" Carmilla joked.

The officer still standing shook his head and motioned her away from the bound man.

"Rick didn't want to scare you, but," he glanced at the man again before looking to her; "He's a very very bad man, Carmilla, and he's got an arm's lengths of warrants against him," he shook his head; "He murdered the last one…”

"Fuck…” she sighed.

"Exactly," he agreed; "Rick told us not to take any chances."

"Can I ask him a couple of questions before you take him away?" she asked.

"I don't know how much sense he's going to make," he smiled; "My partner is an excellent shot, knows just where to hit someone to cause the most pain without killing them."

"It's worth a try, right?" she asked, and without waiting for his answer went to kneel by their stalker. She studied him a moment; somehow he didn't seem so scary anymore. "Are you working for Deanna Karnstein?"

"Fuck you, you fucking dyke," he replied and then squealed in pain as the officer putting pressure on his wound dug her thumb into it a little harder than necessary.

"Answer her," she hissed.

"I don't know," he admitted and howled again as she applied more pressure; "I don't!" he yelled. Carmilla nodded at the officer who relaxed her grip. "I don't know who it is… could be man for all I know…” he panted as he tried to catch his breath; "I got a phone… instructions… texted information and got paid a few minutes later."

"Sure sounds like her style," Carmilla commented wryly as she stood up and turned to Mark as he and Laura joined them.

"Laura… please… it's not too late…” Bruce pleaded.

"Shut up," the officer halting his bleeding warned as she again applied more pressure.

"It is," Mark commented dryly; "for you…” he added.

"Mark?" she said, looking to him as the disgust was obvious in his tone.

"You just got a text from your friend. You must have dropped it when you ran out here," he explained as he handed her her phone. Carmilla read the text quickly, blanching at the list of
existing charges against the man in front of them; they ranged from petty theft all the way to aggravated sexual assault and murder. She looked up when she heard Mark speak again; "Do you know what happens to men like you in prison, Mr Smith?" He laughed and shook his head; "I think you'll be getting over that homophobia pretty quick, pretty boy, or you won't last long."

"Do you need us to make a statement?" Carmilla asked.

"No, we have enough to put him away for life already," the male officer replied.

"Thanks, guys, I appreciate your diligence today," Mark commented and went to shake his hand. They walked back to Laura's new car as the ambulance arrived and Laura had yet to say anything. "I'll give you two a minute," Mark offered and excused himself.

"You okay?" Carmilla asked as Laura went to lean against the car.

Laura sighed and shook her head.

Carmilla was at a loss; as much as she wanted to assure her she knew that this, their lives being put in danger, might happen again. She stepped forward and tentatively put her arms around her.

"I can't promise being in my life will always be easy," she started, pausing when Laura pushed her away to search her eyes; "but I can promise to always try to make it worth it."

"Is it always like this?" Laura asked quietly.

"Not always," she said, but even to her own ears it sounded hollow; "Well, not this crazy anyway…" she shook her head and went to step away; "Maybe you should go back home with your Dad… at least…” she was interrupted as Laura silenced her with a kiss.

"Not. Going. Anywhere."

"You sure, Pup? If something happened to you," she looked at Laura's cast; "well, if something else happened to you because of me, I'd never forgive myself."

"Carm, stop," Laura said, forcing her to meet her eyes again; "This," she indicated her broken arm; "Wasn't your fault. And neither was this…" she said as she pointed to the ambulance they were loading their injured stalker into. "He was following me long before I met you."

"So… it's not all about me?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"No," Laura laughed and pulled her close again; "and what doesn't kill us will only make us stronger, right?"

"Couldn't you have come up with a better choice of words?" Carmilla groaned.

"Think of it this way," Laura started as Carmilla met her eyes again; "If we can make it through this we can make it through anything, right?"

"Someday, I promise, it won't be like this," Carmilla assured her before kissing her softly; "Once this is all over we'll have our normal life, I promise, I do…"

"And we'll have earned it."

"We will have," Carmilla laughed; "But until then we get our little breaks. Like this weekend at
Frank's cabin and…” she smiled mischievously and stepped back; "We're going to New Mexico for two weeks while I train for my Invicta fight."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously, coach told me this morning," she replied with a smile.

"You two about ready to head back to the Doc's?" Mark interrupted.

They both smiled and nodded. Mark handed Laura the keys to her new Mini but she shook her head and handed them back to her Dad. "I won't feel comfortable driving it until I get some mobility back and I'm a little shook up."

"Me too," Carmilla admitted quietly.

"Alright then, the two of you get in the back but try to control yourselves?" he teased.

"We'll do our best," Carmilla replied seriously despite the blush on her face.

The two girls climbed into the back of the car, Laura coming to rest in Carmilla's arms as soon as they were comfortable. She could feel her shaking slightly and rubbed her back until it stopped. Again her carefully laid plans had gone awry and again, someone she cared about was nearly hurt. How long until her luck run out? If Deanna was resorting to using wanted felons for information, what wouldn't she do? It was that uncertainty that scared her. She could plan. She could try to stay ten steps ahead of her, but somehow Deanna just kept coming back like a cockroach. She smiled at the mental image of stomping on a cockroach with Deanna’s face. No matter what, though, she'd keep Laura safe. Laura was her new reason for wanting to see Deanna's reign of terror come to end; she wanted a normal life, and she finally had someone she wanted to share it with.
this chapter was a bitch to write for some reason. Hope you like it anyway.

The rest of their day didn't turn out quite as they had planned. They were debating grabbing a bite
to eat when Laura's phone rang. "Why would Doc Coughlin be calling me? My appointment isn't
for another hour," she commented before answering the call and placing him on speaker. "What's
up Doc?" she asked.

"I need you and Carmilla to meet me at St Paul's as soon as possible," he replied quickly.

"Doc? What is it? What's wrong?" Carmilla asked.

"I got Laura's test results back," he sighed; "When I discharged you last Friday your red cell count
was a little low but you should have recovered by now," he explained. "If these new numbers are
correct then I never should have released you or you're bleeding internally."

"Wouldn't we have noticed by now?" Carmilla asked, trying to keep the panic from her voice.

"I don't know," he replied; "Look, I'd like Laura to come in, have a new set of tests done," Laura
groaned; "and Carmilla? Just as a precaution, I think we should run a full panel on you as well."

"Doc?" Carmilla asked as it dawned on her; "Techs don't remove I.V.s, do they?"

"Not usually, no. Why?"

"And nurses don't take blood samples, do they?" she asked as she looked to Laura.

"That nurse!" Laura hissed; "He was there when you admitted you'd rather I spend the night."

"We're a few minutes away from St Paul's," Carmilla informed him.

"I'm already here, come in through Emerg," he replied and hung up.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…" Carmilla muttered angrily.

"Babe?" Laura said quietly. "Hey…" she prodded; "kitten?"

Carmilla smiled despite herself and met her eyes.

"Maybe don't rush to 'worst case scenario' just yet?" Laura offered; "Maybe it was an honest
mistake?"

"And maybe the reason he fudged your results was because he didn't want me to find out what he
gave me?" Carmilla replied flatly. "A red blood count is a lot faster than the tests they'd run to
make sure I could donate to you," she explained; "I need to text Dark," she sighed; "Let's hope his
seduction skills worked and he got his number."

She quickly tapped in a text asking him if he got the nurse/tech's number and if he did, to send it to
her immediately. He sent it back to her within minutes and she forwarded it to Rick. Her phone rang moments later.

"Hey Rick," she answered, her weariness coming through in her voice.

"Whose number is this?" he asked.

"An overly friendly nurse at Eagle Ridge Hospital," she replied; "We just got a call from the Doc and we're at St Paul's for blood tests."

"You're worried he gave you something without your consent?" he asked.

"I am," she replied flatly and reached for Laura's hand.

"But surely if we can prove..." Rick started but Carmilla cut him off.

"Won't matter," she said; "if he gave me something like steroids."

"Shit," Laura breathed quietly.

"I'll see what I can find out," he promised and ended the call.

"If its morphine or another pain killer I'll probably be okay," she told Laura and her father; "But if it's performance enhancing?"

"Your whole plan goes down the tubes?" Laura asked as her father parked the car.

"Pretty much," Carmilla affirmed and tried not to let the panic consume her as she dialed another number. "Hey cutie, how are you?" she asked when the call was answered.

"What do you want?" a female voice asked.

"I'm hurt," Carmilla joked.

"You only flirt when you need something," she replied.

"How quickly can you be at St Paul's?" she asked.

"Ten minutes, why?"

"I need you to oversee our blood tests," she explained.

"What? Why?"

"Because I trust you," she replied and looked to Laura. "There's a lot on the line, Elsie, and I need accurate results. You're the best lab tech I know."

"I'm the only lab tech you know," Elsie countered.

"True," she replied with a laugh. "Can you do it?"

"Already putting my shoes on," she replied.

"Thanks, Elsie, we'll see you soon," she answered and ended the call.

"Who was that?" Laura asked, her tone unreadable.
"Someone I met at University," Carmilla replied; "and yes, I was only flirting with her to get her help."

"Did you and she?"

"No," Carmilla laughed; "she's just a study buddy."

"Laura tells me you're halfway to two different degrees?" Mark asked conversationally as he helped Laura out of the car.

"More like a third," Carmilla replied with a laugh; "Who told you? Dark?" she asked Laura.

"He does like to brag about you," Laura teased. "Why didn't you finish them?" she asked as Carmilla followed her from the car.

"Maybe I will, someday, but a piece of paper isn't that important to me," she shook her head; "No, I took what I wanted to learn and nothing more."

"What were you studying?" Mark asked as he held the door open for them.

"Business and Sports Medicine," she replied; "And Will is pre-law."

"Carm?" Laura said, bringing them to a stop on the sidewalk; "There's something I should tell you," she looked to her Dad and then back to her. "I'm taking some time off school…"

"What? Why?" Carmilla interrupted.

"Because I won't be able to concentrate while you're away at the show and you won't succeed if you're too busy worrying about me," she replied in a rushed, and maybe rehearsed, manner.

"And you're okay with this?" she asked Mark.

"I suggested it," he replied.

"C'mon, let's not keep the Doc waiting," Carmilla said as she tried to figure out what was going on.

"Laura was worried her marks would suffer if she's worried about you," Mark explained.

"And taking time off doesn't look as bad on a transcript as bad marks do," Laura added.

"I suppose," she replied uncertainly. "I just hope you don't resent me for it someday."

"I doubt it," Laura replied and kissed her cheek.

"Promise you'll go back when this is over?" Carmilla asked.

"If it's that important to you," Laura replied with a smile.

"It's important to me because it's important to you," Carmilla answered.

"I promise," Laura said and kissed her cheek again. "I'm still going to take a couple of courses online so I won't have as many to do when I go back full-time," she added, making Carmilla feel slightly better.

"Hey Doc," Carmilla greeted as they met him just inside reception.

"Both of you get registered," he said with a nod to the desk; "Then we'll get that cast off and see
what's happening and get you tested."

Laura and Carmilla went to sit at the desk and were registered rather quickly as Doc Coughlin had already informed them why they were there. They followed him through to a private examining room where he already had the saw to remove Laura's cast ready.

"We'll take some x-rays while we've got it off," he told them as he handed out masks; "and we'll see how your mobility is. If you've healed enough we'll give you a smaller cast," he finished with a smile.

"But it's been less than week; surely you won't be able to tell much from an x-ray yet?" Mark questioned.

"With a break this bad we can," he replied and shrugged; "We would have done this next week anyway. Since most of the muscles in Laura's forearm were spared it would do more damage than good to keep her arm completely immobilized. As it is, your wrist will take some time to regain its natural movement and I'd like to spare the same for your elbow." He smiled and slipped his own mask in place as he took the saw to Laura's cast.

Ever so slowly he pried the cast apart to reveal that Laura had bled, but only minimally. Carmilla let go a breath she hadn't realized she was holding when she saw that, aside from the lack of blood, there were also no signs of infection.

"Well, the good news is; you're healing just fine," the Doc informed them with a sigh; "The bad news is I should have never have released you from hospital last Friday."

"Is that why I've been so dizzy and craving red meat?" Laura asked.

"Your numbers were a little low," the doctor admitted; "but they were borderline and you should have been fine by now," he trailed off as Elsie joined them.

"Hey," Carmilla said with a grin and went to hug the older, larger, woman; "When did you get hired on here?"

"A couple of months ago," she replied and looked to Laura; "You must be Laura," she said and went to shake her good hand; "Don't worry," she said as she noticed Laura eyeing the needles; "I have a gentle touch."

"Now you do," Carmilla teased.

"Yes, well, it's not my fault you used to be such a wuss," Elsie countered and looked back to Laura; "I used to work at one of the independent labs and Carmilla used to really hate needles," she offered as she tied a rubber hose around her upper arm. "She taught me patience, she did…"

"And you helped me learn anatomy," Carmilla replied with a laugh; "Fair trade, I'd say."

Laura barely winced as Elsie took her blood.

"You next," Elsie said with a smile as she motioned Carmilla to a chair.

"How long before we get the results?" Carmilla asked.

"Would help if I knew what I was looking for," Elsie replied.

"Steroids, pain killers," Carmilla winced slightly as the needle entered her arm; "to start anyway…”
"Give me an hour," she replied as she bottled the last of the dozen or so phials she had taken.

"Doc?" Carmilla said to get his attention; he and Laura's father had stepped away to talk; "Can Laura have something to eat?"

"I don't see why not," he replied.

"Good," she replied and leaned over to kiss Laura's forehead. "Burger?" she asked.

"I'd rather you stay," Laura replied.

"I won't be long," she offered; "there's a Fat Burger ten minutes away."

"I'll go with you," Mark offered.

"I'd rather you stay with Laura," Carmilla admitted.

"And I'd rather you have my dad with you to watch your back," Laura said quietly as she took her hand; "I'm safe here," she added.

"I'll stay with her, if you like?" Doc Coughlin offered.

"Oh for..." she shook her head; "Fine... want to share a Hawaiian burger with me?" she asked Laura, who smiled and nodded. "Doc, you want anything?"

"Chocolate milkshake," he replied.

"Oh... I want a strawberry milkshake," Laura squealed.

"Alright," Carmilla said with a smile and kissed her quickly; "We'll be right back."

Carmilla looked up the restaurant's number as they left the hospital and placed their order.

"You really okay with Laura taking time off school," she asked to break the silence.

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I wasn't," he replied neutrally and then sighed deeply.

"Mark? Is everything okay?" she asked, bringing him to a stop with a hand on his arm.

"No," he replied and laughed; "But my daughter loves you," he smiled; "and I've seen how much you love her..." he sighed again and went to lean against the wall. "There's something I need to tell you."

"What?" she asked, she felt the hackles on the back of her neck rise at his serious tone.

"I knew your mother," he admitted, and then at her obvious shock, continued; "We went to high school together. Had a couple of classes together," he shook his head; "We weren't friends but I knew her," he shrugged. "I had just gotten onto the force when she died... I, um, investigated her death."

"Does Laura know?" she asked and he shook his head. "Did you find anything?"

"It doesn't add up," he replied; "I don't understand why they never tried to find the driver who ran her off the road or why they didn't inspect her car," he shook his head again and motioned down the alley; "It's like they didn't want to know the truth."
"I suspect that had something to do with my father and eventually Deanna," she replied bitterly; "My dad was devastated by my mother's death and all the questions became too much, I think," she shrugged; "I think he figured she was already dead and there was nothing that was going to change that."

"True," he replied sadly.

"Laura told me about your wife," she offered quietly; "Did you ever catch him?"

"Yeah," he replied tonelessly; "He's serving a life sentence."

"Did it make you feel better? Getting justice?" she asked.

"Is that why you're doing this? Justice for your parents and what Deanna did to you?" he countered.

"How much has Laura told you?" she asked him carefully.

"Enough," he replied.

"It's more so I can finally have a normal life without worrying every two seconds what her next scheme is to ruin my life," she said truthfully.

"And she thinks once you're out of the way she can have your brother and his money?" he asked, she nodded. "She's quite the piece of work, isn't she?"

"You have no idea," she replied with a laugh.

"I'm starting to," he said grimly; "I mean, who does that? Sends a wanted felon after someone?"

"She does," she replied; "The people who end up helping her generally fall into three categories; the first are those she's blackmailing. The second are those looking for a quick buck. The last are the desperate and usually the most dangerous," she paused as she held open the door for him; "She finds a weakness… a sick relative, gambling debts, whatever… and they're dangerous because they've got nothing to lose."

They had just finished their meal when Rick called. She contemplated a moment before putting him on speaker so Laura and her dad could hear.

"I some good news and some bad news," he informed them; "Which would you like first?"

"The good news," Laura answered.

"We've got the nurse in custody," he replied.

"If that's the good news what's the bad news?" Carmilla asked tersely.

"We caught him at VGH trying to kill your stalker," he answered to their gasps. "According to him he was only trying to help you, both of you," he explained; "he swears he didn't give you anything, Carmilla, and he only bumped up Laura's numbers enough so you could take her home."

"How did he know about Bruce?" Mark asked.

"What happened at the car dealership is all over the news," Rick admitted, sounding somewhat reluctant.
"Of course it is," Carmilla sighed; "Someone at the dealership probably called them," she said sarcastically; "Even bad publicity is good publicity, right?" she asked rhetorically; "Thanks Rick, let me know if anything else develops but let's keep it to seven or higher until after my fight, okay?"

"You got it kiddo, I'll email you the details later in case you're curious," he said and then hung up.

"Seven or higher?" Laura asked with a raised eyebrow.

"On a scale from one to ten," she replied and sat on the edge of her bed; "a seven is a stalker," she supplied as the Doc returned with Laura's x-rays. "So?" she asked him.

"You're healing well," he told Laura; "let's check your range of motion and get you casted back up."

As the doctor was running her through her a variety of range of motion tests Elsie returned with their test results. "Except for a slight trace of Ativan, you're clean Carm, and even that should be gone before they test for your fight," she informed them and turned to Laura; "Your red cell count is a little low but you'll be fine in a couple of days," she said and handed the doctor the test results.

"Thanks, Elsie," Carmilla replied gratefully and went to hug her.

"Just doing my job," she replied happily; "but it's nice to have good news to give for a change."

"Come to the after fight party?" Carmilla asked.

"Sure thing, just let me know when and where," she replied.

Doc Coughlin looked over Laura's test results a moment longer.

"She's right," he sighed; "But I shouldn't have let you leave hospital without another unit of blood," he shook his head; "Let's get you casted and get you home, yes?"

"Yes, thanks Doc," Carmilla said and went to put a hand on his shoulder; "It's not your fault, Doc."

"Yeah, well, I'd never forgive myself if I failed you again," he admitted quietly and then busied himself with Laura's cast to cover.

"..."

The drive home was quiet; none of the car's occupants knew what to say. As Carmilla stared out the window pondering all that had happened she came to one conclusion: she hadn't warned them because she was afraid Laura would run if she knew just how crazy her life could sometimes get. Hell, she wouldn't have blamed Mark if he tried to force Laura to go back home with him. She looked down to Laura, the younger girl was lying with her head in her lap; how could one person make her feel so safe and so scared all at the same time?

Laura sat up as Mark parked the car.

"Maybe you should take a nap?" Carmilla suggested when she saw how tired she was.

"Join me?" Laura asked.

"I'm, uh... I think I'm going to work out for a bit," she smiled and offered Laura a hand to help her get out of the car; "I need to blow off a little steam."
"I, personally, am going to go have a beer," Mark commented; "or maybe six…"

They made their way inside and straight to the elevator. Carmilla saw Dark trying to get her attention but she wasn't ready to talk about it just yet. They both hugged Laura's father before he left the elevator on the first floor, Mark returning Carmilla's gun to her.

She pulled Laura into her arms the minute the doors closed and held her tight, grateful, once again, that she was safe. They parted a minute later when the doors opened on their floor and made their way to Carmilla's apartment. Laura kissed her cheek and made for the spare bedroom.

"I thought you were going to take a nap?" Carmilla asked.

"I am," Laura replied; "I'm going to change into something more comfortable."

"Oh, right…" Carmilla smiled, jogged over and kissed her deeply. "Sorry…" she whispered, her voice deep and breathless; "I've wanted to do that all day."

Laura pulled her back for another kiss, her good hand creeping beneath her shirt.

"Later…" Carmilla laughed as she took Laura's hand back out from under her shirt to Laura's pout; "I'm going to need a shower when I get back, join me?"

"Yeah?" Laura asked.

"Definitely," she replied and kissed her again; "Now go get changed and I'll tuck you in before I leave."

Laura nodded, smiled and kissed her one last time before heading towards her bedroom. Carmilla shook her head and laughed under her breath; 'Laura's room'. Sure, she kept all her clothes in there but she'd yet to sleep in it. It was amazing to her, how easily Laura had fit herself into her life. Less than a week and they already had their routines. It was comforting.

She made her way to her bedroom and quickly changed into her workout gear. She was sitting on the bed tying her shoes when Laura joined her.

"Carm?" she said quietly as she sat beside her and reached for her hand; "Why didn't you tell us what was going on?" she asked sadly.

"We thought it was the best way to keep you and your Dad safe," she replied but she knew it wasn't the whole truth. "Laura," she sighed; "I'm not used to this, having a girlfriend, I'm still learning, but when you've gone most of your life only depending on yourself it's hard to accept that you can depend on someone else."

"I think that might be the saddest thing I've ever heard," she responded; "Carm, you can you know, depend on us. Depend on me. You're not alone anymore."

"I know," Carmilla sighed and put her head on Laura's shoulder; "still, it takes some get used to." She shook her head and sat back up to pull the covers down for her; "It's also, these plans, sometimes they're really complicated and the fewer people involved means the fewer chances of something going wrong."

"True, but if you'd said something sooner all this might have been avoided," Laura countered.

"True," Carmilla replied with a smile as Laura lay down and she covered her with the blanket; "But you could have said something when you saw him at the Aquarium."
"I didn't think it was important," Laura replied.

Carmilla sat running her hand through Laura's hair, for some reason the action soothed them both.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, the defeat clear in her tone; "I know, all this, it's a lot, maybe..." she sighed; "I don't want you to, but maybe you should go home with your Dad, at least until this is over..."

"No," Laura said and sat up; "You're not scaring me off..." she kissed Carmilla before she could interrupt; "You've had a really fucked up life, I get it, but I don't care. I love you Carm, the good, the bad and the ugly... all of it..." she laid back down; "I'm yours Carm, best get used to it."

"I'm trying," she replied and kissed her forehead; "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Get some rest and I'll make us dinner when I get back."

"I can do it, what do you want for dinner?"

"I'll take some chili out of the freezer," she replied and kissed her again. "We can heat it up after our shower."

She kissed her again, waited for her to close her eyes, and then kissed her cheek one last time before leaving. She took the chili out of the freezer on her way out and then made her way down to the gym.

"Carm?" Dark called the second she stepped off the elevator. He ran over and then walked over to the treadmills with her. "You okay?"

"How much do you know?"

"We saw the news," he replied; "Did you know you were being followed?"

"Yeah."

"Damn it, Carm," he muttered angrily; "When are you going to stop doing this?"

"Now," she replied to his surprise. "Can you do me a favour tomorrow?"

"I... yeah... I guess," he stammered.

"Can you drive up to Frank's cabin and get it ready for us," he smiled broadly; "for me and Laura," she amended; "for the weekend?" He nodded. "Just open a few windows, put fresh sheets on the bed..."

"Maybe set up the raft?" he suggested.

"Sure, thanks babe," she replied and gave him a hug; "We're leaving Friday, and barring any mishaps, we'll be back Sunday night. No interruptions."

"Seven or higher?"

"Definitely," she replied with a smile.

She put her headphones in as he walked away and turned the treadmill on low so she could warm up a bit before she started her run. She took her phone from her pocket, and although she knew she might regret it, opened an email from Rick. In it he updated her on Bruce's status, (stable and being moved to a penitentiary in Alberta as that was where most of his charges were). Kyle, the lab
technician from Eagle Ridge, had met Bruce in a bar Friday night. They'd gotten quite drunk, or Kyle did at least, and admitted what he'd done. When he saw the paper the next day he knew Bruce must have talked to someone and tried to track him down to confront him. When he saw the TV report he'd rushed to VGH to talk to him. One thing led to another. The officers outside were only alerted to something being wrong when the nurses came running down the hallway towards them. Kyle explained that he'd snapped when Bruce had begun a homophobic rant about he was just trying to 'save' Laura from a life of sin. Unfortunately, or fortunately, Carmilla wasn't sure; Kyle hadn't thought to unplug the machines monitoring his condition.

She closed the email and slipped her phone back in her pocket before upping the speed on the treadmill. She wasn't sure what to think; Bruce admitted to receiving money from someone but was already following Laura. How had Deanna made that connection? Only one answer came to mind: Danny. She upped the speed again. Maybe she needed to talk to Danny, find out what her angle was. She shook her head, no, that would have to wait until after the fight. She was already distracted and trying to determine what was motivating tall, red-headed, and annoying wasn't high on her list.

It was almost an hour later before she felt her mind starting to calm. She hit the off button and looked around the gym; it was still quiet, the after work crowd had yet to start showing up. She stepped off the treadmill and looked over to the counter where Dark and Brody were talking.

"Hey Dark!" she called; "Feel like holding the pads for me?"

He nodded and jogged over, joining her as they entered the octagon.

"So what's the game plan for Danny?" he asked conversationally as he watched Carmilla wrap her wrists.

"Take out her legs, slow her down, and then take her out," she replied.

"You make it sound so easy," he joked and slipped the pads onto his hands.

"She's a big target," she laughed as she pulled on her gloves. "Look, I know it's not going to be easy and I do have something specific planned but I'm not going to start practicing it until we close the gym next week."

"You're worried someone is going to warn her?"

"I'm not taking any chances," she replied seriously; "What I'm planning needs the element of surprise or it won't work," she smiled; "And if it does work? It's going to be spectacular."

They worked out for another hour, Dark holding the gloves higher than normal to simulate where Danny's chin would be. Finally he dropped his hands and shook out his arms; "I'm done," he announced.

"Thanks Dark," she said and hugged him.

"Ew, get off, you're all sweaty," he complained.

"So are you," she teased and swatted his arm. She took off her gloves and handed them to him. "You'll drive up tomorrow?"

"Sure thing," he replied; "And Carm? I'm happy for you," he said and hugged her again; "Bout time you had something good in your life."
She smiled; she really did and that 'something' was upstairs, asleep in her bed, and waiting to take a shower with her. She unwrapped her wrists as she walked over to the elevator, balling them up to throw them in the washer when she got upstairs. She opened the door to her apartment and was momentarily stunned; the dining room table was set and complete with candles.

"Laura?" she called.

The door to her bedroom opened to reveal Laura standing there in one of her fluffy bathrobes.

"Shower?" Laura asked, Carmilla could only nod.

She walked over and tried to take her in her arms but Laura stepped back into the bedroom with her hand outstretched. She followed her, a little dumbfounded, as she tried to figure out what was going on. Laura reached for her shirt and lifted it over her head and then turned her to undo her bra. While Laura was busy doing that she slipped off her shoes and undid her shorts letting them fall to ground as Laura turned her back to face her.

Laura looked her up and down, licking her lips slightly as she shrugged off her robe.

"Help me wrap my arm?" she asked as she handed Carmilla the bag she used to cover her cast. "Carm?" she prodded, Carmilla had been too busy appreciating the view to hear her.

"What?" she said, shaking her head and meeting her eyes.

"Wrap my arm?" Laura repeated, a blush on her cheeks letting Carmilla know her frank appraisal hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Sorry… yeah, of course," she stammered as she took the bag from Laura, placed it over her cast and then used an elastic band to secure it. "Um, can you give me just a sec?" Laura frowned slightly but nodded. "Sorry, not ready to have you watch me while I wash my, you know…” she trailed off as she blushed. Laura smiled, reddened further, and accepted a brief kiss from her. "God you're beautiful…” she whispered and kissed her again before making for the bathroom.

She turned on the water and stepped under its warmth. Already she could feel the tensions of the day going down the drain along with the water. She reached for the soap and quickly washed her behind and between her legs. She was rinsing off when there was a quiet knock on the shower door followed by a shy Laura. She took the loofa and poured some body wash on it.

"Wash my back?" she asked as she handed it to Laura.

"Rather wash your front," she countered.

"Start with my back," Carmilla replied with a laugh as she turned her back to her. She jumped a little when she felt Laura's fingers on her back instead of the sponge. She sighed when she realised Laura was tracing her scars.

"These aren't all from the window, are they?" she asked carefully as she started to wash her back.

"No," Carmilla replied; "I had a favorite studded belt that she didn't like…”

"She used it on you?"

"A couple of times," she admitted; "But then I cut it up… kept the part with my blood on it for evidence and made the rest into…”
"The bracelets you wore to the airport?" Laura supplied and was shaking her head as Carmilla turned around to meet her eyes; "You're something else, you know that?"

"I grew up with a master manipulator," she shrugged; "I had to learn to survive," she looked to the loofa in her hand; "Well?" she asked as she held her arms up for Laura to wash her.

Laura smiled and washed both her arms before moving to her belly and finally her breasts. She let the loofa slip from her hand and started to stroke her, already hard, nipple with her thumb. Carmilla groaned and pulled her close, turning them as she stepped forward so she could lean against the wall with Laura in her arms.

"Want me to stop?" Laura asked uncertainly.

"No," she replied and sighed as Laura began stroking with a little more confidence; "But maybe you should…" Laura's hand grew still. "It's not that I don't want you to but I really want to wait until we're at the cabin this weekend…"

"Why?" Laura interrupted; "I mean, why is it so important to you?"

"Because here we always run the risk of being interrupted," she replied and she tilted her face up and studied her eyes; "I want to be able to focus on you and nothing but you…" she smiled and kissed her; "At the cabin there's no cell coverage, no internet…" Laura smiled; "Just a landline for emergencies and everyone will know they're not to bug with me with anything less than a seven."

"So it's really just you and me from Friday afternoon until Sunday?" Laura asked.

"That's the plan Pup. Now," she pulled Laura close; "let me hold you like this for a bit. It's been a shitty day and you're the only thing making it better."
Carmilla woke Friday morning as she often did; alone. She reached a hand to Laura's side of the bed and found it still warm, and as she looked to the clock to see what time it was, heard the toilet flush followed by the sound of running water. She turned to her back and stretched with one eye towards the bathroom door, smiling when Laura returned and stopped in her tracks.

"Tease," she joked and ran back to bed and jumped on top of her.

Carmilla rolled her to her back, looked down and smiled; "Who's teasing?" she all but growled.

"You are," she laughed and kissed her before looking at the clock; "You need to be up in half an hour."

"So..." she started as she leaned down to kiss her neck; "that means I have half an hour to enjoy you before we have to get out of bed..." she trailed off at the sound of three knocks at the door, a pause, two more, another pause, and finally three more. "Fuck..." she hissed; "can't we just have one drama free day?"

"Carm? What's wrong?" Laura asked in concern as Carmilla rushed from the bed.

"That's Rick's knock," she explained as the knocking pattern repeated. She grabbed her t-shirt from where she'd left it the night before and threw Laura her's as well; "And that specific pattern means someone's dead," she rushed over quickly and kissed her; "Not someone we care about but someone connected to us," she clarified. "Can you let him in while I go to the bathroom?" Laura nodded numbly and slipped her t-shirt over her head. "No matter what, we leave this afternoon, understood?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she affirmed and kissed her again.

They'd almost made it to the weekend drama-free. Almost.

"Damn it," Carmilla thought as she left the bathroom, crossed her bedroom and exited to find Laura making their breakfast and Rick seated at the table. She walked up behind Laura at the counter and kissed her neck before making herself a cup of coffee.

"Coffee?" she asked Rick.

"Laura already made me one, thanks," he replied.

"So, who's dead?" she asked as she took a seat across from him.

"Carm!" Laura hissed as she'd almost dropped the bowl of cereal she was carrying.

"What?" she asked innocently and kissed her cheek when she sat down.

"You couldn't wait until I was sitting before you asked?"
"You want full disclosure?" she asked with a shrug; "This is full disclosure," she offered and looked back to Rick.

"Bruce Smith," he replied sadly. "We transferred him yesterday and he was found dead in his cell this morning. We told the warden not to put him in with the general population," he sighed. "What happened Tuesday? What he was accused of? It was all over the news."

"I don't understand," Laura said quietly.

"Your Dad was right about what happens to men like him in prison," Carmilla replied flatly; "Given he managed to say something bad enough to make a guy like Kyle snap, is it really any surprise?"

"Have you been following the news?" Rick asked.

"No," Carmilla laughed; "You know I avoid it at all costs."

"Yeah, well, you might want to start," he answered. "There was a house fire in West Van Wednesday night. Bruce's house…"

"So any evidence was destroyed?" Carmilla asked.

"It's more complicated than that," he said; "He had a girl held captive in the basement," he shook his head and sighed as he ran his hands over his face. "She set the fire hoping someone would call the fire department and she'd be found," he shrugged; "That's the theory anyway… the only thing she's said so far is that she wants to talk to you," he nodded in Carmilla's direction; "Both of you."

"Rick? What is it? What's wrong?" Carmilla asked.

"Isn't that enough?" Laura sighed.

"More than," agreed Carmilla; "But none of this couldn't have waited until we come back on Sunday," she said before looking back to Rick; "Out with it, what's up?"

"Aside from the reporters waiting outside?" he asked as he took a manila envelope from inside his jacket; "They probably want to ask you about this," he said as he pushed it over to the two of them.

Inside they found a letter with two cheques attached, each of them for half a million dollars.

"Dear Misses Karnstein and Hollis," Laura read aloud; "Please accept this gift as a token of my gratitude for aiding in the arrest of Bruce Smith. Finally I, and my family, can put my daughter's memory to rest. Miss Hollis I understand you are currently attending university and I hope my gift aids in that endeavour. Miss Karnstein; I understand you have attended university in the past and I hope, perhaps, once you've completed your fighting quest, you'll return. Good luck to you both, sincerely, James Sheriden."

"Rick… I can't…" Carmilla started.

"I told him you'd say that," he interrupted; "Look, this guy lost his only daughter to this monster and he's rich, like, Donald Trump rich," he shook his head as Carmilla went to interrupt again; "He's already sent similar cheques to all of Smith's victims and made a generous donation to the Vancouver Police Fund."

"But…"
"He can afford it," Rick assured them.

"I was going to say this could've waited until Monday," Carmilla clarified and studied him a moment before continuing; "How worried are you?"

"On a scale of one to ten?" He asked, she nodded. "Six."

"What's a six?" Laura asked.

Carmilla chuckled and pulled her laptop over. She opened her documents folder and chose two to print off. "Those are for you," she told Laura and nodded to the printer. "We don't deserve this… wait…" she shook her head; "You already knew who was following us!" she accused and stood from her seat to pace. "Damn it Rick!" she shook her head as he had yet to deny it. "As soon as I realized he was following us I told you… how long did you know?"

"Carm… I…" he stuttered.

"How. Long?" she demanded.

"Since the airport," he admitted and looked down.

"Did you know who he was? What he'd done?" Laura asked quietly as she sat back down.

"Not at first," he replied and shrugged; "We assumed it was another of Deanna's lackeys."

"Another?" Laura said and looked to Carmilla.

"Why do you think I don't go out much?" she offered and sat back down. "When did you know who he was?" she asked Rick.

"We didn't know for sure until Laura gave us the name," he frowned and looked to Laura; "How did you know his name? He usually goes by an alias."

"The night Danny made a pass at me at the bar he was there," she replied; "We were talking when Danny got there. He introduced himself," she shrugged; "I guess he saw the whole blow out with Danny," she shook her head; "He showed up at the gym a few days later…" she trailed off and took Carmilla's hand; "If you're both so worried why are we going to a cabin in the middle of nowhere?"

Rick laughed and looked at Carmilla; "You haven't told her?"

"What?" Laura asked and looked to Carmilla again.

"Let's put it this way," she said as she opened up her pictures folder on her lap top; "if there's ever a zombie apocalypse," she opened up her pictures and scrolled through until she found the one she was looking for; a twenty foot high fence; "this is where we're running."

"I don't…" Laura stammered.

"That fence runs the entire perimeter of the property and the only weak spot," she said as she brought up a picture of the cabin itself; "is where it ends at the mountain. It would take most normal people at least a week to make it that far…"

"Not to mention the motion activated cameras set up in a ten mile perimeter around the cabin and ten miles along the outside of the fence," Rick interrupted.

"There are two set of monitors," Carmilla explained; "one at the cabin and one," she pulled up a
picture of an older, grinning, man and his family; "is with Kenny and his family. They take care of the property year round and live just outside the main gate. There's no road from the gate to the cabin and only three ways in; ATV to the lake and boat across, ATV directly there, or walk," she smiled; "ATV the whole way there is fastest and walking would take you a good six to eight hours."

"This cabin," Laura said; "it's yours, isn't it?" she asked.

"Technically, it's Frank's," she corrected; "but my Dad left it to him when he died," she smiled and looked to Rick; "Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Laura interrupted; "Why are you both so worried?"

"Because, whether she found out Bruce was following you and took advantage of the opportunity or she somehow put you in my path because he was following you…"

"You don't honestly believe…" Laura tried to interrupt.

"No, I don't," Carmilla assured her; "but the point is, she's done it before," she shook her head; "Actually that wasn't my point, my point is, she's not one to do not do her homework. She had to have known who he was and what he was capable of. Maybe she was only using him for information or maybe she was hoping I'd get killed," Laura paled; "The point is: she's scared and I'm afraid of what she's going to do next."

"Which is why I don't think either of you should leave the gym alone until this over," Rick informed them.

"I don't think that's necessary," Laura replied.

"I agree," Carmilla said quietly and looked to Laura; "with Rick."

The two stared at each other a moment and then Laura turned to Rick.

"Set up a press conference for Monday," she said calmly and looked to Carmilla; "We'll go out and talk to them now, briefly, but face them, full on, Monday night after we've talked to…" she looked back to Rick; "I'm sorry, what's her name?"

"Her name is Laura," he replied.

Laura shook her head and looked back to Carmilla.

"Why not just answer their questions now?" Carmilla asked.

"Because we want it on your terms and preferably with a camera crew there so they can't twist anything we say," Laura replied, "We go down now, maybe answer a few general questions and then announce the press conference on Monday."

Carmilla searched her eyes a moment and then looked back to Rick.

"Did you come in the back way?"

"There's a back way?" Laura asked in surprise.

"By the water," Rick nodded and then explained; "I have a dock a few miles down," he said as he stood; "You two have a lot to talk about," he smiled; "Try to have a good weekend?"
"That's the plan," she replied and smiled as Laura kissed her cheek.

Carmilla got up and gave Rick a hug; "No more secrets," she told him and met his eyes as she stepped away; "it's not just my life on the line anymore."

Rick smiled as he nodded.

She watched him leave then walked back over to Laura and turned her and her chair before straddling her and kissing her softly. She felt Laura's hand sneak beneath her shirt and leaned down to kiss and nibble her neck.

"Hey…" Laura said softly and gently pushed her away; "we don't have time for this."

"We always have time for a little of this," Carmilla countered and kissed just below her ear. She sighed as she felt Laura's teeth graze her pulse point before she bit down and starting sucking. "Hey…" she said as she pushed her away; "what do you think you're doing?" she asked through her laughter.

Laura met her eyes then looked to the small hickey on her neck.

"Giving those idiots out there undeniable proof that I'm with you of my own volition," she replied and leaned in to kiss the spot; "but it needs to be bigger…" she nipped it slightly; "and besides…" she sat back and pulled her t-shirt aside; "I owe you one."

"Yeah but it's not just reporters who are going to see this," Carmilla argued.

"And why would you care?" Laura countered; "I love you Carm and this is my way of shouting it from the roof tops…" she trailed off as she leaned back in and went back to work on the hickey.

"At least they can't say you're just with me for my money anymore," Carmilla joked and sighed.

Laura kissed her mark one last time before meeting her eyes.

"I never cared about the money," she said seriously; "and I know you don't think of all the little things you've done for me as spoiling me rotten, but you have…" she leaned in and kissed her softly; "but I'd love you even if you gave me nothing…" she kissed her jaw; "if you were broke… it wouldn't matter…"

"Damn…" Carmilla sighed as she heard her alarm go off in the bedroom.

"Told you we didn't have time," Laura teased.

"You know what?" Carmilla said with a grin. "Fuck it. Let's talk to the idiots and leave for the cabin."

"Carm, no…" Laura said and then smiled when Carmilla pouted; "You're already taking the weekend off and you're training has been messed up enough this week."

"Since when did you become the voice of reason?" Carmilla teased as she stood.

"Since I know how much winning this fight means to you," Laura replied as she stood and took her in her arms.

"You're right," Carmilla sighed and leaned her forehead against Laura's; "I hate it but you're right," she kissed her; "But one promise this weekend?" Laura smiled and nodded; "No fight talk or talk about what we have planned for Deanna…" she moved some hair from Laura's forehead; "Just you
and me… in love… and enjoying all that's supposed to mean…”

"Deal," Laura replied and kissed her. "Now go get dressed."

"Yes dear," Carmilla replied with a smirk, which earned her a playful swat to the behind from Laura.

She went to her bedroom to change, Laura to the spare bedroom as that was where she still had all her clothes. She sighed as she walked to the dresser; she wasn't sure Laura really had any idea how much danger she was really in. She fished around her sock drawer for a couple of small boxes and put them on the bed before quickly changing into her standard workout gear. Laura joined her as she was finishing tying her shoes.

"I was going to give this to you tonight but then I thought why bring it all the way there just to bring it back?" she said as she sat next to her and handed her a flat gift wrapped box.

Carmilla regarded her a moment and then unwrapped the gift to find a stunning silver picture frame with the words; "Forever together," inscribed along the bottom. It was what was inside the frame, however, that instantly brought tears to her eyes.

"How?" she choked out quietly.

"You're Dad's obituary was on the same page as my Mom's," Laura explained. "I'd already asked my Dad to bring down my scrapbooks and we were looking at them when you were working out Tuesday afternoon," she reached for her hand and laced their fingers; "I told my Dad that I thought you might like to have it when he told me he had your Mom's," she shook her head; "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"This is incredibly thoughtful," she said as she wiped away a tear. "Thank you."

Carmilla didn't know what else to say. She was incredibly moved by the gesture.

"I'm sorry," Laura said quietly as she took her hand; "I didn't mean to make you sad."

"No it's…” Carmilla sighed, put the gift aside and grabbed the smaller of two boxes beside her; "maybe they're the reason this all started but if she'd just left us alone after we ran," she sighed again; "But the woman is stubborn and persistent," she said as she handed her the box; "which is why I got you that," she smiled; "Go ahead, open it."

Laura smiled and then gasped softly when she opened the box to find a very expensive watch.

"Go ahead, take it out and turn it over," she urged.

Laura shook her head slightly but did as Carmilla asked. She smiled and ran her thumb over the inscription on the back; the date they met.

"See those round metal disks on the watch band?" Laura nodded. "They're GPS tracking nodes; break one off and I'll know where you are in minutes."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," Carmilla replied; "There's another GPS node inside the watch itself that I can activate remotely if you go missing."

"You think that's likely?" Laura asked quietly as she turned the watch over and examined its face.
"She was paying Bruce for information," she shrugged; "I wouldn't put it past her," she shook her head; "You don't have to accept if you don't want…" she trailed off as Laura handed her the watch.

"Put it on for me?" she asked as she offered her wrist.

Carmilla smiled and set the alarm, but didn't turn it on, before putting it on Laura's wrist.

"What did you just do?"

Instead of answering Carmilla opened the second box to reveal a men's version of the same watch, set its alarm, but again, didn't turn it on, before putting it on.

"I set the alarm for nine PM," she smiled and took Laura's hand; "If I make it into the house…"

"When," Laura corrected.

"Every night at nine o'clock, no matter what I'm doing. I'm going to take fifteen minutes, maybe more, to just go out and look at the moon and think of you," she smiled and kissed Laura's hand; "Not that I won't be thinking about you all the time but if you do it too…"

"We'll be thinking about each other at the same time?" Laura asked, her amusement and affection clear.

"Go ahead, say it, I'm a sap," Carmilla joked.

"Carm?" Carmilla turned to face her at her change of tone; "I love it. Thank you."

"And my watch has the same features as yours," she explained further; "so you can activate my GPS anytime and know exactly where I am."

"Isn't that against the rules or something?" Laura teased.

"Maybe," she shrugged; "I won't tell if you don't," she added with a wink. "C'mon," she kissed her and then stood; "Let's go face the vultures."

Laura nodded, stood and kissed her again.

They made their way downstairs and after stopping briefly to tell the trainers she'd be right back and for Laura to invite Dark to go shopping with her, they made their way outside to face the reporters.

"Want me to tell them to go away?" Dark offered.

"No," Carmilla replied more calmly than she felt; "we're going to invite them to a press conference Monday night."

"Really?" he asked in surprise.

"Really," Laura replied; "No more running," she kissed Carmilla's cheek; "We've nothing to hide."

They walked out unhurriedly toward the place the reporters had set up camp. As they approached they could see them talking amongst themselves before they focused on them.

"Miss Karnstein, is there any truth to the rumors that you were tested for narcotics and steroids on Tuesday?" one reported shouted.
"Yes," she replied simply. "Next question?"

"Why?"

"There was a possibility that I had been given something against my will or knowledge," she replied.

"Miss Hollis, is it true your father begged you to leave with him?"

"No," Laura replied with a laugh; "He loves Carmilla and knows that she loves me. Next question."

"Is it true that James Sheriden has gifted you both with half a million dollars?"

"Yes," Carmilla replied; "along with similar gifts to all of Smith's victims."

The reporters seemed stymied; clearly they hadn't expected Carmilla to be so forthcoming.

"If you have any further questions you can ask them Monday at the press conference," Laura announced; "Carmilla has a big fight in a week and her training has been interrupted enough this week. Please, I ask you to leave us alone until then."

"One last question?" a brave reporter ventured.

Carmilla nodded.

"Is that a hickey on your neck?" he asked.

"What?" Carmilla said in shock and turned to Laura; "You little brat!"

"What?" Laura replied innocently, playing along; "I owed you one for this," she said as she moved her tank top aside to reveal the hickey Carmilla had left the night before. She turned back to the reporters; "Good day to you," she said, waved to them and turned to walk back to the gym.

The three managed to hold their laughter until they got back into the gym but only just.

"I'll be right back, I'm going to grab my wallet," Dark said when he caught his breath.

Laura nodded and then turned to kiss Carmilla softly.

"Need me to pick anything up while I'm out?" Laura asked when she broke the kiss.

"No, we're good," she replied and smiled; "Thanks for taking Dark with you."

I like the company," she shrugged; "Besides, I understand why."

"Do you?"

"You're worried someone will approach me if I'm alone," Laura started, Carmilla nodded; "And you're worried that they'll try to turn me against you."

"No," Carmilla replied; "I mean they'll try but I don't want you to have to deal with it."

"Fair enough," Laura replied and kissed her; "Do I think you're being overprotective?" she asked as she indicated her new watch; "Maybe a little but I get it," she shrugged; "If I have this, if I don't go out alone, you don't have to worry about me."

"I'll always worry," Carmilla admitted and let Laura draw her into a hug.
"Oi! Karnstein!" Carmilla looked over to trainer who'd interrupted them; "If you're taking off this afternoon you've got five minutes to get your ass on that treadmill!"

The rest of the day passed drama free and Carmilla and Laura were packing the Jeep before they knew it. They took down the roof, the process taking only a few minutes as they worked together, without words and in complete harmony. They didn't talk much during the six hour drive, Laura having nodded off around the halfway mark and stayed that way until the change in terrain jolted her awake.

"Sorry," said Carmilla; "We're almost there."

"I missed all the scenery," Laura commented sadly as she rubbed her eyes.

"You can see it on the way back," she offered and returned her attention to the rapidly degrading road. About a half hour later she came to a stop outside a large imposing metal gate. She parked the Jeep and got out to punch in the code to open it and then got back in the Jeep as the gate opened, drove through and waited a few minutes before driving another ten minutes to a collection of large storage sheds. She pressed a button on the remote attached to her visor and pulled into the largest of the structures.

"Why is this place so, I don't know, fortified?" Laura asked as she climbed from the Jeep.

"I'm not sure," Carmilla replied. "The land was passed down through my Dad's family, always to the eldest son, but my Dad was the first to really do anything with it," she paused as she lifted the cooler from the back of the Jeep. "Ironically it's as nice as it is because he kept hoping Deanna would come up here."

"She never did?"

"Couldn't stand the bugs," she grinned; "Maybe Will and I made it out worse than it is." She nodded her head to the next building over, its door had opened the same time she'd opened the first. She walked inside and deposited the cooler into the back of the ATV.

"Huh," Laura said as she put her bag alongside the cooler; "I was expecting more of a four-wheeler type thing but this is more like dune buggy."

"We have a couple of the other kind too but this is the easiest way there with supplies," Carmilla explained.

"Why didn't you and Will run here when you ran?" Laura asked as they made a second trip from the Jeep to the ATV.

"We didn't know Dad left it to Frank," she replied. "I think my Dad was starting to suspect something was up with Deanna, that she'd sell this place off the first chance she got if he left it to her. So he left it to Frank with the condition that these precautions be put in place and that it passes into Will's possession when he turns twenty-one." She smiled and handed Laura a helmet. "We contacted Frank about nine months after we ran and he said we were welcome to come here anytime," she shrugged and helped Laura with the strap; "He never came up here himself... we found a note my Dad left for him, asking him to watch out for us."

"So if he'd come up?"

"That's not a 'what if' I like to dwell on," Carmilla replied before putting her own helmet on and
motioning Laura into the buggy.

She got in, did up her seatbelt and then reached over and helped Laura with hers.

"Ready?" she asked.

"More than," Laura replied, a blush barely visible beneath the face mask of the helmet.

They didn't talk much during the rest of the trip except for the few times Carmilla stopped to point out things like the trail to the lake and the tree fort she and Will had built when they were younger.

"Wow," Laura said in awe as they pulled up to the cabin an hour later; "I don't think your pictures did it justice."

Carmilla looked to the cabin and smiled; yes, it was impressive. Her father had hired an architect to build the cabin right into the side of the mountain. It was three floors and could sleep twenty in a pinch. There were four bedrooms but every single couch in the place was a hide-a-bed. The front of the cabin, the part that overlooked the lake, had two patios, one on the main level and a second from the second floor master bedroom.

"You hungry?" Carmilla asked as she took off her helmet and reached for the cooler.

"I am. What's for dinner?"

"Barbeque Tequila chicken with veggies and rice," Carmilla replied with a smile.

"Sounds good," Laura replied as she put her backpack on and then grabbed Carmilla's bag. "I'll take these to the bedroom."

"It can wait," Carmilla replied.

"It's okay, I can manage," Laura chided.

"It's not that," she replied with a smile as she unlocked the cabin's door; "I asked Dark to come up and get the place ready, and knowing him, he's left us some incredibly embarrassing surprise in the bedroom."

"Why didn't you just ask Kenny to do it?" Laura asked as she followed her inside and deposited their bags on the nearest couch.

"Dark needed a couple of days away," she shrugged; "and I don't know if I'd feel comfortable asking Kenny or his wife to come get the cabin ready for me to have sex with my girlfriend."

"Is that the only reason you brought me here Ms Karnstein?" Laura asked with a raised eyebrow as she sauntered over to her; "To try to seduce me?"

"Didn't realize I had to try," Carmilla replied, her voice low as she leaned in to kiss Laura's neck. "True," Laura sighed; "but you didn't answer my question."

"It's not the only reason," she chuckled softly under her breath; "but it's one of the big ones." She leaned back and searched her eyes a moment; "I'm being selfish," she shrugged; "I want you all to myself for a change," she kissed her softly; "No interruptions," she kissed her again. "No emergencies," she kissed just below her ear; "Just the two of us," she leaned back; "We can talk, go swimming, do nothing... whatever..." she kissed her again and then took her hand to led her back outside; "No set plan," she continued as she let her hand go to pick up the last box and carry it
inside; "Just doing whatever," she looked Laura up and down slowly, almost tripping at the cabin's entrance because she wasn't paying attention; "whenever we want," she managed to finish, hoping Laura hadn't noticed why she'd tripped.

"Do you need any help with dinner?" Laura asked as she followed Carmilla to the kitchen.

"No, I can manage," Carmilla replied.

"Mind if I take a shower?" Laura asked.

"Let me check if the hot water is hot," she replied and went to run the kitchen tap. Went it didn't heat up immediately she turned to Laura; "The pilot light must be out," she smiled crookedly; "we can shower together after dinner?"

"That sounds like a better plan anyway," she replied and went to kiss her.

Carmilla quickly emptied the cooler's contents into the fridge, putting aside what she planned to cook for dinner, and then made them a pitcher of Sangria. She gave Laura all she could carry and then took the rest out to the balcony off the kitchen. They set everything down next to barbeque, and while Carmilla took the cover off it, Laura poured them each a glass of Sangria.

"For the Sangria we missed out on a week ago," Carmilla toasted.

"Should we be drinking this?" Laura asked after taking a sip.

"There's only enough alcohol in it to taste it so it shouldn't mess with your meds any," she smiled and kissed her; "Besides... I want you sober the first time I make love to you," she kissed her again and then turned to unlock the barbeque.

"Why is the barbeque locked?" Laura asked as she took a seat at the table to watch Carmilla work.

"When you've been woken up one too many times in the middle of the night to find a raccoon licking the grill, no matter how well you cleaned it, you come up with some impressive measures to stop them," Carmilla explained, smiling when she noticed Dark was thoughtful enough to hook up a propane tank. She turned it on and lit the grill a few seconds later. She closed the lid and turned to Laura. "I'm going to go light that pilot light."

"Okay," Laura smiled as Carmilla came over and kissed her briefly. She made quick work of the pilot light and returned to find Laura at the balcony railing looking out over the water. She walked up behind her, put her arms around her and propped her chin on her shoulder. Laura seemed to melt into the embrace making them both sigh contentedly.

"I don't remember the last time I was this relaxed," Laura commented.

"Before you met me I'm guessing," Carmilla joked.

"In some ways, I guess," Laura laughed softly and turned in her arms; "but I was never this happy." She smiled. "It's not the place, though it is beautiful here, it's you, Carm, you make me feel safe and happy and content, no matter where we are, or what we're doing, I know everything will be okay because we have to have our happy ending."

"You make it sound so simple," Carmilla said, sighing as she leaned her forehead against Laura's.

"I know it's not simple, Carm," Laura said and gently pushed her away; "I know you think I'm
some nineteen year old naive little girl from a small town and that I couldn't possibly understand…"

"Laura, hey…" Carmilla said soothingly as she took her by the elbow to stop her from walking away; "Maybe I do think those things but it doesn't mean I don't think you can't handle all this stuff or that I think any less of you because of it," Laura turned to her; "I just rather you didn't have to. My life isn't perfect and it's not going to be anything resembling easy for some time, but having you…" she shook her head; "You make it easier. You give me a new reason to fight. You motivate me," Laura let her put her hands on her hips and pull her closer; "First it was about justice for my parents and what she did to Will and I. Then it was about keeping her from Will and his money. Now?" she smiled; "It's about having the normal life I've always dreamt of because I finally have someone I want to share it with." She ran her thumb along Laura's cheek, the younger girl leaning into her touch. "You make all this worth it," she finished as Laura leaned in to kiss her again, but before she let herself get too distracted she ended the kiss, which earned her a pout. "We have to wait a couple of hours before the water is hot enough for a shower and I, for one, desperately need a shower," Laura leaned in and sniffed her neck.

"You smell fine to me," she countered.

"All the same," Carmilla laughed as she pushed her away; "I did an intense workout this morning and I need a shower," she heard Laura's stomach growl; "And we're both hungry," she kissed her briefly and stepped away; "Besides, we have all weekend, what's the rush?"

Laura took her seat at the table again as Carmilla started getting their dinner ready.

"There's no rush, Carm, if you're not ready," Laura said quietly.

"What on earth?" Carmilla thought and looked up from the vegetables she was cutting; "What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, maybe 'cause you keep stopping us when things are getting interesting," Laura said shyly and looked down to cover her blush. "I mean," she looked up; "given what you've been through I can understand if you're not comfortable being touched…"

"It's less a comfort thing, as you mean it, than a, I'm just not used to be touched, thing," Carmilla replied honestly. "I mean, my Dad wasn't overly affectionate and Deanna, well, you get the idea," she shrugged; "You've been getting me used to your touch since the day we met," she smiled at her and then went back to work on the vegetables; "Never too much, always little things," she blushed; "I started craving your touch and wanting to be close to you." She shrugged. "I was also a little worried what you'd think of my scars."

"We all have scars, Carm, you just can't always see them," Laura replied quietly; "And it's the scars you have that can't be seen that worry me most."

"How much of my journal have you read?" Carmilla asked as she prepared the chicken.

"About two thirds," Laura replied. "I was thinking," she continued; "Carm, I think you should publish them anyway."

"Really? Why?"

"Subject matter aside, you're a compelling writer," she smiled; "I swear I feel like I'm right there with you." She paused a moment, considering her next words. "I was thinking… I'll have my cast off while you're away, and since I don't have classes to worry about, maybe I could type it up for
you? And then we could fill in any blanks when you get back and have it published right around
the time they air the finale?"

"Can I think about it?" Carmilla asked, stalling for time; she wasn't sure how she felt about it. Yes,
she'd meant her journals as a backup plan but now she wasn't sure how she felt about the world at
large knowing even more intimate details of her life.

"But I thought that was the plan?" Laura asked, looking a little crestfallen.

"It was, it's just..." she shook her head; "You'll understand when you read the second journal."

"Fair enough," Laura replied with a smile; "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You said you've only been completely clean for the last year?"

"I was still smoking weed up until a year ago," Carmilla replied, somewhat relieved at the easy
question; "She hurt Will and I both pretty bad the night we ran and we were both given
painkillers," she sighed; "When those ran out I started buying them on the street. It was part of the
reason we ran out of money so fast." She turned and put the vegetables and rice on the barbeque
followed by the chicken. "I'd been out for about a week when we met Bob. A week later, after my
first paycheque, I was high as a kite again. I hid it for a while, only Will and Dark seemed to figure
out something was wrong. Then Bob confronted me and got me off the meds." She shook her head.
"That's when I discovered weed helps with pain, and for the record, most of my journals were
written while stoned."

"Seriously?"

"It helps slow everything down enough that I can write it down," she replied with a smile; "You
might not have figured it out but the wheels are always turning and it gets exhausting. I also suffer
from certain amount of chronic pain from what Deanna did to me, the weed helped."

"So how do you cope now?" Laura asked.

"Training helps," she replied as she turned the chicken, "When my brain gets spinning too fast a
good run will usually calm it and since I've been seeing a physio and chiro regularly, the pain is
usually at a minimum," she shook her head and laughed; "It's ironic really, part of the reason I'm
such a good fighter is from what did Deanna did," she turned to Laura to find her looking bemused.
"I always had to be on my guard. Learned how not to get hurt and to act more hurt than I was to get
her to back off. It taught me how to read people when they fight, predict what they're going to do
before they do it and look for a weakness to exploit."

"So what's your plan for Danny?" Laura asked as she watched Carmilla transfer their food to their
plates.

"Keep her at a distance with leg kicks, to start, slow her down a bit," she replied as she put their
plates down and then sat beside her. "Next I'll start picking her apart. She throws these big,
looping, haymakers that, if they connect, would hurt, but she's so obvious about it it's easy to get
out of the way." She smiled. "And then, just when she's getting comfortable I surprise her, probably
near the end of the round in case it doesn't work so I can get myself out of trouble."

"You're not going to tell me what you're planning?" Laura asked neutrally.

"Wouldn't want to ruin my air of mystery," she joked, but seeing that Laura wasn't smiling she
explained further; "If it works it's going to be very cool and I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"So it's not because you think I'm going to warn Danny?" Laura asked her tone now unreadable.

"Of course not," Carmilla laughed and kissed her temple, "I trust you Laura."

"Why do you keep trying to send me away then?" she asked sadly and looked down at her plate. "It's almost like you don't want me around."

"What, aside from asking you to go to your Dad's for your own safety, have I ever done to ever give the impression that I don't enjoy every single minute I spend with you?" she asked as she took her hand. "I want to be with you Laura, despite all the shit in my life, not because of it. I wish," she sighed and looked down; "sometimes I wish we'd met after all this was over," she looked back up to her; "And maybe I'm little scared because I was so distracted by you, by us, that I missed that we were being followed for so long."

"How did you notice anyway?" Laura asked.

"Eat. Before it gets cold," Carmilla said before replying; "There's a lot of empty stretches of highway to the airport so any other car on the road sticks out. And then I saw his car when we left the restaurant." She studied her a moment. "Laura, I don't want you to go, I really don't. When I say those things…"

"It's because you're scared?" Carmilla nodded. "Of what Carm? Being happy?"

"No, of you getting hurt," Carmilla replied; "From the moment you stood up to Deanna you became a target whether we are together or not," she motioned to Laura's plate and then started on her own food. "She has tried, sometimes successfully, to turn every single person who has come into my life. Bob saw through it right away, filed for guardianship, and got in touch with Frank to get us our money." She smiled as she savoured her first bite of her favourite chicken dish. "Next she tried Brody, and then Dark…" she laughed; "She didn't have any luck with either of them but Dark had a little fun feeding her false information for a few weeks before she caught on." She chewed her food and watched Laura for a little while before she continued. "I should have known Danny was a plant the minute she showed up at the gym."

"You think Deanna got to her before she started working out there?" Laura asked in surprise.

"I don't know," she shook her head; "See, part of the reason I'd prefer you not go out alone, or any of us really, is that sometimes things get said in casual conversation with strangers that wouldn't normally get said if you weren't alone."

"What does that have to do with Danny?"

"Somehow Deanna found out about the Ultimate Fighter and starting sniffing around trying to find out more information," she shook her head again and took a sip of her Sangria; "I went off the grid in a major way when I started training full time," she laughed; "I think I've left the gym more in the last month than I have in the last year combined." She sighed again. "But that's why I should have known something was up. I wasn't leaving the gym and although I didn't talk to Danny much it would've been easy enough for her to overhear things." She took another mouthful of food. "I don't know though. From what you've said about Danny I'm starting to wonder why she's doing it."

"Because Deanna has her convinced you're the bad guy?"

"Maybe," she shrugged; "I'm going to talk to Danny after the fight, find out what's going on."
"If it's bugging you, why wait?"

"I don't want anything interfering with the fight," she replied as she refilled their glasses; "Now enough about the real world," she started as she held her glass aloft; "To us."

"To us," Laura agreed as she tapped Carmilla's glass with her own.

... 

It was a couple of hours later and the two were snuggled up on one of the lounge chairs on the patio watching the sun set behind the mountains. Carmilla lay with Laura in her arms, one hand under the back of her shirt rubbing circles.

"I like it here," Laura said quietly.

"Me too," Carmilla replied and kissed the top of her head.

"No," Laura said and looked up to her; "I mean I like it here, in your arms."

"I like having you here," she said and kissed her. She felt her shiver a bit and pulled away. "Are you cold?"

"A little," Laura admitted; "It really cools off quickly when the sun goes down, eh?"

"Yeah," she kissed her again; "C'mon," she said, pushing her slightly to indicate they should get up; "Let's get this stuff put away and call it a night."

"And by calling it a night you mean?" Laura asked as she sat up.

"I mean, putting this stuff away," she sat up and took her in her arms again; "taking a nice hot shower..." she leaned in and kissed Laura's neck; "and then finishing what we didn't have time to finish last night..."

"So it really has been a time thing?" Laura laughed.

"Mostly," she replied with a grin; "I didn't want to stop last night but it was already getting late and I still had to get everything ready for the weekend."

"Wait," Laura said as she stood; "you got back up last night?" she asked, Carmilla nodded. "What time did you come to bed?"

"Around two," she admitted.

"So you'd rather stay up late getting stuff ready for the weekend, when I could have just as easily done it this morning, instead of taking advantage of the very turned on and willing girl in your bed?" Laura teased.

"Laura," Carmilla started as she stood and took her in her arms; "I know we've only been together a week and maybe it's too soon to be admitting this but..." she paused to search her eyes; "I can't see a day, not for the rest of my life, where you're not in it," she kissed her to cover her admission; "So really? Why not wait until we could fully enjoy our first time?"

"Maybe we should wait until I get my cast off then?" Laura joked.

"We could, if you want to," Carmilla replied.
"Wait," Laura laughed; "that's what you meant when you said at least it's not my right arm!"

"No, I meant it was literally a pain in the ass having my right arm casted," she replied; "Seriously," she said as she stepped away to turn the barbeque on high, "it took me almost two weeks to figure out how to wipe my ass properly with my left hand," she joked.

"Is that why your left is stronger than your right?" Laura asked, causing Carmilla to drop the wire brush she was holding.

"How did you figure that out?" she asked as she picked up the brush.

"I've held pads for you," Laura replied simply.

"Right," she turned to her; "that stays between us."

"You don't think your trainers have figured it out?"

"No," she replied; "I fight like a right handed fighter. All my techniques are done right handed."

"Why though? If you're stronger with your left?"

"Because the two years I had to use my left arm while my right one healed doesn't trump a lifetime of doing everything with my right," she explained and smiled; "Besides, my left hook is my secret weapon. No one ever sees it coming and because I'm a 'right-handed' fighter no one has figured out yet that it isn't a fluke."

Laura had gathered their plates and utensils while Carmilla cleaned the grill, closed and locked it. Carmilla grabbed the plates and glasses, Laura, the empty Sangria pitcher and made their way inside. Carmilla put what she was carrying into the sink and turned the hot water on long enough to determine its temperature and then quickly rinsed off the plates.

She turned to find Laura watching her, a soft smile on her face. "How did I ever get so lucky?" she thought. Her whole life had been a series of misfortunes before now. All bad luck and no good. She hooked Laura's backpack on her shoulder, grabbed her own bag with the same hand and then reached for Laura's hand with her free hand. They were no more words that needed to be said. Not tonight anyway. They both knew how the other felt and that was all that mattered.

She led her over to the stairs, Laura stopping them to turn off lights as they went, and then made their way upstairs to the master bedroom. She turned on the lights to find that Dark had really outdone himself; every available surface was littered with tea lights and the bed was scattered with rose petals. Carmilla laughed when she noticed what lay in the middle of the bed.

"I see what you mean," Laura laughed as she went to pick up the impossibly large dildo from the bed; "I mean, is this actually usable?" she joked.

Carmilla laughed as she put down their bags and took two towels from her own; Laura had a point, the thing was nearly a foot long and probably six inches around.

"Not comfortably anyway," Carmilla said as she took it from her; "It's heavy enough though, I suppose you could use it as a weapon."

"Oh god, can you imagine that headline?" Laura laughed; "Man killed by enormous dildo!"

"So, shower?" Carmilla asked as she tossed the toy aside.
Laura nodded and knelt to search through her bag a moment, standing when she'd found the bag she used to cover her cast. Carmilla held her hand out to her and led her to the bathroom.

Laura stopped the minute Carmilla turned on the lights, she understood why, the bathroom was stunning. Surrounded by glass it was almost as though they were outside. If that weren't stunning enough the large old fashioned tub set by the window and the glassed in shower were also incredible. Carmilla hung the towels on the rack next to the shower and then took the plastic bag from Laura to cover her arm.

As she leaned in to kiss her she took the hem of Laura's shirt, broke the kiss long enough to lift it over her head, and then pulled her close. She started kissing down Laura's neck as she felt her trying to take her shift off and leaned back so she could. Laura pulled her close as she fumbled with her bra, Carmilla undoing hers with little difficulty.

"Need a hand there, Pup?" Carmilla teased and stepped back.

"No fair," Laura said with a pout; "you've got two hands."

"All the better for you, don't you think?" Carmilla asked seductively as she undid her bra and slowly slipped it off her shoulders. She undid her shorts next, let them fall to the ground and stepped out of them as she reached for Laura's shorts.

"You like undressing me, don't you?"

"I do," Carmilla agreed as she let Laura's shorts fall to the floor and then knelt to take off her, already damp, underwear; "It's like getting to unwrap the same gift over and over again and being excited like it's the first time every time."

"You'd think it would get boring," Laura said as she watched Carmilla slide her own underwear off; "opening the same gift over and over."

"When said gift is you?" Carmilla asked as she stood straight again and drank in every inch of Laura's perfect little body. "I look forward to it," she said as she held a hand out to her again. She opened the door to the shower and turned the water on, testing it with her hand until it warmed up. "C'mon," she urged; "We've only got about a half hour of hot water."

They washed each other between kisses and sighs, turning their backs to each other so they could wash their more intimate parts without embarrassment before leaving the warmth of the shower. Carmilla towelled Laura off and then tried to stand still as Laura did the same for her.

She took Laura's face in her hands when she was done and smiled.

"If you're not ready…"

Laura interrupted her with a kiss.

"I'm nervous," she said when she broke it and stepped back with her right hand out to her; "maybe a little scared," she admitted; "but I'm definitely ready," she finished as Carmilla let her lead her back to the bedroom.

"Candles?" she asked as they approached the bed; "Maybe just enough that we can actually see one another?" Laura smiled and nodded. Carmilla lit a few candles on each of the bedside tables while Laura went to turn off the main light. She looked over to her and found herself momentarily stunned by Laura's beauty; the way she moved, almost shyly, as she went to turn down the covers, almost like she still wasn't entirely comfortable being naked around her.
She walked around the bed to where Laura was sitting, reached down and tilted her chin up.

"Do you have any idea how ravishing you are?" she asked as she gently pushed her backwards onto the bed. She slowly crawled on top of her as Laura moved more fully onto the bed, kissing her pulse point before continuing; "I swear I could've ripped off that little white sundress you wore to the airport and made love to you on my dining room table."

"Ah but for the ill-timed head wound," Laura chuckled.

"I was working up the nerve to kiss you, you know?" Carmilla asked as she kissed her way up her neck to her lips.

"You should have," Laura said before Carmilla kissed her.

Carmilla kissed her way down Laura's chest her to her left nipple looking up to find Laura watching her as she circled her tongue around it and then took it between her lips. Laura closed her eyes and moaned as she arched towards her. Carmilla ran her right thumb over Laura's lips as she continued to tease her nipple with her teeth and tongue, then slowly ran her hand down her neck to her other breast, fondling and pinching the nipple as she moved to kiss Laura's open mouth.

Laura rolled her to her back and pulled away to search her eyes. She smiled softly and leaned down to kiss her before slowly, almost agonizingly so, kissed her way down Carmilla's chest to her breast, her right hand following her to the other. But Laura's right hand didn't stop there long and continued down her side to her hip and then to the inside of her thigh. As her hand inched higher she worked her way back to Carmilla's lips, kissing her deeply as she felt Laura's fingers touch her for the first time.

She rolled Laura back to her back, making sure that Laura's hand didn't move while she did, and started kissing her again as she maneuvered her hand between Laura's legs, the younger girl's gasp turning to soft sighs as they began moving as one.

Carmilla felt tears stinging her eyes as her orgasm approached; she'd never felt so alive, so loved, as wanted as she did in this one moment. She felt Laura clenching around her fingers and knew she was close too so she slowed her movements and added another finger inside her, moaning low in her throat as she felt Laura mirror her actions.

"Oh god, Carm..." Laura moaned as she broke their kiss.

"I love you, Laura," Carmilla said as she buried her head in her neck, her orgasm washing over as she felt Laura shake beneath her.

She gently took her hand from between Laura's legs as she felt her do the same and then slid off to the side to nuzzle into her side, her leg thrown over both of Laura's.

"That was... wow..." Laura sighed and turned to Carmilla; "Hey..." she said quickly and turned on her side to wipe away Carmilla's tears; "why are you crying?"

"For the first time in my life," she admitted softly; "I'm crying because I'm happy."
Sorry for the delay folks and I’m sorry but it’ll likely happen again. I’ve been working too many hours and ignoring my other story for too long. Hopefully I’ll have another chapter to you before next Tuesday but I can’t make any promises. Hope you enjoyed the fluff!
Laura pulled her to her chest and wrapped both her arms and legs around her, and started rubbing circles on her back, cooing softly and rocking her gently. Carmilla couldn't remember a time when she felt so safe, so cared for, so unconditionally loved; the realization caused her to start crying again. This wasn't supposed to happen, not now. She wasn't supposed to fall in love; she had too much yet to do. Besides, who in the world could ever deal with her life? Maybe she was pushing Laura away by asking her to go stay with her Dad. Maybe it was better she push her away before she ran. She sighed and pulled her closer. The feeling that was scaring her most though, was hope. It was an utterly foreign feeling to her and she didn't trust it. Almost as much as she didn't trust happiness. Too many times it had been within her grasp only to have it taken away, throwing her even further into despair.

Slowly she felt her tears slow and pulled away to meet Laura's eyes.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Better than," Carmilla admitted and smiled as Laura reached up to wipe away her tears. "I don't know how one person can both scare the hell out of me and make me feel so safe at the same time," she shook her head and turned to kiss her hand, but stopped; "Shit," she hissed.

"What?" Laura asked in confusion.

Carmilla took Laura's hand from her face and showed her.

"Figures," she sighed; "my period is really irregular and I haven't had it in a few months."

"Better this weekend than next?" Laura reasoned.

"True," Carmilla chuckled, rolled to her back and sat up. "Damn," she looked to Laura; "we're both covered in it."

"Shower?" Laura suggested, Carmilla nodded. "Only, maybe," she said shyly as she sat up and wrapped her in her arms; "don't, um, put a tampon in yet?" she whispered, causing Carmilla to blush.

"You don't have to, I can wait," Carmilla said as she turned in Laura's arms to kiss her.

"What if I can't?" she asked, her voice low and her desire evident despite her blush. "What if, despite how amazing our first time was, I really want the chance to concentrate on you? You were ready to donate blood to me, I don't see a difference," Laura offered and shrugged. "We'll be in the shower, it can't get much safer than that," she kissed her. "And we know we're both completely
"clean," she sat back. "Aside from the 'ick factor' I see no good reason why I shouldn't show you how much I love and want you."

"Yeah?" Carmilla asked uncertainly.

"Why do think I'm usually up and showered before you get up?" Laura asked.

"You're an insufferable morning person?" Carmilla teased.

"No," Laura laughed and shoved her playfully, "it's because I wake up having to use the bathroom. By the time I come back you're usually sprawled on your back," she smiled. "I start off watching you sleep; you look so innocent and peaceful," she confided. "But then I start thinking about all the things I'm really looking forward to doing to you," she pulled her close again, her shyness getting the better of her as she nuzzled into her neck. "Then I get all turned on and have to do something about it so I go to the spare room. get all hot and sweaty and need a shower when I'm done," she admitted.

"Really?" Carmilla purred.

"Carm, I know you still have doubts."

"I…" she tried to interrupt but Laura kissed her.

"I get it, baby, I do," Laura smiled; "but eventually you've got to let yourself believe this, what we have? It's real," she said seriously. "I know there's this little voice in your head; what if all this is a clever ruse? What if she is working for her?" Carmilla shook her head. "Do me a favour when we get back?"

"Anything," Carmilla stated.

"Read Frank's background check."

"Laura," she interrupted.

"No Carm," Laura kissed her; "If that's what it takes to shut that stupid little voice up for good then I want you to do it," she kissed her again. "I love you Carm and I've nothing to hide, I promise," she let Carmilla kiss her softly. "You've let me in so far, I want to prove to you that you haven't been misguided."

"Laura, before I met you I wondered how many times a heart could be broken before the scar tissue left behind by each disappointment rendered it incapable of feeling," she said, her eyes again welling with tears; "but then I met you and you've made me feel so many things I've never felt before; safe," she kissed her. "Happy," she kissed her again; "Being in love," Laura kissed her softly. "But the one that scares me most, is hope."

"You know what I think?" Laura asked with a smile; "I think all you ever needed was the right person to help you mend it," Carmilla kissed her. "Maybe, like a broken bone is stronger at the point where it broke, now that your heart is mending, it will only be that much stronger once it's healed?" She kissed her softly. "And maybe, like a bone, what doesn't break us as a couple, will leave us stronger?" She shook her head and sighed. "You're stronger than you know, Kitten. To have survived what you have and still be able to love like you do? I don't just mean me, but Dark, Brody and Will; they'd be lost without you. Even those people you call 'allies', you care about them and they you." She smiled and kissed her again. "What I'm trying to say, Carm, is that you are loved by so many, when will you finally accept that you're worth it?"
"You think I saved your life last week at Buntzen, but Laura? I was dead inside before I met you, it was the only way I could cope," she shook her head; "But Bob's death hit me hard, and then that whole stupid internet thing," she sighed; "I love you Laura, if I have any doubts, or you do, don't doubt that."

"I don't," she replied adamantly; "Now let's get in the shower."

Carmilla kissed her one more time and then turned to crawl off the bed. She stood and turned to evaluate the damage done to the bed. "Let's strip the bed and throw the sheet in the tub to soak overnight," she suggested.

"Go get in the shower," Laura prodded as she followed her off the bed; "I'll take care of this and be in in a few minutes."

"Okay," Carmilla replied before kissing her softly. She went to her bag and grabbed a tampon and fresh pair of underwear.

"But?" Laura said, causing her to stand and meet her eyes.

"For after our shower," she provided; "Although I'd like to reiterate…"

"Carm?" Laura interrupted; "You've already been covered in my blood."

"So what? Now we're even?" Carmilla joked.

"Well, yes, but that wasn't my point," Laura replied as she steered her towards the bathroom and then turned her at the door; "The circumstances might be different, and yes, you'd have done the same for anyone, but the reasons are the same," she kissed her; "Love," she whispered," Now go get cleaned up," she ordered; "I'll be in in a few minutes."

"Okay," she replied again, she had no other words available to her. She kissed her one last time, smiled and shook her head as she entered the bathroom. She left her underwear and tampon on the counter and got in the shower. She looked down and sighed; at least this time it was her own blood she was covered in. But Laura was right about one thing, better this weekend than next. There was a reason her periods were few and far between, she had a disease called Endometriosis, and suffered terrible cramps when she did have her period. Her family doctor suggested she start taking birth control to limit how many times she had her period and even, to some degree, plan when to have it when it was most convenient. Unfortunately this wasn't planned. With all the stress, turmoil and yes, the distraction of Laura, she simply forgotten to take her morning pill. She was making a mental note to take some Ibuprofen before bed when she heard Laura enter the bathroom. She'd been so lost in thought she'd completely neglected to clean herself up and quickly grabbed the loofa, soaped it up and started washing herself. She was just about to rinse off when the water turned scalding and she jumped out of the shower with a yelp.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry!" Laura said as she rushed to shut off the tap in the tub.

"Just hurry up and get in the shower to make it up to me," Carmilla replied as she tested the shower's temperature and got back in. She was finishing rinsing herself off when Laura joined her.

"How did I get so lucky?" Laura sighed as Carmilla added more soap to the Loofa and started washing her.

"Something I've asked myself a million times in the last week alone," Carmilla replied as she turned her towards the water to rinse off. She pulled Laura into her arms and helped rinse the soap from her body.
Laura slowly stepped backwards until Carmilla felt the cold glass wall behind her. She turned and started kissing her softly, her good hand already wandering her body while her bagged casted hand held Carmilla's right hand above her. Carmilla fisted her left hand in Laura's golden locks as she deepened the kiss. Laura's hand came to rest on her left breast, her thumb stroking the already stiff nipple while she massaged her with her whole hand. Laura let her right hand go and put her left hand on her hip as she slowly kissed her way to her other breast and her right hand proceeded her lower, first to her hip and then across and between her legs.

Laura let the nipple she was sucking pop from her mouth and looked up to her; "You're so wet already," she said her voice low and full of wonder; "You feel amazing," she said before kissing her again; "I wonder how you taste," she whispered in her ear before kneeling in front of her and looked up to her again; "Unless," Laura entered her with two fingers as her thumb started rubbing her clit; "you don't want me to…"

Carmilla tried to answer, she did, but Laura had once again stolen her ability to speak and so, instead, she put her right hand on top of Laura's head and nodded slightly as she pulled her towards her. Laura didn't need much prodding, and as she leaned forward, lifted her left leg over her shoulder, and wrapped her left arm around her other leg. She stuck out her tongue and licked her lips as she looked up and met Carmilla's eyes. She withdrew her fingers from inside her and used them to open her lips apart to reveal her prize. As her tongue touched it Carmilla closed her eyes and threw her head back as the pleasure washed over her.

"Fuck," she hissed as Laura entered her again, first with two, and then three fingers.

"Am I hurting you?" Laura asked as she withdrew her fingers.

"For the love of all that is Hogwarts, don't stop!" Carmilla growled as she pushed a giggling Laura back to where she'd been.

She lost track of time, and frankly, of any conscious thought, except maybe; "Wow, she's really good at this." The only words she managed to speak were Laura's name and a plea of; "Harder!" as she felt her orgasm approaching. She took her own nipple in her free hand and pinched it roughly, the act enough to finally push her over the edge.

"Oh god, Laura!" she cried as the leg supporting her threatened to give out, her climax causing her to shake and hold onto to Laura's head for support. She threw her head back again as she felt another wave about to crash within in her and somehow didn't notice when Laura stood and kissed her deeply, her hand still thrusting deeply inside her, her thumb again rubbing her clit, coaxing the second, or was it a third? Orgasm from her.

"Ahhh!" Laura cried and jumped back, the shower having gone from lukewarm to icy.

Carmilla pushed her aside, shut off the water and pulled her into her arms as she leaned back against the glass again. "That was…"

"Inconvenient," Laura joked and kissed her.

"No, I wasn't talking about the water," Carmilla sighed and tilted her chin up; "You're amazing… that was…" she shook her head and laughed; "Wow."

"Yeah?" Laura asked uncertainly; "I was good?"

"Didn't I already say 'amazing'?" she teased; "I felt the shower getting cold but didn't want to stop you," she admitted; "I keep meaning to get a plumber up here to update the plumbing," she sighed.
and pushed Laura away; "C'mon, it's been a long day."

"Week," Laura amended.

"Life, if you want to get technical," Carmilla joked; "We should make the bed and get some sleep," she eyed Laura up and down; "Well, maybe once I've shown you how good that felt anyway," she said, her voice silky.

Laura smiled and blushed as she went to towel her off. "Bed is already made," she admitted and shrugged; "It was only the fitted sheet," she smiled; "Took me longer to find the clean sheets than it did to make the bed."

"It amazes me how nonchalant you're being about all this," she commented as she took a fresh towel, dried Laura off and took the bag off her arm for her.

"Karma," she replied lightly; "I would hope you'd do the same for me when the time comes," she replied with a wink; "Now get herself, you know, and I'll be waiting for you in bed," she added and kissed her. "Don't take too long though or I might just have to start myself," she teased.

"I wouldn't mind seeing that," she said and noticed a blush mirroring her own on Laura's cheeks. "Go on, I won't be long," she urged before kissing her briefly.

She attended to her needs and made her way back to the bedroom, sighing when she found Laura sprawled on her back, the blanket covering her lower half, and by the looks of it, sound asleep.

"Wake her or let her sleep?" she thought; "Let her sleep," she concluded, reasoning it a good night's sleep would do them some good, and after all, what was the rush?

She padded over to the right bedside table and blew out the candles, made her way to the other side and did the same. She crawled into bed, kissed Laura's shoulder, then laid her head on it. As she placed her hand over her heart and her leg across hers, she heard Laura sigh a soft; "Wow."

"You're awake," Carmilla commented and looked up to her. She followed Laura's gaze to the skylight above them. "Beautiful isn't it?" she asked as she turned to her back and looked up. "It's comforting to think how small we are in comparison. All the lives we've led, the people we've been… nothing to that light."

"Carm?" Laura said quietly as she turned to her stomach so she could see her in the semi-darkness; "I have a past too," she smiled; "Maybe not as tragic but I'm also not as innocent as you seem to think."

"When have I ever said that?" Carmilla asked as she turned to her side and stroked her cheek; "Besides… after tonight? I can hardly call you innocent," she teased and kissed her softly. She leaned back and studied her face the best she could in the dim moon light. "You're tired," she stated and kissed the pout from Laura's lips; "we have all day tomorrow and some of Sunday before we have to head back to reality."

"So no rush then?" Laura asked with a shy smile; "It has been a long day."

"Week," Carmilla continued.

"Lifetime," Laura finished and kissed her softly. "I love you Kitten," Laura whispered as Carmilla rolled to her back and pulled her to her shoulder.

"And I love you Pup," she replied and kissed her forehead; "Now get some sleep so you'll have lots
of energy when I ravage you tomorrow."

"Is that a promise or a threat?" Laura joked.

"Both," Carmilla laughed.

...

Carmilla woke the next day to the bright sunshine of midday. She looked to clock and groaned; it was almost noon. She turned to her side and found Laura sprawled on her stomach beside her. She carefully lowered the blanket and studied her back as she ran her fingers over her pale unblemished skin. "Right there," she thought, "is the difference between us."

Laura had come to her whole and oblivious to the darker side of the life and now she was a part of it because of her. She lowered the blanket further and studied the backs of her legs; not a mark to be found. She sighed and gently rolled her over, trying her best not to wake her. She trailed her fingers up her legs and noticed a small scar on the outside of Laura's right knee. She frowned a little, Laura never mentioned a knee injury. Making a mental note to ask her about it later she let her gaze drift upwards; aside from the mysterious scar on her knee she found nothing. "And now she has another because of me," she thought sadly. She shook her head and leaned to kiss Laura's shoulder. She studied her face a moment and then rolled away to get out of bed.

"Where are you going?" Laura asked sleepily.

"Bathroom," Carmilla replied; "I thought you were asleep."

"No," she replied as she sat up and stretched; "I've been awake for a while but I didn't want to disturb you," she smiled and blushed; "and I was enjoying the attention and waiting to see where you'd go with it."

"Hold that thought," Carmilla replied; "I'll be right back," she said and blew her a kiss.

She was relieved to find that she hadn't bled through her tampon, and upon seeing it, remembered the bloody sheet in the tub. She finished up and went to check on it, it was only partially covered in water so she turned the cold water on, added some detergent from under the sink to the water and waited for the tub to fill. She sighed and smiled; as far as disasters went this was nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

She stood up too quickly and reached for something, anything, as the room spun around her. Her vision faded to black before she was able to sit.

"Carm?"

She woke to Laura sitting over her looking worried.

"You okay?" she asked as she helped her sit up.

Carmilla assessed herself before answering.

"Aside from a slight headache, I'm fine," she kissed Laura quickly and noted she tasted something sweet in her mouth; "Did you give me honey?"

"That was the right thing to do, right?" Laura asked anxiously; "I had a lot of free time this week and looked up what to do if you passed out."
"I'd have woken up eventually," she replied with a smile; "but thank you."

"Here, let me help you up," Laura said as she stood and held her hand out to her. She reached for her shoulder as the room spun again. "I'm okay. Got up too fast," she assured her as the nausea passed. "C'mon let's have some lunch."

"I can't believe we slept so late," Laura replied.

"I don't remember the last time I slept in," Carmilla confided. "But I need to eat before I do anything else. Pancakes, sausage and bacon?"

"Sounds good, I'll be right out," Laura answered and looked to the toilet significantly.

"Okay," she replied and kissed her briefly; "I'm looking forward to having you for dessert."

"Deal," Laura replied, her voice low; "Go, let me pee in peace."

Carmilla laughed and kissed her again before taking her leave. She took a pair of shorts, bra and tank top from her bag and was almost dressed when Laura returned.

"I thought…"

"I was thinking of going for a run after we eat," Carmilla explained, took her hand and led her to the balcony off the bedroom. She pointed to beach a little ways down the shoreline. "See the beach?" Laura nodded. "It's about an hour's walk, or half hour run," she explained; "I'll run there and then back to you and walk back with you."

"Or I could run with you," Laura countered.

"But…"

"I saw the Doc yesterday," Laura admitted, kissed her briefly and then went back inside; "We did more blood tests, I'm back to normal. He even said I could start working out again as long as I don't overdo it or use my left arm for anything."

"But we're at altitude and even if you were a hundred percent it would still be hard on you," Carmilla reasoned.

"Then you shouldn't be running either," Laura replied sternly; "No baby, you've been training like a maniac for the last five weeks, you need a break." She walked over and stroked her cheek; "You've earned a break." She kissed her softly. "Besides, I just found you passed out on the floor."

"Fine, I'll walk to the beach with you," she agreed reluctantly.

"Good girl," Laura said brightly and patted her behind; "Go on, I'll be down in a minute to help with breakfast, lunch, brunch, whatever…" she trailed off as she kissed her.

Carmilla smiled and took one last longing look at her girlfriend.

"Go," Laura admonished.

Carmilla chuckled and made her way down to the kitchen. She took the bacon, sausages, milk and orange juice from the fridge and the pancake mix from the cupboard. She had already started the bacon and sausages when Laura finally joined her wearing short shorts and a bikini top.

"Can I help with anything?" Laura asked, breaking her from her stupor.
"No, I, uh, I got it," Carmilla managed to answer.

"Juice?" Laura asked as she poured herself a glass and then poured a second at Carmilla's nod.

"Why do you have a scar on your knee?" Carmilla asked after downing half her juice.

"Oh," Laura said and reached down to rub it; "I had arthroscopic surgery to repair my meniscus. It's fine now."

"How long ago?" She asked as Laura took a seat at the counter.

"Year before last, why?"

"You should have told me," Carmilla replied tersely; "And you should have had it wrapped when we sparred."

"It's fine now," Laura repeated.

"The knee is a complicated joint, once weakened it's never the same again," Carmilla replied calmly as she put the sausages in the pan and started her first pancake in another. "Did you see the fight between Patrick Cote and Anderson Silva at UFC ninety?" Laura shook her head. "Cote never should have been given the fight but they had no else for Silva to fight," she flipped the pancake and dumped the bacon onto some paper towels. "Cote went into that fight knowing his knee wasn't a hundred percent but didn't wrap it. I think he also knew he had little chance of winning." She shrugged. "Sure, he can knock guys out but you gotta be able to hit someone first and Silva's defence is amazing. Anyway, midway through the second round it was obvious that something was wrong with Cote's knee. At the beginning of the third round he held up three fingers to indicate he'd made it to the third round, something no one else had managed in the UFC," she slipped the pancake onto a plate, added bacon and sausage and placed it in front of Laura before starting a second pancake in the pan. "Less than forty seconds into the third round his knee gives out and he falls to the mat in pain. Silva wins but Cote could argue that he didn't beat him. Who knows what might have happened if he hadn't blown out his knee?"

"So what's your point?"

"My point is it would have been a very different fight if Cote had taken the simple precaution of wrapping his knee," she shrugged and flipped her pancake; "And my further point is that you should have told me. If you get injured," she frowned; "well had you injured your knee before that happened," she indicated her cast, "you'd have been totally useless as a training partner."

"Stop," Laura said quietly and played with a piece of pancake on her plate; "Stop making it sound like every nice thing you've done for me has been selfish on your part. That you've only done it to make me the best sparring you can so I can help you achieve your dreams."

"That is how it started," Carmilla reminded her as she slipped her pancake on a plate, added bacon and sausages and went to sit beside her. "It is what it is Pup," she smiled crookedly and kissed her cheek; "Maybe we started off a little unconventionally but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Great way to seduce someone," Laura said quietly; "Beating them up in the gym for a month."

"It's what you signed up for, Cupcake," she reminded her.

"True," Laura replied with a smile and met her eyes; "I'm not as innocent as you think, Carm, I've been through my own share of shit." She shook her head. "Not that I'm comparing it to what you went through..."
"Everyone's shit is their own and is as awful to them as someone else's shit is to them," Carmilla replied and kissed her cheek. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Maybe later," Laura replied.

They sat quietly eating their breakfast for a while when Carmilla started to notice a dull ache in her lower back. By the time she finished eating she was starting to feel nauseated again and ran to the kitchen sink to throw up most of what she'd just eaten.

"Carm?" Laura said as she rushed to her side and held her hair out of the way. "Are you okay?"

"No, not really," she replied before turning on the tap, cupping some water in her hands and using it to rinse her mouth out.

"What's going on?" Laura asked in concern and watched as Carmilla sank to the ground clutching her stomach. "Baby?"

"I'll be okay," she assured her, or tried to. "Help me to the couch?"

Laura helped her stand but she couldn't stand up straight. She bit back another wave of nausea as she let Laura guide her to the couch. She fell down on it and immediately curled into a fetal position.

"What's going on? How can I help?" Laura asked in concern as she laid a blanket over her.

"Grab me the Ibuprofen from my bag and the two heating pads from the master bathroom," she replied as she gritted her teeth in pain; "I'll explain when you get back."

Laura kissed her forehead and then ran upstairs to grab the things she'd asked for. She plugged in both heating pads, handed them to her and went to retrieve her orange juice from the counter so she could take her pills. She shook out six and downed them all in one go.

"Carm, what the hell is going on?"

"I have something called Endometriosis," she started as Laura maneuvered herself behind her and wrapped her arms around her. "Endometrium is the tissue that lines the uterus. Endometriosis is when that same tissue is found elsewhere in the body and when I have my period it bleeds too."

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"Well, there's what my doctor and I tried but it seems to have backfired," she shook her head and sighed; she was starting to feel the combined effects of the heating pads and Laura rubbing her lower back. "She suggested I take the pill for a few months to give my body a break from this but I don't think she expected it to hit me this hard."

"So, wait, you planned this?" Laura asked.

"No, I didn't," she sighed again; "With all the stress of the last week I zoned out and forgot to take my pills. Sorry I ruined our weekend."

"It's not ruined," Laura replied and kissed the top of her head. "Is there no other solution for it?"

"I could have a surgery where they go in Laparoscopically and burn the tissue but it's not a permanent fix," she sighed and laid her head over Laura's heart; "It just grows back."

"Have you tried?"
"No, the down time isn't worth the potential benefits," she answered; "But let me tell you, it's times like these I miss weed."

"It helps?"

"With the nausea and the pain, yes," she sighed; "No, the only permanent solution is to have a hysterectomy but since I've yet to give up on the idea of having kids, it's not something I plan on doing anytime soon."

"So I guess our walk to the beach is out?"

"Maybe tomorrow morning but I don't think I'll be moving too far from this spot for the rest of the day," she answered.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Tell me a story? About you and your life before we met? Maybe what you were alluding to earlier?" Carmilla suggested.

"I…" she sighed; "I guess."

"You don't…"

"No, I want to," Laura replied with a heavy sigh; "You're not my first girlfriend," she admitted.

"What? Really?" Carmilla asked in shock as she turned to meet her eyes.

"It was never official mind," she said with a smile and kissed her forehead; "I was fifteen when I met her," she started as Carmilla settled herself more comfortably in her arms. She had a feeling this was a tough subject for Laura to talk about and sensed it might be easier minus the eye contact. "I just started grade nine when we met. I was already an outcast; everyone knew who my father is and were afraid I'd rat them out to him. Anyway, Cindy was new to the school and one day, at lunch, she just came and sat with me," she paused a moment and Carmilla looked up to find her smiling wistfully. "She said, 'I notice you're alone a lot. I thought, since I am too, maybe we can be alone together?'" She chuckled under her breath. "We were, pretty much, inseparable after that. For my sweet sixteen I persuaded my dad to let me have her over for a sleepover. He agreed and when I woke up the next morning it was to find myself in her arms. I didn't say anything and pretended to be asleep when she woke." She paused again and stole a sip of Carmilla's orange juice. "We never talked about it but we slowly grew closer and more affectionate towards each other. She decided to have a New Year's Eve party and invited half the school. Just before the clock struck midnight she got me alone and kissed me for the first time," she sighed heavily; "It was almost perfect until some idiot boy walked in on us," she continued, her voice now taken on an edge. "He ran back out to the rest of the party and told them what he'd seen. She got really upset and asked everyone to leave."

"That's pretty cowardly of her," Carmilla commented as she snuck her hand under Laura's shirt. "My Dad offered to let me switch schools too but I figured if I left it was just letting the ignorant bullies win," she laughed ruefully; "I got my revenge though," she started; "I threw myself into my studies, graduated Valedictorian and used my graduation speech to call them all on their behaviour," she looked up and met Laura's eyes again, her hand still inching towards her breast.
"There was dead silence when I was done. Until, that is, my Dad stood up, started applauding and yelled; "That's my girl!" at the top of his lungs. Pretty soon more and more parents joined in, and by the end, more than half the audience and good portion of my classmates were standing and applauding as well," she sighed as Carmilla's hand finally reached it's destination. "After the ceremony some of my classmates came and apologized for how they'd treated me, saying they'd never realized just how awful it was for me." She pulled Carmilla up for a kiss. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Distracting myself from my physical pain and trying to ease your emotional pain," she replied.

"Feeling better?"

"A little," she replied; "I don't think I'm up for walking to the beach any time soon but I definitely have the energy for you," she explained as she rolled to her stomach, lifted Laura's shirt and started kissing her belly.

"If you insist," Laura said with a sigh.

Carmilla smiled; "I do."

Maybe to someone else Laura's story would seem insignificant, just another story of high school drama and immature kids picking on someone they perceived to be weak. While Carmilla had underestimated Laura on several occasions, she never considered her weak. If anything, she found herself admiring the younger girl more and more as each day passed. There wasn't a comparison to be made; Laura's shit, though not as dark as her own, was still shit and stank all the same. As she lifted Laura's shirt over her head and then removed her bikini top she made herself a promise; she'd never be the one to cause Laura pain and she'd do everything she could, from this day forward, to see that she was always happy, cared for and loved.
Carmilla looked up to Laura from where she knelt between her legs; she was sprawled against the back of the couch, her legs hooked over Carmilla's shoulders, her bum at the edge of the seat, her right hand tangled in her hair and her left, casted, hand gripping the armrest as best she could. She smiled as Laura gasped, and then sighed, as she changed the hand that was thrusting inside her with three fingers and used it to rub her clit while she entered her with her left hand. She watched as Laura came undone at her touch, the noises she was making no longer resembling words but low, guttural moans of pleasure.

"C'mon baby," she urged, her voice low; "I know there's one more…"

Laura pulled her up so she was kneeling and kissed her deeply. She moaned as Carmilla's fingers started hitting her g-spot over and over.

"Oh god!" she gasped as she fell back on the couch again, her body convulsing with her most intense orgasm yet. Carmilla looked down as she felt something warm wash over her fingers and smiled; she'd actually made her ejaculate. When the liquid stopped she bent down to lick her clean while slowly, and gently, taking her fingers from inside her.

She sat back and licked each of her fingers, smiling as she noticed that Laura had yet to recover. Carmilla braced her hands on Laura's thighs and went to push herself up when she felt herself cramping again.

"Damn it," she hissed and fell back to sit on her heels, her arms clutching around her middle.

"Hey, you okay?" Laura said as she rushed to help Carmilla back onto the couch.

"I will be."

"Stop," Laura said firmly as she helped Carmilla get comfortable; "Stop downplaying how much pain you're in."

"Laura?" Carmilla said quietly as Laura continued to fuss over her. "Laura, hey… stop a second…" she prodded. She pulled her knees to her chest, for some reason it seemed to lessen the pain.

"Please… sit…"

"No," she shook her head; "You need to eat something."

"Pretty sure I just did," Carmilla joked.

"Carm, I'm being serious," Laura said, sounding irritated.

"Hard to take you too seriously when you're still naked and the awe inspiring vision of you as you orgasmed is still fresh in my brain," Carmilla countered.
"Fine," Laura huffed, reached for her t-shirt and pulled it over her head. "Better?"

"No," she answered honestly. "Why are you so pissed off?"

"I'm not sure," Laura sighed and sat at her feet. "Please, be honest with me."

"Laura, do you wake every day with something hurting?" Carmilla asked, wrong footing Laura who could only shake her head. "I do. I don't remember the last time I woke up without pain somewhere," she could see the sadness in Laura's eyes. "I'm not telling you this to garner your sympathy, just trying to explain a little something about chronic pain sufferers," she offered and pointed to the heating pads; "Could you hand me those and grab a cushion for under my legs, please?" Laura nodded and passed her the heating pads before getting up to grab a couple of cushions from another couch. Laura waited until she was settled and laid a blanket over her before resuming her spot at her feet.

"People like me, like Dark, people who have some level of pain every day, we have a higher pain tolerance than the average person. What I might consider a three out of ten you might consider an eight or higher. When you're in pain every day you learn to take control of it or it controls you," she shrugged; "When I first started having bad cramps it did. I'd spend days curled up in bed crying," she laughed ruefully; "Even Deanna took pity on me and left me alone."

"I'm still not sure how any of this is supposed to make me feel any better," Laura said quietly as she reached for Carmilla's hand.

"My point is; yes, I'm in a great deal of pain, maybe a six with an occasional spike to a nine," Laura winced; "But I refuse to let it ruin our weekend."

"Maybe we should head back?" Laura suggested, although it sounded half-hearted.

"I can't drive right now," Carmilla admitted and forestalled Laura's interruption by holding up her hand; "You can handle the Jeep fine once we get to the highway but even I have trouble with the backroads. As it is, I might ask Kenny to drive us out if this doesn't let up by tomorrow morning."

"You should still eat something," Laura prodded; "You didn't finish your breakfast and threw up most of what you did eat."

Laura was right but the nausea she was still feeling made her stomach turn at just the thought of food.

"Maybe some toast?" Laura offered; "A cup of tea?"

"There's cinnamon raisin bread in the fridge, I'm making French Toast tomorrow, and I'll have a coffee, please," she said, giving in. She had a feeling that Laura was feeling helpless and having something to do would make her feel better. "I don't usually eat much when it's this bad," she shrugged; "My doctor and I can't figure out why, but having a full stomach seems to make it worse."

"How many days does this usually last?" Laura asked as she retrieved her shorts and slipped them on.

"A few days," she replied; "but it's usually only this bad for the first day or so," she sighed; her nerves were already becoming frayed by the pain. "Would you mind, terribly, if I had a smoke first?"

"Does it help?" Laura asked.
"It's an old habit," she admitted. "I keep a pack in the freezer for emergencies," she supplied; "I need to go to the bathroom."

"I have some Ibuprofen with muscle relaxants," Laura said as she stood and then helped Carmilla do the same; "Maybe they'd help?"

"Over the counter?" Carmilla questioned.

"Yeah, so they should be safe, right?"

"Should be but if they aren't I'll say you gave them to me not knowing they were banned," she replied seriously; "What?" she asked with a laugh at Laura's frown. "It doesn't matter either way as long as I claim them on my pre-fight questionnaire," she assured her; "Can you grab me some Gravol from my bag too? Might help the nausea a bit."

"Eww..." Laura said as she stepped into the puddle she'd left on the floor and then noticed that it had also soaked the front of the couch. "Wait, did I do that?" she asked, mortified.

"Oh, baby," Carmilla cooed and took her in her arms; "It's a good thing."

"Why? What did I do?" she asked in confusion.

"You ejaculated," Carmilla informed her, smiling when Laura blushed deeply; "Didn't it feel amazing?" she asked. "It looked like it felt amazing," she purred and kissed her neck. "You always look beautiful to me," she whispered; "but in that moment? You were radiant," she pulled away to look into her eyes; "I look forward to seeing that side of you again."

"So that, what happened, it's normal?" Laura asked uncertainly.

"Completely," Carmilla assured her; "Consider yourself lucky; some women try to achieve that all their lives and never do."

"Maybe you're just that good?" Laura teased.

"Or maybe you trust me enough to let go?" Carmilla countered.

"There is that," Laura kissed her softly; "I'll be right back," she said and kissed her again before going to get the meds for Carmilla while she painfully made her way to the nearest bathroom.

It had never been this bad before; her legs felt like leaden weights along with the sensation of having knives slowly twisting both in her lower back and her lower stomach. She gritted her teeth and quickened her steps to the bathroom.

She grabbed a fresh tampon from under the sink along with a sanitary pad, just in case, and went to attend to her needs. She was shocked when she removed the tampon to find that, not only had it bled through in the hour, or so, that it had been in, she distinctly felt, and heard, a rush of blood as it left her body.

"What the hell?" she thought; her periods hadn't been this heavy in years. She shook her head; "Maybe it's just a three month build up?" she wondered. She waited until she felt the dripping stop and then cleaned up the best she could before inserting a clean tampon and affixing the pad to her bikini bottoms.

She used the sink to pull herself up, washed the blood from her hands, and returned to the living room to find Laura already busy in the kitchen, the smell of brewing coffee and toasting raisin
bread reaching her nose.

"You okay?" Laura asked again.

"I'd be better if you stopped asking if I'm okay," she replied gently; "I'll be fine," she smiled weakly and went to kiss her cheek. She checked the ingredients in the medication Laura had brought down and shook out two when she didn't see anything that raised any bells. She took two Gravol as well and downed the four pills with a sip of orange juice.

"Are you sure you should be taking more Ibuprofen? You just took some," Laura asked as she made her coffee for her.

"Since the first batch has done little to numb the pain I don't see how it will hurt," she replied and retrieved her cigarettes from the freezer.

"Why don't you eat first?" Laura suggested as her toast popped up.

"Okay," Carmilla replied and kissed her cheek. "I'll take this stuff. Can you grab the pillows and heating pads?" She smiled at Laura's confusion. "If I'm going to be in the fetal position most of the day I might as well be outside getting some sun." She kissed her cheek again. "With any luck these cramps will slack off a bit and we can go sit in the hot spring for a bit."

"I thought you said the hot spring is an hour away?" Laura commented as she went to gather Carmilla's things from the couch.

"It is, but we had a pipe run to it last summer," Carmilla replied with a grin. "The spring itself is about halfway up the mountain," she explained as they exited onto the patio. She took a sip of her coffee and continued; "We ran it to the hot tub by the lake," she said as she pointed to the covered tub by the lake's edge. She watched as Laura set up her pillows on the lounge chair they'd shared the night before and then handed her her plate and put her coffee down on the table beside the chair. She sat down, her legs raised and a heating pad on her lower back. Laura handed her back her plate and then placed the second heating pad across her lower stomach before putting a smaller cushion on her lap so she had somewhere to put her plate.

"Thank you," Carmilla said gratefully.

"You don't have to thank me," Laura replied with a blush as she sat by her feet; "I'm happy to take care of you," she sighed; "I just wish I could do more."

"Do you have any idea where I'd be without you right now?" Carmilla asked, smiling when Laura blushed again and shook her head. "I'd be at home, curled in the fetal position, crying and feeling sorry for myself."

"You're not much better off," Laura commented sadly.

"I disagree," Carmilla said and lowered her toast back to the plate. "I don't remember the last time someone took care of me and that," she smiled as she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat; "that means everything to me."

"I like taking care of you," Laura replied and kissed her knee.

"Not to mention; you're a great distraction," she added with a wink.

"Yes, well, no more of that until you're feeling better," Laura replied with a blush.
"Why ever not?" Carmilla teased.

"Cause it's hardly fair that you're making me feel so good when you feel so crappy," Laura countered.

"But making you feel good makes me feel better," Carmilla replied.

"Still, it sucks that I can't reciprocate," Laura said quietly.

"You did last night," Carmilla reminded her.

"You weren't in this much pain last night," Laura stated.

"True," Carmilla replied with a sigh and tried to eat her toast. "But I enjoy just being close to you almost as much," she shrugged; "Besides, I have a little more than a month to get to know you, in that way, before I leave, so I don't see any need to rush."

"Every time I think about you leaving," Laura said sadly; "I feel like someone's cut a hole in me."

"It's only six weeks," Carmilla reminded her; "and I'll be thinking about you every chance I get." She waited until Laura met her eyes; "I think we should make it official."

"I'm sorry?" Laura asked in surprise.

"Laura Hollis," she said and kissed her hand before continuing; "will you officially move in with me?"

"I thought I already had," Laura said with a giggle.

"I suppose, but I was thinking you can re-decorate the spare room however you like. You know, really make it your own space," Carmilla suggested. "Maybe put some of your pictures up in the living room?" She smiled. "I want it to feel like it really is your home too."

"It already does," Laura said, kissed her knee and stood. "I'll be right back," she informed her and kissed her softly before going inside.

Carmilla watched her walk inside then returned her attention to her toast. Maybe there was something in her life that was easy. Spending time with Laura certainly was. Living with her had been too. It was amazing, actually, how quickly they'd adapted to each other's routines.

She'd finished her toast by the time Laura returned wearing her bikini and carrying a bottle of suntan lotion and towel. "Do my back?" she asked as she handed her the lotion and sat on the chair beside her.

Carmilla nodded and squeezed some lotion into her hand.

"You know we're completely alone up here, right?"

"Yes, what's your point?"

"That you can sunbathe naked if you want," Carmilla provided as she spread the lotion over her back.

"True," Laura replied and stood so Carmilla could do the backs of her legs. "But I don't want things that have never seen the sun to burn."
"Fair enough," Carmilla replied with a laugh. "Can you grab me a lighter?" Laura nodded. "There should be one in the drawer by the sink."

Laura kissed her briefly and then went back inside to grab a lighter. As Carmilla waited for her to return she shook a cigarette from her pack and then took one of the cushions out from under her knees and stretched her legs. Her cramps had abated again, albeit only slightly.

"Here you go," Laura said as she handed her a lighter.

Carmilla forgot about the cigarette in her hand as she watched Laura pull another lounge chair over, laid it flat, laid her towel down on it, removed her bikini top and then lay on her stomach beside her.

"And you call me a tease," Carmilla joked and lit her smoke.

Laura turned her head and studied her a moment.

"There's something I should tell you before you read Frank's background check," Laura started.

"Or," Carmilla interrupted as she reached over and ran her fingers through Laura's hair; "I could learn everything about you the normal way."

"No," Laura replied and propped herself up on her elbows; "I want you to read it but…" she shook her head and rubbed her face. "I was arrested for, but not charged with, assault last fall." Carmilla was about to make a joke when she saw how serious Laura was looking. "I went to a Halloween party, disguised of course, because I heard Cindy might be there," she sighed; "I just, I wanted to talk to her, put things to rest." She shook her head. "She was there and all over some boy I'd never seen. I got upset and found a room by myself." She frowned. "I was sitting alone when a boy from my school came in. He was really nice, at first, listened while I poured my heart out. He left to get me a drink," she sighed, "The next thing I remember was him trying to undress me."

"Oh Laura…" Carmilla gasped.

"I punched him in the throat," Laura continued despite the interruption. "But he got angry and hit me," she shrugged; "I fought back; broke his wrist and a couple of ribs, badly bruised his testicles."

"Good for you," Carmilla praised with a smile.

"I got out of there, took the cup with me and ran home," Laura continued. "My Dad took me to hospital, had my blood tested. It was positive for Roofies," she sighed. "Why did they try to arrest you though?"

"Because he wasn't just any boy," Laura replied ruefully; "He was the captain of the hockey team with a promising career." She shook her head and laughed. "They, the cops, showed up at our door with an arrest warrant. My Dad gave them the test results and a warrant for Derrick's arrest for attempted rape and assault charges. He claimed, Derrick did, that he'd been drugged too and didn't know what he was doing, at first anyway." She frowned again. "It didn't go to trial, not enough evidence apparently. Personally I think the judge thought he'd already been punished enough by missing a part of the hockey season," she laughed but there was no humor in it. "School only got worse. The popular girls? They actually had the nerve to tell me they'd have gladly slept with him, and that I was an idiot for rejecting him even if I am a lesbian."

"Yes, because attempted rape is a great endorsement for the male gender," Carmilla commented wryly.
"Exactly!" Laura laughed. "And the jocks? Forget it," she shook her head; "They were constantly threatening me, but subtly of course." She smiled. "But then the coolest thing happened… someone, actually a group of someones, stood up for me. It was a small town but we there was a group of four Goth kids and they took me in…"

"Wait!" Carmilla exclaimed and sat up; "I saw it, your speech! I didn't recognize you, but you were amazing!"

"I'm not surprised you didn't make the connection," Laura said with a smile. "They, my friends, said I didn't have to dress like them but when you're trying to fade into the background, looking like me in a group of Goth kids?"

"I could see where you might stick out," Carmilla replied with a grin; "You looked really hot as a Goth, though."

"Thanks," Laura blushed. "The lot of them went traveling, said they weren't ready to grow up yet."

"I'm glad, for one, that you didn't," Carmilla said softly.

"Me too," Laura replied and kissed her hand. "I didn't join them because I wanted to start my life. Get school over with, you know? Get out there and start working," she shrugged; "Traveling I can do later."

"I look forward to exploring the world with you Laura."

"Me too," Laura replied with a smile; "I look forward to all the things our future holds in store for us."

"We might have taken very different paths to this point," Carmilla said and took a drag off her cigarette as she looked out over the lake; "And in some ways we are very different because of it, but in the way that matters most, we are the same; survivors who don't let that term define us."

"We made it through all the shit we've been through has only made us stronger because we refused to let it destroy us. It came close, a few times, but still we came out the other side all the more resilient for it."

Carmilla had drifted off a little while later; the combination of the meds inside her, the fresh mountain air, the sun and frankly, the pain, making her feel far more tired than she should have. She woke a couple of hours later to find Laura fussing with a large umbrella.

"Sorry," she said and kissed her; "I didn't mean to wake you but I figured the last thing you needed, on top of everything else, is a sunburn."

"It's okay," Carmilla said as she sat up and stretched; "I need to go the bathroom anyway."

"How are you feeling?" she asked as she stood.

"Stiff," Carmilla replied and stretched again. "But it's slacked off a bit."

"Are you hungry?" Laura asked prompting her to look at her watch and realize she'd been asleep for more than a few hours.

"I was going to make steak fajitas for dinner," Carmilla replied; "Why don't you start bringing the
stuff out and I'll help you as soon as I'm done in the bathroom?" Laura smiled and came over to kiss her. "Maybe open us a couple of Coronas?"

"You sure? You've got a lot of medics in you," Laura countered.

"Most of that's gone and I'll only have the one, okay?" Carmilla offered, far from being put out by Laura's worry, she found it endearing.

She made her way to the bathroom while Laura followed her in and went to the fridge. She tried not to let on just how uncomfortable she still was. Although the cramping had eased off her legs still felt as though they weighed fifty pounds each. She made quick work of changing her tampon and pad, the former having leaked through, but the latter not overly stained. At least it seemed to have slowed.

By the time she returned to the patio Laura had everything for dinner on the table. "Can you start the barbeque? I've never been overly comfortable starting them."

Carmilla nodded, unlocked the barbeque, turned the propane on and lit it. She turned back to Laura and picked up a knife to cut some peppers into quarters.

"So I was thinking," Carmilla started thoughtfully; "You've told me a little about your past, maybe I should do the same?"

"Or I could just read it in your journal," Laura countered; "I mean, if that's easier."

"No, there's, well there's something I should probably tell you about before you get to it," she glanced at her from the corner of her eye; "It's about the three women I slept with."

"I don't know if I need to hear about your exes," Laura replied with a laugh, however it sounded off to her.

"None of them qualify as exes," Carmilla replied flatly; "Well maybe the first," she shrugged. "Do you want to hear it or not?" she asked and looked at her.

"If you want to tell me then I want to hear it," Laura replied.

"Well," she started and then paused as Laura kissed her cheek; "Like you, my first girlfriend was in high school. Unlike you, we were quite aware of what was happening between us, talked about it and even agreed to pursue it, albeit secretly," she shook her head; "She wasn't worried about her parents but I was worried about Deanna for obvious reasons." She sighed. "Her parents figured it out, went to Deanna for advice; they weren't sure what, if anything they should do about it. The rest I found out last year, ran into her in a bar," she glanced at Laura briefly. "Her parents walked in on us while we were having sex, she was quite loud, and chased me from the house, yelling all the while they were going to have me arrested for defiling their daughter. Deanna told me that she offered them a… shit…"

"What?" Laura asked.

"When I ran into Melissa she mentioned that Deanna paid off their house in addition to giving them a large sum of money," she shook her head; "She wouldn't tell me how much but I know her parents were near bankrupt when I knew her. Anyway, what if Deanna just outright bought their house in West Van?"

"You don't think?"
"Maybe," she shook her head; "It's not like Deanna to make a mistake like that but she is getting desperate and we'd likely have never made the connection if the girl in the basement hadn't set the house on fire."

"So you were in the middle of having sex with Melissa and that's why she didn't, um, 'return the favour'?" Laura asked, bringing them back to the topic.

"Exactly," Carmilla replied with a smile and kissed her briefly. It went without saying that a call to Rick with this new information could wait. "The second girl was a straight up set up," Carmilla continued bitterly. "She was actually straight!" She laughed. "I think she was Deanna's hairdresser or something. Again, someone in need of money." She shook her head. "I met her at a bar, we started talking," she shrugged; "She seemed nice enough. We started dating. You know, normal things like movies and dinner, but I never invited her to my place, nor me to hers." She unwrapped the steaks, coated them with spices and put them on the barbeque. "It went on like that for a while until finally she invited me back to her place. I knew something was off from the minute I walked in. She told me she lived alone but I could tell someone else lived there."

She added the vegetables to the grill and turned to Laura. "We had sex, but I was on my period and neither of us felt comfortable with her touching me," she laughed; "Afterwards she came clean, told me she'd been working for Deanna all along and that I'd better go before her boyfriend got home."

"Wow, that must have pissed Deanna off," Laura commented.

"Don't know, don't care," Carmilla replied; "Michelle knew what she was getting into." She laughed again as she flipped the steaks and vegetables. "And then there was Janet… straight up psycho…" She shook her head. "We met at the bar, started seeing each other, had sex once, but again I was on my period."

"Did you plan it that way?" Laura asked.

"Maybe," she shrugged; "You're the first person I've shown my scars to who isn't a doctor, lawyer or police officer," she admitted; "I wasn't ready to explain and she was pretending to not know who I was so I went along with it. Anyway, we were at the bar a few days later and I'd finally worked up the nerve to go through with it all the way but she seemed off. I took her home and put her to bed. As I was leaving I ran into her roommate who said she had to show me something. She took me to a room that Janet said belonged to the roommate and was always locked but it was actually hers." She took a long swallow of her beer. "The walls were lined with photos and articles, all about me. The roommate explained that Janet planned to blackmail me into giving her lots of money. She was going to claim that I'd drugged her and taken advantage of her but we found the pills she'd taken in 'shrine' room. I took pictures of everything and got in touch with Rick. She was charged with stalking the next day."

"What about all the girls the papers reported you being with?" Laura asked as Carmilla took the steaks off the grill to rest.

"I didn't sleep with any of them even if I did dance and/or make out with some of them at the bar and did leave with them," Carmilla replied with a smile. "I stopped drinking when I went out and sometimes I'd take them home because they were drunk. Next time I saw them at the bar they were too embarrassed to approach me again."

"Carm, I appreciate you telling me all this but…"

"Why am I telling you?" Carmilla asked and continued at her nod; "Because all of them…" she turned to Laura and ran a thumb over the cheek, "What I felt for them? None of it compares to how
I feel about you and none of them could ever hold a candle to you."

Laura pulled her close and kissed her softly.

"I never thought I'd be lucky enough to meet someone like you," Carmilla said, her eyes welling with tears; "Or if I was, it wouldn't be until long after all this crap is over," she shook her head and kissed her again. "There's still a long way to go before we get there, but Laura?" Laura smiled. "The journey doesn't seem nearly as long, or as scary, anymore, with you at my side."

Chapter End Notes

As usual, sorry for any mistakes I missed. I'll do a better edit when I have the chance but I didn't want to make you wait any longer
The Calm Before the Storm

Carmilla was surprised to find herself alone when she woke the next morning. She rolled to her back and stretched, assessing her condition as she did. She was stiff but the ache in her lower back seemed to have subsided somewhat. She sat up, stretched again, took a deep breath and smiled: she could smell breakfast. She looked at her watch and frowned; it was only eight. She went to the bathroom and was relieved, at first, to find that her flow to seemed to have slowed, until, that is, she felt a rush of blood again. She shrugged; maybe it was as simple as gravity. She'd been horizontal for the last ten hours; maybe the blood had just collected? She shook her head, maybe they should head back early, if hadn't slacked off by tomorrow, she'd give her doctor a call. She wasn't overly worried but she did have a fight in less than a week. While it was true she had been training like a maniac for the last five weeks and could afford a break for a few days, with her fight in less than a week, she wasn't sure what effect being idle, not eating properly and losing so much blood would have.

She slipped on a pair of pajama bottoms and a tank top before going to find Laura, surprised when she got downstairs and didn't find her in the kitchen.

"Laura?" she called.

"I'm outside," she heard Laura call from the direction of the patio. She noticed the light on the oven and found a covered plate inside. She grabbed some oven mitts, took her breakfast out and put it on the counter. Lifting the cover she found French Toast and bacon. She slathered butter on the French Toast and then poured syrup over everything. She replaced the cover then made herself a cup of coffee before heading outside to join Laura. She found her looking out over the lake at the railing, a telltale wisp of smoke above her. She put her plate and coffee on the table and went to join her.

"Hey," Carmilla said as she took her in her arms and kissed her neck. "Since when do you smoke?"

"I gave it up when I graduated high school," Laura said with a shrug and butted it out in the ash tray. "I've been craving one since I saw you smoking yesterday," she admitted and turned around.

"You've been crying," Carmilla said in concern as she went to wipe away the recent tears. "What is it, baby? What's wrong?"

"Carm, be honest with me, did you get your period this weekend on purpose?" Laura asked as she looked down.

"God no," she raised Laura's chin with a finger; "Why would you say that?"

"It's a good excuse for me not to touch you?" Laura offered and looked down again.

"And when have I ever given you the impression that I don't want you to touch me?" Carmilla asked and kissed her neck. "I might have made out with a lot of girls, but I never wanted them to touch me like I do you."

"Yeah?" Laura asked uncertainly.

"If you'd have tried, yesterday, despite the pain, I would have let you," she confided.
"Let me?" Laura said sadly.

"I was in a lot of pain," she reminded her.

"How are you feeling now?" Laura asked, searching her face as she answered.

"Better."

"Carm, be honest, please?"

"I feel better, I do," Carmilla assured her.

"That's not saying much considering how shitty you were feeling yesterday," Laura replied ruefully. "Be honest with me, please?" she implored.

"My back is still achy but my legs don't feel like dead weights anymore," she confided; "I'll be okay, I will."

"Maybe we should head back early? I already packed up most of our stuff and cleaned out the garbages," Laura studied her a moment; "Are your periods always this heavy?"

"You didn't have to do that," Carmilla deflected and kissed her briefly; "Kenny would have come out tomorrow and taken care of it."

"You didn't answer my question," Laura stated.

"It used to be but I suspect it's just because I haven't had it in three months," Carmilla replied, and taking her hand, led her over to the table. "What's really going on, Pup? Why were you crying?"

"I just..." Laura sighed and took a seat beside her; "I can't help but wonder if it'll ever be enough."

"If what will ever be enough?" Carmilla asked as she took the cover off her breakfast.

"If I will ever be able to convince you that, for better or worse, I'm in this for the long haul," she looked down at their hands as Carmilla took hers. "I feel like, sometimes, you're still keeping me at arm's length because you're not sure you can trust me... or trust what we have..." she trailed off as she pulled her hand from Carmilla's to wipe her nose.

"Laura? Hey... look at me..." Carmilla prodded until she again met her eyes. "I do trust you and I do love you..." she kissed her as she still looked unconvinced; "Do you have any idea how many times I've made myself come while fantasizing about you touching me?" Laura, despite her surprise, blushed and shook her head; "Lots..."

"Yeah?"

"God yes," Carmilla replied and laughed; "Laura, me getting my period this weekend, while inconvenient, was not planned to keep you at arm's length. I want you to touch me almost as much as I want to touch you." She smiled crookedly and took her hand again. "Yes, all this relationship stuff is new to me..."

"It's new to me too."

"I know," she pulled her hand up and kissed her knuckles; "so we'll figure it out together, yes?"

"I love you Carm, I hope, if you still have doubts about anything else, you don't doubt that," Laura said quietly.
Carmilla studied her a moment; she wasn't sure where this insecurity was coming from. She got up from her chair and then moved Laura's so she could straddle her. She tilted her face up and kissed her forehead before kissing along her jaw to her lips, her hands cupping both her cheeks. She smiled into their kiss as she felt Laura's tongue enter mouth and her hand slip under her tank top. As it inched towards her breast she finally pulled away from the kiss to whisper; "Careful, they're tender."

Laura took her breast in her hand and gently rubbed the nipple with her thumb.

"Do you know," Carmilla whispered as she kissed along Laura's neck; "the reason I have to use the washroom after we spar?"

"For the same reason I do?" Laura asked with a throaty laugh; "To, um, dry off?"

"I have many a fantasy revolving around having sex with you in the cage," Carmilla replied.

"Ew…"

"Ew?" Carmilla asked with a laugh and sat back.

"The mat is disgusting!" Laura said with a laugh; "All that sweat and blood? So yeah, 'ew'!"

"You wouldn't be on the mat," Carmilla said seriously; "I was going to use your wrist wraps to tie you to the fence," she said with a wink, her voice low with desire; "and have my way with you…"

"You don't need to tie me up to have your way with me," Laura replied with a low chuckle; "Unless that's something you're into…"

"I honestly don't know," Carmilla replied; "but I look forward to exploring all things sexual with you."

"Maybe we can start," Laura said and kissed her briefly; "once you've eaten your breakfast and after we've gotten home?"

"Or," Carmilla said before kissing her and then going to resume her seat; "we can soak in the hot tub for a bit before we go," she cut off a piece of French Toast and popped it in her mouth; "Seems a shame to come all this way and not take advantage of it." she said around her food; "Besides, it's early yet…"

"I know, but I'm worried about you Carm," Laura admitted.

"I know you are sweetie, but I promise, I'm fine," she said, trying to convince her; "And a soak in the tub will do me a world of good before we head home."

"I'm not winning this one, am I?" Laura asked with a sigh.

"Probably not," Carmilla said with a laugh; "But if you really want to go after I eat, we can."

"No," Laura replied with a smile; "I guess we're not really in any rush to get back to reality." She smiled and looked out over the lake. "I noticed some smoke…" she looked off into the distance and pointed; "that way… I thought we were alone up here?"

"We are," Carmilla assured her; "Sometimes Kenny's grand kids come up camping but they keep their distance," she shrugged; "they know I come up here for privacy." She ate another piece of French Toast. "Though Kenny usually warns me," she thought. "You know it occurs to me that I
haven't given you a tour of the place."

"That's okay," Laura smiled; "I did some exploring this morning."

"Did you now?" Carmilla teased; "Just how long have you been awake?"

"A couple of hours."

"Why were you awake so early?" she asked and sipped her coffee.

"Just got to thinking," Laura said vaguely; "about what we talked about yesterday and wondering if it's always going to be an uphill climb with you. If I'm always going to wonder what is going to scare you away."

Carmilla wasn't sure what to say, hadn't she had the same doubts?

"Maybe," Carmilla said as she took her hand again; "it's a good sign?"

"How can being scared I'm going to lose you be a good thing?"

"Because you're scared of losing me?" Carmilla countered and kissed her knuckles; "I know it reassures me to hear you're just as afraid of losing me as I am of losing you." Laura leaned over and kissed her softly. "But I'm not going anywhere, Laura," she said fiercely; "It has taken me way too long to feel this way about someone and I promise I'm going to do everything in my power to try to make you as happy as you make me because I never want this feeling to end." She smiled. "I always wanted to meet someone and think, not only is a future possible with this girl, but anything less than forever would seem absurd," she shook her head; "I never thought I'd actually meet someone who felt the same about me."

"Carm, I know Deanna did a number on your self-esteem," Laura said carefully.

"Yes, well, grow up with someone constantly treating you like you're than lower than dog shit, and at some point, you start to believe it," Carmilla replied sarcastically.

"Carm?" Laura said and waited until she met her eyes. "It's not just random flattery when I tell you you're one of the most beautiful people I've ever met. Not just on the outside, cause yes, you're hotter than hell," Carmilla blushed; "but you're beautiful inside too. Compassionate, loving, generous..." she smiled; "Every day that I've woken up next to you has been like a dream... I just, sometimes, I have to remind myself that you're mine."

"I am, Laura, yours," Carmilla smiled and kissed her; "so completely and utterly yours," she added.

They stared at each other a moment and then Carmilla returned her attention to her meal.

"It scares you, doesn't it? Being vulnerable?" Laura asked and Carmilla looked back to her. She was beautiful; her head resting on her hand as she thoughtfully studied her. "I mean, I get it, you've only had yourself to rely on for so long, had to be strong for so long..."

"Tell you a secret?" Carmilla interrupted, Laura smiled and nodded. "I'm faking it. I'm not strong. I'm afraid all the time. Afraid of whatever Deanna plans on next to ruin my life. Afraid that, somehow, I'll lose to Danny and my whole plan will go down the tubes before it gets a chance to take off." She reached for Laura's hand. "But most all I'm petrified of fucking this up. That I'll do something, whether consciously or not, to sabotage the best thing in my life." She shook her head and looked out over the lake. "If you asked me to, Laura, I'd give this all up and run away with you. We'd find some way to leave and we'd just go... somewhere without stalkers and evil stepmothers.
And sleep in hotel rooms and never live in the same city twice. There'd be no one to fail or
disappoint or save. It'd just be you and me in love." She smiled and looked back to find Laura
looking wistful. "And that scares me most of all, Laura." She shook her head. "I've been on the
path of revenge and redemption for so long that…"

"You're not sure how to live any other way?" Laura deduced. "As good as all that sounds Carm,
and it does, it really does, that wouldn't be who you are." She shrugged and leaned over to kiss her
cheek. "I've seen for myself what Deanna is capable of and I know you'd never stop worrying
about those we left behind." She nodded, as if she was confirming something to herself. "We'll get
through this Kitten, all the stronger for it as well, and then we'll have our whirlwind romance
globetrotting around the world."

"I like the sound of that," she replied and sighed. "This thing with Deanna, it only ends one of three
ways; her in jail, her death or mine," she shook her head at Laura's look of shock. "It's the only way
either of us will give up." She reached over and took Laura's hand again. "She's invested too much
into this crusade of hers to give up easily. If I die she has a clear shot at Will."

"You really think Will would go running back to her? After everything she's done? To you? To
him?" Laura asked in shock.

"I love my brother, I do, but he's far from healed from what she did to him and I think, were I not
around, he'd go back to what he knows is familiar, and to him, safe," she shook her head and took
her hand from Laura's to sip some of her coffee. "The worst part is, she knows that. She's banking
on it."

They grew quiet again, Laura resuming her earlier position of her head on her good hand and
staring at Carmilla thoughtfully.

"What?" Carmilla asked as the silence stretched and she finished her meal.

"You don't give yourself enough credit," Laura commented.

"Nor do you," Carmilla countered. "Nor did I, at first. I'm sorry for that." She got up and again
straddled Laura where she sat. "You're stronger than you know Laura. Most people would have run
at the first sign of trouble. Hell, most people have. But you?" She smiled and kissed her. "You've
just held on tighter." She kissed her forehead. "We can talk until we're blue in the face, Pup,
reassuring each other of our feelings and our levels of commitment, but in the end, what matters
most are actions. I should have known, the moment you offered to pretend to be my girlfriend to
piss off Deanna, that you were a keeper."

"That wasn't entirely selfless," Laura admitted shyly, "It was a great excuse to start showing you
affection."

"And the same reason I suddenly started going on a lot of small errands," Carmilla laughed. "I
think we've been dating for weeks but we've only just figured it out," she joked. "And baby? If you
have any doubts about me wanting you to touch me, don't."

"But…"

"No," she cut her off. "You want to know what my plan was for the weekend?" Laura smiled and
nodded. "I was only going to let you out for bed to eat and go to the bathroom," she informed her.

"Oh really?" Laura tried to asked sarcastically but the dip in her voice betrayed how much she liked
the idea.
"C'mon, let's go sit in the hot tub," Carmilla said as she stood.

"I made you a protein shake, want me to grab it while I grab us some towels?" Laura asked.

"Please, and thank you," Carmilla said as she went to hold her and kissed her. "For everything. You've been amazing all weekend."

"You'd have done the same for me," Laura replied with a smile and moved some hair of Carmilla's forehead; "Hell, you already have, time and again." She kissed her. "Go on, I'll meet you there."

"Careful on the stairs, they can be slippery," Carmilla warned.

"You too," Laura replied affectionately; "What?" she said with a laugh at the look of amusement she knew was on her face, "I'm not the one with a fight in less than a week."

"There is that," Carmilla sighed at the dose of reality but then smiled, Laura was in this reality too and that? That wasn't so bad. "Go on..." she said kissing her and then patting her on the behind, "I'll be waiting."

Laura smiled and kissed her again before turning to go inside. Carmilla sighed and shook her head; Deanna told her, after the mess with Melissa, that love was weakness. She smiled; her love for Laura had only strengthened her resolve to see an end to all of it. One way or another they'd have their normal.

She made her way over to the tap at the side of the house and turned it on full before carefully making her way down the stairs to the lake's edge. They'd completed the work last summer, and as it was with all her projects, she was quite proud of the results. They'd had large slabs of stone brought down from the mountain and then arranged by the water's edge. There were places to sit, build a bonfire and the rocks closest to the water were perfect for diving. She smiled and looked back up to the cabin, the sight of Laura descending the stairs carrying two towels and her protein shake, making her smile. "Someday," she thought; "this could be every day and the only responsibility I'll have is making sure she's happy."

She shook her head and started taking the cover off the hot tub. It was already full, the spring water gushing into and through it. She studied the water a moment, and when she deemed it debris free, she turned the tap by the tub to half, a gentler stream of water now flowing through the tub, steam rising from it.

"Hey," Laura greeted as she approached and held out her shake to her.

Carmilla took a sip and smiled; "You've been talking to Brody."

"I actually downloaded all the recipes onto my phone," she admitted and took her phone from her pocket. "I thought you said we wouldn't have coverage up here?"

"We never have before," Carmilla replied with a shrug and turned Laura's phone off; "Doesn't change our agreement," she said as she handed it back to her; "No outside influences for the weekend."

"I might have cheated," Laura admitted as she took off her sweat shirt. "I used the internet to do a little research on your condition." She frowned. "Sounds like you have a pretty bad case."

"It's unconfirmed though," Carmilla said, somewhat distracted as she watched Laura continue to undress. "I'd have to have the surgery I told you about but I have all the symptoms."
"Help me wrap my arm?" Laura asked, shaking her from her stupor.

Carmilla nodded, took the bag from Laura, wrapped her arm and then pulled her close.

"Do you have any idea how disappointed I am that we didn't get to spend the day making love?" she purred as she nuzzled into her neck.

"You're the one who wanted to go for a run to the beach," Laura reminded her as she took Carmilla's tank top off over her head.

"Where I planned to make love to you out on the raft," Carmilla informed her.

"Oh really?"

"Yes really," Carmilla replied with a low chuckle; "You're the only girl I've ever brought up here and I planned on christening every available surface with you," she drawled as she took off her pajama bottoms, stepped into the tub and held her hand out to Laura; "You coming?"

"Not yet," Laura joked as she took her hand and joined her.

Carmilla took a seat and pulled Laura onto her lap.

"Well let's see if we can't do something about that," she offered.

"We're really alone up here?" Laura questioned.

"We're all alone," Carmilla affirmed and then smiled as Laura turned and straddled her; "Just you," she kissed her neck; "Me," she moved a hand to her breast; "and a bunch of furry little critters."

Laura laughed and pulled her into a kiss. From that moment on time lost meaning as Carmilla lost herself in all that was Laura. Her kisses that rocked her to her very core. Her soft and unblemished skin. Her pert little breasts with nipples begging for attention. She wrapped both arms around her and pulled her close. She took one nipple in her mouth while her left hand caressed the other and her right hand continued to explore. She ran it down along her back and over her butt, pausing there to squeeze and kneed it before moving on. She moved to her other breast and placed her left hand on her hip.

"Um, Carm?" Laura said breathlessly.

"Hmmm?" Carmilla hummed in reply, not willing to let go of the nipple in her mouth.

"As good as this feels…"

"Please don't tell me to stop because you can't reciprocate," Carmilla sighed in exasperation.

"Only long enough to get to a bed," she said; "I don't feel, particularly, um, stable, in this position."

Carmilla moved her so she was again sitting in her lap.

"Better?" she asked and starting kissing her again as her hand made its way between Laura's legs.

"Carm?" Laura said as she took Carmilla's wrist and stopped her progress. "Let's wait until we get home?"

"Why?" Carmilla sighed and lay back against the tub's edge.
"Cause…" Laura started as she leaned into her and kissed her neck; "I'd rather be at our home, in our bed, so I can fall asleep in your arms after," she leaned back enough to kiss her and then kissed her nose; "And I'd like to stay awake for the ride this time."

"I suppose," Carmilla said as she rubbed Laura's back; "your plan has its merits." She sighed. "Alright, let's relax for a bit, pack our stuff and then head home?"

Laura kissed her in affirmation then leaned back and ran her hand through Carmilla's hair.

"Who does your hair for your fights?" she asked.

"Perry."

"Perry? As in your manager Perry?" Carmilla nodded. "He does hair?"

"First, Perry's a she. Second, she's not really a sports manager, or at least she wasn't planning to be when she met me," she paused and reached for the shake Laura had made her. She took a sip, smiled, and kissed Laura. "It's perfect, thank you. Anyway, about a year and half ago I put an ad on Craig's list looking for someone who could travel with me and do my hair before fights. That's how I met Perry. She did my hair for one fight and we started talking. She came back for the next fight and asked some interesting questions, things I hadn't thought of before, and I asked her if she'd give managing me a try. She agreed and has been learning as we go but she's awesome."

"And she still does your hair for you?"

"It's part of my pre-fight ritual," Carmilla nodded and then explained, "First thing in the morning I go for a long run and clear my head; just put in my music and go. When I get back I have a good breakfast, take a shower and then a nap. Perry comes over a couple of hours before the fight and we have lunch, dinner, whatever," she laughed; "A meal to get me through until after the fight. And then, while she's doing my hair, I finally start thinking about the fight itself. I imagine everything, from getting my hands taped to walking out to the cage to staring across the ring, or the cage, at my opponent for the first time. And then I picture my opponent as Deanna and beat the shit out of her." Laura sat back and studied her. "I keep going through that in my head until I'm actually doing it. By the time the fight starts all the anger, the rage, it's boiling just under the surface. After that, my training, instinct, whatever you call it, takes over…"

"Then you wait for your opponent to make a mistake and take them apart like a kid with Legos…" Laura finished.

"An interesting way to put it," Carmilla laughed.

"That's how simple you make it look," Laura replied and kissed her; "Is everything a chess game with you?"

"You aren't," Carmilla replied honestly; "For the first time I have no clue what I'm doing," she smiled as Laura giggled and nuzzled into her neck; "And for the first time I'm okay with that."

They sat for a while longer in the healing waters of the hot spring before deciding to head home. They closed up the hot tub, gathered their things and headed back inside. "Your stuff is still upstairs," Laura informed her, "mine's already down here," she walked over to her bag and handed her a couple of the ibuprofen with muscle relaxants. "Maybe you should take those before we head out? Just in case?"
"I really do feel fine," Carmilla replied.

"Carm…" Laura said and came to take her in her arms; "I'm being serious."

"Again, hard to take you seriously when you're naked," Carmilla teased.

"Stop," Laura laughed as Carmilla pulled her closer and kissed her neck. "You're right, I can probably handle the highway but I'm not sure about the backroads…"

"But…"

"No, it hit you out of nowhere yesterday and I don't feel like getting stuck in the middle of nowhere with you in pain and me nervous about driving your precious Jeep through barely roads for ten miles."

"Okay, okay…" Carmilla laughed and took the pills from her. She retrieved the last of her shake and downed it along with the pills. "Happy now?"

"Been happy since the day I met you," Laura replied.

"And I'm the sap?" Carmilla joked.

"Shut it, you," Laura said with a playful smack of her behind; "Go get dressed so we can go home."

"Yes dear," Carmilla replied and took her in her arms again; "And then, after dinner, I'm not letting you out of the bedroom until tomorrow morning."

"Promise?" Laura said with a blush.

"Promise," she affirmed and kissed her briefly. "Now I better go get dressed before we don't make it out the door," she said with a smile and a raised eyebrow; "Cause definitely a possibility if I don't get moving soon." She kissed her again on the cheek and then, just to prove how better she was feeling, jogged up the stairs to the bedroom.

She sighed as she took her clothes from her bag; her lower back was still aching but otherwise she was feeling better. She took her clothes to the bathroom, changed her tampon and then got dressed. As much as she loved the cabin the anxiety of not knowing what was going on at home was starting to creep back. She returned to the bedroom and stuffed her pajamas into her bag. She briefly considered checking her email on her phone but when she went to try she discovered her battery was dead. "Oh well," she thought; "probably for the best." Since no one had called the house phone she figured there wasn't too much that could have gone wrong in her absence.

When she returned downstairs she found Laura looking in the fridge.

"Whatcha doing?" Carmilla asked as she walked up behind her and cupped her ass; "Not that I don't like the view."

"How much of this should we take back?" Laura asked as she stood up and turned to her.

Carmilla looked past her and into the fridge.

"Most of it can stay," she replied; "I was thinking we could come back for a week after the Invicta fight so the beer and stuff like that can stay. The rest Kenny can take when he comes out tomorrow to clean the place up."

"A whole week?" Laura said in surprise, a large smile on her face.
"That was what I was thinking," Carmilla replied as she closed the fridge and then pushed Laura up against it; "There's a lot I didn't get to show you," she kissed her neck; "and a lot of things we didn't get to take advantage of." She kissed her neck, her hand sneaking under her shirt. "There's a pool table downstairs that I'd love to fuck you on," she whispered; "And I was really looking forward to rocking the raft with you."

"Next time?" Laura asked as she stopped the progress of Carmilla's hand.

"Next time," Carmilla agreed and kissed her again.

She sighed, pulled away and rested her forehead against Laura's.

"Why can't they just hurry up and invent transporter technology already?" she joked to Laura's laughter. "I'm serious," she said as she moved her aside to take a couple of bottles of water from the fridge for the drive, "I love it up here but the drive I could do without," she put the bottles on the counter and pulled Laura into her arms roughly; "And I'd rather just be home in bed with you than waiting the six hour drive."

"Well that drive isn't getting any shorter the longer you procrastinate," Laura teased and kissed her.

"Procrastinating?" Carmilla laughed; "I'm not procrastinating, I can't resist you Laura, don't you get that yet?" She pulled her close again. "I never want to stop touching you," she knotted her hand in the hair at the base of Laura's neck and kissed her deeply; "I don't know that I'll ever get enough of you." She gave her a peck on the lips, changing her demeanour entirely before smacking her behind and offering her hand. "You coming?" she asked as she put her bag on her shoulder with her free hand.

"Not at the moment," Laura joked, as she led Carmilla out the door; "but, if I'm lucky, in about eight hours..." she teased, kissed her cheek, and then ran off toward the ATV.

Carmilla smiled and followed after her, there were other ways of passing the time on a six hour drive than staring at the scenery. She blushed at her own train of thought and smiled. She was going to enjoy the drive home.
Riding Out the Storm

As Carmilla made her way to the ATV and a smiling Laura she was hit in the face by a very large raindrop. She looked to the sky, scanned it and frowned; off in the distance she could see gathering storm clouds. “Damn it,” she thought as she heard the phone ring in the cabin. She shook her head and jogged over to the ATV, jumped in and grabbed the walkie talkie from the dashboard just as it beeped.

“Big bear to baby bear, come in, over,” it crackled.

“Baby bear here, go ahead,” she replied and looked to a grinning Laura.

“There’s a big storm coming in. The two of you should head out soon if you want to beat it,” big bear informed them.

“We were already on our way out,” she told him.

“Good, I’ll meet you at your car and help you with your stuff,” he replied.

“No, we’re good,” she said; “but we’ll stop by the house for a few minutes on our way out,” she added.

“No,” he answered; “I’ll go put the roof up for you. This storm is coming in quick.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in a half hour,” she informed him and went to put the radio back in its charger.

“Be safe. You’ve got a little time,” he replied.

“Was that Kenny?” Laura asked as Carmilla reached across her to help with her seatbelt.

“Yeah,” she smiled; “Put your helmet on and hold on tight, Pup, we’re in for a bumpy ride.”

“It’s just a little rain,” Laura countered as she did up her own seatbelt and reached for her helmet.

“It doesn’t take much to make the road impassable,” Carmilla informed her; “And it takes days to dry out again.”

“Surely it’s not the only way in and out?”

“No, but the other way isn’t much better, is way longer and shouldn’t be driven in bad weather either,” Carmilla replied before putting on her helmet. “Do me a favour?” Laura nodded. “Look up the weather on your phone?” Laura nodded again and took her phone from her pocket.

As Laura was busy with her phone she started up the ATV, turned them around, and headed for the path that would lead them out. She’d only been driving a few minutes when she felt Laura’s hand on her arm and came to stop. Laura handed her the phone and she swore when she read the weather report; not only was the storm approaching fast it was a bad one with wind and rain.
warnings in effect. As she handed the phone back to Laura there was a bright flash of lightning.

“One one thousand. Two one thousand…” Carmilla began counting off, reaching fifteen before a peal of thunder was heard. “It’s still about fifteen miles out,” she frowned; “it’s hard to tell up here though, sound travels differently, so it could be more like twenty.”

She smiled and hit the gas, Laura emitting a squeal as the ride got bumpier. It was fun but it wasn’t why she was driving so fast; the sooner they made the main road the sooner she’d finally relax. If they didn’t make it out in time they could be stuck for days and Carmilla really needed to get home.

They pulled up to the storage sheds about twenty minutes later. She took off her helmet then reached over and helped Laura take off hers. “You okay?” she asked as Laura, despite her smile, was looking a little pale.

“That was fun!” she exclaimed and tried to hug her before realizing she was still belted in.

“Goof!” Carmilla teased and undid her belt after taking care of her own.

“Baby bear!” a voice called, interrupting her intention to kiss Laura.

“Uncle Kenny!” she called back as she jumped from the ATV and then ran into his waiting arms.

“Hey kiddo,” he said warmly as swung her around and then put her down; “You made good time,” he remarked as Laura joined them.

“Scared the living daylights out of me a few times,” Laura commented as she reached out her hand to him; “Hi, I’m Laura.”

“Carm’s girlfriend,” he smiled as he shook her hand; “Nice to meet the girl who finally tamed my little bear.”

“Oh stop!” Carmilla said as she playfully slapped his arm.

“C’mon, we should get going if you want to see…” he trailed off as Carmilla shook her head subtly; “Nana C before you go.”

“How’s she doing?” she asked.

“Good days and bad,” he replied with a shrug; “Come on, I’ll help you with your stuff.”

“We don’t have much,” Carmilla replied as they walked over to the ATV. “We left some food for you in the fridge.”

“Tequila chicken?” he asked with a grin.

“Yeah, a couple of breasts left over from Friday night, should still be good by tomorrow.”

“I wondered why you made extra,” Laura commented as she shouldered her bag.

“I was going to make sandwiches yesterday but since we had breakfast for lunch,” Carmilla shrugged.

“So how come you were heading out so early?” Kenny asked as they walked over to her Jeep.

“I haven’t been feeling all that great and I just want to get home to my own bed to rest,” Carmilla
supplied, hoping that would be enough for him. “Since when do we have cell coverage up here?”

“A few months,” he answered; “The put a new tower up about a hundred miles from here.”

“You didn’t tell me the grandkids were up,” Carmilla commented as she threw her bag in the car.

“They’re not,” he answered; “Good thing too, I called them after I talked to you and asked them to gather their friends in case you two get in trouble on your way out.”

As if to reinforce their need to leave soon there was a flash of lightning followed by a peal of thunder about ten seconds later.

“It’s getting closer,” Laura commented.

“We’ll see you at the house but we can’t stay long,” Carmilla said as she got into the car. She watched him walk over to his own ATV and then turned to Laura; she had a feeling she had more than a few questions. “He’s my uncle by marriage,” she started as she started the Jeep. “My grandmother died when my father was young and and his father married Kenny’s mother. When my grandfather died she met Kenny’s father. She couldn’t marry him though because there was a stipulation in my grandfather’s Will that would see her financial support end if she did,” she shook her head and put the car in gear. “As soon as my dad came of age he changed all that so Kenny and his mother would always be provided for and moved them up here to take care of the land. His father died a few years ago and now it’s just the two of them.”

“What about his grandkids?”

“They’re his partner’s,” she smiled and Laura’s look of surprise; “Yes, Kenny’s gay but his husband Eric came out a little later in life...” she sighed; “He died last year. I don’t think Kenny has recovered yet.”

“So what about the smoke I saw this morning?”

“I don’t know,” Carmilla replied and shrugged; “Sometimes people from town come up here to camp. I’m not too worried as long as they keep their distance,” she admitted as she pulled up behind Kenny and watched him punch the code in to open the gate. “I’m sorry I didn’t mention he’s my uncle,” she offered and waited for Laura to meet her eyes; “It’s one of those secrets I’ve kept for so long that I’ve forgotten it’s a secret.”

“Why is it a secret though?” Laura asked as Carmilla followed Kenny past the gate.

“For their safety,” Carmilla replied; “If Deanna found out they received money from my dad she’d go after them too.” She shook her head. “Not even Rick knows the truth. Only Frank, Will and now you, know.”

There was another flash of lightning and the two counted off the seconds aloud until the thunder was heard. “It’s really moving fast,” Laura commented as Carmilla pulled up outside of Kenny’s house; they’d only made it to seven seconds this time.

They both got out of the car and joined Kenny at the front door.

“Maybe we should just head out?” Laura suggested. “We can visit for longer in a few weeks.”

“Might not get the choice of the litter if you don’t come see them now,” Kenny replied with a wink and entered the house ahead of them.
“Pick of the litter?” Laura asked as Carmilla took her hand.

“Kenny breeds Bengals,” Carmilla replied with a smile as she led her inside; “And one of his females, Batty, had a litter about six weeks ago,” she smiled as she could see Laura starting to get where she was going with this; “I was thinking it might nice for you to have some company…” Laura interrupted her with a hug and a squeal.

“So I take it that’s a ‘yes’?” Carmilla asked with a chuckle.

“I haven’t had a cat since I was kid,” Laura admitted before kissing her briefly; “I’d love a kitten.”

“You might second guess that decision once you’ve raised a Bengal kitten,” Kenny joked as they joined him; “They can be quite a handful,” he added as Laura knelt next to the playing kittens.

“She finally had a black one?” Carmilla asked as she knelt beside Laura and reached for the one black kitten amongst the leopard spotted ones.

“Yeah,” he replied with a large smile; “We’re calling him ‘Lucky’ until he gets chosen,” he smiled as she held the kitten up to her face and he promptly head butted her chin; “I think he’s chosen,” he joked.

“But we can’t take the only black one,” Carmilla said as she held the little guy to her chest, the kitten purring contentedly.

“Now that we’ve found a male with the recessive gene she can have another,” he replied.

“Carm?” Laura said as another kitten had climbed into Carmilla’s lap and was trying it’s best to get to its brother. “If they’re such a handful, maybe we should get two to keep them occupied?”

“We’ve been calling her ‘Monkey’,” Kenny supplied.

Carmilla looked to her uncle, then the two kittens now wrestling in her lap and then finally to a hopeful looking Laura.

“Okay,” she replied and then hissed an ‘ouch’ when Laura, in her enthusiasm, accidentally hit her in the head with her cast as she went to hug her.

There was another crash of thunder, much closer than the last, which made them all jump.

“You two should hit the road,” Kenny informed them as he offered Carmilla a hand up.

“Thanks Uncle Kenny, for the kittens and for, well, everything,” she said as she hugged him.

“I promised your dad I’d watch out for you,” he said quietly, his voice catching; “I’m sorry I did such a piss poor job of it until now.”

“You didn’t know,” she reminded him as she helped Laura up; “And even if you did what could you have done? We’re not legally related.”

“I know, little bear, but still,” he said sadly as he motioned them out.

“No, you had your own problems,” she offered as she squeezed his elbow; “What happened? It’s no one’s fault but hers.”

“I tried to warn him, your dad, that she was no good,” he shook his head; “But would he listen?” He sighed. “Oh how I wish I’d made him listen.”
They stopped at the front door and surveyed the rain.

“Go on,” he said as he hugged her again; “I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

She smiled as he let her go and then kissed her forehead.

“Give my love to Nana,” she said before running through the rain to the Jeep.

She ran to the passenger side first and opened Laura’s door for her before jumping inside and crawling over her seat to her own. She plugged her phone in to charge as she waited for Laura to get herself sorted and then reached over to do up her seat belt for her.

“Aren’t Bengals really expensive?” Laura asked conversationally as Carmilla started the car.

“It’s mostly a hobby,” Carmilla supplied as she put the car in gear. “Yes, he sells the kittens but he makes sure they’re going to good homes and the people who buy them sign an agreement to have them neutered as soon as they’re old enough.” She smiled. “And taking care of the kittens seems to help his Mom.” She sped up as she passed the gates to Kenny’s house. “She’s got Alzheimer's and doesn’t recognize me most of the time.” She smiled. “She actually keeps mistaking me for my Mom.”

“My dad mentioned you two look a lot alike,” Laura commented.

Carmilla shook her head and laughed.

“What?” Laura asked in confusion.

“Just thinking how different our lives would have turned out if your Dad had worked up the nerve to ask my Mom out in high school,” she supplied and chanced a glance at Laura. “What?” she asked, unable to read Laura’s expression. “You think he’d hold on to the obituary of a woman he barely knew all these years if he hadn’t, once, had feelings for her?”

“There’d be no us,” Laura said quietly and shrugged; “Or, at least, no us as we are now.”

“No, but both our mothers might have…” she trailed off at a flash of lightening and attempted to count but the follow-up thunder hit before she had a chance. “Shit! Fuck, fuck, fuck…” she muttered as a tree fell about ten feet in front of them and blocked the road. She hit the brakes and came skidding to a halt in the mud. “You okay?” she asked as she looked to Laura.

“I’m fine,” she replied, her voice a little shaky.

Carmilla nodded and reached for her phone.

“Uncle Kenny?” she said when the phone was answered after the first ring.

“You okay?” he asked in a rush.

“No, we’re not,” she replied and rubbed her face. She turned the wipers on full and looked out to the smouldering tree blocking their path. “We’ve got a tree across the road and the Jeep is sinking in the mud as we speak.” She fired up the GPS on the dashboard. “We’re about three miles from the main road.”

“Alright, I’ll call the boys,” he replied; “You sit tight, they’ll be there in about an hour.”

“I’m going to use the winch to get us on to higher ground,” she told him; “or we won’t be going anywhere once they get here. And tell them to bring chainsaws, it’s a big tree.”
“Okay, be careful,” he said before hanging up.

“Carm?” Laura said as she undid her seatbelt and reached in back for her bag. “Why the hell haven’t you ever gotten this road fixed?”

“Because it keeps people out,” she replied simply as she took jeans and a sweatshirt from her bag. “Can you grab my hiking boots and raincoat?” she asked before pulling on the sweatshirt.

“Sure,” Laura replied and climbed in the back of the Jeep to grab them.

“And my gloves if you can find them,” Carmilla added as she slipped out of her shorts awkwardly and pulled on her jeans. She shook her head and climbed over to the passenger seat to put on the boots Laura handed her. “Thanks,” she said as she took them.

“I don’t see your gloves anywhere,” Laura said as she handed her her raincoat.

“Check the emergency kit, I always have an extra set in there,” she informed her as she bent over to put on her boots. “Can’t afford to be hurting my hands, now can I?” she joked.

“Not with a fight in less than week,” Laura said seriously as she handed them to her.

“I was thinking more about what I plan on using them for later tonight,” she teased. “Speaking of which,” she smiled as she noticed Laura blushing; “Use my phone and call the Chateau Fairmont Whistler,” she turned and kissed Laura. “We’ll get a room for the night,” she kissed her again to forestall any questions; “It’s going to take at least a couple of hours to get us out of this mess and I don’t feel like driving home in this storm.”

“But…”

“We’ll head out early and be home by noon,” she kissed her again; “I’m not going to be up for training tomorrow anyway.” She smiled as Laura nodded. “Give them the name White, it’s my alias there.” She kissed her as she shook her head. “I give them a lot of money every year to hold a room for me and keep my anonymity.”

“And yet you leave this road impassable the minute it rains,” Laura joked.

“Speaking of which,” Carmilla sighed, as much as she knew she had to get the Jeep moved, she wasn’t looking forward to going out in the rain. “I’d better get started on getting us moving,” she finished as she put on her raincoat and zipped it up.

“Be careful,” Laura said before she kissed her.

“I will be,” she replied and kissed her again. She drew back and ran her hand along Laura’s cheek. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

She put up her hood and got out into the rain. She tied her hood tight and pulled on her gloves as she made her way to the winch at the front of the Jeep. She unhooked it and looked around for a sturdy tree to attach it to. Picking one a little further up the hill where it evened out, she carefully made her way towards it pulling the cable with her. She attached it around the tree and then used the cable to make her way back to the Jeep.

“Mother fucking son of a bitch,” she hissed as her glove caught on the cable. She examined the cable closer and found that someone had cut it almost all the way through. Just far enough that, had she applied any pressure to it, it would have snapped and possibly hurt someone. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she muttered as she slipped her jacket off and laid it over the cable; though it was unlikely
there’d be an evidence to preserve, she had to try.

She tried to run back to the shelter of the Jeep but found herself slipping and sliding towards it instead. By the time she got back inside she was soaked to the skin and covered in mud.

“What’s going on?” Laura asked in concern as she handed her a towel.

“The cable’s been cut,” she supplied grimly and reached for her phone. “Did you call the hotel already?” Laura nodded. She dialed Rick’s number and waited for him to answer.

“Hey kiddo, didn’t expect to hear from you until sometime tomorrow, what’s up?” he asked when he answered.

“Someone cut the cable on my Jeep’s winch,” she replied to his muttered ‘Damn it’. “We’re going to spend the night in Whistler but what do I do with it?”

“Can you detach it?” he asked.

“Do you have a raincoat?” she asked Laura, she shook her head; “We’ll figure something out,” she told him.

“Okay, wrap it in plastic, if you can, and I’ll pick it up tomorrow,” he replied. “Why were you using it anyway?”

“Got stuck in the mud on the way out,” she replied with a sigh. She turned the car back on and put the heat on full as she was starting to shiver. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said and hung up.

“So what do we do now?” Laura asked.

“I’ve got a couple of raincoats in my emergency kit,” she replied as she climbed in back to grab them. “Better wrap your arm just in case,” she said as she handed Laura one of the jackets. She pulled a another sweatshirt out of her bag along with a pair of sweatpants; she was going to look like hell when she walked into the hotel but it couldn’t be helped. “We’ll wrap the break first,” she continued as she changed her clothes; “and then I’ll get you to hold it while I detach it from the tree and coil it up.”

“Good thing you checked it first,” Laura commented.

“I wasn’t,” she admitted ruefully; “I was just using it to steady myself when my glove caught on it.”

“So what do we do once we’ve done that?” Laura asked as she put the coat Carmilla gave her on and she shoved a handful of garbage bags and a roll of duct tape in her pocket.

“Wait,” she replied with a shrug as she put her own coat on. “The boys will get us out.”

The two made their way out to the cable slowly as the footing was becoming worse. Carmilla took the garbage bags and duct tape from her pocket and used them to wrap both the cable and her jacket.

“What about your jacket?” Laura asked as Carmilla duct taped the bags in place.

“Even though I doubt there’s any evidence to save,” she started.

“It’s raining so hard you want to save anything there might be?” Laura finished.
“Exactly,” she replied with a shrug before kissing her quickly. “I have no idea when it was cut but I’ve only had it for the last year.”

“So, sometime in the last year?”

She smiled, nodded and kissed her again.

“You catch on quick, Miss Hollis,” she said, her voice low; “and I’m not just talking about this,” she added with a wink. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

She used the cable to climb back to the tree she’d attached it to, detached it and then very carefully made her way back to Laura who had smartly starting making her way back to the front of the Jeep with the wrapped cable in her hand and giving Carmilla something to hold on to.

She reached the Jeep just behind Laura, took the duct tape from her and used it to tape up the coil in her hand before pulling the remaining cable from the winch, coiling it and taping it as well. She took another bag from her pocket and held it open for Laura to put the whole thing inside. They both made their way to the back of the Jeep, using it to steady themselves as they did. She put the cable in the back, closed the tailgate and then promptly fell on her ass in the mud when she went to help Laura back to her seat.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?” she asked a laughing Laura as she grabbed a handful of mud.

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Wouldn’t I?” she joked and threw the mud, hitting her square in the chest.

“You brat!” Laura laughed and knelt to grab a handful of mud herself, slipped and fell onto her knees. She didn’t let it deter her though as she flung the mud in her hand at Carmilla’s head.

She ducked and laughed, the mud barely grazing her face.

“Truce! Truce!” she laughed, her hands in the air. “I give up!” She turned to the direction of the fallen tree at the sound of many ATVs. “Guess the cavalry’s here,” she joked. “Get back inside,” she advised Laura as she helped her to her feet, her good hand holding onto the Jeep and her casted hand out her. She kissed her cheek. “Aren’t we going to make the quite the sight when we both walk into one of the nicest hotels looking like this!” she joked.

“Maybe we should just head home?” Laura suggested.

“No,” Carmilla replied as she ushered her back inside the car; “I have a few sets of clothes that I keep at the hotel. We’ll look like hell walking in but amazing when we go to dinner.”

“Or we could order room service?” Laura countered as she pulled Carmilla closer.

“The food isn’t as good,” she stammered before Laura kissed her.

“Hey cuz!” a male voice called as it got closer.

“Hey Stan!” she greeted and looked back to Laura. “Stay here and change into something dry if you have it.” She kissed her. “Wouldn’t want you getting sick.”

“You’re the one who can’t afford getting sick,” Laura reminded her.

“But you being sick would be almost as bad,” Carmilla replied and kissed her before she could disagree. “I’ll be right back.” She kissed her one last time and then closed the Jeep’s door.
“Hey, I thought you’d be out of the mud by now,” Stan commented as she got closer.

“That was the plan but the cable’s been tampered with,” she replied as she looked over the tree and the group of people making plans as to how best to get rid of it. “Do me a favour?”

“Another one?” he joked.

“You’ll like this one,” she said with a smile; “You and your friends go stay at the cabin for a few days…”

“Really?” he interrupted; she never let anyone, save Dark, Will and Brody, near the cabin.

“Yes, really,” she replied. “You and your friends are saving my ass and it’s my way of thanking you, but…”

“I knew there was a ‘but’,” he interrupted.

“The master bedroom and camera room are off limits,” she informed him; “And if you could, can you bring the tree up there?”

“So, the cabin is less a reward and more like payment?” he teased.

“A ‘thank you’ for helping me out,” she corrected; “I’ll send you some money in the next couple of days for supplies,” she smiled; “Have fun and don’t demolish the place?” she said, teasing her older cousin.

“Don’t you have a fight in a week?” he asked, she nodded. “Go on then, get your skinny little ass back in the car before you get sick.”

She surveyed the tree, noticed his friends seemed to waiting for them to stop talking before starting their chainsaws, and then looked back to him.

“How long do you think this is going to take?” she asked.

“Not too long,” he replied smiling, “We’ll cut a hole big enough for you to get through and then pull you out of the mud.” He pulled her into a hug. “We’ll follow you out in case you get in more trouble and come back when it stops raining to clear the rest.”

“Thanks Stan,” she said warmly, and gave him one last squeeze. She looked over to the others; “Thanks for coming to help!!” she called.

“Get us tickets to your fight next Saturday and we’ll call it even,” someone called.

“Done!!” she yelled back with a laugh; “And the lot of you are invited to spend a few days at the cabin!!” she added and received a collective cheer. “Thanks Stan,” she said turning to him again; “I’ll have tickets set aside at the entrance,” she said with a wink; “It’ll be nice have my own rowdy cheering section for once.”

She made her way back to the Jeep, slipping and sliding in the mud again, the sound of a dozen chainsaws following her. Her progress was slow and it gave her time to think. So lost in her thoughts and concentrating on not falling in the mud, she didn’t notice that it had stopped raining. She looked to the sky and smiled; the clouds were still moving fast leaving a swath of blue sky behind them; maybe the day was looking up after all.

“Everything okay?” Laura asked as she got into the warmth of the car.
Carmilla didn’t reply, well not verbally at any rate, instead pulling her over for a long kiss. “A year ago,” she explained quietly as she pulled away and looked into Laura’s eyes; “none of this would have been possible.” She looked to where her cousin and his friends were busy clearing away the tree. “Before Eric died, Stan blamed Kenny,” she sighed and accepted a dry shirt and her shorts from Laura.

“At least they’re clean and dry,” she offered. “Why did Stan blame Kenny?”

“He died from AIDS related complications and Stan believed it was Kenny that had given it to him,” she replied sadly; “Eric told him the truth on his deathbed, he’d gotten HIV long before ever meeting Kenny and had done everything in his power to see that Kenny didn’t get it too,” she sighed as she took off her wet clothes; “He didn’t, Kenny is still clean.” She laughed softly. “Ironically Stan’s oldest brother came out shortly after Eric’s death and it was Kenny that helped them both through it.”

“Funny how things work out, isn’t it?” Laura commented.

“It’s not just that,” she said as she reached for Laura’s hand; “All this, all the stuff that has gone wrong this weekend; not too long ago it would have shut me down completely,” she smiled as Laura leaned in and kissed her. “Someone told me once that love is weakness…”

“Deanna?” Laura interrupted.

“Yes,” she smiled; “but she was wrong.” She moved some hair from Laura’s forehead; “Before you I’d have been sitting in the mud, crying my eyes out and yelling at the world how unfair my life is,” Laura chuckled; “But instead I’m dealing with it and managing to laugh.” She paused to kiss her. “My love for you has made me stronger in ways I didn’t know were possible.” She shook her head. “Made me laugh when things seemed darkest,” she looked down as Laura took her hand. “I’m still terrified, Laura,” she started and looked up to meet her eyes; “every single second of losing you or of something happening to you because of me…”

“Carm…”

“I know,” she smiled and kissed her; “you’re not going anywhere and neither am I but that doesn’t stop the fear.”

Laura studied her a moment before replying.

“Maybe you’re right,” she smiled; “maybe it is a good thing we’re afraid of losing each other even if we’re both going to do everything possible to see that never happens,” she said as she ran her thumb over her cheek; “But Kitten? Eventually you have to accept that you’ve always been worth fighting for.”

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, the last chapter’s title was foreshadowing of an actual storm... hope you enjoyed! Oh, and just an FYI: my days off are changing to Friday/Saturday and I'll probably start posting late Saturday or Sunday before I go back to work.
The two had sat quietly for a while, just watching Carmilla’s cousin and his friends working on the tree when they were both startled by a loud crash of thunder. Carmilla reached for her phone, checked the satellite imaging for the area and swore under her breath. She honked the horn to get Stan’s attention and turned to Laura; “We weren’t through the storm, we were in the eye of it,” she informed her, another boom of thunder was heard as if to reinforce her statement. She turned to a tap at her window, rolled it down and looked to Stan; “I’m thinking we should just get out of here,” she told him.

“I was thinking the same,” he replied grimly, water pouring down his face as it had started to rain again. “You’re already up to your doors in mud and that tree isn’t going anywhere. Grab your stuff and I’ll have Sheila meet us at the main road. You can borrow her car to get home and we’ll pick it up when we come down for the fight next weekend.”

“Thanks but you can pick it up in Whistler,” she replied; “We were already planning to spend the night and head home in the morning.”

“Good plan,” he replied with a smile; “Need a hand with your stuff?” he asked, she shook her head. “Alright, better make it quick, even my baby is going have trouble getting through this shit.”

“True enough,” Carmilla replied; “Give us fifteen minutes?”

“No more than,” he answered before going to talk to the crowd around the tree.

“Care to explain, again, why you haven’t fixed this road?” Laura asked sarcastically as she followed Carmilla into the back.

“We have, actually,” Carmilla replied.

“You mean it used to be worse?” Laura asked in shock.

“No, it used to be better,” Carmilla replied to her surprise; “We made it so only something as big as Stan’s Hummer can make it through when it’s wet. Keeps the less adventurous away.”

“Only if it rains,” Laura said as though it were obvious.

“Or we turn the hoses on to wet it,” Carmilla countered to her further surprise. She wiped away the fog on the nearest window and pointed to the tree line. “For the last five miles before Kenny’s there’s water hoses set up to soak the road. If someone he isn’t expecting trips the cameras at the entrance he can slow their progress just by turning on the tap.” She frowned as her phone rang. “C’mon, grab anything you might need for the next few days, I doubt I’ll be seeing my Jeep until next weekend,” she told Laura as she reached for her phone. Her frown turned to a scowl when she saw who was calling and put him on speaker. “What’s up Rick?” she asked as she put the phone down and started gathering her things.

“I played a hunch,” he replied grimly; “I sent someone over to the gym to check out your other cars; all but Laura’s had black boxes attached next to the gas tanks. I don’t think you should drive your Jeep anywhere until we’ve had it inspected.”

“What are the boxes?” Laura asked.

“We thought they were simple GPS devices, but when our tech tried to open the first one, it blew
“Shit, is he okay?” Carmilla asked.

“Yes,” he replied to their both their sighs of relief; “The charge was just big enough to destroy the evidence but,” he sighed deeply, like he didn’t want to admit the rest; “The second one they got open without triggering it,” he paused as if struggling with what he had to say next; “Carm, the charge was big enough to set off the gas tank.”

“Was anything else found? Were they tampered with in any other way?” Carmilla asked tersely.

“Not that we’ve found, yet,” he replied.

“Good thing we got trapped in the mud then,” Laura commented wryly despite how pale she was looking.

“Look, Carm, we’ll get some people up there tomorrow to dig it out and bring it back to Vancouver,” Rick offered.

“It’s about three miles from the main road,” she informed him, her throat tight from forcing back tears; “We were already going to leave it because the storm’s getting worse and we’re up to the doors in mud.”

“Told you your little mud trap would backfire on you someday,” he joked.

“Kept us from driving a potential firebomb any further,” she tried to say lightly, but it came out sounding a lot darker than intended. “We were already planning to spend the night in Whistler,” she sighed; “What time is the press conference?”

“Carm?” Laura interrupted before he had a chance to answer. “Let’s put it off until after the fight?”

“Why?” she and Rick both asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Laura replied with a nod to the window behind her, a tap sounding as she turned to it.

Carmilla leaned over to the driver’s side window and rolled it down.

“C’mon kid, we need to get going,” Stan urged.

“We’re almost ready,” Carmilla replied, rolled the window back up and turned back to Laura who was digging through the cooler. “Rick?” she said, wondering if he was still on the line.

“Yeah?”

“Do as Laura says; cancel it but rebook it for next Sunday,” she informed him; “We’ll talk after we visit Laura in the hospital.”

“Alright. Give me a shout when you get in and drive safely,” he said affectionately.

She hung up the phone and looked to Laura.

“Care to explain?” she asked.

“You need to eat something, or you will soon,” Laura replied as she handed Carmilla four
sandwiches and reached back into the cooler.

“I was talking about the press conference, it was your idea, after all,” Carmilla asked as she took a couple of juice containers from her and put them in her bag along with the sandwiches.

“I’ll explain once we’re on the road again,” Laura replied and looked around; “How are we getting out?”

“Through the back?” Carmilla suggested. “Better wrap your arm, it’s raining pretty bad.” Laura nodded, shrugged off her jacket, wrapped her arm and put her jacket back on.

Carmilla went first, climbing over the stuff they were leaving behind and opening the tailgate. She climbed from the Jeep, dropped to the ground and sunk to her ankles in the mud. She shook her head as she helped Laura climb down and then reached for their bags. She handed Laura hers and then shouldered her own before grabbing the bag with the damaged cable and then closed the tailgate.

She stopped a moment with her hand on her Jeep; “Sorry, sweetie, we’ll see you in a few days,” she said quietly before taking a bemused looking Laura’s hand and leading her away.

“You okay?” Laura asked over the pounding of the rain.

“No,” she replied as they rounded the front of the Jeep and found Stan looking under it. “What’s up?” she asked as he stood.

“Good thing you didn’t use the winch,” he replied as he tied a rope to the fender; “C’mon, I’ll explain in the truck,” he said as he indicated the rope; “To help us get back there,” he supplied.

She and Laura both nodded, reached for the rope and then followed him up the hill to where the tree was. As they got closer she understood why they’d given up on getting it out of the way, they’d only managed to clear enough away for them to walk through, the rest of the tree was mired in the mud.

“Hey Stan?” she called and waited for him to turn to her when he got past the tree; “Dinner and drinks at the local pub, on me, in addition to the few days at the cabin.”

“You don’t have to do that Boo Boo,” he joked; “We’re happy to help.”

“I know but this is a bigger job than a ‘out of the kindness of your hearts’ requires,” she replied seriously.

“Fair enough,” he replied with a laugh.

They made their way through the mud in silence, each of them too focused on not falling to talk. Stan reached the Hummer first and opened the back door for them. She ushered Laura in first and noticed that Stan’s friends had already left. She climbed in behind Laura and closed the door behind her.

“What’s up with the winch?” Carmilla asked Stan as soon as they were moving.

“It wasn’t installed properly,” he answered; “If you’d have tried to use it the whole fender would have come off with it.”

“Which begs the question; why bother damaging the cable?” Carmilla asked. “Which do you think would have failed first?”
“The winch,” he replied; “I’m surprised you didn’t have an extra cable,” he commented.

“I do…” she trailed off thoughtfully as she tried to remember if she saw it in the back of the Jeep. “I don’t remember seeing it though,” she looked to Laura; “Did you happen to see it?” Laura shook her head. She sighed and looked out the window. “I don’t get it,” she muttered under her breath.

“Maybe someone damaged the cable so we wouldn’t use the winch?” Laura posited.

“We’ll come up and dig it out tomorrow, get it back to you before the weekend,” Stan offered.

“No,” Carmilla replied firmly; “no one should go near it,” she sighed again; the accumulation of bad news since they’d left the cottage was starting to wear on her; “Rick sent someone to check my other cars, all but Laura’s Mini were rigged to explode.”

“We don’t know that they would have,” Laura interjected.

“They were attached next to the gas tank,” Carmilla countered; “If it was full enough it likely would have.”

“Stop jumping to worst case scenario,” Laura chided; “What if the person who installed them really only meant to the destroy the evidence if they were found?”

“And what if they were rigged to explode at the push of a button?” Carmilla countered.

“Well we won’t know until they take them apart, right?” Laura asked, Carmilla nodded. “So there’s no point worrying about it.” She reached for Carmilla’s hand and laced their fingers. “We’re safe and no one got hurt, we can worry about the bigger implications when we have more information.”

“You should listen to your girlfriend, Boo Boo, sounds like she’s got a good head on her shoulders,” Stan commented.

“She does,” Carmilla replied as she studied Laura a moment. “How do you do that?” she asked quietly so Stan wouldn’t hear.

“Do what?”

“Put everything into perspective so easily?” she asked.

“Someone has to,” Laura replied and kissed her softly. “I know this looks bad but what if someone damaged the cable to keep you from using the winch? What if someone was actually trying to protect us?”

“Why not just tell us not to use it?” she countered and then frowned; “You have a theory.”

“If I tell you will you let it go until we get home?” Laura asked and Carmilla nodded. “The GPSs definitely sounds like Deanna, so does the winch,” she started; “But I think the cable was Bruce,” Carmilla regarded her skeptically; “Hear me out. He was obsessed with me, yes?” Carmilla nodded. “Maybe he damaged the cable to keep me safe?”

“Not like we can ask him,” Carmilla commented wryly and shook her head; “I guess it doesn’t matter right now.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not like we can do anything about it until we get home.”
“We’re almost to the main road, Boo Boo,” Stan informed them; “Sure you don’t want to come by the house and get cleaned up before you head to Whistler?”

“As much as I appreciate the offer, I just want to get through this storm,” Carmilla replied and looked back to Laura; “We were in the eye of it but it looks clear in Whistler,” she smiled and kissed her softly; “Maybe we can salvage the rest of the day after all?”

“What’s the plan then?” Laura asked.

“Check in at the hotel, take a shower, maybe go for walk until dinner,” she leaned in to whisper the last bit; “and then back to our room for an extended dessert?”

“I like the sound of that,” Laura replied, her voice a little deeper than usual.

Carmilla kissed her softly and then smiled crookedly as she pulled away.

“Why does he keep calling you ‘Boo Boo’?” Laura asked as they pulled onto the main road and came to a stop.

“A little bear?” Carmilla offered; “I call him Yogi whenever he pisses me off.” She shrugged and reached for Laura’s seat belt, undid it and then her own before opening the door. “C’mon,” she urged, her hand out to her. They met Sheila and Stan next to Sheila’s Jeep Compass. “Thanks for this,” she said warmly as she went to hug Sheila but was kept at arm’s length.

“You’re covered in mud,” Sheila said with a laugh.

“I guess we are,” Carmilla replied with a chuckle. She took off her jacket, threw it in the back of the SUV along with her things, then quickly hugged Sheila before getting in. “Thanks,” she said before closing the door and opening the window. “I’ll get it detailed in Whistler before you pick it up.”

Before Sheila could reply Stan stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Let her,” he replied; “If I know Boo Boo, she’ll go ahead and do it anyways.”

“Yeah, well, I appreciate the help and I like to show my appreciation,” Carmilla replied sincerely.

“Send me a text when you get to Whistler? Let us know you got there okay?” Stan asked.

“Sure thing,” she replied and turned to Laura. “Ready to go?” she asked as she reached over and did up her seat belt. Laura nodded and she turned back to her cousin and his wife. “Thanks again, I’ll see you next weekend?” They nodded. “You can use one of the empty apartments if you like?” They smiled and nodded again. “Alright, and Stan? I’ll send the money tomorrow and tell your friends not to go near the Jeep?”

“Sure thing, Boo Boo, take care and get some rest,” he replied warmly.

“Will do,” she replied with a smile before rolling the window back up and driving off.

They’d been driving for more than hour when Carmilla glanced at Laura to see her taking the sandwiches from her bag.

“You should eat something,” she urged as she unwrapped one and handed it to her.

“Thanks Pup,” Carmilla replied gratefully and took a bite of her peanut butter and jam sandwich.
“So, why are we postponing the press conference?”

“I’m worried Carm, worried we’re pushing Deanna too far too fast,” she said quietly. “This thing with the cable, the winch and the GPS boxes… it reeks of desperation,” Carmilla chanced a glance at Laura to see her shaking her head. “I don’t know that I took you seriously about Deanna trying to kill you but…”

“Now you’re not so sure?” Carmilla offered.

“The main reason I think we should postpone it is because you’re already distracted enough,” Laura continued; “I know you can beat Danny.”

“Thank you,” Carmilla interrupted.

“For what?” Laura asked in confusion.

“That’s the first time you’ve said I can beat her,” she provided.

“I didn’t say it was going to be easy but it’s only going to be harder if you don’t put some weight on and are focused,” Laura replied around her own sandwich. “I’m worried that if we go through with the press conference she’ll do something else to distract you or even interfere with the fight. Let her think we’re scared after finding what we have on the cars.” She sighed. “What we really need is someone on the inside. Someone she trusts.”

“I had a thought about that,” Carmilla said as she fished her phone from her pocket, plugged it in to charge and then handed it to Laura. “Call Frank?”

“Can’t it wait?” Laura countered but took her phone anyway.

“A compromise?” she offered. “Send him a text, ask him to send over your background check and to have one done for Danny, if he hasn’t already.”

“Why?”

“What? You don’t want me to read it anymore?” Carmilla teased.

“No, why the background check on Danny?” Laura asked as she typed the text in for her.

“I want to know what her deal is,” she replied; “Hand me one of those juice boxes please?” She glanced at Laura to see what was taking her so long and saw that she was taking the straw from it’s plastic and putting it in the box for her. “Like I told your Dad; Deanna uses three type of people; those she’s blackmailing, those looking for a quick buck and those that are desperate. I want to know which one Danny is before I approach her for help.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“You said it yourself, she’s not a bad person,” Carmilla shrugged; “The more I think about it the more I wonder what Deanna’s angle is, what could she have said or done to get Danny on her side?” She sighed. “And then there’s Will’s friendship with her… I think she’s genuinely worried for him and cares about him.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She came to welcome home party despite knowing how pissed I’d be about it?”

“But if she’s working for Deanna maybe the risk was worth it to find out who I am?” Laura
questioned and looked to the phone in her hand. “Will do one for DL, will send over Laura’s tomorrow,” she read aloud. “Carm?” Laura said as she put her left hand in her lap. “Don’t do this right now.”

“Do what?”

“You’ve gone into planning mode because of what happened today,” Laura replied calmly. “It’s exactly what she wants.” Carmilla took Laura’s wrist and lifted her hand up so she could kiss the tips of her fingers.

“I’m tired of playing this game by her rules,” Carmilla finally said as she put Laura’s hand back in her own lap and then rested her hand on Laura’s thigh. “I’m tired of reacting,” she shook her head. “But you’re right, I need to stay focused,” she nodded; “But tonight?” she glanced at Laura; “It’s just us, no game talk, just you and me out on a date, okay?”

“Do you think you can manage that Kitten?” Laura asked, a hint of sadness underlying her question.

“I’m sure as hell going to try,” she replied.

…

They remained quiet for most of the trip, the rain not letting up until about a half hour before Whistler. Between the weather and driving an unfamiliar car, Carmilla was almost too focused to let her mind wander too far.

“Text Rick about the house in West Van for me?” Carmilla asked, startling Laura who was staring out her window at the view. Carmilla chanced a glance at it and smiled; they were finally out of the worst of the storm and the sky had cleared enough to reveal the mountains, even if there tops were still shrouded in cloud.

“You know,” Laura said thoughtfully as she reached for Carmilla’s phone; “one thing that has always amazed me about Vancouver is how the mountains completely disappear when it rains. You know they’ll still be there when the sky clears but if you didn’t know they were there in the first place you’d have no clue,” she finished as she typed the text in for her. “Kind of like us really.”

“How so?” Carmilla asked as she relaxed her grip on the wheel for the first time and reached for her hand.

“I’m sure, there will come a time, when all the awesomeness that is us will seem to disappear in the face of whatever shit gets thrown at us next,” Laura started and Carmilla glanced at her; “But I’m not going anywhere. I’ll always be here when the sky clears.” She paused and when Carmilla looked over to see why it was because Laura was reading a text, a worried look on her face.

“What?” she asked finally.

“The house has been under one of Bruce’s alias’ for the last six months,” Laura replied carefully.

“And?”

“Before that it was under one of Deanna’s,” she admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

“Why does that worry you?” Carmilla asked as Laura took her hand again.
“Lends more weight to the theory that she put me in your path because a dangerous stalker was following me,” she laughed dryly; “Hell, maybe she put Bruce on to me because she planned to have you meet me.”

“Does it matter?” Carmilla asked as she pulled up in front of the hotel. She looked to the Valet and held up a finger, asking him to wait a moment. She put the car in park, turned it off and the looked to Laura. “I love you, Laura,” she said and reached for her hand again. “That’s not something she can manipulate,” she looked down at their hands; “The only one capable of that is you.”

“Oh?” Laura said, her voice choked with emotion.

“It doesn’t matter, Laura,” she said firmly and met her eyes, her heart almost breaking when she saw them swimming with tears; “The how or why we met doesn’t matter. Neither does the how or why of how and why we fell in love,” she smiled when she saw Laura’s mouth twitch. “So what if your coming into my life was part some diabolical plot?” She asked and kissed her. “It backfired on her, didn’t it?”

“Yeah?”

“You make me stronger, Creampuff, stronger than I thought I could ever be,” she kissed her again. “You could tell me right now that you’ve been working for Deanna all along and I wouldn’t care, I’d be heartbroken, yes, but I would fight all the harder for you.”

“I considered it,” Laura admitted quietly; “After our run in at the airport.” She sighed. “I thought I could be a double agent, get her to back off, you know?”

“What changed your mind?”

“The lake,” Laura replied; “I figured I’d be more use at your side than playing double agent.”

“Besides which, had I known,” Carmilla started.

“It would have only distracted you,” Laura concluded.

“And you would have been in far too much danger,” Carmilla added and kissed her softly. “While I might be willing to put Danny’s safety at risk I won’t, knowingly, risk yours.” She glanced over to the Valet; he seemed to be doing is best to watch without staring, waiting for them to need him. “C’mon, we should go before the poor guy has a fit,” she joked.

“I know you’re not baby,” Carmilla soothed and kissed her again. “You’re a lousy liar.” Laura pushed her away but she was laughing. “That isn’t a bad thing,” she offered.

“But you don’t think I couldn’t have pulled off the whole double agent thing?” she asked, her tone light.

“I didn’t say that,” Carmilla replied and undid her seat belt for her. “There’s a difference between bullshit, acting and outright lying,” she explained. “You’re fairly good at the second, pretty good at the first and lousy at the third.”

“How can I be good at two and be a lousy liar?” Laura joked as she went to open her door.

“Because you don’t have to lie to bullshit or act,” Carmilla replied as they both opened the back doors to the car to grab their things. “In fact, the best bullshit always contains an element of truth.”
“Which is why Deanna’s smear campaign has been so effective,” Laura commented ruefully. “All of it’s plausible.”

“Exactly,” Carmilla affirmed; “Now,” Carmilla said, closed the door and walked around the back of the car to her; “No more Deanna talk, yes?” Laura nodded. “Good,” she said firmly and kissed her. “Let’s go get checked in, I really need a shower.” She took Laura’s hand and the two walked over to where the Valet was patiently waiting. “My cousin’s wife will be by tomorrow to pick it up,” she informed him as she gave him the keys. “Please have it detailed before she does?” she added as she slipped him a twenty.

“Sure thing, Miss White,” he replied.

They walked into the lobby and over to the reception, both receiving more than a few intrigued looks as they were still covered in mud.

“Miss Karnstein, so nice to, um…” the lady behind the counter greeted and then trailed off when she saw the state they were in.

“Hey Nancy,” Carmilla replied and looked down at herself before looking back to her; “We’ve had a rough morning.”

“Your clothes are already in your room and we had the food your friend ordered delivered a little while go,” Nancy informed them.

“Thanks,” Carmilla replied with a smile and squeeze of Laura’s hand. “Are there any rooms available near the room we have?” she asked to Laura’s surprise.

“The whole floor is empty, as is your preference,” Nancy replied.

“Good, we’ll take the room across the hall as well,” she answered.

They waited a moment while Nancy printed off a key card for the second room and then made their way to the elevator.

“What’s with the second room?” Laura asked once they were in the elevator heading to their room.

“Well,” Carmilla said slowly as she pulled Laura to here with her free hand; “we’ve yet to have an official ‘date’. I thought it’d be nice if we get ready separately and then I could come collect you from our room as if I was actually picking you up to go on a date.”

“Okay,” Laura replied.

“Really?”

“Yes really,” Laura answered and kissed her; “I think a vacation from our reality is in order.”

They exited on their floor and made their way into their room.

“I had Dark bring some clothes up for you when he came up to get the cabin ready,” Carmilla informed her as she led her over to the closet. “I picked them out online and had him pick them up,” she said as she opened the garment bag to reveal two sundresses, a pair of dress pants and a dress shirt. “I hope you like them,” she added self-consciously.

“So you planned on us stopping here on the way back?” Laura asked as she fingered the sundresses.
“No,” Carmilla replied; “There’s something I didn’t tell you about our week at the cabin,” she started as she removed her own garment bag from the closet; “Everyone is invited up for the first few days and I thought we could stop here on the way up to have a little alone time first.” She shrugged. “I wanted you to have something nice to wear, I hope that’s okay?”

“It is, Kitten,” Laura replied and turned to kiss her. “I think it’s incredibly sweet and thoughtful.” She kissed her again. “Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome sweetness,” Carmilla replied in relief. “I’ll see you in about an hour?” Laura nodded and accepted another kiss. “I miss you already,” she admitted quietly.

“You’ll just be across the hall,” Laura teased.

“I always miss you when you’re not at my side,” she admitted quietly and pulled Laura close; “I really have no idea how I’m going to survive six weeks without you.”

“I’m always with you Carm,” Laura said, pulled away and placed her hand over her heart; “Here.”

Laura ushered her from the room a little while later, the two very aware that if she didn’t go, she wouldn’t. She took her clothes, overnight bag and a plate of food with her across the hall. She ate while texting Kenny and Stan to let them know they’d arrived safely and then called the front desk to ask them to get her a dozen roses.

Exactly an hour later she stood in front of Laura’s door, nervous for some reason, as she went to knock and held the bouquet of flowers behind her back. She straightened her shirt, made sure her suspenders were in place properly and checked her blazer pocket for her wallet. She took a deep breath but as she went to knock, the door opened to reveal Laura and she found herself breathless; yes, she may have bought Laura’s clothes, she never expected her to look so beautiful.

“Hey,” Laura said and blushed; “You look nice.”

“Yeah?” Carmilla asked nervously and looked down at what she was wearing and then looked at Laura from head to toe. “You look…” she shook her head, words failing her, as she produced the flowers from behind her back. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you for the flowers,” Laura replied politely; “Would you like to come in while I put these in some water?” Carmilla nodded numbly and followed her inside. “What?” Laura asked as Carmilla was lost in watching her.

“Room service it is, then,” Carmilla replied, her voice low.

“I’m sorry?” Laura said and turned as Carmilla walked up and placed her hands on her hips.

“We’ve got plenty of time to go on dates,” Carmilla said as she leaned in to kiss Laura’s exposed collarbone, “but I’ve wanted to make love to you since this morning and I don’t think I can wait any longer,” she continued as she nipped along her shoulder to ear; “I want you. Now,” she whispered, causing Laura to break out in goosebumps even as she struggled to help Carmilla out of her blazer.

The two started undressing each other as they backed towards the bed, Carmilla grinning wildly into their kiss when she ran her hands up Laura’s thighs under her dress to find she wasn’t wearing
any underwear.

“Why Miss Hollis,” she purred as she lifted her dress over her head to reveal she wore nothing under it; “is this what you were hoping for?”

“Maybe…” she said shyly as she fumbled with the buttons of Carmilla’s shirt; “but I have a pair of underwear and bra in the bathroom,” she admitted as she finally succeeded at unbuttoning her shirt and slipped it from her shoulders. “You know, in case you followed through on your ‘date’ plan,” she said as she undid Carmilla’s pants.

Carmilla slipped off her shoes and kicked them and her pants aside and then starting pushing Laura back towards the bed as they kissed. She laid her down gently and then laid down beside her. She trailed her fingers along her eyebrows, to her jaw and then finally her lips before leaning in to kiss her softly.

“It occurs to me,” she said quietly as she kissed along her jaw; “that you got your way after all…”

“We can still, ah…” Laura tried to interrupt but Carmilla’s fingers had found a nipple. She felt Laura’s hand around her wrist and then slip up to still her hand. “It’s not that I don’t love the idea of going on a date with you,” she explained and kissed her softly. “But, after the day we’ve had and reality crashing back so brutally before we even got back to the real world?” she sighed and kissed her again. “In here, at home, we’re safe from out there.”

“Not completely,” Carmilla said sadly; “but it is easier to ignore when I’m in your arms.”

She kissed her softly as she she began playing with her nipple again, this time Laura letting her and using her one good hand to tangle in her hair instead. Laura rolled her to her back and smiled down at her.

“Reality isn’t so bad so long as you’re a part of it,” Carmilla said as she reached up and stroked her cheek.

Laura leaned down and kissed her softly.

“I love you Carm,” she whispered in her ear; “If I have to spend the rest of our lives proving that to you, I will.” She pulled back and met her eyes. “I promise.”

Carmilla swapped their positions as they kissed.

“You already have.”
Chapter Notes

Before my fellow Creampuffs massacre me please understand the first scene was written before episode thirty was aired. This was my way of imagining, and dealing with, the line that messed us all up. Enjoy!

It was late. She hadn’t believed Dark at first, sure he was mistaken. But then she’d followed herself. She stood in the dark, hidden from view, doing her best to suppress the shiver caused by the drizzling rain. She looked to the estate in front of her. She’d gotten past the fences and the guards the same way she had for almost seven years. The front of the mansion, the place she’d grown up in, was lit as it always was. She took a moment to admire it’s beauty. It was only a building, after all, not responsible for the horrors it held for so long. Her father, though careful with his money had built it from the ground up, expanding it and changing it right up to just months before his death.

“God I’m being a nostalgic idiot tonight,” she thought derisively.

Sticking to the shadows, she made her way around the side of the house; although it’s facade was lit, only one of it’s window showed any signs of life. She swallowed her shock; “No, she wouldn’t…”

She knew the house like the back of her hand; that light, that room, could only be Deanna’s bedroom. She fought the urge to rush the front door, demand answers and looked for a more subtle way in. She made her way to the trellis beside the room that had been both her bedroom and prison.

“Wonder if she ever fixed it?” she thought as she looked up to the room, the window’s lock she’d broken when she was thirteen and finally brave enough to risk climbing down the trellis.

She took one last drag of her cigarette, threw it to the ground and then crushed it under her heel. She reached out her right hand and was testing the trellis’ reliability when she noticed an open window, which, if memory served, was the downstairs parlor. She took her gun from behind her back where it had been tucked inside her waistband, ejected the clip, checked it and re-inserted it before slipping off the safety.

Carmilla took several deep breaths as she looked around; she hated waiting but Deanna was nothing if not predictable. All she’d had to do was wait for the eleven o’clock shift change to get this far, and if, as she suspected, Deanna hadn’t changed her other routines, the alarm was off until she herself had gone to bed.

She took one last deep breath to steel her nerves and hoisted herself into the house. She landed as quietly as she could inside and remained still a moment, listening for any sign she’d been heard. She let go of the breath she’d been holding and made her way to one of the many of her Father’s secret passages. She smiled and shook her head; he’d laughed it off as his obsession with old mansions but now she couldn’t help but consider that he’d known more of what was going on than he’d let on.
The passage let her out a few feet from Deanna’s bedroom but Carmilla found her progress stymied when she heard a noise she hadn’t expected; the very familiar sound of Laura in ecstasy. She grabbed her stomach as she fought the overwhelming urge to throw up. She knew those groans and that they meant that Laura was close. She crept forward, hoping that any noise she might make would be covered by the sounds coming from the bedroom.

She reached the door as Laura’s moans turned to outright screams of pleasure and used them to cover the opening of the door far enough to see the pair in the reflection of the mirror across from Deanna’s bed. She put a hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp of horror and backed away; yes, Laura was in the throes of passion but the woman who currently had her bent over at the waist as she pleasured from behind was none other than Danny.

She leaned against the wall and tried to stem the rising rage and panic.

“And you’re sure she believes you?” a older, gravely female voice echoed out to her a short time late. She bolted to the door again and confirmed that it was Danny Laura was in bed with. “She actually called me a lousy liar!” Laura said with a nod and laugh, Danny joining in.

Danny began caressing her cheek softly, a thoughtful look on her face before Laura reached up and pulled her down for a kiss. “How was it? The sex?” she asked neutrally; “You know, with my monstrous stepdaughter? She didn’t hurt you, did she?”

“Please, Laura, for the love of God, don’t answer her,” Carmilla thought; “It’s a trap…”

“It was okay,” Laura admitted hesitantly.

Carmilla saw the warning signs even if they were on another woman’s face; the subtle rise of an eyebrow, the tightening of her jaw, her hand ever so slowly making it’s way to her throat. So slowly one might almost think it a caress, Laura seemed to think so as she sighed and melted into her.

“Is she better than me?” Danny asked with Deanna’s voice.

When Laura didn’t answer she slid her hand around her throat, squeezing only enough to let her know it wasn’t a game; she was angry. “Tell me!” she growled.

But Laura still didn’t answer and was thrown from the bed by the hand around her throat. Carmilla didn’t think, couldn’t think, and did the only thing that seemed to make sense; rushed in and put herself between them. Her eyes flicked to the black studded leather belt in Danny’s hand as she warned; “Stay away from me,” her voice low and the gun tucked into the back of her jeans weighing heavily.

“Do you think this is a game little girl?” Danny taunted as she became Deanna in all of her six foot, power suited glory, the belt still in her right hand; “Just what do you think you’re going to do about it?” she mocked as she stepped from the bed and advanced on them.

Carmilla drew her gun and leveled it at Deanna’s face, forcing her to stop her in her tracks. “I will kill.”
“Carm? Baby? Wake up sweetie, it’s just a…” Laura soothed as she gently shook her awake.

Carmilla woke slowly and then, as her eyes focused in on Laura, images from her nightmare flashed before her eyes, the blast of the gunshot still ringing in her ears. “N-n-n-no…” she stuttered, her heart racing at an alarming rate and her breathing reduced to shallow gasping for air as she pushed Laura away and then scrambled from the bed away from her; “S-s-s-stay away…” she hissed, the hand she held out in front of her shaking so badly she pulled it to her chest and held it with the other. She felt the wall at her back and slid down it to the floor.

“Carm, listen to me,” Laura said quietly, approaching her as if she were a wounded animal; “You’re having a panic attack,” she continued as she inched forward, her voice soft and soothing. “You’re safe. It was just a nightmare.”

Carmilla shook her head violently, “No,” she thought; “it was too real, too specific.”

“It was a dream, baby, just a dream,” she cooed as she knelt and reached her hand out to her. “You’re safe, Kitten, I’m here.”

Carmilla eyed the hand still stretched out to her; “Was it a dream? Does Laura love me?” she thought. She wanted to take her hand, but she feared, if Laura saw how badly she was shaking, she’d only realize the basket case she really was.

“You’re so much stronger than this, Carmilla,” Laura said, her voice now taking an edge. “Let me help you?” she asked as she finally lay her hand on her shoulder, the edge already gone from her voice; “Please, baby, you’re breaking my heart. Let me help,” she pleaded.

Carmilla met her eyes; Laura’s were swimming with tears. She broke. Giant heart wrenching sobs tore from her throat, the sound almost inhuman. Laura didn’t wait for permission and forcibly pulled her into her arms.

“Hush, baby, hush,” she cooed as she rocked her and rubbed her back; “It’s okay, I got you.” She kissed the top of her head and pulled her closer. “Breath with me, baby. Slow and steady.”

Through her fear, through her sheer panic, Laura’s voice finally got through to her. She didn’t know how long they stayed that way. At some point Laura had stood them back up and moved them to the head of the bed so she could lean against the headboard and pull her into her lap. As her breathing and heartrate finally matched Laura’s slower one, she realised that, despite having just woken, she was suddenly exhausted.

“You okay?” Laura asked, lifting her chin to regard her.

“I w-w-will be,” she stuttered. “Damn it she thought,” of all the times for her speech impediment to return. She shook her head and sighed as she pushed herself up. “Haven’t had one that bad in a long time,” she said and smiled, proud of herself for taming her speech. “Thank you,” she added and leaned forward to kiss her.

“It was bound to happen, baby,” she said when they parted; “I mean, if you’re prone to panic attacks, I’m surprised you haven’t had one sooner,” she told her as she stroked her cheek. “You’ve been under so much stress.”

“You researched it?”
“Took an ‘Intro to Psych’ class,” she replied with a laugh. “But I might have done a little research so I’d know what to do if it happened again.” Laura studied her a moment. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” she admitted, her voice catching. She didn’t want to relive it but she needed to know the truth. Laura was a lousy liar with a very expressive face, if any of it rang true, she’d know.

“Short version?” she stalled, Laura nodded. “I found you in bed with Danny, only she was really Deanna. She asked you if I was better in bed and when you didn't answer she threw you from the bed by your throat and then advanced on you with my studded belt. I ran in, she became Deanna, I shot her in the face.”

It was obvious Laura didn't know how to respond; a strange mix of shock, anger, sadness and love on her face. So, instead, she pulled her into her arms again.

“I hate your subconscious,” Laura finally said with a sigh.

“You and me both, Pup,” she replied with a laugh. “How about a shower? I’m covered in sweat.”

“I already had one,” she admitted reluctantly; “I…” she sighed again; “I started my period overnight.”

“Seriously?” Laura nodded. “Well it sure as hell didn't stop you, and after…” she shook her head.

“Baby? I need you, even if it’s just holding me.”

“Carm? Sweetie?” Laura said quietly, her voice filled with emotion; “I could never hurt you like that.” She smiled. “You’re not only the only woman I’ve ever slept with you're the only woman I ever plan on sleeping with ever again.” She smiled shyly and kissed her neck. “Unless, sometime in the future when our lives aren’t under a microscope anymore, you wanted to invite another girl into our bed for a change of pace.”

“You’re so good at that,” Carmilla said with a low chuckle; “Saying exactly what I need to hear when I need to hear it.” She kissed her softly. “Meet me in the shower?” Laura nodded and kissed her again. “I love you Laura.”

“I love you too Carm,” Laura replied and kissed her again. “Go on, I’ll order us breakfast, wrap my arm and be right in.”

Carmilla smiled, kissed her and then made her way from the bed. She glanced at Laura as she read from the menu, smiled and entered the bathroom. She used the toilet, pleased to see that it seemed her period was almost over. She got in the shower and let the hot water soothe her frayed nerves. She felt raw, worse yet, fragile; like any more bad news and even Laura might not be able to put her back together.

“No,” she thought and reached for the soap; “it was just a stupid dream.” A product of a stressful day coupled with what they’d talked about when they’d first arrived at the hotel. Laura was right, her subconscious was playing tricks with her, turning her anxiety back on her and giving her the worst case scenario again.

She’d was rinsing the soap from her intimate areas when Laura finally joined her.

“What did you order us for breakfast?”

“Steak and eggs,” she replied as she reached for the Loofa, held it for Carmilla to add some body wash, and turned her so she could wash her back; “Yours is medium rare and eggs over easy, right?” Carmilla nodded. “I also got us some fresh fruit, yogurt and a jug of orange juice.”
“Call back when we get out and order coffee?”

“I’m worried about the caffeine setting off another attack.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” Carmilla replied as she turned to face her and reached for the shampoo; “Besides I drink coffee everyday, I’d rather risk the off chance it might make another panic attack worse over the headache I’ll get if I don’t have some caffeine.”

She washed her hair as Laura washed her body. She put her head back to rinse out her hair and felt Laura’s teeth on her neck. She sighed and pulled Laura up for a kiss.

“I’ve been trying to figure out, every day since we’ve been together, what I could have done in a previous life to deserve you,” Carmilla smiled crookedly; “Cause I sure as hell haven’t done anything in this life near good enough.”

“Maybe,” Laura replied, blushing slightly; “It’s me that Karma is finally rewarding?”

When they finally made their way to the table they found their food had been delivered while they showered.

“Carm?” Laura said as she took her seat next to her and placed the cordless hotel phone on the table. “I have an idea and I want you to hear me out.” Carmilla’s cell phone rang but before she could answer it Laura reached for it and took it from her hand. “I’m screening your calls,” she informed her; “I’ll explain later,” she added before answering the call. “Hi Rick, it’s Laura,” she paused. “No, she’s here, I’m screening her calls. What’s up?” Laura paled as she listen to Rick. “I’m putting you on speaker.”

“Carmilla, honey, I have some bad news,” he started.

“Out with it,” Carmilla replied, she knew Rick well enough to know he didn’t want to have to tell her whatever he was about to tell her.

“I sent a couple of my guys up to watch over your Jeep. Kenny’s step son drove them out to it and they had just finished moving most of your stuff to Stan’s Hummer when,” he sighed; “it blew sky high, or would have if it hadn’t sunk about four feet in the mud.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Carmilla asked as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Seriously? That’s your first question?” Laura asked.

“Well?” she shrugged and prompted.

“No, they were far enough away when it blew,” he replied.

“Well, we were due for a break,” Carmilla replied ruefully as Laura poured a cup of coffee, the hotel having included it without ordering it because they knew her habits. “Is there anything left?”

“The mud saved the undercarriage and some of the evidence but the rest was burnt to a crisp,” he sighed; “Carm? Your gun was missing.”
“Gun?” Laura asked as she choked on her orange juice.

“It’s not a big deal,” Carmilla said matter of factly, “I almost always have one within reach.” She looked back to her cell. “How do you know it was missing?”

“I had my guys grab the case from under your seat, we’re not sure, but we think, that’s what set it off,” he paused; “or the mud shorted something that set off the explosives.”

“I have the cable, maybe we’ll find something on it,” Carmilla informed him.

“We might not need it,” he said carefully; “Carm? We’ve confirmed the pick-up would have suffered the same fate. From what we can tell so far the van was rigged first, then the pick-up, and finally your Jeep. The box on the van was crude, and barely took anything to make it blow. The pick-up was a different story. We found explosives lining both the gas tank and engine. As far as we can tell, judging by the amount of dirt, they’ve been there for at least a year. It also had a remote detonator.” He paused a moment. “Carm, honey, I know you don’t want to but…”

“I was thinking the same thing,” she interrupted. “And maybe it’s time to put a tail on Deanna.”

“Consider it done,” he assured her.

“Rick?” Laura interrupted.

“Yeah Laura?” Rick answered.

“You have access to bomb dogs right?” she asked as she reached for Carmilla’s hand.

“We do, why?”

“The gym will be closed at ten, maybe you should have them do a sweep and check the cars for listening devices?” Laura suggested.

“We already checked the cars,” he replied, his tone such that Carmilla knew that she wasn’t going to like whatever he said next; “We found microphones in both the van and pickup.”

“Fuck,” Carmilla hissed; “So she knows everything.”

“I’ll have the dogs taken over and sweep the gym,” Rick continued; “and we’ll check for microphones while we’re at it.”

“I’m not as worried about the gym as I am the warehouses on either side, I’m hoping to have their sales finalized by the end of the week,” Carmilla replied and looked to Laura. “Bob had a state of the art security system installed as soon as we took over the building,” she explained. “Is Laura still in the hospital?” she asked Rick.

“No, she was released last night. I’ll text you the details?” he suggested.

“Thanks Rick,” Carmilla sighed, hung up the phone and opened her contacts.

“Phone,” Laura demanded.

“I’ve got four calls to make and then it’s all yours,” she replied as she found what she was looking for.

“Fine,” Laura replied and pointed to her plate. “Eat.”
“Yes, Ma’am!” she joked, saluted her, dialed the number, put it on speaker and then started on her breakfast.


“I want to book a car to take us from Chateau Whistler to North Vancouver,” Carmilla replied around the food in her mouth.

“We can have one there in an hour.”

“Thanks, it’ll be under the name Karnstein,” she informed them before ending the call.

“A limo? Seriously?” Laura asked incredulously.

“After yesterday I don’t feel like driving, so sue me,” Carmilla replied as she dialed the next number. “Besides, with that much explosives in the Jeep what do you think would have happened if we’d been in accident?”

“Vancouver Real Estate, Matska Belmonde speaking,” a smooth, almost melodic voice answered, saving Laura the need to reply.

“Hey, Mattie, it’s Carmilla.”

“Hey, they still haven’t responded to our latest offer,” she replied, her voice now having taken on a warmer air.

“Don’t care,” Carmilla replied firmly; “Give them what they’re asking for.”

“But I’m sure I can still bring them down a few hundred…”

“Don’t care,” she repeated; “I want them in my possession by the end of the week.”

“Alright, I’ll get right on it,” Mattie replied.

“Thanks Mattie. Let me know when it’s done so we can get started on the fencing.”

She ended the call and was pulling up the next number she had to dial when Laura asked; “What was that about?”

“You’ll understand after the next call,” Carmilla replied as she hit Dark’s number.

“Hey Dark, hold on a sec,” she said as Dark answered the phone so she could swallow what was in her mouth.

“Carm?” Dark questioned, the worry clear even over the phone.

“Hey love,” she replied.

“About fucking time you called. What the hell Carm?” he asked angrily.

“Why? What’s wrong?” she asked as Laura took her hand. “Hold on, I’m going to put you on speaker.”

“Want to explain why they confiscated all our cars yesterday and why the fuck you didn’t come home last night?” he demanded.
“We got stuck in the big storm and then stuck in the mud on the way out. When I went to use the winch I found that it had been partially cut,” she explained; “Rick decided to play a hunch and have the rest of the cars checked. They found GPS devices on both the van and the pick-up. The box on the van blew up when they opened it and they found the pick-up was also laced with more explosives,” she sighed; “My Jeep blew up last night.”

“Shit Carm, are you okay?” he asked, his tone softening.

“We are, we were already at the hotel when it happened. But I didn’t call to catch up,” she looked to Laura as she continued; “We’ll have the warehouses by the end of the week. I need you to call the fencing company, get a new estimate and see how soon they can get started.”

“Price is no object?” he asked.

“The faster the better,” she affirmed.

“Alright, I’ll get on it. When are you guys going to be home?”

“We’ll be leaving Whistler in the next hour or so but I’m hoping to stop the Jeep dealership on the way and then probably go see the girl Laura’s stalker was holding hostage.” She sighed. “And Rick is sending someone over with bomb dogs and to check the gym for listening devices like the ones they found in the pickup and van.”

“Okay, we’ll see you soon. Love you.”

“Go ahead and rent a few cars until Rick clears the van and pick-up,” she instructed; “And I love you too, babe, see you soon.”

She dialed the last number on her list and stuffed her face while she waited for the call to be answered.

“Good morning, Destination Chrysler. My name is Theo, how can I help you today?”

“Hey Theo, it’s Carmilla,” she replied after swallowing and put the call on speaker.

“I have a bone to pick with you Missy,” he replied playfully; “Why did you buy from someone other than me?”

“Because it was faster to get a Mini through the Mini dealership,” she explained; “You’re just pissed you missed out on the publicity!” she teased and then offered; “How about I make it up to you?”

“What do you need?”

“A new Jeep, all the same options,” she replied.

“Do you care about the colour?” he asked, the sound of him typing in the background.

“Not if means you can get it faster,” she replied; “Besides I’ll want to get it painted anyway. Is there any chance you have a loaner I could use until it comes in?”

“For one of my best customers?” he joked. “Yeah, I think we have a Grand Cherokee you can borrow.” She smiled, one good thing about having money is that people bent over backwards to get their hands on a little of it. “And I was going to be calling you soon,” he paused for effect; “I’m flying to Montreal in a few days to look at a mint condition British green MG for you.”
“That is amazing news,” she said, grinning broadly; “We’ll be by in a few hours to pick up the loaner and pay for the Jeep.”

“I’ll see you then,” he replied and hung up.

Carmilla went to look up another number but stopped when Laura put her hand over hers.

“You said four calls, that was four,” she informed her and held her hand out for her cell.

“Just one more,” she replied; “I need to call my credit card company and authorize the payment for my Jeep.”

“Fine,” she sighed.

Once the call was answered she read off her Credit card information and then explained she’d be making a car purchase in a few hours. She ended the call and finally paid her meal her full attention, Laura, who’d already finished her meal, sat studying her.

“What?” Carmilla asked in amusement.

“How can I ask this without seeming crass?” she began, shook her head and sighed; “Carm, just how much money do you have?”

“At last count I could live on fifty grand a month and not run out of money until I’m well over a hundred,” she replied to Laura’s astonishment. “And that doesn’t even include the money the gym makes or the money I get for winning fights, but between my cash assets, properties, businesses and investments?” she shrugged; “Somewhere over a hundred million.”

Laura choked on her orange juice; “Are you serious?” she spluttered. “No wonder you act like a hundred dollars is nothing to you.”

Carmilla studied her a moment before answering; “It’s not that I don’t understand the value of money,” she began; “but that I understand it all too well. My Dad, though successful, was a frugal man. That’s not to say we weren’t spoiled, we were, but Deanna made sure he never spent too much on us,” she explained as she cut into her steak; “After Dad died though,” she shook her head; “Will was fine, but me? I was living in poverty in the lap of luxury.”

“That should be the title of your book,” Laura commented; “‘Living in Poverty in the Lap of Luxury.’”

“It does have a nice ring to it,” Carmilla replied with a smile; “Anyway, my point is, while a hundred dollars is no longer a lot of money to me I remember, all too well, when it was. So, when I tip someone well, even though it isn’t a big deal to me, it’s a big deal to them, they appreciate it, and I garner their loyalty and discretion.”

She ate in silence for a few minutes when her phone rang. She went to reach for it but Laura got to it first. “Carmilla’s phone.” She paused as she listened to the person on the other hand. “That is good news, we’ll see you in a few hours, thanks.” She hung up and looked to Carmilla; “They’ll have your Jeep by the end of the week.”

“So would you like to explain why you’re screening my calls?” Carmilla asked in curiosity.

“Well, I was thinking, if you insist on continuing to pay my salary, then I’m going to make myself useful.”

“Call it what you want, but for the next three weeks your only job is to train,” Carmilla went to interrupt; “No, hear me out. Let me take care of all the little bullshit things. I’ll screen your calls and emails and only bother you with it if needed.”

“What if I had another job in mind for you?” Carmilla countered.

“Like what?”

“I want you in my corner for my fights,” she replied.

“But there are so many others more qualified,” Laura countered.

“True, but you have something the others don’t.”

“And what’s that?”

“An incredible knack of spotting the holes,” she smiled; “and it’ll be easier for you to see them from the sidelines than it will for me.”

“Hmmm…” Laura hummed thoughtfully; “I’ve watched a few of Danny’s fights,” she tapped a finger on her chin; “We could number them, the holes, and rig one of the heavy bags at the gym to her height, tape them off.” She smiled; “She throws this big looping right hand that you should be able to take advantage of.” Carmilla smiled and nodded, she’d noticed the same thing. “Do you want me to check your email?” Carmilla shrugged, her day had already started off badly, how much worse could it get? But then, as she watched Laura scroll through her emails, she saw her pale and worried what she’d found.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked as she reached for the phone but Laura closed the browser and put the phone in her pocket.

“Nothing's wrong, exactly,” she started slowly and rubbed her face; “Frank emailed you my background check and there was something in it I didn’t expect.”

“I warned you it’d be thorough,” she said as she reached for Laura’s hand; “What is it Pup? What’s got you so upset?”

“The summer before I met Cindy,” her eyes welled with tears as she turned her hand over and laced their fingers; “One of my Dad’s college buddies’ son came to stay with us for a few days. One night, when my Dad was working, we started talking,” she shook her head; “He made Fuzzy Navels and yes, before you ask, I knew there was alcohol in it but I didn’t think I was in any danger from him.”

“How old was he?”

“Eighteen,” she replied and then continued; “Anyway, as the night wore on I confessed that I thought I was gay. He asked me if I’d ever kissed a girl and I admitted I hadn’t. Then he asked me if I’d ever kissed a boy, and again, I admitted I hadn’t. He then suggested that maybe I should. I figured, ‘what the hell?’ I was curious and confused. We started kissing and one thing led to another.” She took a deep shaky breath. “I tried to stop him, at first, I really did, but then I just let him finish what he was doing and got out of there.”

“Why though? You beat the crap out that Derrick douche canoe,” she asked.
“I wasn’t even five feet then and he was over six?” she shook her head; “Anyways, it was a few weeks later when I realized I’d missed my period. I finally told my Dad what had happened when he took me to see the doctor and I found out I was pregnant. I was going to keep it, I was, I mean he wasn’t a bad guy, he’d been drinking too and probably would have never done what he did if he’d been sober, and he did try to make sure I had a good time.”

“Wait, all this was in the background check?” Carmilla questioned.

“No, but the fact that I miscarried at three months is.” She sighed deeply; “There’s something else I should tell you. Something I really don’t want to tell you right now after the dream you had this morning but chances are it’ll come up in Danny’s check.” She shook her head again and pulled her hand from Carmilla’s to wipe her eyes. “Danny is a Lit TA and she was TA’ing one of my classes last Fall. I didn’t really speak to her until near the end of the semester though, when she came in with a black eye. After what happened to me, I was worried, so I went to talk to her after class and she told me she was an MMA fighter and we talked for a few hours. I didn't see her again until she showed up at my gym though.”

“So why do think that would bother me?”

“Because I know her better, and spent a little more time with her, than I’ve admitted previously?”

“Laura, in my dream, even though you’d just broken my heart, I still rushed in to protect you. What does that tell you?”

“I think you were dreaming of me playing double agent and that’s why you rushed in,” Laura speculated.

“Maybe,” she smiled and shook her head; “Or maybe that, even in that moment of greatest betrayal, I couldn’t stand by and watch someone hurt you,” she said as she again took Laura’s hand. “Did she talk about me? Danny?”

“I’d have told you if she’d said anything significant.”

“That’s not an answer,” Carmilla pointed out.

“She mentioned getting into it with the owner of the last gym she was training at but nothing specifically about you.”

“Any idea what Deanna might have on her?”

“None, we talked mostly about fighting.

“So why didn’t you tell me?” she asked as she went back to her meal.

“You don’t like her,” Laura stated; “seemed like a good reason at the time.”

They stared at each other a moment; Carmilla realized that it came down to whether or not she trusted Laura. In the time she’d known her she’d never given her any reason not to.

“What do you say we get dressed and head home?” Carmilla suggested as she finished her meal.

“I like the sound of that,” Laura replied and accepted a kiss as Carmilla stood; “Carm?”

“Yeah, Pup?”

“We okay?”
“Sure we are, baby.”

“You’re not mad at me for keeping my friendship with Danny from you?”

“So you were friends?” she questioned.

“More of an acquaintance, really,” Laura clarified as she stood and let Carmilla take her in her arms.

“I’m not mad, love,” Laura raised an eyebrow; “I’m not,” she assured her; “We’re getting to know each other, that’s all,” she stroked her cheek; “I’m agreeing to trust you to run my life for the next few weeks, what does that tell you?”

“That you really do trust me? I mean, I know how hard it is for you to let someone else deal with stuff.”

“It’s more about control than anything else,” she admitted; “From the age of three Deanna controlled, or tried to, every aspect of my life, from what I ate to when I slept to who my friends were. It’s difficult to give up control again after not having it for so long.” She kissed her softly and then leaned her forehead against Laura’s. “Will I always have trust and control issues?” She shrugged. “Maybe, but it’s because I’ve only known the two extremes… from no control and having no one to trust, to all of it. I don’t know how I feel about relinquishing it, even to you.”

“Fair enough,” Laura replied and kissed; “Go on, go grab your clothes and get dressed so we can go home and deal with this shit.”

Carmilla smiled and kissed her again before going to head to the room across the hall but stopped the moment she exited their room. “Fuck fuck fuck…” she hissed; the door of the other room was ajar, and when she pushed it open slightly, she saw that her room had been ransacked.

“Laura?!” she called.

“Yeah?” Laura said as she popped her head out the door.

“Bring me the house phone and call Rick,” she said, her voice neutral despite her returning panic.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Someone broke into my room overnight,” she replied as she indicated the open door; “I suspect… hold on,” she turned and went back into their room to check that the winch cable was still in their safe. “I’m guessing they were after the cable or just did it to scare me; either way it means someone told someone we’re here, and that’s not good.”

“I was in the Jeep when I made the reservation,” Laura pointed out; “Not that big of a mystery of how they knew we were here.”

“Yes,” Carmilla replied as she opened the safe and sighed in relief that the cable was still there; “but somehow the fact that someone risked breaking in while we were across the hall? Not exactly comforting.”
Sometimes Beaten, Never Broken

Carmilla went back out into the hall to make sure no one entered the other room, leaned on the wall and was calling the front desk when a noise from down the hall caught her attention. She started moving slowly towards it and then, when she rounded the corner, saw a man backing down the hallway away from her.

"Who are you?" she demanded; "Why did you break into my room?"

"I, wait, what?" he asked in confusion.

"Answer me!" she ordered as she advanced on him, her voice getting louder.

"I don't know anything about your room," he said and then added as she hadn't stopped advancing on him; "I need to talk to you," he said, his hands up in front of him; "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to…"

"Ambush me while I'm on a romantic getaway with my girlfriend?" she provided; "Which begs the question; how did you know we were here?"

"Carm?" Laura said as she walked up behind her; "What's going on?"

"I found this guy spying on us," she replied.

"I wasn't spying, I was hoping to talk to you," he corrected.

"Wait, I recognize you," Laura said and put a hand on Carmilla's arm; "He was at the gym Friday," she looked back to him; "He's the one who asked about your hickey."

"Why are you here?" she demanded, her anger starting to boil through to the surface; first the dream, then her Jeep, her room and now this? She'd already been close to breaking before, but now she was ready to put her fist through a wall.

"I… I wanted to…" he stammered; "I need to apologize."

"For what?" Laura asked as she took Carmilla's hand and squeezed it, the action alone bringing her temper down a few notches.

"I'm the reason that article, the one after your accident at lake, was published," he replied, trying to look anywhere but at the two of them in his guilt.

Carmilla was on the verge of hitting him when the hotel phone in her hand rang and reminded her she was still holding it.

"Hello?"

"Carm, its Nancy," the caller replied; "Care to explain why I've got a couple of cops at my desk asking to be taken to your room?"

"The spare room was ransacked overnight," she replied neutrally; "Bring them up," she instructed. "You!" she spat at the reporter; "Come with me."

"Carm?" Laura said hesitantly.
"I have questions for him but he doesn't need to know any more than he already does about what's going on," she explained; "Whatever reason he's here, he's still a reporter."

"Fair enough," Laura replied; "I suggest you do as she says," she informed the man; "We've had a rough morning already and I wouldn't want her to use you as substitute for her heavy bag."

Carmilla nodded down the hall to indicate that he should precede them, and then, as they followed him back to their room whispered to Laura; "There's a small pistol in my backpack. I don't think you'll need it but I'll feel better about leaving you alone with him while I deal with cops if it's in your pocket."

"You really keep a gun near you at all times?" Laura whispered.

"It's my version of a safety blanket," she replied; "I know, in my head, that if it came down to it, I could kill her with my bare hands but there's no guarantee I wouldn't shut down from fear before I had the chance."

"Yeah, I saw how you reacted to her at the airport," Laura agreed; "Rick just offered to help me get a license to carry."

"What else did he have to say?" she asked, turning at the sound of the elevator opening. "Tell me later. Don't talk to him, the reporter, okay?"

"I won't," she smiled and kissed her despite the two police officers and the hotel manager walking towards them; "Give me a little credit, babe," she teased and showed the reporter into their room.

Carmilla turned back to the three people walking towards her.

"Has anyone been inside since you found the door open?" the male officer asked.

"I don't think so," she replied; "I didn't go in when I found it, I only pushed the door open far enough to see if anyone was inside."

"Alright, wait here," the female officer instructed as she pulled on a pair of latex gloves, "We'll take a look around."

"Carm?" Nancy said to get her attention; "What the hell is going on?"

"The usual," she replied tiredly; "Deanna." She sighed and went to lean against the wall. "A reporter is in my room, any idea how he knew I was here?"

"I'll look into it and fire whoever is responsible," Nancy replied.

"That might not be necessary," Carmilla said, clearly surprising her; "Yes, I'm pissed someone tipped him off that I'm here but I'll reserve judgement until I find out why."

"Miss Karnstein?" the female officer said as she returned; "There's something you need to see."

Carmilla felt her stomach clench, how much worse could it be?

She followed the officer into the room and looked to where she pointed; scrawled in, what looked like blood, were the words; "Love will have its sacrifices."

"It's not blood, it's paint, we checked," the male officer informed them.

"Any idea what it means?" the female officer asked.
"That's what Deanna said," Nancy said quietly; "My parents told me, after she paid them and they admitted that they thought I genuinely had feelings for you."

"Then this isn't her," Carmilla said as she looked to the police; "She would never do something so obvious."

"How can you be so sure, Carm?" Nancy asked; "If she knows I work here it would be just like her to do something like this if you haven't told your girlfriend about me."

"You have a point," she replied. It would be like Deanna to try to cause conflict. "I have told her about you but not that you're you." She looked back to the officers again; "Do you have more questions for me?"

"When did you notice the door open?" the female officer asked as she walked back over, taking her notepad from her back pocket as she did.

"I was over here around ten to put out mine and my girlfriend's laundry and then noticed the door open about," she looked at her watch; "a half hour ago."

"Speaking of laundry," Nancy interrupted and handed her the bag in her hand that Carmilla hadn't noticed.

"Thanks," Carmilla said and looked back to the officers again; "I'll be across the hall if you need me." They nodded. "You might as well come and officially meet Laura."

"I want to find out how this guy got in here," Nancy replied as she followed her across the hall. They found Laura and the reporter sitting across from each other, Laura on the couch and the reporter in the arm chair across from her.

"He said anything?" Carmilla asked as she motioned Nancy to the chair beside him and took a seat next to Laura. She shook her head. "Can you make me a Jack over ice?" she asked Laura who raised her eyebrow. She leaned in to whisper; "I'm holding on by a thread right now, if I don't do something to take the edge off, I will lose it."

"But…"

"I know it's not the best coping method but it's the only one I have available to me at the moment," Carmilla whispered.

Laura leaned back, searched her eyes a moment and then nodded.

"I think I might have something myself," she said as she stood.

Carmilla smiled as she watched Laura cross the room and then looked back to the man across from her. "What's your name?"

"Tyler, Miss, Tyler Finn," he replied nervously.

"And who told you Miss Karnstein was here?" Nancy questioned.

"I don't want to get anyone in trouble," he stalled.

"Tell her or all the staff that knew I'm here will be suspended pending an investigation," Carmilla replied evenly. "I pay this hotel a lot of money to keep my presence here secret. Firing a bunch of people isn't a big deal in comparison."
He looked between the two women before answering.

"Please," he pleaded; "She needs her job…"

"If she needed it so badly she wouldn't have told you I'm here," Carmilla interrupted as she took her drink from Laura.

"She only told me because she knew how badly I wanted to talk to you, in private," he offered.

Nancy's phone rang before she had a chance to question him further.

"I'll be right down," she said to whoever was on the phone, hung up and looked to Carmilla. "I have to go Carn. Let me know what you want me to do and, um, try not to hurt him too badly? Blood's a bitch to get out of the carpets."

"Sure, Nancy, and thanks for bringing up the laundry," she replied as she stood and hugged her briefly; "Be careful, I don't like it."

"I won't run from her again," Nancy assured her.

"Yeah, well, your testimony is no good to me if you're dead," she replied quietly.

"True," Nancy said with a smile; "Your whole stay will be on the house."

"That isn't…" Carmilla tried to object.

"It's completely necessary," Nancy countered; "This idiot got past us along with whoever broke into your room. It's the least we can do." Nancy put her hands on Carmilla's arms as she went to object again. "No, it's not about the money but the principle of the thing. We, I, failed you again, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Carmilla assured her and hugged her again; "No one got hurt, just scared."

"Still," Nancy said as she pushed herself away.

"Fine," Carmilla replied with a sigh; "We'll see you on our way out."

Carmilla watched her leave and then went to sit next to Laura again. She studied her out of the corner of her eye as she took a sip of her drink and could see the hurt and questions all over her face.

"I'll explain later," she said and looked back to Tyler; "So, out with it, why are you here?"

"Could I, um, could I have a drink?" he asked hesitantly.

"What do you want?" Laura asked before Carmilla had a chance to formulate a sarcastic reply.

"Rum and coke?" he asked.

Laura nodded and went to make it for him. Carmilla watched her as she poured the drink and smiled; she'd given him only enough alcohol for him to taste it.

"Thanks," he said as he took his drink and sipped it. He stared into his glass a moment, took a deep breath and finally met their eyes again. "The night Laura got hurt I received an envelope. Inside was the article, already written, a thousand dollars cash and a note saying I would receive a total of ten grand if I got the article published."
"Are you even a reporter?" Laura snapped.

"I am, a struggling one though," he replied.

"Did you keep any of it?" Carmilla asked; "The envelope, the note, anything?"

"I did," he answered; "for a few days," he amended; "The note said to destroy everything. A few days later I got a text asking why I hadn't," he took a sip of his drink, his hand shaking slightly. "Freaked me out, to be honest."

"You're being watched," Carmilla shook her head and sat back; "Does anyone, aside from your friend, know you're here?" He shook his head. "I don't get it, why risk coming up to see me when there was a very good chance you wouldn't get to?"

"I've been getting tips, via texts, as to your whereabouts," he confided; "And from what I've heard, I'm not the only one."

"Makes sense given what we found out this morning," Laura reminded her.

"Did you get one telling you I'm here?" Carmilla asked.

"No."

"You really think she wants any of what's happened the last two days in the paper?" Laura interjected; "Annnnnd..." Laura continued, her hand over hers; "no one but who was there yesterday knew anything about it. And if that," she jerked her thumb in the direction of the other room; "is her, she sure as hell doesn't want it in the papers."

She had a point, of course.

"You still didn't answer my question," Carmilla prompted.

"When my friend told me you were here and I didn't get a text I knew it might be the only chance I'd get to talk to you alone," he took a long swallow of his drink and then a deep breath before he continued. "I'd like to help you."

"Help?" Carmilla laughed; "How the fuck do you think you can help?"

"Carm," Laura said calmly; "let him talk," she said as she took her hand.

The regarded each other a moment before she turned back to him.

"Well?"

"We don't just get locations, we get questions too," he divulged; "I thought, maybe, it might be a good idea to have some asking the questions you want to answer?"

She looked to Laura; "What do you think?"

"I think it's dangerous but it has potential," she replied.

"D-dangerous?" Tyler gasped.

"Those who stand with me publicly become targets very quickly," Carmilla informed him; "And how do you think your fellow vultures are going to treat you once you start asking the questions they don't have the guts to?"
"I…" he took a shaky breath; "I hadn't considered that."

"Well it's something I have to consider every day," Carmilla replied evenly; "For example, I just found out I've been putting the lives of the people I care about in more danger than I knew for more than the last year."

"Carm that wasn't your…" Laura tried to console her but trailed off at the look on her face.

"Of course it's my fault," she countered angrily; "None of you would be in danger if it weren't for me and now she's putting innocent people at risk too. How do you think that makes me feel? Knowing Brody, Dark, Will or you, could have been hurt because of me?" She could feel her heart starting to race again as the full implications of what had transpired in the last twenty-four hours sunk in. "She could have killed any of you on a whim and not thought twice about it."

"Carm," Laura said firmly; "Stop." She looked to Tyler significantly and then back to her; "We'll talk about this later, okay?" Carmilla managed to nod. "We'll think about it," Laura said as she looked back to a nervous Tyler. "I suggest you take some time to consider what you're getting yourself into. If we agree, and you decide it's worth the risk, you might want to move into one of the apartments at the gym for the time being," Carmilla squeezed her hand to let her know she agreed and looked to her briefly before continuing; "My girlfriend has enough to worry about without your safety being one of them."

"You've got balls," Carmilla said quietly, pleased despite her rising panic that she'd managed not to stutter; "I'll give you that," she continued; "The question is, are they big enough to stand up to the big bad Deanna Karnstein?"

"She's the one behind this?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"Yes, and if we don't see a whisper of that on the news before we talk again, we'll know we can trust you," Laura replied for her and then looked to her; "Background check?" Carmilla nodded. Laura got up and retrieved a pad and pen which she handed to Tyler. "Name, email address, birthdate and Social Insurance Number."

"You must be joking!" he laughed nervously.

"You want us to trust you?" Laura countered, he nodded. "Then we'll be doing a background check on you. Giving us that information will quicken the progress and show us you have nothing to hide." Laura resumed her seat next to Carmilla. "Don't feel so bad, she had one done on me too."

"W-w-with o-" Carmilla stuttered.

"Without your knowledge or consent, I know," Laura said calmly, though her worry was clear on her face. "But he didn't know that and he didn't need to." Laura frowned as the house phone rang. "Hello?" she paused while she listened; "You've got to be fucking kidding me," she said hotly. "No, we'll be down as soon as we're dressed."

"W-w-what?" Carmilla stuttered.

"You done?" Laura asked Tyler, he nodded. "Good, time for you to go," she said and motioned towards the door. As soon as the door closed behind him Laura took the empty glass from her hand, straddled her and then kissed her deeply. "Breath, baby, just breath…" she cooed as she kissed her way to her ear; "Yes, we could have gotten hurt, but we didn't," Carmilla took her by the arms and pushed her away. "No, you can't live in a world of 'what ifs'..." she shook her head. "It's going to be okay, okay?" Carmilla nodded. "What matters is that we caught it before anyone got
hurt, right?"

"B-b-but sh-sh-she knows… a-all of it!" she gasped, tears springing to her eyes.

"No, I don't think she does," Laura replied; "We don't know how long the cars have been bugged and almost every time we've driven together we've either had the roof down or the music up and we don't even know if the Jeep was bugged," she leaned forward and kissed her softly. "There's no point stressing over something that may have happened or what she might or might not know. We can't know, right?" Carmilla nodded as Laura wiped the tears from her cheeks. "And so what if she does know? What is she going to do about it?" Carmilla shrugged. "Exactly. I don't much like the sitting- back-and-waiting approach either but that's why I want you to try to focus on just training until you get on the show."

She leaned forward and kissed her again and Carmilla could finally feel her heart slowing down again. She reached up and pushed Laura's robe aside and started kissing her way down her neck.

"Babe?" Laura said as she cupped her cheek with her hand and stopped her progress. "We don't have time for this," she sighed as Carmilla pouted dramatically. "That was Nancy on the phone. For some reason the guys Rick sent up to collect your Jeep thought they'd stop on their way back to check in with the local department and they thought it'd be a good idea to bring the carcass of your Jeep with them."

"You. Can't. Be. Serious?" Carmilla said as she shifted Laura off her and rushed over to the window. "What were those idiots thinking?"

"You okay?" Laura asked as she joined her at the window.

"Am I still on the verge of another panic attack?" Laura nodded. "Yes. But am I too pissed right now to care? Definitely."

"Want me to call Rick?" Laura offered.

"No," Carmilla replied; "I want the chance to go off on someone who really deserves it." She turned from the window, kissed Laura, and then walked over to grab the laundry bag Nancy had brought up. "Come on, let's get dressed," she suggested as she dumped the bag onto the bed.

"So, um, not to sound all jealous girlfriend-y but…" Laura started as she picked out what she was going to wear.

"What's the deal with Nancy?" Laura nodded. "I'm sorry, I should have said something, she's, uh, well her real name is Melissa."

"Melissa, as in, your first girlfriend, Melissa?" Laura asked in shock.

"No one knows she's here, or least we thought no one did," Carmilla sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, her jeans in her hands. "When Deanna found out that she and I were spending time together again she threatened her parents. I got her the job here, she worked her way up on her own, and Frank helped me set up a new identity for her." She bent over to pull on her jeans as Laura sat down beside her.

"What makes you think anything's changed?" Laura asked.

"My room," she started as she sat back up again and took a t-shirt Laura handed her; "There was a message on the wall intended for her." She slipped her shirt on over her head. "I think Deanna was worried about the winch cable, sent someone here to get it, or just someone to scare us."
"It worked, didn't it?" Laura asked gently as she took her hand.

"She knows, Laura, probably everything," she shook her head and roughly wiped away her tears. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"The only thing that's changed is now we know why she's trying so hard to distract you," Laura said calmly; "She knows that when you beat Danny you'll get the Invicta fight and then get on the show. She knows she's screwed and she's doing the only thing she can to stop you without getting her hands dirty." Laura turned her face towards her. "She's trying to distract you. Are you going to let her?" Carmilla shook her head. "Good."

They quickly finished dressing and then headed downstairs. Carmilla could feel herself still on the edge of another panic attack but she was far too angry for it to take hold. While she knew Rick might have asked the officers to stop by, she was also pretty sure he never would have told them to bring the Jeep with them. She nodded to Nancy on the way out and mouthed an "I'm sorry," and received Nancy's shrug in reply.

They approached the flatbed truck, her Jeep, or what was left it, was covered by a tarp on the back and a small crowd people around it trying to find out what had happened. Carmilla walked up one of the officers and tapped him on the shoulder. She waited for him to turn and then said; "What the fuck do you lackwits think you're doing?"

"I'm s-sorry?" he said in confusion.

"Why did you think it was a good idea to bring my wrecked Jeep to the hotel where I didn't want anyone to know I was?" she asked sarcastically.

"Rick told us…"

"Yes, I'm sure he told you to stop by and touch base with the locals but I'm sure as hell sure he didn't mean for you to bring the Jeep with you," she replied, her voice showing the strain of not yelling when she really wanted to.

"I…" he looked from her to his partner and back again; "Shit, I'm sorry," he looked to his partner; "She's right, we're idiots."

"I believe the term was 'lackwits'," Laura interjected.

He nodded and looked to his partner again.

"Go with the Jeep and wait at the edge of town," he instructed; "I won't be long." His partner nodded and did as he was told. "I'm sorry, Miss Karnstein, we weren't thinking…"

"Clearly," she replied dryly.

"We were both a little shook up after it blew," he explained. "I know Rick thinks…"

"We shouldn't be talking about this in the open," Laura pointed out and looked around. She noticed a limousine parked off to the side. "Think that's for us?"

"Probably," Carmilla replied with a shrug and headed that way with Laura and the police officer in tow. She stopped to talk to the waiting driver; "You here for Karnstein?" He nodded. "Is the bar stocked?" He smiled and nodded again. "Good. Do you where the North Shore Auto Mall is?"
"I don't but I'll look it up before we leave," he replied.

"Thank you," she replied and slipped him a twenty; "We're not to be disturbed but let us know when we're fifteen minutes away. He nodded again. "We'll be leaving shortly," she informed him and motioned the police officer into the back of the limousine. "So what did you want to tell me?" she asked him the minute the door closed behind him.

"Well I know Rick seems to think taking your gun case from under the seat was what set off the bomb but I don't think it was," he explained and shook his head. "The timing was too perfect, it was almost like someone was waiting for us to get your stuff out of the car and get far enough away."

Carmilla studied him a moment; maybe there was something else going on.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Is that the winch cable?" he asked as he pointed to the garbage bag at her feet. Carmilla nodded. "Rick told me to pick it up." She picked it up and handed it him. "I really am sorry, Miss Karnstein, we weren't thinking."

"No, it's okay," she sighed; "I'm glad no one got hurt when it blew."

Once he'd nodded and taken his leave Carmilla reached forward and tapped on the partition to let the driver know they were ready to go. She took her phone from her pocket only to have it taken away by Laura.

"I want to check the weather from yesterday," Carmilla said as she held her hand out for her phone.

"Why?" Laura asked.

"Because yes, we made the road worse to trap someone if needed but it hadn't rained nearly enough for it to have been as bad as it was. We shouldn't have gotten stuck." She explained, her hand still out waiting for her phone. "I want to see when it started raining."

"Fine," Laura finally gave in and handed it to her. "Drink?"

"Just the one," she said distractedly as she looked up the weather and confirmed her theory.

"What do you want?" Laura asked as she looked through the bar.

"Crown Royale over ice, please," she replied as she handed her phone back to Laura and then leaned her head back against the seat. None of it made sense; the mics she understood, and if she was being honest with herself, she was actually kind of glad they'd been found as it explained a great deal about how Deanna seemed to know her every move. It didn't mean there wasn't still a mole in their midst, if anything it pointed to that even further as she couldn't figure out how they'd managed to install mics in the first place. But the whole thing with the Jeep was bugging her. It was almost as though someone went out of their way to make sure she didn't drive it any further than necessary. Almost like someone wanted them to find the explosives and the mics.

"Stop," Laura said as she handed her her drink.

"What?" Carmilla asked.

"Please, I can just about hear the wheels from here," Laura teased. "Want to let me in on what you're thinking about?"
"I have a hard time believing in coincidences," Carmilla replied; "And it seems far too convenient that getting stuck in the mud led to the discoveries in the other cars. It's almost like someone wanted us to get stuck so we'd figure this stuff out but I have no idea who. I mean, why not just tell us?"

"Almost sounds like we have our very own Dobby," Laura replied with a sigh and laid her head on Carmilla's shoulder. "We should call Rick."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think you're in any condition to meet with a traumatized young woman right now," she replied as she took Carmilla's phone from her pocket and turned it back on. "I'll ask Rick to ask her if she can wait until after your fight."

"Okay."

"Hey Rick. Yeah I know but you gotta admit that was a pretty dumb thing to do," Laura said when he answered. "No, she's okay, a little stressed but okay. Sure, hold on," she said and put him on speaker. "Go ahead Rick."

"I'm sorry Carm, I assumed they'd know better than to bring your Jeep with them," he apologized.

"And what do I keep telling you?" she asked; "It's better to assume all people are stupid until they prove themselves otherwise."

"That's awfully cynical of you," Laura joked.

"How about; best to give clear instructions if you expect them to be followed?" Carmilla offered.

"Rick, can you call Laura and ask her if she'd be okay with a phone call later this week instead? I don't think either of us is up to more than that but I don't want to keep her waiting too long."

"She might actually appreciate that," he confided; "I don't think she's up to being around people just yet. I'll text you later with the details?"

"Sure Rick, thanks," Carmilla said with a sigh and then ended the call.

Carmilla sat sipping her drink and looking out the window for a while, too many thoughts were running through her mind to make sense of any one alone.

"Carm?"

"Yeah Pup?" she asked and turned to her.

"What's the deal with the warehouses?"

"Right, I never did get around to explaining, did I?" she asked as she held her left arm up for Laura to cuddle into her side. "Well the one on the left…"

"The one that's basically falling down?" Laura questioned.

"Yeah, that one's getting torn down," she supplied; "I'm having a heated lap pool put in; ten feet wide, fifty feet long. Around it we're going to make our very own little park by the water and the rest of the space will be for our secured garage." She smiled and kissed the top of Laura's head. "The other one we're going to renovate into a big rec room."
"But we already have one on the second floor," Laura pointed out.

"True, but I want to turn that into a laundry room and what I have in mind is more like club house: a pool table, ping pong table, arcade games, big ass big screen TV to watch fights on and a fully stocked bar and another six to eight apartments on the second floor." She sighed deeply. "I was really hoping to avoid having to fence the whole thing in. I mean, yes, it's a place of business, but it's my home too and I've already lived in a prison." She swallowed as she felt her throat close, tears again threatening. "God, it's like she's trying to destroy my life in small increments," she said, the tears slowly falling down her face.

"She's trying to scare you, that's all," Laura said soothingly as she turned to look at her and wiped the tears from her face. "Trying to throw you off your game." She kissed her briefly. "That's why I want you to concentrate on your training for now."

"I already agreed to let you run my life," Carmilla reminded her.

"True, but agreeing to it and actually doing it are two entirely different things," Laura teased her and kissed her again. "I have your priorities list, I know what you need to know, please babe, let me do this for you."

"I'll try?"

"I'll take it," Laura replied and laid her head in her lap. She looked at her watch and then up to Carmilla. "How is it that it's not even noon?"

"Because time flies when you're having fun and we were having anything but?" Carmilla joked.

"So what's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"Since you're running my life, why don't you tell me?"

"Well I think we should head straight home once we pay for your new Jeep and pick up the loaner, have some lunch and then I think you should hit the gym after we check where you weight is at." Carmilla smiled and nodded, all that sounded like a good plan. "After dinner, maybe cuddling on the couch? Watch a movie?"

"That sounds…" Carmilla sighed; "that sounds like a great way to end this shitty day."

She turned to the window, sipping her drink while Laura laid her head in her lap. She closed her eyes and put her head back against the seat as she absentmindedly ran her hand through Laura's hair. Her anxiety attack had finally abated, due in large part, to the anger she was trying to keep at bay. She expected Deanna to come after her, hurt her if she could, but put the lives, not only of the people she loved, but innocents in danger as well?

"Oh Deanna," she thought; "you've just made your life so much harder."

She sighed deeply and took another sip of her drink.

"You okay?" Laura asked as she rolled to her back and looked up to her.

"Not really," Carmilla admitted sadly as she looked down and met her eyes.

"And that's why I'm doing what I'm doing," Laura stated and sat up.

"And what exactly are you doing?" Carmilla asked as she put some of Laura's hair behind her ear.
"Until after your Invicta fight I want you to consider me your 'bad news filter'," Carmilla went to interrupt so Laura kissed her instead. "No, listen to me," she urged; "I can tell, one more bad news bomb," she paled and shook her head; "Sorry, bad choice of words; but you are Carm, I can tell you're barely holding it together." She leaned forward and kissed Carmilla's forehead. "Please, baby, just hear me out."

"It sounds like you've put a lot of thought into this," Carmilla pointed out.

"I've been thinking about it since the hospital," she smiled; "I know you were you only holding it together for my benefit."

"That and the Ativan still in my system," she remarked dryly and took a long swallow of her drink.

"Still, for the next three weeks I'm only going to bug you with stuff if it's one: a decision only you can make. Two: not knowing the truth is distracting you more than knowing would. Three: it's a seven or higher."

"Sounds fair," Carmilla remarked; "So you plan on keeping me in the dark?"

"Not completely," Laura replied; "We're going to have a once a week 'Reality Check' meeting, sometimes just you and me, sometimes the whole gang," at Carmilla's raised eyebrow she elaborated; "When necessary, Rick, Frank, Dark, Brody..."

"Brody and Will stay out of this," Carmilla interjected; "and I'm not too thrilled with Dark being involved either."

"Why not?"

"Laura if I had my way I'd send all of you far away to keep you safe," she shook her head and marshalled her anger.

"We're not going anywhere, none of us," Laura said adamantly and kissed her; "Will and Brody can be kept on a need-to-know, okay?" Carmilla nodded. "But I need Dark. I know he's your best friend but I don't know what I would have done without him the last few weeks."

"How so?" Carmilla asked.

"He kept my spirits up when I thought you'd never figure out how I feel about you," Laura sighed, leaned into her side, and rested her head on her shoulder. "I'm going to need someone to lean on when you're away."

"So when's our first 'Reality Check'?" Carmilla asked in an effort to change the subject, she didn't want to think about six long weeks away from Laura.

"Sunday before the press conference," Laura replied; "I was thinking we rent out a floor of the hotel for Stan and all his friends, and we could stay there Friday night and Saturday," Carmilla kissed the top of her head to show she agreed. "They have meeting rooms there so we could meet first, have the news conference and then leave for New Mexico."

"Almost doesn't seem fair," Carmilla replied wryly.

"What's that?"

"Throwing shit at the fan and running away to let everyone else deal with it," she replied.
"That's just it, we're not going to," Laura clarified. "That's what Deanna expects, even if she doesn't know what happened to your Jeep or that we've found the stuff in the other cars, she has to know about the hotel and be wondering if we're going to acknowledge it. We have no idea what she knows only that there's little, aside from distracting you, that she can do about it." Carmilla heard a phone vibrate and watched as Laura fished her cell phone from her pocket and held her hand out for it when she realized Laura wasn't holding her own phone. Laura only shook her head and replied to the text. "I have some good news, bad news, good news and more bad news."

"Who was that?"

"Rick," she replied and looked at the phone as it vibrated again; "Shit..." she muttered and shook her head. "They finished the sweep of all three buildings, all three were clear for explosives," Carmilla sighed in relief then tensed as she remembered Laura said that would be followed by bad news. "They found half a dozen microphones in the gym, five of them dead, the live one in the elevator," Laura smiled at Carmilla's confusion; "They stupidly thought it would be a good idea to use noise activated microphones in a noisy gym."

"Anyone could have placed the ones in the gym," Carmilla commented, a slight tension headache starting to take hold behind her eyes; "I'm more concerned about the one in the elevator."

"It wasn't Danny," Laura informed her; "It's been there at least six months."

"Then it could be anyone as well," Carmilla replied with a heavy sigh; "What with all the delivery and construction people that have been coming and going while we completed renovations."

Their driver tapped on the partition to let them know they were almost there and startled them both. Carmilla looked at her watch and smiled; they'd made good time and it was barely two.

"Text Rick and tell him to hold on to the mics, I want to mess with Deanna a bit," Carmilla informed her; "Maybe get her to hear something she doesn't want to and send a little message."

They pulled into the Jeep dealership a little while later and exited the car when their driver opened their door for them. Carmilla reached into her wallet to give him a tip when she realized she was out of cash.

"I got it," Laura said quietly as she dug her wallet out of her backpack.

"Carmilla Karnstein!" a voice shouted angrily causing Carmilla to turn; "Would you care to explain to me why there is a goon going over your loaner with a fine tooth comb?"

"I wish I could Theo," she replied as she looked over to see a rather large blond haired man crawling through a black Jeep Cherokee. "I know why he's doing it but I don't know who told him to."

"Don't take it personally," Laura added; "We've had a rough morning and someone is just being over-cautious."

"Go on inside," she said to Theo, "I'll find out what's going on."

As they watched him walk away Carmilla felt Laura's hand on her arm and turned to her.

"Wait, you knew about this?" she asked, trying not to sound angry.

"That was the last bit I didn't get to tell you, but Carm? I think it's a good idea," Laura replied tentatively, the worry that she'd overstepped her bounds obvious.
"So, he's what? A bodyguard?" she asked as she looked over and sized him up; he looked big enough to step in front of a bullet for both of them.

"Personal protection professional and driver," Laura supplied; "Carm, he's trained for this sort of thing, we aren't. After everything that's happened in the last two days?"

"I never agreed to this," she stated.

"You kind of did," Laura corrected; "When you thought Rick was talking about fencing he thought you were agreeing to this." Laura took her hand and pulled her to face her. "If he'd been with us last night your room wouldn't have been broken into or maybe we'd have caught the guy." Carmilla nodded reluctantly. "He can make sure we don't get re-bugged and that everyone's safe," she kissed her softly; "It's one less thing to worry about and that's why I agreed to it for you," Laura said and then waited for her reaction.

"Maybe you're right," she sighed in defeat as she rested their foreheads together. "But I'd rather drive myself."

"I'm trained in evasive driving, Miss Karnstein, you are not," a deep voice said behind them, startling both girls slightly. "My apologies, Steven Xander," he said as he held out his hand to them. "My wife and I work as team, twelve hour shifts."

"I won't consent to you driving us," Carmilla said matter-of-factly as she shook his hand; "But I will get you your own vehicle."

"But…" he tried to interrupt.

"Your driving skills will be just as effective, if not more so, if you're following us and you shouldn't have to risk your own personal vehicle to do it," she said, her tone such that it was obvious to both him and Laura that she wouldn't change her mind. "Black Cherokee?" she asked.

"I'd prefer something smaller, a little more maneuverable and standard please," he replied.

"How would you know?" Carmilla joked and then frowned when she saw a distinctly guilty look cross Laura's face. She shook her head and looked around the lot. "How about that one?" she asked as she pointed to a black Compass.

"That'll work if it's standard," he replied.

"If not you can use the loaner until we can get one and we'll use Laura's Mini until we get my new Jeep," she informed him and received his curt nod. "I'm afraid you won't have much to do. We won't be leaving the gym much until Friday and we leave for New Mexico on Sunday. Are you and your wife free to join us?" He nodded again. "Good, and maybe for convenience sake, you should take one of the apartments at the gym."

"I'll talk it over with my wife," he replied.

"Good," she nodded towards the Compass she'd pointed out; "Go take a look at it; we'll be out as soon as I sign the paperwork." He smiled and nodded, clearly relieved that she'd agreed to his presence. She led Laura towards the building and with a squeeze of her hand brought Laura to a stop. "Want to explain the guilty look?"

"I learned how to drive using a standard," she said meekly and looked down.
"Why would you lie about something like that?" Carmilla asked gently.

"It was an excuse to spend time with you outside of the gym and training?" she offered and looked up as she felt Carmilla's finger under her chin. "And I pretended to be so bad cause it made you smile and laugh." She shrugged. "It was the first time I got to see that side of you and I wanted to see more of it."

Carmilla shook her head, and laughing under her breath, kissed her softly.

"Time may prove me a fool, Laura Hollis, but even if it does I will never forget how happy you've made me," she smiled and kissed her softly again. "Now," she said as she pulled Laura toward the dealership; "Let's get this taken care of so we can finally go home."

"You're not mad at me?" Laura asked.

"I'm amused, maybe a little confused, but no, not mad," she replied and kissed her cheek to further her point before opening the door for her and following her inside.

"It's about time, care to explain?" Theo asked testily as they sat down in front of his desk.

"I can't," she replied; "I'm sorry Theo, how about I make it up to you?" she asked sweetly.

"And just how do you think you're going to do that?" he asked sarcastically.

"By buying a Compass," she pointed out the window, Steven giving her a thumbs up when he noticed her; "that one, in fact, and we'll take it today."

"Really?" he asked in surprise, she nodded. "I, um, okay," he smiled; "I'll get the paperwork and," he turned the monitor towards them; "I can get this here by tomorrow."

"I'm not too fond of the colour but we can get it painted while we're away," she said.

"I don't know, Carm," Laura started.

"Army green, really?" she asked with a laugh.

"I'll go get the other paperwork," Theo said, reminding them he was still there.

"Thanks," Carmilla replied and looked back to Laura for an explanation once he'd walked away.

"We're sort of going to war aren't we?" Laura asked as she took her phone from her pocket. She fiddled it with a few seconds and then turned the screen towards her. "We'll get it painted matte green, the gym's logo on the hood inside of an old time medical cross, and this..." she said as she zoomed in on one part; "on the back bumper."

"What is this?" Carmilla asked as she tried to understand what she was seeing.

"It's the banner I had made for your fight with Danny," Laura replied with a smile; "It was supposed to be a surprise but Dark texted me that it came in and I thought seeing it might cheer you up."

"Sometimes beaten, never broken?" she read from the banner.

"It sounds like a perfect MMA motto but really..."

"Once the show airs everyone will know what it really means and until then it'll freak the hell out
Theo rejoined them and placed the paperwork for both cars in front of her. As Carmilla signed them Laura and Theo talked about the graphics they wanted added and the matte finish for the Jeep.

"If price is no object I can get it done by Friday," he informed them as he handed her the keys to the Compass.

"Thanks Theo," Carmilla replied as she handed him her credit card. "Any pictures of the MG?"

"Oh yes," he replied with a grin as he brought them up on the computer screen.

"It's…" she said in awe; "It couldn't be, could it?" she asked him hopefully.

"I think it might be," he replied, held up her card and added; "Be right back."

"Carm?"

"When I was kid one of my Dad's hobbies was restoring an old MG," she confided, her voice choked with emotion; it might not be the same car but it looked very similar, right down to racing stripes and the ninety-eight on the side. "It was supposed to be mine when I turned sixteen but it was one of the first things Deanna got rid of after my Dad died. Theo's been looking for it, or one like it, for the last year."

"Sounds like, piece by piece, you're getting back some of the things she's robbed you of," Laura commented.

"Yeah," Carmilla replied and sighed; "but she's still trying to take more."

"I know, baby, but you're not fighting her alone anymore, remember?"

"I know," she replied and kissed her cheek; "but I'm still getting used to the idea."

"Me too," Laura said quietly and kissed her forehead.

Theo returned with her card and then followed them outside to attach their new plates to the Compass. She and Laura climbed into the back while Steven retrieved their bags from the limo.

"So lunch and then hit the gym?" Laura asked as Carmilla did up her seat belt for her, "I have a feeling you could stand to blow off a little steam."

"There are other ways to blow off steam," Carmilla purred and nuzzled into her neck.

"Um, not tonight, I'm afraid," Laura replied causing Carmilla to pout. "I don't suffer from cramps or heavy bleeding like you do, but everything gets too sensitive to touch for the first day or so." She kissed her softly. "But," she whispered into her ear as Steven took his seat behind the wheel, "yours is over and I very much look forward to having you for dessert tonight."

"Deal," Carmilla replied huskily. As shitty as their day had started, ending it at the mercy of Laura's hands sounded like a wonderful escape. "How did you come up with the mantra, by the way?"

"I was trying to decide between 'Often', 'Rarely' or 'Sometimes', I thought 'sometimes' sounded the most humble," Laura offered; "You don't like it?"
"No," she replied seriously, Laura's face falling in despair; "I love it," she said and kissed her. "It's gonna knock Deanna right in the teeth," she kissed her again. "And after what she's put us through the last couple of days? I look forward to it."

"Sometimes beaten, never broken," Carmilla thought and smiled as Laura laid her head on her shoulder. If today wasn't proof of that she wasn't sure what was. Moreover, she realised, her new mantra applied to her and Laura in a way; every fight they fought together only made them stronger.
Carmilla woke Friday morning, turned and curled back into Laura and pulled the blanket down a little so she could admire the girl she was rapidly falling head over heels for. She ran her fingertips down Laura's arm, leaving goosebumps in her wake. She leaned forward and kissed her shoulder, nosed her hair aside and kissed just below her ear. Laura sighed in her sleep and melted into her, a small smile on her face. Encouraged, Carmilla moved back a little and pulled Laura to her back. She'd rarely gotten the chance to study Laura while she slept and she'd squandered the one opportunity she'd had looking for scars.

"Scars…" she thought, her hand stopping before reaching Laura's right breast; "not all of them can be…"

"Why'd you stop?" Laura asked her voice deep and alert; she'd been awake for a while.

"How long have you been awake?" Carmilla asked as she bent to kiss her chest.

"Since you pulled the blanket down," Laura looked up and met Carmilla's eyes; "Baby?" she said in concern as she reached up to stroke her cheek; "What's wrong?"

"I was thinking about what you said, about how not all scars can be seen?" she replied tentatively; "And it hit me, why it was so important to you that I was ready because…"

Laura pulled her up and kissed her deeply as she rolled her to her back.

"Stop," she said firmly; "I was happy when you let me change the subject. Not because it's hard to talk about, I mean, it's not my favourite topic, but it was four years ago and I've," her voice caught slightly; "mostly come to terms with it. I didn't want you to know because, well, for this very reason." She paused a moment to kiss her, Carmilla knew her confusion must be clear. "I was going to tell you, before we slept together, but I got to thinking about why it was so important for you to be away." She smiled and kissed her again. "I didn't want our first time tainted by my past," she kissed her chest; "I wanted us to be able to express ourselves without worrying about it."

"I might not have a Psych 101 class, but Laura, you should have told me," Carmilla replied quietly; "I know enough about flashbacks to know that I could've…"

"Stop," Laura interrupted again; "I wasn't," she took a deep breath; "In my head, it wasn't rape. Would I do things differently given the chance? Been more forceful about trying to make him stop?" She smiled. "You bet, but not for the reasons you might think. I was curious, he was good looking, he really did try to make sure I enjoyed myself," she laughed and shook her head; "If anything he proved to me I was gay. But, yes, it wasn't with my consent, but I stopped voicing it, I let it happen."

"Still doesn't make what he did right," Carmilla countered softly.

"I agree, and so does he," Laura replied, her voice strained; "He felt so badly about what happened," she took a deep, but shaky, breath; "He was going to provide for us, well the best he could," she offered; "And that," she looked down; "that's what I feel guilty for," she looked up and met her eyes, her brown ones swimming with tears; "I was relieved when I miscarried," she sniffed and wiped her nose; "I was fifteen, I wasn't ready to be a mother," she admitted as tears finally leaked from her eyes.

"Can I ask, what happened?"
"My mother miscarried four or five times before she finally carried me to term," Laura explained as she wiped her tears away roughly; "Which, ironically, was a part of the reason I decided to keep her," she shrugged; "I didn't know if I'd ever be able to have another, especially since I'd just accepted that I was gay," she sighed deeply; "They, the doctors, don't know why I miscarried, or why my mother did for that matter."

"It's not your fault, Laura, none of it," Carmilla said as she reversed their positions; "Everything happens for a reason; the good and the bad." She smiled and kissed her softly. "And if, someday in the future, you really want kids, I will move heaven and earth to see that you can, I promise." Laura smiled broadly and pulled her down for another kiss. "Do you want to know what my ultimate dream has always been?" she asked when they parted, Laura nodded. "I've always wanted to have my partner carry my fertilized egg, and vice versa. That way, when the child is born, we'd both have a biological connection to it."

"Same sperm donor for both?" Laura asked.

"Ideally," she replied with a smile; "I think it would be nice for them to have the same father."

"You really want kids?" Laura asked as she ran her thumb across Carmilla's cheek.

"I do," she admitted; "and maybe one of my reasons is selfish," she smiled; "I want to give my kids an amazing childhood."

"To make up for the one you didn't get?" Laura deduced.

"Is that selfish?" she asked.

"Maybe," Laura replied with a light laugh; "but it's a far more valid a reason than some I've heard."

Carmilla laughed lightly and put her forehead to Laura's chest.

"What?" Laura asked as she lifted her head.

"Us," she shook her head and laughed; "we've been together for two weeks and we're already talking about kids."

"So?" Laura said seriously; "I find it comforting that we're both thinking about our future together."

"Very true," Carmilla replied and kissed her softly.

"And Carm?" Laura said, her voice having dipped; "When it comes to my body, please and kindly assume you my consent."

"Oh really?" she chuckled throatily.

"Yes, really," Laura replied and reversed their positions; "I can't think of anything you could do that I wouldn't want you to do."

"Because you know I'd stop the minute you asked," Carmilla replied seriously.

"I do," Laura smiled; "and that's why I can give you my consent freely," she leaned down to nibble at her neck; "And I look forward to being woken to find you making love to me."

"Oh…" Carmilla trailed off at a crash from the other room; "What the creeping hell?" she muttered as she swiftly moved Laura off her, grabbed her gun from the bedside table, and got out of bed.
"Um, Carm?" Carmilla turned to her; "You're naked."

"So I am," she laughed as she grabbed her red cheetah covered silk robe and slipped it on. She walked quietly over to the door and opened it far enough to see what, or who, had caused the loud noise. "Mark?"

"Sorry Honey, I didn't mean to wake you," he said from the kitchen; "I decided to drive down and made better time than I thought. Dark let me in last night and gave me your keys so I could surprise you with breakfast," he supplied as Carmilla walked over to give him a hug. "I tried to follow Laura's menu, I hope you like it."

"How did you know it was Laura's menu?" she asked with a laugh as she went to inspect what he was making: omelettes and sweet potato home fries.

"I recognize her handwriting," he replied.

"Daddy?" Laura said from the bedroom doorway and then walked over to give him a hug; "I thought we were picking you up before weigh-ins?"

"I'm going to use the bathroom and get dressed," Carmilla interjected and kissed Laura on the cheek on her way to the bedroom.

She used the bathroom quickly, tied back her hair, dressed and was tying up her shoes when she heard Laura yell angrily; "The last thing she needs is one more person to worry about!"

"It's not your decision to make," Mark countered just as angrily as Carmilla joined them.

Carmilla looked from Laura to Mark and then back to Laura.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" she asked.

"Not right now," Laura replied firmly.

"Fine," Carmilla replied neutrally and went to the hall closet to grab her tennis bag; "I'll be out back if you need me," she added as she picked up her plate, utensils and orange juice.

"You don't have to go," Laura said as she kissed her cheek.

"It's obvious something is up and you and your Dad need to talk," she replied; "and that will be easier to do without me around."

"Thank you, Carmilla," Mark said, reminding the two they weren't alone.

"You're welcome," she answered; "and thanks for breakfast."

She kissed Laura on the cheek again and left the two in awkward silence as Mark held the door open for her. She shook her head and sighed; she wasn't sure she was up for more bad news and she wondered if Laura was going to tell her what was going on. She made her way down to the gym and over to the counter.

"Morning Brody," she greeted as she put her plate and glass down on the counter.

"Smoothie?" he offered.

"Yeah, a post weigh-in," she answered to his surprise.
"How far under are you?" he asked.

"Let's find out," she sighed, slipped her tennis bag from her shoulder and made her way over to the scale. "Shit..." she sighed; one hundred and nineteen, fully clothed, with shoes on.

"So?" Brody asked when she returned.

"One nineteen," she replied and started on her breakfast; "Might be the first one-twenty-fiver to weigh in fully clothed," she joked.

"You'll be fine," he stated.

"Why thanks, Kirsch," she replied fondly.

"Well there's no point worrying about it, right?" he reasoned and earned her nod. "You were always going to be giving up a size advantage and at least this way you'll be in really good shape for your next fight."

"Very true," she grinned; she was glad at least one person understood; "And if I play it just right, I might be able to shake Danny's confidence a little." She smiled at his look of interest. "If I show up to weigh-ins at the weight I normally fight she might think I'm not worried enough about it to try to compensate."

"Or it'll make her overconfident," he suggested.

"Either way, it works to my advantage, don't you think?"

"I hope so, Carm," he answered with uncertainty. "But if anyone can pull it off it's you," he added reassuringly.

"Besides, physically I feel better than I have in a long time," she sighed as she finished her meal; "I just have to make sure she doesn't get a hold of me." She smiled and pushed her plate towards him. "Take this upstairs when you have a minute, please?" she asked and looked towards the elevator when it opened, hoping to see Laura but frowning when Steven appeared. "Wait until after Laura comes down though," she shook her head and picked up her bag and protein shake; "Something's up with her Dad and they're talking it out."

She smiled when he nodded and made for the back door, frowning again when she noticed her bodyguard following her.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked politely when he caught up.

"Do I have a choice?" she countered sarcastically. He seemed taken aback so she added; "For crying out loud, the place is totally fenced in, the worst thing I have to worry about is someone taking pictures with a high-powered lense."

"If they can get close enough to take your picture then..."

"Then there would be nothing you could do about it anyways," she cut him off.

"Okay," he said he hands up in a defensive gesture; "I was really only hoping to talk to you a minute."

"So you don't think someone is out there with a high-powered rifle waiting to kill me?" she asked, meaning it to sound defiant, but her voice cracking near the end instead. She pushed open the back
door with all her force and made her way to the wall she had set up to play tennis.

"Miss Karnstein, please," he pleaded as he followed her out.

"For…" she huffed and turned around; "If you're going to be my bodyguard you need to blend in."

"Ninety percent of what I do is prevention through presence," he countered.

"I understand that is normally the case, but this isn't your average situation," she said as she bent to take her racket and a couple of tennis balls from her bag. "As soon as she figures out who and what you are she's going to know I'm scared."

"By 'she' you mean?" he asked.

She studied him as she stood up straight again; could she trust him? More importantly, should she? Yes, he and his wife, Betty, were willing to put their lives on the line for them but they were being paid handsomely to do so. Where would his loyalties truly lie if he knew the truth of what he was getting involved in? He had to know it was dangerous; he'd been part of the team who had found the explosives in the pick-up. But even that was now in their control; not only was he and his wife experts at finding hidden audio devices, they had their very own trained bomb dog. As much as she hated to admit it, she felt safer knowing they had her back, and by extension, all those she cared about.

"Deanna Karnstein," she admitted and watched his face; it went quickly from shock to understanding and finally to grim acceptance.

"Now I understand why Rick asked me to do this," he said quietly; "My wife has her own history with you mother…"

"Step-mother," she corrected.

"Carmilla," he said, obviously uncomfortable using her given name; "You have my word, Betty and I will do everything possible to keep you and your loved ones safe."

"The question is: are you in it for the long haul?" she asked, smiling despite herself when she saw Laura walking towards them.

"Define; 'long haul'."

"Optimistically?" she said; "A year at best, two at the worst." She looked to Laura as she joined them and placed her hand on Carmilla's shoulder; she couldn't help but wonder the same of her. Despite all her promises, would there come a time when it became too much? "Hey you," she said warmly and kissed her cheek, noting that it appeared she'd been crying recently; "Everything okay?"

Laura shook her head and looked to Steven; "Is there anything that can't wait?" she asked, her voice strained slightly, he shook his head and went to walk away.

"Steven?" Carmilla said to get his attention; "I'll have you drive us to the dealership and go over my new Jeep before we drive it and then follow us the rest of the day?"

"You won't make it too hard to follow you?" he asked, his tone light.

"I'll do my best," she replied and motioned him back inside; "We'll be picking up my test results."
"Don't need to, Elsie had them sent over," Laura informed her.

"Great," Carmilla replied and turned back to Steven; "So, straight from the dealership to the hotel." He nodded, she turned to Laura a moment, and then back to him; "If you don't mind we'll have Laura's Dad drive with you though, if that's okay?" He nodded again and took his leave.

"You didn't have to do that," Laura said quietly; "Yes, I'm mad as hell at him, but I could've shared the car with him."

"What if I don't feel like sharing you right now?" Carmilla asked as she dropped her racket and balls to the ground and grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close. "What if, I'm dreading being away from you so much, that I'll take every second to be alone with you that I can?" Laura tangled her hand in her hair and pulled her into a kiss, the temptation to lose herself to it almost as great as her desire to find out why Laura was so upset. Almost. She pulled away and studied her eyes. "Want to tell me what's got you so upset?" she asked gently.

"No," Laura replied firmly and pushed her away. She bent to Carmilla's bag. "You have an extra racket, let's play?" she asked as she took the second racket from the bag and took off its cover.

"Laura," Carmilla said tiredly as she bent to pick up her racket and took off its cover; "I think this is one of those times where not knowing the truth will bother me more than knowing."

"Don't be so sure," Laura replied sadly.

"Laura…" she prodded as she walked over and placed a hand on her arm.

"No," she replied, a little less forcefully this time; "Let me…" she sighed; "Just let me blow a little steam off first?"

"Whatever you need, sweetness," she replied fondly and kissed her forehead. "You any good at tennis?" she asked as she bent to pick up the forgotten tennis balls.

"I haven't played in a while but I used to be okay."

"Okay, we'll start off slow and I'll try to avoid hitting to your backhand," Carmilla replied as they walked over to her court.

"Why not have full court made?" Laura asked as she watched Carmilla stretch and then hurried to do the same when she noticed her watching.

"I prefer Squash, to be honest," she replied; "but we didn't have room for a court so this was the compromise," she explained.

"Ah, so that's what the empty space is in the rec room designs," Laura replied with a smile. "I haven't played Squash; you'll have to teach me."

"If it's like everything else you'll be kicking my ass in no time," Carmilla teased and patted Laura's behind with her racket. "You ready?" Laura nodded. "Okay, we'll start off slow to warm up."

They started off slowly as promised, Carmilla assessing Laura's skill as they took turns hitting the ball off the wall. As she felt her muscles loosening up she started hitting the ball a little harder, pleased when Laura kept up easily. They'd been playing for about an hour, neither talking much except for the occasional comment on a nice shot. Like everything else they did, it was easy, like they'd done it a million times before.
"Enough," Laura finally said with a laugh as the ball went past her. She looked at her watch; "Come on, we have just enough time for a shower and a bite to eat before we pick up your Jeep."

"We're not going anywhere," Carmilla said as she walked up and pulled her close; "until you tell me what's going on with your Dad."

"It can wait," Laura replied and pushed her away. She picked up her racket's cover, put it on and put it back in Carmilla's bag. "What?" she asked as Carmilla was watching her, a small frown on her face.

"No," she replied firmly; "You're going to tell me what's going on," she all but demanded.

"Fine!" she replied angrily, walked over to the wall, turned and slid to the bottom to sit. She hugged her knees to her chest and put her head down on them. Carmilla rushed to her, kneeling at her feet and running her hand through Laura's hair as she'd started to shake from crying.

"Baby? What is it? What's wrong?" she asked in a rush, fearing the worst as she moved to her side and rubbed her back; "C'mon Laura, talk to me," she pleaded.

Slowly Laura stilled then sat up straight and leaned her head back against the side of the building and wiped away the tears on her right cheek, Carmilla reaching forward and wiping the left for her.

"I get it now, Carm, why you keep trying to send me away," Laura said quietly, her eyes searching the sky. "Apparently there's a few openings in the Vancouver Police Department due to recent suspensions and firings," she finally met Carmilla's eyes; "Rick offered my Dad one of them," she took a deep and shaky breath; "He accepted."

"I don't understand how that's bad news," Carmilla replied in confusion; the thought of Laura's father being there while she was away was a very comforting one.

"You're joking!" Laura laughed; "Yes, he's a cop, a damn good one too, but from a small town. Even if it he wasn't getting directly…" she shook her head as she realized she was about to reveal too much; "Vancouver is far more dangerous than he's used to," she amended.

"Did he mention what he's going to be doing?" Carmilla asked, wondering if Laura would actually tell her.

"Something about 'cold case' files," she replied and smacked her head; "No wonder he was relieved when I agreed to take time off school."

"Because it'll be easier to keep an eye on you?" Carmilla guessed.

"Maybe, but no," she laughed ruefully; "I've been helping him with his cases for years," she shook her head; "It happened by accident the first time, he forgot a file on the kitchen table. I looked through it and then, despite my fear he'd yell at me for looking at it, asked him if he'd noticed this one thing," she smiled; "He was angry until I pointed it out," she shrugged; "Led to a big break in the case and the guy was caught."

"I'm not surprised," Carmilla commented and kissed her cheek; "You're one of the smartest people I know, even if you're being incredibly dumb right now."

"I'm sorry?" she asked angrily despite the blush from her compliment.

"I'm sorry, baby, but I can't be anything but relieved your Dad is going to be here for you while I'm…" Laura interrupted her with kiss.
"Sorry, I don't want to think about being away from you right now," Laura admitted quietly and looked away.

"But Laura?" Carmilla said and pulled her to face her again; "Your Dad can take care of himself, and unless I'm very much mistaken, what Rick has him doing amounts to desk job."

"How do know?" Laura asked, a tinge of hope to her voice.

"Because he, the Doc and Frank have been carefully finding all the evidence they can against Deanna: medical records, police transcripts, everything that has happened in the last couple of weeks," she explained patiently; "They need someone relatively unbiased to put it all together, figure out a timeline, and see where the evidence leads."

"'Relatively' unbiased?" Laura asked.

"He knew my Mom, that's sure to come up," Carmilla advised her. "She's already one to exploit any weakness, now that she's getting desperate?" She kissed in her in an effort to wipe away the grim expression she now wore. "And as much as neither of us wants to think about it, I am going to be away for six weeks," she put a finger over Laura's lips to stop her interruption; "No listen," she admonished; "I'm glad he'll be here to support you." Laura nodded, kissed her finger and then took her hand from her mouth.

"What about you though?" she asked sadly.

"What do you mean?" Carmilla asked in confusion.

"I can't help but worry about you, alone in the house," she supplied

"I'll hardly be alone," she replied lightly and sat back; "There'll be fifteen other fighters, not to mention a host of camera crew, there to keep me company."

"You know what I mean," Laura replied and shoved her playfully.

"But what you forget, Laura, is having someone to support me like you do, is new to me," she replied and kissed her because she looked sad; "What I mean to say is, I'll be okay," she tried to sound reassuring but she wondered who she was really trying to convince. "Yes, I'm going to miss you terribly but you know what's going to get me through?" she asked as she knelt in front of her again; "Knowing you'll be waiting for me at the end of it." She stood and held her hands out to her.

"Now come on," she prodded as she took her hands and helped her up; "We've got four whole weeks before I go anywhere and I, for one, plan to enjoy every minute I have with you until then," she kissed her softly; "Join me for a shower?" Laura blushed and nodded. "You okay?"

"I will be," she sighed; "Sorry it took my Dad moving here for me to finally get it."

"He'll be safer here," Carmilla offered as she kept hold of her hand and picked up her tennis bag; "Deanna would have come after him eventually and distance wouldn't have made any difference. At least here he has the might of the Vancouver Police Department behind him."

"I don't know if that makes me feel any better," Laura admitted but let Carmilla lead her back towards the gym.

"It wasn't meant to," she shrugged; "It is what is, baby, and the bottom line is he'll be safer here." She reiterated.

"How can you be so sure?" Laura questioned.
"Because Rick knows I'll kill him if anything happens to your Dad," Carmilla replied seriously and kissed her softly. "Your Dad can have your old apartment, of course."

"No wonder you're planning at least six more apartments in the rec warehouse," Laura commented with a laugh; "Keep it up and you won't have anywhere for fighters to stay."

"Have we heard from Tyler then?" Carmilla asked, curious again to see if Laura would reply.

"We're meeting with him before the meeting on Sunday," Laura replied vaguely. "I think, no matter what we decide that he shouldn't know everything."

"You don't trust him?" she asked as she led Laura inside and over to elevator. She punched in the code on the new security keypad they'd had installed and turned back to her as she waited for it to arrive.

"I'm not sure yet," Laura replied and shook her head; "No, enough," Laura said as she pushed Carmilla into the elevator and up against a wall. She leaned in and kissed and nibbled at her neck. "Let's forget reality until Sunday."

"You have an interesting way of changing the topic, Miss Hollis," Carmilla laughed throatily as she leaned past her to hit the button for their floor.

"I'm trying to," she replied, her voice deep as her hand crept beneath her shirt.

Carmilla snuck a look at her watch and smiled; they had time for this. She dropped her tennis bag to the floor as the door opened at their floor and picked Laura up causing her to yelp in surprise even as she wrapped her legs tightly around Carmilla's waist. She carried her to their apartment, opened the door and proceeded to the bedroom. Somewhere around the dining room table Laura successfully managed to get her shirt off and started kissing her deeply.

She set her on her feet by the bed and pulled her shirt over her head, resuming their kiss the moment she was able. Both were now so adept at undressing each other they managed the feat without ever breaking their kiss. Finally Carmilla laid Laura on the bed and draped her body over hers, the sensation of their naked bodies already covered in sweat from their tennis playing, rendering her incapable of thought.

She began kissing her way down Laura's neck to her breast only to be pulled back up and into another kiss as Laura rolled her to her back; "If I'm going to shout it in a room full of people I'd like the pleasure of doing it first," she whispered in her ear. She lifted herself to her hands and knees and moved off her. "Besides," she whispered as she moved so she was at Carmilla's head, her body facing away from her; "my periods over and I think we should take full advantage."

Nothing more was said as Laura kissed her and then began kissing her way down Carmilla's body, her own body within kissing range of the brunette as she made her intention clear. Laura slowly let her weight fall on top of her, her desire already dripping onto Carmilla's waiting tongue. As she felt Laura move to take her into her mouth she reached up to the do the same, both of them moaning at the same time. She ran her hands over Laura's backside, used one hand to steady herself as she trailed her other hand up the inside of her thigh. When she felt Laura do the same she finally entered her wetness, her very core, with two fingers.

Laura's mouth broke contact with her momentarily as she gasped in surprise and pleasure before rushing to mirror her actions. Carmilla reversed their positions as her neck had started to hurt, Laura letting her, and redoubled her efforts once they were settled again. The moved as one, each grinding into the other's face as their desire took over. Carmilla gripped Laura's ass tightly with her
free hand as she felt her orgasm approaching and added a third finger inside her as she hoped Laura would take the hint and do the same, almost coming instantly when she did. She felt Laura's body still and tighten around her fingers, the two finding their release at almost the same time but neither stopping what they were doing as they helped each other ride out their first orgasm, into a second, and finally a third.

Carmilla licked her clean before slowly moving and kissing everything she could reach while she went to lie beside her. "You're not worried calling out 'sixty-nine' in the middle of my fight isn't going to distract me?" she joked lazily.

"We can change the number," Laura offered with a laugh.

"No," Carmilla replied and kissed her; "It's still a good plan and I'll take any advantage I can get."

"You weighed yourself this morning?" Laura asked as Carmilla sat up and stretched.

"One nineteen," she answered and braced herself for Laura's reaction.

"Shit, Carm, what are you going to do?" she asked as she sat up and wrapped her arms around her.

"I feel amazing," she replied and blushed given what they'd just done; "This is the weight I'm usually at when I fight," she clarified; "Besides, if I can pull it off, I might just shake Danny's confidence a little by making her think I'm not at all worried about her size advantage." Laura looked unconvinced so she elaborated. "Put yourself in her shoes; you're feeling pretty confident because you have a big enough size advantage to think it'll make up for your lack of technique but then your opponent shows up and takes the scale fully clothed. You don't think that might make you question how much of an advantage your size is in the face of that confidence?" She turned and took Laura's face in her hands. "I have more than enough anger built up over the last two weeks that I'm going to have to force myself not to make it into an all-out brawl." She kissed her and stood. "Shower?" she suggested with a hand out to her, hoping she would let her put the topic on hold for the moment, relieved when she nodded and took her hand.

They didn't talk as they washed each other until Laura stood staring at her chest for a moment.

"What?" Carmilla asked with a small laugh.

"What are you wearing for the fight?" Laura asked as she began tracing patterns on her chest.

"My Under Armour Karmma rash guard," she supplied, wondering where Laura was heading with her questions.

"And what are you planning to wear for the weigh-ins?" she asked.

"A tank top and, ah…" she trailed off as Laura began sucking on her chest. "What are you doing?" she asked as she finally pushed Laura away.

"Every advantage you can get," she replied as she ran her fingers over the new hickey she'd left.

"Yes, but don't you think pissing her off might make things worse?" Carmilla joked as she turned off the water.

"She gets messy when she's angry," Laura supplied; "Not like you, your anger seems to focus you."

"And you know this how?" she asked, thoroughly puzzled.
"I've watched a lot of footage of both your fights," she replied as she towed Carmilla off. "I've seen it, the change that comes over you the second the bell rings." She shook her head. "It's rather frightening, to be honest, and I hope to never see that look directed at me."

"You likely never will," Carmilla assured her; "In that moment all I'm thinking of is the anger, the pure rage, I have over what Deanna did," she smiled as she took a towel and dried Laura off. "Everything else falls away and I see my opponent for what she is; just another stepping stone on my path to my eventual goal."

"Getting your life back?" Laura questioned.

"I don't know if 'getting it back' is really the right term as I've never really had a life that wasn't darkened by her," she replied dryly and then softened as she met Laura's eyes again; "But yes, finally getting the life I've always wanted."

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind of activity. While their detour on the way to the shower was exactly what both girls needed, it had put them behind schedule. They dressed quickly, Carmilla donning a pair of her tight fitting leather pants, a tight black 'Karmma' tank top that revealed Laura's hickey, her trademark studded bracelets, her boot Docs, and finally her favorite leather vest.

"Think it'll be enough?" she asked Laura when she found her staring at her, her expression unreadable.

"What?" she asked with a shake of her head, like a dog trying to get the water from its ears.

"Do you think I'll weigh enough now?" she prompted as she walked over and placed her hands on Laura's hips, the younger girl haven't made it so far as putting on the pants she was holding.

"Sorry," she blushed and slipped from Carmilla's hands to put on her pants; "I was just imagining taking all that off you later," she admitted and blushed again. "And, um, maybe?"

"Let's go find out," she said as she watched Laura slip on her shoes. Laura took her hand and laced their fingers as she led them from the apartment. They kissed softly on the elevator ride down, Carmilla trying very hard to ignore the butterflies currently residing in her stomach. They walked over to the scale, and taking a deep breath and she stepped on it.

"One twenty-four and half," she said; "Close enough."

"I have an idea," Laura said, walked over to the counter, talked to Brody a moment, took something from him and returned clutching something awkwardly between her broken arm and her good. "Here," she said, handing her a roll of dollar coins; "Put it in your vest pocket," she prompted.

Carmilla did as she was as told and looked to the numbers on the scale as she noticed where Laura's focus was. She had four rolls of 'loonies' in her pocket when the scale finally tipped one hundred and twenty-six. Laura handed her one more then turned and returned the rest to Brody at the counter.

"So what's the plan then?" Carmilla asked as they walked over to where Laura's father and Steven waited.

"Look surprised when you're over, step off, slap yourself dramatically in the forehead and hand me the coins from your pocket," Laura smiled at her grin; "Maybe add an; 'Shit, I forgot about these,'" she suggested. "Step back on and weigh just under, still fully clothed."
"You're a genius, Laura Hollis," she said proudly and kissed her cheek as they followed the men outside to Steven's Compass, his German Shepherd, Chico, already in the trunk area. "You know," she laughed; "I don't think I've ever looked forward to a weigh-in this much."

"And I'm hoping that will mess with her most of all," Laura replied; "If you're having fun she might think you're not taking her seriously."

The drive to the dealership was quiet, the silence only broken by the panting of the large dog behind them. They were almost at the dealership when Carmilla decided to break the ice. "Mark?" she said, getting his attention; "You can have Laura's apartment for as long as you want it," she offered with a glance at Laura at the corner of her eye.

"Would that be okay with you, Pumpkin?" he asked Laura.

"If you insist on moving to Vancouver..." she started.

"I do," he interrupted.

"Then it would probably be for the best if you did," she relented, sounding defeated. "But I don't want to talk, or think about any of this, until Sunday," she looked to Carmilla; "Understood?" Carmilla nodded. She looked to the two men in the front of the car. "Understood?" she asked them, they both nodded. "Good. Let's get past this fight and then we can deal with the rest of this sh..." her father cleared his throat; "crap after the fight."

Carmilla brought Laura's hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles.

"Thank you," she said softly so the two in front wouldn't overhear; "You've been awesome this week."

"Yeah?"

"I've never been able to only focus on my training like I have the last few days," she told her, a little louder so Mark could hear. "Is it hard not to worry?" She smiled. "Yes," Laura looked down; "But I trust you, Laura, to tell me if it's bad enough."

"It's terrified you, hasn't it, not knowing?" Laura asked quietly.

"Yes, but then I remind myself I only have to wait until Sunday to find out what's happening and it forces me to re-focus on my training until I stop worrying," Carmilla replied and smiled as they pulled into the dealership. "We're here," she announced brightly; as much as she was saddened at the loss of her first Jeep, as it came into view, she thought her new Jeep looked pretty cool.

"You like it?" Laura asked as Carmilla undid her seatbelt for her.

"I'm still not sure about the color," she teased; "but the graphics make up for it and I really like the matte finish." She looked to her bodyguard as they all got out of the car and gathered near her new Jeep; "Go ahead," she prompted; "Give it a good once over." He nodded and went to get the dog from the back of the car.

"Search!" he commanded the dog and then followed him over to the new Jeep.

"Is that really necessary?" Theo asked as he joined them.

"Did you use the same graphics shop that did that van and pick-up?" she asked.
"No," he replied, slightly confused; "They shut down shortly after they finished the graphics on both of them."

"Relay that information to Rick," she said to Laura and then looked back to Theo; "I'm sorry, Theo, I can't explain, but yes, I'm afraid it is necessary." She motioned towards the dealership. "You have paperwork for me?"

He nodded and then led them inside, Mark staying outside while Steven inspected her new ride. Theo, ever efficient as always, already had her insurance paperwork, plates and title to the car ready, the whole process only taking fifteen minutes as she'd already paid for it.

"So the big fight is tomorrow?" Theo asked conversationally as they walked back out to her new Jeep. Carmilla nodded. "Pity I'll have to miss it," he sighed dramatically and waited for her to ask why.

"Cause you're going to look at the MG?" she asked dryly, reminding him that he'd already told her about it.

"Cause I'm going to buy it for you," he corrected; "I'm almost positive it's…"

Carmilla interrupted him with an uncharacteristic squeal as she hugged him and kissed his blushing cheek.

"Sorry," she said with a laugh, stepped back, and then reached out and straightened his jacket; "That's the best news I've had in a while," she provided with a grin; "Thank you, so much, Theo. How long till you can get it here?"

"You'll have it by the time you get back from your trip," he supplied.

"How did you…" she trailed off as she felt Laura take her hand and squeeze it.

"I might have mentioned it when he called to ask how you wanted to have it shipped," Laura provided and frowned at Theo; "I thought we agreed to keep it a surprise?"

"Sorry," he shrugged; "I'll, um, just put your plates on."

Carmilla looked to Steven, received a thumb's up, and turned back to Laura, a smirk firmly in place.

"I thought it would be nice surprise when we get back from New Mexico," she offered sheepishly; "He couldn't get it here before we leave so I told him it could wait until we get back."

"I can't believe you managed to keep that from me," she teased and tickled her; "Come on, let's get going," she added as she led her over to her new Jeep.

"We're still waiting on the matching soft and hard tops," Theo said apologetically as they approached; "We should have them by the time you get back."

"No worries," Carmilla said happily as she ran her hand over the logo on the hood; "Thanks for everything Theo," she said warmly and laughed as she saw he was clearly bracing himself for another hug. "I guess I'll see you when we get back?"

"Sure thing," he replied, his relief that there wasn't another hug coming obvious. "I'll get it all checked out and make sure it's in top running condition."
"Thanks, Theo," she said warmly and opened Laura's door for her. "Have a good trip," she added as she closed Laura's door. She nodded to Steven and Mark who went to get back in the Compass before climbing into her new Jeep. She sat staring at the wheel a moment, running her hands along it, as she remembered why she had a new Jeep.

"You okay?" Laura asked as she placed her hand on her wrist.

Carmilla nodded and started the car; her sadness at the loss of the first big thing she'd bought herself, and how she'd lost it, would have to put on the backburner. She had bigger fish to fry.

They drove to the hotel in silence, Carmilla occasionally checking the rear-view mirror to make sure Steven still had them in sight. They were pulling up to the hotel when Laura finally spoke; "Carm?" she said as Carmilla parked the car. "You never answered me, are you okay?"

"I will be," she replied as she turned off the car and looked to her. "Let's get checked in, weighed in, and then back to our hotel room for dinner and," she looked her up and down seductively; "dessert."

"Deal."

They checked in quickly and confirmed they had the whole floor; Mark would be taking the room to one side of them and Steven the other. The rest of the floor would be occupied by Stan and his friends when they arrived the next day. Steven offered to take their things to their room so they could go sign-in at the weigh-ins, Laura, for some reason, still carrying her backpack.

Carmilla signed in and gave them her sealed lab results and then was directed to a holding area where she was informed that weigh-ins would be starting shortly. Laura directed her to a chair and then took a travel mug from her bag.

"We skipped lunch," she supplied as she handed it to her; "The last thing you need is your blood sugar bottoming out."

"Thanks," she replied with a smile, took the mug, and then pulled her close with her free arm. "You take such good care of me," she added as she snuggled into her belly and caused her to laugh.

"Should I wait outside?" Mark chided from the doorway.

"No," Carmilla laughed as she pushed Laura away; "We haven't nearly enough time to get into a proper amount of trouble."

"Stop!" Laura said, smacking her arm playfully before sitting in her lap.

All too soon someone came to collect them for the weigh-in, Carmilla's nerves making her thankful she didn't have more food in her stomach. They followed their escort to the edge of the stage and watched as Danny weighed in and raised her arms, somewhat lethargically, Carmilla noted, when the scale settled at one twenty-five and a half.

"Not only that," she thought, "she's skin and bones." She looked to Laura and whispered. "Do you have a new sports drink in your bag?" Laura nodded. "Give it to Danny while I weigh in," she looked in Danny's direction as she, somewhat unsteadily, stepped from the scale; "She looks on the verge of passing out."

"Alright, you're up," the escort said, motioning them to the stage.

Carmilla nodded to Laura's bag and then motioned towards Danny again before going to take her
place on the scale. She watched Laura walk over, taking a sports drink from her bag as she approached, and held it out to a skeptical looking Danny.

"Oh c'mon," Laura said lightly, her voice carrying as she ripped off the protective plastic, took off the top, removed the tin foil cover, replaced the lid and held it out to her again; "It's brand new and you look like you could use it."

"Thanks," Danny muttered and tentatively took a sip from it despite the look on her trainer's face. She met Carmilla's eyes, the latter nodding once before taking the scale.

"One twenty-seven," the official announced.

"Shit," Carmilla hissed as she stepped off the scale and motioned Laura over. She took the coins from her pocket and put them in her open backpack; "I forgot I picked them up for the gym," she said with an apologetic look to the official as she stepped back on the scale.

"One twenty-four and a half," he announced and motioned towards Danny; "Time for the face off."

She was making her way over to where Danny waited, the look on her face one Carmilla had never seen before; a mix of confusion, amusement and the tiniest bit of doubt. Carmilla stopped at a hand on her shoulder and turned to Laura with her eyebrow raised as she discovered why Laura had her bag with her; apparently it contained more than drinks and snacks and she took a collapsible step stool from her bag and set it up in front of Danny.

Carmilla and Danny both laughed slightly as she took her place atop the stool and found herself eye to eye with the redhead. She raised her hands to a fighting posture, Danny doing the same, small, determined smiles still on both their faces until Danny's gaze shifted down and she noticed the hickey on her chest. She met her eyes again quickly, a look of anger flashing across her face before she settled her expression into something more neutral.

Carmilla couldn't help but smile; she'd hoped to get under Danny's skin and it looked like it was working. She stepped down off the stool carefully and held her hand out to Danny, waiting to see if she'd take it. When she finally did she shook it firmly and quipped cheerily; "See you at the violence!"
When Carmilla woke the next morning she couldn't help but wonder if she would ever get used to waking up next to Laura. Every morning seemed to contain a new experience and this morning's might prove to be her favorite yet. She woke slowly, savouring the remnants of the most pleasant and erotic dream when she realized it wasn't a dream.

She lay on her stomach, the blanket somewhere below her behind and Laura's naked body pressed tightly to her side. She did her best to feign sleep as Laura ghosted her fingers over the many scars on her back and then leaned to kiss each one softly, her hair tickling her back as she paused a moment, her right hand moving to her side and brushed lightly against the side of her breast before moving onto the next and repeating the whole process. Carmilla wondered idly what Laura was doing, and after what seemed like forever, that she hadn't realized just how many scars her back had.

Once Laura had methodically made her way to her neck, she brushed her hair aside, ran her tongue along her ear and the whispered softly; "You awake yet?"

"No," she replied, her voice belying how turned on she already was. She cleared her throat as she rolled to her back; "What were you doing?"

"Waking you up," she replied innocently.

"Why were you kissing my scars?" she asked with wonder.

"They are a part of who you are," Laura said quietly as she met her eyes; "I knew I'd probably never get the chance to find them all if you were awake," she said sadly, although Carmilla couldn't detect any note of pity in her voice.

"I was awake," she corrected and smiled; "But, even though I couldn't figure out what you were doing, I didn't want to stop you." She closed her eyes and shook her head; she couldn't explain it to herself, how could she explain it to her? "Laura," she began; "from the moment I met you, you've made me feel like the most important person in the world, and," she reached up to push some hair behind Laura's ear; "somewhere along the way, not only did I start to believe it, you became the centre of my universe." Laura blushed and kissed her softly. "You make me feel so loved and adored…"

"And cherished," Laura continued and kissed her again; "and so wanted," she kissed her neck; "and needed," she met her eyes again; "When I kissed each scar I told it I loved it because they're a part of you and what makes you, you, and I love you." She said fondly and kissed her chest. "I made each one a promise; I'm going to make her pay for every time she laid a hand on you," she continued, her voice now having taken an edge; "For every time she made you doubt yourself, and lastly, and maybe most importantly, for making you believe that you aren't worthy of love." She
leaned in and kissed her softly, only this time Carmilla tangled her hand in Laura's hair and deepened the kiss as she reversed their positions.

Laura pushed her away gently as her hands started to roam. She met her eyes and pouted dramatically in an attempt to lighten the mood, but Laura wasn't to be deterred.

"Do you know how you swept me off my feet, Kitten?" she asked. Carmilla smiled shyly and shook her head. "By just being you," she smiled. "You let me in, and I know, from my own experience, how hard that is to do when you've spent so long trying to be strong and trying not to feel. I know how scary it is to be vulnerable and break the habit of looking for ulterior motives. I knew I was in love when you opened up to me."

"I do love you, Laura," she shook her head; it seemed so inadequate after Laura's speech. "I know that might not seem like enough but I don't know what else to say."

"You don't have to say anything, baby, I already know, you show me every day," she said fondly. "Thank you for letting me take care of you this week and not asking too many questions."

"Would you have told me if I asked?"

"I wouldn't have had many answers for you," Laura admitted sheepishly; "Any time someone called I asked them if it could wait until after the fight."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to have to lie to you," she answered simply. "For example; Rick called yesterday morning to tell me the results of the analysis on the Jeep so I asked him if not knowing right away would put us in more danger. He got quiet a moment and then said no."

"You want to know what this last week has made me realize?" Carmilla asked.

"That your step-mother is certifiable?" Laura joked; "No. Wait. We already knew that."

"I realized that," she started, her tone such that Laura sobered immediately; "until she's dealt with there's no such thing as safe for us, only safer. I can pay triple what I should have had to have my home fenced in and turned into a compound but it only makes us safer, not safe. And that goes for everyone now living within that compound, not safe, only safer."

She shook her head and looked to the clock.

"Is that why you agreed to Steven and Betty?" Laura asked when she turned back to her. "It makes us safer?"

"Yes," Carmilla replied; "But enough about that for now. Perry is going to be here soon to braid my hair and I'd like to eat first."

"Carm?" Laura said softly, a hand on her arm stopping her as she went to get out of bed; "You shouldn't be ashamed of them, your scars." Carmilla turned to her and searched her eyes. "Not only are they proof you survived something that no one, let alone a child, should have to survive but," she smiled and ran her hand along her back; "they're beautiful, in their own way, and they only make me love you more."

"Well don't get used to them," she replied and ran her thumb over Laura's cheek; "I'm getting them tattooed over the minute her ass is dealt with," she pointed to the scar on her arm; "I'm planning a tattoo over this one after the Ultimate Fighter." Laura ran her finger over the scar thoughtfully.
"But I'm not trying to cover them, exactly," she smiled and kissed her softly; "C'mon, let's have some breakfast and I'll explain," she said as she got up and held her hand out to her.

"Shouldn't we have a shower first?" Laura said as she followed; "We must stink of sex."

Carmilla turned and nuzzled into her neck.

"You might have a point," she said huskily; "but I'm going to need a shower after my run and I'm not sure I want to shower three times today."

"I suppose," Laura sighed dramatically; "I'll want a shower after your run too, if you don't mind me joining you?"

"Actually," she smiled and pulled Laura close; "I think I'd like that very much but I need you to let me focus, okay?" Laura smiled and nodded. "And please don't be offended if I put my music in, it's just part of my routine."

"I don't have to…"

Carmilla interrupted her with a kiss.

"I'm still processing what we just talked about," she said and rested their foreheads together; "And a part of me wants to forgo all my usual prep and lie in bed with you all afternoon talking but…"

"You can't," Laura supplied firmly and then kissed her softly. "It's okay, Carm, really. I don't want to mess up your pre-fight ritual. I just, I guess I want to be as much a part of it as I can. Is that okay?"

"Six weeks ago I couldn't have imagined my life as it is now with you in it," she said, the words so hard to find; "but now?" she smiled. "I can't imagine my life any other way." She kissed her softly as Laura tried to pull her back to the bed. "We don't have time, sweetness, but I promise I'll make it up to you tonight," she offered and pulled her toward the bathroom. "Let's freshen up a little and get dressed, I can eat while Perry does my hair."

They took turns in the bathroom and then met up at the sink to wash up a bit.

"I was so nervous when you gave me my sponge bath," Laura confided as Carmilla washed her. Carmilla met her eyes and smiled. "You were so gentle, so shy," she ran her hand through Carmilla's hair. "It was really very endearing."

Carmilla kissed her forehead and then resumed washing her.

"I was nervous too," she admitted; "but the, I don't know, the relief?" She shook her head. "Whatever I was feeling, it was so much greater than anything else." She put the washcloth aside and took Laura's face in her hands. "I don't know that I realized, until that very moment, how much you already meant to me," she sighed, kissed her softly and then made to wash herself. "And I was terrified of pulling you into the shit storm that is my life right now, that you'd get hurt even worse than you already have," she sighed as she soaped up the washcloth and starting washing herself, Laura watching her intently. "After what happened with the Jeep," Laura put her hand on her shoulder, "I guess I didn't really think she'd try to kill me, or someone I'm close to," she put her head down and gripped the edge of the sink. Unable to meet Laura's eyes as she voiced her worst fear, she kept her head hung as she continued; "Maybe I should walk away from all this. Maybe I shouldn't, I don't know, find some way to end this peacefully before someone gets hurt."

"You said it yourself, Kitten, you stopping won't stop her," Laura reminded her as she rinsed out
the cloth and started to wash away the soap on Carmilla's body. "Besides, she has to be shitting bricks right about now, right?" she asked, Carmilla meeting her eyes skeptically. "She has to know about the Jeep by now, yes?" Carmilla nodded. "She has to know, or at least suspect, we've discovered the tampering in the other cars if for no other reason than they've stopped recording," Laura smiled. "I can almost guarantee she's more afraid than we are."

"Nothing scares her," Carmilla corrected.

"She knows, or suspects, that you know and can't help but wonder what you're going to do with that information," Laura told her and she starting to think maybe she was right. "Even without the mics she has to know about the Press Conference at the Convention Centre tomorrow."

"Convention Centre?" Carmilla questioned. "I thought we were having it here?"

"Apparently too many people want to be there," Laura advised her. "And we're staying downtown tonight, not here, but only my Dad and the Xanders know."

"Why?" Carmilla asked as she went to wet her hair under the shower. She looked back to Laura to find her watching her. "What? It makes it easier for Perry to braid." She finished wetting her hair and turned to find Laura watching her intently. "So, why are we staying downtown?" she prompted.

"Closer to the Convention Centre," Laura replied as she handed her a towel for her hair.

"True, but if it's solely for convenience sake, we might as well just go home for the night," Carmilla reasoned and headed out of the bathroom.

"Either way," Laura replied as she started dressing; "so long as I get you to myself tonight."

Carmilla smiled as she slipped a shirt over her head. She walked over to her and teased; "Now who's the sap?"

"It's just," she sighed; "If we stay here we'll probably get caught up in whatever party your cousin and his friends get going and I really don't want to be hungover and tired for the press conference tomorrow."

"I'm more than okay with going home and being alone with you for the night, Pup," Carmilla said as she tucked some of Laura's hair behind her ear; "Besides, we have a lot to talk about."

"It can't wait until the morning?" Laura whined.

"We'll see," Carmilla replied noncommittally and then looked to door when someone knocked. "Coming!" she called, grabbed a pair of shorts and slipped them on as she went to open the door.

"Carm!" Laura hissed, causing Carmilla to turn and laugh as Laura frantically finished getting dressed.

"Sorry," she apologized and opened the door. "Per!" she greeted and hugged her taller, curly red-haired manager.

"It's good to see you to, dear. Now," Perry pushed her away and took her face in her hands. "just how under are you?"

"One nineteen," Carmilla replied.
"Bullshit," Perry replied and shook her head.

"With clothes and runners," Carmilla admitted reluctantly.

"Damn it, Carmilla," Perry said in exasperation and made her way over to Laura; "Lola Perry. You must be Laura." Laura nodded. Perry turned back to Carmilla. "Want to explain your little stunt yesterday?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"Carm?" Laura said tentatively, it was obvious she found Perry a little intimidating; "Breakfast?"

"Please," she smiled and motioned Perry towards the table while Laura prepared their cereal and yogurt. "You were at the weigh-ins?" Carmilla asked as Laura joined them, Perry nodded. "Why didn't you come talk to us?"

"I was a little busy," she replied tersely; however a small smile seemed to be playing around her mouth as she took out the tools she'd need to braid Carmilla's hair. "Fortunately your little display amused the woman I was escorting, though she was concerned with your weight."

"Out with it, who's here?" Carmilla asked.

"Shannon Knapp," Perry stated.

"Holy Hufflepuff!" Laura gasped, both Carmilla and Perry laughing at her outburst.

"Yes, well," Perry continued, composing herself; "Lucky for you the officials let you get away with it."

"What do you mean?" Laura asked.

"There are weight classes for a reason," Perry replied with a glare in Carmilla's direction. "I thought you were going to try to bulk up?"

"I did try, but you know how I get the week before a fight," Carmilla replied wearily and looked to Laura. "I rarely have trouble getting down to one fifteen because stress goes straight to my gut," she shook her head; "I barely have any appetite and what I do manage to eat goes straight through me." She looked back to Perry. "I did try," she assured her; "but then I realized putting on extra weight was only going to make me feel crappy," she could see Perry was about to object and continued before she could; "She was always going to have a size advantage, no matter what, at least this way I feel better than I have in months. I'm ready for this, Perry. I can beat her."

"You still haven't explained your little stunt," Perry reminded them as she started combing Carmilla's hair while she ate her breakfast.

"Which part?" Carmilla stalled; something was up with Perry, she'd never seen her so on edge.

"Let start with the coins," Perry prompted.

"That was my idea," Laura offered; "So was the stool. Carm didn't know about it."

"Where did you come up with that anyway?" Carmilla asked, smiling as she remembered the look on Danny's face.

"Pat Barry versus Stefan Struve, October two thousand and eleven," Laura replied with a smile while Carmilla and Perry wore identical looks of bemusement. "It was one of the first fights I watched with my Dad," she continued; "Barry is five foot nine and Struve is a full foot taller. Barry
took the scale second and when it came time for the face-off he stayed on the scale, Struve went over for the face-off but he was still shorter," she shook her head and laughed; "When he stepped down the height difference was hilarious." She looked to Carmilla. "I'm surprised you didn't know that."

"I'm not," Carmilla replied with a shrug; "You've probably watched a lot more fights than I have. Hell, you've probably watched more fights than Perry and I put together."

"Because I've watched all of six, all of them yours," Perry replied, affection lacing her voice for the first time. "Why did you give Lawrence a sports drink?" she questioned.

"She looked on the verge of passing out," Carmilla replied tonelessly; "If she passed out the fight might have been canceled," she sighed; "She looked like shit up close, Per, I don't think she's well."

"Rumor has it she had to cut fifteen pounds in the last thirty-six hours," Perry supplied.

"So my little stunt probably really pissed her off," Carmilla sighed.

"If you were trying to get into her head I'd say you succeeded," Perry affirmed; "But I had to assure Shannon that you'd take her weigh-in more seriously."

"I've got the fight?" Carmilla asked excitedly and turned to her.

"Not yet," she replied and she put her hands on either side of Carmilla's head and turned it forward again. "But, and she didn't confirm this mind, I suspect she's here on Dana's behalf.

"How the hell did you get Invicta's president here?" Laura questioned.

"A flight in the Karnstein jet of course," Perry replied simply.

"You have a jet?" Laura exclaimed.

"It was Frank's," Carmilla replied nonchalantly; "Deanna finally figured out he was helping us and tried to bankrupt him about six months ago. I bought his jet just in case. Once he got everything settled he decided to leave it my name but our trip to New Mexico was the first time I was going to use it."

"Why have Will fly commercially from Montreal?" Laura asked.

"I wondered that myself," Perry commented.

"So we could confront Deanna, of course."

"Of course," Perry sighed. "Should I be worried about this press conference tomorrow?"

"I have no idea," Carmilla replied and looked to Laura; "My 'bad news filter' won't tell me what's going on."

"She let you get away with that?" Perry asked in shock, Laura smiled shyly and nodded. "I'm impressed; I've been trying to do that for the last year, at least for the week before a fight. How did you manage that?"

"She has her ways," Carmilla replied with a wink to Laura. "Trust me."

Perry spent the next hour putting Carmilla's hair into corn rows and then she and Laura went down to the hotel's gym, with Betty in tow, for their run. They didn't talk much until later that afternoon
while they lay in bed after their shower.

"You never did tell me about the tattoos you have planned," Laura said as she ran her finger over the scar on Carmilla's right arm.

"If I had my laptop I could show you," Carmilla teased, she knew Laura wouldn't let her see it on the off chance she might glimpse a disturbing email. "I found a tattoo artist in Vegas who actually incorporates scars into the tattoo design. I'm getting a phoenix on my arm and a full back piece once this all over."

"Why wait on the back piece?" Laura asked.

"For one, a piece that size takes a while to heal and I can't afford the down time," Carmilla reasoned; "For another, I might need those scars as proof and I doubt a picture would really do them justice."

"Fair enough," Laura yawned; "What's the back piece of?"

"It's based on a piece of art I saw," she explained thoughtfully; "It's of a fallen angel, sitting holding his knees, a broken halo in his hands. It was in black and white and he had one demon wing and one angel wing in the process of changing, the only colour, one red horn and a single blue tear. My version is sort of the opposite; mine is a redeemed angel. He's losing his demon attributes and has his repaired halo in his hands, his wings are growing feathers and he's walking out of the fires of Hell."

"Do you think," Laura started thoughtfully as she continued to run her fingers along the scar on Carmilla's arm; "your artist could draw a complimentary phoenix for my arm?" She looked up to Carmilla, the surprise, she was sure, was all over her face. "Well, we kind of have complementary scars," she moved from where she'd been resting on her shoulder and kissed her. "We don't have too, I just thought it'd be cool," Laura said quietly when Carmilla still hadn't replied.

"Are you sure?" Laura nodded. "Tattoos are for life, even a non-matching tattoo is a big deal, especially on your forearm."

Laura turned to her stomach so she could look at her properly.

"Firstly; I said complementary, not matching," she clarified, which, in Carmilla's opinion, clarified nothing; "They'll look really amazing together or apart."

"Still, a forearm tattoo?" she questioned; "Tattoos aren't a big deal for fighters, but a journalist?"

"We'll just have to make sure it can be covered by a long sleeved shirt," Carmilla went to object but Laura wouldn't let her; "or there's makeup for that sort of thing." Carmilla still didn't answer; she was dumbfounded by Laura's suggestion. "What? You don't want me to?"

"Will you ever stop surprising me Laura Hollis?" Carmilla asked as she pushed Laura to her back and kissed her. When they came up for air again she studied her a moment. "Well," she sighed; "I suppose it could be worse," she laughed and laid her head on Laura's shoulder; "We could be getting each other's names."

"And what would be so bad about that?" Laura joked, "Maybe a small 'Carm's' on the inside of my wrist?"

"Actually," Carmilla said with a smile and looked up to her; "I like that. Can we do that before I leave?" Laura looked uncertain so she rushed to add; "You don't have to if you don't want to but…"
"It would be nice to have during the show?" Laura guessed. Carmilla's smiled, kissed her and then lay her head back down. "And you'll get 'Laura's'?"

"How about 'Pup's'?" Carmilla teased.

"You really want me to advertise, 'Kitten's'?" she joked.

"No," Carmilla laughed; "I suppose I don't." She sighed and got more comfortable. "I really need to try to get some sleep."

"Okay," Laura replied, kissed the top of her head and started rubbing her back. "I love you Carm, you're going to be amazing tonight."

"I love you too, Laura," Carmilla replied, tilted her head up and accepted Laura's kiss. "I'm happy you're here," she said and snuggled back into her. "I don't think I've ever been this relaxed before a fight."

"Glad I'm good for something," Laura joked.

"You're amazing for many things and many reasons," she replied and yawned; "Now let me rest."

She drifted off a little while later, the steady thump of Laura's heart beneath her ear, as well as Laura rubbing her back, comforting her in a way she never felt before. Safe. Loved. Unconditionally so. When Laura gently shook her awake a few hours later she couldn't believe how rested and relaxed she felt.

"God," she sighed as she sat up and stretched; "I don't think I've ever felt this good a few hours before a fight."

"Speaking of which. Up!" Laura prodded; "You need to eat and I let you sleep longer than I should have," she ordered, this time physically poking her in the side.

"Oh, you don't want to do that Cupcake," Carmilla warned and pinned her to the bed; "I can't stand being tickled," she growled and kissed her neck.

"Carmilla!" Perry called as she opened the bedroom door. "Oh for…" Perry shook her head and covered her eyes.

"We have clothes on Perry," Carmilla teased as she hopped from the bed and pried her hands from her face. "Dinner?"

"Yes, come on," Perry said, blushing as she ushered Carmilla through the door and led her over to the table where several travel containers of food sat waiting.

"I thought we'd be getting room service?" Laura questioned as she sat beside her.

"You haven't caught on yet?" Carmilla teased and playfully bumped their shoulders. "Have I eaten anything but the food we brought since we got here?" she prompted.

"You don't think she'd…" Laura started.

"Have someone dose my food so I'll fail a drug test?" Carmilla provided. "After the thing with the cars? I wouldn't put it past her." She took the lid off her plate and sighed at her meager meal.

"It'll get you through the fight without puking it up all over her," Perry reminded her. "Eat," she ordered.
"Maybe we should order anyway?" Laura said as she went to get the house phone. "I'll order like it's for the both of us and we can get your meal tested?"

Carmilla nodded.

"I'll clean this, then, so we have something to put it in," Perry offered, picking up her own empty container. Carmilla frowned slightly as she looked at the time, Laura had let her sleep long enough that Perry had gone ahead and eaten.

"Damn it, Laura," she hissed and started shoveling food into her mouth.

"What?" she asked, as she waited for the phone to be answered.

"I have to be downstairs in less than an hour," Carmilla said between mouthfuls.

"It's okay," Perry soothed as she returned from the sink; "We've got plenty of time."

Laura returned to the table once she'd place their order.

"I'm sorry," Laura said and laid her hand on her wrist; "I haven't been sleeping so great the last couple of nights, I, um, I fell asleep too."

"Why didn't you say something?" Carmilla asked in concern, though aware of the time and still eating.

"For the same reason you didn't say anything about your stomach," Laura reasoned; "It's just something that happens when I'm stressed."

Carmilla swallowed what she had in her mouth and then leaned over and kissed her.

"I want it to be this time tomorrow already," Carmilla said softly as they parted; "Fight over. Press Conference over and on the plane to New Mexico."

"I don't know," Laura said thoughtfully and leaned in to whisper; "I'm looking forward to tonight."

"Me too," Carmilla smiled, blushed and returned her attention to her meal.

All too soon the relative peace that was just her, Laura and Perry was shattered by the arrival of 'her boys'. Dark immediately took her aside and gave her a big hug. "How you faring, Carm?"

"Nervous. Scared. Like I'm going to hurl any second." She shrugged. "You know? The usual."

He laughed and hugged her again.

"You got this, Carm," he assured her. "Besides, Will told me she had to cut almost fifteen pounds to make weight, there's no way she's recovered from that."

"Why is he even still talking to her?" she hissed and glared at her little brother; "Will he never learn?" she thought angrily.

"I don't think she has anyone else," he said quietly.

She turned and frowned at him.

"It's not important right now," he said, trying to dismiss the subject. "You need to get dressed," he said with a nod to Laura who held her clothes ready for her.
She took her clothes from Laura and kissed her cheek.

"Thanks," she said with a smile but stopped her when she made to follow her to the bathroom. "I need a few minutes to myself, okay?" Laura smiled, nodded and kissed her softly. "Thank you. Get these clods out of here before I get back?" Laura nodded and kissed her again. "I'll see you all after the fight!" she called as she closed the bathroom door behind her and then slumped against it. She shook her head and pushed herself away from the door. After using the toilet she washed her hands and splashed some cold water on her face.

She looked to the mirror as she dried her face; "You can do this," she told her reflection as she put the towel aside. "Yes, she's bigger than you but she was always going to be bigger than you. You spent seven years fighting someone so much bigger than her. You can do this." Her eyes flicked to the doorway, so focused on her pre-fight pep-talk she hadn't heard the door open. She turned to Laura and beckoned her close. She leaned against the sink and took her hands before meeting her eyes. "You might have watched a lot more fights than me, Pup, and have a lot more martial arts training under your belt than I do, and yes, I know Danny is bigger than me," she took a deep breath as Laura kissed her forehead. "But I'm not a frightened little child anymore trying to survive at the hands of a woman so much bigger than me," she met Laura's eyes. "I'm a fighter and I'm going to kick that girl's ass on my way to my next fight." She shook her head and sighed. "What's an MMA fight compared to seven years of fighting for your life?" she asked and met her eyes.

"That's why I've got this. Danny can't scare me. She can't beat me. The only one who can do that is me."

"She's nothing but a stepping stone," Laura affirmed; "You got this, Carm, I know you do."

She took Laura's face in her hands, her thumbs caressing her cheeks as she searched her eyes. Laura reached up and held her wrists. She pulled her in and kissed her softly.

"And that," she said softly as she hugged her close; "your unwavering belief in me?" she said as she met her eyes again; "That, if nothing else, is why I've already won."

Perry cleared her throat at the door.

"It's time," she announced.

"Just one more…" Carmilla kissed Laura deeply, chuckling at Laura's surprise and then moaning low in her throat as Laura responded. "Really looking forward to a few hours from now," she teased and smacked her behind as she pushed her towards a red-faced Perry and the door.

Carmilla slipped a pair of board shorts on over her skin tight fight shorts and a 'Karmma' sweatshirt over her head. Laura handed her her mouth guard, which she slipped in her pocket, and then took her headphones and MP3 player from her. She scrolled through her playlists, found the song she wanted and put it on repeat. She kissed Laura one last time and then slipped her headphones on as Ani DiFranco began singing; at first, just her voice and the sounds of the live crowd beneath her words could be heard. She took Laura's hand and followed her from the room as she let the words, along with all the anger she'd built up since her Jeep had blown up wash over as she closed her eyes and let Laura lead her.

"Amazing grace.

How sweet the sound.

That saved a wretch like me."
I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind but now I see."

She opened her eyes as the first strains of music from the Philharmonic orchestra sounded and followed Laura and Perry into the elevator. She leaned against the wall and pulled Laura into her arms as she shivered from the goosebumps she always got, no matter how times she'd heard the song, go down her arms at the live music.

"Twas grace that taught,
my heart to fear.
And grace that fear relieved
How precious did
That grace appear
The hour I first believed."

She looked to Laura as the words took on new meaning for her. She smiled and followed her from the elevator as the song continued:

"Through many dangers
Toils and snares
I have already come
Twas grace that brought me
Safely thus far
And grace will lead me home."

She followed her and Perry into a curtained off area and took the seat the official who was to tape her hands pointed to. She looked to Laura as he started, the words of the song really hitting home for the first time.

"And when this heart
And flesh shall fail
And mortal life shall cease
I shall possess
Within the Vail
A life of joy and peace"

Laura walked over and kissed her cheek as the song restarted and then moved behind her and placed her hand at the base of her neck, her thumb stroking the back of it. She lowered her head and started to focus. First she tuned out the music. And then the man efficiently taping her hands.
Lastly, and perhaps the most difficult, the fingers massaging her neck.

She let the images, the ones she spent most of her waking life trying to forget, wash over her. Deanna backhanding her off the chair the day of her father's funeral the first to flit by. She'd left her alone while she healed, until the next time she pushed her just a little too far. Deanna was crazed the first few times she'd beaten her. Almost killed her on more than one occasion and hurt herself in the process a few times. As Carmilla learned to survive so did Deanna's means of attack evolve. It started with a wooden spoon but pretty soon it escalated into whatever was at hand; a metal coat hanger, a golf club, and yes, even her favorite studded belt. All that pain she'd suffered at her step-mother's hands; how many times had she wished Deanna would just finish the job and kill her already? Back then the only thing that kept her alive was her brother and the fear of what would happen were she not around to protect him. When she discovered, about a year before they left, she'd failed to protect him at all, it had almost crushed her.

She opened her eyes and looked to Laura as she took the Sharpie from the official and drew a small heart along with their initials on her taped right hand. He raised his eyebrow and shook his head at her as he handed Carmilla her fight sanctioned gloves. She slipped them on and then clenched her fists and punched each hand into the other a few times to soften the leather before holding them up for the duct tape to seal them. He took the marker from Laura and initialled each one before motioning for Carmilla to take off her headphones.

"One hour," he looked at his watch; "Depending on how the first few fights go."

She nodded and slipped her headphones back on, looked to her MP3 player and turned it to a dark techno number. She looked to her best friend and found him ready with the pads for her warm up. The three of them had worked together all week, Dark holding the pads in places she was aiming for and Laura shouting out numbers. She settled into a rhythm, all her training, all her hard work taking over as she imagined each punch, each kick, taking her one step closer to ending Deanna for good.

Dark motioned for a timeout and she slipped the headphones off again.

"You need to stretch," he reminded her; "and you don't want to take all your aggression out on me."

"Thanks sweetie," she said as she hugged him.

Someone knocked loudly one of the poles holding the curtains and startled all of them.

"Ten minutes!" they called.

"Shit," she looked around, "Was no one watching the fights?"

"It's been almost an hour, Carm," Laura said calmly as she showed her her watch.

"Okay, everyone out," she took Laura's hand as she made to leave; "You stay." She pulled her to the middle of the room as the curtain closed behind Perry. "Help me stretch?" Laura nodded and led Carmilla through all her stretches, making sure she held each one long enough instead of rushing onto the next. She heard the roar of the crowd for the first time, mixed with a generous amount of booing, and looked to Laura. "Guess broadzilla's on her way to the cage," she joked.

"You've got this Carm," Laura said fiercely as Carmilla took her face in her hands.

"Have I got you?" she asked as she searched her eyes.

"Always," Laura replied.
"Good," she said and kissed her; "that's all that matters," she added with a wink, slipped her headphones back on and started 'Amazing Grace' again. The curtain opened followed by Perry urgently motioning them to follow.

She kissed Laura's cheek and took her hand as they followed the security personnel out to the referee responsible for her pre-fight check. Laura brought her to a stop about five feet from him and pointed towards the crowd. Carmilla looked to where she pointed and smiled as she slipped her headphones off and blindly handed them to Laura.

Not only had Stan brought the friends that and helped with the tree, but it looked like everyone he knew had come along too. She turned to Laura and yelled over the cheering; "This why you don't want to stay here tonight?" Laura blushed and nodded. She shook her head, looked back to her fans and blew them a kiss; she'd never had a cheering section before. She kissed Laura on the cheek and looked to Danny waiting for her in the cage as they continued on thier way.

She looked to the official as she handed her MP3 player to Laura and slipped in her mouth guard. Laura helped her tug off her sweatshirt as she slipped off her shoes, Laura bending to grab them as she slipped off her shorts. She took out her mouth guard, kissed Laura one last time and finally turned back to the referee as she slipped her mouth guard back in.

He held his arms out and she followed suit. He quickly patted her down, checked that her nails were short and dull and then confirmed the mouth guard he'd already seen her put in.

"Any last questions?" he shouted, motioning towards the cage once she shook her head.

She met Laura's eyes one last time, the younger girl mouthing an; "I love you."

She mouthed the same back, blew her a kiss and made for the steps to the cage.

She stopped before entering, taking a moment to calm and focus herself as the anger, the rage, so recently tempered by Laura's love, came rushing back. "She's nothing but a stepping stone," she thought as she entered the cage and walked to her corner, her eyes never leaving Danny as she tried to assess how much she'd recovered from cutting weight. "Okay, maybe more of a stepping boulder," she mused, smiled and grinned only wider when it seemed her smile was unnerving Danny. "Is she actually scared?" she wondered as she tore her eyes from her and saw the banner Laura had made her for the first time.

"Carmilla 'Karma' Karnstein," she read; "Sometimes beaten, never broken." She smiled as she noticed the small heart with her and Laura's initials in the corner.

She turned back to Danny to find her staring at it and then slowly met her eyes. Then Danny did something that scared her for the first time; she nodded, smiled and mouthed the words; "Bring it."

Carmilla looked back to Laura as the announcer introduced them, Danny's introduction almost being drowned out by boos while hers almost suffered the same fate as Stan and his friends began chanting; "Karma".

"You got this," Laura mouthed. Carmilla nodded. "I love you!" she shouted, her words barely heard above the crowd and suddenly Carmilla was worried; she'd been sure she'd be able to hear Laura's instructions over the crowd but now she wasn't so certain.

"Fuck it," she thought as she turned to the referee, nodding when he asked if she was ready; "I can do this alone. I've done it alone all this years, I can do it again."

They walked across the cage towards each other, Carmilla raising her right hand to touch gloves
before the actual fight began. Danny eyed her raised hand suspiciously, tapped her glove to it and then immediately assumed a fighting posture.

"I'm many things, Xena, but a dirty fighter I'm not!" she yelled over the crowd as they circled each other.

"Three!" she heard Laura yell and responded immediately by kicking the outside of Danny's thigh with everything she had. She stepped back and smiled, it had made the taller girl wince. "Two!" Laura yelled. She circled slightly to the left and nailed the inner thigh of the same leg with another kick, dashing backwards again before Danny's counterpunch could land and landing one of her own to Danny's ribs as she ducked under her arm.

Danny rubbed her ribs as she turned to face her, her face determined. Carmilla smiled and waved her forward as she circled, again gaining the center of the cage. Danny lunged at her with her signature right hook. Carmilla ducked easily and nailed her in the ribs again before stepping back.

"That all you got Xena?" she taunted.

Danny gritted her teeth and rushed her, attempting to get her arms around her middle to drag her to the ground.

"Bad move, Xena," she thought as she side stepped and punched her in the liver.

Danny stumbled a bit and reached for the cage to right herself. She turned to face her again, walking towards her like she was stalking her before unleashing a barrage of punches at Carmilla's head. None of which connected cleanly enough to affect her as she ducked under and hit her with clean right uppercut that knocked her backwards on to her ass.

She laughed and walked over to her; "Aw, look, big red down," she teased as she held a hand out to help her up. "Whatever," she said when Danny shook her head and walked away.

She looked to Laura in her corner and glanced at the clock when she mouthed 'time'.

"Four minutes?" she thought; "How the fuck have four minutes gone by?"

She turned back to Danny, rushing the tall redhead as soon as the referee indicated to continuing fighting. She tried to hit anything and everything she could, but that wasn't her goal; her goal was to back her into the fence. Danny tried to pull her into a clinch but Carmilla slipped out and pushed her into the fence instead.

"Sixty-nine!" Laura yelled.

Carmilla smiled as Danny was distracted, for all of split second, and glanced at Laura. She took a half step back, leapt towards the cage, planted her right foot and pushed off just as Danny turned back to her. The redhead didn't have time to react as Carmilla's right elbow came crashing down across her jaw.

The two tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs, Danny out before hitting the canvas with Carmilla landing on top of her. She slipped off her back and made to hit her when she saw she was already out and looked to the referee.

"Keep fighting!" he yelled.

"She's out, you moron!" she screamed angrily.
"Keep fighting or you'll be disqualified!" he warned.

She glanced at the clock and looked back to Danny; she still hadn't stirred and her head sat at an awkward angle.

"Last warning!" the referee shouted over the crowd.

"Fine!" she yelled as she glared at him before, as gently as she could, placed Danny in a rear naked choke but applying no pressure. There'd only been thirty seconds when she'd glanced at the clock, if Danny managed to come to before the bell she could hold her down until it did.

She sighed when the bell finally rang and carefully laid Danny down, before shrugging the referee's hand off her shoulder. "Get away from me you incompetent ass!" she yelled and turned back to Danny when she felt her stir and quickly placed both her hands on either side of her head to keep her from moving. She leaned down and yelled into her ear; "Don't move, I'm worried about your neck," she pulled back and met Danny's eyes, shaking her head at the blatant distrust despite the fact that she hadn't cleared the fog from her head. She leaned back in and shouted; "I'm trying to help you, let me, okay?" She pulled back and Danny nodded only slightly causing her to wince.

"Get away from her!" a male voice shouted as he tried to pull her away.

"I'm trying to make sure she's okay!" she yelled at him, recognizing him as one of Danny's trainers as she shrugged him off; "Something you failed to do when she was clearly out and the idiot ref was yelling at me to keep hitting her!" She leaned back down to Danny; "Can you feel your hands?"

"I think so," she muttered and Carmilla was suddenly aware of how quieten it had gotten.

She looked up, spotted Laura and motioned her over with her head.

"Take each of her hands in turn," she instructed and looked back to Danny; "Can you feel Laura holding your hand?"

"Yes."

"Which one?" Carmilla questioned.

"Right one," Danny answered and she looked over her shoulder to confirm she was correct; "Good, can you give a squeeze?"

"Okay, you can stop now," Laura called; "I've only got one good hand right now!"

Danny smiled despite herself.

"Now the left," she said, continuing when she felt Laura tap her shoulder; "Go ahead and squeeze."

"She's good," Laura stated.

"One last check and I'll let you up," she told Danny and whispered to Laura; "Tickle her feet."

Laura did as she was told, causing Danny to laugh and finally push Carmilla away.

"Well, thank god, Xena, I thought I'd broken your neck," she sighed in relief as Laura offered her a hand up. "As much as I've considered it in the past I wouldn't want to end your career by accidentally breaking it," she joked and offered Danny a hand up to the crowd's cheers.
Danny smiled and took the offered hand up and then used Carmilla's shoulder to steady herself.

"Sorry, big red, you might have a concussion," she teased and pulled the surprised redhead into an awkward hug; "We need to talk, you and I," she whispered and then leaned back to see if Danny had heard her. Danny nodded slowly so she leaned back in; "Tomorrow. The gym. The earlier the better."

"Eight?" Danny suggested and Carmilla nodded, somewhat surprised that Danny had agreed so easily.

Carmilla studied her a moment; was Danny's safety already at risk? She turned to Danny's trainers, none of them meeting her gaze. "Why aren't they chewing out the ref?" she wondered and then got her answer; Perry was already doing it for them.

She leaned in and whispered to her; "If you need a safe place to stay you can take one of the apartments at the gym," she offered, Danny so surprised that she jerked back in shock before wincing in pain. "At least come stay the night," she said as she leaned back in; "Let my driver take you to the hospital and then he can take you home to grab a few things before you come back to the gym."

"Why are trying to help me?" Danny asked.

"Because the fight is over, you lost, and you looked more terrified than ever," she replied evenly; "If your losing has put you in danger then it's my responsibility to see that you're okay."

"Why?"

"Because it'll be my fault if someone other than me hurts you," she offered and looked to Laura; "Besides, someone told me once you're not a bad person," she looked back to her; "I'd like to see you prove her right." She leaned back and patted her on the shoulder. "Who knows, maybe we can even be friends!" she joked.

"I wouldn't push it, Elvira," Danny joked back; "but I'll take you up on your offer."

"Maybe I can prove to you I'm not the evil bitch you think I am," Carmilla joked as the promotion's owner walked over to them.

"Like the fact that Laura seems to love you hadn't already made me question that," she said seriously and looked to the owner.

"You done?" he asked Danny who was still leaning on Carmilla for support.

"You must be kidding!" Carmilla said angrily; "She was out for almost two minutes! What the fuck do you think?"

"I saw that, Miss Karnstein, but I need to hear it from her," he replied calmly and looked back to Danny.

"I'm," she looked to Carmilla and took a deep breath; "I'm done." As he held a microphone up to his mouth she leaned in and said to her; "I wasn't supposed to quit."

Any questions Carmilla might have had were drowned out by the cheering crowd as the promotion's owner announced her the winner and Danny held her hand up in victory. She looked around in awe as she felt someone take her other hand and held it aloft, turning she found Laura beaming at her.
Next thing she knew she was yelping in surprise as someone picked her up and put her on his shoulders. Laughing and smiling as she fisted one hand in Dark's curly hair she waved to the standing crowd; each and every one of them cheering and yelling her name.

"If this is what winning feels like," she thought to herself and smiled as Dark put her down carefully before Laura ran into her arms and kissed her deeply; "I could get used to it."

Chapter End Notes

Well, fellow Creampuffs, if I thought writing happy Hollstein was hard it was nothing compared to the brick wall I hit after episode 35. Even though I’ve known how the fight was going to go since the beginning and really, all of this was planned, it was still tough. So I tried to write and then watched the finale. Yeah. Well I hope I did this chapter justice as it’s maybe the third most anticipated chapter so far.

On another note; my posting days are changing again thanks to my work schedule changing, again. I’ll be posting on Tuesdays, hopefully for the first time this coming Tuesday. I only have one day off so I can’t make any promises. Hope you all enjoyed the chapter and stay strong Creampuffs! Only nineteen days until Season Zero!

Song credit, Ani Difranco, ‘Amazing Grace’, ‘Living in Clip.” Gives me the chills every time I hear it.
Carmilla kept an arm around Danny’s waist, the taller girl still dizzy from so recently being separated from consciousness and a firm grip on Laura’s hand with her free hand as the three followed Perry from the casino’s theatre where they’d staged the fight. The grin on her face was starting to hurt, which was something considering all the worst-case-scenarios running through her head. Already she was making plans: so much needed to be done with the next hour or two.

When finally they reached the relative quiet of the lobby Carmilla steered them to a lounge off to the side. She turned to Steven; “I need Betty to take Danny to the hospital, home and then the gym,” he nodded and reached for his phone. “See that we’re not disturbed?” He nodded. “I need fifteen minutes.”

“Carm?” Perry interjected; “If you don’t need me, I should probably go talk to Shannon,” she said with a polite wave to her.

Carmilla followed her gaze; “That can’t be…” she gasped.

“That’s not Joe Silva, is it?” Danny whispered.

“I think it is,” Laura affirmed.

“And who is Joe Silva?” Perry asked.

“You really need to start doing some research, Per,” Carmilla teased.

“He’s matchmaker for the UFC,” Laura provided.

“Oh,” Perry looked in their direction again to find Shannon motioning her over; “I should definitely go then,” she said nervously and rushed over to them.

“C’mon, Xena,” she said as she motioned Danny and Laura inside; “we need to talk.” The two followed her inside, Steven taking point at the door. “You got my energy drink in there?”

“Yeah, but you sure that’s such a good idea?” Laura questioned, her tone vague enough that Danny clearly had no clue what she was talking about but Carmilla knew exactly what she was worried about.
“I’m terrible at giving urine samples,” she explained as she took the drink from Laura and downed half of it before continuing. “I’ll be fine so long as the wicked witch of the west doesn’t show her surgically enhanced mug here.” She looked to Danny as they sat. “Do you trust you trainers?”

“I guess, why?” Danny replied with a shrug.

“Because we were right in front of your corner when I knocked you out,” she informed her. “They should’ve thrown in the towel the second they saw the ref wasn’t stopping it.”

“I told them not to,” Danny replied uncomfortably with a glance at the door.

“Who told you not to quit?” Carmilla pressed.

“I can’t,” she replied; “We can’t talk here,” she said and looked up as Betty joined them.

“Agreed,” Carmilla said before looking to Betty; “I need you to take Danny to St. Paul’s, home and then the gym.”

“Richmond Hospital is closer,” Betty pointed out.

“True, however I know a lab tech who works at St Paul’s and Doc Coughlin has privileges there,” Carmilla replied simply.

“I have everything I need with me,” Danny provided with a shrug, “I don’t have to go home tonight.”

“We just need a few minutes, Betty, thanks,” Carmilla informed her and watched her go wait with Steven.

“Why do I need a lab tech?” Danny asked.

“Because, no offense Xena, but you look and fought like shit,” Carmilla explained; “I mean, I was pretty sure I could beat you, but I never expected it to be so easy.”

“She’s got a point Danny,” Laura added a little more gently; “Carm made it look like you were standing still.”

Danny looked from Laura to Carmilla and then leaned back in her chair and rubbed her temples.

“If I was slipped something surely my pre-fight tests would have caught it?” Danny reasoned as she met their eyes again.

“Not necessarily,” Carmilla replied vaguely. “Look Danny, I know you have no reason to trust me, but do you think you can try? Even if it’s just for a few hours?” Carmilla spotted the officials carrying urine sample containers towards them and downed the last of her drink while Danny seemed to be weighing her options.

“You could have beaten me into a coma, you didn’t,” she stated, trying to make sense of it. “As a fighter, that part I get, but why take care of me after knocking me the fuck out?”

“Because there is one person in the whole world that I trust one hundred percent,” Carmilla replied as she stood; “and it sure as hell wasn’t your trainers or the ref.”

“Maybe you don’t need to understand,” Laura said, beaming as she realized she was the one
person Carmilla was referring to; “If you don’t think you can trust Carm, then trust me,” Laura said as she stood and looked up to Danny. “You have no idea the crap we’ve been through the last couple of weeks and I’ve come to realize that nothing is impossible when it comes to…”

Carmilla interrupted her with a squeeze of her hand.

“Danny, if I’m right, I think we caught it early enough that you’ll be fine, eventually,” Carmilla said quietly as the officials tried to get past Steven. “That’s why you’re going to St. Paul’s. My friend Elsie already knows what to look for and my Orthopedic surgeon will get you a full-body CAT scan within the hour.”

“What exactly do you think is wrong with me?” Danny asked fearfully.

“Symptoms are, in order; water retention, weakening of the bones, and eventually, heart,” she replied hurriedly; “If your hands, forearms, feet, ankles and shins aren’t riddled with stress fractures, you’ll be okay in six months or so.”

Both Laura and Danny stopped and stared at her.

“Yeah, Xena, it’s that serious,” she informed them grimly. “The way you fell,” she shook her head; “or landed, rather,” she sighed; “If I’d have hit you one more time I could have killed you.”

Danny and Laura both paled.

“I hadn’t gotten this far in the thought process at the time,” she admitted; “my first aid training just kicked in.”

“I don’t get it, Elvira, why do you care?” Danny asked as Steven let the officials past him and they handed each of them their sample containers.

“About you specifically?” Carmilla asked with a laugh. “I’m not sure that I do,” she replied honestly; “but if someone’s life is in danger because of me I can’t sit idly by and do nothing, no matter what our personal history might be.” She sighed again. “Give me twenty-four hours to explain?”

“Um, Carm?” Laura interrupted; “The apartments haven’t been cleaned yet.”

“Shit,” she sighed; “I guess you’ll just have to take our spare room until Monday, Xena, if that’s okay?”

“Our?” Danny questioned; “So you two are living together?” she teased.

“Have been since the night after I broke my arm,” Laura supplied with a laugh.

Danny then surprised both of them by pulling them into a hug.

“I’m going to go along with this,” she said quietly; “mostly because I don’t have a better plan,” she leaned back and looked at Carmilla; “Thanks.”

Perry came to collect them once Carmilla had finally managed to produce a urine sample; next to Deanna it was one of her biggest pet peeves. She could usually pee at the drop of a hat but
ask for a sample and suddenly it was like she hadn’t had a drop to drink in days. Fortunately she passed the time by texting both Elsie and the Doc so they could meet Danny at the hospital. They were walking towards the elevator when she spotted Rick walking towards them.

“Great fight, kid,” he said warmly as he hugged her.

“You were here?” she asked in surprise, he’d never gone to one of her fights before, too worried someone might realize their connection.

“I had a bad feeling something might happen,” he looked to Laura; “Can I tell her what’s going on or are you still filtering the bad news?”

“We don’t have time for this,” Perry interjected; “Shannon and Joe are waiting.”

“Short version,” Laura said to Rick.

“We’ve arrested the ref from you fight,” he began.

“What for?” Laura asked.

“Well, I’m sorry Laura,” he started hesitantly, “your Dad went to talk to him after the fight, they started arguing and the ref hit him.”

“So he’s been arrested for assaulting an officer?” Carmilla asked, he nodded.

“Is my Dad okay?” Laura asked as she looked around the lobby for him.

“He’s fine, bloodied his nose,” Rick replied and shrugged. “He went upstairs to change his shirt.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Carmilla said in an undertone as they began making their way toward the elevator again. She pulled him and Laura aside and continued quietly; “I need you to send some people over to Danny’s to collect evidence.”

“Danny?” he said in surprise; “As in the girl’s whose ass you just kicked?”

“Yeah,” she sighed, “it shouldn’t have been that easy. Rick, I think she’s been exposed to the same stuff my Dad was.”

“Alright,” he said grimly; “I’ll send some people over right away.”

She gave him another quick hug and sent him on his way before following Perry into the elevator with Steven and Laura.

“Miss Perry?” Steven said quietly when she pushed the elevator button, but not for their floor; “It would be best to meet in Carmilla’s room.”

“You can’t expect me to ask two of the most important people in MMA to meet elsewhere,” Perry objected, her voice getting higher and higher until Carmilla, Laura and Steven covered their ears, the noise painful in the small space.

“Per,” Carmilla interrupted when she stopped to take a breath; “Hear him out before you have an aneurism.”

“Tell them if they want their conversation to remain confidential it would be far more prudent to use a room that has been swept for listening devices,” Steven offered.
“Or something less complicated,” Laura suggested at Perry’s look of disbelief.

“Such as?” Perry asked tersely as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Tell them Carmilla is borderline hyperglycemic and I can tell she’s already close to crashing,” Laura offered.

“I am?” Carmilla asked with a laugh.

“No, but you’re not far off,” Laura replied; “You’ve barely eaten all day and you need to eat something substantial.”

Perry and Steven wore identical looks of shock mixed with a bit of affection at the exchange between the couple.

“You heard her, Per,” Carmilla said with a chuckle under her breath, touched by Laura’s protective streak.

“But you don’t want them to think you’re some sort of…” Perry said in exasperation, fluttering her hands around her face as she searched for the words.

“They understand fighters, Per, it’ll be fine,” Carmilla assured her as the door opened on Shannon Knapp and Joe Silva’s floor.

“I didn’t sign up for this you know!” Perry reminded her as the doors closed.

“Remind me to send her for a long vacation soon,” Carmilla joked as she leaned on the wall and pulled Laura into her arms. “So, have we gotten Danny’s background check back?” she asked her carefully. It seemed forever before she felt Laura nod against her chest. “Did you read it?” she asked as Laura stepped back, her look slightly fearful as she nodded again. She motioned her out of the elevator when they arrived on their floor before asking; “Is there anything that can’t wait until the ride home?” she asked, shocking Laura enough that she stopped in the middle of the hall.

“I’ll clear the room?” Steven offered uncomfortably.

“How, exactly, do we know no one has been in our room while we were away?” Laura asked.

“Like this,” Steven replied and knocked on their door. They heard the patter of feet to the door followed by a low, deep angry sounding growl. “Retirarse!” Steven ordered and the growling ceased immediately. He opened the door to be nearly knocked over by a very happy Chico as he put his front paws on Steven’s chest and then licked his face. “Down!” he commanded, laughing as he pushed the dog inside; “I’ll take you out soon,” he told the dog and then went back into the hall and his position by the door.

“About Danny’s background check,” Laura started as she followed her to the bedroom.

“I need to know before we talk to Big Red, but I need to focus on this meeting first,” she pulled Laura to her and kissed her softly. “Which is probably the same reason you didn’t let me see it before the fight, right? So I could focus?”

“Every advantage you can get, right?” Laura countered with a smile, happy that Carmilla understood why she’d hadn’t told her.

“Would anything in the report have warned me about her health?” Carmilla asked as she
gathered a change of clothes.

“Nothing I can think of,” she replied with a shrug. “What do you want to eat?” she asked.

“Just my usual after fight protein shake for now,” Carmilla replied and the paused at Laura’s raised eyebrow. “Wait, you were serious?” Laura nodded. “I’m too nervous to eat right now, my stomach is in knots,” she explained as she went over and put her hands on Laura’s waist. “Don’t want me puking on the ‘two of the most important people in MMA!’” she added in Perry’s voice as she tried to lighten the mood.

Laura leaned in and sniffed her neck.

“Why don’t you get freshened up and changed so we can leave the minute this meeting is over?”

I don’t know that I have…” she trailed off at a knock at the door.

I’ll stall them,” Laura said quickly. Carmilla could tell she was trying to act and sound more confident than she was feeling.

Carmilla took her leather pants, a ‘Karmma’ t-shirt and a fresh pair of underwear and headed for the bathroom to freshen up. By the time she re-entered the bedroom she was surprised to hear laughter coming from the other room. She grabbed her boots and went to join them.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, Miss Karnstein,” Shannon Knapp said warmly as she stood and offered Carmilla her hand.

“I assure you, Miss Knapp, the pleasure is all mine,” she replied as she shook her hand and then turned to the only man in the room. “Mr Silva,” she said as she shook his hand.

“Your lovely girlfriend was just telling and showing us what really happened at the end of the fight,” he said, smiling as he sat back down.

“She was?” Carmilla asked as she took her protein shake from Laura.

“Yes,” Laura replied with a grin; “I had Tyler in the stands filming and Dark giving him a play-by-play via Bluetooth. Wanna see?”

“I can watch it later,” she replied and took a long swallow of her shake as she tried to calm her nerves, the Rum in her ‘Power Pina Colada’ helping immensely. “The shake is perfect, Pup, thanks.”

“This is your special diet?” Joe joked.

“No,” Perry replied as she placed a warmed triple chocolate brownie in front of her, “this is,” she said as she added a large scoop of vanilla ice cream.

“But you didn’t come to talk to me about my dietary habits,” Carmilla said lightly as she used her fork to break off a piece of her brownie. “Shall we get down to business?”

“I like you, Miss Karnstein,” Shannon said with a hearty laugh.

“Surely we can dispense with the formalities?” Carmilla asked with a smile before shoving the piece of brownie into her mouth. “I’m surprised to see you here, Mr Silva.”

“Please,” he laughed; “call me Joe.” Carmilla and Laura both nodded. “Shannon called me
after the weigh-ins yesterday and suggested that this might be a fight I should see for myself,” he smiled broadly as he took a large manila envelope from his blazer. “In fact, I’d say you did more than enough tonight to earn you your spot in the house.”

“I don’t understand,” Laura started as she looked to Shannon; “if she’s already on the show, why are you here Miss Knapp?”

“Please, call me Shannon,” she replied with a shake of her head and looked to Joe; “You might as well tell her,” she said to a scowling Joe. “Oh c’mon, it’s one of the worst kept secrets in MMA!”

“Fine!” Joe huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “This can’t leave this room!” he informed them sternly, continuing when he received Perry, Carmilla and Laura’s nods. “As you’re probably aware, this season isn’t just for the six figure contract but the finalists will be fighting for the Strawweight title. Because of this we’re altering the tournament slightly and the fighters will be ranked before the show starts.”

“So the preliminary fights are already set,” Carmilla commented.

“Essentially,” he confirmed; “All that’s up for debate is which team you’ll be on and when you’ll fight your first fight.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake Joe, stop beating around the bush,” Shannon said playfully as she smacked his shoulder. “The UFC Brass is well aware what you being on the show could mean for them.”

“Of course,” Carmilla started as she pushed her half-eaten brownie away, her nerves not allowing her to eat any more without feeling sick. She took a gulp of her shake and then continued: “The ratings for the Ultimate Fighter have been dropping for years and they have to be worried about how an all-female cast will fare.”

“Exactly,” Shannon affirmed; “After tonight’s fight, and the controversy surrounding it, people will watch the show just to see you.”

“Not to mention all the non MMA fans who will watch just to see if I really am the monster the press has painted me to be,” Carmilla said thoughtfully. “So why should I take the Invicta fight if I’m already on the show?”

“Take the fight, and win or lose, it justifies being ranked seventh. Don’t, and you’ll be ranked fourteenth,” Joe explained.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Perry commented.

“The higher ranking means that at least my first fight will be against a lower ranked fighter and thereby give me a better chance of making it to the second round.” She smiled. “The more fights I win, the more interest there’ll be in the show.”

“And if you make the finals?” Shannon said with a chuckle; “They might just have to make it the first Ultimate Fighter that’s a pay-per-view.”

“Which means more money for the UFC,” Laura commented pensively and looked to Shannon; “What I don’t understand is; what’s in it for Invicta?”

“Money,” Carmilla replied simply; “People who wouldn’t normally pay for the fights, people who know little about MMA, but know something about me, will watch.”
“You’re a very astute young woman,” Shannon commented warmly. “I am curious though, why you fight at all?” She looked around the room. “It’s obviously not the money, I don’t know many fighters, outside the elite of course, that could afford a room like this,” she met Carmilla’s eyes; “And it’s not the fame, I daresay you’re already more famous than you’d like,” she tapped a finger on her chin, “So? Why fight?”

“So that someday I won’t have to,” Carmilla replied simply causing Joe and Shannon to look at each other in confusion. “I’ve been fighting since the age of three. First, in a less concrete sense and then, after my Dad died, in a very literal one.” She stood, turned her back to them and lifted her t-shirt. Perry’s gasp of shock was joined by the distinct sound of both Joe and Shannon stifling their own gasps by clasping their hands to their mouths.

“And you, what? Hope to expose the person who did this?” Joe asked, his shock still clear on his face as Carmilla lowered her shirt, resumed her seat and then laced her fingers with Laura’s. “Surely there are less elaborate ways to get justice?”

“If that were the case, don’t you think I’d have pursued it already?” Carmilla asked neutrally. “The person who did this is far too powerful and has far too many equally powerful people in her pocket,” she smiled at the looks of dawning comprehension on their faces. “But if my story makes it’s on network television?”

“Afraid or not, they’ll have to investigate,” Laura finished.

“Miss Karnstein,” Joe started; “are you even interested in winning the show?”

“You want to know if all I care about is the chance to tell my story?” she countered and received his nod. “Mr Silva, it’s quite simple really, the further I make it in the tournament the more time I have to tell my story, but I’m not naive; I know just about every single person in the house will have more experience and training than I do,” she smiled as she reached for Shannon’s manila envelope; “And I’ll take any advantage I can get,” she added as she handed it to Perry to look over.

Perry read through it quickly, nodded and then handed it to Carmilla to sign.

“Mr Silva?” Laura said hesitantly as she took a couple of pieces of paper from her laptop bag and played with them a moment; “We’d like you to consider an amendment to your contract.”

“You haven’t even seen the contract yet!” he joked.

“I realize that but I doubt it includes this stipulation,” Laura replied as she showed the papers to Carmilla; it was her ‘shit list’ and a stipulation that she be advised of any situations seven or higher, and if needed, a guarantee that she’d be allowed to take a couple of days off from the show should her presence be required.

“Thank you,” she said as she kissed Laura’s cheek and then watched as she handed the papers to Joe. She couldn’t help but smile at the look on his face as he read the list.

“There’s already a precedent for fighters going home in the case of a death in the family,” he said contemplatively, “Seven or higher?” he asked; “You really think any of this likely while you’re in the house?”

“In the last two weeks we discovered we were being followed by a very dangerous man and then that man was killed in jail. Last Sunday my Jeep blew sky high and similar explosives were found in another of my vehicles,” she informed them, both their faces dropping the longer she talked;
“Signing that piece of paper,” she said as she pointed to it; “will give me the piece of mind I need to succeed on the show.”

“So the rather large and intimidating man outside your door?” Shannon asked.

“Is my bodyguard,” she affirmed; “and his dog is a trained attack and bomb detection dog,” Carmilla supplied as she pointed to Chico. “And I had to have a twenty foot, electrified, fence installed around my gym, which is also my home,” she sighed; “And none of that means that I and the people I love are safe, only safer. Until the person responsible for darkening my life is dealt with, there’s no such as thing as safe for any of us.”

“So you think any of this will affect the show?” Joe asked.

“Other than making your ratings better than they’ve been for years?” Carmilla teased. “I assume, Mr Silva, that there is strict on-set security and the house’s location is kept secret, yes?” Joe nodded. “Then I don’t foresee a problem. While my stepmother might be able to influence local fights and their officials, I doubt she’ll have any luck in a larger organization.”

“What are you saying?” Joe asked.

“I’m saying she intended for my quest to end tonight, one way or another,” she replied carefully. “You know about my first professional fight?”

“You were disqualified for an illegal knee, right?” Shannon asked.

“It was an accident,” Carmilla affirmed; “I didn’t realize she had her hands down,” she shook her head; “That isn’t the point. The point is I had to beg the officials to let the loss stand as a disqualification because my post-fight urine test showed traces of a banned substance. I was able to find the source; someone spiked an entire shipment of protein powder, and proved I’d taken it unknowingly. Since my pre-fight test was clean, they agreed.” She smiled as she could see that Shannon was catching up. “Now fast forward to tonight; if I’d followed the ref’s instructions and seriously hurt Danny as a result, would either of your organization’s touched me with a ten foot pole?” She sighed and looked to Shannon. “Can I ask a favour?”

“Depends on the favour,” Shannon replied warmly.

“I’d like to have a rematch with Danny when she’s better,” she smiled at everyone’s look of surprise.

“Better?” Joe asked.

“She’s…” she sighed; “She’s potentially very sick,” she shook her head; “and usually a lot better than she was tonight. It might give her the motivation she’ll need to beat this illness if she knows, when she gets better, that she will have a fight waiting for her in Invicta.”

“And if you’re fighting for the UFC at the time?” Joe countered.

“Surely the UFC can give one of their partner organizations a one off fight?” Laura suggested.

“I suppose,” he shook his head; “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“I thought there was bad blood between the two of you?” Shannon asked thoughtfully. “Which makes you taking care of her after knocking her out already exceptional, but looking out for her future too?”
“It’s my fault she’s sick,” Carmilla replied simply and then rushed to add; “I didn’t personally make her sick but I believe she was made sick so that, if I somehow managed to beat a much larger opponent, that I’d do it in such a way that I’d be black-balled from the fight community.”

“Well,” Shannon started, suppressing a chuckle, “I’d say you did the complete opposite,” she smiled; “You’ve got your re-match in Invicta if the UFC doesn’t want it.”

“Thank you,” Carmilla replied warmly.

“So you really didn’t apply any pressure to your choke?” Joe asked skeptically.

“I’m a level three first aid attendant,” she explained, “when I saw how Danny was lying I knew there was a good chance she’d hurt her neck badly. The ref wasn’t listening,” she sighed; “so I put her in the choke because I knew I could hold her still with it if she came to before the bell.”

She looked to Laura when she heard her phone vibrate.

“The last fight just started,” Laura provided as she stood; “We should all get going if we want to avoid the party heading this way.”

Carmilla hurriedly grabbed her contracts, signed them along with the amendment Laura provided and handed them to back to Joe and Shannon to sign.

“I understand you have a Press Conference planned tomorrow?” Shannon asked as she stood, Carmilla nodded and followed suit. “Would you mind if I attend? Announce your next fight?”

“Who am I fighting?” Carmilla asked, she’d only skimmed the contract when she signed it.

“Rose Namajunas,” Shannon replied; “I spoke to her earlier and recommended she check out your fight on YouTube,” she smiled broadly; “She’s looking forward to fighting you.”

“Will you announce her spot in the house?” Laura asked as she and Carmilla followed Joe and Shannon to the door.

Shannon looked to Joe a moment.

“We can say that her accepting the fight has piqued your interest, and if she wins or does well, she’s in the house?” Shannon suggested.

“Do I have a choice?” he asked.

“Of course,” Carmilla replied with a laugh, “We can keep a secret,” she joked, “and if someone asks me directly if it’s the case, I’ll tell them you’ve expressed interest but I want the Invicta fight anyway.”

“You do?” Shannon asked, her hand on the doorknob.

“Any advantage I can get, right? Tonight’s the biggest show I’ve ever fought,” she supplied; “I need the experience of fighting in front of a bigger crowd against a far better opponent.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, kid,” Joe said warmly. “You should watch the video of your fight.”

“You need to remember Danny was moving a lot slower than usual,” she countered.
“That may be true,” he smiled; “but every strike you landed did damage, and every one of them was with perfect form.”

“Your girlfriend here might have more actual Martial Arts training, but you have something you can’t teach,” Shannon elaborated, “You’ve got heart and you’re, maybe, one of the smartest fighters I’ve ever seen. Keep it up and you’ll go further than I think you want.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Joe asked, perplexed.

“She means that, as much as I really enjoy fighting, it’s still nothing more than a means to an end,” Carmilla replied quietly. “I’ll keep fighting so long as I keep winning,” she added, trying to assuage Joe’s obvious fears that she would bail the moment she’d achieved her goal. “Besides, it’ll be a nice distraction once the shit really hits the fan.”

The door opened, startling Shannon who still had her hand on the doorknob.

“My apologies,” Steven stammered; “but if you want to get back to your rooms unseen you should probably get going.”

“We’ll speak more tomorrow Carmilla?” Shannon asked as she quickly shook her hand.

“Of course,” she replied with a smile and turned to Joe; “I hope I haven’t scared you off?”

“No,” he replied; “but I might have to smack someone when I get back to Vegas.”

“I’m sorry?” she asked with a laugh.

“Someone had to have known about all this,” he said quickly; “They should have given me a head’s up.”

Steven stepped aside and watched the two to the elevator before turning to them.

“You two should get moving if you want to avoid the crowd heading this way,” he advised and closed the door.

“Carmilla?” Perry said quietly, her voice strained. Carmilla turned to her in concern and recognized her ‘shit list’ in her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’ll get us packed?” Laura offered, heading to the bedroom once Carmilla had nodded.

“Perry,” Carmilla said as she approached and put her hands on her arms, “It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Perry looked up at met her eyes, her disbelief clear. “Perry, the more you know, the more anyone knows, the more danger they’re in.”

“But you’re okay with Laura knowing everything? This girl you’ve only known for a month and half?” Perry asked with an edge and walked over to the table to gather Carmilla’s contracts. “You trust her more than me?”

“No,” Carmilla replied; “It’s not about trust, Per,” Perry met her eyes again; “Laura was in danger the minute she walked into my life and the only way I can protect her is to push her away completely,” her voice caught; “I can’t, won’t, do that but Perry, if I can protect someone from this, shouldn’t I?” When Perry still didn’t answer she continued despite her better judgement. “If you want to know,” she sighed, “come to the pre-conference meeting tomorrow, but know what you’re getting yourself into, okay?”
“She did that? Your stepmother?” Perry asked, her voice still strained.

“That and more,” Carmilla confirmed. “Per, I know you like living close to school, but if you get more involved in this, will you consider taking one of the apartments at the gym?”

“You can’t protect everyone,” Perry replied, her voice warmer.

“Maybe not,” she replied earnestly, “but I can try.”

Steven managed to get them to the Jeep unnoticed, the two breathing a sigh of relief once they’d climbed in back. They watched him walk Chico a moment and then Laura took Carmilla’s tablet from her bag.

“Want to see your fight?” Laura asked as she powered it up.

Carmilla didn’t reply and instead pulled her into a deep kiss. Nothing had gone the way she thought it would and she wanted to forget about all of it, if just for a few blissful moments and only pulled away when she heard Steven open the passenger door to let the dog in.

“Sorry,” she said as she blushed; “I’ve wanted to do that since the fight ended.”

“You never need to apologize for kissing me like that,” Laura said and kissed her softly as the driver’s side door opened. “Want to see this?”

“Yes, but give me a sec,” Carmilla said as she pulled out her phone and called her favourite pizza place.

“Carmilla!” the pizza shop’s owner greeted excitedly; “Amazing fight kid!”

“Thanks George,” she replied warmly; “Think you can get us a couple of pizzas ready for pick up in about a half hour?”

“Sure thing, kid. The usual?” he asked.

“Let me check,” she said and covered the phone with her hand; “Grape soda?” she asked Laura, who nodded, a small frown on her face. “Steven?” she called and waited for him to turn. “What do you want to drink?”

“I can wait until I get home,” he replied.

“Nonsense, what do you want?” she pressed.

“Coke is fine,” he answered and started the car.

“Two Cokes and four grape sodas,” she said into the phone; “A large tropical chicken and a large all dressed.”

“Alright, kid, we’ll see you soon,” he replied and hung up.

“What?” she asked Laura.

“We can’t order room service but you randomly order pizza?” Laura questioned.
“When I realized,” she sighed. “She tried the same thing with Dark that she’s done to Danny.”

“Really?” Laura asked, her tone softening.

“We figured it out when he wasn’t recovering as quickly as he should have from the accident,” she replied; “But, in answer to your question, when we figured it out I decided to subsidize a few of my favorite restaurants. In return they test any food they prepare for anyone at the gym. That list also includes the liquor and grocery stores.”

“What about the day you went to Fat Burger?” Laura asked.

“I don’t worry too much about last minute food orders,” she shrugged and took the tablet from Laura; “I figure she can’t be everywhere at all times and so is more likely to target places I frequent often.”

They sat quietly while Carmilla watched the video of her fight. Not until her flurry near the end did she say anything; “Wow…”

“What?”

“I didn’t hear a single number you called during that but…”

“You hit every single one!” Laura exclaimed.

“I was going on pure instinct but you predicted every single thing I was going to throw,” she shook her head; “I didn’t realize I’d hit her that many times,” she said sadly.

“Hey,” Laura said and put her hand on her leg; “you didn’t know she’s sick.” She stoked her thigh a moment before starting the video again to watch the spectacular ending. “And that was the second time you knocked her out.”

“What?” Carmilla asked in surprise.

“The uppercut that knocked her on her ass,” Laura provided and rewound the video, “Watch when she gets back up.” Carmilla saw what she meant; Danny’s legs were definitely a little shaky. She hadn’t noticed because she had her back to her at the time and then rushed her before assessing her condition. “Is she going to be okay? Physically I mean?”

“I think so,” she sighed; “but after watching that? I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yes, I hit her hard, my leg kicks were on point, but they shouldn’t have had her grimacing like that,” she supplied and held the tablet out to Laura; “Bring up Danny’s background check for me?” Laura nodded, took the tablet and handed it back quickly, a concerned look on her face. “What’s wrong, Pup?”

“I’m worried how you’re going to feel about some of the decisions I made on your behalf,” she replied hesitantly. “But time was of the essence and I didn’t want this to affect your mindset before the fight.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Carmilla assured her and began reading the document. A few lines in and she was already swearing. Everything bad that had happened to Danny Lawrence in the last year was her fault. First her father had been arrested and fired from his job along with more than a
dozen other men. He was the only one tried alone and sent to jail. A few days later Danny’s mother committed suicide. She was alone and it was Carmilla’s fault. She recognized the company as one of the many that Deanna held stocks in, while the men were undoubtedly guilty, including Danny’s father, the fact that it had actually reached the courts was an indication that something more was at play. As she read further she found the first connection to Deanna; three large deposits in the name of ‘The W. Karnstein Sr Foundation’. A foundation she’d never heard of. The first deposit had come a week after her mother’s death, the last, a week before she found out she’d be fighting Danny. After the background check were a series of emails between Laura and Frank; it seemed her lawyer was already working on getting Danny’s father out of jail and into somewhere safe until all this was over.

Carmilla sighed, turned off the tablet, handed it to Laura and then looked out the window; something still smelled off about the whole thing. “How does her friendship with Will fit in?” she wondered, closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. “Why did she look so scared?”

“Carm?” Laura said, her fear evident as Carmilla met her eyes; “We okay? I mean, I did the right thing, right?”

“Getting Danny’s Dad out of jail?” she asked and received Laura’s nod. “Of course,” she replied; “All the shit she’s been through, it’s all my fault,” she sighed sadly; “She should hate me.”

“You can’t take the blame for the people she chooses to use,” Laura countered; “You couldn’t have known.”

“She broke her down and then turned her against me before she even got the chance to know me,” Carmilla said thoughtfully, thinking back over all the interactions she’d had with the redhead. “We were, well not friends, but friendly, at first.”

“What are you thinking?” Laura asked.

“I’m not sure,” Carmilla replied; “I won’t know anything for sure until we talk to Danny and get some answers.” As if the redhead had heard her, Carmilla’s phone rang in her pocket. “Hey Betty, what’s up?”

“We’ll be heading out soon, Danny is just getting dressed,” she whispered; “Look, Carmilla, she’s in rough shape. I don’t know what the doctor told her but she’s barely holding it together. Take it easy on her, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Carmilla replied, her stomach knotting again. “How long till you guys get home?”

“About a half hour,” Betty replied.

“Alright,” she sighed, her night had just gotten longer; “We’ve ordered pizza.”

“Okay, we’ll see you soon,” Betty replied in a rush, she heard Danny’s voice in the background before she hung up.

“How’s Danny?” Laura asked.

“Not good,” Carmilla replied and called the Doc. “Hey Doc, how is she?”

“It could have been worse,” he answered; “she’s got more stress fractures in her hands than I can count but none from your fight tonight. I suspect the hands were a cumulative thing from
hitting the heavy bag. She’ll be okay, Carmilla, this wasn't your fault.”

“Yes it was,” she answered angrily and looked to Laura as she answered; “and you all need to stop saying it wasn’t. If she hadn’t had the misfortune of meeting me and being someone Deanna could use against me she wouldn’t be sick. Of course it’s my fault!”

“But it’s also your fault she didn’t get hurt worse than she could have,” he soothed; “No listen,” he rushed as he heard her clear her throat; “If it weren’t for you she might never have known she was sick. Because of you she’ll be okay in about a year.”

“Yeah?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes,” he replied firmly. “She’s got a long road to recovery but she’ll be okay.”

“Thanks Doc,” she said with a sigh; “Would you be willing to answer some questions about it at the Press Conference tomorrow?”

“What happened to keeping our affiliation on the ‘down low’,” he asked.

“She already knows,” she sighed; “And tonight proved just how much she already knows.”

“Okay, kid,” he said warmly; “I’ll see you in the morning, try to get some rest?”

“I’ll try,” she replied half-heartedly before hanging up.

“So?” Laura prodded.

“She’ll be okay in a year or so,” she shook her head; “I should have known.”

“How?”

“None of her punches hurt as much as they should have,” she replied. “Her hands are riddled with stress fractures. She couldn’t hit me as hard as she can because it hurt too much.”

“Carm?” Laura said tentatively; “It’s not your fault,” she looked at her, anger etched on her features. “It’s not!” she protested. “You can’t be held responsible for Deanna’s actions.”

“Can’t I though?” she said sadly. “If Danny hadn’t met me she’d still have her mother and her father wouldn’t be in jail, and she wouldn’t be sick.” She shook her head and looked out the window. “You can’t make me feel better about this one, Pup.”

“And if it turns out Danny has knowingly been working for her?” Laura asked.

“I don’t think she has,” Carmilla replied; “Call it a gut instinct, but Danny was scared after the fight, she had no idea that Deanna meant to end my quest by having me kill her in the ring.”

“You really think?”

“I do,” she replied; “She knows a loss would’ve only been a minor setback.”

The two sat in silence for the rest of the drive but it wasn't uncomfortable. Laura seemed to sense that Carmilla needed time to process all that had happened and she was grateful for it. She
laid her head on Laura’s shoulder when the younger girl took her hand, laced their fingers and started rubbing her hand with her thumb.

She was angry. Deanna had known exactly what she was doing. She hadn't only played Danny but her as well. Even though her plan had failed, Deanna still had her questioning herself. Could she have beaten Danny if she hadn’t been sick? Could she beat this Rose girl?

She sat up and looked to Laura as they pulled into the pizza shop.

“I’ll be right back,” Steven offered and looked to Chico; “En guardia!” Chico immediately sat up and looked around intently. “He’ll let you know if anyone is acting suspiciously,” he informed them and left.

“Can I have my tablet please?” Carmilla asked sweetly.

“Depends,” Laura said, smiling at Carmilla’s playful tone; “Why do you want it?”

“I want to check out my next opponent,” she supplied and held her hand out for her tablet.

“Have you heard of her?” Laura asked as she took it out, opened a search window and typed in her name.

Carmilla shook her head as she reached over and tapped the first link. Nothing she read was comforting. She wouldn’t have a height advantage, they were the same height. As for experience? Rose hadn't only won her last two fights in Invicta, she’d won ‘Submission of the Night’ bonuses for both. “Good thing I’ve been practising my grappling,” she muttered as Steven returned. “She’s scrappy,” she commented as they watched a video of one of her fights.

“But she punches wild,” Laura countered.

“She’s fast,” Carmilla pointed out.

“You’re just as fast,” Laura assured her. “Use the same game plan you used for Danny but try to end it quick.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I think you can overwhelm her,” Laura said thoughtfully; “She won’t be expecting you to come right at her. Use her own strength against her.”

“How exactly?” she asked and then laughed when their stomachs both growled at the smell of the pizza when Steven handed it back to them to hold.

“Keep her at a distance to start,” Laura continued as she took the can of grape soda Carmilla opened for her. “And then, in the middle of a flurry, take her down and submit her. She’ll never see it coming.”

“That could work,” Carmilla replied with a grin as she opened a can of Coke and then handed it to Steven.

“Or you could just knock her out,” Laura said and took a sip of her soda. “Danny might be sick but she’s still bigger than you and you knocked her out twice.”

“True,” she replied; “but I doubt I’d have done anything more than stun her if she hadn’t been so drained from making weight,” she reasoned as they got back on the road again. “We’ll see what the
“trainers in Albuquerque think,” she said with a shrug. “I’m already on the show, I just can’t get hurt.”

“You looked like you were having fun out there tonight,” Laura commented.

“I was, but,” she laughed; “it was more that I found it amusing that the more I seemed to be having fun the more it pissed Danny off.”

“Any advantage you can get?” Laura joked.

“Damn straight!” Carmilla confirmed.

The two spent the rest of the ride talking about her next opponent while trying to ignore the growling of their stomachs. They pulled into the gym fifteen minutes later, Danny and Betty pulling in behind them before the gate had a chance to close.

“Steven, do you mind grabbing our bags?” Carmilla asked as they all went to get out of the car.

“Sure,” he looked to Chico; “Perimetro!” he commanded and the dog jumped from the car and began running the inside of the fence.

“Are you speaking Spanish to him?” Laura questioned.

“That’s how he got the name,” Steven affirmed with a laugh; “We tried a bunch of different languages but Spanish was the only one he’d listen to.”

Laura stopped Carmilla with a hand on her arm as they watched Betty help Danny from the car; Carmilla couldn’t help but think that the poor girl looked broken.

“How are we going to play this?” Laura asked.

“I don’t know that I have the energy for subterfuge,” Carmilla said with a sigh; “Normally I’d try to get as much information from her as I can before telling her what I already know, but,” she nodded in Danny’s direction; “I don’t think either of us is up for that tonight.”

“You might have a point,” Laura replied quietly as they walked over to them; “I know a bit about the foundation…”

Carmilla kissed her cheek and whispered; “Later.”

“How come you guys are only getting here now?” Danny asked as they approached, the harsh fluorescents of the gym’s parking lot making the fresh bruise on her jaw stand out vividly. That, along with the stark white collar around her neck, and she looked like someone had taken a baseball bat to her.

“Our meeting took a little longer than expected,” Laura replied.

“You got it? You’re in the house?” Danny asked excitedly.

“Looks like it,” Carmilla replied with a smile; “and I’ve got good news for you too, but I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” she said as she motioned them towards the gym; “And these things are getting heavy,” she said, indicating the pizzas in her arms.

No one said anything until Carmilla was punching in the code for the elevator.
“You’ve really beefed up security,” Danny commented as they piled into the elevator.

“When was the last time you talked to Will?” Carmilla asked, wrong-footing her.

“They say Laura got hurt, why?” she asked.

“Did you call him or vice versa?” Laura questioned.

“I called to tell him I was officially offered the fight and he told me Laura got hurt and that he and Brody were going to grab your Jeep,” Danny answered.

“What do you mean ‘officially’?” Carmilla asked as they exited the elevator but looked to the Xanders before she answered; “Come grab some pizza before you turn in?” They both nodded and followed the three to Carmilla’s apartment. “You hungry, Xena?” she asked Danny.

“Yeah, but my jaw is killing for some reason so I don’t know if I’ll be able to manage pizza,” she joked as she took a seat at the table.

Carmilla laughed and grabbed one of her ice packs from the freezer, wrapped it in a cloth and handed it to her.

“Sorry about that,” she teased.

“No you’re not!” Danny accused with a laugh; “I saw the video while I was in hospital, it was, I hate to admit it, but it was beautiful.” She smiled as Laura put the rest of the two pizzas on the table along with plates. “Tell me though; did you only yell sixty-nine to distract me?”

“That it distracted you for a split second was a bonus,” Laura added.

“Carmilla?” Betty said, nodding towards the door. She followed them over to the door. “She’s in rough shape.”

“You mentioned,” Carmilla said, wondering why Betty was telling her this.

“She cried all the way home,” she provided; “But, you trust her? Here, in your home?”

“I had a background check done on her,” Carmilla shook her head sadly; “I’m pretty sure she had no idea what was going on,” she sighed and looked over to Danny and Laura as they laughed; “She was a pawn. Innocent. She didn’t deserve any of this and I intend to make it right.” She looked back to Betty. “Which reminds me, Steven mentioned you have a history with Deanna?”

“I do, but it can wait,” Betty assured her; “You’re all exhausted. We’ll head for the Convention Centre at nine?”

“Sounds good,” Carmilla said warmly; “Thank you, both you, for everything. You’ve been awesome.”

“While I’ll admit we might have a vested interest in your success,” Steven started.

“We’re just doing what you’re paying us for,” Betty continued; “If it brings down that bitch in the process?” She smiled. “Then I’m all for it and we’ll do anything we can to help.”
“Start by hiring a few people to keep an eye on this place while we’re away?” Carmilla suggested.

“Consider it done,” Steven replied; “And thanks for the pizza.”

She watched them leave and went to the fridge.

“Laura?” she called; “Beer or wine?” she asked when she turned to her.

“With pizza?” Laura laughed; “Beer.”

“Danny,” she started, not surprised at look of surprise on the redhead’s face at the use of her name; “Beer?”

“I shouldn’t,” she replied as she took several pill bottles from her pocket.

“Have you taken any of them yet?” Carmilla countered as she opened three beers.

“No,” Danny replied after attempting to shake her head and realizing that was a bad idea.

“Then one beer should be okay,” she said as she handed her one; “If anything it’ll help you get to sleep.” She took a seat between her and Laura and looked at her carefully. “How badly hurt are you?”

“From the fight?” Danny asked, Carmilla nodded and then took a bite of the pizza Laura had put on her plate for her. “Bruised my jaw pretty good and everything you hit is sore as hell but the worst is my neck.”

“Whiplash?” Carmilla asked.

“A little more than a Grade two without actually needing surgery to repair it,” Danny replied. “Your doctor wouldn’t tell me anything about the poison, or whatever it is, in my system.”

“That’s because we know very little about it,” Carmilla replied honestly; “We have no idea where it comes from or how she got it. We only know the symptoms and even that,” she sighed. “It seems to affect everyone differently.” She studied her beer a moment and decided total honesty was her best play. “My Dad gained almost thirty pounds of water weight before he realized something was wrong. He managed to lose it, was feeling better enough that he went to play golf with his buddies,” she sighed and took a sip of her beer; “Broke every bone in both his hands on his first swing.” She looked to Laura when she felt her hand on her wrist. “They, the doctors, misdiagnosed him with Osteoporosis.” She shook her head sadly. “When they did a CAT scan they found his feet and ankles riddled with stress fractures, all from just carrying around the extra weight. Six months later he died in his sleep when his heart just stopped working.”

She looked to Laura a moment and then took several bites of her pizza before she continued; “We think Dark was exposed when he was in hospital recovering from his accident. They found something in his blood they couldn’t identify but it wasn’t until it took far longer to heal that it should have that we made the connection.”

“Dark?” Danny questioned; “As in, your best friend, Dark?” she continued, a slight bit of hope in her voice.

“Yes, and he’s fine now,” Carmilla replied with a smile as she put her hand on Danny’s wrist; “And you will be too,” she smiled; “In fact, how does a rematch sound once you’re better?”
“I don’t know,” she said as she looked down to her untouched pizza; “it’ll be at least a year before I can even train again,” she sighed; “God, what do I do now?” she added sadly as tears hit the plate in front of her.

Carmilla stood without thinking and took her, the girl whose ass she had been so intent on kicking just a few hours earlier, into her arms and held her as tightly as she could without hurting her. She felt Laura join them, put her left arm around Carmilla’s waist and rubbed Danny’s back with her free hand.

“It’s going to be okay, Danny,” Carmilla assured her; “I’m going to make sure of that.”

Danny finally calmed and pushed them away, this time with her and Laura sitting on either side of her.

“Why?” Danny finally asked.

“Why what?” Carmilla countered and starting eating her pizza again.

“Why do you care?” she asked.

“I had a background check done on you this last week,” Carmilla began, noting Laura’s look of surprise at her directness. “What? I told you I was too tired for subterfuge,” she joked; “I had it done because I thought you were actively working with my stepmother. Are you?”

“No,” Danny replied; “at least, I don’t think so.”

“What do we know about the ‘W. Karnstein Sr Foundation’?” she asked Laura.

“It was set up by your Dad about a year before he died, but Danny is the first recipient,” Laura started; “It seems there’s a stipulation that if the money isn’t used by the by the time Will turns twenty-one the money goes to him.”

“Wait…” Danny interrupted; “if you did a background check, then…” she said, shame tainting her voice.

“Frank, my lawyer, is already working on getting your Dad out of jail and into somewhere safe,” Carmilla rushed to assure her.

“He’s guilty, my Dad,” Danny said quietly.

“That may be but he didn’t deserve to go to jail for it,” Carmilla replied calmly. “Besides, we can probably get him out for compassionate reasons; his only daughter is very sick.” She put her hand on Danny’s wrist again. “Everything bad that has happened to you in the last year, it’s my fault, I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know how you figure that,” Danny started; “Did you make my father steal from his company? Did you give my mother the pills she used to kill herself? Did you, personally, make me sick?”

“No, but I’m the reason it all happened,” Carmilla countered; “And all I can do now is try to make things right.”

“When you say ‘she’ you mean your mother?” Danny asked.

“My stepmother, yes,” Carmilla corrected; “Have you met her?” she asked, wondering if
Danny trusted her enough to tell her the truth.

“Three times,” she confirmed; “Each time I received my grants.”

“And what did you talk about?” Carmilla asked before sipping her beer.

“The first time; you, and Will, of course. She said she’d been worried about the two of you since you ran away and took Will with you,” she met Carmilla’s eyes; “She said you put her in a coma?”

Carmilla looked to Laura; “Have you gotten that far in the second one?” Laura nodded. “Told you the best bullshit contains a kernel of truth.” She looked back to Danny. “Did Will ever tell you what she did to us?” Danny shook her head slightly, wincing again. “Hold on, let me get a heating pad for your neck,” she said as she got up and then went to the bathroom to grab it. She considered a moment and grabbed the Tiger Balm as well before heading back. She plugged the heating pad in and then helped Danny remove the collar around her neck. “Better?” she asked and sat down. Danny smiled in reply. “I’ll rub some of this into your neck before you go to bed, it’ll help you feel a little more human tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” she said and took a sip of her beer.

“Anyway,” Carmilla said with a sigh; “Deanna…” her voice caught; “her voice caught; “she beat the shit out of me from the day of my father’s funeral until the night we ran.” She looked up at the Danny’s hand on her wrist. “What she did to Will was worse, in a way,” she met Danny’s eyes; “She tried to seduce him, I suspect so she could marry him when he came of age and get his money.” She pulled her hand from under Danny’s and took a long swallow from her beer. “When Will told me, we hatched a plan. Spent a year gathering evidence, setting up a place to live, everything. We meant to catch her in the act and then tell her we’d leave her alone if she left us alone, but she snapped.” Her voice had gotten very quiet, her courage failing her until she again felt Danny’s hand on her wrist and Laura move beside her. “She chased me down the hall. Will tried to stop her but he got thrown down the stairs for his efforts. She and I, we looked at each other, and for the first time I saw fear in her eyes. I think she could tell I was about to kill her for killing him. I had nothing left to lose and she knew it. I remember running for the kitchen but the next thing I remember was waking up to find her straddling me, a knife in her hands,” she closed her eyes as the memories from that night returned as though it were yesterday. “Her face was a mess. Probably a broken nose.” She laughed but there was no humor in it. “I remember thinking; ‘Well at least she won’t be as pretty anymore’. She didn’t realize I’d come to. I thought she was deciding how to kill me when she stabbed herself instead. I was so shocked I pushed her off me before I knew what I was doing,” she sighed deeply; “The next thing I remember is Will pulling me off of her and telling me I didn’t want her death on my hands. We ran, ran as fast as Will’s broken leg would take us and then called her an ambulance a few blocks away.”

“You should have let her die,” Laura said quietly.

“And I’d be the one sitting in jail,” Carmilla countered; “Even with her dead it would be my word against hers. Who are they going to believe? The drug addicted juvenile delinquent or her?” She shook her head and wiped the tears from her face. “Yes, in the long run, her death might have made things easier but I couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Will alone.” She looked to Danny, the redhead wearing a look of confusion; “Not exactly the story you were told?”

“Deanna,” she said quietly; “she described you as ‘troubled and violent’. That she was relieved when she woke up from her coma to find you’d run, even if she was worried what would become of Will.”
“Is she the one who told you not to quit?” Laura asked.

“The last time I met with her she told me she was worried what would happen to you if your past came out because of this ‘silly Ultimate Fighter dream’,” Danny explained; “She had me convinced that she was just trying to help you, get you both to come back and work with her instead of against her. She even said she was worried you’d get yourself hurt if you continued.” She sighed and studied her beer as she continued; “She told me to win, to help you and Will. She told me I couldn’t quit.” She met their eyes. “And then she mentioned Bruce getting killed in jail and how often things like that happened.”

“You felt she was threatening your Dad?” Laura asked.

“I did,” she shook her head slightly, smiling when it hurt a little less; “She’s… intimidating, you know?”

“Why did you call my Dad?” Laura asked.

“I was worried about you,” Danny replied sheepishly.

“And you believed I was capable of hurting her because Deanna made you believe it?” Carmilla asked, Danny nodded sadly. “Hey, don’t feel so bad. Older and wiser people than you have fallen victim to her lies.”

“Did you just quote Harry Potter?” Laura asked with a laugh.

“She’s no Voldemort, but she might as well be,” Carmilla affirmed; “You don’t know how disappointed I was when I didn’t get my Hogwarts’ letter when I turned eleven,” she added with a dramatic sigh; “I figured Deanna was killing the owls.” She looked back to Danny. “We’ve both made mistakes, think we can start over?”

“Who are you?” Danny said; “I mean, is this what being in love changes you into?” she joked.

“No,” Carmilla replied and looked to Laura; “This is what happens when someone loves you unconditionally and wholeheartedly throws her fate in with yours.” She looked back to Danny. “She made me realize I need to trust people if I’m going to make it through this. I was broken when I met Laura, like you are now. Both of us by the same person.” She studied Danny’s eyes a moment. “I almost hated you, Danny, because I thought you were spying on me for Deanna but now I see you’ve been a pawn all along and suffered greatly because of it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Danny said adamantly.

“You’re not Harry Potter,” Laura added thoughtfully.

“What?” Carmilla asked and turned to her.

“You can’t be held responsible for what happens to the people who choose to help you,” she said and reached up to stroke her cheek. “Because we want to help you. We know the risks. We know we’re sacrificing our safety so that someday we won’t have to.”

“I didn’t ask for that,” Carmilla retorted angrily.

“It’s not something that is ever asked for, Kitten,” Laura said softly and turned her to meet her eyes again; “But it is our choice to make, not yours.”
“Kitten?” Danny laughed.

Carmilla ignored her a moment as she and Laura sat staring in each other’s eyes a moment. She rubbed her face and turned back to Danny.

“So? Do you think we can?” she asked; “I mean, start over?”

Danny sat up straight and held her hand out to her.

“Hi, I’m Danny, nice to meet you,” she said with a smile.

“The next question is,” Carmilla said after shaking her hand with a smile; “Do you want to help us?” Danny looked at her questioningly. “Originally I thought you were working with Deanna and I was going to ask you to play double agent, but I think we blew any hopes of that tonight.”

“So, what do you want me to do?” Danny asked.

Carmilla looked to Laura as she took her hand and smiled.

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this,” she said before turning back to Danny; “but it will give great me comfort if I know you’re here keeping Laura company while I’m away,” she turned to Laura and smiled when she felt her squeeze her hand; “What? You need more than Betty for female companionship,” she looked back to Danny. “I think, were it not for Deanna, we could have been friends. I’d like to test that theory.” She smiled and reached for Danny’s hand. “Besides, I have access to the best doctors who can help you recover as quickly as possible,” she smiled; “I want to see if I can beat the real Danny Lawrence.”

“You’re on Carm,” Danny smiled warmly; “But I’m not your responsibility, okay? Yes, I got played, I thought I was doing the right thing,” she turned her hand over and squeezed Carmilla’s hand. “It’s not your fault,” she squeezed her hand again when she saw Carmilla was going to interrupt; “Fine… maybe some of it was, but Carm? Don’t think I don’t know you saved my life tonight. That I haven’t put the pieces together.”

“That she meant to prove me the monster she always said I was,” Carmilla continued for her. “She set us up to hate each other. She meant to have me black out and hurt you before I realized what I was doing.”

“And instead you protected me,” Danny finished for her, “from the ref, from my trainers, from myself. You kept me safe when you had no reason to.” She smiled widely. “I think you’ve blown her ‘monster’ image out of the water all in under a minute’s time.”
Carmilla woke the next morning to an empty bed and a slightly throbbing head. She and Laura had gone from beer to wine and finished a bottle between them before finally stumbling to bed. They’d talked a bit more with Danny, and by the end, were almost certain she was never knowingly working for Deanna. They’d rehashed every conversation the redhead had had with the woman, and although she had shared crucial information with her, it was nothing she couldn’t have learned through the microphones in the cars.

She looked to the clock and groaned as she flopped onto her back; it was already seven and they’d be leaving for the Press Conference in a couple of hours. She heard the toilet flush, and figuring Laura was on her way back to bed, decided to close her eyes and feign sleep. A few minutes passed and she was starting to wonder what was taking her so long when she heard the shower start. She smiled mischievously and climbed from the bed to join her.

She entered the bathroom to find it already filling with steam and opted to use the toilet before joining Laura in the shower. She tried to distinguish her through the steam and the door of the shower but it seemed as through, for some reason, she was sitting on the shower’s floor.

“Laura?” she said quietly as she opened the door, not wanting to startle her. “Hey…” she cooed as she knelt beside her; the younger girl sat huddled holding her knees, her head down on them as she shook slightly. “Laura?” she prodded again as she rubbed her back; “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Laura finally looked up and met her eyes, confusion and sadness etched on her features.

“Carm?” she croaked out and reached for her, the fingers of her good hand digging into her arm as fear replaced everything else. “Don’t go!”

“Don’t go where?” she asked, completely perplexed. “I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere,” she said soothingly as she tried to pull Laura into her arms.

Laura let her and then surprised her further by pulling her into a deep kiss. Carmilla didn’t understand what was going on but pulled her to her feet as they kissed and then pulled her into her arms. Laura nuzzled her head into Carmilla’s neck and held on to her tightly, almost like, if she loosened her hold, Carmilla would vanish.

“Hey,” she cooed as she rubbed her back, “want to tell me what’s going on? Did something happen with your Dad?” she asked gently.

“No,” Laura said quietly and stepped away and under the water. She leaned her head back and let the water wash over her face. “It’s… stupid…” she said, her voice betraying her sadness.

“Laura?” Carmilla said, her heart breaking at Laura’s despair as she stepped forward and took
her in her arms. “I’m sure it’s not stupid if it’s got you this upset. Just talk to me, okay?”

“I dreamt,” she sighed and met Carmilla’s eyes; “I dreamt all this; you sweeping me off my feet, everything, that it’s just an elaborate ruse you and Danny cooked up to get me back for rejecting her,” she admitted in a rush and looked down.

“Laura?” she said as she lifted her chin with her finger; “Last night was the longest conversation Danny and I have ever had,” she smiled. “If anyone should be worried, it’s me.”

“Carm, I’d never…” Laura began to protest but was cut off when Carmilla kissed her.

“I know,” she said and reached for the shampoo to wash Laura’s hair. “But, if anyone should be worried, it is me,” she reiterated as she started washing Laura’s hair. “Me away for six weeks. You, lonely, missing me,” she said as she felt Laura’s hands on her hips. “I can see it now; Danny comforting you late one night, cuddling turns to more and the next thing I know you’ve left me for her and her far less complicated life.” Laura leaned back her head as Carmilla rinsed the shampoo from her hair. “I’m not saying that would happen, but that I’d understand if it did.”

“You forget one thing,” Laura said as she met her eyes again; “I don’t love her, I love you.”

"And I have been in love with no one, and never shall," Carmilla whispered, “unless it should be with you.”

Laura smiled, her eyes lighting up the way they always did when she was genuinely happy, and pushed her back towards the wall as she kissed her softly.

“Why did you say ‘don’t go’?” she asked as Laura kissed along her neck.

“I’m scared,” she admitted softly, “I’m so used to spending every minute with you,” she met her eyes, “I don’t know how I’m going to cope without you.”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, Pup,” Carmilla said affectionately but realized she’d said the wrong thing when Laura stepped back, reached for the conditioner and handed it to her, a frown creasing her forehead. “What?” she asked as she squeezed a generous amount into her hand and then worked it into Laura’s hair.

“If I’m so strong why do you keep trying to make sure there are lots of people here to take care of me when you’re away?” she asked edgily.

“Laura,” she started firmly as she forced Laura to meet her eyes by tangling her fingers in Laura’s hair at the back of her head, “don’t think for one second that I don’t know you can take care of yourself,” she said adamantly and moved her hands to Laura’s face, her thumbs stroking her cheeks; “But, after all the shit that’s been thrown our way in the last two weeks, can you blame me for trying to keep you as safe as I can? Even when I’m away?” Laura tried to interrupt but she continued; “Or for trying to make sure you have people here you can lean on, people who care about you and can help you deal with whatever she throws at you while I’m gone?” She kissed her before she could try to interrupt again. “No, listen, okay?” Laura nodded. “I know you can handle whatever happens, I do, you’ve proved it time and again and this past week you’ve been amazing, but,” she kissed her again, “if there’s one thing I’ve learned since I met you is that it sucks being terrified all the time, but it sucks a lot more being terrified alone.” She leaned their foreheads together. “All this? Everything that’s happened the last two weeks?” She leaned back and searched her eyes. “I think, without you, I’d have broken.” She shook her head and pushed Laura back under the water to rinse out the conditioner. “I realized it when I saw Danny last night, when we first got home?” Laura nodded. “The biggest difference going into our fight was you.” Laura met her eyes.
“Even though I couldn’t hear you most of the time, I knew you were there.”

“You really looked like you were having fun,” Laura commented as she handed Carmilla the Loofa.

“I think,” Carmilla smiled as she added body wash to the Loofa and started washing her, “it’s the first time that’s happened, that I had fun, I mean,” she shrugged. “I think it’s because, every other time I fought, I was fighting Deanna, it was the only way I could fight.” She could see Laura wasn’t understanding and so, for the first time, tried to explain her process. “Danny is the first person I’ve fought that I’ve known. Every other time I knew little about the person. This plan of mine, it didn’t start to take shape until they announced the Ultimate Fighter,” she smiled, “Fighting was… therapy,” she turned Laura around to wash her back. “A chance to let all the anger, all the frustration and hate out,” she frowned as she remembered accidentally kneeing a downed opponent. “I lose myself,” she admitted quietly, Laura turned back to her. “Last night was the first time I remember a fight from bell to bell.” She shook her head as she added more soap to the sponge and handed it to Laura to return the favour. “That’s what she was counting on.” She shook her head. “It’s what happened the night we ran, I blacked out. If Will hadn’t…” she shook her head and turned for Laura to wash her back. “She was counting on my dislike for Danny to make me black out. Make me hurt her without meaning to.”

“And yet you did the complete opposite,” Laura stated as she turned her back around. “I keep telling you she’s more scared than we are, the lengths she tried to go to end your career only proves that.”

“Because, thanks to her microphones, she’s known, right from the beginning, what I’m planning,” she countered as she stepped under the water to rinse off. “Even if she’s only gotten bits and pieces, she’s gotten the rest from Danny and Will.”

“What are you going to do about that? Will, I mean?” Laura asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted with a sigh and took Laura in her arms. “It bothers me that he’s been seeing Deanna without telling me.” She shook her head and leaned against the wall. “I honestly don’t know if he’s working against me, actually believes Deanna’s bullshit, or if he thinks he’s helping me somehow.”

“Is that the real reason you don’t want him at the meeting this morning?” Laura questioned as she let her hands explore Carmilla’s body. “You already suspected something was going on?”

“No,” she sighed and turned off the water, “it was more of the ‘the-more-someone-knows-the-more-danger-they’re-in’ thing. Will is…” she shook her head and opened the shower door to let them both out; “he’s still broken from what she did. His childhood was very different from mine,” she grabbed a towel and started drying Laura. “She doted on him, gave him anything and everything he wanted. Things were harder on him than they were for me when we ran. I was used to having little to nothing, he wasn’t. On more than one occasion I caught him packing to go back to her because he thought it would be easier.” She slipped the bag of Laura’s cast and kissed her fingertips. “But I really don’t know what’s going on with him now. I mean, yes, he’s still a spoiled brat but I’ve tried my best, since I got my money last year, to see that he wants for nothing. So he’s not tempted, even a little, to go back to, what he felt anyways, was an easier life.”

“So what do we do about it?” Laura asked as she took another towel and started drying Carmilla.

“Since I don’t know what ‘it’ is,” Carmilla said as she pulled Laura into her arms again; “and nothing is stopping us from leaving this afternoon, I think,” she kissed the tip of her nose; “it’s best,” she leaned in and kissed her neck, “that we not worry about it too much until we get back.”
As they entered the bedroom together they were greeted by the smell of bacon and fresh coffee.

“Get dressed after breakfast?” Carmilla suggested as she handed Laura a robe.

“I guess, but why?” Laura replied as she slipped on the offered robe.

“Cause I want to wear something nice and I don’t feel like worrying about getting food on it,” she replied as she slipped on her favorite red silk robe.

“Fair enough,” Laura replied and followed her out of the bedroom.

“Danny?” Carmilla said cautiously, the redhead was sitting at the table staring at her breakfast of pancakes and bacon that sat in front of her untouched; “Xena? You okay?”

“I made breakfast,” Danny said quietly, her gaze still fixed on the plate in front of her. “There’s pancakes and bacon in the oven and fresh coffee.”

“Danny is something wrong?” Laura asked as she went to stand beside her and put a hand on her shoulder.

“I made breakfast because I was hungry but now, looking at it, I can’t bring myself to eat it,” she admitted and pushed the plate away.

“You started your meds?” Carmilla asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee, Danny nodded. “How do you feel about smoking weed?” she asked, surprising Danny enough that she finally looked up from the table. “When Dark got sick it took a lot of experimenting to work out something to kill it and a lot of the time he wouldn’t have been able to eat at all if it weren’t for the munchies the weed gave him.”

“Kill it? Is it some kind of parasite or something?” Danny asked.

“We’re not sure,” Carmilla replied as she grabbed the oven mitts and took the breakfast Danny had made them from the oven. “Dark was already on multiple antibiotics from his accident so we think they affected it somehow, hopefully, with your blood samples being taken before taking any medication, we’ll finally get some sort of idea of what it is.” She smiled. “You didn't answer my question, how do you feel about weed?”

“Since my main objection is that it’s a banned substance that I could get in trouble for while fighting and I won’t be doing that for a while, I guess I have no real objection,” Danny replied.

“Good,” Carmilla said and went to grab her phone to text Dark. “I’m sorry we’re leaving you today to deal with this on your own, but Dark’s been through it and should be able to help you.”

“You’re going to train at Jackson’s gym, aren’t you?” Danny asked, trying, unsuccessfully to hide her envy.

“How did you know about that?” Carmilla asked, trying to keep the suspicion from her voice.

“The fight community isn’t very big, Elvira, people talk,” Danny replied.

“Yes? And what have you heard?” Carmilla asked when she went to sit at the table with her and Laura.

“Probably that the trainers you flew up here are so impressed with the gym, the apartments, and you,” Laura provided affectionately; “that they haven’t stopped raving about it to anyone who will
“listen.”

“Seriously?” Carmilla said in surprise as she turned to her.

“Yup,” Laura replied smugly; “I overheard them on the phone to someone about how nice it was to have everything taken care of for them and their fighters and suggesting to whomever they were talking to that maybe they should consider setting up something similar near their gym.” She smiled and reached over to squeeze her hand. “They also mentioned how impressed they were with how quickly you learned everything and suggested they bring in a grappling coach to train you.”

“That’s…” Carmilla started thoughtfully as she put a piece of pancake in her mouth; “interesting.” She looked to Danny. “These are really good, thanks for breakfast.”

“I just followed Laura’s menu,” she said with a shrug and then a wince at the action.

“Why does everyone assume it’s Laura’s menu?” she joked.

“I was her Lit TA for a semester, I recognized her handwriting,” Danny explained.

“How are you feeling, Bid Red?” Carmilla asked as she studied the redhead; she had some colour back, but she still looked drawn and tired, like she hadn’t slept or eaten in a week.

“Sore,” she smiled; “Kinda like a dwarf took a baseball bat to me,” she joked and went to shrug, thought better of it and continued; “Not much worse than usual after a fight.”

“That’s good to hear,” Carmilla said thoughtfully; “I think you should come to the Press Conference, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“I don’t have anything to wear,” Danny countered.

She picked up her phone again, texted Betty to see if she could take Danny to the local mall, and then looked back to Danny when her phone vibrated to let her know that Betty would be over as soon as she had eaten and was dressed.

“Problem solved,” Carmilla said smugly; “Betty will take you to the mall on the way to the Convention Centre.”

“Carm, you don’t…” Danny muttered, embarrassed.

“Hey,” Carmilla said as she reached for Danny’s hand; “this one isn’t totally selfless; I’m hoping if you’re there we can keep the vultures concentrated on what happened last night and keep them away from my personal life and everything that is happening with Deanna.”

“Speaking of which,” Laura said as she gathered the rest of her breakfast and stood; “I need to touch base with Tyler, mind if I borrow your office?”

“Did we get his background check back?” Carmilla asked after nodding.

“He’s clean, well, mostly,” Laura replied and kissed her on her cheek; “When he said he’s a struggling journalist it’s because he’s gotten himself into huge debt gambling. I think, and so does he, that’s why Deanna targeted him to get her false story published.”

“Money,” Carmilla shrugged; “the great motivator, of course.”

“He’s promised to stop gambling, even signed up for something called ‘the Self-Exclusion’ programme the casinos have set up,” Laura offered and kissed her cheek. “Try not to kill each other
while I’m gone?” she teased as she walked away.

She and Danny both watched her walk into Carmilla’s office and close the door behind her.

“You still have feelings for her,” Carmilla stated.

Danny turned to her and studied her a moment before replying.

“Can you blame me?” Danny countered.

“No,” Carmilla smiled, it seemed that she and Danny had more than fighting in common; “I suppose I can’t but what I really want to know is: is it going to be a problem?”

“Carmilla I wouldn’t,” she sighed and looked down; “Yes, maybe I still have feelings for Laura, but,” she looked up at met her eyes; “you make her happy,” she smiled crookedly. “Do I wish I was the one making her happy? Sure, but I care enough about her to just want her to be happy, even if it’s not with me. You’ve been so kind, so generous, I’d never think of abusing that.”

“That’s, um, that’s good to hear,” Carmilla replied and pushed the last of her breakfast around her plate; it wasn’t that there was anything wrong with it, in fact it was almost as good as her pancakes, but after having not eaten much all week, her stomach had shrunk and she was already full. “I know I said, last night, that I’d appreciate you staying here to keep Laura company but I’m afraid of you getting your feelings getting hurt again.”

“Didn’t I just say I’d never try to come between you?” Danny prodded.

“Saying and doing are entirely different things,” she shrugged and drank the last of her coffee. “I’m going to be gone for six long weeks, and really, anything could happen,” she met Danny’s eyes. “I trust Laura, probably more than I’ve ever trusted anyone and I know she wouldn’t set out to cheat on me, but I could see in her loneliness, her despair if Deanna keeps up her attacks, I could see her turning to you for comfort and that comfort turning to something more.”

“Carmilla, I’d never take advantage of Laura like that,” Danny rushed to assure her.

“Danny,” Carmilla started, her voice lowering to something that sounded more menacing as she stared into the depths of her empty cup; “So help me God, if you hurt Laura, or she gets hurt because of you,” she looked up and met Danny’s eyes again, her look causing Danny to recoil slightly; “just run.”

“What?” Danny stuttered.

“That girl in there? She is my world,” she started as she looked to the door Laura was behind; “If anything happens to her because of you, you had better run because I will hunt, torture and kill you,” she took a breath as Danny paled, she was happy she was scaring her. “And trust me, it won’t be satisfying if it ends too quickly, so just run.”

“What?” Danny stuttered.

“Just,” she smiled as Laura opened the door again, her tone and demeanor softening; “keep her company and maybe help her, Kirsch, and Dark to keep this place going while I’m gone?”

“What makes you think we need help?” Laura joked as she sat beside her again; “We managed just fine this week without you,” she reminded her.
“Yes, Brody and Dark managed, thanks to you,” Carmilla countered and smiled when Laura blushed at the compliment; “but you won’t be here for the next two weeks and you might be distracted while I’m gone, so the more the merrier, yes?” She looked back to Danny. “Besides I know Danny is probably going to be going stir crazy without training after a couple of weeks and she could probably use the distraction.”

“You can stop talking about me like I’m not here, ya know?” Danny said with a laugh, which ended when a knock sounded at the door. “Who’d be knocking here at this hour?”

“Carm?!” Dark called through the door. “C’mon, open up, we want to know what’s going on.”

“Who’s with you?” she called back as she went to let him in.

“Just Kirsch,” he replied as she opened the door. “Hey midget, how you feeling?” he greeted warmly as he gave her a hug.

She didn’t get to answer him as Brody had come in behind him and noticed Danny at the table. “What the fuck is she doing here?” he exclaimed angrily.

“Brody, chill,” Carmilla said as she placed a hand on his arm. He looked to her in shock. “You both owe each other an apology.”

“What do I have to apologize for?” he asked indignantly.

“While I agree Danny should not have slammed you,” she started as she looked to the redhead and then back to him, “you were sparing and should have let the arm bar go the minute you figured out she wasn’t going to tap.” She looked back to Danny. “And you should have tapped.”

Danny stood, both Carmilla and Dark moving between them as they came face to face. They seemed to stare at each other a moment, neither willing to make the first move. Then Danny sighed deeply, her illness and the revelations of the last twenty-four hours making her seem to fold in on herself as she held out her hand to him.

“Kirsch I’m sorry I slammed you and cost you a fight,” she glanced at Carmilla a moment and then back to him. “And she’s right, we were sparring, I should’ve tapped.”

Brody stood stunned; Carmilla wasn’t sure if it was the apology or the fact that Danny had said she was right. She poked him in the side; “Well?” she prompted.

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“Since when are you on her side?” he questioned but still made no move to shake Danny’s hand.

“Did I not just point out that you were both idiots?” she teased and smiled; “And I did take your side, originally, if you remember?”

“I…” he sighed, looked to Danny and finally took her hand, “I’m sorry Danny.”

“Was that so hard?” she joked.

“What the fuck happened in the last twenty-four hours?” he countered; “Last I heard you wanted to kick her ass.”

“In case you missed it,” Danny said as she went to sit back down, “she kind of did.”

“So, um,” Dark started uncomfortably, “you really think she’s got the same thing I had?”

“Yeah,” Carmilla sighed, “Danny? Do you mind catching them up?” Danny smiled and nodded,
only slightly given she was still wearing the restrictive collar. “Okay, we’re going to get dressed,” she smiled as she thought she had an idea. “Kirsch?” she waited until he turned to her. “Maybe you could go with Danny and also get something nice to wear for the Press Conference? Maybe give you guys a chance to talk?”

“So, what? You guys are friends now or something?” he asked.

“We’re,” she smiled, first at Danny and then at Laura, “we’re working on it.”

“Look,” Danny said getting his attention by putting her hand on his arm, “Carm and I both admit we’ve made mistakes and grossly misjudged each other.”

“I’d say that’s fairly accurate,” Carmilla affirmed.

“But here’s the thing,” Danny continued, “I don’t have many friends at the moment and it would appear I could use all the help I can get.” She looked to Carmilla. “But I am not your responsibility,” she saw that Carmilla was about to interrupt and held up her hand to stop her. “No,” she said firmly, “I appreciate your help and everything you’re doing for me, but please, don’t feel obligated out of some sort of misplaced guilt. This,” she said indicating herself; “everything that bitch has done? It’s not your fault, only hers.”

“Something I’ve been telling you for years,” Dark added gently. “You should have seen her after my accident, wouldn’t leave my side for months. Got kind of annoying, to tell you the truth,” he said fondly.

She felt Laura’s hand in hers and turned to her.

“I know it’s not your fault,” she said quietly, almost as though she wasn’t sure she should be saying what she was about to say in front of the others, “She made you think this way. Made you believe you deserved everything she dished out and has continued to make you feel guilty for every person she uses and hurts.” She took both her hands and studied her eyes. “There is only one person responsible for Deanna’s shit and that is Deanna, got it?”

She leaned their foreheads together; in her head she knew Laura was right. She really did. But it was difficult to suppress a lifetime’s worth of conditioning that told you that every bad thing she did to you was your own fault. That every person who was caught in the crossfire was her fault.

“I’ll try?” Carmilla offered weakly.

“I’ll take it,” Laura replied and kissed her softly.

“Oh, get a room,” Dark teased.

“Sounds like an idea,” Carmilla joked and smiled. “Did you bring Danny something to make her feel better?”

“A joint?” he smiled and took one from behind his ear. “Pity you can’t join us,” he said with a grin; “Big time Invicta fight and all.”

“You got it?!” Kirsch exclaimed as he got up to hug her.

“Yeah,” she replied and looked to Dark; “How did you find out?”

“Just did,” he replied with a laugh and looked to Danny; “C’mon, let’s take this out on the balcony. Wouldn’t want them to suffer the second-hand smoke,” he said with a nod to Kirsch and Carmilla.
“I don’t have a fight coming up!” Kirsch protested.

“Make sure they’re soberish by the time you get to the Convention Centre?” she begged as Laura led her to the bedroom. “And see if you can't get Danny to eat something?” Dark stopped in the middle of opening the balcony door to regard her. “What?” she asked as she stopped at the door to the bedroom.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked, confusion and shock all over his face.

“She’s got what you had, do really need to know any more?” she questioned.

“No, I suppose I don’t,” he replied and looked to Danny. “C’mon, let’s see if we can't get your appetite back.”

Carmilla shook her head; he was right of course, everything had changed in twenty-four hours. “Well,” she thought and looked at her girlfriend, “maybe not everything.”

“What’s that grin about?” Laura asked as she walked her over to the closet.

“Just thinking that’s it funny how quickly things change sometimes,” she commented as she opened the closet and tried to decide to what to wear.

“You should wear this,” Laura said as she reached for and then ran her fingers along her black hooded sleeveless cape with deep blue stripes on the hood, “It’ll look really cool once I take out your cornrows during the meeting.” Carmilla smiled and nodded as she took it from its hanger; she loved the cape but rarely had a reason to wear it. Next Laura picked out a pair of her tight, low-waisted leather pants and handed them to her. She turned and laid them on the bed while Laura went through her tops. “How about this one?” she suggested, taking out a tight black t-shirt that, along with her low-waisted pants, would show off a little bit of her stomach and had lace across the chest and shoulders.

“Okay,” Carmilla replied as she made for Laura’s side of the closet, “how about I pick out something for you?” she suggested as she picked a nice navy blue top almost the same colour as the stripe on her hood along with the dress pants she’s bought her for Whistler.

“Not matching but complimentary?” Laura asked with a smile.

“Kind of like us,” Carmilla replied with a smile. “And that there is the reason Danny and I clashed from the beginning: we’re far too alike in all the wrong ways.”

“So, what? You’re saying we’re opposites?” Laura asked with a laugh.

“In some ways, yes,” Carmilla said as she went and placed her hands on Laura’s waist; “But it’s more like, you’re strong where I’m weak and vice versa,” she smiled as Laura kissed her forehead. “We complement each other and you, at least, make me be a better person.”

“You were always a good person, Kitten,” Laura replied; “You just never had the right people to be good to before.”
At nine a.m. sharp Carmilla and Laura followed Steven and Chico down to the Jeep while Betty, Danny, Brody and Dark took the Compass to go clothes shopping before the Press Conference. While Carmilla still wasn't overly happy about being driven in her own car most days, today she was actually grateful for it; ten minutes into the drive and already she was struggling to calm her nerves.

"I made you a shake, you want it?" Laura asked, breaking into her thoughts. She nodded and took a large gulp from the drink once Laura had handed it to her. She smiled as she felt the alcohol burn on its way down her throat. She looked to Laura to thank her when she noticed the small box in her hands.

"What's that? Carmilla asked.

"It's for you actually," Laura admitted and blushed as she gave it to her. "We can call it a belated birthday gift."

"Another leather bracelet?" she joked once she saw what was inside.

"It's not just a leather bracelet," Laura replied as she took it from the box.

"What the?" Carmilla wondered as Laura turned it over and took, what appeared to be a watch, from inside the bracelet.

"It's a heart monitor," Laura explained calmly. "Once it learns what's normal for you, it'll warn us if your heart starts racing again."

"You mean; it'll warn us if I'm about to have another panic attack," Carmilla clarified quietly as she took it from her.

"And stop it before you get so bad that you're stuttering," Laura clarified gently.

"You caught that, huh?"

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Laura assured her.

"I'm not," Carmilla replied quickly, not even convincing herself. "I stopped talking altogether after my Mom died," she admitted quietly. This part hadn't been in her journals. To her, like everything else, it was just another thing she'd beaten. Mostly. "I was," she thought a moment, "five?" She shook her head. "Will was the ring bearer, which means he was walking," she thought aloud. "Anyway, it was a couple of weeks before the wedding and I was the fucking flower girl," she laughed bitterly. "We were at a dress fitting; me, Deanna and her 'Maid of Honour'. Who I'm pretty sure was just a co-worker from my Dad's construction company who she paid," she shook her head again. "But I digress." Given what she was about to tell Laura she figured it was as good a time as any to give her gift a try and fastened it on her wrist. She smiled and put her hand in Laura's lap as she continued: "I was being 'difficult'," she laughed mirthlessly, "I swear she had me try every single hideous and uncomfortable dress in the place, all at least one size too small." She looked at her wrist as Laura fiddled with her heart monitor and revealed her heart rate had already climbed to seventy. "My resting heart rate is usually about sixty," she provided. "Anyhow, as the day wore on,
and she got drunker, her insults about my weight became less and less subtle. Her 'friend' started to feel sorry for me and asked if there were any dresses I liked," she smiled. "Looking back," she laughed softly, "I wish I had a Polaroid of her face," she sighed. "At the time though, I was terrified. She was glaring at me as she said: 'Well, speak up darling! Tell her which one you like.' And then I spoke for the first time in two years," she took a deep breath, "I managed to stutter out an answer and she immediately asked for a moment alone with me," she laughed bitterly. "I almost pissed myself when she knelt down in front of me," she closed her eyes; "She put her hand gently at the back of my neck and then grabbed me by the hair, looked me in the eye and said: 'Now listen here, you little shit,'" she growled, imitating Deanna. "'So help me, if you fuck this up for me, I will make your life a living hell.'"

"We're here," Steven interrupted, his tone such that they knew he'd been listening.

"Where, exactly, is here?" she asked as she opened her eyes and looked around; they seemed to be underground but she could see Burrard Inlet and the North Shore Mountains on the other side of a low cement wall.

"Betty and I scoped this place out a few days ago," he stated as he pulled ahead slightly; there were a few cars ahead of them, each one stopping to talk to the security guard at the gate. "We've mapped out a route that will get you, and your guests, from your cars, to the meeting, to the conference and out again without being seen."

"So this includes," she looked around, "entering through the loading bays?" she laughed. "Real VIP treatment," she joked.

"You've already separated Betty and I," he snapped, "and this, apart from last night, is the most exposed you've been since you hired us." He pulled forward and talked to the security guard at the gate before driving on. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Carmilla assured him, "I appreciate the forethought, if not for us, at least for our guests."

"Yes, well, you might have given us a little more warning about Miss Knapp," he chided as he drove up and onto the loading dock before pulling into the building itself and parking at the end of the line of cars already there. She reached for her briefcase and smiled; maybe having bodyguards wasn't so bad after all.

They were climbing from the Jeep as Betty, Dark, Brody and Danny pulled up in the Compass.

"Fuck," Carmilla hissed, "just how stoned are you?" she asked as she studied Danny's eyes.

"Sorry," Danny giggled, "It's been awhile."

"Try," she pinched the bridge of her nose, "not to embarrass yourself with Shannon."

"Shannon? Shannon who?" Danny asked as they followed Steven to the freight elevators, Betty following behind them.

"Invicta's President?" Laura supplied.

"Shit," Danny said and came to stop. "Seriously?"

"Yes," Carmilla replied with a grin, "She asked if she could attend and announce my next fight." She smiled. "And, if you don't make a total ass of yourself, our rematch will be in Invicta."
"Fuck off!" Danny exclaimed.

"If the UFC doesn't want it," Laura added.

"Ladies?" Betty prompted as she motioned them inside the elevator.

"I can't…" Danny leaned against the wall of the elevator and rubbed her face; "How am I ever supposed to repay you?"

"You don't have to," Carmilla assured her. "Why don't you join us for the drive out to the airport? Talk some more? Maybe Dark can take you to your place to grab some of your stuff?"

"Um, okay," Danny replied, seemingly overwhelmed, as they exited the elevator.

They followed Steven through a series of back of house hallways to their meeting rooms; the 'Green Room' was, thankfully still empty. The room next door was set up with a large table surrounded by comfortable chairs with a big screen television set up at one end. This room, however, was already occupied: Rick, Frank, Doc Coughlin and Mark, who was sporting black eyes, were deep in conversation.

"Are you sober enough to keep your mouth shut?" she asked Dark. He smiled and nodded. She looked to Danny, "We'll come get you in a bit," Danny nodded, "Drink some water, eat if you can, okay?"

"Sure Mom," mocked Danny.

"Don't," Carmilla warned, "I've only just started to accept that maybe, just maybe, you're not an asshole."

"You're okay, Carm," Danny said and then surprised her by pulling her into a hug. "Sorry I made you think I'm an asshole."

"Yeah, well," Carmilla laughed as she pushed her away, "I wasn't exactly easy to be around either," she shrugged. "When you don't know who you can trust you tend to keep everyone at arm's length by acting like a jerk."

"How'd I get so lucky then?" Dark teased affectionately.

"Hard times?" Carmilla offered. "Persistence?"

"Time," Steven reminded them.

"Betty? Kirsch?" Laura said, getting their attention; "Can you guys keep Danny company until we're ready for her?" They both nodded.

They split up; Brody and Betty joining Danny in the 'Green Room' while she, Laura, Dark and Steven joined the others and took seats across from them, Laura on her right side with Dark on Laura's other side.

"How's Danny holding up?" the Doc asked.

"She's coping," Carmilla replied. "How bad is it?"

"Later," he suggested, "she deserves to hear the details and I don't feel like repeating myself more than twice."
"Fair enough," Carmilla allowed and looked to Frank. "Where are we on getting Danny's Dad out?"

"Given her illness," Frank started with a nod to the Doc, "she'll be picking him up from the airport tomorrow morning," he smiled. "You know, given the off chance that..." he trailed off at a look from the Doc. "Let's just say I made a convincing argument that she needs him here."

"Thank you," Carmilla said warmly, "both of you." She looked to Rick. "What did you find at her apartment?"

"Really?" he laughed. "I'd have thought the first thing out of your mouth would be about your Jeep!" he joked and shook his head. "We're still testing her food but I suspect you already know we won't find anything." He studied her a moment. "We didn't find any connections to Deanna beyond what we already know."

"Do you trust this girl?" Mark asked, his voice a little more nasally than usual.

"Who? Danny?" Carmilla asked in surprise, he nodded. "She's sick, Mark, a victim," she sighed. "After the fight," she shook her head, "she was terrified." She let Laura's hand go for the first time since sitting down and rubbed her face. "By the time we met up at home?" She met his eyes. "She's broken, alone and scared," she shrugged, "I was lucky enough to have someone rescue me when I needed it most, figure it's time I pay that forward." She looked back to Rick. "So, what's up with the Jeep?"

Rick smiled, handed her a manila folder and then stood next to the television while doing something with his laptop.

"We know what we've found," he started as she took the pictures of the Jeep's undercarriage from the folder, "but we have no clue what any of it means."

"What am I seeing?" Carmilla asked as she squinted at the pictures.

Rick brought the picture up on the television; "See here?" he said as he pointed to a small box. Carmilla looked back at the photo in front of her. "It's a detonator but it was disconnected," he supplied, "but it's not the only one." Carmilla looked up from the picture. "There were two more," he explained as he brought up the next picture, this time of her front bumper. "See here?" he said, pointing at something and forcing her to look at the hard copies again. "Had your fender moved more than a couple of inches in either direction it would have set off the explosives," he sighed. "Unfortunately that one was still connected." Before Laura and Carmilla could do anything more than blanch at the news that they'd been one fender bender away from blowing up, he soldiered on and pulled up a third picture. "This is the detonator that set off the explosives, and that's only the start of the weird."

"The start?" Carmilla said wearily, held up her hand and looked to Laura. "Would you mind starting on my hair?" Laura nodded.

"I can help," Dark offered, the two going to stand behind her while they took out Perry's meticulous braids.

"Does this have anything to do with the winch cable?" Laura asked.

"Rick?" Carmilla said, her voice low, "What's wrong?"

"It was tampered with recently," he admitted reluctantly.
"How recently?" Carmilla asked tersely.

"Probably while you were at the cabin," he trailed off at a beep from her wrist.

She looked up to Laura; "I'm angry, not panicking," she offered and looked back to Rick. "What did you find?" He pointed to the folder before continuing.

"It's not so much what we found but what was missing," he began. "If the tree had fallen due to the lightning then it would have pulled up from the roots or had a clean break." He paused a moment as Carmilla looked at pictures of the tree. "Yes, that's where Stan's friends cut the tree, however, they took one load up to the cabin and found several pieces missing when they came back. Namely a piece near the top of the tree and the part where the tree had been cut previously, on an angle. We think someone cut a wedge out of the tree, replaced it and then supported the tree with rope. The part that is left in the ground supports this theory." He paused a moment to make sure they were keeping up. "We think someone either followed you up there, or knew you were going up there and were waiting for you. While you were occupied at the cabin they inspected your Jeep, found the explosives and decided to keep you from going any further than necessary with it."

"And then they decided to take advantage of the storm?" Carmilla asked thoughtfully.

"That's what we're thinking but it means they came up with the plan at the last minute and decided to cut the tree to make sure it would fall and stop you," he shook his head. "The rain helped and hindered us; while it preserved the evidence under the Jeep, everything around it was destroyed. There's no trace of anyone being there."

"Have you spoken to Kenny? Did the cameras get anything?" she asked.

"Yes, and no," he replied, "Whoever this person is, they knew to disconnect anything that might capture their movements and/or avoid them entirely."

"Do we know if there was a microphone?" Laura asked.

"The GPS box was stripped and the dashboard melted, but," he sighed, "it looks like it." He ran his hands through his hair. "There's something else, the way the Jeep burned, we think she had something done to the paint itself to make the whole thing burn hotter than it should have." He pulled up another picture, this one of the Jeep's melted door. "And let me remind you..."

"This was during an intense downpour," Carmilla finished for him. "We're not getting the Pickup back, are we?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. She felt two hands on her shoulders, one Laura's, the other, Dark's.

"We're working on a safe way to strip the paint," he offered, unable to meet her eyes. "The shop that did the custom paint on the Jeep was broken into a week before someone keyed your Jeep," he continued as he sat back down. "And it closed a week after doing the graphics on the van and truck. The van is clean though," he offered.

"I don't care about the f-f-f-ucking v-v-an," she stuttered and slammed her hand down on the table. "Goddamn it!" she hissed as she pushed her chair from the table, stood, left the room and walked over to a security guard standing a little ways off.

"Closest place we can be alone a minute?" Laura asked for her as she took her hand.

"This way," the young man motioned and led them to another meeting room. "Let me get the lights," he offered and turned them on.
"Thanks," Laura said warmly, "we won't be long."

"I'll have to tell someone you're in here," he informed them nervously.

"Whatever you have to do," Laura said in dismissal. They watched him leave and then Laura took her into her arms. "Talk to me, what's wrong?"

"Ev-everything," she stuttered and pushed Laura away to pace. What she really wanted to do was hit something, but with a fight in two weeks the nearest available option, the wall, wasn't a viable one. She walked over to the wall, turned and slid to the bottom and buried her face in her hands as Laura came to kneel beside her.

"Just breath," Laura said softly. "Talk when you're ready," she suggested as she started rubbing circles on her back.

Carmilla looked up to meet her eyes and found them filled with worry and love. She smiled and reached out to stroke her cheek. "H-h..."

"You want me to finish your hair?" she asked.

Carmilla smiled and nodded.

"Whatever you need," Laura assured her and kissed her temple before going back to work on her hair. It was calming, and distracting, which is just what she needed to slow her thoughts. She rested her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. She was almost as pissed about the Pickup as she was the Jeep. She and Dark had spent three months finding it and then spent the next six months rebuilding it together. The worst part was, Deanna knew Dark was the one who used the Pickup the most; she was targeting him again.

"Will hasn't been in the Pickup once since he got home," she said evenly, previously unknown pieces coming together in a way she didn't like. "C'mon," she said and stood, surprising Laura who was still kneeling. She held a hand out to her to help her up. "This, baby girl, is rage, not panic," she pulled her up and kissed her softly. "But I'm just as close to losing it right now."

Laura pushed her back against the wall and kissed her deeply, both thumbs rubbing the skin exposed by her shirt. Carmilla gasped as Laura broke the kiss and nibbled down her neck. She knotted her hands in Laura's hair and pulled her back for another kiss.

"Better?" Laura asked when she finally pulled away, smiling and flushed.

"Huh?"

"I thought it would be a quick way to quell the anger," she offered.

"Oh, I'm still pissed," Carmilla admitted and kissed her quickly. "Just a lot less likely to hit something I shouldn't," she said as she took her hand and led her back to the meeting. She took her seat and waited for Dark and Laura to start on her hair again. She tilted her head back and asked Dark: "When was the last time you saw Will?"

"Not since before the fight," he replied and frowned. "Which is weird, he was looking forward to the party."

"Carmilla?" Rick said to draw her attention. "He was seen entering Deanna's about an hour after the fight and, um, he's been there every night this week."
"We need to include Danny in this conversation but first, what do we know about my room in Whistler?" Carmilla questioned Rick and immediately didn't like the look on his face. "What?" she prompted tersely.

"We've got a suspect but you're not going to like it," he said regretfully.

"Someone from the hotel?" Laura guessed.

"Nancy?" Carmilla deduced from the look on Rick's face, her anger again growing when he nodded. "What did you find?"

"Nothing was missing from the room but her hair was there and," he held his hand up, seeming to know her objection. "She doesn't have much of an alibi; she says she went to her office to finish off some paperwork, and as she was, technically, off shift, decided to have a glass of wine. She woke up the next morning face down on her desk, the bottle and glass gone. Someone said they saw her going up to your floor sometime after midnight and returned about a half hour later dressed differently and carrying your laundry."

"Is this witness reliable?" Carmilla asked neutrally.

"Not in the least," he replied, "she's actually next in line for her job."

"So she might have been set up?" Laura asked.

"Yes," Carmilla answered for him. "Which means Deanna knows where she is and she's safer in jail." She looked to Rick. "Right?" He nodded.

"The question is, why?" Mark asked.

"Because she's trying to break me," Carmilla replied tiredly. "Nancy was my first girlfriend, something I hadn't had the chance to tell Laura yet."

"Are you sure it wasn't Nancy?" Dark queried. "She wasn't very happy when you turned her down last year."

"No," Carmilla answered firmly, "as upset as she was I don't think she'd risk her job, or revealing her location, just to stir up shit. This has Deanna written all over it." She shook her head, she could see they remained unconvinced. "Mel was always a horrible liar, if she'd done it, I'd have known."

She looked up to Dark behind her. "Go get Danny?"

Dark nodded, went to fetch her and was back a few minutes later.

"Perry wants to know if she should join us," Danny said as she took the seat to Carmilla's left.

"I'll can go talk to her, if you like?" Laura offered.

"Thanks," Carmilla replied as Laura kissed her cheek. "Tell her she's more than welcome."

"Actually," the Doc interjected, "I'd like to talk to Miss Perry."

"You would?" Laura said in surprise.

"Danny was telling me last night that her partner, LaFontaine, is a brilliant Bio Chem major," he explained with a smile. "Frankly, we could use all the help we can get; this is, after all, outside my field of expertise."
"Fuck me!" Laura exclaimed as she smacked herself in the forehead.

"What?" Carmilla asked, really laughing for the first time since the meeting began.

"LaFontaine is my friend too," she replied, her cheeks red from swearing in front of her Dad. "I should have recognized Perry's name, they talk about her all the time."

"Wait," Carmilla said as she turned to Danny, "you know Perry?"

"We all go to school together," Danny replied, "Although Perry, LaF, and I are in our last years and Laura just finished her first year. I have a few classes with Perry and LaF but I wouldn't say we're friends." She smiled. "And I didn't know Perry is your manager either, but when I saw her last night I remembered a conversation I heard between her and LaF," she shrugged, "any advantage right?"

"Two questions," Carmilla said as she sorted through the emotions of finding out that Laura not only knew Perry beforehand and hadn't said anything, or Danny for that matter, she focused on the two things of most importance, or at least, easiest to answer. "Why do you keep referring to Lafontaine by gender neutral terms?"

"They identify as non-binary," Laura supplied.

"Which means?" Mark asked.

"Which means they identify as neither male nor female and goes by they/them pronouns," Laura shook her head, "I'm not explaining it as well as LaF can." She looked back to Carmilla. "Your other question?"

"They went home for the summer, right?" she asked, Laura nodded. "Can you ask Perry to call them and get them here as soon as possible?"

"I'll be right back," Laura replied and kissed her cheek before going to talk to Perry.

"When was the last time you saw Will?" Carmilla asked Danny without preamble.

"He came to see me yesterday morning, why?" she replied.

Carmilla studied her eyes a moment and was pleased to see they'd lost their telltale redness from earlier.

"He went with you to your meetings with Deanna?" she pressed, Danny nodded slightly. "Why didn't you say something last night?"

"We were getting along so well I didn't want to upset you?" Danny offered. "Look, all this, finding out Deanna was actually trying to have you kill me in the ring, it's a lot, ya know?"

"Welcome to my life," Carmilla replied sarcastically as she looked to Doc Coughlin. "So, out with it, what's the prognosis?"

"What you have to understand is that we know very little about this parasite," he stalled, "and almost all of our information is little more than speculation. While the evidence suggests this parasite was responsible for the death of Carmilla's father, it is unproven. Part of the reason we had difficulty in Dark's case, aside from his only being the second suspected case, was that he skipped the water retention phase. We think the parasite uses the excess water to multiply until their numbers are significant enough to attack the bones and go after the marrow inside."
"And because I broke just about everything from my waist down they had ready access to it," Dark provided. "Little fuckers used my marrow to replicate, right?"

"Yes, which made them especially difficult to neutralize," the Doc agreed. "It took two rounds of Chemotherapy and multiple bone marrow transplants to finally eradicate them. However," he smiled in Dark's direction, "all follow up tests have shown no trace of the parasite." He looked to Danny. "Your case is different," he said bracingly and opened his laptop to display three pictures. "The one on the left is Dark's blood when we discovered the parasite," he explained and pointed to the next. "This was his blood a month ago and a normal blood sample, my own in fact, to show the difference between the two."

"What are we looking at Doc?" Carmilla asked.

"Even though Dark is now free of the parasite his blood remains altered from having been in contact with it," he smiled, "Which is why I need LaFontaine. I'm not sure, but I suspect, we can extract the antibodies from Dark's blood to fight the parasites infecting Danny's," he said as he pulled up one last picture. "This is Danny's blood last night," he looked to her again. "The level of infection, in your blood anyway, is low enough that it wouldn't have been found if we hadn't known what we were looking for."

"But what about the fractures in my hands?" Danny asked as she looked at them.

"Sloppy technique?" Carmilla teased.

"That," the Doc interrupted before Danny could respond, "might be a part of it," he allowed. "How long have you been dehydrating yourself?"

"The last week," Danny supplied.

"I suspect the parasite, deprived of water to multiple, made for some of the smallest bones in the body, weakening the ones in your hands, to go after your marrow," he explained. Carmilla looked to Danny and seeing she was pale, took her hand in comfort.

"So it might not be in my blood 'cause it's already in my marrow?" Danny asked, her voice on the verge of breaking.

"I don't think so," the Doc assured her as he put the pictures of her and Dark's blood side-by-side, "I think dehydrating yourself weakened them." He smiled. "We'll start testing your marrow tomorrow to be sure," he held his hands up. "Small samples," he soothed, "starting at your wrist. If we find nothing we're done."

"And if you do?" Danny said tersely, "You keep going till it's clean?"

"Yes," he replied regretfully, "and then we'll have an idea of how aggressive we'll need to be with your treatment."

"You donated to Dark, didn't you?" Laura asked quietly behind her, startling her as she hadn't realized she'd returned with Perry in tow. She turned and found the two of them looking pale. "I heard all of it, why didn't you say something?"

"There's nothing to say," Carmilla replied neutrally and reached for her hand. "Dark was dying and we couldn't find an exact match fast enough. I was close enough to buy him a few weeks until we did."

"Carm?" Danny said quietly, but getting her attention by her tone alone, "I won't let you."
"I won't have to," Carmilla replied with a smile, "because a) I'm hoping we caught it early enough that you won't have to resort to that and b)," she paused for effect, "you'll be picking your Dad up from the airport tomorrow morning."

"Really?" she asked in disbelief, "I knew you might get him out but how did you get him out of the province?"

"On the off chance that you need a bone marrow transplant," Frank offered.

"Shall I finish off your hair?" Perry asked Carmilla quietly.

"Please, thank you," Carmilla replied and squeezed her hand, "I'm glad you're here, Per," she said warmly.

"LaFontaine said they'll be here tomorrow to help," Perry informed her, "but I want them kept out of the rest of this, okay?"

"We'll do what we can," Carmilla assured her and looked back to everyone at the table before turning to Danny. "Will was seen entering Deanna's last night and every night this week, any idea why?"

"Before you told me what you did last night," Danny started and rubbed her face. "He went to all my meetings with her because I was nervous to meet with her alone. They seemed, affectionate? Towards each other, like a mother who loves her son and vice versa. He told me, after the first meeting, that he'd go back to her if it weren't for you. That he was keeping an eye on you for Deanna because she has both your best interests at heart," she shook her head. "I don't get it, how does she have access to something like this?" she asked as she pointed to the screen.

"Frank?" Carmilla started, "How much, at last count, am I worth?"

"I don't see…." Danny said but trailed off at Carmilla's light squeeze of her hand.

"I have a point," she assured her and looked back to her lawyer. "Frank?"

"Approximately one hundred and thirty million," he replied, "at last count."

"And your point is?" Danny questioned.

"Deanna is worth about half that, and Will? When he turns twenty-one? About twice that," Carmilla started, "And I have two points. One: that amount of money is a powerful motivator and two: with access to that kind of money? Nothing is impossible."

"What do you want us to do about Will?" Rick asked as he looked at his watch.

Carmilla did the same as she answered; they only had fifteen minutes left before the conference.

"Since I have no clue what he's up to?" she replied, weary from the influx of bad news and things she could do nothing about. "I don't know, start keeping an eye on him?"

"I could talk to him," Danny offered.

"And how would you explain our sudden friendship?" Carmilla asked.

"You saved my life last night and you're helping me put it back together now?" Danny offered as she turned her hand over and squeezed Carmilla's hand. "I owe you one, hell, I owe you several. I know you're still not sure if you can trust me, but give me a chance?"
"Already did when I let you into my home," Carmilla reminded her, "Don't make me regret it."

"So what's the plan?" Rick asked as he stood and gathered his things. "For the conference?" he clarified when no one answered right away.

"We'll start off with Shannon's announcement of my next fight," Carmilla provided as she ran her hands through her, now freed, hair. "After that? I have no idea," she admitted and looked to Laura, "It's your puppet show, care to fill us in?"

"The videos of both the fight and weigh-ins have been playing on continuous loop while they've been waiting." Laura informed them as she took out her notepad and showed Carmilla the list of questions she'd given Tyler. "If I want him to continue the line of questioning I'll run my right hand through my hair. If I want him to change the direction, I'll rub my left eyebrow." She looked to the Doc and Rick. "I want you both standing by to answer questions," she held up her hand to forestall their objections. "We're going to try to keep this focused on Carm's fighting career but Danny's illness is bound to come up," she reasoned. "And, if we're asked about things no one should rightly know about…"

"Like?" Carmilla interrupted.

"The Jeep, what happened in Whistler," she provided and looked to Rick, "you can give them just enough answers to whet their appetite but then default to, 'I can't comment on an ongoing case'," she suggested, smiling when he nodded.

"Do we have a signal to end it?" Carmilla asked.

"Yes," Laura blushed, "but I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"Okay," Carmilla replied slowly and looked around the room at everyone. "Ready to face the vultures?" she joked.

"Easy for you to say," Dark replied evenly, "You get to leave all this behind for two weeks."

"Which reminds me," Carmilla said, stopping at the door and impeding their exit, "Laura will still be filtering the bad news while we're gone but," she looked to Laura, "I need nightly updates and I need to know anything five or higher, okay?" Laura nodded, albeit reluctantly. "No, if you want me to focus on training, after throwing the amount of shit we're planning on throwing today, I'll need to know even more because we are away and I'll already be feeling powerless, okay?" she asked, she'd been preparing her argument since the night before; she didn't like surprises, and although she acknowledged that she couldn't have done anything about anything she'd just found out, she still didn't like being completely blind-sided.

"Whatever you need," Laura answered and kissed her cheek, "Now let's get this over with, yes?"

"Definitely," Carmilla agreed and opened the back of house door to find another surprise, her next opponent. "You could have warned me," she hissed to Danny.

"And miss the look on your face?" she teased.

"Carmilla," Shannon Knapp greeted her warmly, "I'd like you to meet Rose."

"Thank you for coming," Carmilla managed as she shook her hand.

"I apologize for not warning you," Shannon offered, "I wasn't sure if Rose would be able to make it, but since we don't have time for an official announcement I thought I'd take advantage of your
"Press Conference. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Carmilla replied genuinely. "How are you both getting home?"

"We're flying out to Vegas this afternoon," Rose provided.

"Nonsense," Carmilla said with a smile, "It's a little out of our way, but we can drop you off," she offered.

"I wouldn't mind a nap," Shannon replied thoughtfully, smiled and looked to Rose; "It would get us home earlier, what do you say?"

"Private jet or flying coach?" she said in mock thoughtfulness, "You're on Karnstein."

"Sounds like the natives are getting restless," Laura joked, a chorus of low voices could be heard from the direction they were walking in. "Shannon?" she waited for her to acknowledge her. "We'll start with you and then you and Rose will be led back to the Green Room until we leave, okay?" Shannon nodded. "Alright." Laura pulled Carmilla to a stop and let her hand go to straighten her shirt and run her hands through her hair quickly. "How do I look?"

"Beautiful."

"Thanks, but," she blushed, "do I look as nervous as I feel?"

"Not at all," Carmilla assured her, her own nerves causing the butterflies in her stomach to go from merely waltzing to something akin to frantic techno dancing.

"So I'll start us off with introducing Shannon," Laura continued as she led them towards the noise, "and then I'll thank them and open the floor to questions."

"Sounds like a plan," Carmilla replied, wondering whether the rage she was still feeling over the meeting's revelations would be enough to keep her panic at bay.

Steven led them into the open space of the ballroom and onto the stage, the fight still playing on a large screen behind them. Rick led them, followed by the Doc, Danny, Laura, herself, Shannon and finally Rose with Dark and Frank standing just inside the doors with Steven and Betty.

Carmilla looked out over the heads of the two hundred or so people gathered and enjoyed the view of the North Shore Mountains through the floor to ceiling windows behind them. She looked to Laura when she felt her stand beside her and smiled, "How did I ever get so damned lucky?" she thought as Laura picked up a microphone.

"Um, hi everyone," Laura started nervously, "Thank you for coming. We'd like to start this Press Conference with an announcement from Shannon Knapp, president of Invicta Fighting Championship, Miss Knapp?" she said as she handed her the microphone.

"I am pleased to announce that Miss Karnstein has accepted a short notice fight with Rose Namajunas in two weeks, in Las Vegas," her announcement was met with a smattering of applause. "Rose? Carmilla? If you'll face off for the cameras?" she suggested and motioned the two to the front of the stage.

Carmilla followed them to the front of the stage, a half dozen photographers surrounding them as they squared off. Carmilla couldn't help but smile; she wasn't sure, she didn't know Rose at all, but she thought she saw the tiniest bit of doubt in her eyes, like she wasn't sure what she'd gotten herself into.
"Thanks for taking the fight," Carmilla said as she shook her hand.

"Just don't be pulling any of that 'Matrix' crap, okay?" Rose joked.

"No promises," Carmilla replied with a laugh as she hugged her briefly and then motioned her and Shannon from the room before going to take her seat between Danny and Laura again.

"Ready?" Laura whispered.

"Would it matter if I said no?" Carmilla replied quietly.

"Unfortunately, no," Laura answered and kissed her cheek before taking the microphone again. "We'll take your questions now," she prompted.

"How much do you really weigh?" a woman near the front asked.

"About one hundred and seventeen, next question?" Carmilla replied succinctly.

"You seem awfully chummy with Miss Lawrence given the rumored 'bad blood' between you, was the fight fixed?" a man near the back called.

"Well that escalated quickly," Laura joked.

"Not to my knowledge," Carmilla replied once the laughter had died down.

"Why did you choke out an unconscious opponent?" someone near the middle pressed.

"You watched the video, right?" Carmilla joked and then continued when the smattering of laughter died down. "I could see that Danny was out, which is why I didn't hit her again and looked to the ref."

Laura stopped her with a hand on her wrist and brought up the video near the end of the fight. "As soon as we landed," she narrated, "and I slipped off Danny's back, I could tell she was already out and moreover, that her head was at an awkward angle. When I looked to the ref he told me to keep fighting," she smiled as she watched herself yell at him; "I called him a moron and pointed out that she was out, he then warned me I'd be disqualified if I didn't keep fighting. I checked the clock, there was only about thirty seconds left, so, since I was already worried about her neck, I held her in place with the choke hold until the bell rang," she turned and pointed to the video. "Had I applied any pressure," Danny could be seen slowly coming to, "she'd have still been out."

When the silence stretched for more than thirty seconds Laura ran her hand through her hair.

"Why help your nemesis though?" Tyler questioned.

"Danny was never my 'nemesis'," Carmilla laughed. "Part of it is just honour among fighters: you don't hurt someone more than necessary to win. Hitting a downed opponent is bad enough, but as a level three first aid attendant, I knew, with the angle her head was at, if her neck wasn't already hurt, it would have been if she moved it more than necessary."

"Which definitely would have happened if she'd hit me again," Danny joked and looked to Carmilla. "Seriously, Elvira, you've got a mean right."

"Call me Elvira in public again and you'll find out just how hard I can hit with it Xena!" Carmilla joked and gently bumped their shoulders.

"You know calling me Xena isn't really an insult, right?" Danny pointed out.
"It was never meant as one," Carmilla admitted with a shrug and looked back to the crowd. "Next question?"

"Why did you give Miss Lawrence a sports drink at the weigh-ins and a follow-up question, did it have anything to do with why she seemed so slow last night?" Tyler asked, surprising her that Laura would give him such a question.

"The drink is an easy answer; I didn't want the fight canceled if she passed out from the weight cut. As for your follow-up question," she turned to Danny and asked: "Would you care to comment?"

"Last night, on Carm's advice," Danny started and then took a deep breath before she continued; "I had a complete blood work-up done and CAT scan performed," she motioned to Doc Coughlin. "But my Doctor can probably explain better than I can, Doc?"

"Blood tests showed an unidentified micro-parasitic-organism. Although little is known what we do know is this: once ingested the host begins retaining water so the parasite can multiply. Its first target? Bone Marrow. First, if left unchecked the host will begin seeing stress fractures in the feet and legs simply from walking." He paused to look at Danny and smiled. "While Miss Lawrence's hands are riddled with stress fractures, she has no others," he looked back to the vultures, "Which given her chosen profession, is a good sign."

"Told you you were punching wrong," Carmilla whispered to Danny.

"Really? Now?" Danny whispered back tersely.

"Point taken," Carmilla replied and then realized that the Doc was waiting for their whispered chat to end.

"There is only one other confirmed case and one suspected case. In the case of the latter, the host eventually died in his sleep of a suspected heart attack." The crowd began muttering between them and Carmilla couldn't help but wonder if they'd made the connection yet. "In the case of the former; the parasite was discovered when one of my patients wasn't recovering as quickly as he should have been." The muttering grew louder and several of the vultures glanced in Dark's direction. "In that case, after several rounds of Chemotherapy," Carmilla reached over and took Danny's hand in support, "and bone marrow transplants, well, the host is no longer a host and no longer shows any symptoms," he finished simply.

"And I was slow last night because the weight cut to one hundred and twenty-five was a bitch," Danny stated and looked to Carmilla. "She kicked my ass and then saved it, end of story."

"Next question," Carmilla prodded.

"One for the doctor?" Doc Coughlin nodded. "How did you, an orthopedic surgeon, get involved with this case?"

"The confirmed case was a patient of mine," he replied simply.

"Follow up question for the Doctor?" The Doc nodded again. "Why is the other case only 'suspected'?"

"Because the subject was cremated before an autopsy was performed," he replied causing the muttering to begin again.

"Question for Miss Karnstein?" Carmilla smiled and nodded. "Did you know Miss Lawrence was sick before the fight?"
"No," Carmilla replied without hesitation. "Had I even suspected I was risking her life I would have stopped the fight immediately," she sighed dramatically. "True fighting, professional fighting, isn't usually about how much damage you can inflict on your opponent, it's about winning, sometimes by any means necessary."

"Would you care to give an example?"

"At the weigh-ins I aimed to make Danny believe I wasn't worried about her size advantage. While not weighing more wasn't intended, I am, not only well aware of Danny's size and reach advantage, she was always going to have that advantage," she paused and looked to Danny. "Well, once she learns how to use them," she could see Danny was about to protest and continued before she could; "Which is why I am somewhat nervous to announce our re-match once Danny's ready." She looked back to Danny. "Seriously? Learn to punch properly and use your advantages?" she teased, "I'll be lucky to make it to the second round!"

"You're on, Shorty," Danny responded good-naturedly and ruffled her hair.

"Why were you arguing with the ref after the fight?" someone called.

"A ref's primary responsibility is fighter safety, he failed miserably," Carmilla replied.

"My apologies, that was meant for Mr Hollis," the man clarified.

"Same answer," Mark replied once he'd been handed a microphone. Rick motioned for it and elaborated.

"The official statement with regards to Mr Stecore," Rick spoke up, "He is currently in custody for assaulting an officer and is under investigation for his involvement in the attempted murder of Miss Lawrence." His statement was followed by gasps and the most muttering yet.

"Are you saying that he knew she's sick?"

"The investigation is ongoing, and as such, I am unable to comment further," Rick stated.

"Is Miss Karnstein a suspect?"

"Didn't I already say I had no clue she's sick?" Carmilla exclaimed in exasperation. "I thought she looked and fought like shit," she looked to Danny, "Sorry," and then looked back to the crowd, "but I thought it was only because she hadn't recovered from the weight cut yet."

"And no, Miss Karnstein is not a suspect," added Rick.

"Wait!" someone shouted, "Are you implying Miss Lawrence was infected on purpose?"

"The investigation is ongoing," Rick reiterated calmly.

"Miss Karnstein, is it true your Jeep exploded last week?"

Carmilla glared at Rick before answering; "I will answer your question if you can tell me how you came by that information," Carmilla countered. For the first time since the meeting, she could feel her heart rate starting to climb.

"Oh c'mon, Carm," Laura chided as she placed her hand in Carmilla's lap and stroked it lightly; "at least a couple of dozen people saw it in Whistler and you chewing out the cops!"

"True enough," Carmilla replied lightly, her heart rate already returning to normal. She kissed the
back of Laura's hand and looked back to the audience. "Yes, my Jeep blew up last Sunday, but as Detective Graham said, 'the investigation is ongoing.'"

"Is it true your hotel room was ransacked that same night?"

This time when she glared at Rick she found him searching the crowd in an attempt to identify who had asked the question. She looked to Laura and found her doing the same and then rub her left eyebrow.

"Are there any more questions concerning my career?" Carmilla asked.

"Is it true you met with Joe Silva and have already been offered the last spot for the next Ultimate Fighter?" Tyler asked.

"Yes," Carmilla replied with a smile.

"Why take the Invicta fight then?" he asked.

"I need the experience of fighting on a bigger stage against a much better opponent," she looked to Danny again, "No offense."

"None taken," Danny said with a wave of her hand, "I sucked donkey balls last night," she joked.

"Ew!" Carmilla and Laura both squealed and caused everyone to laugh.

"Anyway," Carmilla said as she wiped a tear from her eye; "almost every fighter in the house has more experience than me and I'll take any advantage I can get."

"Like this?" Tyler called before playing back an audio clip of Laura yelling sixty-nine in a sexy voice. Everyone laughed while Laura, Carmilla and Danny all blushed.

"I was worried Carm wouldn't hear me over the crowd," Laura offered. "That it, may have, distracted Danny, was an unintended bonus!"

"If there are no more questions," Laura said once the laughter had died down, "We have a flight to catch," she said as she stood. "Thank you all for coming."

Steven and Betty escorted them back downstairs to their waiting vehicles, arranging who would go with who as they did. "So Betty, if you can take Shannon and Rose to their hotel to grab their things and then meet us at the airport? Brody, if you could go with them and bring the Compass home?" They all nodded. "Okay, Danny and Dark, you come with me, Laura and Steven. Dark, if you can take Danny to her place to grab some stuff and then home?" He nodded. "Be very careful with my new Jeep and no smoking inside it?" she ordered firmly but he smiled and nodded. She turned to Brody. "I'll see you in a couple of weeks?" she said. "Try not to let the place burn down while we're gone?" she teased as she hugged him.

"I'll do my best," he assured her.

They parted to climb into their assigned vehicles, Dark joining Steven in the front of the Jeep after Danny, Carmilla and Laura had climbed awkwardly into the back with Carmilla in the middle so she could talk to both of them.

"Carm?" Danny said quietly, breaking the silence once they'd pulled onto the road. "Thanks, um, for everything and I'm... I'm really sorry for ever misjudging you."
"I can't fault you for that, Xena, it's human nature to judge a book by its cover," Carmilla replied honestly. "Besides, I'm guilty of the same," she said with a shrug. "Add into Deanna's convincing bullshit and it's no wonder you hated me."

"No," Danny said quietly, "I never hated you. Hated that you seemed to have everything handed to you on a silver platter when I've had to struggle for everything, especially after..." she shook her head. "She did it, all of it, to fuel my dislike of you."

"There were microphones in all but Laura's Mini and scattered around the gym," Carmilla provided. "She knew what was going on long before she figured out she could use you.‖ She took Danny's hand. "I'm so sorry you and your family got dragged into this."

"It's not your fault," Danny reminded her, "but I appreciate your help."

"Speaking of which," Laura said as she took an envelope from her bag and handed it to Carmilla. She opened it and smiled; inside was a cashier's check in Danny's name for the amount she'd received from Deanna.

"Your idea or Frank's?" Carmilla asked as she passed it to Danny.

"I knew you'd want her to be able to sever all ties," Laura replied.

"I can't," Danny started, "I can't accept this."

"Remember how much Frank said I'm worth?" Carmilla countered, she wasn't bragging, just stating a fact.

"That doesn't make me feel any better about it," Danny admitted.

"I do what I can because I can," Carmilla tried to assure her. "That," she said pointing to the envelope, "is the first step to breaking away from Deanna. And," she said firmly, "if it makes you feel better, you can consider it a rather large advance on your salary."

"My salary?" Danny questioned.

"For helping out at the gym and," she trailed off and turned to Laura. "She's an English Major, right?" Laura nodded despite the confusion on her face. "She can help you with the book?" Laura seemed unsure so she explained further. "Look, it's not that I don't think you can do it, but it's dark stuff and I think it would help having someone you can talk to about it." When Laura smiled and nodded she turned back to Danny to explain. "I have a couple of journals that detail what happened, both before Will and I ran and after. Laura has offered to type it up while I'm gone, but given the content, I'd appreciate her having someone to take over for her when it gets too much."

"I'll do it," Danny answered immediately.

"Are you sure? It's very explicit and very dark," Carmilla clarified.

"I am," she replied firmly. "When are you planning to publish it?"

"Probably around the time they air the last episode of the show," Laura supplied.

"What are we going to do about Will?" Dark asked.

"That depends on Danny," Carmilla replied and looked to her. "I've never understood your relationship with him, but if he'll talk to anyone, it's you."
"He reached out to me," she started, "about a week after he got to Montreal," she sighed. "Son of a bitch."

"He is at that," Carmilla joked.

"No," Danny said and looked to her. "They set me up. He called me because he was 'lonely' in Montreal. When my Dad got fired he was the only I had to talk to," she shook her head, wincing slightly. "He suggested I contact Deanna about the Foundation."

"What did Rick mean when he said you already knew that they wouldn't find anything in Danny's food?" Laura questioned.

"Because Danny's illness hasn't progressed very far and you only have to be exposed once," Carmilla explained and then frowned when Laura paled. "Yes, one of the tests you had done when we realized Kyle had messed with your results was for the parasite." She kissed her briefly to forgo her interruption. "I didn't tell you because I didn't want to scare you if the tests came back negative and I was pretty sure you were safe because you hadn't shown any symptoms."

"Still," Laura started.

"I should have warned you and I'm sorry I didn't," Carmilla offered. "Make it up to you tonight?"

"You'd better," Laura teased, "since I was expecting to you have you to myself for the flight and now we have company for half of it. Why did you do that anyway?"

"Any advantage I can get, right?" Carmilla joked. "Danny was my first opponent I both knew and disliked. In the house I'm bound to get to know my fellow fighters and maybe even like some of them."

"So you want to know what it's like to fight a friend?" Laura deduced.

"Exactly," Carmilla replied with a smile and kissed her. "You were incredible today, thank you."

"Yes, I think we managed to stir the pot just enough to scare the big bad witch of the West, don't you?" Laura joked.

"Yes," Carmilla sighed and looked out the window, "still not crazy about leaving everyone to deal with it."

"We'll be fine," Dark assured her. "It's you and Laura she's after right now and you'll be out of her reach," he turned and held up his hand to forestall her interruption. "We've been dealing with this for what? Going on four years?" She nodded. "We'll be fine behind our tall fences and burly bodyguards." She knew her face showed she wasn't convinced, and Dark knew her all too well. "We'll keep you informed, or at least Laura informed, okay?" She nodded. "Good, the two of you deserve a break from the bullshit. Enjoy it, okay?"

"We'll do our best," Laura replied with a blush.

"And I wasn't just talking about the Press Conference," Carmilla told Laura quietly, "I don't think I'd have managed to stay as calm as I did if you hadn't been right there beside me."

"That was calm?" Laura teased gently.

"If you hadn't been there when I stormed out? I'd have hit something and probably hurt myself," she smiled at the look on Laura's face. "You stopped me from doing that, thank you."
"You're welcome?" Laura replied and kissed her.

"Carm?" Danny interrupted, reminding the two they weren't alone before they got lost in each other. "Want to know the real reason I'd never try to come between you and Laura?" Carmilla raised an eyebrow and nodded. "You're too darned cute together," she teased and smiled, "and I can see how happy you both are. Am I jealous? Maybe," she offered with a shrug, "not because Laura is with you but because I hope to find what you guys have someday."

"Not like you'd stand a chance of coming between us, Xena," Carmilla said warmly, "but I'm happy to hear you won't try." She smiled and looked out the window as she continued thoughtfully; "If someone had told me yesterday that we'd be here now, with me starting to, not only consider you, Danny fucking Lawrence, not only a friend, but a good and trusted friend too...

"You'd have asked them if they were on crack?" joked Dark.

"Probably," Carmilla laughed and shook her head. "But maybe, for the first time since that bitch started manipulating my life, something good has come of it." She looked to Danny and held her hand out to her. "What do you say, Big Red, friends?"

"Good friends," Danny corrected as she ignored the offered hand and pulled both her and Laura into an awkward one-armed hug. "Thanks for giving me a chance."

"Right back at you Xena," Carmilla replied fondly.

Yes, her life had taken some surprising, and at times terrifying, turns in the last twenty-four hours, but all in all, she felt as though they'd finally made some progress. Laura's questions, via Tyler, were enough to pique the interest of the legitimate reporters, without having the whole thing devolve into a shouting match of accusations. She smiled; "So Deanna knows my plan, so what?" she thought. She'd tried her best to stop her and not only failed miserably but had made her more popular in the process; the YouTube video of their fight had already reached half a million hits. "No," she thought as she laced her fingers with Laura's, "there's no stopping us now."

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks, my schedule has changed, yet again, (sigh). I will be aiming to post by Monday afternoon for the month of November. I'm going to try my hardest to get the next chapter out by next Monday, but as I only have one day off this week, I can't make any promises. Hope you enjoyed the new chapter!
When they arrived at the airport a short time later Carmilla took Dark aside to talk to him; she hated leaving with so many questions still unanswered but she also knew she and Laura desperately needed a break from it all.

"You sure you can trust her?" Dark asked as he looked over to where Danny and Laura were talking.

"Who? Danny?" she asked, continuing when he nodded. "I trust her more than I trust Will right now," she admitted ruefully. "Keep an eye on both of them while we're gone?" He nodded. "Go through Will's things when you have the chance, only don't let him know we're suspicious of him."

"We are?"

"He's been seeing Deanna behind my back and somehow convinced Danny he's on Deanna's side," she replied with an edge. "I don't know what he's up to, but even if he's actively working against me with Deanna," she sighed.

"He's still your little brother and you don't want to see him get hurt?" Dark offered.

"The bottom line is that I don't know and I don't have time for this shit," she replied.

"Why don't you call him before you leave? See if he admits where he is?" Dark suggested.

"No," she replied, smiling as her attention was drawn by a laughing Laura and Danny, "I'm still so angry from the meeting this morning that I don't think I can manage subtle at the moment."

"Fair enough," he allowed and pulled her into a hug. "And if it turns out the little shit has been working for her I'll gladly kick his ass on your behalf."

"You won't have to," she replied, "if he's working for her I will find a way to feed him his own testicles," she laughed as Dark crossed his legs and visibly squirmed. "I've put too much into this to have anyone, especially him, fuck it up."

"Why especially him?" Dark questioned.

"Because he's a big reason I'm doing it," she reminded him and sighed. "I hate that she targeted you again," Carmilla admitted sadly.

"It's my own fault for pissing her off," he joked.

"More like she knows how important you are to me," Carmilla amended.

"I love you too, midget," he said affectionately as he gave her an extra squeeze before letting her go. "Have a good trip and try not to worry about us too much?"

"Don't think you can stop me," she answered with a shake of her head. "I still can't, somehow, get over the fact that I've been driving around in a time bomb for the last year."

"Maybe you should take comfort from the fact that she didn't blow you up?" Dark suggested.
"Too many questions if I just randomly blew up," she pointed out. "Honestly I think it was more of a fail safe to destroy any evidence if I managed to get myself killed some other way." She smiled as Danny and Laura walked over to them. "Just keep me updated, okay, every night?"

"Sure thing," he replied and looked to Laura, "You'll take good care of her while you're gone?"

"Always," Laura replied and took her into her arms. "You wanted to get changed before we took off?"

"Yeah," she replied as Laura kissed her cheek, "As much as I love my leather, sitting in it for almost five hours doesn't really appeal." She looked to Danny. "You going to be okay Xena?"

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow," Danny joked.

"Call us, anytime, if you need to talk, okay? I mean, I know this, finding out everything you have in the last day, it's a lot, but we are your friends, okay?" Carmilla asked as she took Danny's arms in her hands and looked up to her. "And be careful with Will; I don't know what he's up to and I don't like it."

"Maybe I should call him? See if admits to where he is?" Danny suggested.

"Would you normally call him out of the blue to see where he is?" Carmilla countered.

"Well, no," Danny conceded.

"Then act as though nothing has changed," Carmilla advised, "And deposit that cheque to your account but don't forward it to Deanna until we get back."

"You're worried what she'll do once I break off ties with her?" Danny questioned.

"It's more that I have no clue what she'll do," she sighed as she saw Betty pull into the airport. "You're in the best of hands, though," she said as she gave Danny a hug. "But maybe…"

"Don't leave the gym too much while you're gone?" Dark teased.

"There's no such thing as safe right now, only safer," Carmilla clarified, "and I'm more worried what she'll do to you once she realizes you're no longer someone to be used." She looked to Laura. "Shall we?" Laura nodded, hugged both Danny and Dark and then followed her onto the plane.

"When did you have our bags brought out?" Laura asked as they entered the bedroom to find their overnight bags waiting for them on the bed.

"Steven came out a couple of days ago to give the plane a once-over along with a mechanic," supplied Carmilla as she fished out a pair of jeans and t-shirt to change into, "so I quickly packed our bags and asked him to bring them out so we wouldn't have to worry about it," she said as she threw her clothes on the bed and pulled out her phone. "I forgot to ask Rick a couple of things," she supplied at Laura's raised eyebrow.

"Can't it wait?" Laura asked.

"Probably," she replied but dialed Rick's number anyway, "but I'll feel better if I know the answers before we leave."

"And you're sure," Laura said as she slowly undid her shirt, "that it can't wait?"

"Since we don't have nearly enough time for me to fully appreciate what you're trying to do, yes,"
Carmilla replied and then kissed her briefly as she pouted. She dialed Rick's number and then put it on speaker while she changed.

"Hey kiddo, what's up?" Rick asked when he answered.

"Just a couple of things I forgot to ask you about," she replied as Laura took her cape from her and hung it up. "Any leads on my gun?"

"None, but it's been reported missing so if it turns up somewhere it shouldn't you'll be in the clear," he answered.

"What was so special about the top of the tree that a piece of it went missing?" she questioned.

"We think there was a lightening rod attached," he replied, "Carm, I hope you don't mind, but I've sent the techs up to put some extra security into your storage sheds, keep anyone from getting in there again."

"And we have no leads as to who found the most indirect way possible to help us?" she asked once she'd taken her shirt off.

"None, but I've organized a team to do a sweep of the perimeter, check to make sure the fence is still intact and check on the cameras," he informed her.

"Do all that but I doubt we'll find them if they don't want to be found," Carmilla replied tiredly. "Besides which, all things considered, someone helping us, even in a weird roundabout sort of way? Not high on my list of concerns at the moment."

"You're worried about Will?" he questioned.

"If the little shit is stupid enough to go back to her," she sighed again, "I want to say fuck it, he's made his bed and he can lie in it but…"

"He's blood," Rick finished.

"And he's the only blood I have left," she smiled as Laura walked over, took her in her arms and kissed her shoulder, "though granted, my chosen family is becoming far more important rather quickly." She kissed Laura's cheek. "Rick, keep an eye on Will. I want to know as much about what's he's up to before I confront him."

"Will do," he replied, "I'll call you tomorrow?"

"Sure, but call Laura," she paused as Laura gave her a squeeze, "she's still filtering the crap during training hours."

She turned in Laura's arms to find she was still wearing her blouse, albeit undone, but had also taken off her dress pants to reveal lacy black underthings. "You're terrible," she growled as she pulled her close and kissed her neck.

"Just wanted you to know what you're missing out on," Laura answered as she undid Carmilla's leather pants. "You know, since we're playing host instead of joining the 'Mile High Club' like I thought we'd be doing."

"Oh Cupcake," Carmilla cooed affectionately as she pried Laura's hands from her pants, "as good as that sounds I doubt I'd have been comfortable getting it on here."
"Why not?" Laura managed, her voice having dipped as she watched Carmilla take off her pants.

"Well," she drawled as she pulled on her jeans slowly as she knew Laura was still watching her, "there's the fact that this room is hardly soundproof and we tend to get a little…"

"Oh god! You don't think Danny heard us last night, do you?" Laura gasped in horror as her cheeks turned red.

"I doubt it," Carmilla replied with a sly smile, "Unlike this room, our bedroom is actually, pretty much, soundproof once the door's closed," she confided as she handed Laura a pair of jeans.

"But you usually sleep with the door open," Laura commented as she pulled on her jeans.

"Because there's not usually anyone else in the apartment and I don't like being cut off from it when I'm sleeping alone," she shrugged. "I like to hear what's going on."

"Alright, I can accept that excuse," Laura teased, "what are your others?"

"I don't know how I'd feel about being found in a compromising position and/or naked if the plane went down," she admitted, she'd only flown a few times since her father's death and hadn't been a big fan of it before then either.

"Yes, but if the plane went down we'd probably be dead so would it really matter?" Laura countered.

Before Carmilla could answer they were both startled by a knock at the door and then Steven calling through it to advise them they'd be taxiing out to the runway in the next ten minutes.

"Tell you what," Carmilla said as she watched Laura finally slip a t-shirt over her head, "How about, after we leave Vegas, we come in here and cuddle until we get to New Mexico?" She leaned in and kissed her neck. "Maybe make out a little?" she suggested in her most seductive voice before Laura pulled her into a kiss so deep a low moan escaped her before she could stop it.

"Do you really think we could stop once we started?" Laura asked breathlessly when they parted.

"Point taken," Carmilla chuckled and kissed her briefly. "I'm willing to try if you are."

"Time to get buckled up!" Betty called.

"C'mon Pup," Carmilla said with a grin as she she took her hand and led her towards the door, "let's go get to know my next opponent." When they entered the main compartment Carmilla beelined for the bar fridge. "Beer?" she asked Laura who smiled and nodded in response as she went to sit down.

"Rose? Shannon?" Carmilla questioned.

"I shouldn't," Rose replied regretfully.

"I'll have a Grand Marnier, if you have it," Shannon answered.

"I think we might," Carmilla said as she opened the freezer to check, smiling when she found her, yet opened, bottle of Patron Tequila. "Or," she said presenting the frosty bottle with a flourish, "we can celebrate with this?" Shannon smiled but Rose shook her head. "Oh c'mon, one shot of very expensive Tequila won't kill you," she teased as she grabbed six shot glasses and walked over to the others. "Betty? Steven?"
"We're on duty," Betty replied seriously despite her smile.

"And you really think you're going to have anything to do once were in the air?" Carmilla joked.

"She has a point," Steven replied with a grin as he watched Carmilla open the bottle and pour out the shots carefully.

"One of us should be sober," Betty teased, "you know, in case of an emergency."

"Fine," Steven laughed, "I'll have hers," he said with a jerk of his thumb towards his wife.

Carmilla poured the shots and handed them out as the plane took off. She passed around a ziplocked bag of lime wedges and studied her own shot glass while she waited for them.

"To fighting a good fight!" she toasted as the plane leveled out.

Carmilla watched as Shannon drank her shot, suck on her lime and then stare at her empty glass.

"Is there something wrong?" Carmilla asked as the silence stretched.

"I had an interesting chat with Dana on my way here," Shannon replied and turned to Rose. "Thank you again for putting on your headphones." Rose smiled and shook her head. Shannon turned back to Carmilla. "I trust anything your associates have heard, or might hear, will remain confidential?"

"Of course," Betty replied from across the aisle.

"Dana is…" she sighed, "concerned you'll get hurt and threaten your participation on the show." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's pressuring me to cancel the fight," she laughed ruefully. "Don't worry, that's not happening. Unless you want out?"

"What about Joe's, um, offer?" Laura asked vaguely with a glance at Rose.

"Carmilla has already fulfilled her end of the deal by accepting the fight," she supplied, "nowhere does it say you have to actually fight."

"You said you won't cancel the fight, why?" Laura questioned.

"Because the venue has sold out since the official announcement of your fight," she announced proudly, "and the buyrate for the pay-per-view has tripled." She looked from Rose to Carmilla. "Your fight has been moved up the card to co-main event."

"Seriously?" Carmilla gasped.

"No way!" Rose exclaimed.

"Holy Hufflepuff!" Laura blurted out, all of them having spoken at the same time and then bursting out in laughter.

"Ladies, my girlfriend," she teased and kissed her cheek. "So," she said as she turned back to Shannon, "what do you propose?"

"I'm not, officially, suggesting anything," she clarified lightly. "However, if the two of you could, somehow, come to some sort of agreement," she smiled, "I'd appreciate it."

"Of course," Carmilla replied.
"I'll go in the other room once we've leveled out," Shannon continued, "let the two of you talk."

"Thanks," Carmilla replied and sighed; Laura was rubbing her thumb with her own and it was calming her. "I noticed a variety in the sandwiches in the fridge if you're hungry."

The plane finally leveled and the pilot informed them they were free to move around the cabin.

"Come get me when you're done talking?" Shannon asked as before making her way to the other room.

Rose and Carmilla studied each other a moment after the door closed, neither willing to break the silence.

"What, exactly, do you think she's asking?" Rose questioned as she watched Carmilla go to the fridge to grab a couple more beers and a couple of sandwiches.

"Are you sure you don't want one?" Carmilla prodded as she waved a beer in her direction. "It's only Corona."

"Oh fine," Rose said with a laugh, "I'm not training again till Tuesday anyway," she nodded at the sandwiches in Carmilla's hand, "I'll have one of those too."

Carmilla handed Rose her beer and sandwich and then sat down next to Laura and unwrapped her sandwich as she gathered her thoughts.

"Look, Rose, I know there's no good reason for you to agree to this but…" Carmilla started, trailing off when Rose held up her hand.

"Wait," Rose said with a laugh, "I still don't know what I'm agreeing to."

"I think Shannon wants us to agree to not hurt each other in a way that would keeping me from fighting on the show," Carmilla offered.

"And you'll agree to the same?" Rose asked, her tone unreadable.

"I can't remember who said it," Carmilla started, obviously wrong footing her, "but it's a philosophy I try to follow; only hurt your opponent enough to get the win, in his case, the submission."

"How do you explain the 'Matrix' elbow?" Rose joked.

"Have you seen Danny?" Carmilla countered with a laugh. "She's huge!" She shook her head. "I knew my only chance to submit her would be to get her to the ground, but given our size difference, I knew the only way I'd get her down is if I took her off guard." She smiled. "And that's why I waited until the end of the round…"

"In case it didn't work," Rose finished for her. She took a sip of her beer and leaned back in her seat. "So what are you suggesting?"

"No cuts or anything else that would take either of us more than a couple of weeks to recover from," Carmilla suggested. "But I don't expect you to hold back," she shrugged. "If I get hurt, I get hurt. It's the cost of fighting and really, aside from me asking, there's no reason for you to agree." She studied her a moment. "In fact, I'm still not sure why you agreed to fight me in the first place."

"We got moved to the co-main," Rose deflected.
Carmilla laughed under her breath as she took a sip of her beer.

"What's so funny?" Laura prodded.

"Remember what I said about short notice fights?" she offered before turning back to Rose. "Win and it's no big surprise; you were supposed to," she smiled as Rose nodded. "Lose and it'll be considered an upset. One, maybe two, fights and you're back to where you are now." She tapped a finger on her chin. "Aside from the paycheque though, I'm still not sure what's in it for you."

"A shot at the title, either way, in the next year," Rose admitted. "Barring injury, of course." She smiled as she leaned forward and offered Carmilla her hand. "You've got your agreement," she smiled as Carmilla shook her hand. "Still gonna kick your ass though!" she joked as she sat back.

"I look forward to you trying," Carmilla countered.

'Hey," Laura interrupted, "why did you keep teasing Danny about her punching technique?"

"I accidently punched a cement wall once…"

"Accidently?" Laura interrupted again. "How do you 'accidentally' punch a cement wall?"

"Deanna was always on me about my grades and when I bombed a math test I knew it was only a matter of time before she took out her displeasure on me." She sighed and rubbed her face before turning to Laura. "You've seen how bad my anxiety attacks can get." Laura nodded. "Well, back then, my coping method was punching things, usually the nearest wall." She took Laura's hand again. "The pain snaps me out of it." She shrugged. "Anyway, I went into the bathroom, checked one wall, it was wood, but hit the wall behind me."

"Which was cement?" Laura guessed with a small smile.

"The school nurse sent me to the hospital to get it checked," she laughed. "The doctor was shocked; he told me, given that everything between my wrist and elbow was bruised, pulled or torn, I should have broken every bone in my hand."

"And you didn't?" Laura asked in surprise.

"Yes, my knuckles were bruised, swollen and torn up but I didn't break, or even fracture, anything," she clarified.

"Your friend, Danny, is she going to be okay?" Rose asked.

"How much of the Press Conference did you watch?" Laura queried.

"Shannon watched the whole thing but stopped me when they asked about your Jeep," Rose replied.

"For the record," Carmilla said with a sigh, "I really didn't know she was sick." She shook her head. "We'll know tomorrow but I think we caught it early enough that she'll be okay in about a year."

Shannon rejoined them a short time later and sat across from Carmilla.

"So," Shannon started with a smile, "do we have an understanding?"

"We do," Rose replied.
"Excellent," Shannon said with a grin and turned to Carmilla. "Can I ask you an ethics related question?"

"I suppose," Carmilla replied with a shrug.

"If you went into a fight knowing your opponent had a pre-existing injury, would you try to exploit it?" she asked.

"Only if I was losing and I could do it in such a way that it wouldn't make the injury any worse," Carmilla replied after a moment's thought. "But if it was an injury I caused, say something like a cut? Damn right I'd target it." She shook her head. "But, as I explained to Rose, I'll only do what's necessary to win." She smiled. "I have my own reasons for fighting and I appreciate anyone who is willing to fight me. I'm not about to endanger their careers with an avoidable injury."

Shannon regarded her a moment and then pulled her briefcase into her lap. She opened it, took a single sheet of paper from inside, scanned it a moment and then handed it to Carmilla.

"And you do this for the same reason?" Shannon questioned.

Carmilla recognized it immediately as the standard amendment she'd had for all her fights so far so she handed it to Laura to read. Normally, however, this was presented to her opponent after the fight. Perry had suggested, given the size of Invicta, that if she still intended to offer her opponent the money, that perhaps she should run it past Shannon before offering it to Rose.

"Seriously?" Laura exclaimed as she handed it back to her.

"Most fighters at this level don't get paid very much and struggle to make ends meet," she shrugged and handed the paper back to Shannon. "I'm not and I don't feel the women I fight should suffer financially if I win." She smiled and looked to Shannon. "They still get less than they would have if they'd won, I make sure of that, and there's a built in NDA."

"You don't want someone to accuse you of paying your opponents to lose?" Shannon provided as she handed the paper to Rose. "What about fight bonuses?"

"If I ever manage to win one," she joked, "I'll keep it." She shrugged. "Figure I'll have earned it."

"Fair enough," Shannon conceded and turned to Rose. "If you agree you'll get forty percent of Carmilla's purse if she wins."

"Wait," Laura interected, "so with mine and Perry's twenty percents you get barely anything for fighting?"

"I don't need it," Carmilla reminded her.

"I'd be stupid not to agree," Rose said with a smile as she signed it. "And I'm grateful enough not to question your motives."

"I always mean to win Rose, but I don't need the money and I don't expect to be doing this for the rest of my life. Don't get me wrong, I love competing, but in the end it's still nothing more than a means to an end."

The four continued talking about the fight game with Rose sharing her experiences of fighting for Invicta versus fighting in smaller organisations. The conversation stayed light, and not too personal, until the silence had stretched for a little while.
"I almost forgot," Rose smiled, "I have a bone to pick with you," she added as she pointed at Carmilla.

Before Carmilla could figure out what Rose could be referring to, Laura piped up; "She didn't know anything about it."

"Am I missing something?" Carmilla asked bemused.

"Pat Barry is her boyfriend," Laura supplied and looked back to Rose. "Sorry," she offered.

"No, I was just teasing," she replied with a grin. "We both thought it was funny and Pat's wasn't planned.

"Attention ladies and gentleman," the pilot announced over the PA, "we'll be starting our final approach shortly, please fasten your seatbelts."

They landed a short while later and said their goodbyes along with an offer to Rose to train at the gym anytime she liked. Laura and Carmilla settled themselves back in their seats to await take off again with the Xanders now taking the seats across from them.

"So, Betty," Carmilla started, "what's your story?"

"Well," she laughed, "I certainly didn't grow up dreaming of being a bodyguard." She took Steven's hand; "No offense, dear."

"None taken," he replied with a shrug, "neither did I."

"I'd been out of school for about a year," she smiled proudly. "Graduated top of my class and already had a promising law career ahead of me," she sighed. "Until I crossed paths with your stepmother." She shook her head. "I overheard her, well what sounded like anyway, threatening one of the senior partners. It had gotten quiet so I got a little closer to the door when she stormed out and right into me. I was fired by the end of the day and then blackballed from ever practicing law in this province again by the end of the week. But even that wasn't enough for her and why I ended up hiring Steven here." She laughed. "I know, it sounds like the plotline to some cheesy movie but here we are."

"By the time Deanna finally backed off she was head over heels for me," Steven added affectionately, "or maybe that was just me."

"So I took over the business side of things but we realised the temperamental actresses who normally pay our bills, sometimes felt more comfortable with a woman watching over them." She smiled. "So I spent the next two years learning everything I could from Steven."

"And now she can kick my ass!" Steven joked.

"Would you pursue your law career if given the chance?" Carmilla asked.

"I've already been offered the chance," Betty confided, "I guess your lawyer ran some background checks on us and he's offered me a job but I kind of want to see this assignment through first."

"Sorry about that, standard procedure I'm afraid," Carmilla replied as she felt the plane speed up for take off.

"No, it's okay, we understand," Steven assured her, "and you needn't worry about the extra help we hired, we ran them past Frank and Rick first and they all checked out."
Carmilla felt Laura's head on her shoulder and turned to kiss her forehead.

"How about that nap once we level out?" she offered.

"We'll be there in just over an hour," Betty reminded them with a raised eyebrow.

"Nap wasn't code for anything," Carmilla joked as the seatbelt light went off. She unbuckled herself and then did the same for Laura before leading into the other room. She took her phone from her pocket and set an alarm in case they actually fell asleep. She put her phone aside and then lay on the bed and waited for Laura to join her. Laura smiled and lay down her left side, her right arm coming to rest across her belly as she nuzzled into Carmilla's neck.

"Did you ever get around to calling Laura?" Carmilla asked.

"Yeah," Laura sighed, "on Wednesday." She propped herself up on her good arm so she could look at Carmilla while they talked. "She describes Bruce as gentle and kind. At least at first." She sat up and faced her. "Her parents had kicked her out when she came out and he 'rescued' her off the streets. At first it wasn't so bad; he gave her the basement apartment, made sure she was eating well and even gave her a television to watch. All that changed right around our stunt at the airport. She'd never tried to leave, because despite the weirdness of it all, she really had nowhere else to go. But she heard yelling upstairs one night and things breaking so she went to investigate. She found him alone but yelling at someone on the computer, she didn't see who. That's when he started locking her in there and disappearing for days at a time. When she saw on the news that he'd been arrested she got desperate and set the fire."

"So where is she now?" Carmilla asked.

"Staying with her aunt, who isn't much better than her parents," Laura replied and looked down. "I was thinking…"

"She can have the apartment across from Danny's but I expect her to finish school, understood?" Carmilla finished for her, smiling when Laura looked up with a grin. "Unless Tyler's taking that one in which case she can have one of the smaller ones."

"No, he's decided not to move in," Laura informed her, "he's afraid he'd only be in more danger if our affiliation with him is confirmed."

"Which is why you had him ask if I poisoned Danny?" Carmilla asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Partly," she admitted, "but I also wanted the conversation headed that way."

"Come here," Carmilla said as she motioned her back to her shoulder. "I'll call Dark and you call Laura…"

"She's decided to go by her middle name, Natasha, or Nat for short," Laura corrected.

"Alright, we'll have Dark call Nat and he and Danny can go get her and help her move in," Carmilla finished. "But enough about the real world," she said and kissed her forehead, "I just want to lay her for a bit and enjoy having you in my arms." Laura moved so she could kiss her softly and then lay back down. "It's been an exhausting couple of days and I feel like it's been forever since I've had you all to myself."

"Sounds good to me," Laura replied contentedly. "Are we still going up to the cabin when we get back?" she asked.
"I don't see why not," Carmilla replied which prompted Laura to look up to her again. "Like I said to Rick, with everything going on somehow hiding out at the cabin and sabotaging my Jeep so we wouldn't get hurt, isn't high on my lists of concerns." She could see Laura remained unconvinced, so continued; "Rick's sending up a team to check the fence and cameras. And though he didn't say it I suspect he's going to try to sweep the place and find any evidence of someone living up there. But don't forget the cameras that surround the cabin, no one can get near it without us knowing."

"How can you be so sure?" Laura questioned.

"Because Rick will make sure of it," Carmilla assured her and rolled her to her back. "And we won't be up there alone, at least for the first few days, so we're going to do a little exploring of our own. If we find anything suspicious we'll go home with everyone else." She kissed her softly. "Okay?" Laura nodded and pulled Carmilla back for another kiss. "Now," she said as she broke the kiss to nibble and kiss her way down Laura's neck, "there's plenty we can do with our clothes on and I'd rather concentrate on you than a bunch of stuff we can't do anything about right now." She kissed Laura again and searched her eyes. "Do you have any idea how much you mean to me?" She shook her head and kissed her again. "I have no idea how I'd have managed without you the last few days and everything you did to get the Press Conference ready and everything else," she sighed and studied her a moment, "How'd I get so lucky?"

"Karma?" Laura offered. "With the amount of shit you've been through, we've both been through, we're getting something equally, if not more, good to balance it all."

"Well then," Carmilla replied with a low chuckle as she snuck her hand under Laura's shirt, "we should celebrate our good fortune," she squeezed Laura's nipple through her bra, "Yes?" Laura could only nod and pulled her back for another kiss.

No, leaving Vancouver and it's all drama behind for two weeks might not be the best plan, but it was what she, and by extension, Laura, needed. Time away to regroup and prepare for the next round. She also suspected that her going away anyway, despite all the shit going on, would further discomfort Deanna. Will though… that was worrisome; she had a few theories and none of them were good.

Further thought was put on hold as Laura reversed their positions and started grinding into her hip as they kissed. "How did I get so lucky?" she wondered one last time before losing herself in Laura. Sure, her life was scary, but it seemed less so now that she had something more to fight for.

Chapter End Notes

So you may have noticed that the title has changed slightly. That's because I came to a somewhat scary but exciting decision the other day. This story has taken on a life of its own and I've decided, in order to properly do the story justice, to split it into three parts. Each part will have its own big revelation and conclusion. I'm hoping to wrap up this, the first part, by chapter thirty and I aim to have each part be about thirty chapters each. I'm hoping you guys see this as a good thing but I know many of you have been looking forward to Deanna getting what's coming to her and that won't happen for awhile. Thanks again for the support everyone and I hope you enjoyed the chapter. Any mistakes I've missed will likely get fixed in the next couple of days.
By Tuesday night Carmilla was starting to worry about Will. It had been three days and no one had heard from him. Laura was making them dinner when she finally broke down and called Dark.

"Aw, missing me already?" Dark teased affectionately when he answered.

"Have you heard from my shithead little brother yet?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied, "and I've been too busy ferrying Danny around to appointments and getting her and Nat settled in to go through his things yet."

"Fair enough," she sighed, "grab a pair of latex gloves from the first aid room and do that right away," she instructed. "I'm going to call Rick and see if he's heard anything." She hung up and called Rick next.

"Hey kiddo, as far as we know he hasn't left Deanna's yet," he said when he answered.

"Have you checked the hospitals yet?" she asked as Laura put her dinner in front of her.

"We had no reason to," he replied.

"No…" she spat and shook her head; "He's been missing for three days, isn't that reason enough?"

"But…"

"For Christ's sake Rick, do I have to remind you what she's capable of?" she asked angrily.

"Have you even tried calling him yet?" Rick countered defensively.

"That's my next call," she advised him and hung up on him.

She scrolled through her contacts, dialed Will's number and waited for it to go to voicemail, only it didn't.

"I was starting to wonder when you'd get around to noticing your brother is missing," Deanna drawled by way of greeting and caused Carmilla's blood to run cold and was about to answer when she felt Laura's hand on her wrist and then watched as she reached over to hit the record button.

"Where. Is. He?" she demanded.

"What makes you think I'd know?" Deanna replied calmly.

"Aside from the fact that you're answering his phone and you know he's missing?" she hissed as she stood and placed her clenched fists on either side of the phone. "So help me God, Deanna, if you don't start talking, I will have the police breaking down your door before you even have the chance to hide the evidence," she growled.

"Fine," Deanna said with a sigh, "no need to set your pet detective on me," she mocked.

"Where is he?" she repeated, her heart monitor beeping as her heart began to race.
"He showed up Saturday night stoned out of his tree," Deanna began, clearly relishing her tale. "He was ranting and raving," she sighed dramatically. "He tired himself out and didn't seem to have the energy to go anywhere so I put him to bed in his old room," her voice caught and Carmilla wasn't sure that it wasn't genuine. "I was an idiot," she sniffed, "I should've checked his things," she took a shaky breath. "I went to check on him before going to bed and found him unconscious in a pool of vomit with a needle in his arm."

"Where. Is. He?" Carmilla hissed again.

"I called my doctor who came over immediately and stabilized him before sneaking us both to the hospital," Deanna continued as though she hadn't been interrupted. "He's at VGH detoxing and will be transferred to a private rehab facility once he has."

Carmilla felt her knees going weak and fell back to her chair; what the fuck had her little brother gotten himself into? More importantly, why go to Deanna? She looked at her phone when it beeped, Dark was calling.

"Which facility?" Carmilla questioned and looked to Laura when she felt her move. She smiled when she saw that she was grabbing a pen and paper.

"I'm still working on it," Deanna replied. "I'll text it to this number?" she offered sweetly.

"Fine," she replied tersely, "and send the bill to Frank." She took a deep breath to gather the courage to say something she never thought she'd say. "Deanna?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Thank you for taking care of him."

"How much did it pain you to say that dearest?" Deanna taunted but continued before Carmilla could reply. "Whatever you may think of me, I do care about your brother."

"I've seen how 'care' about my brother," she retorted and hung before the conversation devolved further.

"You okay?" Laura asked as she called Dark back.

"No," she admitted. "What did you find?" she asked when Dark answered.

"Enough drugs to supply three raves," he replied gravely.

"Fuck!" she spat and stood to pace. "Put them back where you found them, I'm calling Rick," she instructed and hung up before he'd replied.

"I haven't found anything yet," Rick said lightly when he answered.

"Rick, shut up!" Carmilla demanded. "Fire whoever you have watching Deanna because they obviously suck."

"What's going on?" he asked, his worry clear.

"Will overdosed and she and her doctor managed to sneak him out to VGH," she explained as she went to get a beer from the fridge. "And Dark just found a shit load of drugs in his things, don't worry he was wearing gloves."

"Fuck!" Rick hissed, now she knew something was wrong; she'd never heard him swear before.
"Rick?" Laura prodded.

"What do you want me to do?" he deflected.

"Rick, what is it?" Carmilla demanded.

"There's been some rumors going around," he admitted, "some new player on the drug scene," he sighed. "I had no idea Will was involved."

"How bad is it?" Carmilla asked, her voice somehow still steady.

"I'm not sure..."

"Rick!" she interrupted, her patience wearing thin.

"I'm not!" he replied angrily, "Carmilla, calm the fuck down!" he yelled. Between the normally calm Rick losing it and Laura's hand on her shoulder, she deflated and fell onto the couch. "From what I've heard he's in for thirty large with one big player and stole drugs from another to try to pay him," he sighed. "I really didn't know Will was involved. What do you want me to do?"

"Go search his things and arrest his sorry ass," she replied as she started to lose the battle to keep her anger in check.

"Carm?" Laura said calmly as she sat beside her. "Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"I agree," Rick said, "with Carmilla."

"Call Frank, let him know what's going on," Carmilla said tiredly, "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She turned off her phone and threw it, as hard as she could, into the chair across from her.

"Carm?" Laura said tentatively as she put her hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged it off and stomped over to the fridge to grab another beer. She took the top off, shoved a lime wedge down its neck and took a long swallow. She opened the freezer, took out her cigarettes and began searching the drawers for her lighter, getting more and more agitated the longer she searched and then flinching at a tap on her arm.

"Looking for this?" Laura asked, a lighter in her hand, "I used it to light the candles in the bedroom last night, remember?" Carmilla met her eyes and felt her anger dissipate at the look of love and concern on her face tinged with the smallest trace of fear. She reached up slowly and rubbed the scowl from her forehead with her thumb and then replaced her thumb with her lips before kissing her softly.

"Carm?" Laura breathed as she pushed her away. "Talk to me," she pleaded.

"You don't understand," she sighed and leaned their foreheads together.

"So help me to," Laura begged and leaned back to meet her eyes.

"Fine," she sighed, "let's go out on the balcony," she added and took her hand to lead her outside. She shook a cigarette from the pack and put it between her lips to light it. Laura took the pack from her and shook out a cigarette for herself. Carmilla raised an eyebrow but lit it for her anyway.

"Who are you most angry at?" Laura asked carefully.
"I don't know yet," she admitted with a wry laugh. When Laura didn't join in she met her eyes again. "You think I'm overreacting?" she asked with an edge.

"Maybe a little…"

"What do you think would've happened if someone else ratted him out first?" she asked tersely. She stubbed out her cigarette and went back inside. She heard the door close behind her and turned to face Laura. "He brought drugs into my place of business! My home!" she screamed. "He could have cost me everything!" she finished, her voice cracking near the end. She fell to the couch and pulled her knees to her chest as the tears started to fall.

"Hey," Laura cooed as she sat beside her, "that's not going to happen, okay?" Carmilla felt her hand at the back of her neck, her thumb stroking it. "I get that you're angry, but…" she trailed off as Carmilla glared at her. "Don't look at me like that!" she spat angrily. "We don't know anything for sure yet!" Carmilla couldn't help the skeptical look that crossed her face. "We don't!" she repeated. "We only have Deanna's word and Rick's rumors. For all we know she drugged him," she offered. "And we don't know, for sure that Will is involved…"

"Why else would he have that many drugs?" she taunted hotly. "Recreational use?" She stood and ran her hands roughly through her hair. "If anyone knows what a significant amount of drugs is, it's Dark," she said, exhausted suddenly as she collapsed on the couch again and laid her head in her lap. "Maybe he was trying to get money from Deanna, who knows?"

"Exactly," Laura agreed and starting running her hand through Carmilla's hair, "we don't know," Laura sighed. "For all we know this is nothing more than another attempt to distract you or even get you to abandon your training and head home."

"Or maybe my brother is an idiot," Carmilla countered and looked up to her. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"It's okay."

"It's not," Carmilla said firmly and sat up. "I'm angry with myself more than anything else and I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

"This isn't your fault!" Laura exclaimed, her frustration clear.

"No, I know," she agreed with a sigh to Laura's obvious surprise. "And you're right, she got me hooked on drugs, I wouldn't put it past her to do it again." She sighed and rubbed her face. "I'm angry because I should've known something was up," She shook her head. "But between training, Deanna and…" she looked to Laura, "everything…"

"You mean us?" Laura asked sadly.

"I've been distracted," she said with a shrug, "I should've been paying more attention," she added sadly as she let Laura pull her into her arms. "He's my little brother; I should've taken better care of him."

"He's a big boy, responsible for his own decisions and mistakes," Laura reminded her.

"Is he though?" she asked as she leaned back and met her eyes. "Responsible, I mean?"

"You think Deanna is behind all this?" Laura queried.

"You said it yourself," Carmilla reminded her, "it could be just another attempt to distract me. With
"You need to eat," Laura countered as she got up and took her into her arms. "I'll reheat our food?" she offered.

"Okay," she replied and kissed her cheek, "I'm not very hungry though."

"You still need to eat," she chided. "You are training, after all."

"Yes dear," Carmilla replied sweetly and kissed her. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"It's what we do, right?" she replied and kissed her. "Take care of each other?"

"I wish we didn't have to," she replied wearily and went to sit at the table while Laura reheated their food. "We've only been together a couple of weeks," she sighed as she turned her phone on and waited for it to boot up. "We should be enjoying being together and having dates and great sex..."

"Well," Laura piped up as she returned with their plates, "we have been having a lot of the last."

"Very true," Carmilla said as she blushed and then leaned over to kiss her. "I'm still sorry we skipped over the rest though."

"I'm not," Laura replied, "and we sorta did the dating thing," she shrugged, "so what if we didn't acknowledge that that was what we were doing?" She smiled and pulled Carmilla's hand to her lips. "I love you Carm, and despite all the crap that keeps getting thrown at us, I've never been happier." She let her hand go and motioned to her plate; "Eat!" she ordered.

Carmilla chuckled under her breath and grabbed her spoon. She pushed her chili around the plate a moment before fishing out a piece of meat and putting it her mouth. She went to chew it but found the meat falling apart in her mouth.

"Is it okay? I tried following your recipe," Laura asked anxiously, not having touched her own meal yet.

"It's better than mine," she answered honestly. "No really, my meat is never this tender on the first day, my chili is always better the next day. Did you spend all afternoon cooking?"

"Maybe," Laura answered with a grin and a shrug. "I might have been distracting myself," she admitted, "I just finished your second journal," she supplied somberly, but then smiled when she tasted her own chili.

"Told you it was good," Carmilla teased as she buttered a slice of sourdough bread. She ran it through the chili and then bit off a hunk of the bread, sighing in pleasure at the combination of the sour bread with the sweet chili. "You okay? I know it gets pretty dark near the end."

"It's been awhile, though, since you wrote that," Laura said thoughtfully, "You've changed since then."

Carmilla had stopped writing shortly after Bob's death. Truth is, she'd shut down completely for a long time, it was the only way she could cope. At her worst she had seriously contemplated suicide, even going so far as to plan it out. She was days away from enacting her plan when she heard
rumors about the Ultimate Fighter and realised that maybe there was another way. She put her journals in her safe, vowing not to read them again, and dedicated her life to training and getting on the show.

"I think," Carmilla said thoughtfully, "I'd have only gone through with it if I knew, for sure, that Deanna would get blamed but then I heard about the Ultimate Fighter and figured out a better way to get my revenge," she sighed deeply. "She knows she's being followed."

"Yes, I caught that too," Laura admitted. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know," she admitted and pushed her plate away; she managed to eat most of it but was already full. "I know having Will arrested seems a bit much, I do, but it's the only way I can make sure that it's clear that I knew nothing about it. The press will try to twist this, say that, not only did I know what he was doing but that I was giving him the money to do it," she reached for her phone, "which, technically, I was." She dialed Frank's number and waited for him to answer, putting him on speakerphone when he did. "Hey Frank, got any good news for me?"

"I'll call you right back," he said and hung up.

She frowned at her phone and took a sip from her forgotten beer.

"That was weird," Laura commented as she took her plate.

"Slightly," she agreed; why would he answer if he couldn't talk?

She didn't have much time to wonder as her phone began ringing.

"Sorry about that," Frank apologized, "I'm at the hospital and was talking to Will's doctor."

"How is he?" Carmilla asked, realizing, maybe for the first time, that he was in physical danger.

"They're keeping him in a coma until the worst of it is over," he explained. "They're worried his heart will give out if he's awake to experience it. The downside is, with the drugs to keep him under, the detox is a little slower."

"When will they wake him?" Laura asked as she sat back down at the table and took her hand.

"Probably tomorrow," he replied. "So what's the plan?"

"You know the plan, Frank," Carmilla said wearily. "But in addition to transferring the cabin and all its assets to my name; cut him off, completely, and find out how much money the little shit owes me."

"And you're sure you want to do that? The cabin is still under my name until he turns twenty-one," he countered.

"But it's still considered one of his assets and will be frozen along with everything else the minute he's arrested," Carmilla explained patiently. "I won't have Kenny and his family uprooted because of his stupidity!"

"Fair enough," he sighed. "Since Rick can't have him arrested until he wakes up, I'll get the paperwork drawn up tonight and file it first thing in the morning, but…" he hesitated.

"I know the timing will look bad," she supplied, "I don't care."

"But…" he tried to interrupt again.
"No," she said firmly, "I won't lose the property because of his stupidity and if it comes up that is exactly the excuse I'll use and you know I've been thinking of doing it for the last year because I'm scared he'll sell it."

"Okay, okay…" he conceded.

"And find him a good lawyer, he's going to need it," she added before hanging up. She looked to Laura, who was looking bemused. "You may have gathered already that my father's family is a little old-fashioned. There's a morality clause in our inheritances, a clause my father relaxed, somewhat, for us," she sighed. "If we get arrested all assets are frozen until such time as we've either proved our innocence or have served our time."

"I don't understand how that would affect Kenny and his family though," Laura questioned.

"Because the property is a lot bigger than what is fenced off and he, and all his family, have their homes on the very edge of it," Carmilla supplied. "Laura…" she sighed, "I know you must feel like there are still a lot of things that I'm keeping from you, or that I'm even lying about some of them but please, understand, it's not that I want to keep this stuff from you but that there's so many things, I just haven't gotten around to sharing all of them with you."

"I know," Laura smiled, "and I do understand," she assured her and kissed her softly. "But how about we put this stuff on hold for the rest of the night? Maybe take a hot bath?"

"I like the sound of that," Carmilla replied with a grin, "but I want to call Danny first."

"Why?" Laura asked as she sat back down.

"See how's she doing," she supplied with a shrug. "She should have gotten her test results by now," she added as she called her.

"Oh God, Carm, I'm glad you called," Danny said when she answered. "I didn't know Will was into drugs, honestly, I didn't."

"Happy to hear it Xena, but that isn't why I called," Carmilla said with a laugh. "How did your tests go?"

"They took test samples from my hands to my shoulders," Danny paused, as if she couldn't bring herself to admit the truth. Laura took Carmilla's hand and squeezed it as they waited for her to finish. "Nothing, not even in my hands."

"Seriously?" Laura squeaked out.

"Yeah," Danny replied with a laugh of her own. "The Doc and Lafontaine think that my dehydrating myself weakened the little bastards just as they were trying to get into the stress fractures they caused in my hands," she laughed. "And you're right, Carm, the Doc said some of the fractures are older than the infection. Maybe, when you get back from the house, you can help me correct my form?"

"Sure thing, Xena," Carmilla replied warmly; though she wouldn't have admitted it before, she was actually starting to like Danny. "So what's the prognosis?"

"My blood is already almost clean just from the meds, after that it's just a matter of time while my bones regain their density," she paused again, "I should be back to training in three or four months."
"That's awesome, Danny," Carmilla said, it was the first good news she'd heard in a long time it seemed. "We're all going up to the cabin when we get back from the Invicta fight; I hope you'll come with us?"

"Really?" Danny asked uncertainly.

"Yes really," Carmilla replied with a laugh. "I know our friendship had an unconventional start, but if I'm going to leave you alone with my girlfriend for six weeks, I'd like to get to know you a little better before I do."

"Fair enough," Danny replied slowly. "Carm? You should know Deanna called me yesterday."

"And what did she want?" Laura asked as Carmilla had clenched her fists again.

"She didn't say anything about Will," Danny said quickly, "nor did I ask. I didn't think you'd want her to know we knew he was there."

"Good point," Carmilla replied tersely.

"It was kind of obvious that she was fishing for information, though, about me, what happened with your Jeep, why I'm staying here," Danny supplied.

"And what did you tell her?" Carmilla asked, trying, but failing, to keep the edge from her voice.

"Some of the truth," Danny began. "I told her you and I talked after the fight and you shared your suspicions about me being sick with the same thing Dark had been and because of that you offered me a place to stay while I recuperate," she sighed. "She tried to warn me against it, implied it was you that had found a way to make me sick and that you'd made Dark sick as an experiment," she laughed dryly. "I swear that woman could be a writer, the way she can so easily distort the truth. Anyway, I didn't say anything about the Jeep because I really don't know anything and then I hung up on her when she started in, again, on trying to warn me about you," she sniffed. "Carm?"

"Yeah Xena?" Carmilla prodded.

"I'm sorry."

"What for?" Carmilla asked.

"For ever misjudging you," Danny offered. "I disliked you the moment I met you. I thought, 'here's this girl who could have anything, anyone, she wants, and has more talent in the cage than anyone I've ever seen, and she doesn't care about any of it'," she laughed. "I was jealous," she admitted. "I could train with the best coaches in the world and never have an ounce of the raw talent you possess."

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Danny," Carmilla countered. "I wasn't just being nice when I said, if you fix the few holes in your game, I'll be lucky to make it to the second round. Your problem is that you don't believe in yourself enough and you haven't gotten past the awkward stage a lot of taller people go through when they first grow. Once you have, you'll be unstoppable," she smiled as a thought came to her. "I think, once you're able to train again, you should stay at the gym and train with me. No rent, no training costs attached. If all you have to worry about is training and school, you'll be unbeatable."

"You really think so?" Danny asked uncertainly.

"I do, Danny," Carmilla assured her. "And I'm sorry too, I acted like an ass because, well, I envied
your uncomplicated life and the fact that, given a little training, you could beat my ass without really trying just by virtue of your size."

"Can I ask you something?" Danny questioned.

"Sure."

"Did you take our fight seriously at all?" Danny asked, the doubt clear in her voice.

"You were always going to have a size advantage I could do nothing about," Carmilla smiled, "except to get into your head and make you think I wasn't worried about it," she added. "As for having fun during the fight?" she smiled again. "I could see it was getting to you; the more fun I seemed to be having the wilder your punches became, the bigger the holes I had to exploit."

"And you didn't put on weight because you knew you might be getting the Invicta fight?" Danny asked.

"Partially," Carmilla said and noticed Laura yawning. "But it was more about how shitty I'd have felt, physically, if I'd have eaten the way I'd have had to to gain the weight. I also have trouble eating the week before a fight so cutting weight is rarely an issue," she smiled as Laura suppressed another yawn. "But we're going to go, Laura is falling asleep on me."

"Am not," Laura's retort was interrupted by another yawn. "I think it's the altitude." "Could be," Carmilla accepted. "We'll talk to you on the weekend, Danny, take care."

"You too," Danny replied and hung up.

"So..." Carmilla started as she stood with her hand out to Laura, "bath?"

Laura reached for Carmilla's phone and turned it off before taking her hand and leading her to the bathroom. She took the lighter from her pocket to light the half dozen candles around the bathtub while Laura started the water and added some bubble bath. She turned to Laura once she was done with the candles, the younger girl busy putting a bag over her cast.

"Here," Carmilla said as she went to help her, "let me."

"God I'll be happy when this stupid thing is off," Laura said with a sigh.

"I don't know," Carmilla started as she leaned in to kiss her neck, slipping Laura's bra straps down her arms as she continued; "you seem to do pretty well for someone with only one working arm," she chuckled. "Can't imagine what you're going to do me once you've got both hands," she teased.

"Well," Laura said as she lifted Carmilla's shirt off over her head, Carmilla having already taken off the younger woman's bra; "if we're lucky, you might get to find out before you leave for Vegas." Carmilla met her eyes. "Doc took some more x-rays when I saw him Thursday," she paused for effect. "He said it's healing really well, and if it's at least two thirds healed when we get back, I can get the cast off."

"Makes sense," Carmilla commented as they undid each other's pants, "the way your arm broke you spared the muscles, and with the metal plate holding the bone in place, the cast was more to make sure all the veins, arteries, and possibly tendons, healed properly." She smiled at Laura's pout. "I'm sorry, Pup, did I steal your thunder?" she asked as she pulled Laura's underwear and pants down.
"Maybe a little," she laughed as she watched Carmilla take off her own pants and underwear. "He said my wrist was likely going to be frozen so the cast will end up doing more damage than good if I keep it any longer than necessary."

"Which means, even without the cast, it's going to be a little while before you get full movement back," she kissed her softly and then helped her into the bath, Laura sitting against the tub's edge so she could rest her casted arm on the ledge. Carmilla sat in front of her and grabbed the loofa, added some body wash and then handed it to her. "So you'll still have to be careful."

"I know," Laura sighed, "but at least I won't have to put a bag over it every time I want to take a shower and I won't have to worry about accidently smacking you with it anymore," she added as she started washing Carmilla's back.

"True enough," Carmilla replied with a sigh as Laura rinsed off her back. She turned to face her so she could wash her front. "But I meant what I said; you're pretty good with just the one hand," she teased. "Almost makes me wonder how you got so good considering I'm the first woman you've slept with."

Laura blushed deeply as she rinsed the soap from Carmilla's chest and then handed her the loofa to return the favour. "Um, lots of, um…"

"Self-exploration?" Carmilla offered, which caused Laura to blush even further as she nodded.

"And maybe a lot of fanfiction," Laura added as Carmilla washed her front.

"Fanfiction, really?" Carmilla said thoughtfully as she rinsed her off.

"There's this one series," she frowned slightly before turning for Carmilla to wash her back, "it's been on hold for a while, but it's not like anything else I've read. Anyway, it's a Harry Potter story that's told from mostly Ginny and Hermione's points of view but now has evolved and they're in this five way polyamorous relationship that includes Fleur and Luna, who are a couple, and Tonks who hasn't found her soulmate yet," she shook her head. "And the smut!" she laughed. "I found myself way too turned on, on the bus, one too many times," she admitted as she turned back around.

"Is that, polyamory, something you'd be interested in?" Carmilla asked, her heart in her throat; she really wasn't sure she could share Laura.

"No," she said and pulled Carmilla into her arms, "I don't think I could share you with anyone."

"Good answer," Carmilla said with a sigh as she turned, slid her left arm behind her and laid her head on her shoulder. "Laura? What you said earlier? About, despite the shit, you've never been happier?" She looked up and met her eyes. "Me too."

Chapter End Notes

So maybe I referenced my other fanfiction saga ;-) . Sorry this is a little late, I couldn't figure out an ending. Good news though, with a three day weekend coming up you should see the next chapter sometime Sunday.
Carmilla woke the day before weigh-ins alone, which was unusual these days. She stretched and listened carefully as she tried to determine where Laura was. She crawled out of bed and slipped on her red silk robe before going to the bathroom to attend to her morning needs. After washing her hands and quickly brushing her teeth she exited into the living room to find Laura out on the balcony, talking on her phone and a wisp of smoke above her head.

"... no, I understand, but..." Laura was saying as Carmilla joined her and took her in her arms. "No, I have to go," she said and hung up. "Hey," she said softly as she turned in Carmilla's arms and then kissed her.

"Who was that?" Carmilla asked, her suspicions piqued as Laura had immediately slipped her phone in her pocket and not let her see the screen to see who she was talking to.

"My Dad," Laura replied with a sigh. "He's still angry we didn't have him search Will's things instead of Dark." She shook her head. "He can't seem to understand it's probably for the best."

When Rick went to arrest Will he was met by a lawyer Deanna had already hired for him. Will claimed he was only holding the drugs for a friend and that he hadn't even known what was in the bag. Rick had countered that his fingerprints, and only his fingerprints, were found on the bags the drugs were in. The lawyer then challenged the legality of the search through Will's things. A moot point considering the home's owner, Carmilla, had asked him to search her brother's things. Rick finally succeeded, despite the lawyer's best efforts, to put Will under arrest.

Will's arraignment had gone about as well as they had expected; he was released into Rick's custody provided he was then checked into a secure drug rehabilitation facility. Will was still under investigation so Rick argued, and the judge agreed, to have Will placed under 'house arrest' while in rehab as he was concerned that Will would attempt to flee the facility.

That was the bad news. The good news was that Deanna was pissed. Laura had theorized that Deanna, was in fact, the drug player that Rick had mentioned and she was the 'friend' that Will was holding the drugs for. Will claimed to know nothing, of course.

He'd only to talked to his lawyer and Danny. The latter of course, shared the conversation with them minutes after it happened as she'd been troubled by what Will had told her. Not only did he claim that Dark had been drugging him in an attempt to get him to sleep with him but that it had started almost as soon as he'd gotten back from Montreal. He still wouldn't say who he was holding the drugs for and insisted that he wasn't responsible for the drugs that were in his system the night of the fight. His story was that he'd started talking to some girl during the fights who drugged him and took back to her room, supposedly so she could frame him for some nefarious deed and then blackmail him for money. He said he figured out what was going on and ran to Deanna because he was scared, and knowing no one was at the gym, had gone the only place he thought, in his drug induced state, was safe. He also admitted to not remembering much after getting to Deanna's, including how he overdosed.

While Carmilla knew that his story was bullshit, likely concocted by Deanna to cover her tracks, it troubled her as well. As she'd once told Laura, the best bullshit always contained a kernel of truth. His blood tests showed prolonged drug use, longer than the four weeks he'd been back. What
concerned her more though was the Heroin he'd overdosed on as there had been reports of the drug being tainted. Will had gotten lucky, he'd be alright in time, physically anyway; it was his mental state that had her asking Dark and Kirsch to pack all his things and have them placed in storage.

Danny had had the presence of mind to record their conversation and Will's account was told in a way that sounded rehearsed, but when he started warning Danny against Carmilla, his fear for Danny's safety sounded genuine and his story was much the same as the one Deanna had told the redhead herself.

She was trying to give her little brother the benefit of a doubt but as the evidence poured in, she was having a harder and harder time finding excuses for his behaviour. Laura further speculated that Deanna had been slowly drugging him, perhaps getting him hooked before ever leaving for university, to make him more susceptible to her manipulations and lies. Carmilla wondered if Deanna was trying to frame her for the drug dealing.

The sum total of the situation being that Will now sat in rehab with an ankle monitor bracelet and she had no clue if he was knowingly working for Deanna or not. Frank had, for the most part, managed to keep the news from the press and it seemed, for once, Deanna had made no attempt to see that it made it to print anyway. However Will had managed to overdose she suspected it wasn't part of Deanna's original plan and that Laura had been right all along, it was nothing more than an attempt to distract her from her training.

Carmilla sighed and pulled Laura's head to her chest; what was done was done and she'd deal with it when they returned to Vancouver on Monday. Today they had more immediate concerns; namely the weigh-ins the next day. She'd spent eight of the last nine days training harder than she had ever before. Between working with world class fighters and trainers and feeling like she was trying to run through water for the first few days due to the altitude, not only was she in the best shape of her life, she was right on track to weigh-in at one fifteen the next day.

"Did you explain to him that we were just trying to figure out what was going on and not that we expected to find anything?" Carmilla asked as she led her inside.

"He thinks you did it just so Will would have reasonable doubt that the drugs weren't his," Laura confided.

"But we didn't know what we'd find," Carmilla said in frustration. "And trust me, if he is the new player Rick thinks he is, he's safer where he is."

"You don't think Deanna would have him hurt, do you?" Laura asked in shock.

"At this point?" Carmilla countered and sighed; "I don't know, but the dealers he screwed over might."

"Is that why you insisted Danny not leave the gym alone?" Laura asked as she prepared their breakfast of granola and yoghurt.

"Of all of us, she's the most vulnerable and most valuable to Deanna," Carmilla explained as she made the coffee. "One person getting sick is suspicious. Two could be coincidence. But three? Three's a pattern."

"But we have no hard evidence your father was infected," Laura replied thoughtfully.

"True," Carmilla agreed. "But, like I've said before, she's not one to not do her research. She knows, even though Danny will soon be parasite free, that a marker remains in her blood. If we can
find a way to prove that both her and Dark's infections are linked then a judge may accept that my father was too." Carmilla carried their bowls of cereal and her coffee to the table, Laura sitting beside her with a cup of tea. "But enough about that," she smiled and swallowed her nerves, "there's something I want to talk to you about," she said as she pulled her laptop across the table. "I was thinking about all the people now staying at the gym," she began and sighed. "I emailed Mattie, you know, my real estate agent, to start looking for a house, um, for us."

"Seriously?" Laura blurted out.

"I know we've barely been together a month but," she shrugged, "I thought it'd be nice to have a place that is just ours," she reached for Laura's hand. "We're always talking about our future together, and if the last few weeks has taught me anything, it's that we shouldn't wait to start building our future together because who knows what's going to happen next?"

"Carm, don't…"

"I'm not saying anything bad will happen but we need to take advantage of the few peaceful times alone that we get," she pulled her hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles. "I love you Laura and I don't know when our lives will be completely normal but I think we should try for little bits here and there." She studied her a moment before opening the email Mattie had sent her with a few house options. The one she liked most overlooked Horseshoe Bay, already had a swimming pool and had it's own boat launch. "So? What do you think?" she asked as Laura still hadn't responded.

"I think you're crazy," Laura said with a small laugh, "but I love you and I'll follow you anywhere," she smiled. "Do I think it's a bit fast?" she asked with a shrug. "Maybe, but I don't care." She pointed to Carmilla's laptop; "So, what are the options?"

Carmilla opened Mattie's email and the pictures she had attached. Laura gasped at the large home and it's beautiful view. "It's an investment too," Carmilla reasoned, "Even if the real estate market isn't the greatest right now, property is always a good bet." She smiled as Laura's eyes grew wider and wider with every picture. "The only thing I'm not so sure about is how close the neighbors are," she shrugged, "but it's so big I don't see it being much of an issue." She took her hand again and ran her thumb across Laura's knuckles. "I thought, maybe, Danny could stay with you while I'm gone? Help you finish decorating it?"

"Wait," Laura said and met her eyes, "have you already bought it?"

"No," she smiled, "but I let Mattie know I was interested and she can probably get it signed over to us before I leave." She smiled again. "What do you say, Pup? Want to start our future?"

"What about traveling?" Laura asked as she went back to looking at the pictures again.

"Vancouver will always be home," Carmilla countered. "And even if we're traveling the world it would be nice to know we have our own home to come back to, don't you think?"

"True," Laura replied with a small smile as she met her eyes again, "but home is, to me, wherever we are together."

"Shall we take a shower before we leave?" Carmilla suggested, she could tell by Laura's face that her change of topic had confused her. "I'm sorry," she said and kissed her cheek, "I know I'm not so good with the feelings thing and sometimes you say stuff that I just have no answer for." She stood and pulled Laura to her feet before kissing her deeply. "And sometimes you manage to give voice to things I haven't been able to find words for yet."
A few hours later and the two were again cruising above the clouds in the Karstein jet. Laura was looking out the window when Carmilla decided to let her in on one of the surprises she had store for her after the mandatory Press Conference. She took her sketch book out of her backpack and flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

"I didn't know you can draw," Laura commented as she looked over her shoulder.

"I can't," Carmilla replied with a shrug, "not really," she smiled, "but I can trace stuff and design it," she qualified as she handed Laura the book. "I was talking to my tattoo artist the other day, you know, about your idea for the Phoenix tattoos? Anyway, she isn't too keen about tattooing our names, but I think I found a compromise," she said pointing at her design, wondering if Laura would recognize the Celtic knot she used as a background to their names.

"But that's…"

"The knot used in the fanfiction you're so fond of," Carmilla supplied. "I hope you don't mind, I was curious about the story and looked it up in the browser history on your phone."

"Have far into the story have you gotten?" Laura asked as she ran her finger over the design.

"Hermione's name just came out of the Goblet," she provided.

"That's a fair way in, when do you read?" Laura questioned.

"Sometimes, late at night, I wake up and can't go back to sleep," she blushed, "Sometimes I doodle, sometimes I read," she smiled, "I hate to admit it but that story is engaging and hard to put down." She nodded toward the drawing, "I don't know how small she can make the knot but I was thinking of getting our names in white ink," she kissed her cheek, "because really, it's for me to see and know what it is, not others to appreciate or even understand." She studied her a moment, Laura's reaction was impossible to gauge by the look on her face. "What do you think?"

"It's perfect," Laura replied with a smile.

"Remind me," Betty said lightly, "how long have you two been together again?"

"Four weeks tomorrow and a month in few days, why?" Carmilla answered with a chuckle.

"Because you seem like you've been together for years," Steven commented.

"Most people don't spend as much time together as we have," Carmilla countered.

"Or been through as much shit as we have in the time since we met," Laura added.

"That," Betty sighed and took Steven's hand, "that, I understand."

"You mentioned being a bodyguard hadn't been your plan either?" Laura asked Steven.

"I was a hockey player," he shrugged, "mostly an 'enforcer' due to my size but I wanted to more involved in the game itself but they couldn't see past my size," he smiled, "Anyway, I was this close," he said, indicating a small space with his thumb and finger, "from being drafted by the Canucks when I wrecked my knee in a stupid brawl," he shook his head. "The recovery time gave me time to think," he smiled, "That's when I met Rick in Physio. Because of my knee and abysmal high school records, I could never be a cop but he helped me setup my own business and put me in contact with people who'd hire me," he smiled at Betty, "We might not be 'well off' but we do okay," he looked back to the girls, "Every so often we get a cool gig that lets us travel for free and
meet new and interesting people."

"As much as I may have been against the idea, initially," Carmilla smiled, "I'm glad you're part of the 'family' now."

"We're still getting paid, right?" Steven joked.

"Of course," Carmilla replied with a laugh, "especially since you give me something so much greater than money," she smiled, "a little peace of mind."

"Only a little?" Betty teased.

"You know what she's capable of," Carmilla countered grimly, "none of us are safe until she's behind bars," she sighed, "and maybe not even then."

"What do you mean?" Laura asked fearfully.

"My Jeep?" she offered, "It was rigged over a year ago. Now that she knows her time is coming to an end, what's to stop her from doing something else like that?" She sighed and looked back to the Xanders; "I'm think of buying a house in West Van before I leave, if Laura chooses to stay there while I'm gone, I'd appreciate the two of you staying with her."

"No," Laura said quietly but firmly which caused Carmilla to meet her eyes, "I want to stay at the gym," she took Carmilla's hand, "I'll still finish decorating it and maybe stay there for a day, here and there, but I'd rather be around people than isolating myself."

"I was going to suggest, aside from the Xanders, that Dark and Danny stay with you," Carmilla confided, "and maybe your Dad?"

"No," she replied again, "maybe I'm being silly, or sentimental," she shrugged, "I want to be where we fell in love, where I have constant reminders of you, not some big new house we've yet to fill with memories." She smiled as Carmilla kissed her softly. "Besides, we'll be safer together; Dark, Kirsch, Danny, everyone, in one place, ya know?"

"That's true," Steven said thoughtfully.

"Hello ladies and gentleman," the pilot announced over the PA, "we'll be starting our final descent shortly, please buckle up!"

Carmilla woke the next morning, looked at the time, groaned as it was far too early to be awake, and curled up behind Laura. She moved her hair away from her neck, kissed it softly, and then laid her head back on the pillow and thought about all that had happened the day before.

The rest of the day had passed quickly. From the airport they'd stopped by the hotel to drop off their things before the Press Conference across the street. Carmilla had been particularly nervous for the conference; she'd never dealt with the press outside of Vancouver, and despite the success of her last confrontation with them, she knew that had more to do with Laura being by her side than anything else. The upside, of course, is that the Conference wasn't focused solely on her but the other fighters on the card as well. In fact, she'd only had to answer one question, whether or not she felt ready for the fight having fought only two weeks prior. It was the first time she'd been asked a question that she could answer honestly without worrying what the consequences might be.

After a few pictures and dropping off Carmilla's blood tests, Steven drove them to meet with Carmilla's tattoo artist. Although she was still reluctant to tattoo their names she finally agreed with
the provision that, should they ever decide to hide the tattoos in the future, that they come to her for the cover-up. They spent the next hour going over the drawings of the Phoenix tattoos they had planned; as they weren't sure the exact location of Laura's scar, nor the size, the artist took measurements of Laura's right arm and explained she'd leave a blank spot in the approximate location. Carmilla had surprised Laura when she and the artist discussed the main link of the tattoos; the motto Laura had come up with, 'Sometimes Beaten, Never Broken'. It would appear on both tattoos but when then held their arms together the first part would be visible on Carmilla's arm and the second half on Laura's, the two halves of the Phoenix creating one whose outline formed a fiery heart. Each tattoo would be complete, and slightly different from each other, but together they formed something entirely new.

They had planned to do some window shopping along the Vegas strip but Carmilla soon found the oppressive heat of the afternoon wearing on her and suggested they return to the calm, quiet and air conditioning of their hotel room. Carmilla slipped off her clothes the minute they were alone and stepped on the scale to check her weight; one hundred and sixteen. A good run in the morning and she'd be fine.

She let her left hand start to wander as she thought about the rest of the evening spent watching a couple of dumb movies and cuddling on the couch. The cuddling had turned to more and the two soon found themselves ignoring the movie in favour of each other. She smiled and kissed Laura's shoulder before gently pulling her to her back.

"Have I mentioned," Laura started sleepily, "how much I love being woken up by you?"

"Pity you're usually up before me then," Carmilla teased and then kissed her.

Laura broke the kiss and looked at the clock.

"It's not even seven yet, why are you awake?" Laura asked as she rolled Carmilla to her back. "What time do we have to be there for weigh-ins?"

"Four-ish," Carmilla supplied. She smiled and moved some of Laura's hair behind her ear. "I guess, cause we've been getting up around now for the last two weeks, I just woke up," she shrugged. "Why don't we take a shower and go do the window shopping we meant to do yesterday before it gets too hot?"

Before Laura could answer though, there was a knock at the door, followed by the sound of it opening and Steven calling; "Carmilla?!

"What's wrong?" she called back as she hurried from the bed and slipped on her robe on the way out the living room.

"Nothing's wrong," Steven replied calmly, the door half open behind him, "I don't think anyway," he shook his head, "you have a visitor," he supplied and stepped aside to reveal Rose standing behind him.

"Um, come in," Carmilla offered and motioned her inside despite her confusion.

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing here," Rose offered as she joined Carmilla at the table. "Carm?" Laura said as she joined them. "What's going on?"

"I don't know yet," she replied with a small frown.

"Coffee?" Laura offered.
"Please," Carmilla answered and looked to Rose, "Coffee?"

"Sure, black," Rose replied.

"So," Carmilla said as she studied Rose, "what's up Buttercup?"

Rose laughed as Laura came to join them.

"Thanks for the coffee," Rose said and took a sip. "In case you're wondering, I made sure no one knows I'm here," she sighed. "I've been thinking about our agreement, in fact," she sighed again, "it's all I've been thinking about."

"You're worried it'll be obvious we're holding back?" Carmilla surmised and received her nod. "Then don't," she shrugged. "Look, a fight is a fight and anything can happen, right?" Rose nodded again. "So go out there and do whatever you need to do to win, and I'll do the same."

"But what if I hurt you and you lose your spot on the Ultimate Fighter?" Rose countered.

"I agreed to this fight before we had an agreement," Carmilla reminded her, "as did you."

"So?" said Rose.

"So," Carmilla smiled, "I took it knowing that if I got hurt I might not be able to fight in house," she shrugged. "Yes, I have my reasons for wanting to be on the show, and honestly, they have little to do with fighting," she laughed. "Well, with MMA anyway," she amended. "My point is, I took the fight knowing the risks, if I get hurt, I get hurt and we'll find another way to accomplish our goals."

"But if you're already on the show, with or without the fight, why take the chance?" Rose questioned.

"Because the benefits of taking the fight outweigh the possibility of getting hurt," Carmilla reasoned. "Win or lose, a fight against you, an established fighter in Invicta, will help me in the house, give me a legitimacy that I wouldn't have, in the eyes of the other fighters and coaches, that this fight gives me. My first two pro fights ended in controversy; first an accidental knee to a downed opponent and then Danny. I need this fight to prove I'm a real fighter."

"I don't know about that," Rose said thoughtfully, "you looked really good against Danny."

"Thanks, but she was moving a lot slower than she usually does," Carmilla clarified.

"Maybe," Rose said with a smile, "but her slowness doesn't take away from every single one of your strikes landing perfectly. How is she anyway, is she going to be okay?"

"Yes, actually," Laura answered with a grin, "thanks to Carm they caught it early enough that she should be back to training in a few months."

"That's awesome news," Rose replied genuinely. "So… no holding back tomorrow?"

"I won't if you won't," Carmilla replied with her hand out, "Only…"

"Don't tell Shannon?" Rose asked with a laugh as she shook her hand.

"Yeah, and make sure you're not seen on your way out," Carmilla suggested as she stood and motioned her to the door. "I'll have Steven walk you out, just to be safe, and I'll see you later?"
"Should we scuffle at the weigh-ins?" Rose suggested.

"Hmmm…" Carmilla hummed as she considered it. "Maybe just be intense, no nonsense, kind of?"

"Sounds good," Rose said and hugged her briefly. "I look forward to a good fight."

"Me too," Carmilla replied and opened the door. "Steven?" she said to get his attention as he and Betty were talking by their open door across the hall. "Can you walk Rose out? Make sure she isn't seen?"

"Sure thing," he replied and motioned down the hall.

She and Laura watched the two until the entered the elevator and then returned inside.

"Are you going to eat something before weigh-ins?" Laura asked.

"Let me check where I'm at first," Carmilla replied as she shrugged off her robe to weigh herself; still one hundred and sixteen. "Just a shake," she answered, "and I think I'll go for a run instead of shopping."

"I don't know," Laura said as she began taking things from the fridge for Carmilla's shake, "you'd probably sweat off just as much just walking around."

"True," Carmilla replied and took Laura in her arms, "but, since my game plan just flew out the window, I need some time to think and running lets me do that."

"What are you going to do?" Laura questioned as she turned in her arms.

"End it as quickly as I can," she shrugged, "be aggressive and go for a fast knockout," she sighed, "I honestly don't know." She rested her head to Laura's chest. "All I have to do is get out unhurt. A win would be nice but I don't need it."

"But if she knocks you out that's usually a minimum forty-five day no contact suspension," Laura countered.

"So I'll make sure I don't get knocked out," Carmilla replied and met her eyes, "Despite what Rose and I just agreed, I don't think she'll go for the knock out, she usually uses her punches to get the submission. As long as I don't get any bad cuts I should be fine."

"Or, you know, you could win," Laura teased.

"That is the plan, Pup, but you know me; hope for the best but prepare for the worst," she said lightly as she took her hand to lead her back to the bedroom. "But how about we get dressed and go for that run?"

"Carm?" Laura said as she stopped just inside the bedroom. "What happens if you don't get on the show?"

"We'll find another way," Carmilla assured her and took her in her arms again, "we've been building momentum for the last few weeks, gathering tonnes of evidence; yes, if the Ultimate Fighter falls through it will take a little longer, but we will find another way." She kissed her softly. "And we will, ultimately, win."
A/N: For the record: I hate writing transition chapters… hope you enjoyed the, slightly delayed due to screaming migraine, chapter anyway!
Carmilla had never been nervous for a weigh-in before, and yet there she was, staring at her shaking hands and attempting, and failing miserably, to calm her nerves. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her music, only opening them again when she felt Laura's hands on hers. She took out one of her headphones and met her eyes.

"Hey," Laura said softly from where she was kneeling in front of her.

"Hey," Carmilla replied with a small smile.

"You okay?" she asked, Carmilla shook her head, sighed and looked down again. "What's going on?" she asked as she lifted her chin with a finger. Carmilla shook her head again, she wasn't sure she could trust her voice. "You're worried about maybe having to take your shirt off for the weigh-ins?" she guessed and Carmilla could only sigh and nod. "Listen to me," Laura started firmly, "yes, someone should feel shame for the scars on your back," she said as she got closer, "but not you. You shouldn't be embarrassed by them because there are nothing more than a small part of who you are. A small part of what makes you, well, you," she smiled and kissed her softly. "And I love you," she said fiercely and sighed before continuing; "I get that you're afraid of the questions they might raise, I do, but isn't it time we start answering those questions? Or, at least, make people start thinking about asking them?"

"So what do you suggest?" Carmilla asked her, her voice steady as Laura's assurances had calmed her as only Laura seemed capable of.

"Well," she smiled and started unbuttoning her shirt, "swap shirts with me."

"Why?"

"It'll be faster to get on and off than your t-shirt," Laura offered.

"No," Carmilla said and placed her hands over Laura's to stop her, the younger woman's disappointment obvious, "if I'm going to do this, I'm going to act like it's no big deal to me," she smiled as Laura started doing her shirt up again. "And I'm going to take my time and make sure they're seen."

"Miss Karnstein?" one of the attendant's interrupted as he opened the door. "You're up in five."

"Thanks," she replied, stood and helped Laura back to her feet. She leaned their foreheads together and sighed. "I love you Laura and while I may have many uncertainties in my life," she leaned back to meet her eyes, "that isn't one of them."

Laura smiled, kissed her softly and then took her hand to lead her from the room.

"Lighten up," Laura hissed.
"What?"

"You're hurting my hand," she supplied.

"Sorry," she said as they came to a stop and waited for the announcer to introduce her. She went to let her hand go but Laura held on all the tighter. It wasn't her first weigh-in but it was the first that was complete with cameras, reporters and fans.

"Next up we have our co-main event," the announcer started. "In the Strawweight division we have Carmilla 'Karma' Karnstein fresh off her amazing flying elbow knockout," the crowd cheered as the big screen behind him showed her knockout of Danny in slow motion, "versus Rose 'Thug' Namajunas!" he finished and turned to the them, "Miss Karnstein, if you please?" he prompted as he motioned them forward.

Carmilla plastered the biggest smile she could on her face and waved to the crowd with her free hand as she and Laura took the stage. They stopped a few feet from the scale and turned to each other so that their sides were to the crowd. Carmilla slipped off her sandals and her jeans and handed them to Laura. She took a deep breath, pulled her t-shirt over her head and also handed it to Laura. There were a few appreciative wolf whistles as she walked to the scale in only her bikini, stepped up and watched the scale's numbers until it settled at one fifteen. It was only then that she heard the whispers behind her; the people on the stage must have noticed the scars covering her back. She held her arms up and flexed as the announcer read off her weight and the crowd starting cheering again, until that is, she stepped down and turned her back to them.

Those closest to the stage went silent immediately, while those behind them soon followed. She took her shirt from Laura and was about to slip it on when she heard one person clapping slowly followed by the chant of 'Karma'. She turned as another voice joined in, this one also familiar but female, and searched the crowd to locate it; a few rows from the front stood Danny and Dark, both of them smiling as those around them joined in their chant. She grinned and waved to them before motioning to the crowd to quieten so Rose could be introduced.

"Did you know they were going to do that?" she asked Laura quietly as Rose took the stage.

"I knew they were going to be here," she admitted and handed her back her jeans once she slipped her shirt back on, "but I didn't know they were going to do that," she nodded towards the scale.

Carmilla turned and saw Rose stepping down and walking over to her for their face off. She smiled as Rose walked over but then grew serious as she raised her fists in a fighting stance and met her eyes; there was a little confusion there but not a trace of fear or doubt. She couldn't help but smile as a quiet chant of 'Karma' began again. She laughed and shook her head as she grasped Rose's hand and pulled her close for a quick hug.

"Good luck tomorrow," Rose said as they stepped back.

"You too," she replied warmly before they both turned to face the crowd again to pose for more pictures. They made their way off the stage, Carmilla motioning Betty over. "Can you bring Dark and Danny to our room?" she asked. Betty nodded and returned to the weigh-ins to find them while Steven led them out of the hotel where the fights were being held to the one across the street where they were staying.

Carmilla leaned against the wall of the elevator, all the bravado she'd shown at the weigh-ins slipping away as she pulled Laura into her arms. "I'm so proud of you," Laura told her quietly and kissed her cheek.
"I'm a little proud of myself, to be honest," Carmilla admitted with a small laugh.

"As well you should be," Steven commented; "You made a huge statement without saying a word, a statement that is likely to scare the crap out of your stepmother."

"I realised Laura is right," Carmilla replied fondly as she stroked Laura's cheek, "and frankly I'm tired of hiding, and of running away from the truth when I'm not the one who should be afraid of it."

"Amen to that," Steven encouraged as he led them out of the elevator and to their room. He knocked and told Chico to stand down before opening the door. "What are you plans for the rest of the night?" he asked as he followed them inside.

"We won't be going out again, if that's what you're asking," Laura supplied.

"Good," he replied, "Dark mentioned he and Danny want to go to a show, and since I know you'd rather them not be alone, I'd feel more comfortable leaving you here with Betty if you're not going out."

"Why do you do that?" Carmilla asked as she walked over to the fridge to retrieve her after weigh-ins protein shake.

"Do what?" he asked in confusion as he leaned against the counter.

"You're very, I don't know, protective of her," she replied thoughtfully, "almost like you'd rather take the risk than let her do it."

"Well I would," he shrugged, "Wouldn't you do the same for Laura?" he countered.

"Point taken," she replied.

"It's not that I don't think she can't handle it," he clarified. "I wasn't kidding when I said she can easily kick my ass, but we both feel more comfortable with me taking the more high-risk assignments..."

"Because you can easily protect people just by virtue of your size?" Carmilla offered, "Both literally by throwing yourself in the way or by mere presence alone," she reasoned.

"Carm?" Laura interrupted, "Did you want to have something to eat?"

"After we visit with the Ds," she answered, laughing when Laura laughed. "That came out really wrong," she said as she pulled Laura close.

"I'll give you two some privacy," Steven offered before leaving.

"Thank you," Carmilla said softly as she studied Laura's eyes, "you know, for earlier?"

"You don't have to thank me," Laura assured her as she stroked her cheek with her thumb, "but you're welcome."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," Carmilla sighed, sadness causing a lump in her throat as she realised she would soon have to do just that. "Or how I'm going to manage without you for six weeks," she admitted sadly and sniffed.

"By remembering times like this?" Laura suggested and pulled her head down so she could kiss her forehead. "I know that's the only way I'm going to cope without you," she continued as she met her
"Is that why you want to stay at the gym?" Carmilla asked.

"Partially," Laura started and stepped back, "Carm, I'm not sure about the house," Laura faltered at the look of disappointment she was sure was on her face, "well, not that house anyway," she qualified and shrugged, "it's kind of…"

"Big and pretentious?" Carmilla offered with a chuckle. "I know," she conceded, "but the view is to die for."

"True," Laura said and took Carmilla in her arms again, "but think, maybe, we should take a little more time and find something more our style," she smiled and kissed her, "and has a view."

"Maybe you can start looking while I'm…" Laura interrupted her with a kiss, "maybe narrow down the options?" she continued. "I'll give you signing authority in case you find something you really like?"

"You don't have to do that," Laura countered with an edge.

"Well, if you found something you like I wouldn't…" she trailed off at the odd look on Laura's face, "What?"

Laura sighed and took a deep breath as she looked down.

"Laura?" Carmilla prodded gently, "What's wrong?"

"Just stop," she said.

"Stop what?" Carmilla asked in confusion.

"I don't want you to go and you continuing to make plans for me to make sure I'm okay while you're gone is only making it worse," Laura said quickly and backed away from her, "Especially when I can't do anything to make sure you're okay," she admitted as she leaned against the opposite counter.

"But making sure you're okay makes me happy," Carmilla countered gently.

"Doesn't make it fair," Laura replied in defeat.

"Well who the hell cares about fair?" Carmilla countered as she approached her cautiously.

"I do," Laura answered firmly.

"Then make it up to me when I come home," Carmilla suggested, "and that will help me by giving me something to look forward to."

Laura wasn't given a chance to answer as there was a knock on the door followed by Dark, Danny and Betty entering.

"I have a message from Shannon," Betty informed her, "turn your phone on, she needs to talk to you."

"Fuck, Elvira, I hope we didn't get you in trouble," Danny apologized.

"I'm guessing it has more with taking my shirt off," Carmilla assured her lightly as she retrieved her
phone and turned it on. "Give us a few minutes?" she asked Danny and Dark.

"Mind if we raid the bar?" Dark asked.

"Have at it," Carmilla replied with a smile as she took Laura's hand and led her to the bedroom. She sighed as soon as her phone booted up to reveal she'd missed half a dozen calls from Shannon and one from Rose. "Fuck," she sighed as she called Rose back and put her on speaker.

"What the fuck Karnstein?" Rose said when she answered the phone.

"I didn't know my friends were going to be there let alone that they were going to start chanting," Carmilla quickly assured her.

"I don't care about that," Rose replied, "I want to know why I have reporters asking me if I knew about your scars. What scars?"

"You didn't see?" Laura asked.

"Look," Carmilla interrupted, "if I were you I wouldn't want to know something like this about my opponent the day before a fight," she sighed, "I wasn't trying to play mind games or distract you, I was just worried about making weight, I promise." When Rose didn't respond she continued, "I meant what I said Rose, I just want a good, clean, fair fight, that's all."

"Alright…"

"And if you really want to know," Carmilla sighed, "join me for a beer after the fight?"

"You're on," Rose answered, "good luck tomorrow."

"Yeah, you too," Carmilla replied, hung up and went to call Shannon back when her phone rang before she had the chance. "Shannon, I'm sorry," she said the moment she'd answered the call and put her on speaker, "I was mostly just worried about making weight and I didn't know…"

"That isn't why I'm calling," Shannon interrupted, "have you and Rose dropped your 'agreement'?" she asked tersely.

"We're both concerned, if we hold back, that it'll show," Carmilla offered.

"And if you get hurt?" Shannon asked, her tone now unreadable.

"I accepted the fight with that possibility in mind," Carmilla reminded her, "I knew the risks."

"Yes, and if you get hurt and can't fight on the Ultimate Fighter Dana will have my hide," she said with an edge.

"Are you canceling the fight?" Laura asked.

"No," Shannon laughed, "I don't think I could if I tried after your little stunt at the weigh-ins."

"I'm sorry," Carmilla repeated.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Shannon assured her, "if I hadn't been so stunned at your fearlessness I would have applauded myself," she admitted.

"I really was, mostly, just worried about making weight," Carmilla interrupted sheepishly, she hadn't felt brave.
"And if anyone is to blame it's me," Laura added, "She was a nervous wreck at just the thought of taking her shirt off in public," she confided, "I might have talked her into it."

"I admire you, both of you," Shannon admitted warmly, "You may not consider yourselves brave, but you are. True bravery doesn't mean you're never afraid but that you continue on despite it and use it to make yourselves stronger." She paused a moment, as if letting her words sink in before continuing. "If the unthinkable happens tomorrow, and you're injured, I'd like you to consider fighting for me instead. I know it might take a little longer to get your story heard but I promise to do everything possible to see that it is."

"Thank you Shannon," Carmilla replied gratefully; it wasn't everyday a plan B fell into your lap.

"Just put on a good show tomorrow and we'll call it even," Shannon replied, "Now get some rest, both of you, you've got a big fight to win."

"You really have no idea," Carmilla thought but answered instead, "Just so you know I called Rose before you called, calmed her down but didn't tell her the truth."

"Thank you for that," Shannon answered, "She's a great fighter but she can be a bit temperamental at times."

"Aren't all fighters?" Laura joked.

"You might have a point," Shannon replied with a laugh, "Good luck tomorrow, Carmilla," she added and hung up.

"So I'm temperamental, huh?" Carmilla teased and tried to take her into her arms.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Laura asked and then clarified; "Shannon's offer?"

"There's nothing to talk about," Carmilla replied and kissed her nose, "at least not yet anyway." She kissed her but felt that Laura wasn't responding. "Fine, we'll talk about it later?" Laura nodded. "C'mon, let's visit with Dark and Danny, yes?" Laura nodded and followed her back to the other room.

"Is everything okay?" Dark asked as he came over to give her a hug.

"Better than," she replied happily and turned to Danny, "You're looking better," she said as she went to hug the redhead.

"I'm feeling better," Danny confirmed and pulled Laura into their hug. "It's weird, though, I didn't realise how crappy I was feeling until I started feeling better," she added as she pushed them away. "It's still all a little hard to believe, you know?"

"Have you talked to Will?" Laura asked as they all took seats in the living room area of their suite.

"No one's talked to him since…" Danny hesitated at a look from Dark.

"What's he done now?" Carmilla asked tiredly and resisted the urge to have a beer.

"It can wait," Dark stated.

"Out with it," Carmilla said firmly.

"He's been on suicide watch for the last week," Danny answered reluctantly, "and the only person who's been talking to him is his therapist."
Carmilla got up from the couch and started to pace.

"Carm?" Danny said to get her attention. "There's something else you should know."

"Danny!" Dark hissed.

"No!" she said and turned to him. "She needs to know."

"What's going on?" Carmilla asked wearily as she fell back to the couch next to Laura, "Just tell me."

"I suspected for a while but Frank had it confirmed," Danny sighed, "The only times Will was in Montreal was at the start and end of the school year and when you went to visit him last Christmas."

"What?!" Carmilla exclaimed angrily.

"He's got an apartment downtown, under one of Deanna's aliases," Dark supplied.

"So what the hell was I paying for?" she said quietly and shook her head; she had no idea what the fuck was going on with her brother. "Did Frank find anything else?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Nothing yet," Dark replied. "Look Carm, whatever he's gotten himself into, he's a big boy…"

"He's still my little brother," she interjected quietly, "just turns out I know nothing about him or what he's up to," she added and sighed. "I'll deal with it on Monday."

There was a knock on the door followed by Betty, who was laden with take out bags, and Steven.

"Hey guys, if you want to eat before the show we need to get going," Steven informed them as Betty put dinner on the table for herself, Carmilla and Laura.

"Alright," Dark said as she stood and motioned for Carmilla to do the same so he could hug her. "Whatever it is, we'll figure it out, okay?" She nodded against his chest. He backed away and took her face in his hands. "And there's nothing we can do about it until we get home so there's no point obsessing over it right?" She nodded again. He kissed her forehead and met her eyes again. "I love you, midget, you know I do, but you really need to stop blaming yourself for all the world's ills."

"Hard to do when half of them wouldn't have happened were it not for me," Carmilla countered with an edge.

"They happened because of your evil stepmother," Danny reminded her as she put her hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "And you're also the reason my life has gotten a hundred times better," she smiled and shrugged, "I feel like I have real friends for the first time." She looked to Dark. "And while Dark and I might not always agree, we do agree on this."

"Fine…” Carmilla allowed with a sigh, "I'm trying, okay?"

"She is," Laura affirmed as she hugged her from behind. "You guys have to go and we need to eat," she continued as she motioned them out. "We'll see you after the fight?"

"Yeah," Danny replied and gave Laura a one-armed hug, "We're heading back Sunday night, right?"

"As soon as we're done with our tattoos," Carmilla corrected and smiled and both their looks of
surprise, "Go on," she urged, "We'll tell you about it tomorrow."

The two left with Steven in tow after another round of quick hugs. Carmilla and Laura turned to find that Betty had already made herself a plate of food and was heading towards her bedroom.

"Steven mentioned you don't plan on going out?" she said just before leaving them, they both nodded. "Good, I think I might take a nap after I eat," she smiled, "and Carmilla? Well done today."

"Thanks," Carmilla replied with a blush, "but Laura deserves the credit," she kissed Laura's cheek, "It was her pep talk that gave the guts to do it."

"You need to start giving yourself more credit," Betty chastised before entering her room. While they were in New Mexico the Xanders had their own apartment across the hall. Here, in Vegas, however, Steven didn't feel comfortable having a hallway between them. To their credit, though, the Xanders were very good at giving them their space.

Carmilla joined Laura at the table and took the plate of food she'd already prepared for her. She sat down and watched as Laura fixed her own plate, a frown marring her forehead.

"What's wrong?" Carmilla asked.

Laura shook her head and motioned to Carmilla's plate; "Eat."

"Yes, dear," Carmilla replied sweetly, worrying when it elicited only a small smile from Laura. She popped a piece of chicken in her mouth and studied her while she chewed; Laura was definitely lost in thought as she pushed her food around her plate and hadn't noticed she was being watched so intently. "Water?" she offered as she went to stand.

"I'll get it," Laura said and kissed her cheek.

Carmilla continued to eat as she watched Laura walk over to the fridge; she was hungry but didn't feel like eating. She raised an eyebrow as Laura opened and the fridge and paused longer than it would normally take to grab a couple of bottles of water.

"Laura?" Carmilla prompted. "Everything okay?"

"Well," she said and turned to her, "I'd kind of like to have a glass of wine but would feel bad about it because you shouldn't."

"I can have a bit," Carmilla offered and watched as Laura took a bottle of white wine from the fridge, grabbed a couple glasses and the corkscrew before returning to the table. She put the bottle down next to her and handed her the corkscrew. "You should eat something before you drink, though."

Laura sighed and nodded as Carmilla made short work of opening the wine. She poured herself half a glass and filled Laura's. They both ate and drank in comfortable silence for awhile until Carmilla noticed that Laura had stopped eating and was staring into her wine glass.

"Laura, what's wrong?" she questioned.

"I'm an asshole," Laura stated without tearing her gaze from her glass.

"You're not," she replied gently, "but want to tell me why you think you are?"
"Because," she started with a sigh and looked off into the distance, "ever since the flight down to New Mexico I've been secretly hoping you'll get hurt and not be able to go to the Ultimate Fighter," she admitted reluctantly.

"Laura?" she started but when Laura still wouldn't meet her eyes she took her hand and squeezed, "Hey, look at me," she urged and when she finally did her look of sadness almost rendered her speechless, "Laura, baby, you don't think I haven't had the same thought?" Laura skepticism was apparent. "I don't want to go…"

"But you've been working towards this for the last year," Laura pointed out.

"True," Carmilla replied with a smile, "but I didn't know you a year ago," she countered. "Look, Pup, I know six weeks seems like a long time but what's a six week sacrifice if we're done with this by next year?" She stood and turned Laura's chair so she could straddle her. "Ahhhnd…” she smiled as Laura pulled her close, "What's six weeks in the grand scheme of things when I plan on spending the rest of my life with you?"

The next day alternately passed quickly and then as though time had stopped. They'd only crawled out of bed when Steven informed them that Carmilla's hairdresser had arrived to do her cornrows for the fight. She quickly wet her hair and went to meet her; originally Perry was going to join them but when her partner, LaFontaine, had agreed to return to Vancouver early to help Doc Coughlin, Perry had decided to stay in Vancouver to spend time with them.

After her hair was done she continued on with her day as she usually did before a fight; a quick run in the hotel's gym followed by a shower and a nap. Since she'd been moved up to Co-main event she didn't have to be at the casino where the fight was being held until after six they got up around five and Carmilla had a light meal before they headed across the street.

Once there she and Laura were led back to a holding area/locker room where she was met with a surprise; one of her coaches from New Mexico had flown up for the fight. He hastily reassured Laura that she was still in charge of Carmilla's corner and that he'd only come to offer his support. Carmilla slipped in her headphones when the man who was to wrap her hands joined them and tuned them out. She was glad he was here as she wasn't sure how Laura planned to help her warm up with only one hand to hold the pads.

She closed her eyes and like every fight before, tried to tap into the well of anger she'd always drawn from before; but it wasn't there. Instead her mind was being flooded by happy memories of her and Laura and all the time they'd spent together since meeting. She opened her eyes again when she felt a tap on her hand and then took the official Invicta gloves from him and slipped them on. He duct taped them up, signed them and then motioned for her to take off her headphones.

"You've got about an hour and a half but someone will come get you ten minutes before," he informed her.

"Thanks," she and Laura replied together.

"Good luck," he said before leaving.

"Ready to warm up?" Greg, her coach from New Mexico asked. She nodded and joined him, focusing again on her music as she tried to channel her anger again. After about a half hour, Greg dropped his hands and waited for her to take her headphones out again. "What's up with you?"

"I'm sorry?" she asked.
"I don't know, you just don't seem as pumped for this fight as I thought you'd be," he offered.

"I am," she shrugged, "I just have a lot on my mind."

"Babe?" Laura said a hand on her shoulder. "Time to find that shit pause button again, or better yet, use the shit to inspire your fight." She physically turned her so she could meet her eyes. "Put it all on hold, nothing but the fight in front of you matters, right?" Carmilla nodded. "Now get into your game mode, imagine every punch is one more nail in her that bitch's coffin, right?" Carmilla smiled and nodded again. "Just another stepping stone, right?"

They both turned at Greg's quiet chuckle.

"What?" Laura prompted with an edge.

"I get it now," he replied, "why you want her in your corner," he smiled, "she's your inspiration."

"That and so much more," Carmilla clarified.

Before she knew it she was standing at the top of the ramp, the opening strains of Ani Difranco's 'Amazing Grace' playing over the loudspeakers. She waited until the music joined Ani's voice and entered to bright lights and a crowd so loud her music was almost drowned out. She came to a stop in front of Laura, removed her sweats, kissed her quickly and then turned to the cut man who applied Vaseline to her eyebrows and cheeks. She moved on to the referee who checked her for sharp objects, made sure her nails were dull and then confirmed she had her mouth piece in. She turned to Laura one last time and kissed her briefly again before entering the cage.

The lights dimmed again as Rose's music started. She passed the time by taking a jog around the cage and then thrilling those closest to it with a few bounces off the cage itself. She returned to her corner and watched as Rose entered the cage. She smiled broadly and pointing to her head mouthed; "Nice hair."

Rose responded by smiling and running her hand over her newly buzzed head. It was something Carmilla had often considered herself, her hair was always getting in the way when she trained and the cornrows weren't exactly comfortable. Somehow though, she never had the guts to cut off all her hair like Rose had.

"How the fuck am I supposed to do this?" she thought idly; maybe getting to know Rose had been a mistake. Maybe it would have been easier if she'd remained a faceless opponent. She didn't have much time to question herself further as the announcer entered the cage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, live from Las Vegas, Nevada, this is the co-main event of the evening!" He paused for the crowd's cheers. "Three rounds in the Strawweight division. Let's meet our fighters!"

He turned to Carmilla; as the official 'underdog' she was introduced first. "First the fighter to my left and fighting out of the blue corner. Owner of a highlight reel flying elbow knockout in her last fight just two weeks ago! She stands five feet five inches tall and weighed in at one hundred and fifteen pounds. Her professional record stands at one win and one no-contest. Training out of Karmma MMA in North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada," his voice had been getting louder and louder the longer he went, the cheering almost drowning him out, "give it up for Carmilla 'Karma' Karnstein!"

The crowd erupted as she walked to the middle of the cage, did a slow circle as she waved to all of them and then turned and bowed to Rose out of respect before returning to her corner. She walked up the cage, laced her fingers through it and leaned her forehead against it. She closed her eyes as she felt Laura lace their fingers and lay her head against her own.
Again she tried to summon the anger, the pure rage, that had served her so well in every fight before Danny. "Danny," she thought; that's when it changed. She walked into the ring still disliking her but suspecting something more was going on. Her concern for Danny's safety, despite her own feelings for her, had allowed her to fight the best fight of her life by staying present instead of giving into the anger and blacking out. "Maybe I don't need it anymore," she wondered as she leaned back and met Laura's eyes. "Because of this girl I finally believe in my skills and not just my aggression," she chuckled to Laura's bemusement and leaned in to kiss her briefly through the cage. "Who'd have thought finding the love of my life would make me a better fighter?"

She turned back to middle of the cage as Greg removed her banner from the cage.

"You've got this baby!" Laura shouted behind her as the referee asked if she was ready.

She nodded and then, once Rose had responded, the two jogged to the middle of the cage, tapped their gloves and both assumed their fighting stances. The round passed in a blur of punches, counterpunches and stinging kicks to the thighs. Neither fighter seemed able to gain the advantage; each of Carmilla's punches was countered but she was able to avoid it. Every time Rose attempted to go for a takedown Carmilla kept her at bay with leg kicks. The round was drawing to a close when the first significant strike landed; a hard right elbow to Rose's face just as the bell rang. They high fived and both returned to their corners.

Carmilla sat on the stool Greg and put down for her, and after taking out her mouthpiece, gratefully took a water bottle from Laura. She took a big gulp, swished it around her mouth and spit it out into the bucket before taking a long swallow.

"You're doing awesome, Kitten," Laura encouraged.

"You might want to start checking that leg kick though," Greg interjected.

Carmilla raised her eyebrow at him.

"You're doing it on purpose?" he asked incredulously, shaking his head when she nodded.

"Time to unleash the left, Carm," Laura reminded her. "She'll never see it coming."

"Who won that round?" Carmilla asked Greg,

"You, but it was close," he replied.

She nodded, put her mouthpiece back in and stood as the referee ushered her corner out.

As she made her way to middle of the cage again she went over the plan; she'd known, after watching several of Rose's fights, the only way she'd win would be if she caught her off guard. Letting her land her leg kicks had been a part of her strategy; let her build up a little confidence and then switch it up on her. She let Rose hit her thigh one last time and switched her stance, her now 'injured' leg out of the way and her right hand forward. She even decided to play it up a little, limping a little as she backed away slightly and lured her in.

Before she could marvel at the fact that her plan seemed to be working Rose rushed her with a flurry of punches to her face. Carmilla would have smiled at the look on her face when she was met with several hard right jabs to her face if she weren't concentrating so hard on loading up her left. She pulled back, and with everything she had, swung her secret weapon; her overhand left.

Only Rose ducked, the momentum of the swing enough to force Carmilla to one knee. She quickly got back to her feet but was met with Rose's weight on her back and her right arm across her face as
she tried to sink in a choke. She leaned forward to try to compensate for Rose's weight or try to shake her off but Rose wasn't letting go. And then she made her first mistake; she stood up straight which allowed Rose to jump up and wrap her legs around her middle, her left ankle securing itself under her right knee and restricting her breathing. Panic lead to her second mistake; she leaned back, hoping that Rose would drop her feet to keep them from falling but Rose had other plans as she finally succeeded in sinking in the choke. Carmilla's last thought as everything faded to black was; "Well, shit…"

"Carm?" urged Laura's worried voice as she finally opened her eyes to the bright overhead lights. She sat up awkwardly as she was still half on top of Rose. She turned to congratulate her when she found Rose also seemed to be just coming to.

"What happened?" she asked Laura.

Laura could only laugh and pointed to the replay on the big screen instead; by the end Carmilla couldn't help but chuckle herself. It seemed Rose hadn't realized they were falling, and because Carmilla went out almost the second the choke had been sunk in, she wasn't able to control or stop it and Rose had been knocked out by the impact with the mat.

She turned at the sound of laughter and found Rose had also been watching the replay. Carmilla shook her head and pulled her into a hug. "Good fight," she said into her ear.

"No," Rose said as she pushed her away, "great fight!"

Laura helped her feet and then they both turned and helped Rose up.

"To your corners while the judges figure this out," the referee informed them.

She followed Greg and Laura back to her corner and held hands out to Greg for him to remove her gloves. She looked to Laura; "Still love me?"

"Of course, why?" Laura replied in confusion.

"I didn't get hurt," she supplied.

Laura smiled and laughed as she hugged her.

"Just because I don't want you to go doesn't mean I'm not happy you're okay and are going to fulfill your dream," she said into her ear.

Laura was cut short as the referee called her back to the center of the cage.

"This fight has been called to a stop by the referee at the one minute, thirty seven second mark of the second round," the announcer began, "As both fighters were unconscious when they hit the ground the judges have declared this fight a 'no contest'."

Chapter End Notes

So Rose is a real fighter who fought last night in the UFC and won. And she really did
just shave off all her hair. Love that girl! But remember, my version is a fictionalized version of her. I will explain, eventually, why I chose to have Carmilla fight a real fighter.

A note about my posting schedule; I know it's all over the place, and I'm sorry for that, but my work schedule keeps getting changed and I've been working extra shifts.
Carmilla sat staring out the window of the jet, the idle chit chat of her friends barely registering as she mulled over the last twenty-four hours. After providing her mandatory urine sample she was informed she had to visit the hospital even though there was nothing wrong with her. She suspected Shannon just wanted to get her out of the Press Conference. Per standard procedure Rose, having gotten knocked out by the mat, had no choice but to go to the hospital and get checked for a concussion. As they’d made their way out they ran into Rose and her boyfriend and offered them a ride to the hospital rather than taking the waiting ambulance.

"I still can't believe the two of you got matching tattoos," Danny teased, trying to bring her into the conversation.

"They're not identical," Laura clarified as she took the bandage from her right wrist to show her. "See? Mine has a 'C' and Carm's has an 'L'," she pointed out.

"Originally we were going to get each other's names, or more specifically, 'Laura's' and 'Carm's', in white ink but Laura came up with an even better idea this morning," Carmilla continued as she showed her left wrist. "I wrote her 'C' and she wrote my 'L'," she shrugged and kissed Laura's cheek. "Yes, I'm most definitely hers but she's my heart."

"You got that spare insulin?" Dark joked to Danny.

"What you have to remember is," Carmilla said with a smile as she faced them again, "is that we've spent, maybe, a few days apart, combined, since we started dating. How many couples do you know who can say that?"

"Add in all the shit we've had to deal with in the last few weeks and…" Laura trailed off, a look of sadness crossing her face.

"And we both wanted something to remind us why we're apart and what we have waiting for us," Carmilla finished for her.

"I don't know," Danny started, "I think it's kind of sweet, El…"

"Don't," Carmilla hissed angrily; she'd never realised why Danny calling her Elvira had always bothered her; it was this, the small chance she'd shorten it to something that reminded her of a bad memory.

"Carm?" Dark interrupted uncomfortably. "We, I mean I, found something out about her, about El," he said and looked to Laura. Carmilla did the same and noticed her nod. "I know you told me to put all Will's stuff in storage but I thought it'd be a waste to put his laptop in there too and you know my luck with electronics, so I kept it and," he took a deep breath, "I was downloading something on my laptop so I went to use his to check my Facebook and it was already signed in…"

"He was El?" Carmilla choked out, the bile rising in her throat. At his nod she felt the nausea take over and ran through the bedroom to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before emptying the contents of her stomach.

"Carm?" Laura prodded as she knelt beside her and rubbed her back even as she continued to dry
heave. "Hey, it's going to be okay…"

"You don't understand," she croaked out as she sat back against the wall, "the things I told her," she shook her head, "told fucking Deanna," she amended bitterly and put her hand over her mouth as she felt like she was going to be sick again.

"Water?" Laura asked as she offered her the bottle in her hand. "Was it anything she wouldn't have known otherwise?" she asked gently.

"It was stuff I've never admitted to anyone," she replied and took a small sip of water. "Not Dark, not even you, yet." Laura stood and helped her back to her feet. "How long have you known?"

"A few days," she admitted and looked down, "I was worried how you'd react."

"Given how I did react," Carmilla interrupted and raised Laura's chin with a finger, "I'd say you made the right call," she sighed and leaned their foreheads together. "It doesn't make sense though," she said thoughtfully as she leaned back and led them from the bathroom, "he got the laptop after she stopped talking to me."

"We think," Laura started and pulled her to a stop, "we think she was, originally a real person. Will was here for Bob's funeral right?" Carmilla nodded. "Did he use your laptop at any time?"

"Probably."

"I think he saw your Facebook and told Deanna about her," Laura theorized; "and then she, somehow, took over the account and…"

"Completely fucked me up emotionally," Carmilla provided and took a seat. She looked to Laura as she sat beside her on the bed; "And then I met you," she stated with a smile, "and forgot all about her." She sighed deeply and ran her hands through her hair. "I still don't get it," she said as she stood to pace, "I mean, aside from trying to break me, why bother? And why was Will still signed in after all this time?"

"Crime of opportunity?" Laura suggested. "As for Will? I don't think you were the only person he was talking to through that account."

"Maybe," she shook her head and laughed dryly. "All these years and I'll never understand what makes that woman tick."

"C'mon," Laura said as she stood and took her hand, "you should try to eat something."

"I'm not hungry," Carmilla countered with a pout.

"I know, Kitten, but you just threw up the little bit you ate this morning," Laura reminded her as they returned to their friends. "Maybe some trail mix, at least?" she suggested as she took a bag from her backpack.

Carmilla nodded and took the bag from her as they both sat back down across from Danny and Dark.

"You okay?" Dark asked carefully.

"I will be," she sighed. "In a way, I mean, yes, I'm angry she found yet another way to manipulate me, but I'm also a little relieved," she shrugged, "There was never anything I could have done to make it better. I was always going to fail." She searched for another topic, any other topic, as she
no longer wanted to think about it. "Any news on the pick-up?" she asked, and knew, immediately, that it was the wrong choice as she watched Dark's face crumple and tears start falling down his face. She rushed to sit in his lap and pulled his head to her chest. "Hey…" she cooed, "it's okay."

"They tried," Dark said with a sniff, "to take the paint off but it was no use." He shook his head. "The whole thing was soaked in it, right down to the frame."

"Tell you what," she started, "if we can transport it safely we'll take it somewhere and have a bonfire, okay?" He nodded reluctantly. "And while I'm away you can start looking for a new project for us, yes?" He smiled slightly and nodded again. "Okay," she said and kissed his forehead.

"Am I missing something?" Danny asked Laura, "I mean, it was just a truck right?"

"It wasn't just a truck," Carmilla answered neutrally as she returned to her seat beside Laura. "It was therapy. We got it just before Dark got hurt and I was still struggling with my addiction. She looked to Dark and smiled. "It helped him through his physical therapy and it took my mind off the drugs."

"I'm sorry," Danny said and then shook her head. "I seem to be saying that a lot, but about the Facebook thing too, I didn't know."

"You don't have to apologize for poking sore spots you don't know exist," Carmilla offered. "I honestly hadn't realized why you calling me Elvira bugged me so much."

"So if I can't call you that," Danny said thoughtfully, "and if anyone is Gabrielle, it's Laura."

"I'm sorry?" Laura asked in surprise.

"If we're going with a Xena theme, you'd be Gabrielle," Danny explained.

"No I got that," Laura replied with a laugh, "but me? Gabrielle? Really?"

"She's right," Carmilla agreed. "No, hear me out," she urged as she took Laura's hand. "I think Gabrielle was the real hero of the show. She started off as this farm girl trying to be strong and brave, and by the end, she was. But she also learned that sometimes you make mistakes but they don't have to ruin your life. In the end she ended up saving Xena just as many times as Xena saved her." She leaned forward and kissed her briefly. "Sound about right?"

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it," Steven joked, "them forgetting other people exist."

"Haven't had much of a choice with your near constant presence," she teased.

"Touché," Betty replied with a laugh.

"Anyway," Danny piped up. "So I'm Xena, Laura is Gabrielle…"

"She's Callisto," Laura finished.

"Seriously?" Carmilla guffawed. "Short, blond and psychotic?"

"You didn't let me finish," Laura chided and slapped her arm playfully. "Remember the couple of episodes when she and Xena swapped bodies?" Carmilla raised her eyebrow.

"No!" Danny added. "She's totally right! You look really badass most of the time, and try to acting it, but you're really a good person with a huge and generous heart underneath."
"You know that mostly happened because Lucy Lawless got hurt filming the Tonight Show?" Carmilla deflected calmly despite her reddened cheeks. "They had to rearrange most of the second season to let her heal."

"Okay, so who am I?" Dark asked.

"Joxer!" all three girls replied.

"But I don't want to be Joxer!" he whined.

"Oh honey, who do you want to be?" Carmilla said sweetly.

"Hercules!" he replied seriously to their laughter. "Oh fine!" he protested with his arms across his chest. "I'm Joxer."

"It's not a bad thing," Laura consoled as she was the first to catch her breath. "He was a good guy and a hero in his own right, or at least, he tried."

"Can't I at least be Autolycus?" he suggested.

"Sorry sweetie, you're not nearly suave or coordinated enough to be the 'King of Thieves','" Carmilla consoled, all of them, Dark included, laughing again.

"You looked great last night, by the way," Danny said when they all finally stopped laughing. "Can't imagine what you're going to do when you finally stop holding back."

"Funny, Rose said the same thing," Carmilla chuckled. "Last night it was part of my strategy; conserve my energy and lure her in…"

"Then crack her with an elbow at the end of the round to show her what you're really capable of?" Danny supplied.

"Partially," she shook her head, "Rose was holding back because she thought I was even if she says she wasn't."

"I don't think she was," Laura differed. "You just weren't there for her counters and she was really pissed off when you suggested she was."

"She going to be okay?" Danny asked.

"Minor concussion, forty-five days minimum no contact," Carmilla replied with a smile, "Oddly enough, if she hadn't cut her hair, she might have avoided even that."

"She did say she needed the vacation," Laura reminded her.

"And for the record, Xena, I wasn't holding back in our fight," Carmilla told Danny.

"Bullshit," Danny countered, "you could've kicked my ass way worse than you did."

"Did every punch that land hurt?" she prodded.

"Like hell," Danny affirmed.

"Then I did exactly what I wanted," Carmilla replied with a smile, "took you apart, piece by piece and then shocked the hell out of you."
"So what's the plan for tomorrow?" Dark asked.

"Brody, the Dads, Nat, Betty and you two will..." Carmilla started only to be stopped by Laura's hand on her arm.

"I think Danny should talk to Will first," Laura suggested causing Carmilla to raise an eyebrow. "He might tell her things he won't tell you."

"You might have a point," Carmilla replied pensively, "it might also give us a better idea what exactly is going on with him." She looked to Danny. "You up to it Xena?"

"I guess," she shrugged.

"If I might make a suggestion?" Steven piped up and then continued at Carmilla's nod; "We can hook Danny up so we can hear and see everything."

"Do you have a way I can feed her questions?" Carmilla asked and he nodded.

"I have a few questions of my own," Danny interjected.

"I bet you do," Carmilla laughed. "We have an appointment with the Doc before we go see Will, maybe you two and Betty can meet us at the Rehab centre?" she suggested and received all their nods. "Steven can come with us and then after we meet with Will we go back to the gym and caravan it up there?" she asked as she looked to Steven.

"You and Laura in the Jeep," Steven began thoughtfully, "with Betty leading in the van with the Dads, Nat and Kirsch and everyone else with me in the Compass behind?"

"That should work," Carmilla replied with a smile, "I'll have Stan meet us for the last bit, I doubt the van will make it through the last ten miles even in ideal conditions."

"Ah," Carmilla sighed as they finally pulled into the gym's parking lot a few hours later, "home sweet home." Despite the new security measures and all the extra people now calling it home it was the first place she’d called home since running away with Will. Moreover, it was her home.

"If I'm not mistaken," Laura started and looked to Dark, "there might be a surprise waiting for you in the garage," she finished with a nod from Dark.

"It's here?!" Carmilla squealed in a way that was very un-Carmilla-like.

"It is!" Dark affirmed.

"Is it?" she asked him as she hurriedly got out of the van.

"Don't know," he replied with a shrug, "I didn't get a chance to check before we left."

She reached for Laura's hand as she followed her out of the van.

"Someone want to let me know what's going on?" Danny asked, but before Carmilla heard Dark answer she was already running for the garage.

She stopped in her tracks and then approached the car slowly, as if it was only a dream and if she rushed it would vanish into thin air. She grabbed the car's dust cover with both hands and slowly peeled it back and off the car, her eyes widening as she took in every little detail; even if it wasn't exactly the same MG she and her father had restored, it was pretty damned close.
"Go ahead," Dark prodded as he opened the driver's side door for her.

She smiled, and for the first time in a long time, felt overwhelmingly content. Yes, being with Laura made her happy, ecstatic even, but there was always the slight stench of the shit that seemed to follow them everywhere. As she slipped into the driver's seat and ran her hands over the wooden steering wheel though, all of it fell away. It was her tenth birthday and her father's gift to her was the promise of this very car for her sixteenth birthday so long as she kept being a good girl and getting good grades; he was dead a year later. Deanna had seen to it that it was completed, and then sold, as soon as possible.

Her eyes drifted to the right and took in the dashboard, her grin widening further; it seemed the last owner, while taking great pains to maintain the original look and feel of the MG, had upgraded the sound system to the highest end available but disguised it well enough that an untrained eye might miss it completely. She reached forward and popped the hood, her heart speeding up as she climbed from the car to find out if it was indeed the same MG.

She lifted the hood and took a flashlight from Dark once she'd propped it open. She sighed appreciatively before searching for her proof; it seemed the sound system wasn't the only thing the last owner had upgraded; although it wouldn't win any awards for authenticity, she couldn't help but appreciate the shiny new engine and was looking forward to taking it for a drive if all the components, like the brakes and suspension, had been similarly upgraded. Finally, she held her breath and leaned into the engine compartment to inspect the frame itself; there, covered in a fine layer of dirt, were four letters; "Mine," scratched into the metal.

"Soooo..." Laura started softly, her hand on Carmilla's lower back; "is it?"

"Barely," she laughed, "whoever had this car last made it a new car in an old body," she explained; "but it's the same car," she pulled her close and kissed her; "Thank you," she whispered.

"I had nothing to do with it," Laura protested as Carmilla closed the hood; "it was all Theo, you did say he'd been looking for it for the last year."

"True," she replied as she pulled her close and leaned back against the car and noticed they'd been left alone, "but you kept that it was here a surprise," she kissed her softly, "and I like surprises," she added in her ear.

"Good," Laura sighed as Carmilla kissed her neck, "cause I have another one for you after dinner."

"Speaking of which," Carmilla purred as she pushed a pouting Laura back, "I thought I could make us a nice dinner? Maybe watch a movie?" she suggested as she went to grab the dust cover. "You know, have a date night?"

"What movie do you want to watch?" Laura asked as she helped Carmilla put the dust cover back on the MG.

"I've been wanting to watch 'Chamber of Secrets' again lately, but we can start with the 'Philosopher's Stone', if you prefer," Carmilla replied to Laura's obvious surprise. "It's that fanfic you got me into; I'd like to see it again with that story in mind."

"Her twists are something else," Laura agreed as they finished covering the car back up. "I'd have thought you'd want to take it for a drive?"

"I've waited this long," Carmilla said as she held her hand out to her, "I can wait a little while longer until it's less complicated to do so," she shrugged, "besides, we're all tired. I can't imagine
Steven or Betty wanting to go for a drive right now."

"Maybe when we get back from the cabin?" Laura suggested as they made their way inside.

"Maybe," she replied and kissed her cheek. "It feels good to be home," she commented as they got into the elevator.

"It really does," Laura concurred.

"I might have asked Dark to lay something out for you to wear in the spare room," she started nervously as they approached their apartment, "You can wear something else if you prefer but I think you'll appreciate the significance," Laura had her eyebrow raised so she continued; "I thought it would be nice to try, again, what we tried to do in Whistler; get ready separately, I'll make us a nice dinner…"

Laura interrupted her with a kiss.

"Sounds perfect," Laura whispered; "I'll see you soon?"

"I'm going to take a quick shower," Carmilla advised her and kissed her again.

They went their separate ways after kissing for a few minutes, each of them second-guessing their decision to shower alone the whole way to their bathrooms. Carmilla stopped in the bedroom and grabbed what she wanted to wear; while she'd chosen what she hoped Laura would wear specifically she didn't have the option of wearing what she had the first time they'd kissed at the airport as they'd been soaked in Brody's blood. She picked out something close; a pair of faded and ripped blue jeans, a tight fitting black tank top and a red plaid flannel shirt. She skipped the underwear as she wasn't expecting to be clothed for very long after dinner but checked her drawer anyway; right at the back, under the underwear she rarely wore, was a small velvet box. She fished it out and opened it as she went to sit on the bed.

"I'm such a sap," she thought with a chuckle as she closed the box and put it aside.

A little while later she was working on their dinner, grateful that Dark had been thoughtful enough to have her fridge stocked for their return. She'd already taken out a bottle of red wine, opened it to let it breathe and was working on the steaks when Laura joined her.

"You cheated," Laura chided as she stepped up behind her and wrapped her arms around her.

"You look…" Carmilla stuttered as she turned in Laura's arms and admired her, "stunning…"

"But you're not wearing what you were wearing," Laura pointed out.

"I can't," Carmilla smiled; "covered in blood, remember?"

"Right," Laura laughed and smacked her forehead; "I barely remember you coming back."

"I'm not surprised," Carmilla teased and returned her attention to the steaks, "you did drink most of a bottle of wine."

"I was nervous," Laura admitted with a blush. "Can I help?" she offered.

"You can get the potatoes ready," Carmilla suggested, "but I kind of just want to make you dinner so you can grab a glass of wine and chill if you want."

"Or I can help and we can be eating sooner," Laura countered as she started working on the baby
"True," Carmilla replied and bumped their hips, "I really do love that dress on you."

"Thanks," Laura blushed and busied herself with the potatoes to cover.

They worked in comfortable silence, preparing a meal together was as easy as everything else had been in their relationship, and soon they were sitting down to eat. Carmilla poured them each a glass of wine and held hers up to toast.

"I can't believe we've been, officially, together for a month, already," she said finally, her words failing to express all she felt.

"It feels like longer," Laura replied with a laugh and took a sip of her wine. "I mean that in a good way," she rushed to reassure her. "Sometimes," she continued thoughtfully as she reached for her hand, "I don't feel like we're getting to know each other but getting reacquainted, you know?"

"I do," Carmilla said and kissed her softly.

As they ate Carmilla played over in her head, again, exactly what she wanted to say when she gave Laura her gift. It was one of the few other things she'd been thinking about since Dark had told her they'd arrived. Normally her mind was clouded with all things fight related and Deanna, but whenever she'd had a moment of peace, she'd contemplated how to put her feelings into words.

"You okay?" Laura prodded as they finished their meal.

"Just thinking," Carmilla replied vaguely as she got up and gathered their dishes. She took them to the kitchen, rinsed them quickly and put them in the dishwasher. She snuck a glance at Laura, noticed she wasn't watching, and took the small box from the drawer where she'd hidden it and slipped it into her pocket. She walked back over to Laura, offered her hand and then led her out onto the balcony.

She turned to face her and took both her hands, looking down she started; "The last time you wore this dress was when I realised I was a goner," she looked up slowly, her gaze hungry as she appreciated Laura in her white sundress. "And then I kissed you," she shook her head, "and I think," she smiled and shook her head, "I think that's when I started to believe that you could feel the same," she sighed and looked down. "I couldn't," she swallowed and looked up, "I couldn't believe someone like you could ever love someone like me and that's why I tried, for so long, to convince myself that I didn't love you…" she shook her head, "but then you stood up to Deanna, something no girl has ever done, and I knew, even if you never loved me the way I was falling in love with you, that I'd do everything I could to make you happy." She took a deep breath and took the box from her pocket.

"Carm?" Laura said uncertainly.

"Don't worry," she rushed, "I'm not asking you to marry me, not…"

Laura interrupted her with a kiss.

"I'd say yes if you did," Laura informed her as she leaned the foreheads together.

"Good to know," Carmilla replied with a chuckle and leaned back. She studied her eyes a moment and then opened the box, her eyes following Laura's as she looked at it; two titanium rings, one slightly wider than the other, the word 'Forever' engraved on the slimmer of the two with a diamond in the 'O' and 'Yours' with an opal in the 'O' on the other. "These are a promise, Laura,
from me to you," she continued nervously as she took the slimmer ring and showed her that inside the ring was engraved 'Yours'; "to, no matter what, do everything I can to make you happy. To support you and love you the best I can. And yes, to someday, when we're both ready, get you another ring and ask you to marry me," she finished, the ring positioned over Laura's right ring finger.

"Wait," Laura said softly, "shouldn't it go on the left?"

"It will," Carmilla replied, relaxing again, "once you get your cast off tomorrow."

Laura took the other ring from the box and noticed the 'Forever' engraved on the inside.

"These are really beautiful, Carm," she said quietly as she ran her finger across the engraving, "and I like the birthstones," she sighed and shook her head.

"What?" Carmilla urged gently.

"What you just said," she smiled and blushed, "it was beautiful and I don't know what to say." She looked up and met her eyes. "It was never the grand gestures that won me over," she said as she stroked her cheek, "it was the small things that you did; like making sure I had the right gear so I wouldn't get hurt on the very first day we met, that made me fall in love with you," she smiled and kissed her softly. "And every day since then, all the little things you do," she shook her head. "I didn't fall in love with you, not once, but many times since I met you." She sighed and looked down as she put Carmilla's ring on. "I hope you know, everything I do, everything I've done, I've done for you."

"I love you Laura," Carmilla said earnestly as she met her eyes again, "and there is nothing," she pulled her closer, "nothing you could say or do to ever change that."

"Nothing?" she questioned softly.

"Nothing," Carmilla affirmed. "You could leave me for someone else and I would still love you," she stated. "I would wait for you, do everything I could to get you back and I'd only stop if you begged me to," she smiled crookedly, "and maybe not even then." She reached up and put some of Laura's hair behind her ear. "No matter what crap gets thrown at us, I love you and I don't see that ever changing."

"I love you too, Carm," Laura said softly, "I wasn't supposed to," she sighed, "but I fell, fell harder than I thought possible."

"Why weren't you supposed to?" she asked with a soft laugh.

"I, like you, thought it would be better to wait until this was all over," Laura replied with a shy grin as she led her back inside, "but the second you kissed me, I knew, it was too late, I was head over heels." She led her over to the couch, a large gift bag she hadn't noticed before sitting beside it. "So, I, um, got us something too," Laura said shyly as they sat facing each other. "Um, close your eyes and hold out your hands," she instructed.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow but did as she was told, Laura putting something rather cold and odd feeling in her hands after some rustling of the gift bag. She ran her hands along it, smiling and blushing when she realised what she held.

"Oh really?" she teased to Laura's blush.

"We, um, we don't have to if it's not..."
Carmilla interrupted her with a kiss that turned heated as she laid her back onto the couch.

"I take it you like the idea?" Laura breathed and sighed as Carmilla kissed down her neck.

"Hmmm…" she hummed as she leaned back to meet her eyes, "fuck my very beautiful girlfriend with possibly the best strapless double-ended dildo on the market?" she joked. "I have another two in the bedside table," she admitted as she stood and held her hand out to Laura. "I just haven't had the guts to suggest it," she added as she pulled her up and held her tight. "Just one question," she started, her voice low with desire as she whispered into her ear, "do you want to be fucked or would you rather fuck me?"

"Both," Laura purred, "that's why I got two."

"Well which do you want to do first?" Carmilla chuckled.

"The former," Laura answered shyly, "I haven't stopped thinking about it since Dark told me they came in the mail." She maneuvered her toward the bedroom. "Please, Carm, fuck me till I scream…” she pleaded.

"Your wish is my command, my lady," Carmilla answered happily.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy holidays my lovely Creampuffs. So sorry this was so delayed, but with the end of this part so close I've been struggling with what to include in this and the last chapter and how to bring this part of the story to a satisfying conclusion. The other problem I'm having is being distracted by what I have planned for part two; I'm so excited to share it with you all it's all I've been thinking about.

There was one point I wanted to make: writers draw from their life, it's what, I feel, makes this story feel as genuine as it does. Some things, like the idiot who let their friend's dog get away from them, actually happened to me. The one plot line, the one that hasn't been brought up again since chapter 6, that I wrapped up in this chapter, is a highly fictionalized version of something that happened to me, and as such, Carm's confusion reflects my own. However, everything else about it, is pure fiction. It was never meant to be a big part of the story and when I go back and fix the continuity errors I may take it out altogether.

Last but not least: Thank you, all of you, for taking the time to read and review. Since it's unlikely the next chapter will be up before the New Year I'd like to take this chance to wish all of you all the best for the coming year and rest assured Part Two, (which yes, it already has a name but I'm afraid telling you even that might spoil the surprise), will be something no one has ever seen before. So buckle up Creampuffs, it's gonna be one hell of a year!
Carmilla woke to the sound of running water from the bathroom the next morning, and with a smile, stretched her muscles that were sore from the night before. It was good sort of stiffness though, muscles well used from a night of lovemaking. As Laura returned from the bathroom she realized she needed to use it as well and climbed from the bed. She kissed Laura briefly as they passed and then went to attend to her morning needs.

By the time she returned she found Laura stretched out on her back, her left hand gripping the sheets as her right hand explored her body. Carmilla stood transfixed as she watched Laura play with her own nipple, pinching and twisting until she arched her back with a low moan. As her hand wandered lower Carmilla finally felt the ability to move return and sauntered over to the bed.

"Having fun?" she asked, her voice deep with desire.

Laura opened her eyes slowly and met Carmilla's; her eyes lidded, her mouth slightly parted but without any trace of embarrassment. She took her glistening fingers from between her legs and then used them to beckon her closer. Carmilla lunged towards her and captured her wrist before taking each of her fingers in her mouth and sucking them clean, eliciting another small moan from Laura.

"Someone woke up frisky," Carmilla purred as she let her last finger pop from her mouth and then covered Laura's body with her own before kissing her deeply.

"Woke up a little while ago," Laura admitted as Carmilla kissed her way down her neck, "and started thinking about last night."

"Did you enjoy yourself?" she asked, kissing just below her ear and causing the younger girl to shiver.

"I did, but…"

"But?" Carmilla interrupted and leaned back to meet her eyes uncertainly.

"But it wasn't," she started and made Carmilla yelp in surprise as she roughly reversed their positions, "exactly what I was hoping for," she finished and began biting Carmilla's neck.

"No?" she hissed as Laura bit her particularly hard.

"I was thinking," she began as she retrieved the second Feeldoe from beneath the blanket where she'd hidden it, "I could show you?"

Something in Laura's voice, something in her eyes, rendered her mute: there was desire there but it was the tone of her voice that stole her voice; it almost sounded like a plea. Carmilla could only nod and pulled her down for a kiss. Laura broke the kiss first and then kissed along her jaw to her ear. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" she whispered, her breath causing goosebumps
to cover her body. "I want to show you," she continued as she kissed down her neck, biting at a sensitive spot, she added; "Claim you as mine."

"I'm already yours, Laura," Carmilla sighed, "always have been, always will be."

Laura met and searched her eyes, a smile playing around her lips.

"I'm still going to show you," she told her as her good hand found Carmilla's left nipple and pinched it as they engaged in their most heated kiss yet. "I'm gonna make you scream my name." She resumed her downward trip, kissing and biting until she finally came to a stop around her belly button and looked up to meet her eyes. She smiled, and as she lowered her tongue between her legs, Carmilla arched into her with a sharp intake of breath. She went to knot a hand in Laura's hair but groaned in frustration as it caused Laura to stop what she was doing as she forcibly removed her hand and placed it on the bed beside her. "Did I say you could touch me yet?" Laura questioned with a raised eyebrow. She shook her head. Laura ran her hand from Carmilla's wrist, along her arm, down her body and then between her legs. "You're so wet," she chuckled, "I don't think I've ever felt you this wet," she teased as she entered her. She pushed herself up to her knees, her hand still working between her legs, her face shiny with sweat. "C'mon Kitten, show me how much you're enjoying this."

Carmilla responded with a moan as she arched her back and grinded down onto Laura's fingers; she hadn't expected that an in-control Laura would be such a turn-on, but she was already close to coming apart at her touch. She reached blindly for the waiting toy and offered it to Laura once she found it.

"Please…" she pleaded, surprised by the need in her own voice and then almost screaming in frustration when Laura took her hand away.

"Oh baby," she cooed, "you have no idea how beautiful you are right now," she said as she took the toy from her, "but I need my hand if I'm going to fuck you," she teased. "Watch me!" she ordered and Carmilla's eyes snapped back open to watch Laura insert her half of the toy. "Turn over," she said, the command implied and then laughed out loud when Carmilla rushed to comply. "Eager aren't we?" she joked as she pulled Carmilla up the hips and positioned herself behind her. "God I love this ass," she complimented as she massaged it. "Ready?"

"Please!" she whined.

Laura took the dildo, teasing her with just the tip as she ran it back and forth through her wetness before slamming it into her in one swift motion, filling her to the brim and causing her to gasp. She felt the roughness of Laura's cast on her left hip, her right hand digging into her other hip as she slowly pulled out, almost to the tip, before filling her again. She began a slow and agonizing pace, each stroke enough to stoke her desire but not enough to quench it.

"Please, baby, faster," she begged and was rewarded by Laura speeding up with shorter strokes but a quicker pace.

"Play with your clit!" Laura panted, "I'm so close, I want you to come with me…"

Carmilla struggled to obey, groaning when she found out how wet she was, her clit throbbing with a life of it's own as she stroked it.

"Oh god!" she gasped, her orgasm building at breakneck speed, "Oh god Laura! I'm going to…"

"Not yet!" Laura growled as she pulled out entirely and roughly shoved her to her to back. "I want
to see your face when you come," she explained as she pinned her to the bed, deftly entering her again as Carmilla wrapped her legs around her. Laura picked up her pace, Carmilla meeting her thrust for thrust as their mouths crashed together. Her climax took her by surprise, her nails digging into Laura's back as she broke their kiss to scream to her name. A few more thrusts and Laura was biting down on her shoulder as she came too.

"Holy hell," Carmilla sighed with a laugh, Laura met her eyes with concern. She pulled her into a kiss as she reversed their positions, pushed herself up and straddled her, her hips grinding down into her, enjoying the feeling of fullness for a few moments more, the look of bewildered contentment on Laura's face almost stopping her from letting the toy slip from her inside her but one glance at the clock and she knew they didn't have time for another round. Laura's look of disappointment was almost enough to make her second guess her decision but they really didn't have time and the little they did have she wanted to spend catching her breath in Laura's arms. She laid down beside her and gently removed the toy from inside Laura.

"Was that okay?" Laura asked uncertainly.

"That was…" she propped herself up on an elbow to meet Laura's eyes, "that was… wow…"

They didn't have much time to gather their wits or discuss what had just happened as the alarm went off a few minutes later. The next hour was filled with a flurry of activity; a quick shower followed by frantically running around to ensure they had everything they wanted to take with them to the cabin. They were almost out the door when Dark arrived with some good news; all the things Carmilla had ordered on the net for the kittens had arrived and he wanted to know where to put it. She instructed him to pile it out of the way under the window and then asked him not to assemble it, she enjoyed putting stuff together, and as they wouldn't have much time between getting back from the cabin and leaving for Vegas, she knew she might need the distraction.

Before long they were in the Doc's private bathroom, Carmilla tenderly washing away the dead skin Laura's cast had left behind while they waited for her x-rays. Carmilla had thrown a small after cast care package together before they left; a small loofa, mild soap and lotion, a fluffy hand towel and an elastic bandage. She patted her arm dry and then pulled it to her lips to kiss the starburst shaped scar on her inner arm. She leaned back and traced the scar lightly with her fingers. It wasn't too bad. If anything their tattoo artist would probably be able to make it an interesting part of Laura's phoenix but looking at it now, almost healed, and she could still see a piece of Laura's bone sticking out of it and blood pouring everywhere. She shook off the mental image and again softly kissed the scar before reaching for the lotion.

"Carm?" Laura prodded gently.

"Yeah?" she replied and met her eyes.

"Remember what I was saying last night? About the little things?" Carmilla nodded and smiled. "This is what I was talking about," she met Laura's eyes. "All the little ways that make me feel, I don't know…"

"Sacred?" offered Carmilla. "Because that's what you are to me," she continued softly as she added more lotion to her hands and massaged it into Laura's hand. "Every day I struggle to understand what you see in me. Struggle to feel worthy of your love," she sighed and met Laura's eyes. "So every chance I get I try to show you how precious you are to me…"

"Carm…" Laura tried to interrupt but was stifled with a tender kiss.
"No," she stated firmly, "nothing I've accomplished over the last two months would have been possible without you." She took Laura's face in her hands. "You inspire me. You push me to be better, not just in the cage but in every way," she shook her head, "I want to be the person you see me as."

"You already are," Laura assured her. "Whatever you were going through before you met me you were already changing without my help; getting stronger and learning better ways to cope," she took Carmilla's hands from her face and then kissed each palm. "I think," she paused to pull Carmilla's head down so she could kiss her forehead, "I think all I've done is made you believe in yourself."

Carmilla was saved having to answer by the Doc's soft knock on the door; "Girls? The x-rays are back."

"We'll be right out," Laura called and looked back to her. "I love you Carm."

"I love you too baby," she replied fondly and kissed her. "C'mon, let's not keep the Doc waiting."

Laura laughed as she followed her out and over to where the Doc stood examining her x-rays.

"So?" Carmilla prompted as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. "Good news?"

"Very," he replied happily. "See here?" he asked as he pointed to an area on the larger of the two bones in her forearm, the metal plate adding another shade. "It's mostly healed," he winked at Carmilla, "likely because I suspect Carmilla's been adding a little extra calcium to your protein shakes." Carmilla shrugged. He smiled and returned his attention to the x-rays; "Although this here?" he said as he pointed to a small space between the bones near her wrist. "This is of concern." He looked back to them. "I suspect you hyper-extended your wrist when you fell, and," he looked back to Carmilla, "as you know..."

"Soft tissue takes longer to heal," Carmilla provided sadly.

"Fortunately you were spared more damage to your muscles by how your bone broke," he told Laura and looked back to Carmilla. "You've got her set up with your physio?" She nodded. "Good," he smiled and returned his attention to Laura. "She's one of the best in the city and she'll have you sparing again before Carmilla gets..."

"Is there anything else?" Carmilla asked, cutting him off; she didn't need yet another reminder of her imminent departure.

"May I speak to Laura alone a moment?" he requested.

"Um, sure," she replied, trying to disguise her confusion, "I'll, uh, wait outside," she managed and kissed her cheek before leaving. She took her phone from her pocket as she joined Steven in the hall, deciding to call Frank rather than dwelling on what the Doc couldn't tell Laura in front of her. "Hey Frank, any news on how Will was able to take tests he wasn't there for?"

"It seems he found a replacement," he informed her. "A brilliant but poor young man. The police will have him in custody shortly."

"In custody?" she questioned.

"He committed fraud, honey," he pointed out.

"True," she sighed, "but it isn't his fault, probably just saw a chance to learn."
"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Go meet with him," she replied. "Tell him if he'll cooperate with us we'll do everything we can to help him avoid prosecution, keep him safe and let him finish his education."

"Carmilla..." he sighed tiredly.

"Frank," she interjected firmly, "I know this kid isn't my problem, but he's gotten good grades and I doubt he had any idea what was really going on. We've taken control of the Foundation?" she prompted.

"We have," he affirmed.

"Good," she smiled, "Go see him yourself or send someone you trust. In the off chance he does know something, I don't want him disappearing."

"Fine," he sighed.

"And Frank?"

"Yes?"

"Keep me informed of everything until I leave, I want to leave knowing I've done everything I can," she instructed with a smile as Laura joined her and handed her the forgotten elastic bandage. "We're off to see Will, do I need to know anything?"

"I'll send you an email update," he suggested.

"Alright," she smiled, "And Frank? Thanks."

"You're welcome honey, try to enjoy your trip," he said and hung up.

"What did the Doc want?" she asked as she slipped her phone back in her pocket and took the bandage from her.

"He said that was a good idea," she replied.

"He could've said that in front of me," Carmilla pointed out and kissed the inside of her wrist.

"Fine," she sighed, "he wanted to know how you and Dark are doing with the whole Will thing," she admitted reluctantly as Carmilla wrapped her arm.

"Won't know till we've talked to him," she answered as she took the fasteners from Laura and attached them. "Currently however I'm cycling through confusion, anger, and concern." She took Laura's new ring from her right hand and moved it to it's proper home on her left hand. She kissed her softly and laced her fingers with her right hand. "Not to mention the serious urge I have to find out if it's possible to smack someone to death," she joked and started toward the door.

When they got to the car she opened Laura's door for her out of habit, smiling when Laura kissed her cheek. Once she'd joined her she tapped the rehab facility's address into the GPS and waited for Steven's signal that he was ready to go. A short drive later found them waiting outside a twenty foot fence as a security guard checked their credentials.

"I thought this was rehab?"Laura commented as Carmilla parked the Jeep next to Betty, Danny and Dark in the van.
"A secure one," she clarified as her phone rang. She looked to Steven as he pulled up beside her, his own phone to his ear. "What's wrong?"

"We're being watched," he stated, "across the street, black SUV. Betty noticed it when she got here and called Rick with the plates."

"What do you suggest?" she asked as she angled her rearview mirror to see the car across the street.

"Since we don't know if it's just a reporter or someone working for Deanna," he began, perhaps a little hesitantly, "I don't think it's a good idea for Danny to talk to him."

"Agreed," she shook her head and looked over to the van. "What about Dark?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Laura piped up.

"I do actually," Carmilla replied flatly, "I'm going to call Dark," she informed Steven, hung up and called her best friend. "Hey sweetie, you feel up to talking to Will?" she asked, meeting his eyes as he nodded. "Can you manage your temper?" she questioned carefully.

"I'll leave if I can't," he suggested.

"Alright," she smiled. "Let me talk to Betty. He nodded and handed the phone over to her. "You stay with us and Steven can take Danny and the van back to the gym to pick up everyone else."

"He won't fit everyone in the van," she pointed out.

"He doesn't have to," Carmilla corrected, "Mark's a cop, if I'm able to drive with you guys tailing me, he should find it a breeze."

"Fair enough," Betty replied, "Let's get a move on, we don't want to be driving up there in the dark. I'll call Steven and let him know what's happening."

"Thanks, we'll wait on your signal," Carmilla replied and hung up. She looked to Laura and could see she wanted to say something. "Yes, Dark has a temper and he's pissed and hurt," she advised her. "And he's the last person Will will be expecting." Laura nodded. "He is going to be scared of Dark," she smiled, "By the time I get in there we might actually get a few answers."

Laura nodded and then pointed behind her; Betty and Dark were waiting.

"C'mon," she prodded, "let's get this over with and then get the fuck outta dodge for a few days, yes?"

"Definitely," Laura replied with a grin before kissing her quickly.

Dark joined them while Betty followed behind, her hand inside her jacket on what, Carmilla knew, was her service revolver. Rick had forced through some paperwork so both she and Steven could legally carry a gun along with Laura. Though the fact that her 'bodyguards' were now armed should offer her some comfort it only served to remind her how much danger they were all in.

"Miss Karnstein I presume?" a lab coat wearing woman asked.

"I am, unfortunately," she replied warmly, "Dr. Spielsdorf?" she asked as she extended her hand. The blond smiled and nodded. "I've heard good things about you," she continued, trying to butter the woman up a little.

"There's no need for that," the Doctor joked, "Your detective friend is already here with a court
order so flattery won't get you anywhere," she told them as she motioned them down the hall.

"So what can you tell us?" Carmilla asked, her stomach tightening as she readied herself for the bad news.

"Please sit," the Doctor said as they entered a boardroom with two large monitors at the far end. One was currently showing a bare wall while the other showed a handcuffed, pale, and sickly looking Will.

Carmilla fell into her chair as she studied him; "How did I miss this?" she wondered.

"His initial blood tests were enough to alert us to something much larger," the Doctor shook her head. "Another few months and he'd have been facing organ failure."

"What kind of drugs?" Laura asked as she took Carmilla's hand, laced their fingers and rubbed her thumb with her own.

"It's," she shook her head, "a cocktail would be the best way to describe it. It has properties of Exstasy, GHB, Meth. You name it, he tested positive for it."

"How's he doing now?" Dark asked.

"Physically, he's recovering and will heal in time, but mentally?" She shook her head again and focused on the screen. "The only thing he's said since he got here is to ask for his stepmother."

"He doesn't know what to say without mommy dearest handing him the cue cards," Carmilla provided dryly. "Do we have audio as well?" she asked with a nod to the monitors. The Doctor nodded. She looked to Rick. "Will any of it be admissible?"

"No, he'd need to be informed he's being recorded," Rick replied thoughtfully. "However I'd settle for some new leads right about now."

Carmilla reached for Dark's hand.

"You don't have to do this," she told him softly.

"I'll be okay," he said, his eyes fixed on the screen. "We need answers," he met her eyes, "I need answers," he amended with an edge.

She nodded and looked back to the Doctor.

"Where's that room in relationship to this one?" she asked.

"Next door," she answered.

Carmilla and Laura wished him good luck and then waited for him to appear on the other monitor.

Dark walked in, closed the door behind him and then went to stand in front of Will a few inches to the side, his feet spread and his fingers laced just above his waist. He let the silence stretch for a few minutes, Will only meeting his gaze briefly before looking down.

"So how's the food in here?" he asked neutrally. "I hear it tastes like shit."

"What are you doing here?" Will muttered.

"Keep up, dipshit, I'm asking about the food," he replied evenly.
"It's fine," Will met his eyes briefly again and looked down. "Haven't been very hungry anyway."

"Yes, I can see how being full of bullshit could ruin one's appetite," he said, his tone such the Will's head snapped up and then visibly shrink back at the look Dark was giving him. Carmilla could certainly see why; she hoped she never heard her best friend use the same tone with her. Combined with the look of disgust and something bordering on hatred, and it was downright frightening to witness. "Care to explain this fantasy you fed Danny about me drugging you?" Will said nothing but had enough sense to look down again. "Are your shoes shiney?" he quipped as Will's head jerked up again. "Can you see the ugly yet?"

Will still didn't answer, only narrowed his eyes as Dark shoved his hands in his pockets and started to pace. Carmilla went to get up; her best friend was on the verge of losing it and she wanted to be ready to stop him. No matter how angry and hurt he was by Will's lies, he'd never forgive himself if he hurt him out of anger. She felt Laura's hand on her wrist and glanced at her as the silence in the other room stretched.

"Not yet," she whispered.

She nodded and looked back to the screen as Dark finally broke the silence.

"Gee, Will, I figured you were pussy whipped but I didn't realize she got your tongue too," he taunted.

"Fuck you," Will hissed.

"No thanks, I don't fuck family," Dark spat back.

"Family?" Will scoffed. "Please, there's only one person I consider that and they sure as hell don't live at the fucking gym."

"Really? After all the shit we've done for you? That your sister has done?" he shouted, his voice having gotten louder as he walked over to the door and then left with nothing more than the slamming of the door.

Carmilla rushed out into the hall to find her best friend pacing angrily, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Hitting something isn't worth it," she told him as she attempted to place a hand on his shoulder.

"No," he agreed as he ducked out from under her hand. "But it would feel really good right about now."

"I know, sweetie, I do," she sighed in defeat as she tried to marshal her own anger, "and trust me, I'll probably be having the same inclination once I'm done with him."

"No," he sighed in resignation, "you need your hands more than I do." He smiled crookedly. "And I'm not just talking about keeping Laura happy," he joked.

"You going to be okay?" she asked carefully.

"I'm ducky," he replied as he ran his hands roughly through his hair. "I need a smoke."

"Take Betty with you," she instructed to his frown.

"If you think it's necessary, Mom," he replied bitterly.
"I won't have you hurt," she countered vehemently. "Or, at least, not anymore than you've already been," she added sadly.

"Whatever," he replied with a shake of his head. "Tell her to keep her distance, I need a joint."

She nodded and watched him walk away; the last time she'd seen him this broken was when they'd found the parasite in his blood. She leaned against the wall and then sank to the bottom of it as the door across from her opened.

"Where's Dark?" Laura asked as she knelt beside her.

"Gone out for a joint," she said as she leaned her head back against the wall.

"Should I?" Betty asked with a jerk of her thumb towards the exit.

"Please," she sighed. "He's running really hot right now so keep your distance." She shook her head. "Keep him out of trouble?" Betty nodded. "Thanks." She looked to Rick as he joined them.

"Bring what I asked for?" He nodded and handed her a folder from his briefcase. She opened it and sifted through the paperwork and photos of her destroyed Jeep. She took her phone from her pocket to check for an email from Frank, smiling when she opened and read it.

"Good news?" Laura prodded.

"They found the kid who was taking Will's classes," she replied and motioned to Rick to help her up. "He's heading to Montreal tomorrow to sort it all out, but they've got him in custody so at least he's safe."

"You going to be okay?" Laura asked as she rubbed her back.

"I have to do this," she replied with a glance at the door. "That little shit has answers," she took a deep breath, "Answers that will determine what happens next."

"I'm just next door," Laura reminded her softly and kissed her cheek. "You can do this Carm."

Carmilla nodded, kissed her gently and then made her way for the door before her nerve failed her. She put her hand on it, took a deep breath and then pushed it open as she heard the door to the observation room close behind her. She walked over, dropped the folder on the table in front of Will and then went to lean on the wall where Dark had stood. Not once had she even glanced at him but when she did she couldn't help but smile and chuckle under her breath; he was terrified. The questions was; why?

"You look like shit," she said as the silence stretched.

"Like you care," he spat.

"How dare you!" she hissed.

"How dare I?" he yelled over her and tried to stand, only he couldn't as he was attached to the chair. "How dare you!" he spat angrily as he clenched his shaking hands in front of him. "How long did it take you to figure out I was missing?" he questioned dryly.

"I knew where you were the next day," she retorted.

"And you didn't come after me?" he seethed.

"Didn't seem worth the time or trouble," she supplied quietly. "What the fuck happened Will?"
"I already told Danny," he replied edgily, "you already know."

"So that's the story you're sticking with?" she questioned. He nodded. She shook her head and ran her hands through her hair as she started to pace. "You really believe Deanna's the only person who's ever cared about you?"

"You and Dad only ever to took me with you to keep me away from her," he raged. "And then after he died I never saw you!"

"And you know why?" she asked calmly as she spun to face him.

"Jealousy?" he shrugged.

"Is that what she told you?" she laughed. She stalked over to the table and placed her hands flat on it as she leveled him with her gaze. "Before Dad died I was trying to protect you," she corrected. "And after he died I was too busy trying to survive, avoid, or heal from, another beating," she stated and pushed herself up from the table.

"Lies," he muttered and met her eyes defiantly. "If she ever hurt you it was only in self-defence."

"Self-defence!" she spat. "I was eleven!" she shrieked. "She backhanded me off a chair the day we buried Daddy!" she yelled as she walked away and shoved her hands in her pockets. "As soon as I was coherent again," she continued, a little more calmly as she faced him again, "she threatened me. Told me if I ever told anyone the truth she'd kill me and then do worse to you."

"She was afraid of you," he replied defensively.

"Of me!" she laughed. "I was eleven!" she yelled again. She walked back to the wall in front of him and leaned her forehead against it. She took several deep breaths to calm her temper, as well as the anxiety the flood of images she couldn't help but see, was causing. She turned back around, leaned against the wall and put her hands back in her pockets to hide the fact they were shaking. "So many times," she continued, her voice choked with emotion, "she had me moments from death, no, actually praying for it." She met his eyes again. "I held on for you. To keep you safe."

"You almost killed us both that night," he shook his head. "I only went with you so you wouldn't kill her."

"If anything," she admitted reluctantly, "I was trying to push you out of the way but she pushed me into you and sent you down the stairs," she amended. "As for her?" She shrugged. "It wasn't anything I did that put her life in danger. By the time I was able to fight back, I barely had any strength left." She shook her head. "No, what almost killed her was the stab wound she gave herself."

"Lies," he muttered again, but perhaps with a little less conviction. "She was always afraid of you," he repeated quietly. "She told me she'd wake up to find you hovering over her with a knife."

"I remember that," she shuddered. "Scary as hell to wake up to a full grown woman staring at you with a knife in her hand." She met his eyes again. "I was six." She let her confession sit with him a moment while she considered her next move. "Did you know Danny was sick before we fought?"

"I wouldn't have let her fight if I'd know you'd poisoned her," he replied evenly.

"I don't know what scares me more," she admitted, "that you actually believe the bullshit you're spouting or that you don't, but you're managing it with a straight face."
"Did you get the Invicta fight?" he wrong-footed her and she could only nod. "Did you win?" She shook her head. "You lost?" he blurted hopefully.

"Not exactly," she chuckled. "We both got knocked out. Me by her choke, and her by the mat when we hit the ground."

"You got in the house?" he asked and deflated when she nodded. "You can't win, you know, it's too late."

"Too late?"

"We got married the day after I turned nineteen," he declared defiantly.

"Married!" She laughed as she tried to swallow her disgust. She took out her phone and texted Frank the good news. "Oh little brother, you really fucked yourself good," she shook her head and laughed at his confusion. "You should be thanking us for keeping her away from you the last couple of weeks."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, the fear she'd seen when she first walked in was creeping back in his features.

"All your assets were frozen the second you got arrested," she informed him evenly. "And if you're really married?" She genuinely laughed as she could see the truth was dawning on him. "So were hers. You fucked up, little man," she teased as she went to lean on the wall in front of him again. "Don't worry," she said lightly, "she gets to keep the house and a modest allowance," she smiled, "though she'll probably have to cut back on the 'help'."

"It also means you lose the cabin," he jeered.

"That was never in your control," she pushed off the wall, "it was in Frank's name, not yours, until you turned twenty-one."

"Was?"

"You really think I'd let you put the homes of the few remaining blood relatives we have in danger?" she scoffed. "You never read the fine print, do you?" she taunted. "It defaults to the oldest living direct heir if ever it is in danger of being sold." She shook her head. "You're finished Will."

"You should have given up," he agonised. "Why won't you just give up?"

"Who was El? You or Deanna?" she asked him evenly and fought her smile when she saw that she'd surprised him. He didn't answer. "When did she finally warn you about the cars?" she pressed and he blanched further. "After I picked you up at the airport?" This time his silence was answer enough. She walked over and took the pictures of her Jeep from the folder, and as she studied them, asked; "Did she even tell you that I was one fender-bender away from this?" She dropped the pictures in front of him. "One minor accident and I, and everyone within two hundred feet, would have been dead." She regarded him a moment. "That, little man, is where I draw the line. Put my life in danger? Fine," she shrugged, "it's been in danger ever since that woman walked into our lives," she took a deep breath to steady herself; she was getting close to losing it. "But I won't tolerate the endangering of innocent lives and the lives of the people I love." She walked over to the door, turning to face her little brother before leaving. "That!" she spat as she pointed at the pictures. "That is what your mommy dearest is capable of," she hissed angrily and shook her head. She took a deep breath. "I tried to save you Will," her voice cracked with emotion and exhaustion, "I really did." She put her hand on the door. "You've made your bed," she said evenly, "time to face
the consequences of who you've chosen to share it with." She met his eyes one last time. "I'm done." She decided one last parting shot was in order though; she wasn't sure Will was quite scared enough yet. "One last thing," she started but didn't look at him, "we found the boy you paid to take your classes. He's already in custody. If Frank can manage to convince the University to not pursue legal action, he'll get to finish what he started courtesy of the 'William Karnstein Senior Foundation'." She turned to see his reaction and wasn't disappointed; it was clear he was beginning to understand just how much she had already figured out. She smiled, turned and walked out, closing the door behind her maybe a little harder than she'd intended.

Laura exited into the hall at almost the same time but hesitated before approaching her. Carmilla shook her head sadly and walked to her with her arms open, melting into Laura as she wrapped her arms around her. She tucked her head into Laura's neck and felt tears stinging her eyes. "I've lost him," she choked out quietly.

"Can't lose someone who doesn't want to be kept," Laura replied softly. Carmilla met her eyes. "What do we do now?" she asked a she wiped away Carmilla's tears.

"The only thing that's changed," she shrugged, "is that he'll go down with her too." She shook her head and stepped away. "He's really mucked things up for both of them when he married her. She's only going to fight harder now."

"But..." Laura stammered.

"She's right," Rick interjected. "If the marriage is legal?"

"She has nothing left to lose," Carmilla provided.

"Steven and the others are back," Dark announced as he returned. "We ready to go?"

"Almost," Carmilla said and looked to the Doctor. "He really believes everything he's said, doesn't he?"

"If he doesn't, he's an amazing actor," Doctor Spielsdorf replied. "As this is the longest I've heard him talk thus far, I'm afraid I don't have any answers for you," she smiled and amended; "Yet." She walked over and put a hand on Carmilla's shoulder. "But you've made it clear to me that we need to keep him away from his stepmother as long as possible."

"Wife," Carmilla corrected.

"That is so creepy on so many levels," Laura said under her breath.

"Is there any way, if this isn't just an act, that he'll get better?" Carmilla asked indifferently.

"You might have started him on the right path," the Doctor replied. "Or, at least, given me a starting point."

"I'm not sure I care anymore," she admitted as she took Laura's hand and laced their fingers. "Let's get out of here." Laura nodded. "Keep us updated," she told Rick. She pulled her car keys from her pocket and handed them to a surprised Laura. "I'm in no condition to drive, do you mind?"

"I guess, I mean, as long as you take over when we get to the back roads," Laura said uncertainly as she took the keys.

"I should be fine by then," she replied and kissed her cheek.
"We should get moving if we want to get there before dark," Betty advised them as she ushered them down the hall. "I'll be in the lead, then your Dad, you and finally Steven. Just keep your Dad in sight and Steven will do the same behind you."

"Understood," Laura answered and looked to Carmilla. "You sure about this? Me driving?"

"Better than me driving," she confessed and kissed her cheek. "I'm so pissed off and distracted I'd probably get us in accident and then beat the crap out of the other driver even if it wasn't their fault." She kissed her cheek again as they exited out into the sun. "Besides," she smiled as she opened the driver's side door for Laura, "bout time you prove you can drive stick as good as you say you can."

"Thought I already proved that this morning," Laura teased.

"You did at that!" Carmilla chuckled. "God, I love you," she sighed and kissed her tenderly. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Good thing you're never going to find out," Laura smiled. "And I love you too." She kissed her. "Now get in the car so we can get the fuck out of here already."

They'd been driving for a few hours, mostly in silence, each of them lost in thought when Laura got her attention by slipping her hand into her lap and lacing their fingers. Carmilla pulled their hands to her lips and kissed the back of her hand.

"So, um, I was thinking," Laura started, blushing when she spared her a glance to find that she had her full attention, "should we, you know, maybe, talk about this morning?"

"I already told you it was amazing," Carmilla answered with a smile.

"I know, but, um, we've never really done anything like that before and…"

"Laura?" she interrupted. "Stop, okay?" Laura nodded slowly. "Yes, maybe we should've talked first but I don't know if it would have been as intense if we had." She kissed her hand again. "I trust you Laura and I know, if I'd asked you to stop, or if you suspected something was wrong, you'd have stopped. Right?"

"Of course," Laura affirmed.

"Now," Carmilla continued, her voice lowering, "was I surprised how turned on I got by you taking complete control? A little," she admitted. "But I've always known I like a little pain with my pleasure," she blushed. "Not that the pain itself turns me on but it brings me more in the moment, makes everything that little more intense, you know?"

"I do," Laura replied, reddening herself. "Do you think you'd be up to returning the favour some time soon?"

"Saturday night?" Carmilla suggested to Laura's pout. "Oh c'mon, neither of us wanted to have sex with Steven and Betty sharing an apartment with us, do you really think being in a cabin full of people isn't going to spoil the mood a little?"

"Okay," Laura sighed, "maybe you have a point." She smiled. "Besides, I'll probably be getting my period in the next day or two, so it's probably for the best." She glanced at her. "What are you doing about that, by the way?"
"My period?" Laura nodded. "I went back on the pill as soon as we got back the last time and I'll stay on it until I get back home," she shrugged. "I really can't afford the downtime between now and then, but I'll probably take at least a couple of weeks off from training when I get back anyway."

"Carm?"

"Yeah, Pup?"

"If there was a way," Laura started, her attention fully focused on the road ahead of her. "If there was someone out there that could end this and it meant you didn't have to go on the show, would you take it?"

"I can't pass up this opportunity on a maybe," Carmilla answered to Laura's obvious disappointment. "I know leaving for six weeks sucks, I do, but this will work." She studied Laura's profile a moment. "It's going to be okay, you know?" Laura sighed. "Baby?" she prodded and was rewarded with a glance and smile. "We're going to be okay, six weeks apart won't break what we've already built together, I promise."

It was Friday evening and Carmilla stood leaning on the railing of the balcony off of her and Laura's bedroom. The last few days had been spent trying to figure out what was really going on with Will amidst a lot of laughter, drinking and general shenanigans. Their working theory, and at this point that's all it was, was that Will had seen she and Danny talking after the fight and realized she was no longer a viable scapegoat for the information Deanna was getting. From there, they theorized, he had taken more drugs, of his own volition, without knowing what was already in his system. In his fear and confusion he ran to Deanna. From there it was anyone's guess what happened but they believed Deana was attempting to set her up, or someone else at the gym, for the drugs they found in Will's things.

She looked down toward the lake's edge and her friends getting the fire pit ready for their bonfire. It seemed a fitting end to the week; with all the planning they'd done, a night of frivolity sounded perfect. Laughter drew her attention to the cloud of smoke on the balcony below her. Mark and Danny's father, Mike, had, as the two oldest people there and at the gym, gravitated towards each other but now seemed to becoming friends. She smiled. The two had made quite the dent in her father's stash of fine cigars and forty year old scotch. She didn't mind though, she wasn't a fan of either and they were just gathering dust.

She followed the sound of someone chopping wood and found Brody swinging the axe. She whistled to get Dark's attention and pointed to Brody. Dark nodded, walked over to him and pried the axe from his grip. The only time Brody resembled something close to graceful was in the cage and she was worried, given his current state of mind, that he might hurt himself and she wasn't in the mood for a mad dash to the nearest hospital. Of all of them, Brody had taken the news of Will's betrayal the hardest. He thought of both Will and Dark as brothers and was hurt on Dark's behalf as well as Carmilla's. He was also far too hard on himself; they'd all been blind to Will's true loyalty.

She sighed and rubbed her face; she had no clue what was really going on with her little brother. While it was easy to assume he'd been the responsible for the information Deanna had been receiving all this time, their meeting had left her unsettled and more confused than before.

"You okay?" Laura asked as she joined her and rubbed her back.

"Just thinking about Will," she admitted as she turned to lean on the railing and took Laura in her arms. "If you didn't already know the truth, his version of our childhood could be true," she began.
"Think about it; is it so hard to believe she hid the truth from him when even my father had no clue she was torturing me on a daily basis?"

"How do you explain the marriage?" Laura reasoned.

"The same way I can explain everything else," she sighed, "Deanna is a far better manipulator than I ever gave her credit for."

"I don't know," Laura said thoughtfully, "I think he might actually be sick." Carmilla raised an eyebrow so she continued; "I think he might be suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder, you know, multiple personalities?" Carmilla nodded as she had an idea where Laura was going with this line of thought. "It would explain a lot. How he had no clue about the drugs, or only pieces of information. Someone with this disorder can have several different alters, or personalities, and not all them are aware of the others or knows everything the other does."

"But aside from possible inappropriate touching and mental manipulations, I don't know that Will was really ever hurt by her," Carmilla countered.

"You don't know that he wasn't," Laura observed. "If he really didn't know what was happening to you what's to say you know the full extent of what she's done to him?"

"True," she sighed. "Either way I guess he's in the best place for the moment; getting treatment and safe from Deanna."

"I don't think she'd hurt him, not physically anyway," Laura countered. "Even if he's lost his value as an informant he's valuable to her because she thinks he's valuable to you."

"So she won't hurt him unless she can use it to her advantage," she commented dryly. "Perfect."

"Look, Deanna might be a sociopath but she isn't stupid," Laura replied calmly. "She had the marriage annulled the day after Will overdosed; risking her money to get Will's was never the plan. And if it was only about the money why didn't we find out about it sooner?"

"And why not use the confusion that would have brought?" Carmilla added.

"I think she was saving the announcement for when you're away, so you personally wouldn't be able to step in," Laura theorized.

"I honestly don't know what to think," Carmilla replied tiredly and slipped from Laura's arms. "Part of me wants to throttle the little shit for working against me all this time and another part of me just wants to understand what the fuck is going on." She ran her hands roughly through her hair. "The rest of me is pissed at myself for missing it all along."

"You never had a reason not to trust him," Laura reminded her and took her in her arms again. "Shall we put this on hold for the rest of the night and join our friends?"

"Sure," she sighed and led her from the room, "it's not like there's any answers to find unless he talks."

"True," Laura replied and kissed her cheek, "but sometimes knowing the truth is worse than the path to it."

"I guess," Carmilla laughed as she grabbed them a six-pack from the fridge.

They made their way down to where their friends had already lit the fire and were gathered around
The summer before she and Dark had overseen the fire pit's construction along with the couches carved right into massive stone blocks. Then, just to make it more comfortable, Dark had sewn together cushions for each one. She and Laura settled into the couch beside Dark's, the later sharing his couch with Nat, the girl Bruce had held captive. He was talking to Danny who was sharing the next couch over with Brody. Nat sat between them, her head going back and forth as she followed their conversation, usually lingering on Danny a few extra seconds before turning back to Dark. It was obvious to everyone but Danny that Brody wasn't the only one that was developing a crush on the redhead. Or maybe she did know, it was hard to say. In Nat's case it was likely the age difference that had her dismissing it; Nat was only sixteen while Danny was just over twenty-one. As for Brody? Maybe there was something between them but she doubted Danny would ever admit it.

Behind Danny, Brody was slouched down on the couch, his arms folded across his chest as he stared into the fire. She wished there was someway she could help him but she understood all too well the anger he was feeling over Will's betrayal. She hoped, when she and Laura returned to Vancouver on Tuesday, that she'd be able to spend a little time alone with him and help him come to terms with it.

Beside Brody sat Perry and her partner, LaFontaine, who was chatting with Laura. It was nice seeing the more relaxed and nurturing side of Perry even if she made it clear she wasn't overly fond of the great outdoors. As for LaFontaine, Carmilla had found herself growing quite fond of the mad scientist with their quick wit and brilliant mind.

She nudged Laura and then moved up to sit on the armrest of their couch. As she waited to get everyone's attention she ran through her mind what she wanted to say. One by one each person around the fire looked her way and waited for her to speak.

"So, um, I wanted to thank all of you for coming up here," she began as Laura scooted closer and put her arm around her waist. "It's been really great spending time with all of you and getting to know some of you better but…"

"You'll be ecstatic when we all leave tomorrow so you and Laura can fuck whenever and wherever you like?" Dark joked to everyone's laughter but he sobered immediately at the glare Carmilla was giving him.

"But," she continued more firmly, "you all need to understand the danger you're in and that it's only bound to get worse," she said, looking around the circle. "If any of you," she glanced at Laura, "and I mean any," she re enforced, "of you want out, now is the time to tell me. I'll do…"

"Carm, stop," Danny interrupted. "You think we're only here because of you?"

"No, I know she's fucked with just about everyone here in one way or another," she shrugged, "I know you have your own reasons."

"Or maybe we're helping you because it's the right thing to do," Brody said quietly. "Yes, she's hurt most of us, but even if she hadn't, she's an evil callous bitch who needs to go down before anyone else gets hurts."

"Well said," Danny praised and earned the first smile anyone had seen on Brody's face in days.

"Alright then," Carmilla smiled, "if you're all sure." They all nodded. "Fine, then you have to promise me you'll all stick together and watch each other's backs while I'm gone. I've said it before, and I'm sure I'll say it again before all this is done, until that bitch is behind bars, there is no such thing as safe for any of us, only safer." She looked around the circle again. "You're all so precious
to me, even those of you I don't know very well yet, that I can't stand the thought of anything bad happening to any of you," she shrugged. "You're the family I've chosen to replace the one I lost when I was three," she took a deep breath as tears threatened. "So, um, thanks," she smiled weakly, "and to thank you I thought we could sing a song," she chuckled at their surprise. "Let me sing the verses and everyone join in on the chorus? I think you'll recognize it pretty quick but we'll change the last 'rock' to 'end'," her friends shared a look but nodded as she slapped her thighs twice and then clapped, repeating the action until her friends were smiling and joining in.

"Deedee you're a bitch, made a big noise,
growing up in the street, gonna marry a rich man someday.

But you got mud on your face,
big disgrace,
kickin' my ass all over the place.

Singin!"

Her voice was clear and strong, her friends smiled as they joined in on the chorus;

"We will we will rock you!

We will we will rock you!"

They all looked at her intently to see how she'd reword the next verse;

"Deedee you were a young bitch, hard bitch,
treating me like shit, trying to break me someday.

But you got blood on your hands,
your own little man,
somehow wishing he'd never ran.

Sing it!"

Her friends sang the next chorus louder than the last, somehow realising that no matter how Deanna had hurt each of them personally, it was nothing compared to the lifetime of abuse Carmilla had suffered at her hands.

"We will we will rock you!

We will we will rock you!"

Carmilla couldn't help but smile as she prepared to sing the last verse;

"Deedee you're an old hag, bitter hag,
gonna be some prison dyke's bitch someday.

You'll have mud on you face,
big disgrace!
"Can't wait to put you back into your place!"

"And change it to 'end'," she reminded her friends; "Sing it!"

"We will we will end you!

We will we will end you!"

"Everybody!" Laura sang out.

"She will she will end you!"

They all sang, pointing to Carmilla and then let her sing the last line alone.

"I will I will end you!"

About halfway up the mountain above the cabin, a man stood alone at the edge of a cave, smiling as the voices below reached him. The light from the cave behind him would have made him barely visible to the singers but he stepped back as he lowered his binoculars just in case.

As Carmilla changed the words of the last chorus he chuckled under his breath; "Yes we will, honey, yes we will."

Chapter End Notes

So there you have it folks, the end of part one. The next part, (whose title I can't share with you as it'll spoil the surprise I have in store for you), will require some intense plotting and planning. As such, I aim to post at least every two weeks. Hope I'm forgiven for the delay on this chapter given the length and 'fluff' at the beginning but I also wanted to get this chapter just right. Hope you enjoyed! Until next time, Creampuffs, thanks for the love and continued support; it really means the world to me!
Hey folks, just in case you missed it, part two is already nine chapters in! Check it out; Love & MMA; Then and Now

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