

## Chapter Two: Party Time

As if guided by some unseen force Carson was in and out of the house and waiting on the curb in record time by the time Owen pulled up in front of his house. Carson was standing there in his faded jeans, his favorite t-shirt, a red flannel jacket, and a smile on his face when Owen stopped and opened the door.

“If I didn’t know better I would think you were excited to go.” Owen said as Carson got in and shut the door.

“Not my fault you took too long to get here.” Carson replied jokingly trying to hide the excitement. It wasn’t the party that excited him, but the fact that they were heading up into the mountains outside town which Carson always enjoyed visiting. It was also very rare that Carson ever beat Owen out to the curb, so the response made a reasonably good excuse for the excitement.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, because you know that it probably won’t happen again.” chuckled Owen as he pulled out into the street and began the somewhat uneventful drive out of town toward Burnam Meadow.

The drive most of the way there was pretty uneventful except for the scenery and the occasional twist and turn of the road that broke up the monotony. Even the rumbling of the engine which seemed to be competing with the music playing on the stereo both attempting to drown the other out, helped break it up. After only an hour though they had arrived at a turn off of the main highway, the turn off appeared to lead onto an old dirt logging road that had seen better days. It didn't look even remotely maintained, but it didn't matter as there was signs of some fresh tracks which Carson assumed were more than likely from Sean and some of the other party goers that would have already traveled down this road.

Owen turned the music off as he turned down the road and knowing what was coming next Carson didn’t object. The road was rough enough that it would cause the CD in the stereo to skip which always annoyed Owen.

“Almost there.” Owen said not for Carson’s benefit but more for his own.

“Yep, should just be right up ahead. Doesn’t look like much has changed in the last year.” Carson added agreeing with Owen’s assessment.

As they drove down the logging road Carson glanced out the window watching the trees and the bushes lining the road get thicker and thicker choking out much of the light that was struggling to break through the further in they went, and within a few minutes they arrived at the end of the road which was clearly marked by all the cars and trucks that were parked there.

There looked to be about half a dozen vehicles several pickups and a couple of beat up cars that were still in better shape than Owen's old bug parked at the end of the road.

The area around the parked cars was surrounded by trees creating a kind of natural barrier preventing most vehicles from being able to continue deeper into thick trees.

Along with the trees bordering the makeshift parking area there were a couple of cleared paths though not from heavy use but more likely cleared for a specific purpose which was the party if Carson had to guess. From here you could see small flickers of light splashing across the canopy of leaves created by the trees off in the distance.

As Owen pulled up behind one of the pickups and turned off the engine a silhouette appeared in between a couple of trees lining one of the paths to what Carson imagined was a bonfire in the distance.

"Ah, there's Sean." Owen said pointing toward the silhouette that was slowly coming into focus followed by someone else Carson couldn't make out. "I was wondering if he was going to meet us or not. He always has a habit of knowing when people show up. Oh and that's his girlfriend Clara." Owen said.

The two figures walking toward them were still too far away to discern any specific features but you could tell that they must have been a couple by the way they acted as the one Owen pointed out as Sean wrapped his arm around the other, Clara as she quickly caught up with him.

Carson worked his way out of the passenger door as Owen exited from his side, looking off in the distance beyond the direction that Sean was walking from Carson could hear some faint voices talking and laughing and overall having a good time with some low music playing in the background.

"Come on we are missing out on all the fun." Owen said hurriedly to Carson.

Before Carson could respond he heard Sean call out having closed much of the distance between them. "It's about time you got here. I wasn't sure if you were still coming or not." He said jokingly to Owen with a familiarity that made Carson a bit curious and surprisingly a bit jealous.

"Well you know, plans change sometimes, plus I hate missing out on your parties." Owen replied with a cheerful grin and a shrug.

"And who might this be?" Sean asked glancing curiously over at Carson.

"This is Carson." Owen replied motioning toward Carson. "I think I've mentioned him before?" Owen said with a questioning tone.

"Ah yes, Owen has mentioned you a few times. Well it's nice to finally meet you." Sean said with a smile as he extended his hand to Carson. Carson reached out to shake Sean's hand, and glanced up inspecting Sean and the woman who was with him.

Sean wasn't at all what Carson had expected even with the description Owen had gave him which seemed exaggerated at least until now. Sean had short blond hair, blue eyes, and an inviting smile that that seemed to put you into some kind of relaxed if not hypnotizing state. The woman with him was tall slender with fiery red hair that came down to her waist, and she also seemed to have the same inviting smile that Sean had, though her smile seemed to have a more sinister predatory edge to it. You almost couldn't look a way but you knew if you didn't something bad would happen.

Between the two Carson was speechless his eyes bouncing between Sean and the woman unsure of who to look at, and yet not wanting to look away from either of them. His hand was still out stretched in a failed attempt to shake Sean's hand, but as if he knew what was going on Sean reached out and met his hand making it look as if the whole handshake had been planned and not an attempt to cover up Carson's clumsiness.

"This is my girlfriend Clara." Sean said as he gave her a gentle one armed hug with the arm that was wrapped around her.

"Hello." She said with a gentle yet inviting tone.

Carson felt as if her greeting at him specifically more so then both him and Owen, which made him even more nervous as he struggled to meet her gaze, "hi" he replied with a shaky voice. While Carson had a tendency to be a bit shy he was never this bad, let alone this quiet, but for some reason he was to awestruck to talk as he just seemed to stare at the two. Carson even noticed Owen who was normally bouncing off the walls like a social butterfly seemed subdued, normally he would have already made some comment about how good Clara looked, but even he didn't seem to be himself.

"Owen was right when he said you weren't much of a talker." Sean said breaking the awkward silence.

"It's okay, be shy all you want, but I bet you will have opened up a bit by the time you leave tonight." Sean said with a smile and confidence that he seemed to project when he talked.

"Well it looks like I have some other folks to welcome." He continued as another vehicle pulled up near where Owen had parked.

"Everyone is back there by the fire, and there are plenty of refreshments to go around so enjoy yourself." He said motioning with his free hand back toward the flickering lights that where further into the trees.

"Carson breaking out of his shell I would pay to see that." Owen said smiling as a small chuckle followed. As if conceding the potential argument Sean nodded to Owen and

began to walk toward the newly arrived vehicle as Owen and Carson proceeded toward the forest in the direction of the noise and lights.

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As they both walked along the makeshift path Carson did his best to stay on his feet, but he was still enthralled with both Sean and Clara that he kept glancing back at the two of them causing him to trip over the smallest things. Luckily Owen was there to guide him down the path as they continued on.

“You okay?” Owen said as he caught Carson yet again for the third time.

“Huh, what, ya I’m fine.” he replied as he quickly glancing back over his shoulder at Sean and Clara.

“Dude, I know she’s cute but try not to make it so obvious.” Owen whispered elbowing Carson.

Carson glanced over at Owen “What do you mean?” he replied.

“Are you kidding me, you haven’t taken your eyes off her since we met her.” Owen said not realizing that Carson had been staring at both Sean and Clara.

“No it’s not like that.” Carson tried to insist.

“It’s okay she is pretty hot.” He continued ignoring Carson's insistence.

As Carson ignored Owen's rambling he looked back toward Sean and Clara who were a couple of meters away now. He could see their expressions had changed to one of amusement with Sean laughing and saying something to Clara or so it looked like it, and Clara with a grin on her face staring back at Carson.

“Have you listened to anything I’ve said?” Owen asked elbowing Carson again.

“Yes!” Carson replied “I’ve been listening.”

“Just making sure, you’ve been a bit scatter brained since we got here.” Owen commented.

Carson ignored Owen’s last comment as they continued down the path resisting the urge with each step to look back again. After trudging along the path for another meter or two they eventually broke through the tree line and into a clearing roughly 10 or 12 meters wide shaped like a roughly cut circle. Owen seemed to forget Carson’s clumsiness as soon as he saw the festivities, him being such a sociable person he appeared to be right at home. In the middle of the clearing was a huge bonfire with several logs propped up vertically some reaching 3 to 4 feet high, around the outside

were logs placed along the ground as makeshift chairs and benches some with people seated at them others were empty. There was a dozen or more people circling the fire some in deep conversation others laughing and singing and generally having a good time. A good portion of them seemed to be just as attractive or magnetic as Sean and Clara had been which only further confused Carson. One young woman in particular seemed to grab Carson's attention as soon as he saw her, to him she stuck out above all of them; she was on the far side of the circle surrounded by several men and women all of which seemed to be competing for her attention in some form or another.

The young woman had shoulder length blond hair with eyes that even from several meters away seemed to have a sparkle to them that Carson found rather hypnotic, and just like Sean and Clara she had a warm and inviting smile that seemed to draw you in. She was one of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, even Sean and Carla while beautiful in their own right didn't quiet measure up, maybe it was just him but there seemed to be an instant attraction to her that he couldn't explain away.

Carson realizing he had been practically ogling her as he looks away hoping that no one would notice, but before he looked away the blond woman looked over in his direction locking eyes with him as if she had somehow sensed his lingering eyes. The expression on her face quickly changed from a smile to a more serious and agitated look as if somehow Carson had done something that she disapproved of. The look on her face brought a wave of guilt over him as if somehow he was the cause of her agitation, he wondered what he could have possibly done to cause such a reaction, but before he knew it the young women turned her attention back to the crowd surrounding her smiling again as if nothing had happened, and the people around her seemed none the wiser.

Though the people surrounding the young woman and even the other party goers never noticed Carson's fascination Owen did, and he quickly elbowed him trying to get his attention.

"See someone you know?" he said curiously trying to pinpoint what Carson was looking at. "Oh I know that look. You haven't had that look since what was her name?"

"Hmm", Carson replied glancing over at Owen having not heard anything Owen said. Carson had expected him to repeat what he had said but instead Owen shook his head with a smile on his face.

"I asked you what are were looking at?" Owen asked.

Carson looked back to point out the young blond woman on the other side of the bonfire, but she was no longer there with the group of party goers. "Her... Umm... nothing." Carson said with a disappointed tone. Carson could have sworn there had been a blond woman over there, but he decided not to pursue it the last thing he wanted was Owen thinking he had snapped or something.

“Ah well I’m going to go find something to drink, who knows maybe I’ll run into a girl or two.” Owen said with a slight chuckle, he was never one to come back empty handed.

“Why don’t you go mingle a bit?” he continued knowing full well that Carson would probably find a place and plant it the rest of the night.

“Okay” Carson said reluctantly and proceeded to head toward group of folks not really intending to talk to any of them.

As Owen worked his way through the crowd vanishing within a few seconds while Carson on the other hand, being somewhat predictable, steered himself toward one of the empty logs that surrounded the large bonfire. Even if Carson was the sociable type his mind was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he wouldn’t have been much for conversation anyway, though it wasn’t long before a young woman came by asking to sit down next to Carson who was clearly oblivious to everything going on around him.

“Is this seat taken?” a young woman’s voice said grabbing Carson’s attention.

Carson glanced up to see who the voice belonged to, a part of him wondering if it was the mysterious young blond, to his dismay though it was young dark haired woman instead, pointing down at the open space next to him.

Clumsily Carson replied back. “Hmm? Oh no its free.”

“Thanks” she replied and sat down next to him.

Carson attempted to scoot over to give her as much room as possible but she made a quick comment about the space she had available. “Oh, you don’t have to move. This is more than enough room.” She said with a smile. “Thanks though.”

Before Carson had a chance to respond the dark haired woman introduced herself. “Hi, I’m Carmen.” She said holding out her hand.

Hesitantly Carson smiled and reached out to shake her hand “Carson” he replied.

“You don’t look like you’re having too much fun? You must not be much of a party person I take it?” She said with an affirmative tone as if she already knew the answer to the questions.

Carson let a small smile appear on his face as he answered. “No not at all.”

“Well that’s okay, parties aren’t for everyone.” She replied with a cheerful grin.

Carson didn’t know what to think of the night so far it had been more eventful then he had anticipated first there was Sean and Clara who seemed to be super attractive and very charismatic almost to the point of being inhuman, then there was the blond he

hardly knew but was also super attractive to who seemed agitated with him without even knowing him, and now this young dark haired girl that just started talking to him out of the blue.

Of course he knew it was a party and folks socialized at parties but normally they never bothered to hit him up for a conversation or anything so her striking up a conversation with him was very outside the norm.

“I see you made a new friend.” A familiar voice called out breaking the silence several minutes later.

Carson looked up at Owen before replying “Oh hey Owen, this is Carmen.” Carson replied motioning toward Carmen who was seated next to him.

“Hi” Carmen said as she stood up and reached out to shake Owens hand. “I was just having a chat with your friend here.” She continued nodding her head toward Carson.

“Oh? You got him to talk?” Owen said “What did he say? Was it lottery numbers, or some inspiring wisdom?” Owen continued but in a more comical and teasing tone.

Carson closed his eyes and shook his head in embarrassment. He knew he should be used to the ribbing that Owen would give especially since he had a knack for embarrassing him at the most opportune moment.

Carmen looked at Owen with a questioning stare and then to Carson before replying to Owen “I take it you two know each other pretty well?”

Carson was about to respond to her question just as Owen responded. “Yep, practically brothers.” Owen said with a confident smile slapping Carson on the back.

Carmen looked over at Carson expecting some kind of confirmation “Ya.” Carson said letting out a sigh. “We might as well be.” He finished shaking his head.

She looked back at Owen with a bit of doubt showing on her face. “It’s true!” Owen said reassuringly as Carmen still had this questionable look on her face.

“Just ask his mother they’ve practically adopted me.” He finished.

The last bit must have finally convinced Carmen because she proceeded to sit back down followed by Owen right in between Carmen and Carson.

“Hey, where’d you get that?” Carmen asks motioning toward the cup Owen was holding suddenly oblivious to the separation that Owen had created between her and Carson. Not that Owen was trying to be mean, but he tended to be competitive when it came to getting attention from the opposite sex.

“This?” Owen asked holding up his cup. “Oh they actually have a table on the other side of the fire back in the trees. Not sure how they got it in here but they have all sorts of drinks over there.” Owen said motioning in the direction.

“You want one?” Owen asked attempting to win a few points on that invisible score board he kept tally on.

“Sure!” Carmen replied. As if on cue Carson quickly cut in before Owen responded in a subtle attempt to pay him back for interrupting him earlier in the conversation “What would you like I can go get it?”

Glancing over at Carson she replied with a smile on her face. “Anything is fine, surprise me.”

“So anything hot, cold, spicy, sweet doesn’t matter?” Carson asked.

“Doesn’t matter anything will do.” Carmen said with affirmation. “Thanks.”

With that Carson nodded back in acknowledgment as he got up and headed in the direction that Owen had previously pointed. “Be back in a few then.”

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After struggling to maneuver between the different groups of people and the shrubs that seemed to purposely be in his way Carson managed to find his way to the picnic table Owen had been referring to.

The table was nothing remarkable and looked like any other picnic table you would expect to see though it appeared to be solid wood, not the kind that was easily moved, and its length was double what a normal one would be.

On the table there were all sorts of refreshments ranging from juices and waters to what he could only image were alcoholic beverages.

Before he had time to ponder what to get Carmen he was distracted by sounds of two familiar voices off a short ways into the trees.

Not wanting to be one of those people who listen in on others conversations he tried to distract himself but was unable to as the two continued their conversation.

“You sure?” asked a female voice.

“Well Jordan seems pretty insistent, and you know how she gets.” A male voice responded.

“She wouldn't though would she?” the female asked again continuing with her questions.

“Come on you know her as well as I do-” unexpectedly their conversation was interrupted by the sound of twigs breaking nearby.

Somehow Carson, without even realizing it, had been inexplicably drawn to the couple forgetting his original objective.

The two figures turned to face Carson, and gracefully as if they had not been rudely interrupted, walked towards him meeting him halfway.

There in front of him stood Sean and Clara the two he had met when he and Owen first arrived. “Hey there. Carson right?” Sean asked as the couple stood in front of him.

“Hmm. Oh um ya Carson.” Carson clumsily responded to Sean though his gaze was still on Clara’s smiling face.

“Everything okay?” Sean asked as Carson lazily brought his attention back to Sean.

“Ya everything's fine, just getting something to drink.” Carson replied.

“Ah well here try this some of this.” Sean said handing Carson a cup of some kind of mysterious liquid he had never seen or smelled before.

Carson’s hand trembled slightly as he took the cup from Sean, he knew that drinking strange concoctions given to him by strangers was not only way outside the norm but was very dangerous, and yet at the same time he felt comfortable around Sean and Clara even safe to some degree.

Holding it in his hand he hesitated further until an unfamiliar voice called out from behind him. “It’s okay to drink trust me. It won’t kill you.”

The feminine voice though unfamiliar caused Carson to blush but both Sean and Clara gave no indication that they noticed at all instead they only smiled at him and the new arrival as if the stranger was expected.

Carson turned his head to see who the unexpected guest was and his heart seemed to speed up as he recognized the face behind the feminine voice.

There walking towards him was the young blond woman who only earlier had been glaring at him from across the bonfire, only this time she was no longer glaring at him but was looking at him with a smile instead, causing him conveniently forget the discomfort he had felt before. Though he couldn’t explain the sudden shift in the woman’s expression towards him, and the way he felt when he looked into her eyes, at the end of the day he really didn’t care.

Carson stood there in a bit of shock that probably resembled a look of being dumbstruck on his face as the young woman walked up to stand beside him.

Turning toward Carson she gently grabbed his hand that was holding the drink guided it to her lips, then proceeded to take a rather large gulp of the liquid inside. "See it's safe perfectly safe." She said with a mischievous grin on her face. "Here you try it." She said as she guiding the cup to his mouth.

As if Carson suddenly lost the ability to control his movements and without any hesitation Carson let the stranger guide the cup and he too took a gulp of the liquid which was followed by a large gasp for air as it burned down his throat.

"That wasn't so bad was it?" she questioned still grinning at him.

Sean on the other hand seemed to be pretty entertained by the whole ordeal as he proceeded to let out a small laugh as Clara with a smirk on her face kept slapping his arm to get him to stop.

A second later Sean seemed to regain his composure as he stops laughing though still maintaining a very big grin "This is my sister Jordan by the way." He said though Carson seemed to catch a slight hint of warning in the way he said it.

"Hi" Carson said still trying to catch his breath as he glanced over at Jordan who was now waving her fingers at him. "I guess that wasn't so bad." Carson continued as he looked back at Sean he wasn't much of a drinker though he did drink every now and then, but whatever this was it was the strongest thing he had ever had.

"I don't think she will like this one though, it really isn't for me but Carmen." Carson said casually motioning his hand with the cup toward the bonfire.

As soon as he mentioned Carmen's name he regretted it as he could see a change in Jordan's expression though it didn't last long enough for him to discern what it was.

The last thing he wanted to do was aggravate Jordan or upset her, but even the mention of someone else's name seemed to affect her for some reason.

For a few seconds there seemed to be an awkward pause but just like earlier Sean seemed to pick up on it and chimed in.

"You will have to forgive my sister Jordan. She can be a little rude sometimes." He said glaring over at Jordan whose expression had not changed as she looked away from Carson to her brother.

Quickly attempting to diffuse the situation Clara jumped into the trio's conversation. "Are you talking about that girl that's hanging around with Owen?"

Jordan looked back at Carson expectantly as Carson tried to formulate a response that wouldn't upset Jordan.

"The long dark haired girl? Ya, that's her." Carson answered looking over at Jordan hoping she wasn't glaring at him.

"They make a cute couple." Clara said still attempting to diffuse the situation. Clara's comment seemed to help the situation somewhat as Jordan's expression seemed to relax leaving just the smile on her face.

"You know I think your right. They do seem to make a good couple." Sean said as he reflected on Clara's comment. Carson looked back toward him feeling somewhat relieved that Jordan was no longer upset or at least he hoped that was the case.

"You're probably right I don't think Carmen would like this stuff either. Maybe Clara can make something up and take it to her for you?" he continued after having taken the cup back and taken another gulp.

"That's a great idea I can make all sorts of drinks." Clara said enthusiastically as Carson realized that Clara was more of a party person then she let on.

"Does she want anything in particular?" Clara asked with a bit of excitement in her voice.

Carson seemed a bit relieved that he wouldn't have to get it himself, but was somewhat nervous by Clara's excitement at being able to make someone a drink. "No. I don't think she cares." He replied.

"Awesome, I think she will like what I have planned, and don't worry it won't be as strong as Sean's." Clara said looking over at Sean.

"I'm sure she will like it." Sean said patting Clara on the shoulder. "If it's one thing Clara is good at its knowing the type of drink someone likes. Now if you'll excuse us, I believe we better get Carmen her drink." He finished nodding to Carson before he and Clara walked past him toward the table that the refreshments were on.

As the couple walked by Jordan grabbed his arm. "Come on." she said pulling on his arm playfully.

"I won't bite" she said with a flirtatious smile pulling him along as she walked past Sean and Clara. Jordan seemed to mumble something else as they both walked past the two, and though he didn't catch what was said he could tell that Sean and Clara weren't happy about it from the change in their expression. Carson didn't have much time to dwell on this because soon they were out of earshot and had already walked several meters deeper into the trees.

“Where are we going?” Carson asked out of breath having been dragged at a fairly quick pace deeper into the trees, the pace had been so fast it caught him by surprise what with it being so dark he never expected someone to be capable of such a fast pace without tripping or injuring themselves, but he did his best to keep up not wanting to disappoint her.

Jordan stopped and turned around to face him looking almost caught off guard by the question. “No place special just a cool place I found. It’s not far.” She replied before walking over to his side and wrapping her arm around his letting her hand grip his forearm.

“It’s just a place where we can be alone and undisturbed.” She said giving him a wink and then a quick peck on the cheek that seemed to warm him up. “Close your eyes.” She whispered into his ear as she pulled away from his cheek. Not wanting to disappoint Jordan, and unable to control himself at this point he obeyed, and closed his eyes.

He had finally caught his breath by the time she started walking again, this time though she was right next to him guiding him with the surprisingly firm grip she had on his forearm. Nervously Carson let her walk him further into the trees. Even if he did protest her grip was much stronger than he expected, and he had little doubt that he would be able to break free even if he wanted to.