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# LOYALTY and LIES

A LAGUNA TIDES NOVEL

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## **Dedications**

Erica Cameron:

This book is for all of those who have, are, or may yet face issues with addiction, with special love to all of the students I worked with at Inspirations Academy.

There is definitely light and hope at the end of the tunnel.

Don't be afraid to reach out for help when you need it.



Lani Woodland:

Is it redundant to dedicate *Loyalty and Lies* to Erica Cameron after dedicating *Taken By Chance* to her? Possibly, but this book would never had happened without Erica's friendship, talent and initial creation of Kody and Axl. Thanks for letting me part of the journey!

# Chapter 1

Dad used to tell me the truth would set me free. I hope it does because right now all I want is for this truth—that my relationship with Gloria should've ended *months* ago—to send my now-ex-girlfriend out of my house.

“Axl!” She gasps like I’ve literally stabbed her in the back. “You *can’t* break up with me!”

“I’m pretty sure I can.” I cross my arms and lean against the footboard of my bed. She’s standing by my bedroom window, the etchings in the glass casting shadows across her eyes. “Come on, Gloria! We’ve been fighting more often than not for the past three months! We can barely stand each other. Why would you even *want* us to be together anymore?”

She takes a sharp breath and turns tear-filled eyes on me. “Because I’m pregnant.”

Whoa. *What?* Good thing the footboard already had most of my weight or those three little words would’ve knocked me flat on my ass.

The truth will set me free, Dad? Right. Doubt even he would think that mantra applies to this moment. This particular truth is about as freeing as a line drive to the head.

I can’t have heard her right. I need her to say it again, just to be sure. But my mouth is so dry that trying to speak only produces this horrible wheezing

sound.

“You’re *what?*” I finally manage after several hard swallows.

The corners of her mouth and eyes pinch tight, like they usually do before she yells. Then she blinks and Gloria collapses a little, her shoulders slumping and her eyes dropping. Her face is white but her cheeks are a flaming red. “I’m pregnant.”

Yeah. Thought that’s what she said. There’s only one thing I know for certain: the kid ain’t mine.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she asks, her voice cracking. Gloria’s face is scrubbed free of her usual pound of make-up. I might believe the vulnerable, scared look if I hadn’t seen her switch her expressions and her emotions with a blink. She’s a better actress than most people give her credit for and now she’s trying to play me while she’s carrying some other guy’s kid in her belly.

I shake my head, my eyes on my bare feet, because if I *say* anything I’m probably going to start yelling. Suspecting she’s been cheating on me is one thing. Physical confirmation is—well, it sucks. But I can’t leave it there. I force myself to look at her again, ignoring the low-cut shirt and the toned, tanned legs exposed by tiny shorts. Looking into her contact-colored-blue eyes, I ask the question I’m not sure I want an answer to. “Whose is it?”

Her mouth falls open and her eyebrows raise. What, she didn’t think I’d ask the only obvious question?

“Yours, Axl.” She wipes at her eyes. She steps forward grabbing my hand and putting it on her still flat belly. “You’re going to be a daddy.”

I jerk my hand from her grasp, stumbling back against my desk, rattling a few of my model buildings. A laugh somewhere between cartoon villain and an evil witch's cackle passes my lips. "That's kind of impossible considering I've never screwed you."

She follows my retreat, reaching for me again. "Yes, you did!"

Well, she's got balls. I'll give her that, but I'm not caving. *Deep breaths*, I think as I stare at the architectural models on my dresser. I finished them for that project with my brother Nik last week and now I use them to keep my temper in check, focusing on tweaking the design to fix the flaws I'm noticing now. My voice is almost even when I manage to force words out of my mouth. "Then it was a singularly forgettable experience."

Gloria's hands clench into fists. "Carla's party," she hisses, her blonde curls bouncing as her entire body starts trembling. "We both were wasted and we ended up in her sister's bedroom."

I lock my knees to keep them from buckling as guilt lances through me like venom. Guilt immediately followed by denial.

I was wasted at that party, so messed up that memories from that night are hazy, at best, but I remember being there with Gloria and our friends after Homecoming. I remember feeling like I was flying. I remember someone handing me a beer. I drank it—and three more after—not hearing a whisper of my hard won sobriety's voice screaming at me to stop. I remember Gloria snaking her arms around my neck and kissing me. We went upstairs...

And then that's it. There's nothing in my head until the next morning.

I need to breathe. I need space. My chest is constricting like she's

somehow sucking up all the oxygen in the room. Kicking my door open wider and hoping for some better air circulation, I glare across my bedroom at Gloria. “I woke up *alone*.”

“Because I couldn’t wake you up!” Gloria looks away, her heart-shaped face scrunched as she paces between my desk and the window. “You *know* how my parents are! I had to get home or they would’ve killed me.”

I ignore the part about her parents. She isn’t wrong, but that is so not the point I’m trying to make right now. “I also woke up *dressed*.” For the most part anyway. My shirt and one of my shoes were missing and my tongue tasted like cinnamon, like I’d inhaled a pint of it.

She picks up a glass I left on my desk. I flinch. I wouldn’t put it past her to throw it at me right now. Instead, she finishes off the water left inside and slams it back down on the metal surface. “How am I supposed to know what you did after I left?”

“So we finally slept together and then you ditched me?” I rub the back of my neck to give my hands something to do. There are a lot of holes in her logic, but I remember next to nothing from that night. As much as I don’t want to think it’s possible— Shuddering, I shake my head. No, it’s not possible. How does she think this makes *any* sense? “You *ditch* me and then never bring up the fact we slept together? Ever again. Until suddenly you’ve got a baby who needs a daddy?”

“It’s *your* baby!” she screeches, storming toward me, her hands out like she’s going to claw my eyes out.

Grabbing her wrists, I lock my elbows and keep her a foot away from me, staring down into her eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

She looks down. “I have more proof than I wanted.”

Her stomach is still flat and toned, but if she’s not making this up then it won’t be that way for long. It’ll definitely be proof she had sex, but no way is it proof she did it with me.

Damn, I’d kill for a drink right now. But what good’ll that do? An hour or two of numbness won’t make any of this disappear. And hell, breaking my sobriety is what got me into this mess in the first place. I wouldn’t be standing here having this conversation if I hadn’t screwed up and gotten drunk. Until that party I hadn’t touched any drugs or alcohol since moving in with my brother Nik and his wife. I’d almost made it to a year sober. *A year*. And the one night I fall off the wagon...

My hands are starting to tingle. The pins and needles feeling races up my arms and into my chest. Up my neck. I breathe in cycles again. It doesn’t work. Even staring at my models doesn’t help this time.

Gloria tugs my grip on her wrists until I meet her eyes. “Ignoring me won’t change anything. You have responsibilities, Axl.”

Yes, *if* it’s mine. *If* it’s mine then there’ll be doctors and strollers and—no. No. The girl has been trying to tempt me into bed for the last nine months—almost as soon as we started dating. At first she didn’t seem to mind that I never hit it farther than third base, but lately she’s been pissy as hell. And now she’s pregnant? Maybe if I hadn’t seen two different women try to nail my dad to the wall with the same scam when I was little I’d believe her, but this just doesn’t add up.

“It’s *not* mine,” I announce with more certainty than I feel.



Watching her face is like watching a glass shatter in slow motion. Her full lips tremble and her eyes close before Gloria collapses to her knees, her hands slipping free of my now lax grip to cover her face as she sobs.

I hate seeing people cry. It makes it worse that I used to like this girl. I may not have ever loved her, but I did *like* her at one point. My resolve to show no weakness lasts for about two seconds before I reach down to help her off the floor. Quick as a python, Gloria locks her arms around my neck and her lips against mine.

My reaction is instinctive and instant. I pull my head out of her reach—almost choking on the nausea climbing up my throat—and pull her off my neck, holding her at arm’s length again.

It happens so fast, Gloria doesn’t have the time to prepare. For a second—and for the first time since we met—I see her, see a depth of intelligence in her eyes that she’s never let show before. The slightly airhead façade drops back over her features, returning her to the confident, ditzzy beauty I know, masking the calculating light I glimpsed.

My jaw clenches and I let her go, stepping away and crossing my arms. “We’re done. I think you should go home now.”

“You can’t just kick me out!” Her fingers dig into her curls, disarranging them even more. Maybe it’s not all an act. The wild edge of desperation seems real, so strong and true I can almost feel it vibrating against my skin. “I’m not leaving until you admit this baby is yours!”

Her words send a chill across my skin. She sounds *so* sure. Doubt bites at me, but I push it away, staring at her with what I hope is level anger and not the

blinding, uncertain rage that's churning up the acid in my stomach. "Even if I am the father—" She starts to protest but I talk right over her. "—even *if* that were true, we wouldn't be getting back together. I said we were over and I meant it. We were horrible together."

"What?" Her skin takes on a tinge of green. "You're still breaking up with me? You'd do that to the mother of your child?"

I take a deep breath and shrug with a carelessness I don't feel. My hands are starting to shake again. "Did you think finding out you cheated on me would change my mind?"

"I *never* cheated on you!" She covers her heart with her hand like she's vowing.

"The kid *can't* be mine, so I'm pretty sure you did."

She opens and closes her mouth a few times. "Why are you being so mean? I never expected you..."

"Expected me to what? To call you on this charade?" I stuff my hands in my pockets to hide the trembling from her and raise one eyebrow. "Please. You can't think I'm that stupid. I'm not becoming your ATM for someone else's baby."

Gloria steps closer, just close enough to brush the tips of her fingers along my chest. I look down, like she wanted me to, and get a perfect view down her shirt. It's too easy to jump from there to travel down the curve of her legs until they end in hot-rod-red heels. Ever since I met her, Gloria knew how to play herself off to advantage. At first it was intriguing, but the more time I spent with her the more it pissed me off. Now? Now I have to lock my hands in my pockets to keep from shoving her off me.

“I can’t believe it. You actually think I’d cheat on you? I never could because...” Her eyes are still glistening with tears, and she looks up at me through her lashes as she whispers, “I love you.”

“No, you don’t. You never did.” Shuddering, I step sideways, out of her reach. I want to shake myself like a dog just to get rid of the nails-on-a-chalkboard feeling those words leave me with. She opens her mouth to argue, her eyes blazing. My vision blurs around the edges and pacing my breathing isn’t going to help for much longer. She needs to get out of here before I blow a gasket. I latch on to the first thing that pops into my mind and cut her off. “Whatever. You want to stay here? Fine. Should I call your parents and tell them where you are, or would you like to do that honor?”

She’s acting tough, but I can see fear in her eyes. Her lips tighten, and I know I have her.

Gloria’s parents are the weirdest people I have ever met. Their social standing and pristine public image is more important to them than probably anything else. Maybe except for money. If they find out she’s pregnant, Gloria will most likely be shipped off to some halfway house for unwed mothers within an hour. A really ritzy halfway house, but a prison with gardens and gourmet food is still a prison. I don’t know *what* they’d do about the baby after all that.

Side-stepping Gloria, I jerk my head toward the open bedroom door. My heart pounds and the trembling in my hands spreads up my arms. Staring at Gloria, all I can think is, *get out, out, out, out!*

Her eyes narrow and she swipes her hand across my dresser, knocking all of my models to the floor. It’s like she actually punched *me*. I feel it in my gut

when *days* of work crash to the floor, bits breaking off and mylar windows cracking. My body visibly quivers. One glance at me and she snatches her purse and runs—flat out *runs*—downstairs for the front door.

My stomach clenches as I stare at my broken buildings—all of them original designs I've been working on with Nik—and listen to the clack of her heels echoing off the tile hallway. At least she's smart enough to leave after that last act of vengeance. She's only seen me lose my temper twice, but it was enough for her to see I'm on the verge of losing it now.

Once I'm sure she's far enough ahead of me, I follow Gloria to the front of my brother's house and watch her climb into her Mercedes convertible. The last thing I want is to see her again, but I need to make sure she really leaves. I watch her from the edge of the massive living room window. She doesn't see me when she glances over her shoulder at the house, biting her lip, one hand gripping the edge of the car door tight and one centered on her stomach.

That little motion sends a bolt of electricity shooting through my head, one that freezes the trembling rage building in my chest and almost makes time stand still.

*Holy hell.*

I'm almost positive she's playing some scam, that either she's not pregnant at all or some other guy is about to become a daddy. But...what if it's *not* a scam? What if I made one mistake on one night and ruined everything?

I stop breathing. My heart skips a beat. My hands stop shaking.

The hand on Gloria's stomach curls into a fist as she shudders and slides into the car, quickly cranking the engine and reversing out of my driveway with a

squeal of tires.

She doesn't look back again.

As soon as she's out of sight the frozen moment ends. My stillness shatters. Angry, boiling heat pours through my body chased with the sharp edge of fear. Fear that I really may have utterly screwed up my life and someone else's.

With a scream, I knock a pile of books off an end table and kick the coffee table over, satisfied by the huge cracking sound that comes from the wood. My vision is nearly black, but my hands close around something cool and heavy. I send it flying across the room.

*Crash!*

The tinkling of glass falling against the tiled floor is like a thousand tiny accusations, but I don't care anymore. This is too much in one day. My legs give out and I fall to the floor, my head coming to rest against the couch as I stare blindly across the room.

If there's one thing I know, it's a hundred different ways to avoid pain. Ninety-nine of them are forbidden now and they didn't work that well anyway. Holding my breath, I let myself sink into a stupor and hope everything will go away by the time I wake up.