

A romantic couple in formal attire embracing. The man is wearing a black tuxedo with a white shirt and a black bow tie. The woman is wearing a black, backless dress. They are set against a dark, textured background. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their profiles and the texture of their clothing.

billion
dollar **LIE**

USA Today Bestselling Author
LINNEA MAY

Billion Dollar Lie

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Prolog

Logan

I should never have done this. Not with her.

I'm paying her to be with me. It's her job to make me look good, to put on a demure smile and hang on to my arm like a devoted fiancée.

She is the key to my success. And the ring on her finger is nothing but a lie. It's a signal, to the world, and most of all to *them*.

It was never meant to mean anything to her—or me.

I should have stopped this a long time ago. Maybe I never should have started.

But how could I not? How could I resist this brazen, smart and bewitchingly beautiful girl?

The girl who now kneels before me, her head tilted and her eyes closed as she awaits my next move. Her chest is heaving, her nipples hard with arousal and her cheeks flushed. My gaze trails along her perfect little body, her teardrop-shaped breasts, the dark strands of hair that stick to her sweaty neck and her delicate fingers, idly resting on her thighs.

Why is she wearing the ring when it's just the two of us? Did she ever take it off since I placed it on her finger? How did I never notice?

And what does this mean?

Nothing, probably. It doesn't mean anything, just like the way she looks at me doesn't mean anything. She's just very good at this. She's a great actress, that is all.

I will fuck the living hell out of her. And then I will do it again. And again.

And then, at some point, our ways will part. Because they have to.

Whether I want it or not...

Chapter 1

Kat

This isn't happening.

Not again.

Patrick, my boyfriend of three years, sits across from me, slumped and with an apologetic expression on his face. He sighs and lets his tired gaze idle through our living room, before he turns back to me.

"I don't know what to say, it just... happened," he murmurs. "I didn't want it to happen, but—"

"Oh, please, don't give me that bullshit," I cut him off. "It's not like anyone forced your tongue down her throat."

"Kat, please—"

"How could you?" I utter, helplessly shaking my head as I avert my eyes from him. "How could *you* do this to me?"

My gaze is latched to the floor, trailing along the lines of the wooden cracks between my naked toes while I let his harrowing words sink in.

"I slept with Stacey from work."

A life-changing sentence that has been playing on repeat inside my head—each syllable crushing my vulnerable ego

with its withering weight.

He cheated on me. Patrick, the only guy who ever made me feel safe enough to trust him, cheated on me.

I thought I'd finally found my place, after years of being passed around like an unwanted heirloom. He's so different than the guys I used to date—all those bad boys who were excitingly dangerous at first, but turned out to be flaky cheats with abusive tendencies. I thought I was safe with him.

And now, it's happening again. I am no longer wanted.

Someone else was better than me. *Stacey from work*—so painfully random.

Patrick leans over and tries to comfort me by placing his hand on top of mine, but I wave him off like a pesky fly.

“I have to leave,” I utter.

He throws me a confused look.

“I mean, I have to move out,” I clarify. “Right? The lease runs under your name. And I could never afford this place on my own.”

I can't afford *anything* on my own. A crushing pile of debt has been overshadowing my life for years. My résumé is nothing but a long list of bad decisions—a flawed life that was about to change.

Patrick's support allowed me to study for my GED without having to worry about money. I was so grateful, and too besotted to realize how vulnerable I was because of my dependency on him.

Patrick swallows dryly and suggests a nod. “Well, yes. I actually took care of that already.”

I throw him an impatient look. “Took care of what?”

He shifts in his seat, a pained expression lacing his face as he lowers his head, his fingers nervously fiddling in his lap.

“Well, since... you know, I know money is tight for you—”

“Tight as in I don’t have any,” I interject.

“Yes, I’m aware,” he says, clearing his throat before he adds: “That’s why I asked Mrs. Warden if you could live with her.”

“You what?!”

“Don’t worry, it’s okay! She said it was totally fi—”

“Of course she said that! What the hell is she supposed to say?!” I cut him off, almost jumping up from my seat as I gesture toward him. “Patrick, this is fucking insane! How could you drag my old teacher into this mess, just so you can feel better about kicking me out of my home!”

“I’m not kick—”

“Yes, you are!” I burst out, dangerously close to tears. “I woke up this morning thinking everything was fine and the only thing I have to worry about is that damn job interview next week. I thought about what to make for dinner tonight, what to watch on Netflix... and meanwhile, you...”

My monologue is cut short by a violent urge to cry. I choke on my own tears as I try to suppress the heaves that rattle my chest, but it only makes things worse.

I feel so utterly humiliated, so stupid, so blind. I was so focused on finally achieving an eye-blink of security for myself that I didn’t even realize my relationship was falling apart.

I neglected him—and he found someone else. Someone better.

I hated being dependent on him, but he never made me feel bad for it—and I thought I could repay him one day. I thought we were in this for the long run.

Meanwhile, that cheating bastard arranged a new living situation behind my back.

“I’m sorry for being such a burden on you,” I murmur. “That’s what you’ve been thinking, right? That I’m a fucking social case who can now become someone else’s responsibility?”

He sucks in a sharp breath of air and looks like he wants to respond, but I beat him to it.

“Well, I’m not!” I continue my furious rant. “I can take care of myself. I don’t need you! And I certainly don’t need you to make phone calls on my behalf!”

He flinches when I jump up from my seat, now towering above him as he watches me through fearful eyes.

I turn around and march toward the door, fetching my phone and purse in the process.

“Where are you going?” Patrick’s voice follows me down the hall, stained with indignation, while I struggle to slip into a pair of flip-flops.

I have to get out of here. I have to get away from his sorry face and the disappointment he represents.

“Kat, we should—”

The door shuts behind my back, drowning out the rest of his sentence. I don’t need to hear his consolatory words.

I don't need him.

But I do need money. Fast.

Chapter 2

Logan

“Told you! A loaded bank account is not enough to convince those motherfuckers,” my friend Chase says at the other end of the line. “I don’t even understand why you’re so desperate to join their dumb club.”

“I’m not desperate,” I retort.

The traffic light ahead turns green and my driver steps on the gas so hard that the phone almost falls out of my hand.

“We’re not in a hurry, Christopher!”

He’s driving as if we’re caught in a chase tonight. His shift ends after this trip and he probably wants to get home to his family, cradling his newborn baby while his dutiful wife serves him dinner. How wholesome. A life so different from mine, so normal—so fucking mundane.

Christopher slows down the car. “I’m sorry, sir.”

It’s a farce that a man like him would have a better chance with the Vanguard than myself, if he could pay their membership fee. But while he lacks the money, I—apparently—lack the integrity of a gentleman deemed suitable for their exclusive club. I’m too young, too inexperienced, and show no traits of a responsible family man.

“Then why not just let it go?” Chase asks. “Who needs those staid and stuffy dudes anyway.”

“I do,” I say. “They may be squares, but their network is worth a mint. Once I’m in, everything will change. My name will no longer be tied to the Reid clan, but to the Vanguard, a well-respected business community.”

I’ve been living under my family’s murky shadow for too long. Sure, I used their ways to accumulate wealth, but—unlike my brothers—I’m aware of the fragility of it all. You can’t build a long-lasting empire on dirt. It will all crumble at some point, and I want to get out before I end up behind bars like my father.

“Well, you’ll still be a Reid,” Chase reminds me. “Unless you marry and take your wife’s name.”

He pauses for a chuckle, before he adds: “Hey, why don’t you just do that? Find a wife! You remember our pact, don’t you? Just kill two birds with one stone.”

Oh, that damn pact. A drunken joke the guys shared at our friend Aston’s birthday party just a couple of weeks ago. The four of us—Gabe, Chase, Aston and me—were inseparable during college. We all went our separate ways after graduation, but were bound by a common desire to become part of the super rich before we turn thirty.

And now that we all achieved that goal, the boys decided that we need a new pact—the goal to find a wife and produce heirs. But it was never more than a joke—at least to me.

“Solid advice,” I lament. “You know I have no intention of thwarting myself with a nagging wife.”

“Get one that doesn’t nag, then!” Chase laughs, obviously amused at my indignation.

I roll my eyes. “You’re not helping.”

“Dude, chill,” he replies. “I’m just saying. Sounds like this could help with your problem. The Vanguards might look at you differently if you had a wife hanging onto your arm. Makes you look more legit, more—”

“Normal,” I interject, rolling my eyes.

“Yes, exactly! Squares like that dig a good old ball and chain to keep them in place.”

I hate that he is probably right about this. A wife would polish my image in no time, as ridiculous as it is.

The car stops and I’m met with the familiar sight of a refurbished brick stone facade, telling me that we have arrived at our destination.

“Listen, I gotta go,” I inform Chase, already unbuckling my seatbelt. “Talk to you later.”

“Hot date with the future Mrs. Reid?” he asks.

“You wish.”

I end the call and climb out the car, sending Christopher off to his family, before I walk toward the main entrance of the brick building. The large wooden doors are topped with an elegant canopy with pillars on both sides, shielding the entrance just enough to provide a hint of mystery.

I don’t know whether the boys would be jealous or disgusted if they knew where I am tonight. Probably the latter. My old college friends never ventured to the darker side of life, whereas for me, it’s the only place I know. Murky waters, full of secrets and sin.

Just like this place—The Velvet Rooms. The owners don’t like to label it a kink club, claiming that it’s more than that,

more luxurious, more exclusive and sublime. I've been a patron at their main location in Boston for years and when the madame, Miss Barry, announced that she was looking for investors to expand with another location in DC, I saw an opportunity.

An opportunity to turn my dirty money into... well, a little less dirty money.

One step at a time.

I missed the club's official opening last weekend, because it collided with Aston's 30th birthday—an occasion that I couldn't miss. But I had to promise Miss Barry to stop by as soon as I could.

The building itself is an old Victorian mansion, massive in size and restored beyond its former glory. Red-cushioned interior is matched with a hint of boudoir, drinks served in golden flutes and elegant tumblers, and the floor-to-ceiling windows, adorned with heavy curtains, add to the lavish allure of this place.

The dim light immerses the room in varying scarlet tones, accented with large candles and an oversized chandelier floats in the center of it all.

I meander through the room, taking in the sight of the hall and the girls who work here. Angels, dressed in white and not to be touched, and devils, dressed in black lingerie and open for business—the same concept I know from Boston.

However, I am not here to play or to get laid. I'm here to check on my investment.

And to have a drink. Just one drink.

It's still early and not too crowded yet, so it's easy to find a quiet place to sit and observe at the far end of the room. Button tufted leather seats, red as blood and soft as skin, welcome me in a dark corner next to an old fireplace. I sink down in one of them with a heavy sigh, placing my elbows on the soft leather as I scan the room.

And then I see her.

Tall and slender, with long dark brown hair, sleek as silk, cascading down to her slim waist in a strong contrast to the white lingerie her delicate body is wrapped in. She's dressed as an angel, showing a little less skin than her devil coworkers, but still enough to draw attention to herself.

But it's not just her alluring outfit and the body it adorns that keep my gaze fixated on her.

It's her face. Or rather, her expression. She's beautiful, stunning actually, but unlike the other girls, she doesn't sport a plastic smile topped with wide puppy eyes. Instead, she looks focused, grim almost, with her painted lips pressed into a thin line and the hint of a crease between her brows.

I wave her over when our eyes meet. Instantly, her lips curl into a friendly smile, but her eyes remain apathetic when she stalks over to me on her plateau high heels.

"Evening, sir," she chirps, tilting her head to the side as she comes to a halt before me. "It's a pleasure to welcome you to The Velvet Rooms! Would you care for some company?"

She's even more tantalizing from up close. I study her from head to toe, taking my time as I indulge in the sight of her shape, adorned with white lace, matching sheer stockings and jewelry, earrings that look like silver teardrops and a delicate necklace, barely noticeable. Her eyes are framed with thick

fake lashes and too much glittery make-up, her lips painted in a rose-colored tone, a bit lighter than most other girls in here. A white hairpin with a single pearl keeps her smooth hair in place on one side, while the chocolate streaks partly shield her face on the other.

She is devastatingly beautiful—and visibly uncomfortable.

“A drink,” I tell her. “Scotch, neat.”

A frown flashes on her face. “I’m not a waitress.”

She bites her lower lip, seemingly regretting her response in an instant.

Bad girl.

“You’re here to entertain me, aren’t you?” I retort. “Bring me a Scotch and whatever you like for yourself—and join me.”

She utters a low “Yes, sir,” followed by a demure nod, before she turns around and walks away to the bar, swinging her hips for my benefit.

Looks like she *can* be a good girl, if she’s put in her place properly.

Very promising.

Chapter 3

Kat

I'm not a waitress.

Why did I have to say that? How dumb am I?

I'll get an earful if Miss Barry hears about this—and this could end in another complaint about my “unsuitable behavior.”

I can't afford another complaint. I can't afford to lose this job! I've never earned this much money before. This could be my way out of poverty—if I'm smart about it.

Smart, Katherine! Not feisty and audacious!

And why would I snark at *him* of all people? The hottest man who has walked in here all week and the only one whose presence sends an electric shiver down my spine? I noticed him right as he entered the room, and I haven't been able to look away ever since. He's attractive in an edgy way, alluring, and mysteriously dark. It's no wonder I can't keep my head straight.

I receive our order at the bar—his Scotch and a vodka soda for myself—and take a deep breath before I turn around and return to him.

This man is just too much. All tall and out of this world handsome with his mysterious eyes, chiseled jaw and that intense gaze. His dark hair is styled in a trendy undercut, revealing a scar on his left temple that matches the tattoos peeking through at his collar and his right cuff. He looks dangerous, full of sin and secrets.

A bad boy in a suit—just my type.

He screams trouble. *Delicious* trouble.

And he is so much younger than the other patrons in here. I realize that anew when I meet his expectant gaze with a polite smile, before I place the drinks on a small side table in front of him. He can't be much older than myself.

“A Skinny Bitch,” he comments, eying my drink with an amused smirk. “A little disappointing.”

My heart drops and I let it show on my face as I sink down into the leather armchair next to him.

“Disappointing?” I wonder out loud, my voice a little more high-pitched than usual. “How so?”

He scrunches his eyebrows and suggests a shake of the head.

“It's so common, such a cliché for girls like you,” he says. “I guess I was expecting something a little more creative.”

Girls like you.

I would love to ask him what he means by that, but I know I wouldn't be able to pose the question without being snide, so I don't.

“Well, it is a classic,” I argue, as I take my seat next to him. “Much like a Scotch neat.”

“Touché,” he retorts, as he reaches for his glass. “Guess I’m not that unique myself.”

“Oh, I would like to differ, sir.”

I add a seductive wink to my words, just like I’ve been taught — but he ignores my remark and raises his drink to me. We clink glasses and I take a very careful sip, while he empties half of his Scotch in one swig. Even the way he drinks is mesmerizing. His motions are so nonchalant, so incidental yet considered and assertive.

I hope to God he doesn’t notice the way my cheeks blush when he turns to meet my observant eyes.

“Not having a good night?” he wants to know.

I put on my best hostess smile when I reply: “What would make you think that, sir?”

“The look on your face,” he explains. “You look like something is bugging you.”

Fuck. That is the last thing I wanted to hear.

“Must have been the light,” I try to save myself. “Sometimes the shadows in here play a little trick on you.”

“Fine, let’s pretend that’s true.” He shakes his head. “Tell me a little about yourself.”

He leans back and fixates me with an expectant smile. My heart hiccups in response. I force myself to maintain eye contact, even though his gaze makes my insides churn with excitement.

I have to pull myself together!

“Me? Oh, there’s not much to tell,” I say, adding a dismissive wave, acting a lot cooler than I am. “I’d much

rather hear about you, sir. How was your day?"

He is just playing nice to get the conversation started, but I know he's here to talk, not to listen. Men like him come here to feel special. They don't just want their dicks stroked but their egos, too.

"My day was uneventful," he sighs, still looking at me with that piercing stare. "What's your name?"

"Cassidy, sir," I reply.

"No, it's not," he points out, correctly. "I want to know your real name."

"I'm sorry, sir—"

"And stop calling me sir," he cuts me off. "I'm not your master and I'm not interested in the fake persona you adopt for this job. Tell me something real about yourself—or I'll get up and leave."

I don't know what to say. What is he doing? Is this some kind of test? Did Miss Barry hire him to see how we perform under pressure?

We have strict instructions not to reveal our real names to the patrons, so, as much as I'd love to please him, I can't disclose that information—and I never thought I'd ever be forced to.

What is his deal?

"Well? I'm waiting," he urges, raising an eyebrow at me. "It's your job to entertain me, isn't it?"

I nod. "What would you like to hear?"

"Your real name, for starters."

For God's sake, why must he be so stubborn?

“I can’t tell you that, sir,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. “Sorry, I mean—”

“Fair enough,” he interrupts me. “But you can tell me what you do when you don’t work here, can’t you?”

A helpless chuckle is all I muster as a response.

“Oh, so that’s forbidden, too?” he probes.

“No, no,” I hurry to reply, shaking my head. “I just don’t think my life is very entertaining. I’d much rather hear about yours.”

He rolls his eyes at me and adds an exasperated sigh.

Not good, not good at all.

“Let me be the judge of that,” he suggests. “Now tell me, what did you do today, before your shift started?”

He pins me down with that unyielding gaze again, leaving no room for me to hide or run. My lips quiver as I try to come up with a response. I’m scared to reveal the truth, but not quick-witted enough to come up with anything else.

“Well, I got up rather late, because I didn’t get to bed before 3 a.m. last night. I started my day with coffee, sitting at my open window, and a book, then I—”

“What book?” he asks.

I’m caught off guard by his question and need a moment to bring myself to answer him.

“Um, *The Catcher in the Rye*,” I utter, lowering my gaze in shame. “It’s—”

“A brilliant classic by J.D. Salinger, yes I know,” he jumps in, much to my surprise. “Enjoyed that one a lot.”

I don’t even try to hide my surprise. “You’ve read it?”

“Sure.” He shrugs. “It was a while back, though.”

“In college, I presume?”

I’m sure a man like him has a college degree, most likely obtained at a prestigious school that I can only dream of. He must have read it in one of his classes. No one reads *The Catcher in the Rye* for fun.

“No, it wasn’t *that* long ago,” he clarifies. “I didn’t read much in college—was busy doing other things.”

He winks at me, before reaching for his drink. I mimic his gesture, following Miss Barry’s instruction to never let the guest drink by himself.

“Where did you go to school?” he wants to know next.

The question feels like a dagger to my heart, but I respond truthfully.

“Nowhere,” I tell him. “I never went to college... yet.”

“Yet, huh?” He digs deeper. “So, that’s what you’re doing here? Saving up for school?”

“Maybe,” I murmur, awkwardly shifting in my seat as I avert my eyes again.

I don’t want to talk about this, not with him, not now, not here. We’re told to leave our daytime persona outside of these walls, and I’m beginning to understand why. This is uncomfortable, to say the least.

It’s funny how I’m not bothered by sitting in front of him in a revealing set of lingerie, but his questions make me feel as if I’m being stripped down naked before his eyes while he stares right into the abyss of my soul.

Nevertheless, I can't help but feel oddly flattered. His interest in me seems to be genuine. I'm paid to entertain him, so he's in command of where this conversation is going—and he chooses to talk about me? About my interests?

No one has ever shown this kind of interest in me.

No one.

Chapter 4

Logan

I knew it. This girl doesn't belong here. No matter how much she tried to hold on to her fake night club persona, it still didn't take long for me to uncover the person underneath.

A person who reads J.D. Salinger before she dresses up in lingerie to parade around in front of wealthy sleazebags, so she can save up for a goal that others take for granted.

I respect that.

“So, you're reading Salinger for a college prep class or something?” I ask.

No one reads *The Catcher in the Rye* for fun. No matter how great that book may be, its self-conscious prose is not easily accessible and definitely not to everybody's taste.

My question appears to make her uneasy. She doesn't look at me but keeps her eyes glued to the drink in her hands when she answers.

“Um, no, I'm not taking any classes.”

Her voice is so low that I can barely hear her, and it looks like she's embarrassed.

Or is it because she's lying to me?

“But enough about me,” she’s quick to add. “Is this your first time at The Velvet Rooms?”

I shake my head. “Don’t try to change the subject, young girl.”

“Young girl?” she retorts, snickering. “Oh, sir, it’s been a while since anyone has called me that.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop calling me that?” I reprimand her—and she flinches as if I’d just hit her.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“I’m fucking serious. The next time you put on that fake doll act in front of me I’ll drag you up to one of the rooms and spank the living hell out of you,” I warn. “Do you understand?”

A treacherous blush colors her cheeks when she looks at me through wide eyes.

Perfect.

“So, I gather it’s not your first time here,” she comments, tilting her head to the side. “Since you know about the rooms...”

I shake my head, accompanied by a sigh that should let her know how little I want to talk about my experience or involvement with The Velvet Rooms.

“I’ve been to the Boston location, yes,” I tell her. “I’m familiar with the concept.”

I pause and pointedly take in the sight of her beautiful body, the delicate curves of her small breasts, adorned with white lace that leaves just enough to the imagination.

“And I know that you’re off limits, little angel,” I say. “But don’t think that’ll stop me.”

Her face reddens into a darker shade as she nods.

“Stop you from doing... what?”

“You know perfectly well,” I murmur, my eyes flitting over to the stairs that lead up to the playrooms for a split second, before I wink at her. “If I decide to take you up there, that’s what’s going to happen. And I’ll make sure you’ll love it, don’t you worry about that.”

A gasp escapes her pretty lips, when I lean in closer, ready to reach for her face—when she swiftly turns away to reach for her drink. She brings it up to her lips with such velocity that it almost spills down her cleavage.

Deliciously innocent.

“That’s um... well, you know I—”

“Until then, let’s talk, little girl. It’s your job to talk to me, about whatever I want. Right?”

She nods, swallowing dryly when our eyes meet again.

“So, talk to me,” I say. “Let’s see if you can hold my interest long enough for a second drink—I’m sure the madame would appreciate that.”

A hint of fear flits across her face.

She must be new to this, inexperienced and terrified of fucking up. And since the charade of this job doesn’t seem to come to her naturally, she feels inclined to hold on to the strict protocol laid out by the boss—shielding her true self behind a wall of make-up, fake smiles and empty questions.

She needs this job, that's obvious. But why is she so damn afraid? Would she tell me if I asked?

Only one way to find out.

"What scares you so much?" I query. "Why are you so frightened to be honest with me?"

She closes her eyes, shielding me from the beautiful depth behind them as she responds.

"What makes you think I'm scared?"

"I don't think, I know," I insist.

A cheeky smile tugs at the corner of her mouth, only reinforcing what I suspected.

"Fine," she breathes the word like a heavy sigh of relief. "If honesty is what you want, you shall have it. But be warned: I might bore you."

"I'll take that risk," I reply. "And I doubt you will. You read Salinger for fun. No one does that."

A frown emerges between her brows. "You said you didn't read it for a class either. Why did you read it then?"

"For fun," I admit.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Is that so?"

"Why would I lie about this? I have no reason to impress you, do I?"

She bites her lower lip, seemingly contemplating her response—but I preempt her with another question.

"Is that all you did today? Reading I mean."

"Yes. I don't do much else," she replies, adding an insecure shrug. "Told you, I'm pretty boring."

“Not to me,” I maintain.

A nervous flicker darts across her face when I lean forward, bringing myself closer to her.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” I declare, my voice so low that it’s almost a whisper.

And just as I hoped, she bows in closer, unable to resist the pull of curiosity. Her intoxicating scent envelops me, and I have to fight the urge to grab her and pull her into my embrace.

“I hold a degree in American Literature,” I reveal. “It was just a minor, but by far the most interesting class. Very few people know about this.”

“How come?” she asks, tilting her head to the side. “Why make such a secret of it?”

I shrug. “Sometimes things just turn into secrets, because no one ever asks about them.”

The somber tone of my response comes as a surprise, even to myself. I don’t know why I said it, but I know it’s true. My family never cared for my ambitions, they never asked about my classes, my life at college, my passion—things like that don’t mean much in a world that is ruled by violence and money. College was the first place where I didn’t feel the need to hide behind my fists and crude words.

“I never asked, and you still told me,” the girl says, and her lips curve into a coy smile.

“Touché,” I retort. “But I’m sure my secret is safe with a fellow book nerd such as yourself.”

“*Fellow* book nerd?” she repeats, before she erupts in an amused giggle.

Her laughter is surprisingly high-pitched, almost childlike with its unrestrained levity—and dangerously endearing.

But she catches herself within seconds, and her hand flies up to her mouth, silencing the lighthearted spirit as quickly as it appeared.

“Don’t do that,” I reprimand, as I close my hand around her wrist, gently pulling her hand away from her face. “I like what I’m seeing. Don’t hide from me.”

The confusion on her face only adds to her sublime allure. She looks astonished, as if she has never received a compliment before.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just... I’ve never been called a book nerd *like that*.”

“Like what?”

She shies away, nervously batting her lashes as her gaze trails down into her lap.

“In a... nice way,” she utters, still avoiding eye contact. “It almost sounded like a compliment when you said it.”

“Because it was,” I assert.

Fuck, she’s killing me. I must have her.

Fuck the rules.

She stiffens when I move closer and place a finger beneath her chin. A little nudge is all it takes to make her look at me again.

Her lips are quivering when our eyes meet, my face so close to hers that I can feel the heat of her breath on my skin. There’s as little as an inch between us, our lips dangerously close to touching—but she doesn’t move away.

“I like book nerds,” I say, further reducing the distance between us. “Especially pretty ones like yourself.”

Her eyes widen in disbelief, before they flit to the side, checking if anybody might be watching us.

I know I’m overstepping. She’d have every right to push me away and remind me of the rules in this place. It’s what she *should* do, if she needs this job as much as I think she does.

But she doesn’t move an inch, nor does she voice protest against my intrusion. Her lips part as if to speak, but no words break the silence between us. The white lace around her body is meant to protect her from physical advances, but the temptation of forbidden fruit only adds to her appeal.

She releases a faint sigh when I let go of her chin and place my hand at her neck, providing a gentle push until our lips meet for an illicit kiss. There’s no objection from her side, no hesitation, not even a single sign of caution—nothing but sweet surrender as she welcomes my tongue with hers. Her lips are warm and incredibly soft, so youthful and almost innocent, if it weren’t for the subtle sting of vodka that blends with her natural taste.

My grip on her neck tightens and the moan that escapes her in response only fuels my need for her. Fuck, she’s driving me crazy. This isn’t enough. I must have her, everything of her. I must...

The sound of an explosion cuts into my thoughts and brings a violent end to our kiss. We jolt away from each other as another eruption follows, then another, and another, seemingly coming from everywhere at once—before the lights go out a moment later. The entire club is dipped in darkness, with just a few decorative candles providing a hint of warm light.

“What the—”

She jumps up from her seat, visibly unsettled—just like everyone else in the room.

“What’s going on?” I can’t stop myself from asking, even though I know she probably knows as little as me.

“I don’t know,” she responds without looking at me, her gaze scurrying across the room as if the answer was written somewhere on the walls. “I’ll be right back.”

And before I can stop her, she disappears into the dark.

Chapter 5

Logan

She has only been gone for a few moments when I notice the smoke. It seems to be coming from everywhere, filling the entire venue with alarming speed.

I jump up from my seat and my drink is just one of many that fall to the floor as people start panicking. Swallowed in thick smoke and darkness, I hear them scatter around like wild animals, women screaming, men yelling to get out, the sound of heels and suit shoes hurrying across the wooden floors.

I, however, remain still, locked in place while I try to find my bearings. I can't see shit and my ears are ringing with turmoil that erupts around me.

Where the fuck did she go?

Extending my arms to replace my useless eyes, I slowly begin to move, cautious and hyper aware of my chaotic surroundings.

“FIRE!” someone yells to my right. “Out! Everybody out!”

I shake my head as I continue to meander forward, hoping that I'm moving toward the bar—and thus the main exit.

No, this is not a fire. There's a lot of smoke, but it's too dense and expanding too quickly to be caused by a fire. Besides, it would smell differently if this was a fire. The stench of sulfur that penetrates my nose can only be caused by fireworks—or smoke grenades.

And as of right now, my guess would be on the latter.

Did something go wrong when they were preparing the infamous midnight show? They love to incorporate smoke machines and colored smoke grenades for these shows—at least they did in Boston.

But this smoke is colorless, blinding us with its unappealing dark grey veil. And it's too much, way too much.

People are bumping into me left and right, half-naked women and men in pricey suits, some of them drenched in spilled drinks and sweat. I almost fall over when I reach the little step that separates the bar from the main area, barely catching myself before yet another elbow hits me from the side.

I turn around—only to find *her* right next to me. And even in the middle of the ongoing turmoil around us, I notice that she's a lot shorter than before, her angst-ridden eyes staring up at me before they flash with recognition.

“Get out!” she yells at me, nodding her head to the side. I want to reach for her hand to take her with me, but realize that she's carrying a small fire extinguisher in her arms, ready to fight a fire that doesn't exist.

“You're coming with me!” I command. “And let go of that thing!”

I try to take the extinguisher from her hands, but she tightens her grip and turns away from me.

“No!” she objects. “Go! Run!”

She throws her head over her shoulder once more and tries to run in the other direction—but I manage to hold her back by grabbing her upper arm. A futile attempt to free herself of my hold follows, and I answer by pulling her closer to me, close enough to see the frown on her face.

“There is no fire! We sh—”

“How would you know?!” she barks at me, still trying to get away. “Let go of me! I have to—”

“You have to get out of here, trust me!” I cut her off, my voice painfully loud in my own ears. “Come with me!”

The deafening sounds of other people screaming is accompanied by constant bumps from all sides as they run into us on their way out—and they’re all running in the same direction, simplifying the task of figuring out where the main exit should be.

I try to follow the stream of panicking people, but she refuses to follow, seemingly throwing her entire body weight in the opposite direction when I pull her with me.

Furious at her stubbornness, I turn around with the intention to tear that stupid fire extinguisher from her hands and gather her up in my arms—but she stops me in my tracks when she screams: “Not this way! Come!”

Baffled, I let go of her arm and follow right behind when she takes off in the opposite direction—taking the useless extinguisher with her. The dark smoke threatens to swallow her, but just as I worry that she might disappear from my view, the fog begins to clear up. Still, there’s not enough light to see where exactly we’re going and I run right into her when she stops in front of a door that appeared out of nowhere.

“Hold this,” she utters, pushing the extinguisher against my chest with a violent thrust. The blow is strong enough to take my breath away, but I manage to grab the damn thing before it can drop on my feet.

I feel like an idiot, standing right behind her with that redundant tool in my arms while she fiddles with the door lock.

“Dammit, why isn’t this—”

I mute her curses by pushing her to the side, finally making good use of the extinguisher as I ram it against the door with full force. Luckily, the door swings open at my second try.

I throw the fire extinguisher to the ground and grab her wrist, forcing her to follow me even though I have no idea where we’re going. We find ourselves in a narrow hallway, illuminated with just a few tiny bulbs along the walls.

“To the right!” she exclaims behind me, followed by a little push against my back.

I start running, pulling her with me. She tries to squirm away from me, but I don’t let go of her wrist, worried that she might turn around and try to kill a fire that doesn’t exist.

“The door! There!” she pants behind me, and a moment later I spot a black door emerging on the right side.

Much to my surprise, it’s not locked and swings right open when I turn the knob and throw myself against the cold steel a little too violently. Surprised, I stumble outside, greeted by a cold breeze and fresh air. Dragging her with me, I put some distance between us and the building, before I come to a halt on what appears to be an empty parking lot.

Almost empty.

A noise from the left claims my attention. Steps, followed by the sound of something metallic falling to the ground. I turn around just in time to see a dark figure running away across the asphalt, arms flying wildly and steps wide enough for two as he tries to get away from us as fast as possible. I reckon it's a he, albeit a rather short and skinny guy, based on the broad shoulders and the military buzz cut.

“What the hell?” the girl whispers next to me, throwing me a quizzical look when I turn around.

I shrug in response, deciding that there's no point in running after him—especially if it means leaving her behind.

Instead, I focus on the object he dropped before taking off. I find it a few feet away, still rolling on the ground, and even before I close in on it, I have a vague idea about what it could be.

She follows right behind me when I move closer to it, neither of us saying a word as I go down on my knees, careful not to leave any fingerprints when I nudge the can so it rolls on its side.

And my breath hikes.

The green can turns out to be a smoke grenade, just as I suspected. But it's not just any kind. It's a M18 grenade, military grade—and one I am all too familiar with.

Not many people have access to this kind of grenade—but I know some people who do.

In fact, I know them very, very well.

Chapter 6

Kat

“What is that?”

He leaves my question unanswered, his eyes still glued to the thing on the ground as he gets back up on his feet. It looks like a spray can to me, but after what just happened I find it hard to believe that we just caught a harmless vandal who was leaving his tag somewhere.

“Are you alright?”

The man, whose name I still don't know, turns to me, a tense expression on his face as he scans me from head to toe.

“Where are your shoes?” he wants to know, raising an eyebrow at my naked feet.

“I took them off,” I respond. “How was I supposed to run in those damn heels?”

He snickers at my words, and I feel another wave of heat rush to my cheeks.

We kissed.

We shouldn't have, but we did. And then the world exploded around us. Now we're standing outside in a parking

lot, lost and confused and like the strangers we are to each other. I have no idea what to feel, what to think.

What the hell just happened?

“Here, wear this,” he says, taking off his suit jacket. “You must be freezing.”

I hadn’t even noticed the cold until now, but gladly accept his offer. He puts the jacket around my shoulders in a nonchalant but caring manner, making sure I’m all wrapped up before he takes a step back to survey me again.

“You sure you’re fine? You didn’t get hurt or anything?” he probes.

I nod, closing his jacket around myself a little tighter, as if I wanted to hide in it. I’m wrapped up in his smell and I can still feel the heat of his body radiating from the soft fabric around my shoulders.

It feels good, way too good.

“How about you?” I ask back. “Are you hurt?”

He huffs and shakes his head. “Nah, I’m... I’m good, fine.”

His eyes flit back to the green can on the ground, and he furrows his brow. Something is definitely bothering him.

“What is that thing?” I ask, as I lean forward to get a better look at it.

But he holds me back and places himself in front of me.

“Is that a bomb?” I blurt out, confused by his overly protective behavior. “Are we in dang—”

“It’s not a bomb,” he cuts me off, sounding amused. “It’s a smoke grenade. Don’t touch it.”

“A smoke grenade? Is that what that was in there?”

He nods quietly, and I turn around to face the old stone building that hosts The Velvet Rooms. Most of the large windows are closed and shielded from the inside for obvious reasons, but some of the smaller windows on the upper floor are ajar and clouds of smoke are fleeing through the small gaps. But there is no sign of a fire, just like he said.

“How did you know?” I ask, jutting my chin up toward the tilted windows. “That there was no fire? How did you know it was smoke grenades?”

“I didn’t,” he says through gritted teeth. “It was just a guess.”

“A guess?” I poke, raising an eyebrow at him. “You sounded quite certain when we were stil—”

“I didn’t want you to get hurt,” he insists, shooting me an intense look. “You were risking your life, playing Superwoman with that damn extinguisher—”

“Well, excuse me for taking charge!” I cut him off. “I was just trying to be useful instead of running around like a headless chicken.”

He looks at me, a hint of disbelief coloring his expression, before he bursts out laughing.

“What’s funny about that?” I ask, regarding him with an indignant frown.

“Nothing, nothing,” he assures. “I like that. I like that a lot.”

He likes what? Didn't he just complain about my reckless actions?

I don't know what to make of his comment and turn back to the building instead.

We used an emergency exit that few people know about, but I'm still surprised that we are the only ones out here. Everybody else seems to have escaped through the main exit. Hopefully.

“You think everyone made it out?” I wonder out loud. “We should go around to the front, I need to check on my coworkers.”

He doesn't seem to be a big fan of that idea, but nods quietly and is just about to approach the alley next to the building.

“We can't go there,” I tell him. “There's a fence, and I'm not climbing over that in this outfit. We have to go around the block.”

He sighs. “Fine. You lead the way then.”

We leave the premises, passing the smoke grenade that is still resting on the concrete, an invisible cloud full of unanswered questions hovering over it. I notice how his gaze holds onto it as we walk past it, a strained expression on his face.

“Katherine. My name is Katherine, but everybody calls me Kat,” I blurt out as we turn right to make our way around the building.

The words left my lips before I could think twice, born out of a desire to distract my mind for a bit. Anything is better than focusing on the frightening terror we just escaped or the piercing cold against my almost naked feet. I had to say something, something normal, mundane. And it felt right to tell him. After all that just happened, I feel that the dynamic has shifted between us. He’s no longer a stranger, a random patron from my workplace. He was worried about me. He came looking for me, because he wanted to make sure I was safe.

And he kissed me. We kissed.

He cares about me. Right?

At least that’s what I want to believe.

A smirk dances at the corner of his mouth when he looks at me now, seemingly happy.

“Thanks. It’s nice to meet you, Kat.”

That is all he says.

“Do I get to learn your name, too?” I probe.

Much to my disappointment, he shakes his head. “That wouldn’t be right.”

I frown at him. “I told you mine! How is that fair?”

He chuckles and is quick to adjust the suit jacket around my shoulder as it threatens to slide down after I loosened my grip a little.

“Life ain’t fair, baby girl,” he murmurs. “If it were, a girl like you wouldn’t have to give herself to strangers so she can afford to go to college.”

“I’m not giving myself to anyone,” I object, feeling offended. “This is by far not the worst job I’ve had, believe me. At least it pays well! Very well, actually.”

“Dirty work always pays well,” he remarks. “Doesn’t mean it’s worth it.”

I huff. “That’s easy for you to say.”

He catches my accusing look with an indignant expression. “I don’t think you are in a position to judge me.”

“You’re one to talk!”

I want to say more, but get interrupted by nervous chatter as we turn the corner and find ourselves close to the entrance area of the club. Suited men and girls in lingerie—a lot of them wrapped in suit jackets just like me—are gathered on the street, fearful eyes locked on the mansion that hosts The Velvet Rooms.

I’m not close with any of my coworkers, but there aren’t that many of us and as we walk further into the group, I’m relieved to see all of their familiar faces.

“Miss Barry!” I exclaim when I notice the madame a few yards away from us. Despite the circumstances, she looks as flawless as always, dressed in her black, tapered lady’s suit, lips painted in a bright red color and her black hair still held in place by a tight up-do. She is standing close to the main entrance, surrounded by a group of distressed girls and two very confused looking security guys.

Without thinking, I run toward them.

“Is everyone alright?” I burst into their conversation.

Miss Barry turns to me, and her face lights up with relief.

“Katherine, there you are!” She yells out, expanding her arms to welcome me. “My God, yes! You were the only one missing! Where were you?”

“I went out the emergency exit at the back,” I say, still surprised that I seem to be the only person who thought of doing that.

“Alone?” she wants to know. “Were you by yourself?”

“No, I went with...”

I pause, realizing that I still don’t know his name. I’ll have to show her.

But when I turn around, the handsome guy with the edgy haircut and the intense stare is nowhere to be seen. I crane my neck searching for him among the scattered crowd, but can’t find him anywhere.

Whoever he was, he’s gone.

Chapter 7

Logan

I didn't waste any time and made arrangements to fly back to Boston the very next morning.

I didn't tell any of them that I was coming. A warning like that would only give them time to come up with a lie. They would reject any blame for what happened at The Velvet Rooms in DC and spin the truth to their favor until they could gaslight me into thinking they weren't involved.

But I know they were. The grenade is as much proof of that as the sloppy execution. The guy who ran away in the parking lot didn't look like a professional. No, he looked like a dumb kid, ready to do anything for a small amount of cash—just the type of person they would hire for a job like this. Stupid and amateurish—that's how my brothers like to operate.

And they wonder why I wanted to get the hell out of this bullshit.

It's almost noon by the time I arrive at their "office" the backroom of a large electronics store at the outskirts of Boston. The owner of the store has been a family friend for a long time and benefits not only from the cash he receives each month, but also the protection the boys grant him—protection

he may not have needed if they'd left him and his business alone to begin with.

I park in front of the store, but don't use the main entrance. Instead, I make my way around the building, scurrying through a narrow alley to get to the back.

"Logan! Didn't expect to see you here today," Bill, the current watchdog greets me as I turn around the corner. He's a sturdy guy, shorter than me but comically broad-shouldered, the strong mid-day sun sparkling on his hairless scalp.

He's sitting in a lawn chair and doesn't even bother to get up when he opens the door for me by reaching back over his shoulder.

"They didn't tell me you're back in town," he adds, an inkling of suspicion flashing across his face.

"They're not expecting me," I tell him.

My voice is as firm as the look I throw at him as I walk through the door, making it crystal clear that I'm not in the mood for chitchat.

I find myself in complete darkness once the door closes behind my back, and I release a curse at my brothers' inability to take care of even the most simple tasks, such as exchanging the light bulb that died in this narrow corridor years ago. I navigate through the familiar dark until the tips of my fingers touch the cold steel of a closed door in front of me.

When I push it open, I'm met with annoyingly bright light—and the astonished voice of one of my brothers.

"Logan!" Carter exclaims, as he spots me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He stares at me with the same wide-eyed expression as my other brother Jack who sits right next to him around a dark wooden table in the middle of the room, while Tyler, my youngest brother, barely looks up from his phone. He's sitting at the other end of the room, slumped in a large upholstered armchair, his unruly hair covering half of his face, while Jack and Carter sport freshly trimmed buzz cuts.

Lucky for me, they are the only ones in here right now, so I don't have to hold back or ask anyone else to leave before I speak.

"I thought we had a deal!" I begin, pointing my finger at Jack as I approach the table in wide and angry steps. "I stay out of your business and you stay out of mine—and out of DC!"

A frown spreads across Jack's face and he shakes his head at me.

"We agreed to no such thing," he says. "Besides, what the fuck are you talking about?"

I huff with disgust. "Don't play dumb. The Velvet Rooms, last night, that's on you guys, isn't it?"

Jack and Carter exchange a look, but neither of them says a word, while Tyler rolls his eyes in the back. I knew it. They're not even trying to deny it.

"Who paid you?" I implore. "Who hired you to throw some fucking smoke grenades at a kink club? And why?"

"What's it to you?" Carter barks back at me. "And how do you even know about this?"

"I know this, because I was there when it happened," I tell him — and his face derails.

“Dude, we didn’t—”

“Yes, of course you didn’t know!” I exclaim. “You’re not supposed to know, just like you’re not supposed to be fucking around in DC! That’s my city! If you want to expand outside Boston, why not stick to Providence down in Rhode Island? The network is still solid on Federal Hill, you just need to work it.”

“Providence is overrated,” my brother Jack laments. “Besides, we never agreed on staying out of DC and—”

“Yes, we did!” I cut him off. “Just stay the fuck away from me! There’s plenty of shit for you to fuck up over here, why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“We *did* leave you alone!” Carter insists. “Chill, would you? This was just an unlucky coincidence. Don’t be such a baby about inhaling a little smoke, because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I glare at him, before I turn away to foot over to the fridge next to where Tyler is sitting. The thing is small but filled to the brim with beer, just as I expected. It may be early, but I need something to calm me down—otherwise I might rip someone’s head off.

“Why are you so worked up about this?” Jack implores. “Is there something you’re not telling us?”

I hate how well he knows me. Jack is the second born among us and only two years younger than me, so it shouldn’t come as a surprise that he can read me like no other.

“I invested in this club,” I reveal, and the beer fizzes as I open the can in my hands. “You attacked one of my new business endeavors.”

No one says a word, but I can feel their eyes—even Tyler’s—on me as I walk over to an empty chair at the other side of the table, sitting down opposite of my brothers before I take a swig of beer.

“You bought a sex club?!” Carter bursts out. “*That’s* what you call going clean?”

They share a laugh at my expense, to which I have nothing to retort other than a quiet glare. Of course, they’d laugh at that. They don’t know any better and they have no idea what I’m trying to do. They will never understand.

“I didn’t buy it, I invested in it,” I clarify. “And I want to know how the fuck it ended up as a target for your bullshit.”

“Money,” Jack replies, quick like a shot. “What else?”

I scoff. “Whose money? Who paid you? And why?”

Jack and Carter shake their heads in unison.

“You know we can’t tell you that,” Jack says. “It doesn’t matter anyway. Just some random moneybags who don’t like their new neighbors.”

“Besides, it was a one-time thing, total fluke,” Carter adds. “If we had known that you’re... involved with that establishment, we wouldn’t have done it. It was more of a favor, we owed someone.”

“Damn straight,” Jack agrees. “We’re good here, even without you.”

I roll my eyes at him, but he just shrugs.

“Listen, we may not like your decision, but we respect it,” Jack adds, pinning me down with a stern look. “We are not trying to get in your way, you can trust me on that.”

“Me too. All of us,” Carter piles on—and all our eyes wander to Tyler, who hasn’t said a single word since I entered the room.

He arches an eyebrow at us, first looking at Carter and Jack, before he turns to me and mutters: “Yes, all of us.”

He looks back down at his phone as soon as the words leave his lips, signaling that he has nothing more to say. He is the youngest of us boys, and if it were up to me, he would be in college to finish his degree, rather than spoiling his prospects for a legit career. But Tyler, smart as he may be, prefers the path of least resistance—which means following his brothers’ lead.

“You should talk to our local contacts in DC if you want to make sure that club doesn’t get another warning,” Jack says, pulling my attention back to the table. “*We* aren’t your problem here. We merely worked as henchmen for a friend.”

“I don’t want to get involved with anyone in DC,” I tell them. “I don’t want to drag this shit with me. I want to be out, for good.”

Jack just shrugs, while Carter rolls his eyes at me.

“Yes, you’ve said that more than once,” he moans. “We get it.”

“And how is that going for you so far?” Jack probes, placing his elbows on the table between us as he leans forward. “You turning into a pimp now, or what?”

A disgusted frown is all I can muster as a response.

I wish I could make them understand. In fact, I wish I could make them follow my lead and do the same. But I know there’s no use in even trying.

“None of your fucking business,” I tell them, emptying the can of beer in one large swig, before I get up and make a move to leave. This conversation is over.

“Do you even care if she’s still alive?” I hear Tyler’s voice from the back of the room as I place my hand around the doorknob.

I pause and turn around to him, a question painting my expression. Tyler hasn’t moved an inch, but regards me with a dark gaze.

“Grace,” he says. “She’s no longer in school.”

“What?!” I exclaim. “Why? Where is she?”

You’d think as the youngest one and the only one among us who was never burdened with family expectations, our sister would be the one with the easiest path, the most fulfilling life, the most opportunities to blossom. But somehow, our little Grace has always been the one who struggled the most—with everything. And it has only gotten worse after the death of our mother a few years back.

“Psychiatric hospital,” Carter answers in his place. “She was causing too much trouble, ran off again...”

“Jumped,” Jack adds. “She jumped off a cliff into the sea. It’s a miracle she didn’t get hurt.”

My heart almost stops.

“She tried to kill herself?”

They shake their heads.

“According to Grace, no. That wasn’t her intention,” Jack says.

“Still crazy, though,” Tyler adds for consideration. “Crazy enough to get locked up.”

He throws me an accusing look, but I choose to ignore it.

“Where is she?” I want to know. “What hospital?”

“She can’t see visitors,” Carter replies. “Not yet, at least.”

Typical. All of this. My sister tries to hurt herself and gets sent to a psychiatric ward—and no one bothered to tell me. Who knows when—and if—I’d have ever heard about it if I hadn’t shown up today.

“Keep me posted,” I say to no one in particular, before I turn the knob and open the door.

Grace may be troubled, but at least she’s safe.

That’s more than I can say about a certain someone back in DC.

A certain someone who needs to become mine.

And I may have the perfect idea how to make that happen.

Chapter 8

Kat

I release a sigh and soak in the early morning sunlight on the fire escape outside my room, wrapped up in a wool blanket that I found in the living room.

My cheeks are still flushed, my hair damp from the sweat that coated my face when I woke up, and my heart is still racing, beating its drum in a blend of excitement and shame.

I can't remember the last time I had a sexy dream like this. His hands all over me, his intense gaze locked onto mine while I could feel his touch between my legs. It was all so real, so intense. My core was throbbing when I woke up, dancing in the same rhythm as my heart while I tried to make sense of my dream.

It was him, for sure. The handsome stranger from that night. I could see his face and I remember his intoxicating smell...

My heart jumps when I hear a noise outside my door, coming from somewhere down the corridor. Mrs. Warden must have woken up.

As humiliating as it was for me to be foisted off on her after Patrick's horrific betrayal, I'm still beyond grateful for her support. And I hate that I have been lying to her about so

many things, most of all my current job. It's not shame that made me do it, but concern for her. She would be tortured with misplaced worry about my safety. I don't want to hurt her like that.

Miss Barry said that the club will be closed for at least a week, which means I won't get to see *him* again any time soon. The mysterious man who appeared in my dream—and whose suit jacket I still hold in my possession. I'm glad I took it home with me, because it revealed a secret that he wasn't willing to share.

His name.

I noticed the monogram when I put the jacket on a hanger in my closet. Logan Reid, embroidered with delicate silver yarn, right above the inside jacket. I mistook it for a brand name at first, but a little internet search quickly confirmed that Logan Reid is the man who fled The Velvet Rooms with me that night.

And what a man he is!

I found a lot of pictures and articles about him, singing his praises about how he became one of the youngest self-made billionaires in the country about a year ago.

He is a freaking billionaire! Not just a millionaire, no, a *billionaire!*

I can't even begin to imagine what his life must look like.

Why would a man like him show any interest in someone like me? He must have dozens of fascinating and mesmerizing women in his orbit.

I feel small just thinking about it. Minuscule and irrelevant next to a man who has achieved so much more than me. He is so far out of my league.

Yet, I can't stop thinking about him—and that kiss. My pulse speeds at the thought of it, but it will never be more than a sweet memory.

Just like that dream will always remain just that, a dream.

The steam that rises from my hot caramel macchiato blends with the clouds of my breath as I release a heavy sigh. It's about eight in the morning, and the city is already buzzing with life nine stories below my feet. I listen to the familiar sounds of cars passing by, engines droning, impatient honking, joined by bike bells and the occasional outburst of frustrated yelling as people scurry on their way to work.

Normal people with normal lives and normal jobs.

Maybe one day I will be one of them.

At least I have a plan to make good money now. A plan that has been thwarted by an unforeseeable incident. But it's only a matter of time until I'm back at The Velvet Rooms—and, if I am lucky, back with *him*.

Logan Reid.

I wonder why he took off so abruptly after we made our way out? Who does that? Why did he come to save me, but then disappear without even saying goodbye?

He did come to save me, didn't he? It seemed like he was worried about me, unwilling to leave unless I came with him. And he was so level-headed, so in control and not panicky at all—until we stepped outside and found that can on the ground. I could tell that something was bothering him when he saw it.

But what was it?

And how come he knew that there was no fire? The first thing I could think of when I saw the smoke was to fetch a fire extinguisher and ready myself to battle a wall of flames.

But he knew. He knew right away what was going on. Is it because he has experienced an attack like this before? Or is it because...

No. I shake my head with intent, casting away the unwelcome thought that he might have had anything to do with this. That can't be it. I don't want to believe that. He is an elusive businessman with a nose for lucrative investments, not a criminal. Right?

It would suit my pattern, though. Until Patrick, I've only been drawn to guys who were nothing but bad news. Drop-outs, liars, thieves, abusive assholes—covered in ink and hooked on all kinds of illegal substances. I was drawn to them like a moth to the flame, and I burned my wings more than once.

Never again. If this Logan has anything to do with that attack on the club, then that's all the more reason to stay away from him.

I don't want to have anything to do with criminals, never again.

After I lost my alleged safe haven with Patrick, I had no other choice but to move in with Mrs. Warden. She used to be my High School teacher and is the only person who really seems to care about me. When I dropped out of school, she tried everything within her power to keep me on the right path, always running after me so I'd get my diploma.

But I wouldn't listen. Not back then. I wanted to be free and no longer dependent on others, and money is the only way to

get there. You don't get paid for school, but you do get paid for waitressing—and you get paid even more for delivering little bags filled with white, powdery rocks to junkies.

I let her down more than once. I stole, I lied, I ran away. I hung out with the wrong people. But Mrs. Warden never gave up on me. She helped me get out of my ex-boyfriend's drug business, I earned my GED thanks to her—and now I have a home, thanks to her.

I owe it to her to get my shit together once and for all.

But that won't happen if I retreat to old patterns and let myself be dragged back into the darkness that may surround *him*. An inked bad boy, exuding excitement and delicious danger. A man whose dark gaze dove right into the deepest corner of my soul, a man who appeared to read me like no other.

A man who truly saw me for who I am—and didn't seem repelled by what he found.

My fingers clench around the coffee mug, while I follow the stream of thoughts that lead me back to him. I can't get him out of my head, but I know I should.

“Katherine?” Mrs. Warden's muffled voice tears me back to reality. She's speaking in a low volume and seems to be standing right on the other side of my closed door. “Katherine, are you awake?”

“Yes, yes, I am,” I respond, turning around so I'm facing the room, when she opens the door and peeks inside, her graying mane falling over her shoulder in a rumpled braid.

“Morning, dear,” she greets me with a warm smile. “You're up early today! I haven't woken up to the smell of coffee in a long time.”

I reciprocate her smile and nod. “Yeah, I wanted to read in the sun for a change.”

She comes closer, arching her eyebrows in question as she seems to realize that I’m not holding a book in my hands.

“Still waking up,” I excuse myself, jutting my chin toward the sun. “Besides, the view from up here is quite distracting.”

“Yes, it’s quite a sight, isn’t it,” she says, now standing right next to me as her eyes idle across the street below. “People are always so busy nowadays, always hustling, always running, and you never know whether it’s toward something or away from something.”

I suggest a quiet nod, unsure what to say to that.

“You haven’t fed Johnny, have you?” she goes on, referring to the black cat she’s sharing her home with. He’s a rescue who was lucky to find shelter with her—much like me. “He’s been yelling at me as if he’s starving, but you never know with that one.”

I join her short chuckle and shake my head. “No, I haven’t. He has a right to be hungry.”

“Good.” She smiles and makes a move to leave my room. “So do we. Let’s have some eggs. I’m in the mood for eggs.”

She’s already halfway through the door before she finishes her sentence—and I follow right behind, happy to leave my musings about the captivating stranger behind.

For now.

Chapter 9

Logan

“I’m not sure if I understand what you’re asking of me, Mr. Reid.”

Miss Barry releases an exasperated sigh as she leans back in her chair. She sits with her arms crossed in front of her ample chest while pinning me down with an inquiring stare.

Her DC office resembles the facilities in Boston, kept in dark colors all around with the occasional bright red accent placed in a provident manner. The large windows behind her desk are framed with the same thick curtains that decorate the main hall of The Velvet Rooms—are telltale signs that this is not your average CEO business office.

“I think I made myself pretty clear,” I say. “I know for a fact that your agency provides these types of services—”

“Yes, but not with just about any girl who works for us,” she cuts me off. “Cassidy is working as an Angel, exclusively. I’m afraid there’s little I can do for you.”

I don’t even try to hide my indignation as I roll my eyes at her.

“It’s a proposition,” I tell her, jutting my chin forward. “She can say no.”

But she won't. I will make sure there's no way for her to say no—not with what I have to offer.

Miss Barry raises an eyebrow at me. “I'm sorry to ask, sir, but what exactly do you need her for? You're not just asking for a simple escort, are you?”

Most of all, I need her to become mine, and exclusively so. I haven't stopped thinking about her ever since that fateful night—and if I can't get her out of my head, I need to get her into my bed.

Especially if that means killing two birds with one stone.

I was quick to dismiss Chase when he jokingly suggested the ridiculous charade of a fake engagement, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense to me. If the Vanguard's are asking for a family man to join their ranks, then that's what I'll give them.

All I need is the right woman to play along.

A woman like Katherine.

She's beautiful, smart and just feisty enough to stand her ground without being too annoying. And she's in desperate need of money. We'd both get what we need, have a little fun on the side, and then part ways once our contract is over. I wouldn't have to worry about having to commit to something I don't want—a real relationship—without having to forgo the joy of ravaging that enticing body of hers. It's the perfect solution.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I assure Miss Barry. “I have no illicit intentions with Kat—Cassidy.”

Fuck, that was close.

It doesn't seem like Miss Barry noticed my little slip, but she doesn't look happy either way.

"I am mostly looking for someone to accompany me to social functions. Someone who can hold a conversation while looking pretty next to me," I clarify.

"And why do you need her to live with you?" Miss Barry probes. "Cassidy never agreed to provide any sexual favors and I don't see why—"

"I never said anything about 'sexual favors' now, did I?" I interrupt. "Cassidy won't be forced to do anything she doesn't want to do."

No, I won't force her to do anything. She will *want* everything I'm going to do to her.

Miss Barry releases a deep sigh while raising another eyebrow at me.

"Yes, I've heard that before," she says. "We had some unfortunate events unfold at our agency in Boston and I don't want to repeat those mistakes here. Word gets around. We have become more cautious—as have our girls."

She clears her throat before pointing at the black folder that's been resting on the table between us ever since I stepped inside.

"Mr. Reid, I don't see a reason why you wouldn't choose from our girls in here," she adds. "It's not your request itself that has me worried, but the fact that you're so fixated on this particular girl."

I don't like the expression of genuine worry on her face as she looks at me.

“I understand your concern. But I can’t content myself with someone who is not a good fit for my needs,” I tell her.

She nods, pressing her lips into a thin line. “Yes. But I can assure you that all of these girls know what they signed up for. All of them have undergone a thorough screening process and —”

“That’s not what I mean,” I interrupt her. “I have been a customer at your escort agency, Violent Delights, for long enough to trust your work, and I’m sure these girls are just fine. But they’re not what I am looking for.”

Her gaze meets mine across the table, and the way she narrows her eyes tells me that she seems to understand what this is about. She presented me with plenty of suitable options. They are all outstandingly beautiful, elegant, well educated, simply perfect.

But they’re not Katherine.

“Mr. Reid, I just don’t understand why you’re so focused on our Cassidy,” Miss Barry says eventually. “Why does it have to be a girl you can’t have?”

“Can’t have?” I repeat, adding a dismissive huff. There is nothing in this world I cannot have.

A condescending smile blossoms on her face when she continues to speak.

“To be quite frank with you, I’m not sure Cassidy is a good fit for your needs.”

“What makes you say that?” I want to know, my interest piqued.

Miss Barry shifts in her seat, visibly uncomfortable as she bites her lower lip and evades my eyes while needlessly

sorting the papers on the table.

“I know you said you were interested in a well-educated girl, one who knows how to conduct herself and contribute to a more refined conversation,” she says. “All of the girls in our database hold a college degree and come from good families.”

“She passed your background check, didn’t she?” I inquire. “She’s not a criminal or an addict or anything like that.”

“Of course not!” Miss Barry appears revolted at the idea, raising her hands in defense, as if I’d just threatened to attack her. “There’s nothing wrong with her, per se. It’s just that...”

She pauses again while her strained gaze journeys through the room as if the right words were written somewhere on the walls.

“Let’s just say she didn’t have the best upbringing and her background is not quite up to the standard we usually apply,” she says eventually. “I made an exception when I hired her.”

Worry shadows her face when she looks at me now, her shoulders tense and her expression cautious as she awaits my reaction. But I don’t give her anything to work with. What she just told me doesn’t change anything.

“She grew up in foster care,” she goes on. “Didn’t even finish High School, but recently obtained her GED, so—”

“I don’t know why any of this should matter?” I interject. “I’m not hiring her for a position in middle management.”

She releases a polite chuckle.

“Yes, of course,” she admits. “It’s just that... if you’re asking for a girl who knows how to conduct herself among the upper class, I’m not sure she’s the right fit for that. I’ve had to have an extra eye on her, because we’ve run into some trouble

since the club opened. She can be a little challenging sometimes.”

Perfect.

This girl becomes more and more interesting.

“Well, I like a good challenge,” I tell her. “And I know what I want.”

Miss Barry shakes her head. “I’m not sure about—”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that,” I suggest. “Just tell Cassidy I want to talk to her in private, and we’ll go from there.”

I get up from my seat, before I add: “Besides, she still has my suit jacket from that night. I’d like to get that back—in person.”

Miss Barry responds with a silent nod, looking anything but happy about any of this.

I couldn’t care less. Kat is the missing piece to my plan, I’m sure of it.

She just needs to be desperate enough to say yes.

Chapter 10

Kat

“I’ll go check for him outside,” Miss Barry says, as she rises from her seat. “He should be here any minute.”

“O-okay,” I utter, and my fingers clench around the folded suit jacket in my lap.

She sends me a polite smile, before she strides to the door, seemingly floating on her ridiculously high heels without wavering once.

The door closes and I’m left alone in her office, nervously shifting on my seat as I cross and uncross my legs repeatedly. All Miss Barry told me was that the young gentleman who helped me to get out of the club that night wanted to see me—but she didn’t tell me why.

This must be about his jacket. I mean, what else could he possibly want from me?

It *must* be about the suit jacket. I keep reminding myself of that, despite the voice inside my head that’s trying to convince me otherwise. Hope is lacing that voice with a misguided desire for more—for something I swore to give up on. This man may have looked at me as if he really saw me, he may have talked to me as if he cared, and he may have worried for

my safety when hell broke loose—but he also disappeared without a trace, as if he couldn't get away from me fast enough.

He just wants his suit jacket back, that is all.

I caress the thick fabric as my eyes trail down to my lap, remembering the many times I held the jacket up to my face to inhale his scent. Now that I'm about to lose this remnant of our brief encounter it feels as if something—or someone—important is being ripped away from me.

It's so typical, me getting attached to someone who clearly doesn't want me, not for longer than a night; a quick chat while he feasts on the sight of my almost naked body, before he steals an illicit kiss from me.

A kiss I can't forget. A kiss that evolved into a dirty dream, where I could feel his hands all over me, caressing me, teasing me until...

I need to stop.

I'm sure he didn't waste a single thought about me or the kiss since I last saw him. A man like him would never settle for a girl like me.

I need to remember that.

I bring the jacket up to my face one last time, closing my eyes as I breathe in the fragrance that will soon become nothing but a distant memory.

And, of course, this is the moment when the door swings open and I'm met with Miss Barry's raised eyebrows—and his gorgeous face right behind her.

I yank the fabric away from my face, but I'm sure it was too late and they saw exactly what I was doing. Damn, why did I

have to embarrass myself?

He looks just as handsome as I remember, dressed a little more casually with a dark cashmere pullover, black jeans and brand new sneakers, but with that same intense stare and his dark hair gelled in place atop the clean-shaven undercut. I feel like a plain wallflower next to him—and painfully underdressed, even though I'm wearing one of my best blouses.

“Cassidy, this is Mr. Reid,” Miss Barry says, introducing him with a wide arm gesture.

“Logan Reid,” he elaborates as he reaches his hand out to me. “Please call me Logan.”

I jump from my seat, clutching the suit jacket against my chest with one arm while I reciprocate his gesture. His handshake is firm, but not too strong, and I try to ignore the treacherous sparks that erupt throughout my core at his touch.

“It's nice to see you again, Mr... err Logan,” I utter, locking eyes with him for a split second before I catch Miss Barry's probing gaze.

“I'll leave you to it,” she says, raising an eyebrow as if to warn me to behave, before she throws him a polite smile. “Please, make yourself comfortable,” she adds, pointing toward her own chair at the other side of the table. “I'll be down the hall, if you need me.”

“Thank you.” He regards her with a short nod before she leaves the room and closes the door from the outside.

“Shall we?” he says, beckoning me to sit back down.

I follow his invitation and am surprised when he sinks down in the chair right next to me, instead of accepting Miss Barry's offer to use her chair, which would be less awkward.

“I see you brought my suit jacket,” he comments, jutting his chin in my direction. “That’s very nice of you.”

“Oh, yes, here,” I hurry to reply, shoving it in his hands a little too eager. “I’m sorry you had to come all the way here to get it back. I would have returned it that night, but—”

“It’s okay,” he cuts me off, raising his hand in an appeasing motion. “This is not why I’m here, actually, but thank you.”

“Oh, I... I thought this is why you wanted to see me,” I stutter.

He shakes his head as he takes the jacket from me, neatly folding it in his lap before he casts me a benevolent smile.

“I see Miss Barry really didn’t tell you anything?”

I shake my head. “No?”

“Good, she wasn’t supposed to,” he says vaguely, crossing his arms in front of his strong chest as he eyes me. “I have a proposition for you, an unusual offer.”

I perk up, fueled by a weird tingling at the back of my neck. “What kind of an offer?”

“I need a fiancée,” he reveals. “A fake fiancée, to be precise. It’s just for a couple of months, maybe a bit longer, depending on how things go—”

“Excuse me?” I cut him off, almost jumping off of my seat.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. He cannot be serious?

“Don’t worry, I know you’re not an escort. This doesn’t include any sexual favors,” he assures, raising an appeasing hand.

I stare at him, my lips parted but unable to find the right words. I’m waiting for him to smirk or wink at me, anything to

tell me that he's joking.

But he looks dead serious.

"It's just for show," he clarifies. "I need someone to look pretty next to me, to accompany me to certain events and functions. Someone who can hold a conversation and, well, someone who can make me look good."

"You think... you think *I* could make you look good?"

He releases an amused chuckle. "I wouldn't ask if I didn't."

I stiffen when he leans over to me, elbows resting on his knees as he brings his face closer to mine.

"You'd have to live with me, of course. But you'll have your own bedroom, your own space. You just need to appear at a few functions with me and share the same address for a while", he goes on. "You won't have to sleep with me—unless you want to."

Now he adds a wink to his words, and I feel myself blushing in an instant.

I can't believe this is happening.

"And, of course, there will be a generous compensation," he goes on.

This cannot be real. What kind of sick game is he playing?

"How generous?"

He clears his throat, adding a redundant pause to keep me waiting before he reveals his answer: "Five hundred thousand."

I feel like my heart almost stops in shock. He wants to pay me half a million dollars to play his fiancée for a few months, and I won't even have to sleep with him?

“Is this a joke?” I want to know. “You can’t be serious?”

His expression darkens for a split second, a crease emerging between his brows when he responds: “Why would I be joking about this?”

“I don’t know? To make fun of a desperate girl in need?”

“Are you a desperate girl in need?” He replies, brows raised.

The color on my cheeks must be a deep crimson red now, as the heat rushes to my face.

“No,” I decide. “I mean... it’s just that... this seems—”

“Too good to be true?” he finishes my sentence.

I nod. “Well, yes. And things that seem too good to be true usually are just that.”

He sighs, straightening his back as he sits up in his chair.

“There will be a certified contract and everything,” he explains. “You’re welcome to go over it with your lawyer.”

“I don’t have a lawyer,” I say, snorting. “And I sure as hell can’t afford one.”

“You can, with the help of your first down payment,” he says. “Which you’d receive right after this meeting—if you agree to consider my offer.”

I stare into the dark depth of his eyes, searching for the lie behind his words. But he just looks back at me, seemingly at ease and his eyes wide and clear as can be. He doesn’t look like a liar, but looks can be deceiving.

Five hundred thousand dollars. I can’t even begin to imagine the life I could start with this kind of money. I could

pay off my debt. I could get my own place. I could open the bookstore I've been dreaming about for years.

I could achieve everything I ever wanted.

“Do you have any questions?” he probes.

His inquiring gaze puts me under unwanted pressure. I try to shake it off by evading his eyes, taking a deep inhale before I find my voice again.

“Why would you pay me this much money? Why do you need this so badly?” I want to know. “Where's the catch? There must be one. Why do you need me so badly?”

He shakes his head and releases a faint sigh.

“You don't need to know about my reason behind this; it's none of your concern,” he says. “Besides, it's not that much money, if you think about it. You'd have to quit your job, obviously, and put your entire life on hold for a few months. It's quite a commitment.”

I nod along as he speaks and realize that he's right: Five hundred thousand dollars is not a lot of money, not to a man like him. He's a freaking billionaire and could spend that money on a weekend without even thinking about it. And he's right about the last part, too. This is a huge commitment. I have to pretend to be someone I'm not, I have to uproot my whole life, quit my job—which, to be honest, I'm not sad about—and move in with him.

That last part actually doesn't seem that bad, though. Living with a freakishly handsome billionaire in his upscale home, and all I have to do is to put on a smile as I hang on to his strong arm in public—to receive a handsome compensation that could turn my whole life around? Doesn't sound too bad to me.

Crazy, yes. Insane, in fact.

But not bad—or dangerous. He’s not a criminal, he can’t be. Tattoo and edgy haircut or not, this man has nothing in common with the sinister creatures from my past. He’s just a very, very handsome and insanely successful businessman.

Considering the insanity of all of this and the fact that he’s loaded beyond imagination—his offer is actually not that generous at all. I’ve never been good at bargaining, but I would be stupid not to try my luck now. For whatever reason, he wants *me* for the job, and he seems just as desperate as he declares me to be. I need to leverage this.

I straighten my back, and clear my throat, before I muster the courage to lock eyes with him again.

“Double your offer, and I’ll think about it,” I say.

His brows curve with surprise. “Excuse me?”

“One million,” I clarify. “I won’t consider your offer for anything less than that.”

I’m gambling, but it’s a risk I’m willing to take.

It has already been worth it just to see the look on his face right now—a look that tells me he did not see this coming.

Chapter 11

Logan

“Fine, a million then.”

She can't hide her surprise when I agree to her demand without hesitation. Her eyes widen in disbelief and she swallows dryly, clearly trying to compose herself.

She looks so different today, dressed in a light colored blouse and a pair of navy blue skinny jeans, her chocolate mane tied up in a bun on top of her head. A few loose strands frame her pretty face on both sides, curls at the tips that dance along every motion. She's wearing less make-up today—the bright depth of her blue eyes is not overshadowed by fake lashes and gaudy eyeshadow and her plush lips bloom in their natural color.

So fucking delicious.

“Okay, good,” she says. “I will... I will think about it.”

“You have three days,” I inform her. “If I don't hear from you until then, I'll go with someone else.”

That's a lie, but she doesn't have to know that. I know I could just pick any random escort girl from Miss Barry's

exclusive catalog for the job, and if this was truly just about getting into the Vanguard Society, I would. Or if it was just about having a good fuck—I know there are plenty of girls who could provide that.

But this is about *her*. The beautiful girl who reads classics for fun. The girl who ran toward the danger instead of away from it when The Velvet Rooms erupted in chaos.

There's something about her that tells me she's perfect for this job.

And perfect for my cock.

I don't want a girl who is nothing more than a pretty flower with well rehearsed conversational skills for this endeavor. I'd get bored too quickly, and once I get bored, I get irritated and impatient. If I want to be serious about faking my way into the Vanguard Society this way, then I can't go with a spineless pretty face.

I'm killing two birds with one stone here, that's all.

"Three days," Kat repeats in a pensive tone. She looks lost and intimidated, her eyes trailing down to her lap, before they latch onto the suit jacket in my hands. A somber shadow seems to cloud her expression when she catches sight of thick fabric.

"I'll send you the paperwork later today," I inform her. "And you'll receive your first down payment, as promised."

"Today?" she asks. "I'll get money today?"

I nod. "Yes, I said you'd get your first payment for considering my offer. You said you'd think about it, am I right?"

She suggests a shy nod, a hint of doubt lacing her expression.

“And you’ll let me know about your decision in three days at the latest?”

She nods again.

“Well, in that case, I’ll write you a check for ten thousand dollars right n—”

“Ten thousand dollars!?” she bursts out, almost jumping up from her seat.

“That’s right. I told you, it’s just a small down payment,” I confirm.

Kat shifts on her seat, her gaze traveling around the room as if she was looking for something to hold on to.

“Do I... I mean... what if...,” she stutters, clearing her throat before she adds: “What if I say no? Do I have to pay it back?”

I shake my head. “This money is yours either way.”

She looks at me as if I’d just told her she’d won the lottery, blinking nervously as she lets my words sink in. Her lips are moving, but she appears to be incapable of a verbal response, too shaken by disbelief.

Seeing her like this almost makes me regret my choice to promise her a check right away. Ten thousand dollars is nothing to me, but it’s a ton of money for a girl like her. What if she decides to take the money and reject my proposition without even thinking about it? It would be stupid, but it’s a possibility.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks now, adding a subtle shake of her head as if she refuses to believe this is actually happening.

“I told you, I need a fiancée—”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” she cuts me off. “I mean, why would you give me this much money upfront? And why me? I don’t get it...”

She pauses, biting her lower lip with such force that it looks downright painful, as she seems to struggle for words. Sadness shrouds her face like a dark cloud, but I fail to see the reason behind it.

“Is it because you feel sorry for me?” Kat asks eventually, narrowing her eyes when she looks at me. “Am I some sort of welfare case for you?”

“By no means,” I respond, disgusted at her assumption. “This is just a small down payment to compensate for considering my offer. You have a tough decision to make, and I want you to be a hundred percent clear on what this deal entails. I want to be able to count on you, once our contract is signed.”

She is nodding along as I speak, her lips pressed into a thin line and her eyes wide and attentive.

“I understand,” she says.

“Besides, do you not remember what happened at the club, before all hell broke loose?” I go on, adding a little wink to my words. “Because I do.”

She sucks in a sharp breath of air and a treacherous blush colors her cheeks when she lowers her eyes to evade mine.

“You do remember, don’t you?” I probe.

“Yes, of course,” she responds in a whisper. “I just... I’m not...”

She pauses again, noisily clearing her throat before she straightens her back and looks back up at me. Her demure poise has been replaced by stern determination when she speaks again.

“It’s fine,” she says, seemingly more to herself than to me. “You’ll send me the paperwork later today, so I can look it over?”

I nod. “Miss Barry will provide me with your contact information, if this is alright with you.”

“Yes, I guess it has to be,” she says.

She forces a smile, trying so hard to be all business, when it’s clear that I’m unsettling her.

I fucking love it.

This is going to be a lot more fun than I thought.

If she says yes, that is.

Chapter 12

Kat

I can't believe I'm doing this.

I still can't believe it even now, as I'm stepping out of the car and I find myself in front of the high rise building that Logan Reid calls home.

He ordered the car for me, a black limousine with soft leather seats that felt like a warm embrace.

This is crazy. Why on Earth did I say yes to this?

Because you need the money, a voice inside my head reminds me. And this is more money than you'll ever make any other way.

But this isn't just about the money, is it?

I shake my head, as if to negate the truth.

"It's alright, Miss, I'll take care of this," the driver lets me know when I make a move to help him with my luggage. He places himself between me and the open trunk as if he's trying to shield me from some kind of danger.

I stand there with my hands still up in the air, feeling silly for wanting to jump to his aid. This is his job. He gets paid to do this, and I'd just get in his way. Did I insult him by wanting to carry my own stuff?

"I'm sorry, I... what was your name again?"

"Christopher," he says, with a patient smile on his face.

"I'm sorry, Christopher, I didn't..." I stutter helplessly, unsure where to go from here. This is so not my world, being chauffeured around, having someone else carry my stuff—it's so foreign to me, so awkward.

"No worries," Christopher says, casting me another benevolent smile. "You can go ahead. Mr. Reid is expecting you."

He nods toward the entrance, large sliding doors, all glass and shiny chrome, blinding sparks dancing my way as the sunlight hits it. I grasp the strap of my shoulder bag and take a deep breath before I stride toward the intimidating glass doors, feigning confidence.

I shouldn't be here. This is stupid, wrong, and potentially dangerous—but also too tempting to refuse.

He is too tempting to refuse.

The knot inside my chest tightens as I approach the door, and there's a part of me that wants to run away.

Just turn around and say you changed your mind! You still could!

Nothing has been signed, yet. He sent me the contract just like he said he would, and he attached a note that suggested a

two-week probation period. I don't know whether he did it for his own benefit or for mine, but it certainly made it easier for me to say yes.

I walk through the glass doors and into an obscenely bright and clean lobby. White marble floors, so spic and span that I feel like a dirty stray, spoiling the pristine floor with my worn out sneakers. There's a reception at the other end of the hall, clean as a whistle just like everything else in here. A young man, about my age, sits behind the counter in a pressed uniform, his entire presence oozing immaculate perfection with his tan skin, gelled hair, and spotless blazer.

I stop in my tracks for a moment, unsure where to go or what to do—and then I notice him. Logan Reid is coming toward me, wearing a black shirt, a pair of light denim jeans, and black sneakers that probably cost ten times as much as mine. His hair is a bit ruffled atop his edgy sidecut, giving him a boyish charm that almost sweeps me off my feet.

“Good to see you, Kat,” he says, his arms wide as if to invite me for a hug.

My grip around the strap of my bag tightens, and I bring myself to smile back at him.

“Hi.” My voice is so hoarse that it sounds more like a sigh than a greeting. I try to clear my throat, which turns into an embarrassing cough that echoes through the hall with such audacity that the receptionist throws a questioning look our way.

“Come with me,” Logan says, placing a hand on my shoulder and giving me a gentle push. His touch is assuring

and electrifying at the same time. I don't know what I want to do more, lean into it or run away from it?

“Are you hungry?” he asks, as he guides me to the elevators.

I shake my head. “Not really.”

“Fine, dinner can wait.”

Much to my surprise, he doesn't stop in front of the first set of elevators, but walks right past them and around the corner, where we're met with another steely door that appears to lead to another, much smaller elevator.

“We're on the uppermost floor, the penthouse,” he informs me. “This elevator only stops there—and at our spa area on the floor beneath.”

“*Our* spa area?” I repeat.

A smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Yes, ours. Sauna, pool, steam room. No one else has access. I'll show you later.”

My cheeks blush at the thought of the two of us in the sauna. That's not what he means by ‘I'll show you later’, right? It can't be. He said this would involve no sex—unless... well, unless I wanted it to happen.

What a presumptuous thing to say! Of course, I can't let that happen. It would be stupid. Right?

“You'll have to enter a pin here,” he goes on, pointing at a panel next to the door. “And then another one once you're inside.”

He enters four digits and the door slides open almost instantly.

“Please.” He gestures for me to go inside before him, and I reluctantly obey, still holding on to my bag as if it was a lifeline.

“I change the codes on a regular basis,” he announces, as he pinches in another pin at the panel inside the elevator.

“Never write them down anywhere. I want you to remember them by heart, do you understand?”

He sends me a warning look, a stern eyebrow raised until I nod in response. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good girl.” A smile replaces his serious expression and he turns away from me to watch the growing numbers on the display above the doors.

“Relax, will you. I’m not going to eat you alive,” he says. “As much as I’d like to.”

I can’t help the heat flushing through my entire body, and most likely darkening my cheeks in a treacherous way, when he adds a wink to his words.

“Why are you doing this?” I hear myself ask.

“Doing what?”

“These... these insinuations,” I say, forcing myself to lock eyes with him when he regards me with a quizzical look.

“Because I like to see you blush,” he responds, a triumphant smile widening across his handsome features. “It suits you.”

I frown, which causes him to laugh.

“Adorable.” He chuckles.

His remark leaves me dumbfounded. I've never been called adorable before, and I almost breathe a sigh of relief when the elevator comes to a halt and the doors slide open.

“After you.”

My shoulders are up to my ears, my whole body tense as I follow his invitation and walk into the most beautiful home I have ever seen. The door opens right into his vast living room. Grey marble tiles cover the entire area, surrounded by high walls, painted in a cool white that almost makes the place a bit sterile. A row of floor-to-ceiling windows covers the entire wall opposite to the entrance, providing a view across the city far below. A seating area is nestled in the corner right in front of the windows. Black leather couches and a matching recliner gather around a sturdy coffee table, its black marble shining as the sunlight dances across the surface.

“Take your shoes off,” Logan says from behind my back.

I hadn't even noticed that my body kept moving while I was gawking at his home, completely consumed—and overwhelmed—by the wealth it represents.

“Oh, sorry.”

I turn around and hurry back to the door, where he's kicking off his own shoes and shoving them in a small show cabinet that I hadn't noticed before. Neat and tidy, like everything else seems to be in this home.

“You can wear these if the tiles are too cold for your feet,” he says and shoves a pair of slippers in my direction. White and fluffy, like tiny clouds.

I slip out of my sneakers, flushed with shame when I place them next to his in the cabinet. Everything I own was already shabby and soiled when I bought it. I don't think I've ever owned anything that wasn't secondhand.

"Thank you." The words leave my lips like a sigh, as my feet meet the cozy comfort of the cloud slippers. They fit perfectly.

"How did you know my size?"

"Miss Barry was kind enough to hand me your file," he explains. "It told me everything I needed to know."

"Everything you needed to know?" I probe, a suspicious eyebrow arched. "Like what?"

"Like your sizes," he retorts, pointedly scanning my entire body from head to toe. "All of them."

Another rush of heat takes a hold of my body, but this time it comes with a surge of worry. I vividly remember the interview with Miss Barry back when I applied to work at The Velvet Rooms. It was intense, almost intrusive. It felt more like an interrogation and I spent almost two hours in her office, talking about my life, my upbringing, my barely existent educational background—everything.

Did all of that end up in my file? Does he know?

A sharp ping pulls me out of my anxious pondering, and the door to the elevator opens behind my back. It's Christopher with my luggage, stacked up on one of those trolley things they use in hotels.

"The guest bedroom, sir?" he asks, regarding Logan with a questioning look.

“Yes, thank you, Christopher,” Logan responds, his eyes latched onto the pile of ugly storage tote bags that are piled up on my shabby suitcase. My stomach turns under crushing shame, as I watch my pitiful possessions being pushed out of sight, down a bright hallway to the left.

“That’s it?” Logan asks without looking at me. He’s still focused on the trolley as it’s being rolled away, a crease between his brows, suggesting disgust.

“You only have that one suitcase?” he asks, now turning to me.

I nod. “And my books, yes.”

“In those tote bags?” He sounds horrified. “That’s all books?”

“Pretty much,” I reply. “I couldn’t leave them behind.”

He shakes his head violently. “No, of course not. But we’ll have to do something about those bags. And your clothes.”

He surveys me again, one eyebrow raised as he takes in the sight of my ripped jeans and my linty sweater. His disdain is almost palpable—and it turns my shame into anger.

“What about my clothes?” I hiss.

“You need a new wardrobe, a better one,” he asserts. “Something that’s more suitable for your position.”

His tone is so pragmatic, almost cold and showing no regard for my feelings whatsoever. As if I was a thing—his possession.

“We’ll take care of that tomorrow,” Logan decides. “You’ll also need a ring.”

I try to ignore the hard knot inside my throat when I nod in response—and wish for nothing more than to be home, in my cave, my bubble, my shitty little world, where no one ever made me feel as small as he does.

Chapter 13

Logan

She stands next to me, mute and small, with her shoulders up to her ears and a look on her face as if she was readying herself for an imminent attack.

“Relax, will you,” I reprimand her, speaking in a whisper so our personal shopper won’t hear. Her name is Susan and she personifies boring professionalism, dressed in a red blazer and pencil skirt with matching heels, her blond hair in a tight updo, not a single strand astray, and a thick mask of carefully applied make-up. Horrifyingly ordinary and staid—just what I need for Kat.

“This isn’t me,” she whispers back, her eyes darting from one corner to another. A frown emerges on her face as she watches Susan select a few items for her. She needs everything, from pant suits, blouses, skirts and dresses down to tights, socks and shoes. I can’t present her as my fiancé if she looks like a broke college student.

“I’m not paying you to be yourself,” I remind her. “I had no idea Miss Barry doesn’t even pay her girls enough for them to buy proper clothes.”

“She pays well,” Kat insists, throwing me an aggravated look. “I just had other priorities than dolling myself up with the latest fashion trends.”

She glares at me, her sulky words standing between us like a dividing wall. I’m sure her disdain for all of this is born from jealousy rather than actual rejection, but she’ll need to get her head straight for this to work out.

“There’ll be functions for us to appear at,” I tell her. “You’ll have to look your part when I introduce you to people that matter to me.”

“What kind of people?” she probes, a thin line looming between her brows.

“Important people,” I answer—and she rolls her eyes.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The warning doesn’t seem to faze her at all. “Do what?”

“Rolling your eyes at me.”

She lets out an amused chuckle. “Oh, does that bother you, Mr. Fancypants?”

“Listen, you—”

“How about these for a start?” Susan interrupts in a high-pitched voice. She’s dragging a garment rack filled with clothes on hangers next to her.

Kat throws me a triumphant grin before she turns her attention toward the personal shopper.

“I thought we’d start with some office attire: suit pants, skirt and blouses,” Susan suggests, stroking along the row of delicate fabric with an affectionate smile on her face, as if she was introducing us to her beloved children.

“I also added a few casual items,” she adds, her hand resting on silky tops in blue and dusky pink.

“Perfect,” I declare, while Kat musters a polite but strained smile.

“Yes, thanks,” she says, without sounding the least bit sincere.

“Please follow me,” Susan says. “I’ll show you to our dressing rooms.”

Kat throws me a short look, her lips pressed into a thin line and her eyes slightly narrowed. Her redundant defiance amuses me, but it won’t serve her well in the long run. She better shed that stubborn lower class shell and adapt to her new life. I don’t understand why she’s so keen to insist that she doesn’t belong to a world that will now be hers.

And it will be hers forever, I will make sure of that. A girl like Kat doesn’t belong in the gutter, and she certainly does not belong in a kink club to be gawked at. Not if I have a say in it—and I do, now that she’s practically mine.

I plant myself in one of the cushioned chairs and take a sip of the coffee we were offered when we got here. Kat declined everything that was offered to her, refusing to even accept a simple glass of water. Yet another habit she will have to get rid of. Declining an offered drink is often perceived as polite and modest by those who don’t know any better, even though it comes across as rather sullen.

My eyes are locked on the archway through which she disappeared with our personal shopper, unable to see what’s going on behind the curtains around the corner. I expected her to come out and present each of the pre-selected outfits to me, but the longer I wait, the more I come to realize that she has no

intention of doing so. Maybe I should have told her to, but I didn't think I'd have to.

After what feels like an eternity, Susan reappears with the garment rack, casting me an apologetic look.

"I'm afraid these won't do," she tells me. "I will try to find something that's more suitable for her taste."

"Thank you." I throw her a quick smile, before I get up from my seat and march through the archway into the dressing room area.

There's only one cabin with the curtains closed, making it easy for me to spot her. I don't hesitate for a moment, moving in wide and angry steps.

"Occupied!" Kat cries out when I yank the curtain aside with one swift motion. She's wearing nothing but her underwear, a simple black bra and matching thong, revealing her perky ass cheeks in the mirror behind her back when she stares up at me. My cock instantly hardens at the sight of her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she exclaims, hugging her lean frame as she tries to shield herself from my eyes.

"Oh come on, I've seen you in less," I say as I step inside. That's not really true, because the lingerie she was wearing in The Velvet Rooms covered a lot more than what she's revealing now. She wasn't even wearing a thong back then, but a lacy pair of panties. Now, her ass is bare—and only inches away from my trembling hands. I roll my fingers into fists to keep myself from grabbing her at the hips.

Kat sucks in a sharp breath of air when I close the curtain behind myself and corner her until she stands with her ass pressed against the mirror. Her chest is heaving under heated

breaths when her naked skin graces against the fabric of my jeans—and the obvious bulge beneath.

Her lashes flutter and her face juts down for a split second. She noticed.

“You listen to me, little bookworm,” I hiss at her, tilting my hips so my growing erection pokes against her naked belly. “We’re not doing this for fun. This is not about buying something that fits your style or your taste. This is about finding something that pleases me and my needs. Understand?”

A treacherous red blossoms on her cheeks and she moves her hips, slightly caressing my pelvis as if to lure me closer, while her eyes never leave mine.

“What are you doing?” I ask her—and she startles back.

“What are *you* doing?” she hisses back. “Why are you—”

“*You* are doing this to me,” I cut her off—and her eyes widen.

Damn. She’s driving me crazy.

“I never asked you to come in here!” she protests. “You can’t just—”

I silence her with a kiss. My lips crash onto hers with such force that she releases an anguished moan of surprise—but she doesn’t stop me. She doesn’t try to fight me off or push me away.

No, she welcomes my assault. Her tongue intertwines with mine, taking as much as she’s giving, while she leans into me. She doesn’t even stop me when I reach around her back and my hand digs into the flesh of her perky butt. I knead her soft

curves, as I pull her in closer, pressing her dainty body against mine—with my erection tucked between us.

Another moan escapes her and she almost loses her balance when she struggles to get out of my hold, but I can't take her attempts of escape seriously as long as her lips are still on mine and she continues to explore the inside of my mouth.

Her struggle soon turns into an erotic dance, and she's grinding against me, as she lifts one of her legs to wrap it around my waist. She pulls me closer, until my caged hardness is pressed against the warmth of her core—and I let out an anguished sigh.

I'm just about to unclasp her bra, when I remember where we are.

Fuck.

No, not here. Not like this.

I break our kiss, my hand still on her ass and my other arm wrapped around her narrow shoulders as she looks up at me with wide eyes. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are still parted, heat radiating from her body. Slowly, she lowers her sinful leg and lets go of me.

She wants this as much as I do—if not more.

But not here, not now. I'm going to take my time with this one. She's sweeter than any fruit I ever tasted.

My cock, however, has other ideas, still hard as stone and throbbing with painful craving, begging to be inside of her.

Soon.

“I can't just what?” I probe, placing a finger below her chin.

She just stares at me, as if in disbelief. My face is so close to hers that I can feel the heat of her erratic breath, fueling my desire.

“What the hell was that, you little minx?” I hiss.

“You started it!” She yells at me. “I just—”

“No, you don’t get to do or decide anything here,” I cut her off. “I’m here to remind you of your place. You don’t have to like any of this, but you will have to do it, if you want your money. You will have to obey me. You will fucking wear these clothes and buy whatever I tell you to. Do you understand?”

Her lips move as if she was chewing her response instead of verbalizing it.

“Do you understand?” I repeat.

“Yes, I understand,” she sighs, the words barely audible.

I force myself to let go of her, and she lets out a sigh that could either speak of disappointment or relief—or both.

“It’s just that... I,” she stutters, struggling to find words. “Do I really have to wear these—”

“Yes, you do. And I don’t care what you think about those outfits. I am the one who decides what will serve our purpose and what doesn’t. And for that to work you’ll have to show yourself to me as you try them on, don’t you think?”

Her lips are quivering now and she almost looks as if she’s close to tears. She flinches when I trail across her right cheek with the tip of my index finger, tracing along the line of her jaw before I place it back under her chin.

“Good girl,” I say—and that praise seems to pull her out of her bewildered state. “Don’t make me spank you.”

Her eyes widen. “Wha—”

“That was meant as a threat, not a promise, you damn little minx,” I hiss—adding a wink. “Looks like I’m going to have my hands full with you.”

She swallows dryly. “Well, it’s you who’s...”

She pauses to cast a look down to my crotch, licking her goddamn lower lip as she lays eyes on me. She really is trying to kill me.

She’s going to pay for that.

“I’ll be good,” she promises, looking back up with an apologetic look on her face. “Sorry.”

“Very good girl,” I say, taking a step back to bring some distance between us. “You’re fucking gorgeous, Katherine. There’s no reason why a girl like you should run around in shabby hippie clothes that reek of poverty. That’s no longer you.”

Her face freezes in an unreadable expression, lips slightly parted and eyes wide with confusion.

“That’s no longer me,” she repeats, speaking to herself more than to me. “That’s... no longer me.”

She lowers her head, her gaze absent and her mouth still forming the words without a voice making them audible. She looks lost, dazed and somewhat sad. Her sudden vulnerability does something to me. The sight of her like this feels like a weird punch to the chest. I feel the need to apologize—but I don’t.

“Thank you,” she says.

I frown at her. “For what?”

She's smiling now, and there's a determination in her expression that reminds of the night when I first saw her. That grim conviction of someone who has a plan, a goal. Someone who has something to fight for.

"Doesn't matter," she argues, now casting me a somewhat mischievous look. "I'll do better. You'll see."

"I know you will," I tell her.

I want to kiss her again, to touch her, to rip off that last bit of fabric covering her enticing body and get a better taste of her—but we're interrupted by the sound of clicking heels, announcing the return of Susan, and I slip out of the dressing room as quickly as possible.

Chapter 14

Logan

“Turn around.”

She obeys, but not without casting me a sour look, before she twirls around, mockingly stretching her arms out to the sides as if she was imitating a dancer. She’s wearing a black A-line dress with white contrast sleeves. Very proper, almost boringly tame—if the fabric wasn’t flying dangerously high when she twirls around with a little too much ardor.

“I look like an aged preppy school girl,” she comments when she surveys herself in the mirror. She’s either unaware of Susan’s presence or unwilling to hide her aversion in front of her. The woman is standing just a few feet away, discreet but attentive while she waits for us to reach a decision. She’s not moving a single muscle at Kat’s devaluing remark.

“I like it,” I say. “This is just what we need.”

“Is it?” Kat asks, a skeptical brow raised.

I nod. “Yes. You look proper and—”

“Stuffy as hell,” she cuts me off brusquely.

I throw her an aggravated look. “We’ll have to work on your language, too, it seems.”

She lets out a dismissive huff. “Whatever.”

I watch as she surveys herself again in the mirror, turning and pivoting on her toes while the dress flaps around her slim legs. She can complain as much as she wants, but I can see the hint of satisfaction on her face when she watches herself. There’s a side of her that’s beginning to enjoy this, a side that wants to see Kat strive and become a better version of herself.

Why else would she do all of this?

“I just don’t care for Burberry,” she adds. “It’s so... staid.”

She grimaces as if she was detecting a bad smell in the air.

“You’ll get used to it,” I inform her. “And you don’t have to like it. You just have to wear it.”

“And I will,” she says. “For as long as I have to.”

We both lock eyes for a second, an unspoken question floating between us. She agreed to a probation period, but she hasn’t signed anything yet. For all I know she could still back out at any time and just leave with the money I’ve given her so far.

Some people would do that. Stupid people who don’t think far ahead.

People who would push me away when I steal a kiss from them. Unlike Kat, who, if anything, begged for more when I devoured her lips and grabbed her ass.

Besides, Kat needs the money, and from what I could gather, she needs a lot more than just a few grand to turn her life around. She would not have been working at The Velvet Rooms if it were any different.

She will sign the contract.

And then she'll be truly mine—and she'll pave the path into the midst of the Vanguard Society. I don't know how long it will take, but I know it will work. It *has* to work.

And once I'm in, she'll be free, and she can do—and wear—whatever the fuck she wants to. The thought refuses to sit well with me, but I choose to ignore the unpleasant sting inside my chest.

We still have a lot to tackle before that—and plenty of time.

“Right,” I retort, averting my eyes from her. “For as long as you have to.”

“How long will that be, anyway?” she wants to know, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “There was no time frame stated in the contract, if I remember correctly.”

“That's because I don't know for how long I may need your service,” I answer.

“Did it ever occur to you that *I* might need to know?” she nags. “I have a life to plan, you know... for after.”

We lock eyes, and I see my own unease reflected in her expression.

“We won't be talking about that today,” I say, jutting my chin forward. “Try on the next outfit.”

She sighs, but refrains from rolling her eyes at me this time. I watch her walk back to the dressing room, swinging her hips a little too lively for it to be coincidental. It's her Velvet Rooms walk, subtly seductive and well aware that my eyes are on her.

She's trying to please me—even though she'd never admit it openly.

What a good girl.

My core thunders with need for her—a need that I was smart enough to push aside for the time being. I can't have her, not right now, and not in the way I want her. I've wanted to fuck Kat ever since I first laid eyes on her. That's why I called her to my table in the first place, even though I knew I couldn't have her then either.

And now she's here, *this close* to becoming all mine, turning and twisting like a pretty doll for my benefit.

I can't suppress a faint groan as I shift in my seat, my mind too occupied with thoughts about all the things I want to do to her. It doesn't help that she looks absolutely stunning in a navy blue brocade mini dress when she comes back out of the dressing room. The tight fitting dress hugs her figure so fucking perfectly, accentuating her feminine hips and her breasts in a way that drives me insane. And she walks with her head high, shoulders pulled back and hips swinging with an allure that drives me nuts. A true-to-life Cinderella if there ever was one.

She regards me with a coy smile from underneath her batting eyelashes, when she comes to a halt in front of me.

"I like this one better," she admits, her fingertips trailing along the fabric of the skirt until they reach the hem. It's a bit short for formal outings, but it looks so fucking delicious on her that we'll buy it anyway.

There are other places where she could wear it.

In my bedroom for example.

"What do you think?"

I think that this dress will end up ripped apart on my bedroom floor one day, after I've torn it from your exquisite body.

“It looks good on you,” I say, pointedly taking in the sight of her. “Great actually.”

The smile on her face widens.

“It’s not too short?” she probes, looking down at her long legs. She’s walking around barefoot, reminding me that we’ll have to get her some decent shoes, too.

I can only imagine what this skirt must look like in heels. The thought alone makes my cock twitch with urgency.

Fuck, I didn’t expect this to turn into such torture.

“We’ll find good use for it,” I tell her, relishing the nervous flicker in her eyes when she looks at me.

“Next,” I say, mostly to get her out of my sight. I need to calm the fuck down, and we still have a lot of stores to hit.

She tries on a few more crepe de chine shirts and matching skirts, and with each outfit, her face grows a little less tense and strained. I even notice the hint of a smile when she parades around in a new pair of stilettos and a peplum dress, the last outfit of the day. She moves differently, too. Her shoulders are no longer pulled up to her ears, her stance is upright and her steps wider and carried with a lot more confidence.

“Not that bad after all, huh,” I comment, when she’s about to walk back to the dressing room to change back into her current clothes.

She looks back at me over her shoulder and throws me a sassy smile. “Told you I’d make it work.”

I respond with a dismissive huff and shake my head. This sass will get her into more trouble than she’s aware of.

“Let’s wrap this up,” I tell Susan, circling my hand in the air as I turn around to her. She nods and happily proceeds to pack

our numerous purchases up.

I notice Kat swallowing when the cashier announces the sum and I take out one of my cards without even thinking about it. I'm sure it must be a lot of money to her, probably more than she has ever spent on clothes in her entire life.

"It's crazy to pay this much money for clothes," she murmurs when we leave the store.

"Not when you have it," I tell her—and she scoffs.

Christopher has been waiting for us outside, and takes the bags out of our hands as soon as he spots us.

"Where to next, sir?" he asks, as he opens the trunk to put them away.

"Cartier," I tell him.

Kat throws me a quizzical look, while I open the door for her.

"Please," I gesture for her to get in the car, but instead of following my lead, she remains where she's standing, her gaze fixed on the open door as if she was staring down into a black hole.

"We don't have all day," I urge.

She responds with a quick nod and climbs into the car, moving cautiously, like she always does when she's around anything that belongs to me.

"Cartier?" Kat asks, once I'm seated next to her.

"You need a ring, don't you?"

A sullen expression graces her face when she looks at me, suggesting a subtle nod. "Oh, right."

Chapter 15

Kat

We walk into the Cartier shop just a few minutes later. Portraying the perfect gentleman, Logan opens the door for me to walk in before him, but I freeze on the spot once I'm inside the store.

He regards me with an expectant look.

“Well?” he asks, jutting his chin forward. “Feel free to look around.”

“You said we're looking for something to please *your* needs,” I retort. “So? What do your people deem appropriate?”

A frown flashes across his face. He looks like he's about to say something, but then stops himself when a sales woman, dressed in a navy blue lady suit and black heels, teeters in our direction.

“How may I help you?” she asks, flashing a plastic smile at us.

“We're looking for an engagement ring,” he responds swiftly, his tone cold and apathetic.

The woman nods, looking slightly stunned at his stern tone, as she throws me a quick look, laced with a hint of sympathy.

I'd love to tell her that she has no reason to feel sorry for me, because I'm being compensated—and generously so—for this little charade, and have no intentions of actually tying the knot with this cold-as-ice rock of a man.

A man who barged into the changing room while I was practically naked, and then approached me like he *owned* me. My heart begins to race as the memory of that moment surfaces. It was so rude and intrusive—and incredibly hot. That kiss almost brought me to my knees. Why does he keep doing this, kissing me like that, and then acting as if nothing has ever happened?

And why do I have to be attracted to such crude behavior?

How is this supposed to work if he keeps doing these kinds of things? Is he actually attracted to me as much as I am attracted to him? Is he playing some sort of fucked up game with me?

I need to be careful, that's for sure. I can't lose my head in all of this, because I definitely can't trust him. With all that's been happening between us so far, I could very easily get hurt again, if I don't watch out for myself.

I can't let that happen.

“Oh, what a wonderful occasion,” the sales woman cheers, her smile widening. “Please follow me.”

I manage to mirror her smile for a split second, before she turns around and leads us to a glass cabinet that holds a large array of diamond rings.

“Did you have anything in particular in mind?” she wants to know.

She's looking at me first, before she turns to Logan, a questioning eyebrow raised.

“We’re just browsing for now, thank you,” Logan says, already turning away from her.

She gets the hint and regards us with a short nod, before she turns around and moves behind the register to give us a little bit of space.

“So?” he asks, as soon as she is out of earshot. “See anything you like?”

He’s not looking at me, but keeps his gaze fixated on the rings in front of us. I follow his example, trying to appear unfazed as I scan the display. They all pretty much look the same to me, despite their vastly varying prices.

“I don’t know,” I mutter helplessly. “How about that one?”

I point at one of the most delicate rings, set with a small brilliant-cut diamond center stone. The platinum ring itself is paved with even smaller diamonds all around and quite thin compared to most others.

“Étincelle de Cartier Solitaire?” he ponders, indignation lacing his voice. “No, you can’t run around with that. It’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” I repeat. “I like it. It’s not flashy and huge like the other ones.”

“It’s not convincing,” Logan argues. “A man in my position wouldn’t give that to his fiancée. It’s too cheap.”

“But—”

“This is what I was thinking,” he cuts me off and points at another ring in the far corner of the cabinet.

“A Solitaire 1895, platinum, with an oval-cut diamond, two carats easy,” he recites. “That other one wasn’t even a fifth of a carat.”

I stare at the massive oval-cut diamond, set on a much thicker platinum ring.

“It’s huge!” I exclaim, violently shaking my head. “And that price! There’s no reason we should spend this m—”

“We?” he cuts me off, a bewildered look on his face.

We lock eyes, as the awkwardness of what I’d just said lingers between us.

“It’s *my* money,” he adds.

“Yes, yes, of course, but...” I stutter helplessly. “Well, you asked me what I like, and I like that one.”

I point at the delicate Etincelle ring at the front. The ring Logan wants to see on my finger costs about ten times as much, and it doesn’t suit my style at all.

“Out of the question,” he says. “It has to be credible.”

“I’m the one who has to wear it,” I add for consideration.

He shrugs. “Like I said, you don’t have to like it.”

I let out a deep sigh, while scanning the display in front of me. The rings only vary in size and shape—and the amount of little diamonds that pave the ring. But no matter how much I try to warm up to the most expensive models, my eyes keep traveling back to the modest Étincelle.

“How about a compromise,” I suggest. “That’s what marriage is all about isn’t it?”

He clears his throat. “We’re not getting ma—”

“Yes, I know, but it has to look like we’re about to,” I say, trying to ignore the lump that forms in my throat.

This is all just pretend. Why does it hurt to be reminded of that? We’re not buying this ring to celebrate our happiness, but

to convince the world that we are. I shouldn't allow myself to indulge in all the pretty things he's buying for me.

“That's what I'm saying. It has to look convincing,” Logan argues. “And I would never buy a ring like that.”

I deflate with a heavy sigh while my eye trails along the many diamond rings in front of me, all of them way flashier than anything I'd ever imagined for myself.

It was not a lie when I said that Burberry just wasn't my style, but that's not really the reason why I find it so hard to accept these gifts. It's because I feel I don't deserve them. They are not me, because I am not a girl who deserves to be showered in this kind of wealth. I'm nobody, an unwanted foster child who failed at fulfilling her desire for normalcy over and over.

“You said you wanted a compromise,” he says. “How's that one for a compromise?”

He points at a smaller version of the Solitaire 1895. It's a bit smaller than the one he suggested originally, and while the price is still in the five figure range, it doesn't come close to his first choice. It's a brilliant-cut diamond, sitting on a delicate platinum ring.

“I think that could work,” I say.

“Good.” He nods and waves over the sales woman, who has been watching us from a distance all this time. She comes running in an instant, sporting a welcoming smile.

“Anything you'd like to try on?” she asks.

“Yes, that Solitaire 1895,” Logan responds in my place, pointing at the ring.

“Of course,” she says, as she produces a key from a drawer behind the display.

“Do you know your ring size?” Logan asks me, while the woman is opening the cabinet for us.

I shake my head. “No, I’ve never worn a ring before.”

“That’s no problem,” the woman says, as she comes back up from behind the cabinet. “We can figure that out for you.”

She holds the ring with two fingers as she hands it over to Logan, who appears surprised. For a moment it looks as if he wants to jump back as if the ring was on fire, but he catches himself and reluctantly accepts it.

He turns to me and clears his throat, nudging his chin in my direction to prompt me to hold out my hand. My fingers are trembling when I hold my left hand out for him to put the ring on. I can’t stop the tremors, no matter how much I try, and it almost seems like he’s trying to hold me in place when he holds my finger with one hand while putting the ring on with the other.

I didn’t expect the confusing flux of emotions that takes a hold of me as it happens. It feels so awkward, so wrong—and so weirdly nice at the same time. His touch is gentle and caring, as if he was afraid to hurt me or ruin the valuable piece of jewelry as he slides it onto my finger.

“Oh, look at that!” the sales woman calls out in delight. “That looks like a perfect fit. Who would have thought!”

Logan and I exchange a look.

“Does it fit?” he asks with a strained voice.

I look down on the ring, unable to stop myself from smiling when the diamond reflects the light with dancing rainbow

sparks. It looks so beautiful, surprisingly dazzling actually.

No, I can't like this. I shouldn't.

This isn't real.

I yank myself back to reality and pull the ring off of my finger as quickly as possible. It sits a bit tight, causing me to struggle for two or three seconds that feel horrifyingly long.

“Yeah, it fits.”

I clear my throat and hand the ring back, avoiding eye contact with him and the cheerful sales woman as I try to keep my unhinged emotions in check.

Chapter 16

Kat

It's been three days since I moved in with Logan, but I'm still far from getting used to any of this.

I have my own bedroom, just like he promised—and what a bedroom it is! Even the one I shared with the twins at the Millers' home when I was twelve years old was smaller. The twins, Elsa and Tina, were slightly older than me and the most horrible temporary siblings I had to endure during my unsteady upbringing.

It was one of the worst times of my young life, but even then, I felt less misplaced than I do now. Most of my foster families never felt like home to me, but, in an odd way, I still felt like I belonged. It was a life I knew, this constant change, my hope for adoption fading more and more each time I was handed off to the next family. I wasn't happy, but I didn't feel lost and confused.

I have always dreamed of having a room like this. A room to myself, with a door that can be locked from the inside, a bed that feels like heaven, high-end furniture that I don't have to share with anyone, and a breathtaking view across the skyline.

This bedroom is everything I could ever dream of, but it feels so alien to me.

It's not just the size that's so overwhelming. Everything in here reeks of prosperity and abundance. The white walls are so out of this world immaculate and the ceilings are high enough to make it feel more like a hall. There are two large windows, framed with gorgeous white curtains, facing south so that the room is immersed in bright daylight all day long. This seems to be the only space up here without gray or black accents—except for the dark wooden frame of the queen-size canopy bed. Sheer white curtains surround the bed on all four sides, and there are more pillows than anyone could ever need, with silk covers in varying shades of white and beige. I even have my own en suite bathroom with a jacuzzi bathtub, all in white marble and with golden fixtures. I was hesitant to touch anything at first, worried I might spoil the interior with my dirty paws.

Inside the bedroom, there's a white vanity pushed against the wall opposite to the windows, and a seating area, consisting of an armchair and a loveseat, both upholstered with the softest white fabric. When I first moved in, they were arranged around a small coffee table, awkwardly placed in the middle of the room. I moved everything and placed the armchair right underneath the window. A stylish floor lamp with an orb light found its place right next to the chair, building the perfect reading spot.

Perfect, except for the lack of bookshelves. There was nowhere to put my large collection. I didn't want to leave them in bags, so I stacked them up next to my reading corner, lined along the wall in neatly organized piles. It took me hours to

sort and stack them in an order that makes sense to me, but it was perfect to pass the time on my first evening.

I've felt like a fish out of water ever since I got here, but it's only gotten worse now that my closet is filled with all this overpriced fashion, shoes and jewelry.

And that ring. I haven't seen it since we left the store, so I'm assuming that Logan still has it for some unknown reason. Is he waiting for the perfect opportunity to put it on my finger as some kind of official gesture? But why would he do that if all of this is just to pretend?

How am I supposed to keep my head straight and not be confused by his behavior?

That kiss... and the hot buzz that purred through my core when he grabbed my ass. My entire body goes up in flames every time I think about it. I couldn't help myself. I wanted more, so much more, even though I know how stupid that would be. I can't get involved with him, not like that. It would screw with my head—and my heart.

A sigh flees my lips as I sink deeper into my armchair. A book is resting in my lap, but I haven't read a single page since I sat down about an hour ago. My gaze has been latched to the window and the view of the city far below. It's late afternoon, the sky at the horizon already changing color as the sun is about to set.

I haven't seen Logan since this morning, when I bumped into him on my way to the kitchen. He was already dressed and ready to tackle the day, seemingly storming out of the apartment when he saw me dragging my feet along the corridor.

“There’s coffee and some croissants,” he shouted on his way out.

He scrunched his nose in disgust when I told him that I prefer a Caramel Macchiato to regular coffee, but I still found a brand new bottle of caramel syrup in the kitchen on my second morning here. A nice gesture that only adds to my confusion.

I have been by myself all day long, feeling like an intruder as I wandered around the penthouse that’s supposed to be my home for the foreseeable future. I’m beginning to become quite anxious about all of this—just like I’m feeling more and more uncomfortable with all the lies this entails.

It started with me lying to Mrs. Warden. She seemed so pleased when I told her that I’d gotten a better job and that I’d be moving in with a new friend from work. I know it’s what she’s always wanted for me, standing on my own two feet and experiencing life like a normal 24-year old, with a real job and real friend. But none of this is real.

I hope she won’t be lonely. Mrs. Warden is retired, but used to volunteer at a local cat shelter until a couple of weeks ago, when she started to stay home more, eating very little and sleeping a lot. She admitted to being “a little under the weather” when I asked her about it, but was always quick to change the subject. I should call and check up on her, sooner rather than later. I would never forgive myself if something happened to her and I wasn’t there to help.

A knock on the door yanks me out of my pensive state with such abruptness that the book drops down to the floor as I jerk up in surprise.

“Yes?” I respond. “Come i—”

Logan doesn't wait to be invited and lets himself in before I finish my sentence. He looks dashing in a black shirt and a pair of dark denims, his hair a bit ruffled and a slight flush on his cheeks.

Oh my God, why does he always have to look so utterly irresistible?

“We have dinner reservations at eight,” he announces, still standing in the door.

“We do?” I ask. He's stating this as if I should have known about it already. Did I forget? Or is this just his MO when it comes to making plans?

“Yes, at a very nice place,” he elaborates. “Dress accordingly.”

“Accordingly meaning I should refrain from picking my own clothes?” I want to know.

He arches an eyebrow at me. “No, meaning you'll pick something from *your* new clothes.”

I nod. “Of course. Understood.”

His eyes linger on my stack of books for a moment, but just when I think that he's about to say something about it, he turns around and walks out without another word.

“Good talking to you, too,” I whisper into the void.

Chapter 17

Logan

“This is unacceptable!”

The receptionist ducks as if I’d just hit him.

“I’m sorry, sir, there’s nothing I can do,” he utters helplessly, pointing at the screen in front of him. “There’s no reservation under your name and we’re fully booked—”

“Yes, I know you are fully booked, you always are, which is why my assistant made a reservation with you days ago!”

Next to me, I notice Kat awkwardly shifting from one foot onto the other, her uneasiness painfully palpable.

“I’m sorry sir, I truly am, but—”

“No but!” I cut him off. “I’m sure there’s something you can do. Maybe this will help you.”

I push a hundred dollar bill his way, discreet but blatant enough for him to understand what I’m saying. This will work, it always does.

“There’s more where that came from,” I promise, adding a confidential wink in his direction.

But he shakes his head, a single black lock dancing on his unlined forehead.

“I can’t accept that, sir,” he insists. “If you give me a second, I could check to see whether we can get you a table with a little waiting time.”

“I made a reservation to make sure we wouldn’t have to wait,” I tell him.

“Yes, of course, but—”

“I keep hearing that ‘but’ a little too often,” I interrupt. “Let me put it this way: We’re not going to wait here, not even for a single minute. You either give us a table right this second, or there’s hell to pay.”

“Logan,” I hear Kat’s voice next to me.

I turn to meet her apprehensive eyes, laced with worry and a silent plea.

“I may have an idea,” she says. “I know a place around the corner. Let’s just go there instead.”

She throws a quick side look in the receptionist’s direction, and I’m not sure whether she’s trying to help him or us.

“What? No, we’re not going anywhere!” I protest, before turning back to the guy. “I want to speak to the manager. Now!”

He almost looks relieved at the prospect of delegating this issue to someone else. Nodding, he’s just about to turn around and walk away, when Kat interjects.

“No, it’s fine, really!” she maintains. “We are leaving.”

Her hand is on my upper arm, adding a subtle squeeze as if she was trying to tame me like some sort of wild animal. I don't like to be curbed like this, but instead of following my instinct to yank her hand away, I take a deep breath and nod in agreement.

"We will leave," I agree, casting an angry look the receptionist's way. "But this will have consequences, believe me."

The guy looks like he's about to spout another surge of apologies, but Kat beats him to it.

"Bye!" she pipes in her finest high-pitched hostess voice. A voice that I haven't heard since the night we met. She takes my hand and before I know it, our fingers are intertwined and she's leading me out on the street.

"Let me make a call," I say, freeing my hand of hers as soon as we are back outside. "I need to find out what went wrong here. This has never happened before and he—"

"Can't you do that later?" she interrupts, a hint of reproach underlining her words. "I'm hungry. Let's just eat for now. You can continue to yell at people later."

The glum tone of her voice stops me in my tracks, and when I look at her, I find that very same dejection mirrored on her face.

"I had every right to be angry," I defend myself. "It's not like I yelled at him for nothing."

"It wasn't *his* fault, was it?" she adds for consideration.

I don't like that she's right about this, but accept her invitation to take the high road and give it a rest for the

moment.

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I don’t like yelling,” she adds, speaking in a low voice.

She clears her throat and lowers her head for a moment before she beams up at me. “Shall we?”

I throw her a skeptical look. “You really know a place?”

I thought she’d only said that to get herself out of an unpleasant situation.

“Yeah,” she says, nodding enthusiastically. “It’s this diner that I used to go to when I was...”

She pauses, biting her lower lips as if to stop herself from revealing a well-kept secret.

“Anyway, we may be a bit overdressed, but the food is great,” she goes on. “I’m sure you’d like it... the food, I mean. You’ll have to ignore the interior and all that. It’s not exactly Burberry fancy.”

There’s a hint of worry on her face when she looks at me now, her lips curved into a pleading smile.

“Alright,” I say, reaching for my phone to summon Christopher, who is waiting for us in a parking lot a few blocks away.

But Kat intervenes once again.

“It’s just two blocks away,” she claims, pointing to the right. “Let’s walk.”

She’s already turning on her heels, casting me an encouraging nod to follow her as she starts moving.

I hesitate, unsure how to feel about all of this. This is not going as planned, not at all, and I hate when things are taken out of my hands.

“What kind of place is it?” I ask as we make our way through the chilly night.

“It’s this cute little wagon diner,” she says, and the smile on her face widens. “Probably not up to the standard you’re used to, but they serve the best burgers!”

Her eyes are beaming with anticipation as she speaks and she’s walking with such determined and wide steps that I almost struggle to keep up.

“And they serve German beer!” she adds gleefully. “Have you ever tried an Augustiner Helles?”

I shake my head. “Can’t say that I have.”

“Oh, you’re in for a treat, then!” she promises. “This is going to be fun.”

I’m cautiously optimistic and have to admit that her cheerful mood is contagious. It almost seemed like the bright and headstrong girl I met at The Velvet Rooms had completely disappeared beneath a shadow of fear ever since Kat moved in with me. She has been running around with her shoulders up to her ears, seemingly tiptoeing around the place as if she was afraid I could be bothered by her presence.

I prefer this upbeat and confident side of her. It’s a lot easier to forgive her for taking the reins out of my hands when she’s this enchanting. She seems to be really looking forward to this diner, walking in hurried steps, as if she couldn’t get there fast

enough. I haven't seen her this enthusiastic before, but revel in the sight of it.

That and the way her legs look in the new Louboutin heels as she stalks along the pavement. She's wearing a Dior dress, short but still decent and her new Burberry trench coat with a classic check cashmere scarf in blush colors. She still doesn't refer to these clothes as her own, but she's carrying herself in them with a lot more confidence than before.

She will get used to this, all of it—and she will accept it as her own. I will make sure of that.

“Here we are!” she announces, pointing toward a shabby looking wagon diner across the street.

“Are you serious?” I ask, coming to an instant halt as if I'd run into an invisible wall.

“Yes, I am!” she insists, a crease forming between her brows. “Don't be such a snot, I know it doesn't look like much, but trust me, the food is worth it! And so is the beer!”

She waves for me to follow her, already marching toward the entrance. She isn't the first person to call me a snot, but the first who gets away with it without repercussions.

For now.

I catch up with her and open the door before she can beat me to it. The interior is just what you'd expect based on the outside look of this food joint. It's small, with a long bar to the left and a handful of cramped booths along the right side. The dark red seat upholstery is made of plastic-like material and torn in several places, and the whole place smells of drippings.

Kat cranes her neck, as if she was looking for something—or someone.

“I don’t think they’ll seat us here,” I add for consideration.

She looks at me, startled. “Oh, no, I was just... never mind.”

A waitress in a light blue retro uniform comes walking in our direction, and doesn’t even stop while she yells: “You can have a seat wherever you like. I’ll be right with ya!”

She sends a quick smile our way before she turns to serve other guests. Most of the booths are occupied, just like the high chairs that are lined up along the bar.

Kat gives me an expectant look, finally ready to hand the reins back to me. “Bar or booth?” she asks.

“Booth, obviously,” I say, pointing to one at the far back, right beneath one of the windows facing out to the street.

There are cuts and holes in the upholstery and the wooden table is covered in carved in profanities and love declarations. A surge of warm nostalgia hits me when I look at it, bringing me back to my days as a college student.

“What’s so amusing?” Kat wants to know, after we’ve taken our seats opposite to each other.

I hadn’t even noticed the smile that crept onto my face unwittingly as the memory took a hold of me.

“Nothing,” I lie. “It’s just that this table reminds me of something.”

“Of what?” she asks, looking intrigued.

“Oh, just this bar I used to go to, in college,” I say. “Captain Seaweed’s. A sleazy joint that served the cheapest beer and the best nachos in Massachusetts.”

She giggles.

“What’s so funny about that?” I want to know.

“Nothing, it’s just the thought of you at a shabby place called Captain Seaweed’s,” she says, still looking wildly amused. “I never thought people like you would ever frequent anything but a five star restaurant or club.”

People like you. Unlike others, Kat already regards me as part of the high society elite, the good guys—rich and reputable. It’s flattering, but couldn’t be further from the truth. Other than my immense wealth, there’s very little that places me in the middle of the high society she speaks of.

So far, that is.

She will be the one to get me there, whether she’s aware of it or not.

Chapter 18

Kat

“So, who were you looking for?”

His question catches me off guard, and I almost cough up the food I’ve been chewing. The burger is just as good as I remember, the patty thick and juicy, the bun soft and slightly crisp on the outside and the bacon perfectly crispy.

“What do you mean?”

I thought he hadn’t noticed. As soon as we stepped inside, I realized that it may have been a risky move to bring him here. I hold fond memories of this place, but not of the time when I used to frequent it. And I’m not keen to run into any “friends” from back then. I can’t even imagine what they’d say if they saw me sitting here with this overdressed Adonis, whose wealth is as obvious as the fact that he doesn’t belong here.

Logan is wearing a light blue shirt and black dress pants with shiny shoes. He took off his blazer and pulled up his sleeves when the food arrived, revealing a large ear of wheat that stretches across his entire right forearm.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing at the tattoo. “I mean, what does it mean?”

“Why don’t you answer my question first?” he deflects.
“Got something to hide?”

“Don’t we all?”

I’m only making things worse.

“Just tell me,” he pokes. “An old boyfriend?”

“No!” I shake my head violently. “No, no... that’s not it.”

“But?”

I deflate with a heavy sigh. I might as well tell him, at least parts of it.

“Well, when I used to come here it was... I mean, I hung out with one of my brothers a lot, foster brother that is,” I begin to explain. “We lived with the same family for a year or so. My last foster family, actually. He’s about two years younger than me and one of the few foster siblings I got along with. We had a common enemy.”

Logan chuckles. “A common enemy?”

“My foster dad,” I say. “He was an alcoholic and lost his temper with us about once a week. It was usually my brother who felt his lash more than I had to. He protected me—and our foster mom—every time our so-called caretaker fell into a fit of rage.”

Logan stares at me, congealed by my words. But it’s fury that graces his handsome face when he looks at me, rather than pity.

“He beat you?” he produces, disgust lacing every syllable.

“Sometimes, yes. It was mostly yelling and throwing things, though,” I say.

Understanding blossoms on Logan's face. "That motherfucker."

"It's okay," I try to downplay. "It's in the past. We both got out of that house eventually. I left before him, but we stayed in contact... for a while."

I leave out the part about why I spent so much time in this neighborhood, and what I was doing when I came past this diner.

This diner was on *my route* back then. My route as a delivery girl for my dealer boyfriend and his friends—who my foster brother introduced me to. I'd love to say I didn't know what I was doing, but that would be a lie. I knew exactly what I was carrying around for them and I knew exactly why there was so much money involved. I just closed my eyes in the face of it. I didn't want to be aware of my wrongdoings, because I needed the money more than a clear conscience.

I spent a lot of nights on my bike, a messenger bag draped around my body and my heart pumping with anxiety, always scared that I might get stopped by the police and end up in jail for possession.

"You're a white girl, no one will ever check on you," they used to say, and they were right. All I had to do was make sure that I wasn't doing anything conspicuous in traffic to draw attention to myself.

The diner was on my way between two delivery points, and I stopped here almost every night when I was out driving. It was a promise of free food and a friendly face, because my foster brother and his friends used to hang out here. He never let me pay for anything, even when I insisted. He was looking out for me even then, despite everything.

“Are you still in contact?” Logan wants to know, as he reaches for his Augustiner. He hasn’t said a word about the beer, yet, but it’s obvious that he likes it, given that his bottle is almost empty already.

“No, sadly not,” I admit. “We kinda lost contact a few years back.”

“How come?” he probes.

I look out the window, as a wave of guilt and regret washes over me. I can’t tell him the truth. He can’t know that I had to cut contact with everyone from back then, even the guy who was the closest to a brother I ever had. I’d finally found the courage to break up with my toxic ex-boyfriend and break free of his shady environment, and when I met Patrick, I was determined to leave my old life behind. All of it.

“It was my fault,” I say vaguely. “I just stopped coming by at some point, and it just fizzled out.”

Logan regards me with a skeptical look. “Fine. You don’t have to tell me.”

I can’t suppress a sigh of exhaustion.

“Why do you always do that?” I ask.

“Do what?”

“Read more into the things I tell you,” I say.

“I’d say it’s more about the things you *don’t* tell me,” he argues. “Which appears to be a lot.”

“I thought you already knew everything you needed to know?” I implore. “Didn’t you say that Miss Barry gave you my file? I thought you’d already read everything there is to know about me?”

He looks insulted when he shakes his head.

“That’s not the case. Besides, I’d rather hear it from you,” he answers. “How did you end up at The Velvet Rooms?”

“I told you, I needed money,” I reply. “And that job seemed like the perfect opportunity to earn a lot within a short time.”

I pause, adding a conceding sigh. “It’s not like someone as uneducated as me would have many options to crawl their way out of debt.”

“What debt?” he asks promptly, his ears pricked and a wary look on his face.

Fuck. Why did I have to mention this?

Why do I have to make myself even smaller than I already am in his presence?

“Just, debt...,” I utter helplessly, avoiding eye contact as my focus turns down to the half-eaten burger on my plate.

“How much is it?” he wants to know. “And how does someone your age amass so much debt if you never went to college. It’s not student loans, is it?”

I shake my head. “Why does it matter?”

We exchange a look, tense silence stretching between us while he appears to search for the truth behind my eyes.

“Because I’m asking,” he says. “And you know I could easily help you—”

“You’re already helping me, aren’t you?” I interject. “That’s why we’re doing this, remember?”

He groans, and it seems like I’ve insulted him once again.

“Why do you need a fake fiancée so badly?” I turn the tables on him. “You’re not telling me everything either, so why

should I?”

His lips turn into a dark smile when he looks at me now.

“Touché,” he says. “But you’re not getting away this easily. There’s a big difference between us.”

I’m inclined to agree, even though I have no idea what exactly he’s talking about. There are so many differences between us that I wouldn’t even know where to start.

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” I ask, trying to sound more confident than I’m feeling right now.

“The power is all mine,” he states. “At least as long as neither of us signed a contract, which we haven’t so far.”

I frown at him. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is this,” he says—and I freeze in surprise when he reaches up to my chin, holding in place with two fingers, while he comes closer, seemingly leaning in for a kiss.

I’m so stunned that I don’t know what to do or how to react. I just sit there, frozen to a pillar of salt while his lips move dangerously close to mine. I can feel the heat of his breath dancing across my skin, his intoxicating smell, blended with just a hint of malt from the beer. My heart begins to race, as my entire body stiffens, preparing for an impact that doesn’t come.

He hovers close to my face for a few seconds, his dark eyes latched onto mine with such intensity that I don’t even dare to blink—and then he retreats all of a sudden. He leans back against his bench, a triumphant smile on his face when he winks at me.

“You’re here, wrapped in all those pretty things that I bought for you, dolled up to my liking. And I get to do

whatever I want with you,” he says darkly. “With no contract binding me to behave.”

I swallow dryly, still trying to make sense of what just happened. Why didn't he kiss me? Why is he playing with me like this?

“There's no contract to bind me either,” I remind him. “I could leave whenever I want to.”

“Well, do you want to leave?” he asks.

The smile on his face tells me that he already knows the answer to his question.

Chapter 19

Logan

She wasn't kidding when it comes to the beer. Despite considering myself a cosmopolitan, I've never even heard of this brand before. It's not as bitter as the awful German Pils I tried a few years back, but rather smooth and almost a little sweet, coating my throat like lemonade.

I ordered another round for us before we were even done with our food—an excellent burger, just like Kat promised—and then a third round as our empty plates are getting cleared.

Of course, I knew about her foster child past, but despite the thorough content of Miss Barry's files, there are still a million unanswered questions that remain. Questions that Kat is reluctant to answer, even when she's standing with her back to the wall.

Why is she being so secretive? What is she hiding from me? If she had a criminal record, I would know about it.

How bad can her past be compared to mine?

“You may be right,” she says, after we've clinked glasses on our third round of drinks. “I have no intention of leaving, but that doesn't mean you get to do anything you want to me.”

Her cheeks are flushed as she throws me an endearing smile. A smile that tells me more than she knows.

This is exactly what she wants. She's teasing the beast inside of me, but I'm not sure whether she can handle what she's about to unleash.

There's only one way to find out.

"With the way you've been behaving so far, one could almost think you're asking for punishment," I tell her.

The blush on her face darkens in an instant. "What do you mean?"

I take my time as I bring the beer up to my lips, taking in a long and appreciative swig while I make her wait for my response. She's shifting on her seat, visibly anxious for me to speak. And then she provides me with a perfect example of her many alluring misdemeanors: She rolls her eyes at me.

"That," I say, pointing at her. "That's exactly what I mean."

"What?"

"Rolling your eyes," I explain. "This isn't the first time you've done it. I warned you not to do it again, and yet here we are."

She lets out an amused huff.

"I only do it when you give me a reason to," she argues. "Like refusing to answer my question."

"You're not answering my questions either, remember?"

She places her elbows on the table between us and leans forward, a surreptitious flicker in her eyes when she looks at me.

"What else did I do to irritate you, sir?"

“Why are you calling me sir?” I point out. “Didn’t I tell you to not do that?”

“Well, yes you did, at the club,” she remembers. “But that was different, wasn’t it? You pointed out that you’re not my master and that’s why it was misplaced.”

She stops herself, biting her lower lip as she realizes what she just said.

“Oh, and now I am your master?” I ask. “I thought we’d just established that I can’t do anything I want with you.”

She purses her lips while her gaze idles through the room, fixating on anything but me as she tries to come up with a response.

“Do you want to know what I’d like to do to you?” I ask. “Or are you too scared to find out?”

“I’m not scared!” she claims, but her fluttering eyelashes speak a different truth. “But first I’d like to know what else I did that bothered you so much?”

She straightens her back, most likely in an attempt to build herself up and cast aside the nervous jitter that reveals how flustered she truly is.

“If I tell you, would you agree to make amends for your misbehaving?” I ask back.

She swallows dryly while sending me a wordless nod in response. “I think so.”

I shake my head. “I need a definite answer.”

I can tell that she wants to roll her eyes at me again, but she refrains from it just in time.

“How am I supposed to say yes to something when I don’t even know what repercussions we’re talking about here?” she inquires.

“Guess you’ll have to take that risk,” I tell her, shrugging. “Satisfy your own curiosity comes at a price.”

She seems to acknowledge my answer and suggests a nod.

“Okay then,” she produces, after taking a rather large swig of beer. “Tell me about my other misdemeanor.”

She emphasizes the word by adding some air quotes as she speaks.

“That would be another one,” I let her know. “You’re not taking me seriously.”

Kat looks unsure for a moment, studying me with an uncertain look as she tries to make sense of the ominous tone of my voice.

“Maybe I will, if you’d shed a little more light on this, instead of being so vague all the time.”

“Trust me, I won’t be vague when it matters.”

A crease appears between her brows, but she doesn’t say anything, beckoning me to speak instead by nudging her chin forward.

“You took charge when no one asked you to,” I say eventually.

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

“You did it in the club, when... when the incident happened,” I say. “You refused to listen to me, wouldn’t let go of that useless fire extinguisher and would not follow me when I tried to save you.”

“Save me?” she blurts out. “I didn’t need to be saved! I’m capable of saving myself, thank you very much. I just wanted to help!”

“Yes, and stubbornly so,” I say. “You’re not used to someone else taking care of you, are you?”

She stares at me with an unreadable expression.

“I guess you could say that,” she stutters, lowering her eyes.

“That will change from now on,” I tell her. “At least as long as you’re with me. I’m in charge. Always.”

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth when she looks up to me now. “Always?”

I nod suggestively. “Don’t you think it could be nice to have someone else take the lead? Someone who takes care of you?”

A coy chuckle flees her lips and she shies away, her eyes latching on to the windows as if she was searching for something outside.

“Answer me,” I urge.

“How would I know?” She retorts. “It’s like you said. I never experienced this. So how would I know?”

Supporting myself on my elbows, I lean over the table, waving her closer with my index finger. She hesitates for a split second, but eventually follows my invitation and brings her face closer to mine. Her cheeks are glowing, but it’s more than just the alcohol, I’m sure.

“Only one way to find out then, right?” I ask.

Her eyes grow wider. She’s definitely intrigued, but confused just as well.

“What are you doing?” she whispers. “A moment ago you were talking about punishing me for misbehaving... now you’re talking about wanting to take care of me? Which of the two is it?”

“Who says that one has to negate the other?” I add for consideration. “What if they go hand in hand?”

She suggests a shake of the head. “I don’t understand how that would work.”

“Would you like me to show you?”

Kat is a smart girl. She knows very well what game we’re playing—and she’s good at it. Very good.

Her lips are quivering and she looks at me as if she was trying to lure me in, calling me to take her in any way I want.

She doesn’t even try to protest when I place my hand at the back of her head and force her lips onto mine. They part instantly, her eager tongue greeting mine as I invade her mouth with savage force.

Chapter 20

Kat

I blame the alcohol.

I know this is a stupid idea. I shouldn't do this. But I can't fight him any longer. Not when he's like this.

And to be honest: I don't *want* to fight.

I wouldn't be here if I wasn't attracted to him. I would never have agreed to do something this crazy with anyone else.

I want this. But I have to be careful.

However, it appears that all my resolutions went off the table as soon as he pulled me in for a kiss. I did what he told me to do: I gave in. I surrendered to his compelling allure.

And I let him take the lead.

This kiss is wild, greedy and more carnal than our first. I shouldn't have kissed him back then either, knowing it could put me in trouble with Miss Barry. But I did it anyway. I was stupid then, and maybe I'm even more stupid now. But throwing caution to the wind is all I want to do right now.

He breaks our kiss, but leaves his hand on the back of my head, keeping my face close to his.

“Here’s what’s going to happen now,” he breathes, speaking in a voice so low that I can barely hear him underneath the background noise of the diner.

“You’re going to the bathroom and you’ll take off your panties and your tights. You’ll come back to the booth and give them to me, before you return to your seat. Understood?”

Shock washes over me like an ice cold shower. Is he serious right now? He’s kidding. He *must* be kidding.

But the look on his face tells me that he’s not. He’s dead serious, his eyebrows arching as he awaits my response.

“Understood?” he repeats, his grip tightening at my neck.

“But—”

“No but,” he cuts me off. “I’m in charge. You do what I say from now on.”

He adds a pause, sending me an ominous smirk before he adds: “Let me show you what it feels like to be taken care of, Katherine. You won’t regret it.”

I want to ask him how ‘taking care of me’ has anything to do with me running around half naked in public. But instead, I nod—and the smile on his face widens.

“Good girl,” he whispers—and the praise embraces me like a warm hug. “Go, then.”

He lets go of me, and I pause for a moment, locking eyes with him as if to make sure one last time that this is not a joke. It isn’t. The stern expression on his face allows for no objections.

I feel like I’m moving on autopilot when I rise up from my seat and teeter toward the restroom. It’s small, consisting of only one stall for women. My heart flutters when I reach for

the door knob, fearing that it might be occupied and I'd have to stand here and wait, while contemplating what I'm about to do.

But the door swings open and I flit inside as quickly as possible. I use the opportunity to relieve myself and take off my tights and my panties, black and lacy, as if I'd anticipated what would happen tonight—and maybe I did.

I feel watched when I step out of the bathroom. It feels as if all eyes are on me when I make way back to the booth, with my tights and panties rolled up inside my fist.

Evading his gaze, I return to my seat opposite of him, tugging at my dress so as to not touch the questionable upholstery with my bare ass.

I make sure that no one is looking in our direction when Logan stretches out his hand across the table and I hand him the clothes that were hidden inside my fist.

A triumphant smile spreads across his handsome face.

“Good girl,” he praises, acknowledging me with an appreciative nod.

I don't know why, but his words once again send a hot spark down my spine, tingling the nerves at my core in a way I've never felt before. What is happening with me? Why am I playing along with this?

And why do I like it so much?

“Shall we?” he asks—and I nod, even though I'm not quite sure where we're going from here.

He gathers his jacket and gets up from his seat, an expectant look sent my way as he waits for me to follow him.

“Where are we going?” I ask stupidly as I follow him to the exit.

“Home,” he says, while opening the door for me.

I can feel the cold of the night creeping up under my coat, making me painfully aware of my nakedness. I’ve never done anything like this before. I’ve never felt this way before.

Much to my surprise, the car is already waiting outside, Christopher opens the backseat door for us to get in, smiling politely but not saying a word.

If he only knew.

I continue to pull at my dress as we get into the car, horrified by the idea that my exposed core could stick to the fancy leather seats.

“Uncomfortable?” Logan asks, after Christopher closes the door shut.

“No,” I lie. “I was just... it’s a bit awkward.”

“Are you wet for me?” he asks, catching me off guard.

Heat travels from my core to my cheeks, reddening them even more than the beer already has.

“If you’re not going to tell me, I’ll have to check myself,” he goes on, placing a hand on my thigh as he leans over. “Spread your legs for me.”

“But I—”

“Now!” he barks, and I jerk up in surprise.

The car starts moving and I stare up to the front, wondering how much of this Christopher can hear. There’s a blacked-out panel between us and the driver’s seat up front, but is it soundproof?

I feel a pinch on the inside of my upper thigh and redirect my focus back to Logan, who regards me with a dirty smile.

“Spread your legs,” he repeats. “Or I’ll make you.”

His threat is enough for me to oblige. I move my knees apart, tentatively, seemingly moving in slow motion, even though my heart is beating through the roof.

“Good girl,” he commends, gently stroking along my thigh.

The praise comes with the same surge of warmth as the one before, and I begin to realize that that’s what this is all about. I want to hear those words again. I want to please him. I don’t know why or where this desire is coming from, but I know it’s there, screaming to be fulfilled.

He squeezes my leg, adding an appreciative hum as he slowly moves up until he disappears beneath the fabric of my trench coat and then my dress.

“Are you wet for me?” he repeats his earlier question.

I lower my eyes in shame, unable to answer. I don’t understand it, but the words escape me. I want to give him a reply, but I can’t.

“Fine, I’ll just check for myself,” he says, and I almost cry out in surprise when he shoves his hand between my legs in one sudden motion.

I close my legs, following my instincts as shock overcomes me, and thus trapping his hand as it cups my core.

“Legs apart!” he reminds me.

He’s not moving his hand, but remains immobile, trusting that I will follow his command without the need for physical encouragement.

My legs part as slowly as they did before, while his hand stays in place.

“Relax,” he tells me. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” I ask, finally daring to look at him.

He smirks at me.

“No, not of this,” he argues. “Maybe of what will come later.”

“What do you mean?”

He shakes his head. “One step at a time, young girl.”

I suck in a sharp breath of air when he parts my lips with his fingers, letting one slide between my undoubtedly wet folds while he spreads me apart with two others.

The smile on his face turns into a winning grin, and I have to look away, as shame cloaks me.

“Look at me,” he demands. “Don’t hide from me.”

I swallow dryly as I obey his command and turn back to him, fueled with a hot surge of embarrassment when our eyes meet.

“You’re enjoying this.” It’s not a question but a statement. “Do you like being my cute little obedient slut?”

My head screams no, but I know my body is betraying that voice of reason. I can feel the wetness between my legs and I notice myself leaning into his touch, my hips moving in subtle circles as I inch closer to him.

He moves his finger between my lips, circling my clit with such expertise that I can’t suppress a thirsty moan as he caresses my most sensitive spot.

“Don’t you dare come without permission,” he warns me.

“I’m not going to come,” I claim.

“Oh yes, you will,” he objects. “You will come for me before we get home. And if you don’t, I’ll make Christopher wait with us in the driveway until you do.”

My mouth falls open and I shake my head. My shock is quickly overridden by bliss when he pointedly brushes my sensitive nub, sending an electric spark of lust through my core.

“Good girl, very good girl,” he murmurs. “Just like that. Be a good little slut for me.”

I want to protest, but he is making it impossible. He keeps massaging my center, hitting that perfect spot again and again while I continue to sink deeper into my seat, my eyes rolling back into my head as another wave of thrill rolls over me.

“I’m sure you can spread those legs a bit further for me,” he growls.

I oblige without hesitation, declining even deeper into the leather as I spread my legs for him as far as I can. I no longer care about soiling his expensive leather, but only revel in the feeling of his skillful hands between my legs.

Another, dangerously loud, moan flees my lips when he lets a finger slide inside of me, then another, while he continues to massage my clit with his thumb. I bring my hand up to my mouth, trying to silence the sensual sighs that escape me.

“Don’t worry, no one can hear you,” he assures. “No one but me.”

My vision blurs as my eyes flit from one place to another, barely noticing the city rolling by outside as we’re driving through the night.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I hear Logan’s voice next to my ear. His hot breath is dancing along the sensitive skin of my neck as he brings himself closer while adding another finger to spread my channel.

“So fucking wet and tight,” he whispers into my ear. “I can’t wait to bury myself inside that perfect little pussy of yours.”

My gaze is fogged when my eyes meet his, my mind hazed, unable to to conceive any coherent thought, let alone give voice to the turmoil inside of me.

I’m so close to coming that it’s almost painful, shifting and writhing under his touch as I try to enjoy myself without taking the risk of coming too early.

I’m not allowed to come. Not yet.

“You’re close, aren’t you?”

I nod, still unable to speak.

The car slows down and comes to a halt, and for a split second I panic that we may have arrived at our destination and I’ve failed my assignment. Would he actually do it? Would he actually tell Christopher to wait for us until he has made me come like this?

But a quick look outside lets me know that we’ve only stopped at a red light. We’re not home yet, there’s still time.

“Look at me,” Logan urges. “Now.”

I do as I’m told and turn around to him. His dark eyes are right in front of me, wide open and fueled by the same urgent fervor that’s rushing through my veins.

“Come for me,” he hisses. “Come on my hand like the good little slut you are. And look at me. Don’t look away, don’t

close your eyes. You'll look at me while you're coming—understood?”

I hurry to nod. The first harbingers of my climax are already washing over me, teasing with their impending ecstasy and robbing me of the ability to think—let alone speak—clearly.

“Come!” he commands. “Come for me.”

My mind wants to protest, but my body yields to Logan's will. A surge of delight takes a hold of me with such intensity that I feel momentarily blinded by it. I fight the urge to close my eyes as I reach my peak, squirming under an orgasm that is so powerful it almost feels like an attack.

I moan, I sweat, I gasp for air, and for a few blissful seconds there's nothing in the world other than pure and unbridled pleasure as I float through the strongest rapture of my life.

Chapter 21

Logan

She's still riding the last waves of her orgasm when Christopher brings the car to a halt in our driveway, her cheeks flushed a hot red and her breath erratic. Tiny droplets of sweat are pearling on the skin above her quivering lips, when she follows me out of the car, teetering like a newborn deer on her wobbly legs.

I place my hand at the small of her back to guide her inside the building, noticing how she shies away from greeting the receptionist as he pipes up a greeting in our direction.

She's so beautiful, even now in her strained state, as the aftermath of her eruption still jitters through her delicate body.

"Where are we going?" she asks, when she notices that I don't push the button for the uppermost floor, but one below.

"The spa," I tell her. "I promised you I'd show you around someday, and I thought tonight would be a good opportunity."

I throw her a telling look when I add: "And it's the perfect place for what I have planned."

She stiffens and her hand flies up to the collar of her trench coat in a protective motion.

“Why so shy all of a sudden?” I ask, cornering her until she stands with her back against the wall after the elevator doors close behind my back. “It’s not like I haven’t already seen you quasi-naked.”

She cackles and her lips curve into a smile as she lowers her eyes to evade mine. I place a finger beneath her chin, forcing her to look up at me. She parts her lips to speak, but is silenced when I take another kiss from her. I could kiss these addictive lips all day long and lose myself in their warm promise for more.

She sighs as we melt into one, my body pressed against hers as our tongues intertwine in a passionate dance. She just came a few minutes ago, but is still asking for more, still wanting me as much as I want her. Just like I expected.

The elevator comes to a halt and I break our kiss and take her hand, practically pulling her out through the doors as soon as they open. The spa doesn’t cover the entire floor like my penthouse does, but it’s still quite spacious, given that it’s only used by me. And it has everything one could ask for, two saunas, a steam room, a jacuzzi and even a small swimming pool next to my personal gym.

The characteristic odor of high quality teakwood welcomes us, laced with a hint of mint and natural oils. The entrance area is tiled with dark marble floors, the walls partly painted in fir green with white accents on top, providing a calming atmosphere.

Kat takes off her shoes and meanders through the first glass door to the right, leading into the seating area with deck chair facing the panoramic floor to ceiling windows that provide an even better view across the nocturnal skyline.

“Wow, I’ve never been in a spa with a view like this,” she comments, as she approaches the glass panel, gently placing her hand on the glass. “It’s beautiful.”

“You know what would make this even more beautiful?” I ask, waiting for her to turn around, before I add: “You, naked.”

She smiles shyly and makes a move to open the belt of her trench coat, but I stop her by raising my hand.

“No,” I tell her, as I close in on her. “I’ve been looking forward to this all evening, don’t you dare ruin it for me.”

She lowers her hands and tilts her head to the side while an unspoken question graces her face as I approach her.

Her chest heaves with excitement when I reach up to the belt and open it myself, before I begin to unbutton the trench coat.

“Leave this to me,” I say, slap her hand away when she tries to help.

She pauses for a second, but obliges and lowers her hands, letting them hang idly at the side of her body while she lets me undress her. I pull the trench coat down her shoulder and throw it on one of the lounge chairs behind my back.

“Turn around,” I tell her. “Face the window.”

She nods and does as she’s told, inhaling audibly when she catches sight of the view.

I stand behind her, my pulse racing when I reach for the zipper of her dress. A subtle tremor flashes through her when I begin to pull it down. She’s wearing a black bra underneath, lacy and pretty, but not one of the items I paid for. Why did I neglect that part? I make a mental note to endow her with a few new sets of lingerie as soon as possible.

I pull down the dress, slowly and deliberately, relishing every second as her delicate body is being exposed inch by inch. My cock twitches with aching need when I pull the tight-fitting dress across her perky ass.

She steps out of the dress when it drops to the floor, her shoulders visibly rising with every heavy breath she takes as she seemingly tries to calm herself down.

Commencing this slowly borders on torture, but I don't want to be hasty with her. I've envisioned this for too long, craved her and dreamed of ravaging her body from the moment I saw her, rushing into it now would only ruin the fun.

She gasps when I unhook her bra from behind and let it drop to the floor, her eyes following the motion. I stop her when she makes a move to go down and pick it up.

“You're not going down on your knees until I tell you to,” I reprimand, my hand placed on her shoulder as I whisper into her ear from behind.

She suggests a nod, but remains mute.

“Place your hands on the window,” I order. “And hollow your back. Present yourself to me, show me that perfect little ass.”

I can hear her swallowing dryly when she goes along with my commands, slowly placing both of her hands on the window slightly above her head, before she takes half a step back and sticks out her ass for my pleasure.

“Good girl,” I praise, my lips still close to her ear. “Remember what I told you earlier?”

She looks back at me over her shoulder, a puzzled expression on her face, as she doesn't seem to know what I'm referring to.

“Remember I told you I would take care of you, but you also deserve punishment for misbehaving?” I ask.

“Oh, that,” she breathes, and her eyes widen. “Yes.”

She jerks up when my hand trails down along her spine, my fingertips dancing along the bumps of her vertebrae, barely touching but teasing her like electric shocks, until I reach her firm ass. I cup her cheek, providing a gentle squeeze when I say: “What was it again that you did to anger me? Do you remember?”

“I rolled my eyes at you?” she takes a guess.

“Yes, and what else?”

She sighs, and for a moment it looks as if she’s about to roll her eyes at me again, but she’s smarter than that.

“I... didn’t let you save me,” she produces through gritted teeth, obviously disagreeing with my assessment of misdemeanor.

“No, you took charge when no one asked you to,” I correct her. “Didn’t you?”

She’s chewing on her lips when her gaze trails back over her shoulder to look at me again, her eyes turned into narrow slits as she fights to keep her mouth shut from what it is she truly wants to say.

“Answer me,” I urge.

“Yes, that’s I did,” she gives in. “I took charge when no one wanted me to.”

“Good girl,” I say, and a faint sigh flees her lips when I plant a kiss on her neck. “Are you ready to receive your punishment?”

She chuckles. "I'm not sure."

A harsh slapping sound echoes through the room when my hand lands on her back side with a sudden and violent smack, and she cries out in surprise, jumping up and losing her position as her left hand drips down from the window.

"Hands on the glass!" I warn. "Don't you dare move, no matter what happens. Understood?"

She hurries to put her hand back up and nods, while nothing but a helpless mewl escapes her in response.

"Have you ever been spanked before?" I want to know, as I position myself behind her, slowly pulling up the sleeves of my shirt as I get ready.

She shakes her head. "No."

"Excellent," I say. "It's always an honor to be the first. Especially with such naughty little girls as you."

She quivers with anticipation when she prepares herself for what's to come, hollowing her back just like I told her to.

I knew it. I knew there was a submissive side to this girl. The most brazen ones are often the ones who are asking for it. She needs someone to put her in her place, whether she's been aware of it or not.

"Remember, you did this to yourself," I say, before I land another hit on her ass, choosing the other side this time.

She mewls in pain, but doesn't jerk up or lose her position this time.

"Very good," I commend her. "You're doing well so far, Kat. And since this is your first time, I'll be nice and switch sides for each one. Isn't that generous of me?"

She wants to respond but gets silenced when another smack hits her, then another, and another. Each time, she cries out in agony, but still manages to hold her position. I haven't made up my mind on how many she deserves, but decide to go by the color of her ass cheeks. My hand flies across her skin with increasing speed and velocity, each slap growing in intensity and forcing an anguished cry out of her.

Her ass cheeks are blossoming in varying shades of red by the time I'm done with her, and Kat is trembling, her entire body glowing with heat and the glass around her hands fogged.

She jolts up when I corner her from behind, leaning against her trembling body as my hand rests on her reddened ass.

"Very good girl," I breathe into her ear. "You took that like a goddamn warrior. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," she says, smiling, as she casts a quick look at me.

"I think you're enjoying this a little too much," I say, while my hand travels down along the curve of her ass and between her legs. "I swear if you're wet, so help you God."

A hint of worry scurries across her face and she moans loudly when I part her soft folds and let a finger slide into her wetness. She's dripping, even more so than she did in the limousine.

"You little slut," I tell her, my desire for her driving me insane as my hardness stretches against the fabric of my suit pants. "That was supposed to be a punishment. Who told you to enjoy this?"

She giggles. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be,” I say, as I unfasten my belt. “This is just the invitation I’ve been waiting for.”

She keeps her hands firmly pressed against the glass when she turns to look at me over her shoulder, her curious gaze latched on to my crotch as I free my erection from its denim prison.

She gasps at the sight of it, her eyes wide and laced with a kiss of worry when I begin to stroke myself.

“Holy shit,” she breathes.

“Stay where you are,” I reprimand when she makes a move to turn around, her left hand already sliding down the window. “You stay exactly where you are.”

She obeys, but reluctantly so, her eyes holding on to my size for a moment longer before she faces the window again.

“Present yourself for me,” I tell her, stroking my length while I watch her as she hollows her back for me, moving her feet apart by a couple of inches as she invites me in.

I’m dizzy, feeling like I can barely stand on my own as I revel in the sight of her, so eager and willing to please me, so surprisingly compliant.

It’s been a long, long time since I’ve ever wanted anyone this badly, and I can’t remember the last time I actually allowed myself to enjoy this slow burn act. But Kat is worth it; she demands it—just like she’s now fighting not to beg me to fuck her. I could *make* her beg. I could make her dance like a puppet for me. Right now, she’s in a state of mind that would allow me to ask all sorts of things from her, and she’d be willing to do them.

Problem is, I'm just as dazed with lust as she is, unable to control myself any longer.

I close in on her, positioning myself behind her hollowed back, my cock poking against the small of her back as I place my hands on top of hers.

“Say it,” I breathe into her ear from behind. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Fuck me,” she breathes in an instant. “Please fuck me.”

Her words send another rush of need down to my core, and my hunger for her is borderline painful at this point.

The only thing making me want to prolong this further is the look on her face, the absolute devastation of a woman in heat who can't think of anything but the wish for a cock between her legs.

I wish I could make this moment last forever, but I can't wait any longer, not a single second.

She leans into me when I move my cock toward her entrance, slowly parting her lips with the head, but not going all the way in just yet. She mewls and starts moving her hips in circular motions, trying to egg me on—and successfully so.

Kat's suppressed shriek echoes through the room when I push my pelvis against her ass, burying myself inside of her with one brute shove. Her sweaty hands slide across the window when she jolts up as she processes my assault, her muscles tightening around me as I spread her with my entire length. I grab her by the hips, my hands digging into her flesh as I begin to pound her without restraint, driven by carnal lust. Our breathless moans join the sound of my pelvis hitting the soft flesh on her behind as I thrust into her with vicious eagerness.

She's so unbelievably wet, her back hollowed for my pleasure as she rises up on her toes and takes me in like a good girl. Such a fucking good girl.

Her eyes trail back over her shoulder, and I can read the question in her eyes, before she has to verbalize it.

"You can come," I produce under heavy breaths. "Come on my cock."

As soon as the words have left my lips, I can feel her clenching around me, sending me over the edge with the contractions of her second peak. I don't last a moment longer than her and join her climax with a feral grunt as I come deep inside of her.

Chapter 22

Kat

“I think you should sign our contract now,” he says, sending me a smirk as he immerses himself into the bubbly water.

When he said he has his own spa, I expected nothing more than a sauna and maybe a small whirlpool, next to a few lounge chairs. But this is a full-blown spa like the ones you’d find at a hotel. It’s bigger than any apartment I ever lived in and equipped with everything: two saunas with varying temperatures, a jacuzzi, a seating area with lounge chairs, a fake fireplace, and even a small pool and a freaking steam room.

We’re soaking in the jacuzzi now, after he dragged me under the rain shower, where we continued to make out as we lathered each other with soap that smelled of citrus and mint.

I can still feel him inside of me, my core throbbing with the warmth of subtle afterpain. His massive size scared me at first, but mostly because I didn’t expect it. I feel the kiss of shame when I think about the state I was in just a few minutes ago, so horny I couldn’t think straight, my mind so dazed that I was unable to form coherent thoughts let alone giving voice to them. All I could think of was him, being touched by him, getting fucked by him until I find another release.

I came twice within less than an hour, yet I crave for more. I've never been like this, never felt like this before. I'm losing myself to his magnetic attraction, even though I swore to never let this happen. I can't help it. He's making it impossible for me to be as reasonable and cautious as I should be.

And now he says it's time for me to sign the contract. Why is he saying that now? Why is he so adamant that I officially tie myself to him?

"Why?" I ask him. "Why do you say I should sign now?"

He shrugs. "To secure your money."

I look at him and bring the glass of champagne to my lips. It's Moët & Chandon Imperial Vintage, a bubbly drink that costs more than my rent.

"It's in your own interest," he claims. "Otherwise, I could send you home at any time, and you would be left with nothing."

"Except for the down payment," I remind him.

"Sure," he acknowledges. "But that's nothing. It won't get you far. Probably not even enough to clear your debt."

He gives me a quick side-look, silently asking about that damn debt without doing so. I know he's curious about it, but he doesn't have to know everything, no matter how much he wants to.

"You still haven't told me what exactly I'll have to do," I say. "I don't feel like I have done anything for you so far, other than letting you buy things for me and... well."

We share a chuckle and I immerse myself into the hot, bubbling water, trying to hide beneath the mountains of soapy foam that surround me.

“You will know soon enough,” he lets me know. “I have to set some things in motion first. And I want you to sign.”

He regards me with a stern look. “After all, I can barely introduce you as my fiancée and then have you run off a few days later.”

Oh, that’s what this is about. It’s as much for his safety as it is for mine—if not more.

He reaches for his champagne flute to take another sip, and my eyes catch the large wheat tattoo on his lower arm again.

“I’ll sign if you tell me about that tattoo,” I say, adding a wink to my demand.

He huffs. “No deal.”

“Why are you being so stubborn?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

He empties his drink in one large swig, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Is it like... about your mom or something?” I ask, half-jokingly. “And you’re embarrassed to talk about it?”

Laughing, he shakes his head, as he places his empty glass on a stand next to the jacuzzi.

“Ever heard of Plutus?” he asks.

“Are you sure you don’t mean Pluto? The Disney dog?” I retort—and he shakes his head, not laughing this time.

I snicker. “Well, then you can only mean that chubby little baby god. I think Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, was his mother?”

My eyes widen with understanding and I suck in a long breath of air. “Oh, wait, is that what this is about? Agriculture,

wheat... did you grow up on a farm or something?"

Logan fixates me for a moment, an unreadable expression gracing his handsome face—before he bursts into laughter.

"That's...", he begins, before he has to laugh again. "That's just so... fucking adorable."

I frown at him. "What is?"

"You are!" he exclaims, violently shaking his head as he finally calms down.

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I'm not even sure whether to feel flattered or disgruntled.

"Well, you could just tell me...", I argue. "Instead of making fun of me!"

"I'm not!" he insists. "I'm not making fun of you! I'm just... impressed is all."

My frown deepens. "Very funny."

His face turns serious, before he replies: "No, I'm serious. I've never met anyone who knew of Plutus and Demeter, other than... us."

"Us?"

"The boys," he says. "My college friends and I. We all got this tattoo together. But it's more about Plutus than about his mother. So, not so much about agriculture, but—"

"Wealth," I cut him off. "Isn't that what the little boy stands for? Wealth and prosperity?"

"Exactly," he responds, and a genuine smile stretches across his face. "You are even smarter than I thought you were."

Now I'm the one releasing a dismissive huff. "Thanks, I guess."

I don't know how to take this compliment. He's not the first person to call me smart, but it's the first time the praise doesn't come in a reprimanding or even demeaning way. It actually sounds... nice.

"So, will you sign?" he probes, arching his brows. "Now that I told you."

I nod. "Yes, I'll sign."

I didn't say when, though.

"I'd appreciate that."

"Because it includes a nondisclosure agreement?" I ask. He was very adamant about that part, emphasizing that I would lose everything if I ever violate that part.

"That, and because I want to make sure that you're on board with this," he says. "I would hate having to look for someone else."

His words sting. A lot more than they should.

I should have known better, no, I *did* know better. Yes, we fucked, and yes, things between us feel very intense and weirdly real right now—but they are not. This is all for show, secured with a contract, much like any other job. He's paying me to be here, very generously. I'm not here because we like each other, but because we *need* each other. He needs me—I need his money.

His money, not him. I should never need—or even want—him. No matter how great the sex between us has been, no matter how nice his compliments feel. He fucked me because he could. Because a man like him can have anyone he wants. I don't mean anything to him. And if I don't play along, he'll go and look for someone else who will. It's as simple as that.

“You won’t have to,” I tell him. “I’ll sign. I really need the money.”

My voice is cold and distant, signaling that we’re cool. Whatever happens or doesn’t happen between us, will mean as little to me as it does to him. It has to.

“I know you do,” he says absentmindedly. “Even though you refuse to tell me what for.”

“I told you!” I argue.

“Yes, to pay back some mysterious debt,” he says, side-eyeing me. “What is that debt all about?”

I shake my head. “That’s none of your business.”

He lets out an exasperated sigh. “Fine, keep your little secret.”

“It’s not like you don’t have any,” I tell him, throwing him a look.

Ignoring me, he gets up to fetch the bottle of champagne and refill our glasses. I never took myself for a very visual person or someone who is overly drawn to perfectly sculptured bodies, but when I look at his chiseled physique as the water pearls down his tanned skin, I am feeling weak in the knees and it’s hard to suppress an appreciative sigh. He looks like a god, so toned and out of this world sexy with his full-sleeve tattoo that travels all the way up to his strong neck after stretching across his muscular arms. It’s not just the wheat but a mesmerizing melange of lines and symbols. But the ear of wheat sure stands out among them.

I’ve never seen anyone like him, and I can’t believe a man like him would ever be interested in someone like me, the

unhappy, tense and boring booknerd who's just trying to stand on her own two feet.

"I noticed you didn't bring much," he says after a new round of champagne is bubbling in our glasses in unison to the hot water in the jacuzzi. "Except for a ton of books."

"I brought everything I own," I tell him. "I don't have much, and I would never move anywhere without my books."

"Of course not," he agrees. "But what did you do with all your other stuff? Your furniture? Did you just leave it all to collect dust in your apartment as long as you're staying with me?"

I catch his inquiring gaze, unsure whether he truly doesn't know about my former living situation or whether he's just trying to pry.

"I don't have any furniture of my own," I admit.

A skeptical frown appears on his face. "Then, where were you living before?"

"With an old teacher of mine, Mrs. Warden," I say. "She took me in after..."

I pause, unsure whether I should tell him about Patrick or not. It's been more than three months since that horrible day when he came clear to me, but my heart still aches at the memory.

"After what?" Logan probes.

"After my ex-boyfriend kicked me out," I reveal. It's no use, he'll just keep probing until I tell him, and I can only keep so many secrets before him.

"He kicked you out?" Logan repeats in disbelief.

“Well, no, kinda... we broke up and the apartment was running in his name,” I explain. “And I wouldn’t have been able to afford it on my own anyway, so...”

“I understand,” Logan says in a low voice, when I don’t continue speaking.

“It’s okay,” I assure him. “I was lucky that Mrs. Warden took me in, she’s such a lovely soul. I wouldn’t be where I am if it wasn’t for her.”

“And she’s an old teacher of yours?”

I nod, smiling. “Yes, in High School. I never graduated and she wouldn’t have that. She was one of those overly involved teachers, you know? One who actually cared about her students. She couldn’t live with the fact that I would be out in the world without a High School diploma, so she kept in contact and pushed me to get my GED later on.”

“And did you?”

“Yes, I did, just a few months ago,” I say. “It was just the first of many steps on my five-year-plan.”

He smirks, looking visibly intrigued when he asks: “And what were the others?”

I sigh and take another sip of champagne before I find the courage to go on.

“Pay off my debt,” I say. “And... I don’t know. Do something. Maybe open a bookstore? That would be the dream.”

“A bookstore?”

“Yes! With a coffee corner, and a very special selection,” I elaborate. “Classics, romance novels, crime, modern suspense—everything I like. And with a space where local authors

could do readings and book signings. And a very personal touch...”

I stop, biting my lower lip. I must sound ridiculous.

“That sounds like a nice plan,” he comments.

Nice, yes. Or rather silly and plain. It’s nothing compared to the things he has achieved in life.

“I told you, I’m pretty boring,” I say, feeling funny.

“Maybe you are,” he agrees. He sends a playful wink along, but his words still sting.

“Nothing wrong with that,” he adds. “There’s solace in normalcy that one lacks with a more alternative life.”

“That’s very true, I never thought about it like that,” I say. “Did you just make that up?”

He shakes his head. “Can’t remember who said it first, but it wasn’t me.”

A sigh escapes him, before he adds: “Not for me, though. I’m not cut out for normal.”

“Maybe,” I say vaguely—reminding myself never to fall in love with this man. As charming as he can be, we obviously don’t want the same things.

Chapter 23

Logan

The table in the meeting room of Sunderhand Enterprises is excessively large and bright, with a white surface that blinds me as it reflects the piercing sunlight right into my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Meyer says, when he notices me squinting. “I would close the outside blinds but they appear to be broken. We’ve got someone coming to fix them later today.”

“It’s fine,” I say in my best amiable voice.

“So, on the phone you said that you’re interested in investing in the Residence du Marché project,” he recounts our short conversation from a couple of weeks ago.

I contacted Sunderhand Enterprises, because they present yet another—and much more prestigious—avenue to invest and multiply my money in a way that has nothing to do with my family’s business.

It’s a huge opportunity, but one that remains impassable to me as long as I’m not a trusted partner to anyone involved. Mr. Meyer is just one of many voices I’ll have to bring on my side, and just like the others, he is a long-term member of the Vanguard Society. He’s in his fifties, balding and growing a spare tire around his middle, a golden wedding ring on his

finger, and I bet he has a picture of his smiling children on his office desk. We've met before and exchanged details, but if I hadn't contacted him, he probably would have stayed away from me, just like most of them do. I'm a stranger to them, too young, with an obscure background that I keep hidden for a reason. My name means nothing to them—unless they've been dipping their noses into the white poison that my family deals with. But while consumption seems to be accepted in their environment, dealing in that very same business is not.

I get it, I really do. I've seen what darkness lurks behind this business and that's exactly why I want to get out and join their clean ranks. The ranks of real estate moguls and investors of building projects that not only make them even richer, but also more reputable.

“Did you have a chance to look at the files I sent you?” he asks. “And do you have any questions to start with?”

“Yes, I did have a look. Thank you for trusting me with those, I'm sure you don't just hand them out to anybody.”

He smiles and suggests a shake of his head. “That's correct, I do not.”

“I'd really love to get on board with this,” I maintain. “It looks like a great project to me, one that could really benefit a lot of people.”

“Including us, the investors,” he chuckles. “Social benefit is a nice thing if you ask me, a very nice thing indeed. But let's not fool ourselves, Residence du Marché is also about making money.”

“Of course,” I nod. “I wasn't trying to greenwash anything.”

“No need for greenwashing when it's an inherently good endeavor,” he argues, raising an eyebrow. “We're still helping

a lot of people with this.”

Fuck, why do I have to put my foot in my mouth like this? This is a different game than the one I’m used to, I should fucking remember that.

I may be the only one who’s mainly in this to greenwash my own name, but while the other investors also benefit from having their name tied to such a benevolent and prestigious project, they’re not doing it out of sheer generosity, but see a way to increase their wealth most of all.

“It is a wonderful and massive undertaking,” I say. “One that needs as many supporters as it can get, I’m sure.”

Mr. Meyer nods. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean we’d let just about anybody in on this.”

He clears his throat and shifts on his seat, before he crosses his arms in front of his chubby middle.

“You said you were new in town,” he says. “And you’re from...?”

“Boston,” I say. “Well, that’s where I’ve been living for the most part, since I graduated from Harvard.”

Can’t mention that part often enough. I drop my connection with that renowned institution at every opportunity I get, just in case they happen to catch a glimpse of my tattoos through the collar and sleeves of my stiffly ironed shirt or—God forbid—they may have come across my family name in a less than laudable manner in any way.

Up in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, our name is branded to such an extent that I saw no way for myself to establish a life outside of the shadows. My family is notoriously famous for a lot of things I’m not proud of, and I will never

understand why my brothers insist on continuing the filthy deeds of my father even after his incarceration. It's only a matter of time until the police gets to them as well—and who is going to take care of our troubled little sister then?

Probably me. I will have to keep an eye on her.

“Ah, a wonderful school,” Mr. Meyer remarks, a look of appreciation on his face. “My son is hoping to get in next year.”

I prick up my ears, sensing an opportunity.

“I could give him some pointers if you'd like,” I tell him. “You know, tell him a little about what to expect and help with his application.”

Mr. Meyers eyes light up instantly. It's the first time I see an actual smile on his face, natural and benevolent.

“That would be great, actually!” he says. “I'd really appreciate it—and so would he.”

He sits up, supporting himself on his elbows as he leans over.

Perfect. I got him.

“How about I introduce you two at the gala next weekend?” he suggests. “He's coming with me, because I thought it would be a great opportunity for him to meet some important people. People like you.”

This could not be going any better. Mr. Meyer may not be aware of it, but he ran right into the trap I set up for him. Of course, I know he has a seventeen-year-old son, and of course I'm aware of that spoiled brat's ambitions to get into that school.

This is why I'm here, talking to him instead of his business partner Mr. Briggs, who's just as involved in this project as Mr. Meyer is.

"That sounds great," I respond. "I will bring my fiancée."

His eyes light up, and his eyebrows arch in surprise.

"Oh, how lovely," he says. "Congratulations, Mr. Reid. Must be a recent development?"

Perfect. He took the bait, just like I thought he would. It's the first time I've ever mentioned my alleged engagement to anyone—and I can already tell that it has the effect I was hoping for.

"Thank you," I reply. "And yes, it is. I just popped the question last weekend."

He chuckles. "Nerve wrecking, isn't it? I remember when I asked my wife, Claudia, all those years ago... boy, was I nervous! I can't understand how some people do this kind of thing in public."

He laughs and I join in, nodding in agreement, as if I knew even in the slightest what it must have felt like. I don't—and I doubt I ever will.

"You will have to tell us more about it at the gala," he says—thankfully rising from his seat to bring our short meeting to an end. "I'm looking forward to meeting your fiancée. I'll tell my secretary to send you a proper invite."

"Thank you," I say, as I shake his hand.

I'm just about to leave the room when he adds: "Oh, what's her name? We may need it for the invitation."

"Katherine Davis, sir," I respond.

He smiles at me. “Alright then.”

I cast him a polite nod and finally make my way out.

Christopher is waiting for me outside the building and jumps right into motion when I step out on the pavement.

“Where to?” he asks, as he opens the door for me.

“Home.”

He nods and closes the door, before he walks around the car and takes his seat behind the wheel. I check my phone as soon as we start driving and find a bunch of messages from Gabe. Gabe, who’s acting like an idiot right now, because his old college girlfriend came back straight from hell, just to mess with his head. I know he has been seeing her again, even though he refuses to admit it. We just had lunch a couple of days ago and it’s been painfully obvious that he’s head over heels. Again. For a girl who will only break his heart, again.

That’s what happens when you fall for the trap called ‘love’. It’s simply idiotic. And Gabe is an even bigger idiot for letting it happen twice, with the same girl.

But when I notice the subtle flutter within my chest, as Christopher turns into the street that leads to my penthouse, I wonder if I may be just as much of an idiot. I know who is waiting for me upstairs—and I can’t wait to see her.

We pull up the driveway a few minutes later, and I step out of the car with a little bounce in my step that doesn’t go unnoticed by Christopher.

“Good meeting?” he asks, after closing the door behind me.

Yes, but my dumb grin has little to do with that, I’m afraid.

“Guess you could say that,” I tell him, meeting his smile with my own. “Thanks, Christopher. You’re off for the day. Go

home to your family.”

His smile widens. His shift doesn't end for another three hours, but I've made it a habit to let him go home early, especially since his baby was born. I really am growing soft.

“Thank you, sir,” he replies, visibly happy. “I will see you tomorrow.”

I say goodbye to him and make my way to the elevator, stubbornly ignoring my racing heartbeat, when I push the buttons on the panel.

She's not in the living area when I enter the penthouse, but that doesn't surprise me. Kat likes to stay in her room, usually immersed in a book.

And that's exactly where I find her. She's curled up in the armchair beneath the window, wearing a way too large knitted sweater and bright leggings, surrounded by her piles of books, and her nose deep between the pages of the one she has in her lap. She left her door open—which is new—and looks up when I knock on the door frame.

“Oh, you're back,” she says.

Her hair is tied up in a messy bun, with loose strands falling down on both sides of her face. She's not wearing any make-up, but has never looked more pretty to me.

I may be even more fucked than I thought I was.

“Are you hungry?” I ask. “I was just about to order something for dinner.”

Her eyes flit to the book in her lap, before she nods. “Uh, ya, sure. I haven't eaten anything.”

She's barely here, her mind lost in whatever world I just ripped her out of. I envy her for being able to lose herself in a

book like that. It's a privilege I seem to have long lost, as other things have become more important.

“Okay, let's figure something out,” I tell her, waving for her to follow me as I move back to the living area. My eyes fall on the piles of books again, before I leave.

This isn't right. She deserves better.

I need to do something about that.

Chapter 24

Kat

Johnny glares at me, his yellow eyes turned to narrow slits as he pierces me down with his stare. He never liked me, I think, and merely tolerated my existence when I was still invading his home territory as an unwanted guest.

He's sitting on Mrs. Warden's lap, fiercely protective of the only human he loves, and obviously unwilling to share her affection with anyone else.

I've never been much of a cat person, but with this guy, a little black devil who attacked my feet every time I walked by, I can honestly say that the dislike is mutual.

"So, how have you been my dear?" Mrs. Warden asks, a warm smile gracing her face. Her hand is shaking when she lifts the tea up to her lips, and it looks like she has lost even more weight. I feel like she was already getting thinner by the day when I was still living with her, but now it's even worse. Not even two weeks have passed since I last saw her and she looks so much more frail that I'm beginning to seriously worry.

"I've been good," I say. "Very good, actually."

Her smile grows bigger.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she says. “So, you like your new job? What was it again?”

I clear my throat, lowering my eyes for a moment, as most people do when they’re about to lie.

“I’m an editor for an online magazine.”

It’s the perfect lie, because Mrs. Warden has no clue about anything concerning the Internet.

“So, you write articles, you said?” Mrs. Warden implores.

I nod. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“About wha—”

She is interrupted by another coughing fit, shaking her body with such force that she almost spills hot tea on the chubby cat in her lap. Johnny sets back his ears and throws her an annoyed look.

“Mrs. Warden, are you okay?” I inquire, sliding to the edge of my armchair. “I’m really worried about you. You don’t look well, if I may say so, and it looks like you have lost even more weight since the last time we saw each other.”

She waves me off. “Oh, don’t you worry about me. I’m in good care.”

Her face freezes as if she’d just said too much.

“In good care for what?” I implore. “Mrs. Warden, what’s wrong with you?”

She lets out a heavy sigh and rolls her eyes. “It’s nothing really, Katherine, please don’t concern yourself with my issues.”

I frown at her. “After all you’ve done for me? What would you have done if I had said that to you on the many, many

occasions you helped me out?”

“Well, you did tell me to stay out of your business more than once!” she remembers, chuckling. “Remember that time I called you into my office after you handed in that excellent writing assignment, only to inform me a day later that you’d be quitting school to earn some money?”

I can’t help but smile at the memory.

“Yes, I remember very clearly,” I say. “You tried everything to convince me to stay in school.”

“And yet, you didn’t,” she reminds me. “See, sometimes we can try as hard as we want to help other people, but in the end they’ll always have to want to help themselves. That’s what really matters.”

I look at her, noticing the sadness that overcasts her expression now. She’s hiding something from me, something bad. And if I’m not mistaken, she’s been hiding it for quite a while.

“And do you want to help yourself?” I ask.

She nods solemnly. “Yes, I am now.”

“Help with what?” I probe. “Please tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help!”

She laughs and shakes her head so wildly that her whole body shakes, bothering the mean cat on her lap. Johnny flaps his ears, once again glaring at me as if I was responsible for his discomfort.

“Oh no, dear. You certainly can’t help, which is why I shouldn’t even bother you with—”

“Please,” I interrupt her, placing my hand on hers as I lean in closer. “Please don’t shut me out. Let me be there for you.”

She sighs again, placing her other hand on top of mine as she regards me with a benevolent but sorrowful smile.

“You are such a lovely girl, Katherine, but there’s nothing you can do, really,” she says. “It’s cancer, dear. Colon cancer, stage three.”

My jaw drops at her words, and my heart drops into the abyss, leaving nothing but grief and pain in its place.

“Cancer?” I repeat in disbelief. “How bad is it? Are you being treated? Is it curable? It is, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Warden shrugs, looking a little defenseless.

“They say it is,” she says. “But at stage three it takes a lot, a lot of radiation therapy—which luckily, I’m still strong enough for—and additional treatments, depending on what I can afford, you know. But most of all, it’s in God’s hands. In the end, I’ll have to leave it up to him, don’t you think?”

I can’t believe this. Mrs. Warden is one of the best people I know, so strong and independent and with the biggest of all hearts. I’m not the only one of her students who owes her beyond belief. She has always been special in so many ways, but most of all in the way she cared for her students. The world would be a better place with more people like her—and now *she* is the one who gets cancer, so shortly after retiring?

This isn’t fair. She’s the last person on Earth who deserves this.

“Well, yes, but even God can need a helping hand here and there,” I argue, forcing a smile on my face, when really all I want to do is cry. “So, you’re getting treatment? Like... chemotherapy and such?”

“We will start with that soon,” she says. “The doctors said my chances aren’t the worst, and it’s worth a shot.”

“Of course!” I exclaim. “That’s... that’s good.”

“It’s my fault, really,” she adds. “I’ve been feeling a little under the weather for a while, but I never paid much attention to it, thinking it was just a stomach bug. I was having these cramps and losing weight—”

“Yes, I noticed,” I interject. “So this has been going on for a while? And you never told me?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t want to worry you, Katherine. I want you to get out there and live your life, not worry about your old teacher.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t give you that,” I respond. “It’s my right to worry about you as much as I want—and to help you with everything I can. I’m sure there’s something I can do?”

Mrs. Warden pats my hand, before she reaches for her tea again, beckoning me to do the same with a nod of the head.

“Drink, before it gets cold,” she says. “It’s a nice Chai, very spicy. Tastes so much better when it’s still warm.”

“Mrs. Warden,” I say in a low voice, almost pleading. “Don’t try to change the subject on me. I invented that move.”

A short giggle, almost childish in its innocence, escapes her lips when she winks at me.

“I know, it’s you who taught me this,” she says. “But I’m serious. I’m fine. I will be fine. I’ve got insurance and it covers most of the therapies my doctors recommend, so—”

“Most?” I cut her off. “So, there’s some things you won’t do, because of money?”

She sucks in a sharp breath of air, visibly annoyed at herself for letting that one slip.

“It’s nothing major,” she assures. “Nothing that will decide over life and death. Just complementary treatments that may improve wellbeing or something like that. You know, to go along with the radiation, I think. I’m not sure exactly, because I never looked into it.”

I nod along as she speaks, my lips pressed into a firm line to stop myself from speaking. I get what she’s saying, and I understand her reluctance to let me help her. After all, new job or not, she thinks I’m still as broke as I was when I was living with her and thus don’t have the means to help her with anything. She doesn’t want me to feel bad for not being able to help.

But I *can* help. I do have the money to help. I was going to pay off most of my debt with the down payment from Logan, but that can wait. I will have all the money in the world once my contract with him ends, I can still do it then—along with all the other things I have planned, like opening my own bookstore. It’s a dream I never dared to give voice to, because it sounds too ridiculous, but it has become a realistic option now.

But for now, this is more important, and time sensitive. Mrs. Warden needs my help now and not in a few months.

And I will find a way to help her. I just need to figure out how to do it without unveiling my lie.

I will find a way to do that.

I must.

Chapter 25

Kat

Mrs. Warden wouldn't let me leave without giving me some of her famous lemon squares. I feel bad for accepting a gift from her after what she just told me. She made them especially for me when she knew I was coming to visit. That poor woman should be resting in her current state, and my visit prompted her to labor in the kitchen instead.

"You're too good to me," I say, close to tears as she shoves the Tupperware into my hands when I'm standing in her doorway. "You didn't have to go through all that trouble just for me."

"Trouble?" she exclaims, laughing. "Oh dear, anything to keep the mind busy these days! Am I supposed to just sit around and feel sorry for myself all day? That sounds quite horrible, if you ask me."

She winks at me. "It was a pleasure, really. Thank you for stopping by. We had so much fun, didn't we, Johnny?"

The black cat snuggles against her leg, still casting me looks full of disdain. I bet he can't wait for me to leave.

"Bye Johnny," I pipe, waving at the grumpy cat, before I send Mrs. Warden a smile. "Please let me know if there's

anything I can do for you. Anything, really.”

“I will, I will,” she nods, placing a hand on my upper arm. “You just worry about yourself for now, Katherine. Don’t lose your path. You’re doing so well.”

Her words strike a chord with me. She’s pretty much the only person who knows me well enough to know that stability doesn’t come easy to me.

“I will,” I assure her. “I promise to keep my head straight this time.”

The smile on her face widens. “Good! Don’t let anyone get in your way or sidetrack you, like that boy did—”

“I won’t,” I throw in. I’m not sure which boy she’s referring to, the one who dragged me into his not-so-glamorous world of drug dealing or the one who cheated on me and kicked me out of my home. I’m sure they’re both in Mrs. Warden’s bad books.

“Bye now, dear,” she says, ushering me to the door. “I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than hang out with your old teacher.”

I don’t, really, but I’m sure she’s mostly trying to get rid of me, because she’s tired and wants to lay down. She’d never admit it openly, because she doesn’t want me to worry.

“Bye, Mrs. Warden.”

She closes the door as soon as I’m out in the hallway, and I make way downstairs, my mind twirling with contemplations about what she told me. I can’t just give her the money to make sure she gets every treatment available. She would never accept it, and I would have to explain where the money comes from. How on Earth could I ever explain? She’ll just be reminded of my ex Clayton and my questionable career as his

delivery girl. My contract with Logan and my actions back then are not comparable at all, but I wouldn't blame her for thinking so.

After all, I'm helping him to deceive other people, and I still don't know anything about his intentions—so maybe her assumptions wouldn't even be that far off.

I'm staying ignorant for a reason. I don't really want to know myself.

I reach the ground floor of the apartment building and am blinded by the late afternoon sun when I open the door to the street. Shielding my eyes, I step outside, scanning the street for the black limousine. Logan insisted on having Christopher bring me here and wait outside to drive me back home. I protested at first, because I hated the idea of him having to wait in the car while I'm having tea with Mrs. Warden, but he insisted until I had no choice but to give in. We've both signed our contract this morning, and I felt a surge of anxiety, overcome by the feeling of having sold my soul to the devil. He didn't make it much better with his stubborn insistence to "keep me safe" by having me chauffeured around like a small child.

But now I'm actually grateful for not having to jump on the subway but sink into the soft embrace of his limousine's leather seats.

I'm standing in front of the entrance, holding my hand up to shield myself from the sun as I search the street up and down. The car is nowhere to be seen, but there's something else that pulls my attention when I turn to the right.

Or rather: Someone. Someone I haven't seen in more than three months, and whose appearance hits me like a fucking

truck, a vicious punch to the chest that makes me feel sick in an instant.

Patrick is walking along the sidewalk, coming straight toward me, with his hands in his pockets, wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. I've never seen him with a baseball cap, nor do I recognize the bomber jacket he's wearing. Did his new girlfriend give him a makeover? And what is he doing here? If he's still living in our apartment—which I think he is—then he has absolutely no reason to be in this neighborhood.

He's about ten yards away when our eyes meet, putting all hopes for me to hide or run to rest. He looks just as surprised to see me as I am to see him.

He freezes mid-walk, staring at me with his mouth partly open before his lips curl into an all too friendly smile.

“Kat!” he calls out. “It’s so good to see you!”

He closes in on me, opening his arms to greet me with a hug, but I recoil, taking a step back when he makes a move to actually wrap his arms around me.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out, lifting my new Marc Jacobs handbag up to my chest like a shield.

He takes off his sunglasses and raises an eyebrow at me, before he looks at the bag, arching his brows further.

“I was just in the area and—”

“In the area?” I cut him off. “You don’t live or work here, not even close. Don’t try to fool me, Patrick.”

He rolls his eyes at me and huffs. “Geez, Kat, relax.”

“Why are you here?” I ask again, even though I’m not sure if my question is directed at him or the universe as a whole.

Why does he have to show up now? We haven't seen or spoken to each other since the day I moved out. He wanted to keep in touch, claiming that he was worried about me and just wanted to make sure I was doing okay, but I wouldn't have any of it. His concern is neither wanted nor appreciated by me and only serves himself.

"Well, fine, I'm here because I wanted to check in with you," he says ruefully, throwing a quick look at the house I just left. "You blocked me on everything and made it impossible for me to contact you. But I was worried about you. I just wanted to make sure you're okay, and so I thought... I thought I might stop by, just to see."

"Liar," I spit. "You could have just asked Mrs. Warden, you have her number and I'm sure she never blocked you on anything. She wouldn't know how. If you're so worried, why not call her?"

He licks his lips and averts his eyes, looking down at his feet as he seems to try to come up with a clever response.

"Are you stalking me or something?" I want to know. "Why would you do that?"

He snorts in disgust. "Erm, no, I'm not stalking you! Get over yourself!"

"You just said you're here to see me!" I point out. "How did you even know I'd be here?"

"You mean, since you don't even live here anymore?" he asks, glaring at me through narrow eyes.

My jaw drops and I take a step back, instinctively putting more distance between us.

"So, you *did* call Mrs. Warden," I hiss. "You talked to her and she told you."

“Fine, yes, I did!” he barks back. “And she told me you’d moved out, because you found a new job and you’re moving in with a friend from work. I’m sorry, Kat, Mrs. Warden may buy that story, but I don’t! This is bullshit!”

“Bullshit that doesn’t concern you.”

I gasp in shock and turn around to find Logan standing just a few steps behind me. He’s wearing a suit, sparkling cufflinks reflecting the sunlight as he marches toward us, his hair gelled to the side and a stern expression on his face as he’s eying Patrick. What he’s doing here now? And how did he even get here if Christopher was waiting for me? I see the car now, pulled up double-parked a few yards behind Logan, with Christopher sitting behind the wheel.

“Who the fuck are you?” Patrick snaps at Logan, jutting his chin forward as he approaches him.

Alarmed, I jump between them, raising my hands in a defensive motion to beckon Patrick to stay back while I plant myself before Logan.

“I’m the fucking person who will smash your face in if you don’t leave her alone right this second!” Logan threatens, and I hold him back by placing my hand on his strong chest, when he makes a move to get closer to Patrick.

“Please, Logan, it’s okay, I know him,” I say, meeting Logan’s furious gaze. “He’s my ex.”

The look on his face turns downright sour and a deep crease emerges between his brows while he studies Patrick from head to toe. He’s not that much taller than Patrick, but stronger by far, and the confident way in which he carries himself only adds to his much more intimidating appearance. It’s pretty obvious who would win a physical fight between them.

“Your ex?” he asks, a flare of incredulity flitting across his face. “What’s he doing here?”

There’s something new in his expression now, something I didn’t expect.

Jealousy.

He glares at Patrick, his eyes turned to narrow slits and his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Please, Logan, could you give us a minute—”

“No,” he cuts me off. “You’re coming with me. Now.”

Patrick erupts with laughter.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” he blurts at Logan. “She just told you to fuck off, dude.”

“Dude?” Logan repeats.

He makes a move to approach Patrick, but I hold him back, placing both my hands on his chest in an appeasing manner. “Please, Logan, no.”

His hands curl into fists, throwing daggers at Patrick with his gaze, while his whole body trembles with fury.

“Who the hell is this clown?” Patrick wants to know. “Did you get yourself a bodyguard or...”

He pauses, stepping back as he surveys me from head to toe. I’m dressed in my old clothes, cheap jeans matched with my worn out sneakers and a secondhand sweater I’ve had for ages. I didn’t want to raise suspicion by showing up at Mrs. Warden’s in my new designer wardrobe, but still opted for the Burberry trench coat and the Marc Jacobs bag, assuming that she’d be oblivious in regard to their price-tag.

Patrick, however, isn't. He noticed the bag before, and now that he's having a closer look, he perceives the upscale trench coat as well—in addition to the mysterious stranger in his tailor-made designer suit who's so weirdly protective of me.

“Is everything all right, sir?” Christopher's voice startles all three of us, and I can't suppress a defeated groan when he comes walking toward us in hurried but controlled steps.

This is getting out of hand.

“A sugar daddy?” Patrick muses. “Really, Kat?”

His face contorts into disgust. “This is too low, even for y
—”

“Shut up!” Logan yells, as he darts forward with his fist raised—and I jump against his chest in an attempt to stop him.

Everything happens so fast that I don't even realize what's going on until I find myself on the pavement and pain shoots through my left leg as my knee hits the ground. I cry out in surprise and pain, my eyes still latched onto Logan as I watch him turn around to me, a look of terror on his face. His fist is still raised, missing Patrick's face by an inch as his attention is drawn to me.

Time seems to stand still as they both turn to me, frozen in shock as they see me squirming on the ground.

“Kat!” Logan exclaims, and he's down on his knees within a moment. “Fuck, are you okay?”

“See what you did?!” Patrick yells behind him, pointing at me. “You did that you fucking moron! You pushed her!”

“No, he didn't!” I insist. “Shut up, Patrick! Just leave!”

“You can't be fucking serious!” he yells at me, now pointing at Logan who has wrapped his arm around me while his eyes

are locked onto my left knee.

“He pushed you, and you’re telling *me* to go away?” Patrick goes on. “Seriously Kat, what’s wrong with you?! What kind of shit did you get yourself into this time?”

I can see the flicker in Logan’s eyes, alarmed and curious when he looks at me. I chose to ignore him and continue to fixate my stare of death on Patrick.

“Go. Away,” I repeat. “Right this second, Patrick. Or you’ll regret it.”

Logan’s gaze follows mine, and for a moment I worry that he may jump up on his feet and lash out at Patrick again. But thankfully, he doesn’t. He just tightens his grip around me, and before I know it, he and Christopher are both helping me get back on my feet.

Patrick takes a step back, shaking his head in disbelief as he watches us.

“I can’t fucking bel—”

“Leave!” Logan roars, so loudly and so feral that his voice barely sounds human. The sound hits to the core, so terrifying and pervasive that even I am scared of him for a moment.

But he’s still holding me, his arm still wrapped around me in a possessive and protective manner, while he glares at Patrick with dismaying hatred.

My heart hiccups with fear, when Patrick starts to move—but luckily, he merely lifts his hands in an appeasing manner, while he slowly starts to walk backwards, away from us.

“This ain’t over, you fucking creep,” he warns, before he turns around and walks away swiftly, speeding up until he’s literally running away.

“Coward,” Logan assesses, his eyes still on him.

I simply nod, unable to speak still, as Logan and Christopher walk me back to the car—both of them just as mute as myself.

Chapter 26

Logan

I can't get his words out of my head, no matter how much I try.

What kind of shit did you get yourself into this time?

He said 'this time', hinting that Kat has been involved in some shady matter before. But what on Earth could it be? Is it connected to that mysterious debt she refuses to talk about?

Her hands are still shaking when we're in the car, and she's fidgeting nervously in her lap, staring out the window when Christopher starts the engine to bring us home.

"What was that all about?" I ask. "What was your ex-boyfriend doing there?"

Did she lie to me and it was him she was going to see and not her old teacher? I don't want to believe that's true, but I can't shake the suspicion. I need her to tell me that that's not what this was about.

"I don't know," she mutters in a low voice. "He just showed up."

Her gaze remains lodged to the window, as far away from me as possible.

“Look at me.”

She sighs, but turns around to face me, a shadow of sorrow cast over her pretty face, blended with a hint of worry.

“I really don’t know, okay?” she snaps. “I came out the door and ran into him. I have no idea why he’s stalking me—”

“He’s stalking you?” I demand. “Why the hell did you not tell me about this?”

“I didn’t know!” She raises her voice. “He claims he wanted to check up on me, and saw now other way than to come by, because I blocked him everywhere. He has no way of contacting me, which apparently he took as an invitation to just follow me around. It’s not my fault he’s such a fucking psycho!”

She’s tearing up as she speaks, almost yelling as the words pour out of her.

I believe her, though. I *want* to believe her.

“And speaking of people manifesting out of thin air, what the hell were *you* doing there, anyway? Do you not trust me?” She churns, her lips quivering. “Did you come there to *check up* on me as well?”

She puts air quotes to her last question, adding a taste of reproach to her words.

I frown at her, wary as she tries to turn the tables on me.

“Oh, excuse me for trying to do something nice!” I retort. “I came to pick you up. It was supposed to be a surprise. You looked a bit distressed this morning before you left...”

That’s only partly true. I *do* have a surprise for her, but me showing up unannounced wasn’t it. I don’t know why I asked for Christopher to come and get me so I could see her a bit

earlier. I guess it really boils down to just that: I couldn't wait to see her. And I can't wait to show her...

I can't tell her any of that, of course.

She surveys me for a moment, a faint line emerging between her brows.

"It was a surprise alright," she murmurs. "And I'm sorry you had to witness... that."

"Me too," I say. "I didn't know you were dragging this kind of baggage with you."

She frowns at me. "This kind of baggage?"

"An ex who's stalking you," I say. "You never mentioned him."

"That's because there's nothing to mention," she argues. "We broke up more than three months ago, because he cheated on me. I broke off all contact after that. I just told you, I blocked him everywhere. We haven't spoken since the day I moved out. I had no idea he was still thinking of me, let alone trying to contact me."

She pauses and deflates with an exasperated sigh. "I just want to forget about him. Can we just stop talking about this? It was nothing, really. He is nothing."

"Sure," I say, suggesting a nod. "Just one more thing."

She tilts her head to the side and regards me with an inquiring albeit slightly miffed look. "Yes?"

"What did he mean when he said 'what kind of shit did you get yourself into this time'?" I ask. "What was he talking about?"

“Nothing,” she replies, a little too hastily. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, the way he phrased it made it sound like you’ve gotten yourself into trouble before. What happened?”

“I said it’s nothing!” she repeats, louder this time. “It’s none of your business.”

“It is if it interferes with my life,” I add for consideration. “And ‘none of my business’ is not nothing. You’re hiding something from me.”

She groans and turns away from me, facing the window again.

“We’re done talking,” she decides, speaking in such a low voice that I can barely hear her.

“No we’re not.”

“Yes, we are!” she insists, louder this time.

“Who says you get to decide that?” I want to know.

My hands curl into fists and I have to pull myself together not to yell at her.

“You can’t force me to talk,” she says, throwing me an annoyed side look.

“Oh yes, I can,” I object. “You know I can.”

Our eyes meet and she releases an exasperated sigh, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted while she searches for the meaning behind my words. Her shoulders are up to her ears, a faint blush coloring her cheeks and her lashes fluttering nervously. She’s as aghast as she is intrigued, I can tell that much.

“Well, good luck trying,” she says eventually, relaxing her shoulders as she averts her eyes from mine.

I notice the way her fingers intertwine, her knuckles turning white as she hardens her grip. She’s not as cool and unbent as she wants to appear.

We don’t speak for the rest of the drive, and she keeps her distance when we reach home and walk into the lobby, shying away from me when we’re inside the elevator and scurrying through the doors as quickly as possible when they slide open on our floor.

I watch in silence as she kicks off her shoes in the entry area and storms into her room as if she was being chased, not looking back at me once.

This is not how I imagined this evening to go. I had an image in my mind. Her, smiling and happy to see me when I come to pick her up. She was so cute this morning, when she told me about all the wonderful things this Mrs. Warden has done for her and what a great teacher she was in general. I loved seeing her smile, and had set a plan in motion to make her day. I was looking forward to picking her up and bringing her home, anticipating to see her reaction when she saw what I’d gotten for her.

I’m still standing in the entry, moving slowly as I take off my shoes and my coat, prick-eared as I wait for her reaction. She’s run off straight to her room. She must have seen it by now, but I don’t hear a single noise coming from her bedroom.

Did she not notice? Is her mood sour enough to blind her to the change inside her room? I linger in the entry area, my eyes locked to the archway of the hallway that leads to her bedroom as I wait to see or hear anything.

“What the hell!”

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth when I hear her curse. I hear her stomping down the hallway a moment later.

“Where the fuck are my books?!” she yells at me, her voice and face tinged with fury. “What did you do to my books? Did you throw them out?”

“What? No! I’d never do that!” I assure her, raising both hands in an appeasing manner as I close in on her.

“Where are they? Why did you take them away from me?”

She’s screeching and fuming with rage, her lips quivering and her hands rolled into fists while she glares up at me.

“Come with me.”

Kat flinches when I reach for her hand, but doesn’t pull away when I take it into mine and lead her down the corridor. I never had any use for the rooms in this hallway before she moved in, leaving the whole area pretty much empty after I’d settled into my own space on the other side of the penthouse. I ordered her bedroom to be furnished when she agreed to give our charade a try, but left the room opposite to it empty—until now.

“What’s going on?” she presses behind me as I lead her down the corridor. “What did you do to my books?”

I don’t deign to give her a response, but let the room speak for itself, when we come to a halt in front of it and I open the door for her.

I step aside, stretching out my arm to invite her to step inside and see for herself.

She follows my invitation, but freezes as soon as she’s inside the room. Her gaze flits back to me, an unspoken

question written across her face, before she turns back to the room that has now been turned into a library with a proper reading corner. Brand new shelving, airy and light, giving the impression that the books are floating along the bright walls. And a little reading nook right beneath the window, with an armchair and a chaise lounge positioned opposite to each other, each with its own reading light. I asked the decorators to add new curtains, too, and a small coffee table with a glassy vase and flowers.

All of her books found their place on the shelves, neatly arrayed inside the shelves, sorted by classics and modern literature, just like I instructed. And there are so many shelves that there's plenty of room for more books.

I lean against the door frame and watch as she walks toward the shelves, moving in slow and cautious steps while her eyes trail along the rows of books.

"You can rearrange them," I dare to say, keeping my voice low so as not to startle her. "I just thought they deserved better than to be stacked against the wall."

She doesn't say a word, but suggests a subtle nod, still facing away from me as she lifts a hand the trail along the backs of her neatly lined-up books. Then she stops, turning her attention to the armchair and the coffee table, both placed right beneath the window. A smile tugs at the side of her mouth when she looks at the chaise lounge, too.

"You moved the sitting area in your bedroom to the window, so I thought you'd like it like this," I explain. "I thought it would be nice for you to have a proper reading corner in the same room that hosts your books. Your own little library, one could say."

She's still moving with her back to me, not showing any form of reaction to my words. Coming to a halt in front of the side table, she bends down to pick up the present I laid out for her.

“Oh, that's just... since you seem to like Salinger, I thought you might enjoy this, too,” I say. “I enjoyed it a lot. Similar themes, very different prose, if you ask me. I'd like to hear your thoughts on it.”

I'm not even sure if she's listening to me right now. She's holding the book in her hands, reading the blurb on its back, seemingly unaware of my presence.

“You don't have to read it, of course,” I go on. “You're not bound to do so by contract.”

I'm trying to lighten the mood, and successfully so, it seems. She chuckles, as she puts the book back on the table. I don't know what to expect when she finally turns around to face me, but the tears in her eyes surprise me nonetheless. She looks up at me, one hand placed on her chest while the other remains clenched into a fist, as a silent stream of tears rolls down her flushed cheeks.

“What's wrong?” I want to know. “I'm sorry if I messed them up. You can rearrange your books however you want. We can also bring them back into your bedroom, if you prefer. I wasn't trying to—”

I'm cut off mid-sentence when she jumps at me out of nowhere. She wraps her arms around my neck and gets up on her toes to silence me with an unforeseen kiss.

Chapter 27

Kat

I'm bereft of words, and possibly for the first time in my life. My own library! He built me my own library! No one has ever done anything for me that would come even close to this generous act.

Why would he do this? Why would he care so much about someone like me? I'm no one, nothing compared to him! I didn't even say anything about the lack of shelves in my room. But he saw the missing shelves and he decided to give me something I'd never have asked for myself.

I can't stop the tears, not even now that my lips are connected to his, engaging in a greedy kiss. I felt so vulnerable after the day I've had, Mrs. Warden telling me that she's horrifically sick and I'm supposed to just watch her suffer, because she doesn't know that I could help her.

I didn't even have time to fully process that information, before Patrick swung back into my life like a damn jackhammer, unraveling me with his insulting accusation. I still can't make sense of him or his actions, but I don't want to think about it right now.

Not after Logan did this wonderful thing for me. He said he wanted to surprise me by picking me up, and I yelled at him, because I was so shaken from everything that happened before—but now I understand. He did this wonderful thing for me and was probably looking forward to the moment I would set eyes on his present. He created heaven for me, and he even piled on by sharing a personal recommendation. He wants to hear my thoughts about a book he liked. No one has ever appreciated me like this.

No one.

“Why did you do this?” I breathe as I break our passionate kiss. My hands are still wrapped around his strong neck, my vision blurred by tears as I catch his eyes with mine.

“You needed shelves for your books,” he responds in a matter-of-fact tone. “It was nothing, really. I don’t use this room, anyway.”

“No,” I object. “This wasn’t nothing. This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever done for me.”

He chuckles, a somber shadow blending with the sternness in his expression, before his lips curve into a smile.

“Thank you,” I add, planting a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you for this.”

He looks confused for a moment, meeting my gaze with a look that’s hard to read.

“You’re welcome,” he says in a low voice, tightening his embrace around me. “You’re very welcome.”

We hug each other, frozen in time as neither one of us moves, his fast heartbeat palpable against my chest as I inhale his alluring scent.

I lose my grip around him and begin to caress the back of his neck, barely touching him as the tips of my fingers trail along his backbone. Lifting myself up on my toes, I push my breasts against him as I claim another kiss. His stance tenses for a second, before he reacts. He leans into my touch, his hand firmly pressed against my lower back as we inch closer in each other's embrace. His aroused hardness pokes against my belly and I welcome it with a sigh.

"Fuck me," I breathe into our kiss. "Please."

He growls in response, his hand wandering down to my ass. He adds a demanding squeeze, evoking a craving moan from me.

"Say that again," he whispers into my ear. "What do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me," I answer in a breathless whisper. "I want to feel you."

"Good girl."

The praise has barely left his lips when his hands turn to the front, finding the zipper of my jeans and pulling it down with one swift motion before he pulls them down to the floor, together with my panties. I step out of them, but when I make a move to unbutton his shirt, he slaps my hand away.

"Not yet," he says when I cast him a disappointed look. "I want to see you first."

I want to protest, but he preempts me by hooking his fingers below the hem of my top, pulling it up over my head just as quickly as he removed the pants. He doesn't waste much time on my bra either, unhooking the clasp as soon as my top joins my pants on the floor.

"So fucking perfect," he assesses.

I don't stand a chance of feeling ashamed, because he numbs any intrusive thoughts by leaning down to suck on my hardened nipples. He's not gentle, but kneads my breasts with force while he adds teeth to his suckling, sending short-lived sparks of pain through my body.

I throw my head back, releasing a deep groan at his sweet-tasting violence. He continues to the other side, pinching my wet nipple between two fingers while he begins to torture the other with his teeth. The moan I let out now is laced with agony—sweet as sugar agony. I'm standing on my toes, my hands digging into his muscular shoulders while he goes on to tease me in a way that makes my core burn with yearning.

I'm breathing heavily, my eyes rolled back into my head and my lips parted when he stops to scoop me up in his arms. I'm too dizzy with lust to comprehend what's happening before we're out in the hallway, his massive erection caressing my naked butt through its denim prison as he walks toward the living room.

"Where are we going?" I want to know, tightening my grip around his neck, worried that I may be heavy in his arms, even though he carries me with ease, as if I weighed nothing.

"My bedroom," he simply says, as if it was the most natural thing. And I guess it would be, in any other scenario, any other relationship—a real relationship.

That's not us, though. I have never been allowed in his bedroom and even found the door locked on a few occasions when I was home by myself and tried to explore. I only meandered into the second hallway once, never returning after I realized that most of the doors were locked anyway, and he probably locked them for a reason.

The door is wide open now, and he carries me inside a room that looks very different from my bedroom, with the same color scheme as the living area, dark wooden floors, steely grey colors atop of white walls and airy curtains. The bed is a king size, with silk sheets in dark grey, pushed against the wall close to the floor-length windows on the right.

He lowers me down onto the sheets, and I sit up on my knees, throwing him a quick look to ask for approval. He's smiling when he suggests a nod, allowing me to do what I've wanted to do for so long, especially since our evening at the spa.

I unbutton his shirt, relishing every inch as I reveal his chiseled physique underneath. My fingers journey across his defined chest, following the outline of his numerous tattoos before I slide down the shirt over his shoulders.

Planting kisses on his tan chest, I wander down to his crotch, not hesitating when I reach the buttons of his jeans and pulling them apart quickly, driven wild by my need for him. His erection springs free before my face, a single drip of precum pearling at the tip when I bend forward to wrap my lips around his length.

He groans and thrusts his hips forward, shoving his length into my mouth until it's pressed against the back of my throat. I choke on his considerable size, but refuse to let go just yet, forcing myself to pass a few seconds without taking a breath, before I release myself, coughing and gasping for air while my fingers remain snaked around his cock.

His hand is at the back of my head, guiding me back onto his length, my tongue gracing the lower side of his shaft as I take him all in again. I keep him in a tight grip with my hand while I circle around his tip, applying extra pressure against

the most sensitive area where precum continues to sweeten his taste. His growls grow louder and more demanding, as his fist closes around a tuft of hair at the back of my head.

“Enough,” he decides, pushing me away from him, so I land with my back on the mattress.

“Spread your legs,” he commands, stroking himself as he looks down on me.

I do as I’m told, quivering with longing as I position myself in front of him, my legs parted and my eyes locked on to his.

He’s smiling when he climbs on top of me, bringing his tip between my wet folds, where he remains for a moment, before he thrusts forward. I welcome him with a profound groan, a blend of pleasure and pain as he spreads me apart with his massive size.

He’s the biggest I’ve ever had, by far, and I never knew that sex could be this painful and heavenly at the same time. He begins to move his hips, drilling into me with ferocious strength, just like I need him to. After the day I’ve had, I want to feel nothing but this, him, as close to me as humanly possible, and my mind dazed with unbridled joy and mind-numbing ecstasy.

There’s only him and me, his body hovering above mine as he drives into me with feral force. He brings his face closer to mine, his lips almost touching mine, as he supports himself on his elbows and takes my face between his hands. Our eyes meet and I lose myself in the depth of his dazed gaze. His lips curve a little, suggesting a smile, before he leans down to kiss me. He never stops moving, never wavers in his rhythm as he continues to stretch my core.

He's tearing me apart, spreading me like no man ever has before, his tan skin stretching across his defined muscles as he straightens himself up and holds me by the hips. His hands dig into my sides when he toughens his grip, and I arch my back in response, tilting the angle so that each of his violent shoves sends an intense spark of delight through my core.

This is not just lust, is it? How could lust feel this way, this intense, this overwhelmingly blissful? My mind dances to the deepest corners of my consciousness, trying to find a dark spot, a blemish that would serve as a warning—but I find nothing.

This man. He is more than I ever dared to dream of, more than I ever thought I deserved. He's too good for me, too perfect, too...

Logan groans in ecstasy and his thrusts slow down a bit, never losing their vigor as he sets into a gradual pace. He's about to come, I can tell. I can see it written on his face, mirroring my emotions, as I'm overrun by a sense of elation.

I don't ask for permission when the first surges of bliss wash over me, approaching in gentle waves at first, before they turn into an overwhelming rapture, dissolving reality behind a fog of delight as I find my release beneath him. My muscles clench around his thick length, and he follows me just moments later. I can feel him throbbing inside of me, a groan escaping him before he bows down to me, with his pelvis still pressed against my hot core, as we both revel in the last few crests of our climax. Together.

Chapter 28

Logan

I'm dressed and ready to leave, when my phone rings for the umpteenth time today. Jack, the oldest of my younger brothers, has been trying to call me all day, but I couldn't be bothered to talk to him. I know what this is about, and I'm not sure I want to hear what he has to say.

But now as I sit in my office, waiting for Kat to get ready so we can leave for the gala, I give in to his persistent calling.

"Finally!" he exclaims at the other end of the line. "What's up with you, man? Where have you been all day?"

"Busy," I lie. "Let me hear it."

He scoffs. "No reason to be so short with me, brother. Why so peeved?"

"I don't have much time," I let him know.

"You never have time for your family anymore," he laments. "Great firstborn behavior, if you ask me."

I sigh. "I'm sure you didn't just call to insult me."

"No," he says. "Dad's parole hearing was today."

I know that. I've been painfully aware of it all day.

“Let me guess, he’s not getting out.”

“Nope, total shit show,” Jack tells me. “It’s so unfair. They never even gave him a chance.”

“Showing a little remorse for what he did would probably help,” I add for consideration. “Someone should tell him that.”

Jack lets out a dismissive huff. “Come on, it’s not like he killed anybody—”

“That we know of.”

“He’s not a murderer,” Jack insists. “*We* are not murderers.”

“Oh, that’s right, we’re just drug dealers,” I say. “I forget that’s our family’s excuse when it comes to prosecution. Drugs never harm anybody, don’t they?”

“Don’t try to be smart with me,” Jack snaps. “You think you’re so much better than us, when you’ve benefited from our business just as much as we all have. Just because you’re out now you think you’re all high and mighty. Not a good look, if you ask me.”

I couldn’t care less what my brother thinks of me and my decision to get out of my family’s shady business. However, I can’t help but wish they’d follow me, not only for their own sake, but our little sister’s, too. She just turned 19 years old, our mother died years ago and our father has been in and out of prison ever since I was born. Grace has no one but us to guide her, and if things don’t change any time soon, the burden of helping her to get her life in order will fall upon me, even though we barely have a relationship to speak of.

“I’m not saying I’m better than you,” I insist. “But I don’t think it’s too much to ask of a man to take full responsibility for his wrongdoings. Our father deserves to be where he is.”

In fact, we all belong behind bars, me just as much as my brothers.

“Whatever, man, I should have known not to expect any empathy from you,” my brother complains. “I guess loyalty means nothing to you.”

I know he’s only saying this to pester me. It’s the same passive-aggressive bullshit I’ve been listening to for years, ever since I started to break free of my family’s muddy hold.

“I’m just trying to do right,” I say. “And you should follow my example, before it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?” he probes.

“For you!” I say. “Do you really want to go on like this and end up in prison, like him?”

“Who says anything about going to prison?” he wants to know. “I have no intention of getting caught.”

“I’m sure dad didn’t plan on that either,” I say.

“He was careless,” Jack argues. “Trust me, we learned from his mistakes.”

“If you’d learned anything from this, you’d get out of this nonsense yourself,” I claim. “Instead of complaining about unfair parole hearings.”

I pause, trying to calm myself as my pulse begins to speed with rage. This always happens when I argue with any of my brothers, and I hate it. They’re so undiscerning, deaf and blind to any argument I bring to the table.

“Did you ever think about Grace?” I try my last resort. Our sister has always been the weak spot of our family, the poor little nestling who needs our protection. “Do you think about what kind of example you’re setting for her?”

Jack erupts in a dirty laugh.

“Cheap shot, brother,” he retorts. “I see what you’re trying to do here, but it ain’t working on me. No one is trying to set any examples for her. We are looking out for her, though. Unlike you! You fled the city, leaving us—and her—alone without thinking twice. And now you’re seeking the moral high ground by bringing her into this!”

“Who’s going to take care of her when you guys end up in prison?” I bark at him.

“No one is going to prison!” Jack bemoans.

“How can you be so sure of that?” I ask. “You don’t think the police is keeping tabs on us? I wouldn’t even be surprised if we’re under surveillance already. How do you know you’re being safe?”

An annoyed groan is all I get as a response, and I don’t have to see Jack to know that he’s rolling his eyes at me.

“I’m tired of having this conversation,” he says.

As am I. I’m even more tired of my brothers being such irresponsible dickheads, but I refrain from saying anything to that effect. Jack knows where I’m standing. Maybe one day we’ll be in the same place, but that day is not today.

“Agree to disagree,” I grumble. “Is there anything else I should know? Anything new from Grace?”

Jack sighs.

“No,” he says. “Last I heard from Tyler that she’s being taken care of. No need to worry for now.”

There’s always need to worry about Grace, but I guess she’s safer where she’s now than living with my reckless brothers.

At least she's being taken care of by professionals instead of a pack of criminals.

"Keep me posted," I say to Jack, knowing that he probably won't. My brothers are all hell-bent on punishing me for my decision to cut ties with the crime-filled world we grew up in—and that means no contact, unless they absolutely have to.

I hear a noise coming from the door as I end the call and only now realize that I never closed it properly when I came in here.

"Kat?" I yell, but there's no response.

I get up from my chair and stride out into the hallway in wide steps. She's nowhere to be seen.

"Kat, are you ready to leave?" I specify.

"Yes?" I hear her voice, coming from the living room.

I hurry down the corridor and find her sitting on one of the high chairs at the bar that divides the open kitchen from the living area. She's wearing a cocktail dress in a light blue, studded with shimmering beads and ending just above her knee. Her dark hair is curled up in an elegant updo, accentuated with delicate hairpins in the same color as her dress, sparkling as the light hits them when she turns her head. Her make-up is stronger than usual, her lips painted in a piercing red that contrast the icy blue of her dress, and her blue eyes adorned with winged black eyeliner and thick lashes.

She looks absolutely stunning—but also a bit flushed. Even under the heavy make-up, I can tell that her cheeks are slightly reddened and her breath is a little erratic.

"Everything okay?" I want to know.

She nods hastily. "Yes, sure. I'm just a little nervous."

Adding a little chuckle, she slides off the high chair, carefully balancing on her heels as she presents herself to me, a coy smile playing on her face. “Do I look okay?”

“Perfect,” I assess, as I approach her.

A smile blossoms on her face when I plant a kiss on her forehead.

“So, I guess it’s show time then?” She asks, looking up at me under fluttering eyelashes. “Our first official appearance.”

She really does look nervous, her fingers trembling as she holds up the little clutch bag we picked out at Hermès.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” I say, wrapping my arm around her as I pull her into a comforting hug. She’s weirdly stiff in my arms.

Chapter 29

Kat

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

He reaches into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and produces a little jewelry box. “You should wear this.”

I haven’t seen the ring since I pulled it off of my finger at the store when we bought it. Now that he holds it up before me, I’m choked by a troubling knot inside my throat. I keep my lips firmly pressed together as I try to act as normal as possible.

Everything has changed, but he can’t know that.

I didn’t want to eavesdrop. I wasn’t trying to snoop around behind his back or anything like that. But when I was ready to leave and went looking for him, I found myself meandering down his hallway, unable to resist the magnetic pull of his office door standing ajar. And one thing led to another: I heard his voice, I stopped moving, and I listened. I listened to hear things that were not meant for my ears—and they hit me like a punch to the chest.

I should have known better. I guess I *did* know better, now that I think about it. I warned myself when I saw him for the first time. Even under his tailored suits, fancy car and lavish

penthouse home, his bad boy vibe was still unambiguously present. I took notice—and then ignored my own advice. I fell for his act and closed my eyes before the truth I didn't want to see.

He's still waiting for my hand, his brows lifted as he holds up the ring to put it on my finger. We're sitting in the car, on our way to my first real assignment as his fake fiancée, and I'm trying my best to hold it together when all I want to do is scream at him and run as far away as possible.

He's a drug dealer. *Of course*, he is. That's where all his money came from, or rather, how his family got their money. He's part of a crime family, and now he's trying to greenwash his name and his wealth by faking to be someone he is not.

And I'm helping him do that. I am his accomplice.

That's why he needs me. He wants to become part of something else, because it will help clear his filthy image in some way. And apparently, he needs a fiancée for that, someone who makes him look good, legit and like a man who can be trusted—when the opposite is true.

How could I be so stupid? I was trying to get away from all of this, and instead of doing better for myself after that Patrick-failure I ran straight back into the mud. Logan is taking advantage of my desperation just like Clayton did before him. My poverty makes me an easy target for men like him, and I fell for his trap despite my experience in this area. I made it easy for him, too easy.

I try to contain myself, trying to calm myself with a deep inhale, so my hand won't shake too much when I hold it out for him. My heart almost bursts with despair when he slides the ring on my finger, moving in gentle and caring motions, as if this meant anything to him.

But of course, it doesn't. I don't mean anything to him.

I knew that from the start, and I tried to remind myself of that, even after all the wonderful things he did for me. The flirting, the amazing sex, the wonderful library and that book he wanted my opinion on—none of it means anything. I'm just a tool for him, a criminal who is trying to leave his past behind and secure his place in a world that is not his. Not yet.

He clears his throat when he lets go of my hand, throwing me a quick look before he averts his attention to look out the window. It's almost as if this was weird for him, too. As if he felt the same bitter sting at a gesture that holds so much meaning for others, but is just a means to an end in our case.

"Still nervous?" he asks, without looking at me.

"A little," I reply.

I can barely get the words out without gagging on my anger. I need to get out of this, before it's too late and I find myself wrapped up in some seriously dangerous mess. From the sounds of it, he already has a father in prison and is worried about landing there himself. Where does that leave me? What if things go downhill and I get accused for his wrongdoings? How could I end up in a mess like this again?

"Just remember what we practiced and you'll be fine," he promises.

He puts his hand on my thigh, adding a soothing squeeze in an attempt to calm me down. And without the newly acquired knowledge I'm now burdened with, it would have worked. But now I have to pull myself together so as not to yank his unwanted touch away.

I reciprocate his smile and suggest a nod, trying to feign attention while he recites our notes for tonight, the names of

the people we will talk to and who among them is especially important, my personal fake background story and the way we met.

I nod along as he speaks, but I'm miles away, turning over my options in my mind. The contract is signed and I'm bound to my confidentiality clause, but it's not like I'm trapped with him. I can still break our contract and leave, but it would leave me without any money—money that I need now more than ever. How am I supposed to help Mrs. Warden if I back out of this? I would only be left with the down payment, which I intended to pay off my debt sooner rather than later. That debt has been hanging over my head for far too long and it's blocking me from going forward.

But not paying it off now wouldn't kill me. Yes, my plans would be put on hold again, and I would have to go back to working at The Velvet Rooms, but at least I could help Mrs. Warden. I'm sure I could find a way to do it without her realizing where the money is coming from. I could still lie.

But I would also lose *him*, just as I was about to fall in love with him. My heart aches at the thought, and there's a part of me who refuses to believe the truth behind that phone call. I look at him now, looking as neat as a pin in his black suit and iceblue tie—a color he picked to go with my dress. His hair is gelled to the side, his undercut freshly shaved as his strong jawline, and he smells of citrus and a fresh sea breeze, his scent just as irresistible as his looks.

He pins me in place with his dark eyes, all focused and stern looking as he goes through our notes, seemingly just as nervous as I pretend to be—and I can't help but wish that everything I heard on the phone was all just a big misunderstanding.

Maybe it was? Should I ask him about it? Maybe I should give him a chance to explain. After the gala, of course.

For now, I need to play my part—as difficult as it may be.

Chapter 30

Kat

The event takes place at a five-star resort hotel, and the ballroom we walk into hosts the most marvelous interior I've ever seen. Bright and neutral colors dominate the shiny marble floors and the high ceiling boasts an array of tiny star-like bulbs instead of massive chandeliers, providing the illusion of a starry night sky above the venue.

We're each handed a flute of champagne as we enter, and I receive mine with genuine appreciation. I even manage to put a smile on my face when we clink glasses, and the bubbly liquid calms my unraveled nerves at least for a bit.

Logan offers me his arm, and I follow my instructions to walk on his right side, with my left arm hooked into his, proudly presenting the preposterous diamond ring for all to see as we saunter through the room.

I don't know who all these people are, nor do I fully grasp the meaning behind this gala, but I vowed to play my part tonight, and so I will. The smile on my face may be just as fake as the message behind that ring on my finger, but it does the job. I can see them glancing over as we move along, nodding and smiling at anyone who crosses our path.

“There he is,” I hear Logan buzzing next to me.

“Who?” I ask.

“Mr. Briggs,” he responds, bobbing his head forward in a two o’clock direction. “The guy I told you about.”

He told me about so many guys, dropping names and affiliations left and right, so I’m not quite sure what the deal is with Mr. Briggs in particular, but I pretend otherwise and nod.

“And that’s Mr. Meyer and his wife right next to him. Perfect, all in one place,” Logan goes on, a triumphant smile gracing his face. “Let’s say hello.”

He doesn’t wait for my response, but hastens his steps and drags me all the way diagonally through the room, his path as straight as an arrow as we approach a group of two middle-aged men and a woman of the same age with short and curly blond hair.

“Mr. Meyer, Mr. Briggs,” Logan says, stretching out his hand to greet them.

They’re both in their fifties, I’d guess, but while Mr. Briggs is a long and skinny man, Mr. Meyer is more on the short side and rather thickset, especially compared to his fit looking wife.

“Mr. Reid, what a pleasure to see you,” Mr. Briggs welcomes him, stretching out his arm to the side as if he wanted to greet Logan with a hug. “And you didn’t come alone, I see.”

“Yes, may I introduce you to my fiancée, Katherine Davis,” Logan says, petting my left hand as he sends me a benevolent smile before turning back to Mr. Briggs. “Katherine, this is Mr. Briggs, CEO of Sunderhand Enterprises, and his business associate Mr. Meyer and his wife—”

“Claudia, please call me Claudia,” the woman says as she shakes my hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I say, widening my smile so much it almost hurts.

Both the men bob their heads in a welcoming motion, while Mrs. Meyer beams at me.

“What a lovely young lady,” she pipes up as she leans forward to look at my ring. “And what a fine-looking couple you two make!”

Logan provides me with a gentle nudge at the side, prompting me to hold out my hand, my fingers stretched so she can admire the diamond on my ring finger.

“Stunning, simply stunning,” she assesses.

“A Solitaire 1895,” I recite, lacing my words with fake pride.

“You are a lucky girl,” she says, winking at me.

Yes, so fucking lucky to fall into the trap of a scheming criminal. A man who is hiding his telltale tattoos underneath a tailor-made suit, while he’s shaking your useful hands and pretending to be someone he is not.

And I’m part of it. I crawled out of the darkness just to jump right back into it, into his hands and his dirty scheme.

“What a beautiful ring. Don’t you think, dear?” Mrs. Meyer goes on voicing her delight.

She turns to her husband, who leans forward, pinching his glasses between the tip of his index finger and thumb as he expertly examines the ring.

“Yes, indeed, a perfect choice,” he states. “It seems you have quite the taste, Mr. Reid.”

He nods in Logan’s direction, tipping his neck back as he casts him a sympathetic smile.

Logan shakes his head. “She’s the one with good taste. I just picked something I knew she’d like.”

I’m smiling when he locks eyes with me, but I feel like I’m about to throw up. This is harder than I thought it would be.

“Always the way to go,” Mrs. Meyer asserts. “So, when’s the big day?”

“We don’t have a set date yet,” Logan answers. “But we’re thinking next summer.”

The lies roll over his tongue with such ease. It’s appalling, but shouldn’t surprise me after what I learned today. He’s experienced in deceit, just like any other criminal.

“Oh, still plenty of time to plan then,” Mrs. Meyer goes on, throwing me a confidential smile. “And how did he propose, dear? It was romantic I’m sure?”

Fuck. Her question hits me off guard. We never prepared for this. Logan schooled me on so many things. I have a full course of life laid out for a fake version of myself, an elaborate lie about how we met in a coffee place and Logan approached me while I was reading, facts about my made up family, our life together, our alleged plans for the future—but no story for his fake proposal.

How could we forget about that? How could *he* be so negligent?

I turn to him, awkward and unsure what to say, while my fingers circle around his wrist, tightening my grip to urge him

to come up with a response. I've never been a good liar, so all of this is hard enough as it is, but coming up with something like this on the spot is completely beyond my capabilities.

Logan, on the other hand, looks as cool as a cucumber. He pats my hand as if to say 'I got this' before he clears his throat.

"Not sure about the romantic part, but I tried my best for sure," he begins. "It was about a month ago. We were having dinner at Chez Jacques."

"One of our favorites," Mr. Meyer throws in, and his wife nods eagerly.

"It's so elegant, and the food has no equal," she adds. "Perfect place for a proposal, if you ask me."

"That's true, but I didn't propose at the restaurant," Logan says, evoking surprised looks from the entire group—including me. He pats my hand again but I'm sure this time it's not to soothe me, but to remind me that I—unlike the others—am supposed to know about this and thus should not display the same level of surprise.

"I thought about doing it there, but thought it would be better to do at home. It's more intimate that way," he goes on. "So, we just had dinner there. We usually go out for dinner on Fridays, relax and unwind from the stress of the week, and talk. It's kind of become our little tradition, hasn't it?"

The smile on his face is so genuine, so warm and caring that it's impossible not to fall for it, successfully shielding the lies behind his words.

"Yes, it has," I agree, forcing a smile on my face that probably doesn't come across half as genuine as his. "It's a great way to end the week."

“So, you didn’t suspect anything?” Mrs. Meyer wants to know, placing her hand on my upper arm as she leans closer, curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

“Not at all,” I say. “It was just like any other Friday night. Until we got home...”

I trail off and give Logan a look from the side, knowing that I pretty much threw him under the bus right there. I don’t know if he has his entire story already laid out in his head, or if I just put him on the spot. Either way, he’ll have to come up with something now.

“What happened then?” Mrs. Meyer implores. She’s clearly invested now, unlike her husband and Mr. Briggs, who obviously feign interest out of politeness.

Logan furrows an eyebrow at me as he brings the flute to his lips, taking a sip of champagne to buy himself some time. I feel a hint of satisfaction trailing down my spine.

“Well, Katherine is an avid reader,” he goes on eventually.

I try my best not to reveal my surprise on my face. Where is he going with this?

“As am I. So, we have a large library at home, filled with all our favorites, and antiques, collectibles, first editions. You know, that sort of thing,” he goes on. “We like to spend our evenings there, sometimes, each indulging in our latest read. And that evening, after the restaurant, we had planned to do the same. I knew Katherine was between books at the moment, even though her so-called ‘want-to-read’ pile never seems to shrink.”

He pauses, leaving room for a reaction, and a polite chuckle travels through the group.

“So, we change and retreat to the library. I make us some tea, so as not to raise suspicion, because we always have tea with our books. Of course, I had a bottle of champagne prepared and chilled in the fridge,” he continues, adding a little wink that causes another round of laudatory chuckles.

“When Kat gets ready to settle down, browsing through her pile of unread books, I suggest one that I’d just gotten for her that day. It’s still wrapped when I hand it to her,” he goes on—and I’m hanging on to his lips, just like the rest of the group.

“She unwraps the book. It’s a hardcover first edition of *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is—I probably should have mentioned this before—the book we talked about when we first met each other. It was the topic of our very first conversation, and the start of me falling in love with her.”

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Meyer sighs, while her hand flies up to her heart. “How lovely.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, keeping my lips pressed into a thin line as I fight to hold it together.

Did he just come up with this on the spot? Why would he do this to me? Why come up with such an overly sentimental and beautiful story, as if he actually cared about me? And he is reciting it with such conviction, too. Even *I* am dangerously close to believing him.

“And what happened then?” Mrs. Meyer presses, almost childlike in her excitement for Logan’s cheesy tale.

“Well, it’s funny actually,” Logan says. “Kat got so excited when she realized what book it was, she bounced up from her seat to come and hug me. She didn’t even notice the ring I’d hidden between the pages. It fell out on the floor when she jumped toward me, and before she realized what was

happening, I was down on my knees, fetching the ring from the floor and holding it up to her, asking her to become my wife.”

He adds a pause, leaving room for Mrs. Meyer to sigh in adoration, before she looks at me—and becomes the first to notice the tears dwelling in my eyes.

“Oh, look at that, you must have been so touched!” she exclaims, caressing my arm, as if we’d known each for longer than just a few minutes.

I’m strong enough not to recoil from her touch, but unable to stop the tears. She’s right, Logan’s story was touching, very poignant indeed—but it was also a lie. Just like everything else about him.

I can’t bear this. I can’t just stand here and pretend that my tears are born out of affection when, in reality, they are tears of pain.

I can’t do this.

“I’m sorry,” I manage to produce—before I turn around and run off as quickly as my heels allow.

Chapter 31

Logan

I catch up with her just as she is about to enter the ladies' room. My right hand snakes around her upper arm a moment before she gets to push the door open.

“What the fuck was that all about?” I ask, as I force her to turn around.

Tears are streaming down her face and her cheeks are flushed when she looks at me. Deep anguish is written all over her face—but I have no idea why.

All I know is that I cannot bear to see her like this, especially if I'm responsible for her agony in any way.

Am I, though? What did I do to upset her?

She doesn't say anything, but yanks herself free of my grip and puts distance between us by taking a decisive step back.

“Kat, talk to me,” I urge. “What the hell happened?”

“Nothing happened!” she claims, and another surge of tears gushes out of her. “Just leave me alone. Go away. Go back to telling those people what a great guy you are.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I say, trying to soothe her by placing my hand on her shoulder. But she jerks

away from my touch.

“Don’t!” she exclaims, a little too loudly.

She peers to the side, as do I, to check whether her outburst has drawn any unwanted attention to us. But, thankfully, we’re alone in a deserted corridor, far away from the hustle and bustle of the festivities inside the hall.

“Just go back. I’ll be fine,” Kat mutters. “I just need to be alone for a moment.”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” I insist. “Something is obviously bothering you and I—”

“Yes, *you* are bothering me!” she interrupts, outright yelling at me now.

I hear a gasp coming from somewhere behind me, and when I look back over my shoulder, I see two women, both middle-aged and dressed in upscale evening gowns, most likely attendees at the gala—and thus the last people on Earth who should witness this conversation. Their mouths fall open as they stare at us, and I raise my hand in an appeasing manner, casting them a polite smile, before I turn back to Kat.

“Come, let’s go somewhere and talk,” I say in a low voice.

I expect her to object and try to fight me off again when I put my hand at the small of her back and bid her to walk with me. But she lets it happen, sending a short look in the direction of the two women, before she follows my invitation.

I guide her down the hallway and to the left, remembering that there are French doors leading out to a large sunroom that appears to be unused. The doors are unlocked and we’re greeted with a chilly breeze when I open the door and Kat darts out as if she couldn’t wait to get out of the main building

fast enough. It's colder out here, the glass walls only providing the minimum of isolation.

Kat is still crying and hugging herself as the cold air attacks her lightly clad skin. I take off my suit jacket and wrap it around her shoulders, to which she retorts with a bitter look instead of saying thank you.

“What has gotten into you?” I want to know. “What just happened out there?”

Narrowing her eyes, she glares up at me, as if she was trying to convey a nasty message by telepathy instead of giving me an actual response.

“Talk to me!” I urge. “I have no patience for this.”

“*You* need to talk to me,” she retorts. “Who are you? And why do you need me to play your fiancée?”

I frown at her. “Why are you asking that now?”

“I have asked you before, many times, actually!” she bursts out. “And you flat-out refused to tell me! And now I know why. I *know*, Logan. I heard.”

“Know what? Heard what?” I ask, but the answer dawns on me just a moment after those questions leave my lips.

She's been acting strange ever since shortly before we left the house. I blamed it on her being nervous, because it made perfect sense. But that wasn't it. She heard me.

She heard me talking to Jack on the phone.

“Yes, that's right,” Kat says, as if she could read my thoughts. “You're a drug dealer, a fucking criminal. And—I don't know how exactly—but you're trying to greenwash your name with this silly charade.”

She's so churning that her breath hikes and her entire body trembles under another assault violent crying fit, causing her to cough violently when she tries to continue speaking.

"Please, Kat, calm down—"

"Calm down?!" she cries out, yanking my hand away once again when I try to console her. "You don't get to tell me to calm down! I have every reason to be angry—and scared!"

Her lips are quivering and the hurt in her eyes stings like a hot dagger to my chest.

"You are a monster," she hisses. "You're trying to fool the world and make them think that you're this perfectly nice guy, hanging out with the high society and stroking your ego at these charity functions or whatever this is—when in reality, your basement is *bursting* with skeletons!"

She's choking on her tears again, gasping for air as she erupts in another coughing fit—while I'm forced to idly stand next to her, hogtied as any attempt of soothing her is only seen as a form of aggression.

"It's not what you think it—"

"Oh, it's not what I think it is?!" she cuts me off, almost shrieking at this point. "So then, I didn't hear you say that you are a drug dealer? And that your father is in prison and you're afraid of ending up in there as well? You talked about trying to do better. Better than what? Better than your father? Your brothers? Yourself? Why do you need to convince these people that you're just a regular family man with no dark secrets then, if you're such a good guy?"

She breaks off again, sucking in a sharp breath of air before she has the strength to go on.

“And why the hell are you using *me* for this? Why are you doing this to me? Is it because I was easy to agree to this shitshow? Because I was desperate enough to say yes without asking any annoying questions?” She wants to know. “Was I just that easy to take advantage of? And how much fun did you have screwing with my feelings during all of this? How did you even come up with that dreadfully cheesy proposal story? Is this all part of your demonic plan? Killing two birds with one stone—clearing your name while fucking me and breaking my heart?”

She’s interrupted by a violent urge to sob, her desperation painfully palpable as she tries to contain herself.

Her words hit me with painful force, and I find myself stumbling backward. It hurts to see her like this, it’s fucking horrifying actually—but what hurts the most is to hear what she thinks about me. That she thinks I’m toying with her feelings, actively trying to break her heart just for the fun of it.

I never meant to hurt her like this. Never.

“What now, Mr. Scammer? Did I render you speechless?” she probes, and disgust laces her face. “Or are you just trying to come up with another lie, to make sure your diabolic plan still comes to fruition?”

“It’s not like that,” I finally manage to say. “You’re getting this all wrong. And I can’t believe you’d think that about me.”

She releases a huff of disgust. “I don’t have to *think*, Logan. I *know*. I heard you! I heard you talking on the phone and saying all those things! Are you seriously trying to deny saying it?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m just saying that you’re getting this all wrong.”

She tilts her head to the side, crossing her arms in front her chest as she asks: “Getting what wrong? That you’re a drug dealer who is trying to save his ass from being jailed like his drug dealing father?”

“I’m not a drug dealer,” I say, clearing my throat before I add: “Not anymore. I left the business years ago, long before we met and long before—”

“So you’re saying,” she interjects. “But you *were* dealing with drugs? Your entire family is?”

I sigh. “I’m not proud of it, but yes, that’s what I grew up with, and yes, that’s—in part—how I accumulated my wealth, at least in the beginning. The real money, the big money, comes from investments-”

“Investments made with dirty money,” she maintains.

I nod. “Yes. But that’s exactly what I’m trying to get away from.”

“By lying?” she asks. “Why do you need this fake fiancée charade if you’re already doing so well with the money rolling in from your ‘investments’?”

She pins me in place with an interrogative stare, and I realize that there is now way out of this. I will have to tell her, if I don’t want to lose her—and our deal.

“There’s this housing project, financed by Sunderhand Enterprises,” I begin. “It’s a very prestigious project, very high-scale financially and from a philanthropic aspect. But the circle of investors is very restrictive and reserved for members of the Vanguard Society. Being a member with them is a requirement to be considered as a partner in this.”

A frown appears on Kat's face. "And those elitist monkeys don't let you play with them if you don't have a wife? What kind of circus is that?"

I can't help but chuckle at her choice of words.

"You're right, it is ridiculous," I agree, hoping to smooth the waters a little bit. "But it is what it is. And from the looks of it, it's been working so far. Those guys out there, Mr. Briggs and Mr. Meyer, have never talked to me the way they did tonight. And with the way you dazzled Mrs. Meyer it's just a matter of —"

"No, I won't go back in there," she insists.

A sudden coldness hits me at the core, as I regard her with an incredulous stare.

"You signed a contract," I remind her.

She shakes her head. "Under false pretenses. I had no idea what I was agreeing to."

False pretenses? Is she serious right now?

I can't think straight. She can't leave. Not now, not ever. I need her.

"You knew very well what—"

"No, Logan, I didn't!" She cuts me off, hurriedly wiping away her tears. "I'm leaving. And if you try to stop me, I'll run back into that hall and tell everyone in there who you truly are. I bet none of those stuck up bigwigs wants to do business with a drug dealer, once they realize all you did was dish up polished lies to make yourself look better. Do you really want that to happen?"

Her face is fiery red as she glares up at me, while pointing at the door behind my back.

“Are you trying to blackmail me?” I ask.

“Trying?” she retorts. “I *am* blackmailing you. You don’t leave me another choice. Now let me go!”

She yanks my jacket off of her shoulders and shoves it into my hands, before she makes a move to squeeze past me and get inside.

“Kat, please,” I try to grab her upper arm, but she tears herself free with such a violent move that I let go off her immediately.

I have to let her go. Her words are more than empty threats, I can see that in her eyes. And I can’t risk her running back into the hall and ruining everything for me.

“Where would you even go?” I ask, when her hand is already on the doorknob. “And how? Let me at least ask Christopher to drive you home.”

She pauses, sighing audibly before she casts me a wary look.

“Fine, yes,” she breathes.

She opens the door and pauses for a moment. Holding the door open with her foot, she begins fidgeting with her hands. And before I realize what’s going on, she turns back to me and throws the ring on the floor before my feet.

“Don’t follow me!”

Chapter 32

Kat

Johnny never slept in my room when I was living here before. I wasn't the one who fed him, so he didn't show any particular interest in me, and that feeling was mutual.

But for the past couple of days, he's hardly ever left my side, even when I wanted him to. He's not a lap cat, but he seems to enjoy human company during his naps, and for now, that honor is bestowed upon me. Maybe he even missed me. He's curled up into black ball of fur next to me, as I sit on the bed, cross-legged and a book in my hand. Reading has always been my go-to escape, and it has once again become my sanctuary since my break-up with Logan.

Can I even call it that? A break-up? It's not like we were together for real, we just pretended to be. And despite all he did for me, despite the way he looked at me, the way he seemed to care, the way he fucked me—all of that was just a lie, needed to serve his purpose. He needed me, that's why he treated me the way he did, not because he had feelings for me.

I need to remember that—no matter how much my heart aches.

I can't let my feelings for him warp the reality that he is a bad man, a criminal who I need to stay away from. Another criminal I was stupid enough to fall in love with. I had to tear myself away from him, despite this treacherous pain that insists on pushing me back into his arms.

I just wish that my books weren't still with him. I needed to get away from him as quickly as possible and packed in a hurry, leaving most of my books at his penthouse.

He has been calling and messaging me ever since, but I ignored all of his attempts. I don't want to talk to him. He'd only use it as an opportunity to pressure and convince me to come back and continue his charade, luring me in with the money I so desperately need.

And I'm not sure if I'm strong enough to say no. He is bad news, no matter how much he's trying to convince me otherwise. I don't want anything to do with his drug-dealing family and the environment that surrounds him. I've been there, and I remember all too well where it led me. I have no idea where I would have ended up if it hadn't been for Mrs. Warden—and now she's saving me again, when I'm the one who should be saving her.

I still have most of the money from the down payment, and I'm determined to use it to help Mrs. Warden with her medical expenses. Maybe we could even get her to be seen by another specialist. I will have to figure out how to go about this, especially knowing that she will fight me along the way. She still thinks I'm dirt-poor, and me moving back in with her certainly didn't help with that impression. I told her that we had water damage due to a bursting pipe at the apartment I allegedly moved into with 'a friend from work.' I told her I'd

only have to stay for a short while until it was fixed. I don't have much time until that lie gets busted.

There's only one way for me to go—back to The Velvet Rooms. I don't have much of a choice. If I can get my old job back, I might actually have a chance to get back on my feet sooner rather than later, and Mrs. Warden would never have to find out what really happened. I would gladly push my own dreams and ambitions aside, if this means I could help her in this time of need.

The sound of the doorbell rings into my thoughts, and I hear her moving down the corridor outside my room to get the door. Mrs. Warden is a social person and often receives visitors randomly throughout the day—much to the dismay of her reclusive cat, who immediately hides under the bed every time a visitor announces herself. I watch Johnny as he goes into hiding and wish I could join him. These days I share his aversion to company and have been holed up in my room for most of the time.

I hear voices outside the door. Mrs. Warden's voice, politely chatting away, and a male voice responding to her.

A familiar male voice.

Thunderstruck, I sit up, my ears pricked and my heart beating against my ribcage with urgent speed.

It can't be. That voice. It can't be who I think it is.

But a knock on my door supports my suspicion, and it is confirmed a moment later, when the door swings open—and I'm met with Mrs. Warden's apologetic smile, followed by the last person on Earth I want to see right now.

Patrick.

What the hell is *he* doing here?

“I’m sorry to ambush you like this, dear,” Mrs. Warden says, standing with her shoulder slumped and her back curved, making her look even shorter than she already is. “He was worried about you—as am I, to be frank.”

My mouth falls open and I stare at the two of them, bereft of words, as I try to process what’s happening right now. Patrick waves at me, a mellow smile on his face and his stance slightly crouched, as if he knew how inappropriate his presence is.

“Hi Kat,” he says, stepping inside the room without waiting for an invitation. “I thought we could have a little chat.”

“About what?” I blurt out, still aghast.

My eyes flit over to Mrs. Warden, who sends me a conciliatory shrug.

“You’re so withdrawn and seem distressed,” she tries to explain. “I just had a feeling that something was going on with you. And I understand that maybe I’m not the person you’d want to share your problems with.”

But my cheating ex-boyfriend is? What was she thinking? I didn’t go into detail when I told her about our break-up but right now I wish I had. She would never have invited him if she knew what he did to me, I’m sure.

Awkward silence stretches between us, while I throw Patrick a what-the-fuck-look, filled with unspoken questions. Why would he even be in contact with Mrs. Warden? Those two barely talked to each other, even when Patrick and I were still together—and now they’re scheming behind my back?

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Mrs. Warden announces, as she shuffles backward and out the door—followed by a small orb of black fur who runs after her.

The door closes and I'm left alone with Patrick and his sorry face.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I repeat. “Does your girlfriend know you're here?”

He scoffs and shakes his head, casting me a grave look as he pulls up the chair from my desk and sits on it backward.

“I don't have a girlfriend,” he says.

We lock eyes, as he appears to wait for some sort of reaction or response from me, but I don't give him anything other than a tilt of the head, my eyebrows arched expectantly.

“I made a mistake,” he goes on. “I can't put into words how much I messed up, and I understand if you're not willing to forgive me, but...”

His voice trails off as he speaks, and so does his gaze, idly journeying across the floor, before he looks back up at me with a sad puppy face.

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm so utterly sorry for what I did to you. I don't know what I was thinking—”

“*Thinking?* I don't think your head was in charge when you decided to fuck your coworker,” I cut him off, not even trying to hide my disdain, as I throw him a miffed look.

He nods. “Yes, I was stupid. So fucking stupid...”

“What do you want?” I ask him. “Are you honestly trying to tell me you're here because you're worried about me?”

Patrick presses his lips together in a slight grimace, his gaze ping-ponging through the room, adamant to avoid eye contact with me.

“I... yes, I was... I was worried about you, but...,” he stutters—and I roll my eyes in response.

“You don’t have to be,” I tell him. “Whatever Mrs. Warden told you, I’m fine. She’s making a mountain out of a dust speck.”

“Maybe,” he concedes. “But it’s not just that...”

“Then what is it?” I poke, raising my voice. “Seriously, Patrick, I’m losing my patience with you. Why are you here?”

Patrick pulls his head back as his shoulders push forward, a pained expression on his face, when he finally pushes himself to answer my question:

“I came here to tell you I still love you.”

Chapter 33

Logan

This isn't me. I have never felt like this before.

Sad, clueless—and alone. So fucking alone.

I'm sitting on my rooftop terrace, slumped into one of the lounge chairs with a tumbler in my hand—bourbon on ice—and my buzzed gaze latched to the horizon, as I watch the sky fade from varying shades of orange and violet to total darkness. The night already holds the city beneath my feet in its sinister grip, but up here, the light of the day has yet to disappear completely.

I don't know for how long I've been up here, but it must have been hours, judging by the numbness in my propped up legs and the cold that's creeping up my sleeves.

She didn't respond to any of my messages and ignored all my attempts to call her. I was stupid to expect anything else, after the way she stormed out of the gala. She told me to leave her alone, and so I tried. I let her go that day, and went back inside, trying my best to hold up the facade I so diligently worked on for the past few months. I told the Meyers and Mr. Briggs that Kat wasn't feeling well and I sent her home, but as much as I tried to hold a normal conversation with them after

what had happened, I simply couldn't. I was too distracted, my mind too occupied with thoughts about Kat and my eyes constantly glancing to the door, hoping she'd come back.

And when she didn't, I made up an excuse for myself, claiming I was too worried about my fiancée and had to check up on her.

It was pathetic, all of it. Me, taking a fucking cab like a peasant, because I had sent Christopher home with her, my heart sinking as I came home to an empty apartment, and finally, me dwelling about her absence ever since.

I feel like such an idiot.

No one should have this kind of control over me, no one. This is why I vowed to stay away from relationships for good. I've seen what it can do to even the strongest and most respectable men, when they have their hearts claimed by a woman. They turn into sad little puppies, following their women's every whim on command—and losing themselves in them. Love is how people manipulate you, I always knew it.

And now I'm one of them.

My phone rings and yanks me out of my futile ruminations. My first instinct is to ignore it, merely side-eying the thing as it lights up on the side table next to me. But when I see the name of my friend Chase pop up on the screen I decide that a little distraction can do no harm. I haven't spoken to anyone other than Christopher during the past few days and am about to lose my mind.

“Hey.” Even my voice has lost its vigor. I clear my throat and sit up straighter, fighting to compose myself.

“What's up Mr. Vanguard Overlord,” Chase bellows at the other end of the line. “You in or what? Please tell me you

finally convinced those lame squares.”

“Not quite,” I growl, already regretting my choice to answer his call.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m not in yet,” I tell him. “And from the looks of it, I never will be. Fuck it. Who cares.”

“You care!” he argues. “Are you kidding me? For months you’ve been talking about how this is your big chance, your only chance to clear your soiled name or whatever, and become a legit businessman. You know, like me.”

I can imagine the grin on his face without actually seeing him in front of me. Chase has this peerless crooked snicker, a display of the rogue he truly is.

“What’s going on man?” he probes. “Since when are you so whatever about this? What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” I lie. “I tried. It didn’t work. I’ll be okay without them. Fuck it.”

“You tried what?” he wants to know.

I growl and shake my head, unwilling to go into detail about any of it.

“Tell me,” Chase insists when I take too long to come up with anything to say. “You know I won’t leave you alone until you tell me. Maybe I can help.”

“No, you can’t,” I maintain. “This is on me. I tried something stupid, and that plan blew up in my face. Can’t we just leave it at that?”

“No we can’t!” Chase maintains, and after a pause that’s heavy with meaning he adds: “Wait, is this what I think it is?”

I curl my eyebrows in response, my eyes turning into narrow slits as I fixate the dark horizon in the distance.

“I don’t know what you’re conjecturing—”

“Girl trouble,” he throws in. “Dude, it’s so obvious.”

“It is not!” I argue, realizing too late that I’m only reinforcing his assumption.

“Yes, it is. You, suddenly doing an 180 on something and then refusing to talk about the reasons behind it, come on! I’ve seen you like this before, when you were all over that girl who was writing for our college newspaper and you were interested in journalism all of a sudden, and you tried to get on the team as well,” he goes on. “And then when you guys broke up, that whole endeavor fell apart and you claimed that being a reporter was never of any interest to you. Remember?”

“Can’t say that I do,” I growl, even though I know exactly what he’s talking about. I hate that I’m this transparent to him, but I shouldn’t be surprised.

“So, tell me,” he probes. “What happened?”

I deflate in defeat and take another sip of my bourbon before I concede to his relentless probing.

“I tried something and it backfired,” I begin. “In fact, you’ll be happy to hear that I took your advice and—”

“Wait, you actually paid a girl to marry you?!” he bursts out before I can finish my sentence. “I knew it! You are such a fucking cheater! So much for ‘that new pact was just a drunken joke’! You are such a fucking hypocrite, just like Gabe.”

I frown at his ridiculous comparison. He couldn’t be further from the truth. I hadn’t even thought about that dumb pact for

one second. And to compare me to Gabe, a guy who I just scolded for getting his head screwed by the same girl for the second time.

“Gabe started fooling around with his toxic ex!” I argue. “How can you even compare this to...”

I pause, biting my tongue as I remember my conversation with Gabe from a couple of weeks ago. I warned him not to get back with his witch of an ex, but of course he wouldn't listen—and now he finds himself in yet another episode of unnecessary heartache. I'm pretty convinced that girl is playing him like a puppetmaster—and he's hanging from her strings like a defenseless victim.

Just like I let my mood be dictated by Kat's disappearance.

“Compare what?” Chase implores. “Dude, please don't tell me you didn't actually get a mail-order bride?”

“I didn't marry anyone,” I say. “We just pretended—”

“We?!” He cuts me off. “Who is we?”

I groan in exasperation. There's no use in lying. I already said too much.

And since there's no way out, I may as well tell Chase about everything. I tell him about my visit to The Velvet Rooms—while remaining vague about the nature of that place—about my first conversation with Kat and how I made a contract with her to play my fiancée so the stuck-up Vanguard Society would let me join their ranks.

“So, what happened?” Chase asks when I finish my story without a satisfying culminating point

“She ran off,” I simply say. “She overheard me talking to my brother and decided she wanted to have nothing to do with

me.”

“Got scared, huh?” he presumes correctly.

“I guess you could say that, yeah,” I mutter. “She got quite hung up on the whole crime family thing and just... left.”

I clear my throat and empty my bourbon, trying to gloss over the sappy tone of my voice.

“Well, can you blame her?” Chase adds for consideration. “Not many girls want a boyfriend who grew up in a crime syndicate.”

“Boyfriend?” I growl. “Who said anything about her being my girlfriend? We were just pretending—”

“Oh, cut the shit, Logan,” Chase interrupts me, adding a hoarse laugh. “You like this girl, otherwise you wouldn’t sound like a lost dog and no longer care about getting into the Vanguard Society all of a sudden. You’ve been talking about that stuffy club for months—and now this girl ruins your plan, runs off and takes the wind out of your sails with her. Only a man in love sulks the way you do right now.”

I hate the fact that he’s right. I never wasted a single thought about my ambitions with the Vanguard Society ever since Kat ran off with tears in her eyes. I couldn’t even keep up the charade for longer than a few minutes before I ran after her. I lost my head that night and haven’t been able to focus ever since.

“I don’t like this,” I reveal to Chase. “I feel useless and weak. It’s fucking pathetic.”

“Yup, sounds like you’re fucked, buddy,” he laughs. “Question is: What are you going to do about it? The Logan Reid I know never gives up and always gets what he wants—instead of sulking about an alleged loss.”

He's right. How could I not see this?

I want Kat. I need her—but not as an accomplice in a shady charade to convince the Vanguard Society of my worth.

No, I need her to be with me. I need to see her smile when she talks about her favorite books, I need her snarky but entertaining remarks that keep me on my toes, I need to be challenged by her wit and the calming solace of her company. I need the warmth of her alluring body, I need to see her explode into a thousand pieces every time she climaxes underneath me, before she becomes whole again in my embrace.

I need this girl. She needs to be with me, because she is mine.

And I *will* get her back.

“Can I just give you a piece of advice?” Chase adds.

“What's that?” I retort, the tension audible in my voice.

“Don't be yourself,” he says. “Don't go about this the Logan way.”

I frown. “What kind of fucked up advice is that?”

“You know what I mean!” Chase chuckles at the other end of the line. “This girl must really be someone special. You said you wanted to become a different man, a better man. Well, become a better man—for her. But don't cheat your way toward the goal. Get what I'm saying?”

I think I do, as much as it pains me to admit it.

“I went about this the wrong way,” I say. “I tried to clean my name with dirty tricks. And I made her a part of it.”

“Damn right,” Chase agrees. “This may be your chance to prove that you really have become a different man, a man better than your family. Prove it. For her—if she’s worth it.”

Oh, she’s worth it. Katherine Davis is so damn worth it—I’d be a fool to let her get away. I won’t let that happen.

And I think I know just what to do.

Chapter 34

Kat

“You what?”

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Patrick stands before me in a crumpled posture, his arms hanging idly, head down as he looks up at me.

“I never stopped loving you,” he claims, his voice cracking. “What I did was stupid. It was the worst mistake of my life.”

“You said you weren't happy,” I remind him. “Not happy for a long time, actually. Do you not remember saying that?”

“I do,” he says, nodding as he averts his eyes from mine to look down to his feet. Mrs. Warden always asks anyone who steps inside her apartment to take off their shoes, so I'm subjected to the sight of his silly colorful socks with Garfield's face on them.

I gave him those socks about a year ago. It was a joke regarding his infantile love for lasagna—a love he shares with that cynical cat. We used to giggle like little children every time he put them on, but now they just remind me of all the pain I had to go through after our horrible break-up.

Is he wearing them on purpose, because he thought the sight of them would soften me to his objective?

“I remember what I said,” he goes on. “And maybe I thought I was unhappy at the time, I don’t know... all I can say is, I’ve been much, much unhappier ever since you left.”

I scoff in disgust. “Did Stacey dump you? Are you lonely? Is that why you came here to whine?”

He shakes his head, and I retreat when he takes a step forward to approach me with his hand held out in an appeasing gesture.

“No! I was never with Sta—”

“You were fucking her while were dating,” I cut him off.

He grimaces in agony.

“Yes, but I was never with her, we never dated for real,” he asserts. “She wanted to, and maybe for like a split second I thought that’s what I wanted, too, but then we just... No, it didn’t feel right. I don’t love Stacey.”

He pauses and clears his throat before he adds: “I love you, Kat. Always have.”

“No,” I object, raising my hand in a defensive move and practically holding it up to his face, while I put some more distance between us. I move backward until my heels meet the bed frame behind me. My legs give in and I drop down on the edge of the bed.

“No, if you loved me, you wouldn’t have done what you did,” I insist. “You cheated on me, Patrick. For months—”

“It wasn’t that long,” he interjects.

“It doesn’t matter!” I burst out. “You cheated! You’re a lying, cheating bastard! At least own it instead of trying to downplay your massive fuck-up!”

“You’re right, you’re right,” he hurries to respond. “There’s no excuse for what I did, none. I hurt you, and you didn’t deserve that. I wish I could take it back, but I can’t.”

His eyes are actually watery now as he looks at me, a pleading expression on his face, and his lips quivering as he seems to struggle for words.

“Do you think there’s any chance you could forgive me?” he implores. “I know it’ll take time and a lot of effort from my side, but I’m willing to—”

“No,” I cut him off. “No, I don’t... I can’t...”

“Is this because of *him*?” Patrick asks, and his face hardens.

“Who?”

“The guy I saw you with,” he says. “Your new boyfriend or whatever. I don’t know what happened between you two, but when Mrs. Warden told me you had moved back in, I thought —”

“You thought you could just walk back into my life, because I’m no longer attached to someone else?” I bark at him.

Patrick evades my gaze, awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other while his lips move as if he was chewing the words he didn’t dare to voice.

“So, you *were* dating him,” he mutters eventually, a somber shadow casting over his face. “That was fast.”

He looks hurt, and for a moment I almost feel sorry for him. I of all people know what it feels like to be replaced by someone else, and how it screws with your self worth to realize you are no longer special to someone who used to be so special to you.

But my empathy for him is short-lived. He doesn't deserve my pity, not after what he did. And he certainly doesn't get to judge me.

"You're one to talk," I hiss. "Besides, it's none of your business. None of this is."

He nods, but doesn't say a word. His sad puppy eyes are starting to really infuriate me.

"You should go," I tell him. "I have enough to worry about as it is."

This seems to pique his interest. His eyebrows curve with curiosity as he tilts his head to the side with a question written across his face.

"What do you mean?" he asks. "Is there something I can do to help?"

I shake my head. "I don't want your help."

"I understand that you're hurt—and proud," he laments. "But please let me help you, if there's anything I can do."

"There isn't!" I insist. "Unless you can come up with an instant cure for cancer—or the cash to afford better treatment."

I should not have said that. Of course, he looks alarmed right away, sucking in a sharp breath of air as he reaches for the chair at my desk. He pulls the chair with him as he approaches me in hurried steps and turns it around before he sits down on it backward—all the while staring at me through widened eyes.

"Cancer?" he breathes in shock. "You... you have cancer?"

I roll my eyes at him and shake my head.

“Not me, you idiot,” I retort, lowering my voice before I go on to explain. “It’s Mrs. Warden. She’s refusing to talk about it and won’t let me help her, because she thinks I can’t...”

He deflates with relief.

“Well, *can* you help her?” he asks.

“I would like to,” I maintain. “After all she’s done for me. I owe it to her! And I know she’s not doing well. I can tell, no matter how much she tries to hide it.”

Patrick sighs, visibly relieved, as if this wasn’t terrible news nonetheless.

“Look, I know this must be hard for you,” he says. “But it isn’t really your problem, is it? I’m sure she’s in good hands either way and doesn’t want to trouble you with things that are out of your control. You have your own battles to fight.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. How can he be so cruel and self-absorbed?

“Not my problem?” I repeat in disbelief. “How could you say that, after all she’s done for me? I wouldn’t even have my GED if it wasn’t for her! She’s the closest I ever had to a mother figure—and you say her health crisis is ‘not my problem’?”

Now he’s the one rolling his eyes at me, and my heart erupts with fiery rage at the sight of it.

“I know all that,” he bemoans, dragging the words as if it pained him to speak. “But don’t you think we should—”

“There is no *we* anymore, Patrick!”

He looks at me as if I’d just stabbed him.

“So, you really don’t want to even give me a chance?” he asks, almost pleading. “I know I messed up—big time! But don’t you think I deserve a second chance? After all we’ve been through?”

He swallows dryly, and it looks like he’s pushing back tears before he manages to go on.

“Three years, Kat, we’ve been together for three years,” he wails. “I can’t just give up on that.”

I know his pain, because I have felt it myself. I waded through a valley of sorrow for weeks after I moved out of our apartment. I was caged in painful memories of our time together, hopeless beyond belief as I saw my life crumble before me, all those plans we had, all those things he made me believe before it all came crashing down.

But that was months ago. Even now, as I see him before me, anguished by that very same pain, I feel nothing, not even pity.

By now, my former heartache has been replaced by another. The misery I feel now is not attached to his name—but to Logan’s. Patrick has become nothing more than a black spot in my past, and I realize now that I haven’t even thought about him for weeks.

I was too busy falling in love with Logan—and my heart aches when I think about him.

“Well, I have given up on us,” I tell Patrick. “And so have you. You gave up on us the moment you started things with Stacey.”

I straighten my back, before I get back up on my feet, now towering above him.

“You don’t get to play the victim, when it was you who ended us,” I say. “I’m sorry if you thought I’d dwell on you

forever and gladly take you back just like that, but that's not going to happen. Ever. I have moved on—and so should you.”

We lock eyes, while tense silence fills the room between us, and I can see the expression on his face changing. Sadness gets replaced by determination, almost anger, as he rises to his feet.

“How can you be so cold,” he utters. “I don't even recognize you anymore.”

“Good,” I say. “That should make it easier for you. I know it did for me.”

My phone pings, causing both of us to flinch in surprise. I take a step back to avert his curious gaze, before I retrieve my phone from my jeans' pocket.

My heart almost stops when I see the name flashing across the display. Logan hasn't tried to reach me for two days, and he chooses *now* to go for another attempt?

“You must miss your books,” he writes. “Can we arrange a time so Christopher can bring them by?”

And just like that, it's back—the torment of my broken heart.

Chapter 35

Kat

My heart is running at a thousand miles per hour when I see the limousine arrive. I've been waiting downstairs, despite the cold. Meeting him out on the street makes me feel like I'm in control of our interaction, and I feel uneasy about having him step inside my current home.

If he's even coming, that is. We arranged a day and time for this exchange, and he mostly spoke of Christopher without ever mentioning whether he'll show up himself—but that doesn't mean he won't.

I swallow dryly when the car stops in front of the house and turns on the hazard lights. A terrible moment of unclarity passes, before the door at the driver's seat opens and Christopher steps out, flashing me a polite smile as he tips his head.

I ignore the lump in my throat when I step forward, ready to help him carry the boxes with my books upstairs. But instead of walking to the back of the car and opening the trunk, Christopher comes to a halt in front of the door to the backseat. He opens it and gestures for me to get inside.

I freeze on the spot, throwing him a puzzled look.

“I thought you were bringing my books?”

He shakes his head, still smiling. “I was instructed to pick you up, Miss.”

“Why?” I ask. “That’s not what Logan and I discussed. He said you’d drop by my stuff.”

Christopher makes a face, and I’m not sure whether he’s bothered by me or his enigmatic boss.

“I’m sorry for the confusion,” he says. “Please.”

He beckons me to step inside the car again, but I remain where I am.

“Where are we going?” I want to know. “Am I supposed to pack them up myself? Is that what this is about?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” he says. “But I can assure you, you have nothing to worry about.”

I hesitate, running through my options as I stare at the luxury car, waiting to escort me to God knows where, while Christopher—polite as always—patiently awaits my decision.

“Please, Miss,” he urges eventually, casting a quick side-eye down the street. “I’m blocking half the street, I’ll get in trouble.”

He’s right. I can’t stand here forever and ponder about the meaning of all of this—and I definitely don’t want to get him in trouble, with Logan or anyone else.

I take a deep breath and follow his invitation, quickly sliding into the car, before I can change my mind. He closes the door as soon as I’m planted on the familiar leather seats, before he gets back behind the wheel.

My mind is tumbling with competing theories about what's going on. I know Logan must be furious with me. I broke our contact, and I ignored all his calls and messages ever since. Is he trying to punish me by making me go back to the penthouse and pack up my books all by myself?

But from the looks of it, that's not even where I'm going. It doesn't take long for me to realize that Christopher is not taking the route back to Logan's home, but we're heading in a different direction.

"Where are we going?" I ask, leaning forward so he can hear me at the front. "This is not the way to the penthouse."

I hear him chuckle and sense that he won't give me the answer I crave.

"I'm not at liberty to say," he responds.

Our eyes meet in the rear-view mirror, and I'm sure he can see the frown on my face. But if he does, he chooses to ignore it.

We're heading further into a direction that's completely foreign to me, and the further we go, the more I begin to worry.

Where are we going? And why are Christopher's lips sealed?

Am I in danger?

Fear pulls me into its cold and unyielding grip, as I begin to realize how stupid I've been. Of course, he wouldn't just let me leave. He's a criminal, a man who takes what he wants, no matter the consequences. He had a plan, and I ruined that plan by running away from him. And now, he has come to take me back—against my will, if necessary.

How could I be such an idiot?

“Stop the car!” I yell at Christopher.

He shoots me a quick look through the rear mirror, and shakes his head no. “We’re almost there.”

“I don’t care! I want to get out!” I insist, already unbuckling my seatbelt. “Now!”

“Miss Davis, please fasten your seatbelt,” he tells me in an annoyingly calm voice.

“Why won’t you tell me where we’re going?” I complain. “What is he going to do to me?”

A line emerges between his brows when his eyes meet mine through the mirror now. He looks not only confused, but appalled at my insinuation—which calms me down a bit.

“We’re here,” he announces a few moments later, and the car comes to a halt.

I’m too confused to act, and just watch while he gets out of the car and opens the door for me. I follow his invitation to step outside with apprehension, my gaze darting from left to right as I climb out of the car.

“Where are we?”

The question leaves my lips seemingly involuntarily, and I’m not even looking at him as I speak. We stopped in the middle of a lively shopping street, lined with little boutique chops and cafés, and nothing here looks even remotely familiar to me.

“He’s waiting for you inside, Miss Davis,” Christopher says next to me, pointing to the store that’s right in front of us.

It looks like a vintage bookstore, with a small but very organized display laid out in two large windows that frame the wooden entrance door. The covered sign on top indicates that there may be renovations going on—as does the fact that there seem to be no people inside.

I freeze when Christopher proceeds to open the door for me to step inside. This is weird. Why would Logan want to meet me here? What kind of game is this?

Am I in danger?

I shake my head, as I take a couple steps backwards—which seems to amuse Christopher.

“Please, Miss Davis, I don’t know what happened between you and Mr. Reid, but I can assure you, he means no harm,” he says, chuckling. “And I will be right here, ready to take you home at any point, if you so wish.”

He regards me with a pleading look, his brows tilted and a consoling smile on his face.

“Just like I did at the gala,” he adds. “You have nothing to fear.”

I want to believe him. And he’s right, he took me out of an unpleasant situation before. I’m sure I can trust him.

I just wish I could say the same about Logan.

The store seems to be both a café and a bookstore, with a little coffeehouse corner right at the entrance—where Logan is sitting at one of the small round tables. He’s dressed in a white shirt and black pants, his hair gelled into place and his entire demeanor giving off the vibe of a business professional about to attend an important meeting.

There's a barista working behind the counter, a young girl with short brown locks and a genuine smile on her face when she greets me. Her presence calms me down a bit. At least I'm not completely alone with him. The store appears to be entirely deserted, with neither customers nor sales people around, other than the barista. It doesn't even seem like they're actually open.

Logan jumps up from his seat when he sees me.

"Kat," he says, almost looking as if he was surprised about me showing up. "I'm so glad you're here."

He looks nervous when he pulls a chair for me to sit down. I've never seen him like this, trembling and fidgeting with his fingers as he waits for me to come and sit with him. Why would he be nervous, though? What is he planning to do?

I glance over to the barista, who acts busy around the espresso machine, seemingly in the middle of preparing a drink, even though there's already a cup in front of Logan and I didn't order anything.

"Where are my books?" I ask, as I sit down opposite of him. "I thought you wanted to give them back to me?"

"And I will," he says. "But I need to talk to you first."

"About what?" I press.

My heart is racing when I look at him, but I'm not sure why. Tension? Anger? A nervous flurry? Hope?

Hope for what?

"What do you want to talk about?" I probe, when Logan starts chewing on his lips instead of giving me a reply.

"About us," he says eventually, lowering his eyes for a moment before he looks back at me. "I need to talk about us."

I swallow dryly, bereft of words as I ready myself for a conversation I never expected to have.

Chapter 36

Logan

She sits down with her shoulders up to her ears and her eyes flitting from left to right, before they latch onto mine.

“Okay?” she mutters. “What... is there to talk about?”

She clears her throat and straightens her back, but I notice her idle hands fidgeting in her lap, no matter how much she tries to act cool and aloof.

“Caramel macchiato.”

Kat startles when Lucy, the girl who manages the café adjacent to the bookstore, places the oversized cup in front of her.

“I didn’t—”

“I ordered it for you,” I jump in to explain.

Lucy casts her a quick smile before she disappears, just like she has been instructed to.

“But you hate this,” Kat states, as a line emerges between her brows. “What did you call it again?”

“Sweetened devil’s piss,” I remind her—and she snickers. The sound of her laughter feels like a warm embrace, instantly lifting my spirits with its songlike levity.

“But like I said, it’s not for me, I ordered it for you.”

A short-lived smile flashes across her face and she nods as she reaches for the cup. “Thanks.”

She looks more relaxed now, her face softening into an appreciative smile when she takes the first sip of her sugary drink.

“So, what is it you wanted to... talk about?” she goes on. “Because I have to tell you, one caramel macchiato won’t make me forget who you are and what you did. And I don’t intend to keep playing your charade, no matter what.”

She pauses to cast me a cautionary look, before she adds: “And it doesn’t matter how much you’re paying me, so don’t even try to lure me back in by upping the reward. I don’t want to be involved with the likes of you ever again.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” I cut her off.

She looks puzzled. “Saying what?”

“That you don’t want to repeat earlier mistakes,” I elaborate. “You keep saying ‘again’, and I’m just wondering what kind of past experiences you’re referring to here.”

She starts chewing her lower lip, evading my gaze.

“Was it an ex of yours?” He probes further. “Or something that happened in one of your foster homes? Or did you—”

“It was a drug dealer, okay?” she blurts out all of a sudden, adding an exasperated sigh. “I was young and deluded. He lied about himself and made me fall in love with him, before he showed his true colors and turned me into his delivery girl. At first, I had no idea what I was doing, and when I realized what was happening, he told me to trust him and that I was just doing him a little favor, like girlfriends do.”

She pauses to cast me a dark look, while she reaches for her sugary drink. Her face distorts in pain when she takes a cautious sip, only to realize that it's still way too hot to drink.

"I'm sorry that hap—"

"And you know what he did when I told him I no longer wanted to be involved in his shady drug business?" she goes on, cutting me off once again. "He threatened me, making sure I wouldn't dare to ever turn him in—and then he dropped me and pushed me out of his life."

Her eyes turn into narrow slits when she adds: "So, if you brought me here to do the same, let's just cut to the chase: I will never tell a soul about your questionable endeavor or your family. No need to threaten me. I want no trouble."

She takes a deep breath, fighting to maintain composure while her fluttering lashes reveal the turmoil inside of her. Her lips are quivering when she forces herself to speak again.

"You are all the same," she mutters, lowering her gaze. "You fool me into loving you and then you get rid of me when I'm no longer of use to you..."

She stops and flinches, as if she'd revealed something that wasn't meant for my ears. Her eyes latch on to mine, searching for the possibility that I missed what she just said. But I heard it loud and clear.

"You're in love with me?"

I don't even try to hide my delight at hearing those words, sending her a warm smile, while she blushes in an instant.

"Well... I mean, I-I think I—"

"I love you, too, Kat," I say.

Her eyes widen for a split second, speaking of surprise and elevation—before she checks herself, rebuilding a wall of protection between us.

“Stop. You’re only saying that because you need me,” she accuses me. “You need me to come back and pretend to be your fiancée.”

“No,” I insist, violently shaking my head. “Forget about that stupid contract, forget about pretending. I want you—for real.”

She frowns, still unwilling to trust me. After all I’ve done and the things she’s just told me about her past, I can’t really blame her for that.

“Look, I understand. And I will not force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with—especially if it means losing you.”

Her eyes are tearing up, and she swallows hard, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I want you in my life, Kat,” I pile on. “I want you like I have never wanted anyone before. I fucking love you, Kat. I have never said that to anyone, not even close. Simply because I have never met anyone like you before. You’re brilliant, funny, unbelievably beautiful in so many ways and I feel hollow and empty without you by my side.”

I sigh, needing to catch my breath before I reach down to my messenger bag and pull out the folder. She watches me as I slap it on the table and pull out the stapled pages of the contract, signed by both of us.

“Here,” I say, as I tear the contract apart in one decisive motion. “The thought of paying you to be at my side disgusts me now. I don’t want to have a contract with you, I want a relationship. I want us to be real.”

She stares at the torn up pages that are now resting on the table between us.

“But what about the Vanguard—”

“Fuck them!” I proclaim. “I’ll find another way to clear my name. I want nothing to do with my unscrupulous family anymore. I’m no longer a Reid, and there are other ways to make that clear to anyone out there.”

“Like... how?” she wants to know, her face lined with serious worry.

“Let that be my problem,” I say, winking at her. “I could just take your name, when we get married.”

She erupts in sudden laughter, tears streaming down her face, born from amusement and sadness alike.

“You’re joking,” she claims, throwing me a coy look, as if to check whether her words ring true or not.

“Maybe,” I say, grinning back at her. “I mean, yes, you’re right. We should take it slow. No need to talk about marriage when we’re just starting to get to know each other—and that’s what I’d like to focus on for now. You, us, building something real. I want to know everything about you, Kat. Everything.”

I force myself to stop talking, realizing that I’m rambling. But I can’t seem to stop.

“I mean, we do love each other, so I guess you could say we’re already in that stage where you... I don’t know, I mean, what stages are there in dating? I have never done this before, so, like, how do we—”

“You’re really serious,” she interjects, saving me from myself. It’s a statement rather than a question, a discovery that just revealed itself in front of her.

I shrug. "Of course I am."

Her face goes slack.

"You love me?" She stutters, still shaking her head. "You really..."

"I love you," I maintain. "And I want to be with you."

She wipes the tears off of her cheeks and sucks in a long breath of air.

"I don't know, I-I have to think about it," she says, her gaze flitting back and forth between me and the table. "I mean you just... I can't. I-I have so many things on my mind right now. I need to find a job, and I need to help..."

She cuts herself off, pressing her lips into a thin line as she shakes her head again.

"It's okay," I say, reaching for her hand over the table. She doesn't recoil when I take her hand in mine, moving closer as my gaze latches on to hers.

"I know you have a lot to figure out, and I will help you as much as I can."

I pause when I notice the wariness in her expression.

"No, not like that," I hurry to clarify. "We no longer have a contract. I'm not paying you to be my girlfriend."

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth.

"Girlfriend," she repeats, smiling as the word seems to cloak her like a warm embrace.

"Yes, I told you we'd be taking a few steps back," I say, hoping to lift her spirits with another wink.

She chuckles and squeezes my hand. "I would like that. To be your girlfriend."

The coy smile she sends me now makes it impossible for me not to kiss her. I know it's a risky move, but when I lean forward to claim her, she doesn't retreat, nor does she tell me to stop. Instead, she leans into me, her tongue engaging in an eager dance with mine, and a soft sigh of relish flees her lips as she succumbs to my touch.

"Just one more question," she interjects, breaking our kiss. "Why did you want to meet me here? What is this place?"

Her lips are still close to mine, her hot breath wafting across my skin as she awaits my response. There is an answer to her question, but I decide to show her, instead of telling her.

I lean back, putting some distance between us, before I reach into my pocket. Closing my hand around the key I find in there, I take a deep breath before I take it out and put it on the table between us.

She crunches her brows, her eyes locked on the key. "What's that for?"

"This." I extend my arms in a wide gesture around the store.

Confusion unfurls on her face. "What do you mean? Why would I need a key to this store?"

"Because it's yours," I reveal. "You are the owner of this store, and this key belongs to you."

Her jaw drops and she looks at me as if I'd just handed her a ticking bomb.

"W-w-what..."

"Don't worry, it's not an obligation," I cut her off. "Nor is it a present, really. It's just a way for you to make your own money—in a way that's more suitable for someone like you."

Her eyes flit back and forth between me and the key, before she turns around to scan the store. *Her* bookstore.

“Or would you rather go back to The Velvet Rooms?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. Of course not.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want you to either.”

“But this is...,” she murmurs. “I don’t even know where to —”

“I can help you,” I insist. “I *want* to help you. I have invested in other business endeavors before, remember? And I’ve never invested in anything I didn’t believe in.”

She turns back to me, still in disbelief. “You... believe in me? With this?”

My nod is as adamant as my voice when I respond: “Are you kidding me? After all you’ve had to overcome—how could I not believe you? You’re smart, capable and you have ambition. You’re one of us.”

“Us?”

I smirk at her and roll up my sleeve to reveal the large wheat ear tattoo on my forearm. She has seen it before, and her brows arch in question when she looks at me.

“The Plutus Society,” I explain. “That’s what we called ourselves back then. For us, Plutus doesn’t only represent wealth, but also the will to get there—ambition, you could say.”

“Who says I want to get rich?” she retorts, tilting her head to the side.

“You want to build something of your own, don’t you?” I implore. “You want to stand on your own two feet and leave

your past behind, right?”

She nods, her lips thinly pressed together.

“Well, then you will get rich, whether you want to or not,” I tell her, adding a little wink to my words. “I know you have it in yourself to achieve your dream. All I’m asking is for you to let me help you get there.”

Kat swallows dryly and lowers her eyes, as she begins to tear up.

“This is too much,” she objects. “You’re too good to me.”

I get up from my seat and dash around the table, going down on my knees right next to her, before I place a finger below her chin to make her look at me. She’s tense and her lips are quivering, but she reaches for my other hand in her lap, squeezing it tightly, before she speaks.

“I love you, Kat,” I tell her, watching the first set of tears rolling down her flushed cheeks. “Please, give this a chance. Give us a chance.”

My heart almost leaps out of my chest when her pretty lips curve into a smile and she nods at me.

“I love you, too, Logan,” she breathes—before our lips meet for another kiss.

A kiss that feels different than all others before, because there’s so much more to it. It feels passionate, trusting, grateful, right, soothing, and... real.

Epilog 1

Kat

~ A few months later ~

“She must be so nervous.”

My words are almost drowned by the noise surrounding us. There are a lot more people here than I expected. All of them dressed in fancy evening gowns and upscale suits, as they parade their wealth like proud peacocks.

Logan turns his head in the same direction I’m looking, shrugging as he spots the hosts of tonight’s opening gala—his college friend Gabe together with his girlfriend Ella. It’s her occasion more than his, because she’s the founder of the green foundation that is being celebrated tonight. I have only met Ella a couple of times and she’s always had a certain tension about her, a seriousness that can come off as cold, but she has never looked *this* alarmed.

It’s understandable, though. I don’t envy her for having to give a speech in front of all these people in just a few more minutes.

“She’ll be okay,” Logan says next to me. “I’m sure Gabe prepped her. He’s good with this stuff.”

“Still, I wouldn’t want to be her right now.”

A smile appears on Ella’s face when she spots us, but it’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

I never had to give a speech at an event like this, but I can still relate to her tension. After all, I know what it’s like to build something of your own. The work that goes into turning your own vision into reality and the stress of releasing the fruit of your work into the world, ready to be judged by others. It’s not easy, to say the least.

“You don’t look so chill either,” Logan remarks, when he turns back to me. “Still not used to it, huh?”

We share a chuckle, and he wraps his arm around me, possessively pulling me close to himself, before he plants a loving kiss on my forehead.

“I promise this will be a bit more fun than what you’re used to,” he says, his gaze scanning the festive hall. “You’ll see.”

“These galas sure are tiring,” I murmur. “I’m glad we never had to do this for Books & Brews.”

I’m still proud of that name, to be honest. It took me a while to come up with it, almost as long as it took me to accept Logan’s offer. He didn’t want to call it a gift, because the store needed a lot of work and it would be entirely up to me to turn it into a successful business—with Logan’s help. It was a bargain, because it had been neglected for years by its previous owners, and the revenue has been spiraling downward, despite its favorable location. Physical book stores struggle due to their strong competition on the Internet, so they have to offer their customers something that an online store can’t provide.

That's why Books & Brews isn't simply a place to buy books, it's also a place to enjoy books and find a community to share that passion. We have regular events, mostly book clubs and readings with local authors, plus a little coffee and tea club for the elderly. Mrs. Warden was the first member of that club and she has been a great help to get the word around in her large social network. My store also has a heavy focus on women's fiction and we mostly feature female authors in the store window—something that has been well received by our growing number of regulars.

I had a lot to learn about running my own business and I've never worked this hard in my life before, but I've also never been happier. We're still in the red, because renovating the store and marketing cost a lot of money, but if things keep going the way they are right now, we will turn a profit soon.

"Another?" Logan asks, holding up his empty champagne flute. "Gabe said we shouldn't hold back. Today is a big day."

"Oh, yes, please," I say, and he lets go of me and waves over one of the waiters who are meandering through the room with silver trays.

We clink glasses and I notice how Logan sends a wink across the room after he's taken his first sip. I follow his gaze and realize that he's looking at Gabe, who sends us a smile that's just as short-lived as Ella's before.

"He looks nervous, too," I notice.

"Oh, he has every reason to be nervous," Logan says.

I throw him a quizzical look. "How so? Is he giving a speech, too? I thought this was Ella's thing?"

Logan just grins, while shaking his head.

"You'll see," he says vaguely.

I roll my eyes at him, and I make sure he sees it. He's teasing me, so it's only fair that I tease him back—and I'll gladly accept any punishment he has in mind for me. There's nothing sweeter than being *punished* by him.

"Looking to get in trouble again, are you?" he asks, raising a promising eyebrow at me.

"Oh, so it's okay for you to tease me, but I can't tease back?" I retort.

"I'm not teasing."

"Then why are you being so secretive?" I probe. "You know I hate secrets!"

Laughing, he wraps his arm around me again and pulls me closer, adding a gentle squeeze before he says, "This is not my secret to tell. Just wait and see."

If his aim is to arouse my curiosity, he's succeeding. I look up at him through narrowed eyes, trying to read the expression on his face, but he's giving me nothing. He's not even looking at me, but keeps his gaze fixed on Gabe all the way across the hall. I follow his eyes and wonder what Gabe might be up to—before an idea dawns on me.

"Oh, is he going to—"

My question gets drowned in a round of applause that erupts when Ella walks onto the stage, a microphone in hand and a nervous smile on her face. I turn around and join the commotion, while a sigh leaves my lips.

I guess I really will have to wait and see.

Epilog 2

Logan

~ Three months later ~

“Nervous, sir?” Christopher asks as he holds the door open for me.

I just throw him a short look, neither nodding nor shaking my head, before I climb into the car. He knows very well that I am a little tense today—to say the least—and the grin on his face is evidence enough.

He closes the door and walks around the car with swift steps to take his seat behind the wheel. I take a deep inhale when he starts the engine and we start rolling toward the hospital, where Kat and Mrs. Warden are waiting for me.

I still hate that Kat was so reluctant to tell me about Mrs. Warden’s health concerns at first. I had to worm it out of her because she felt uncomfortable about asking for help. She still acts as if money is an issue for her, even though it hasn’t been in months. Yes, her bookstore is just starting to turn a profit and when it comes to helping Mrs. Warden she’s been relying on my help for the most part, but it’s not like I mind. On the contrary. I was annoyed at the fact that she spent all of the

down payment to help her old teacher before telling me about any of it.

I hate that it was still so hard for her to trust me—but I can't really blame her, I guess. We didn't start off on the right foot, and as much as I wish things had been different, I can't change the past. I can't change where I come from, I can't change my family, and I can't change the fact that there's blood on my hands, same as my brothers.

But I can do better in the future, and I intend to—with Kat at my side.

She should have opened up to me about her old teacher's burdens much sooner, but I see why that was hard for her. However, now that I know about it, there was no way I could have looked away, not with someone who is this important to Kat. And Mrs. Warden is a treasure for sure. Her view of me is not tainted by my background simply because she doesn't know about it—and that's refreshing, to say the least. She welcomed me with open arms when Kat introduced the two of us for the first time, but it took a while to convince her that she was worth saving. That woman has a heart of gold when it comes to others, but refused to believe that she may deserve our help. Sometimes, it's hard to believe that people like her still exist in the world. Kat wouldn't be where she is now without Mrs. Warden—that alone is enough for me to do everything I can to save that woman's life. It's quite unlikely that she will ever go into full remission, but the least we can do is try everything that money can buy.

Her therapy has been going well, until recently, when her health declined dramatically and they saw it best to admit her to the hospital to do some extra tests and keep an eye on her. It's hard to tell what the future holds for her, which may be the

reason why she has been so adamant for me to go ahead with... this. This huge fucking step I am about to take.

As Christopher steers the car into the parking lot of the hospital, I can't help but wonder whether this really is the best day to do it. Mrs. Warden was so excited when I talked to her about it. Seeing that she is the closest to a parental figure that Kat ever had, I only deemed it appropriate to talk to her before taking any further steps.

And now, I'm about to turn this plan into a reality. It will be a surprise for Kat, that's for sure. She thinks I'm only here to pick her up and say hello to Mrs. Warden real quick.

But that's not what's going to happen in that hospital room.

"Good luck, sir," Christopher says as he opens the door for me, adding a cheeky wink.

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" I ask him, and he slaps me on the back.

"Who wouldn't," he responds. "It's a joyous occasion, isn't it?"

"Well, if all goes well..."

"It will, sir, I am sure," he says, adding a final tap on my shoulder before he sends me off. "I will be waiting here."

"Thank you, Christopher."

My pulse is racing as I head through the hospital corridors, with my fingers clenched around the small bouquet of flowers in my hands. They are for Mrs. Warden, but now I'm beginning to think I should have brought some for Kat, too. Will she be disappointed? I hope not, since I have something much more valuable for her...

Jesus, I need to calm the fuck down. I hardly recognize myself right now.

I take one last deep breath, before I open the door to her room. It's a very nice private room at one of the best hospitals in the area, so I know we'll be alone, and I don't have to worry about any other patients disturbing us.

"Ah, there he is!" Mrs. Warden beams when she sees me walking through the door.

She's looking good today. Her skin is not quite as pale and her cheeks not as sunken in as last time when I saw her. It looks like she dolled herself up a bit, actually. Her cheeks are blush with color, her lashes have been dipped in black, and she's wearing lipstick.

"Hey," Kat says, her voice soft and soothing.

She jumps up from her chair and wraps her arms around my neck, while placing a quick peck on my lips.

"Oh, you brought flowers!" she says when she sees the bouquet in my hands.

"Um, yes, they're actually for—"

"Awww, yes, of course! That's so sweet of you. Mary, look!"

She spins around and steps aside, pointing at me as I take a step forward and present the flowers to Mrs. Warden.

She casts me a knowing smile, and shakes her head.

"Oh, young man," she says. "You're making me blush."

Even with all the makeup on her face, I can tell that she is, in fact, blushing.

“Just a little to lighten up your room,” I say, and the smile on Mrs. Warden’s face widens.

“I’ll get them in some water,” Kat announces and takes the bouquet from my hands.

She rushes into the adjacent bathroom, leaving me alone with Mrs. Warden for a few moments.

“So, today?” Mrs. Warden asks in a whisper. “You promised! I can’t keep this in any longer.”

She peers over to the bathroom door, before she adds: “Besides, I would still like to be around to see her face and—”

“You will be around for quite a while, Mrs. Warden,” I interrupt. “We are going to make sure of that.”

She laughs, as she reaches for my hand, providing it with a gentle squeeze.

“I sure hope so,” she says, her voice still subdued. “You didn’t have to bribe me with flowers, you know? I already gave you my blessing, didn’t I?”

She winks at me, and now I’m the one laughing, nervously.

I clear my throat, but just as I’m about to respond, Kat darts back into the room, and I leave it at a simple nod—causing Mrs. Warden to grin broadly.

“Here we go!” Kat exclaims, as she places the flowers on the nightstand next to Mrs. Warden’s bed.

“Lovely,” Mrs. Warden comments, a benevolent smile gracing her face. “Just like the two of you. Taking such good care of me and my Johnny. How is he doing, by the way?”

Johnny, her black cat, has been living with us ever since Mrs. Warden got admitted to the hospital. He doesn’t seem to

care about Kat too much, which seems to be mutual—but he has taken a liking to me. I can hardly sit down anywhere without him jumping on my lap, asking to be petted. I’ve never had a pet of my own, so this is a new experience for me, and I can’t say I hate it. That furry little dude seems to approach me with the same impartiality and goodwill as his friendly human.

“He’s doing well,” Kat responds. “Still fawning over my boyfriend like crazy.”

Mrs. Wardens laughs. “Well, my Johnny always had a nose for good people. You found a good man in Logan.”

Kat smiles up at me. “Yeah, I think so, too.”

I’m pretty sure I’m *this* close to blushing myself. Me, a good person? Well, I try to be. I had given up on the Vanguard Society ever since that dreadful night at the gala, and was surprised when they offered me a place in their ranks, despite how that evening went. I could have become a member then, and I was also invited to become an investor of the Residence du Marché project, just like I’d hoped.

But I declined. I’d lied to them, and I knew I would have to keep up with that lie if I was to become a member of their illustrious club. How could I do that when Kat was no longer wearing her ring, when we would have had to keep up the charade that brought us together in the first place? I didn’t want that. I wanted to do things right with Kat—and that was more important than any investment opportunity or green-washing my name through illicit methods. Kat’s ring is gone, and so is our lie. I placed it on her finger under false pretenses.

Today, however, is not going to be like that.

I clear my voice, and Mrs. Warden and I exchange a look. She reads my face perfectly, turning to Kat, as I take a step back, away from the bed.

“It’s so nice of you two to visit me so often,” she says, addressing Kat to distract her for a moment. “And so wonderful to see you this happy, too, Katherine. You’re doing so well, aren’t you?”

“Well, he plays a huge part in tha—”

Kat is cut off mid-sentence, as she turns around—and finds me down on my knees, holding up a little jewelry box that’s been sitting in my desk for weeks. Her lips remain parted, forming a perfect O as she stares at me in disbelief.

“I’ve wanted to do right by you for a long time,” I begin, as I open the box. “Katherine, you are the light I never knew I needed. You are the smartest, most interesting and most beautiful woman I have ever met. You are a fighter, stronger than I ever had to be. I admire your determination, your good heart, your appreciative nature, and your brilliant mind. I can’t imagine a life without you anymore—and I hope I won’t have to. Because, Katherine Davis, today I am asking you to become my wife. Officially. For real. Because I have never loved anyone like I love you.”

Kat remains frozen like a pillar of salt, staring at the platinum ring before her eyes. It’s a small brilliant-cut diamond center stone, very elegant and subtle, just like the one she pointed out at the Cartier store back then. But this one is tailor-made, just for her.

Behind her back, I can see Mrs. Warden clasping her hands together as tears are swelling in her eyes. It almost seems like time is standing still, each of us holding our breaths as we await Kat’s response.

“You-you...,” she stutters, before she drops down on her knees herself, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“You just want my name, admit it!” she laughs under tears, squeezing me so tightly that I’m bereft of breath.

I pull her in a close embrace, feeling the beat of her heart against mine, as I say: “No, I want *you*, Kat. You by my side. Forever.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, girl, will you give him a proper yes!” Mrs. Wardens joins in.

Kat laughs and plants a kiss on my cheek, then another, and another.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she exclaims—taking a massive weight off my mind.

“And just so you know,” I tell her, taking her beautiful face between my hands. “I honestly wouldn’t mind taking your name and becoming Mr. Davis. We are a family now.”

Her lips are quivering when she stares at me through watery eyes.

“A family, yes,” she breathes. “You are my family, Logan.”

Thank you for reading!

Can’t get enough of the Billionaire Pact boys? Did you read the story of Gabe, yet? Check out his story in [Billion Dollar Chance](#) here – or [click here for a free sneak preview!](#)

Curious to read Chase’s story? [Billion Dollar Enemy](#) will be released on November 7th, 2023 and you can already pre-order your copy [here!](#)

And if you like Dark Romances, don't miss out on [**DEEP**](#), the story of Logan's younger sister Grace [**here!**](#)

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Billion Dollar Chance

BLURB

Gabriel Boulder is filthy rich, powerful beyond belief, painfully irresistible—and the ex who almost ruined me seven years ago.

Today, Gabe has the world at his feet, while I have nothing to show for myself other than a never-ending list of screw-ups. Just as I get a chance to salvage my pathetic career, he pops back into my life—and I need his support to get what I want.

Working for your ex—what could possibly go wrong?

But how can I resist his allure when it's all still there? The depth of his dark green eyes, the valleys of his chiseled chest, palpable even under the thick fabric of his tailor-made suit...

One passionate night is all it takes to rekindle the potent flame between us—and it doesn't take long until we burn ourselves, just like we did back then.

We have played this game before—but the rules have changed.

And so have we.

Chapter 1

Ella

“Am I making the biggest mistake of my life?”

She should know. The girl in the mirror should know what she’s doing. She’s twenty-two years old and is about to graduate from one of the best universities in the country.

She should damn well know what she’s doing with her life—shouldn’t she?

“Answer me!” I hiss at my reflection.

I’m obviously losing my mind.

I turn on the faucet and lean over the sink to splash some cold water on my face. My cheeks are glowing with heat, provoked by stress and way too much beer.

I have to tell him, I know that. But how can I tell him anything if I’m still not a hundred percent sure? What if I change my mind, again?

Would he even care? He was always the one who refused to commit, the one who refused to call himself my boyfriend in front of his friends. That was our deal—as requested by him.

A knock on the door reminds me that I need to get going. There’s only one restroom for women in this bar, and I’ve been occupying the stall for an eternity.

I dry my face and take a deep breath, as I cast myself one last angry stare—before I turn on my heels and open the door.

“Sorry,” I whisper at the girls, as I squeeze past the line that has formed in front of the door.

I meander through the crowded bar and return to the booth, where my not-quite-boyfriend is sitting with two of his closest friends.

“Everything okay?” Gabe wants to know, as I sink down on the bench next to him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reply without looking at him. “Just a long line. You know, girls and restrooms.”

I throw him a smile and lift my beer to clink glasses with him. He goes along with it, but the look on his face remains cautious, concerned even.

I need to tell him something... eventually.

I’m met with an even more troubling look from the other side of the table when I put my beer back down. Chase, who is sitting across from me, is one of Gabe’s closest friends—and he makes no secret about his disdain for me. I don’t think he ever liked me, just like Logan, who is sitting next to him.

And I can’t even blame them. I can’t say I’m happy with myself right now.

This is the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make, and it would be so much easier if things between me and Gabe would be different. If things were clear between us, if I knew that...

“I’m going out for a smoke,” Logan announces, before he rises from his seat. “Anybody joining?”

“You know my answer,” Chase replies. “I prefer a clear head.”

Logan huffs and turns to look at Gabe, who immediately shakes his head.

“Maybe later,” he says. “But I’m sure Ella would love to.”

He winks at me and looks surprised when I shake my head in response.

“Maybe later,” I echo his reply. “I’m sticking to beer for now.”

“Fine,” Logan sighs and leaves. I’m sure he’s relieved that I won’t be joining him.

“So, you still haven’t decided, huh?” Chase implores as soon as Logan is out.

He regards me with one eyebrow raised, his resentment a little too obvious.

“Dude, let it go” Gabe reprimands him. “There’s still time.”

“Well, yeah, but not a lot of it,” Chase retorts, casting me an angry look. “Besides, I don’t understand what’s so hard about this? Most people have made their decision by now.”

I swallow dryly. “I... I have a lot to consider.”

My gaze trails over to Gabe, and when he looks back at me, I feel my heart shattering into a thousand pieces all over again.

I can’t read him. After all this time, I still can’t read his face at all. Do I see hope in his eyes? Longing? Heartbreak? Or is there nothing but indifference? It’s impossible to tell.

He never said he loved me, and he was the one who encouraged me to apply wherever they have the best graduate programs. He told me not to take him into account, and it hurt each and every time. Because how can I ignore his existence? How can I ignore the past year? So much has happened between us, yet...

And now he's smiling.

"Why so glum?" he asks. "You can't go wrong either way, right?"

My mouth drops open, but I'm bereft of words and can barely muster a sad smile in response.

That's how he is. So nonchalant and cool, as if this wouldn't affect him at all—no matter what choice I make. He says he doesn't want to be a factor, and he definitely acts like it. But it's not that easy, is it? Not for me, at least.

It hurts. It hurts that he doesn't seem to care. Sometimes I wish he would get angry, or sad, or desperate or... just anything. An emotion. An opinion. He must have one, right?

The tightness in my throat returns, threatening to choke me with unwanted tears.

"Actually, a smoke does sound good right now."

I struggle to get out of the booth as fast as I can, away from Gabe and his damn act. If it even is an act. Maybe he really doesn't care as much about me as I care about him?

"Enjoy."

That is all he says, as he watches me walk away.

Chapter 2

Gabe

~Seven years later ~

I hate waiting. Always have, always will. It's beneath me. People are willing to pay a lot of money for my time, because it's of high value to them.

I am of high value.

And I always make sure that everyone else has to wait for me. In less than ten minutes, I will have to advise the World Resources Institute on their climate plan for DC. But instead of sitting in the meeting room like a forgotten dog, I linger alone in my private office, absentmindedly playing with a paper crane on my mahogany desk. Old-fashioned, mighty in size, and with a price tag beyond reason, this desk is the perfect representation of my position in this world.

It stands out. Just like me.

Unlike most people in here, I don't *need* this job. I have no reason to spend my valuable time in this stuffy government building, surrounded by people who are either idealistic and naive or cunning and power hungry.

I could be out in the Hamptons, surrounded by my own little harem, each girl prettier than the next, indulging in exquisite champagne while lounging next to the pool of my lavish summer home.

But I'm here, sitting in my unimposing office, waiting for a meeting that promises to be nothing but another time sink. And while I know what brought me here in the first place (my insatiable need for power and recognition, that much I'm willing to admit), I'm beginning to question the point of all of this. Yes, it's nice to see how much weight my words seem to carry—but do I really need their approval as much as I used to? Is this really why I'm still here?

Or is it because of *her*?

I haven't spoken to Ella in years, but her credulous ambitions may have rubbed off on me more than I care to admit.

She would probably accuse me of playing an unwarranted power game. And she wouldn't be wrong. Hell, I didn't even look at today's schedule or the many, many notes my assistant clipped to the folder on my desk. You can call that arrogance; I call it efficiency.

I can't suppress an annoyed moan as I glance at my newest Jaeger LeCoultre watch for the umpteenth time. Four minutes until the meeting begins, around two minutes before my assistant, Therese, will pop her face through the door and tell me that it's time to go.

A message pops up on my phone, promising a welcome distraction. It's a text from Aston, an old friend from college and member of the illustrious Plutus Society. We took pride in that name and the meaning behind it, even though it was always just the four of us—Aston, Logan, Chase and myself. A group of four ambitious outliers, united in our joint striving for wealth.

"I can still count on you for this weekend, right?" Aston writes. "Logan and Chase are both a firm yes. Don't let us down!"

I smirk at his reprimanding words, and since he sent them to our group chat, he is quickly backed up by Logan, who adds: "And don't be fucking late!"

I'm in the middle of typing my response when Chase chimes in, interjecting that he will be traveling thousands of miles across the country to make this reunion happen, so I better manage to make the short drive up north.

As if there was any way I would miss Aston's 30th birthday. He's the first of us to hit that milestone. A milestone that holds special meaning for the four of us.

"You guys need to chill," I tell them. "I said I would come and I will. But I won't be driving, that's for sure."

"Taking the new baby out for a ride?" Chase wants to know, hitting the nail on the head.

"Exactly," I respond. "Why drive when I just treated myself to a new Gulfstream jet? That beautiful machine spends too much time on the ground anyway."

"Besides, driving is for peasants," Logan agrees, followed by high five emoji, while Aston reminds us that we still share the same responsibility for pollution control as everybody else.

Some things never change.

"Mr. Boulder." Therese's soft spoken voice yanks me out of my nostalgic musings. "It's time."

Startled, I look up from my phone and find my assistant peeking through the open door, her black locks tied in a conservative updo and her lips shimmering with a fresh layer of bright pink lipstick.

“Thank you, Therese,” I reply, rising from my chair.

Therese is already out of sight as I march down the hallway, the folder tucked under my right arm while I type one last response to the boys before I have to divert my focus elsewhere.

“Gentlemen,” I greet the room, my eyes still locked on my display. “Sorry for the wait.”

I set the phone to silent and force a polite smile on my face before I look up and find the room fully occupied. I’m met with expressions of slight annoyance from my colleagues and nervous tension from our visitors, a blend of government advisers and starry-eyed idealists, hoping for our approval.

And *her*.

Ella Whitt, my kind-of-girlfriend from college is sitting at the far end of the table, her cheeks as red as her blazing hair. She’s the only person in the room who is not looking at me.

And the only person whose presence makes a difference.

A huge fucking difference.

End of preview

[Click here](#) to read the rest of [Billion Dollar Chance](#).

ABOUT LINNEA MAY

Linnea May loves to read and write about strong alpha men with loaded bank accounts and skeletons in their closets. Her heroes are as sexy as they are broken – only to be fixed by the smart & captivating heroines who cross their paths. She loves twisted and dark tales that push boundaries, and there's always a hint of kink in even the sweetest of her stories.

She lives in Europe with her own hero, and her cats Pi and Zeta.

And she loves squirrels.

Be sure to follow her on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) and [subscribe to her newsletter](#), so you never miss her newest updates, ARC opportunities, sales & giveaways!

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