

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 309



Tempting to
TOUCH

FLORA FERRARI

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TEMPTING TO TOUCH

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 309

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

TEMPTING TO TOUCH

This isn't the woman I wanted to be.

With my dad gone and my mom sick, it's up to me to take care of my little brother.

Jobs that lead to nowhere have become the norm.

It's always just been me, and I don't have anyone else.

That is until Eddie Snow comes back into my life. He was once my dad's friend, but my dad is long gone, locked behind bars.

Eddie now owns the strip club that I work at as a waitress, and I want him more than anything.

Of course, he's almost twenty years older than me.

It's all just in my head.

Eddie could be with any woman in the world, so why would he want me?

I'm honestly nothing much to look at. Sure, I have a pretty face, but my comfort is food because of all the stress I've been under. It has left me a bit curvy with some extra pounds I don't appreciate.

When my life is put in danger, though, Eddie proves that he's not going anywhere.

Eddie just might be my savior and my sin all in one.

** Tempting To Touch is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Kathleen

I ignore the whistling and the cat calls. I've gotten really good at that.

I concentrate on the cold bottle in my hand and the tray of empty plates in the other. They teeter with the uncertainty of my balancing act. The dark amber color of the liquor sloshes in the thick glass, heady and potent.

Just behind me, the glittering dancers writhe and twist against the shiny, metal poles that rise out of the long stage.

My focus has become otherworldly as I make my way, dragging me out of my mind and making it so that I can forget I'm in the dark club and that I'm in the midst of a world that I would never have thought I would be in.

In no part of my mind had I ever imagined I would be working in a strip club.

The pay is pretty good, even though the hours are hell on me.

I'm happy that I've had a shorter night. I'm compiling my grocery list of things I need in my head as I wonder if Stevie has fallen asleep yet or if he's still awake.

After the song for the girls' finishes, I try to hurry to the kitchen. The dancers are already grabbing their money off the stage, and I lean across one of my tables as I pass by, remembering to scoop up a few of the bills scattered across the

dark wood. I stuff the money into the tattered pocket of my purple, well-used apron.

The men are still at the table, and when their eyes turn to me, they look hungry.

This is the part of this job I hate the most. The men have no respect or remorse at all.

I remember how some of the bouncers sometimes keep a good chunk of the scattered money after it's collected, at least from the dancers. I've seen girls walk out with a grand in their pocket. Their bills paid for the week.

For me, my tips are usually my own. I guess that's a plus as a waitress here.

If I'm being completely honest, it's incredible to watch other women take an entire check from patrons with little to no effort on their end.

Three drunk men are waving money at me from a table in the center of the room.

I push down the urge to yell at the guy who smacks my ass as I approach, easily slipping the fifty out of the man's other hand while he seems distracted.

I hurriedly make my way out of the main room with its dimly lit booths and tables, blinking against the glare of the flashing neon lights from the high stage.

I drop my tray of dirty plates in the kitchen, and the cook nods solemnly at me.

It isn't until I'm safely inside the dressing room with a hoard of lingerie-clad women that I really let myself breathe. This is the only place where I feel safe.

I lean against the table, letting it take my weight as I stare at myself in the mirror.

My hair is long, and the sandy blonde color looks like gold in the soft light. Big, sad-looking green eyes stare back at me, and my reflection blinks thick, dark lashes at me. The soft angles of my pale face threaten to give away my real age.

I shake myself, pushing the thoughts from my mind. No one can know about it.

I still had glitter scattered over my entire body from the explosion of the sparkle bomb that happened when I was standing too close to the stage to avoid it. It makes me feel like one of the dancers, blending in.

Why the club still does the glitter-filled sparkle bomb is beyond me, but the other women loved glitter, and the men on the floor exploded with shouts and applause.

I see the glint in the eye of the patrons as the dancers move for them.

Sometimes I find myself wishing that I'm one of them on stage, twisting my body to and fro in the dark and captivating the men around me like a siren on the sea.

Instead, I always get the strangest customers who want the dancers but decide to settle for their waitress instead. Earlier had been an example of that sort of thing.

The man was a somewhat regular. I've seen him almost every day since I started at *The Scarlet Lounge*. He has always been too handsy, in my opinion, but the money is usually worth it for me. I need it more than I need to worry about anything else.

The man has always paid in hundreds. Today though, after I handed him his hot chili wings, he decided to slip an extra bill into my tiny, tight shorts, smacking my ass with a loud, boisterous laugh that made my skin crawl where I stood by him.

Of course, the bouncers had been too busy to see it happen, or so I assume.

I let out a sigh as I snatch one of Chrissy's make-up wipes. I know that I'm rubbing harder than I need to, but I feel as if I'm dirty as I scrub at the glitter on my skin.

"Whoa, easy there, Kat," Chrissy calls out as she moves to sit beside me at her table, taking the wipe from me gently. "You're going to scrub a hole in your skin."

Good, I think as the familiar knot forms in my belly. So much on my shoulders.

“Tomorrow’s your day off, right, kid?” Chrissy asks as she opens the rubbing alcohol bottle, squirting a little bit on the make-up wipe.

She takes my arm in her thin hand and starts gently rubbing the wipe across the glitter that is still stuck there on my skin. The flakes begin to fall away as she does.

“Yeah,” I tell her, nodding. “Stevie’s birthday is coming up, though, you know.”

“Oh, how old is our little guy?” Chrissy asks as she determinedly works her magic.

“He’s going to be ten years old this year,” I tell her, hearing the fondness in my own voice. “I can’t even believe it. It seems like he was so young a year ago.”

“Well, I’m sure all the guys and girls will want to pitch in to get him something,” Chrissy answers. She stands up straight, smoothing down her brassy, short hair.

“Chrissy...,” I begin, shaking my head. I know what she’s getting at quickly enough.

“I’m not saying we’re going to buy his birthday gift for him,” Chrissy corrects me before I can even start. “He’s your brother, kitty kat. We love the little guy. It would be nice to get him something to show our love this year, right?”

I sigh, slumping in Chrissy’s chair as she stands behind me in the mirror. “Maybe we could give him a small party or something. But, not here,” I quickly add, not putting it past Chrissy to try and host a kid’s birthday party in a strip club.

“I was going to suggest some other place like the park since we know that Stevie likes the outdoors so much,” Chrissy states in a matter-of-fact tone. “But if you want your ten-year-old brother partying in a den of sin, then, by all means, feel free to do so,” she stated in a playful tone, discarding the wipe covered in glitter.

“Thanks, Chrissy,” I reply, feeling relief flood me at her support. I reach a hand up that still shimmers faintly with glitter to squeeze the thin-fingered hand on my shoulder. “I have no idea what I would do without you.”

“Crash and burn, kitty kat,” Chrissy answers with a slightly crooked smile as she turns to her own mirror to touch up her make-up.

“I guess so,” I tell her with a sigh, smiling ruefully at her in the mirror.

I stand up, letting out a long breath as I make my way out of the room.

“Oh! And Kathleen,” she calls to my retreating form as she applies more eyeliner. “Myers says that you need to start telling him when a patron grabs your ass,” she says, looking at me in the mirror. “My man can spot an unwelcome grab when it happens. He can’t kick those people out when you don’t tell him about it.”

Randall Myers is a beefy, good-hearted bouncer that Chrissy is dating.

I sigh, nodding. “He’s not going to make me give back the fifty, is he? I have it.”

“Keep it, baby doll,” Chrissy replies, winking. “As an annoyance fee.”

I shake my head, letting out a snort as I head to the locker room for my things.

Tomorrow is my day off from the club, but I plan on working at the diner down the street, and I can’t afford not to show up again. I usually work early on weekdays, and I bring Stevie into the diner with me. He gets to eat with my free meal for the day, and then I use the ten-minute smoke break to get Stevie to the bus stop for school on time.

Mrs. Maxine is the retired woman who lives across the hallway from my brother and me. She’s a sweet, older woman who took a liking to my brother immediately, telling me that she had a grandson about his age that she didn’t get to see very much since her son moved out of town.

It reminded me of my dad when he left us with our sick mom. Mrs. Maxine watches Stevie whenever I'm working at the club. She thinks that I'm doing professional ballet dancing at different venues and working as a waitress, and I haven't had the heart to tell her about the strip club.

Unlike downtown's exciting, urban atmosphere, the West End of Atlanta is an unforgiving place. I could remember living there for a while before my mom got sick and my dad left us destitute. Now, I never walk down the street to the bus at night without a hand clutched around my little cartridge of mace.

I'm used to getting cat-called at the lounge, most of the men offering to take me for the night. They see me leaving, and they just assume I'm a dancer.

The dark makes men brave, and it makes them stupid.

It's not that I'm scared, I know it's stupid to walk alone at night. But I don't really have any other choice.

As I walk across the parking lot, I ensure that my long coat is tucked over my revealing outfit.

I can hear the other women leaving the club as others clock in for their shifts, though none of them would be able to see me walking across the parking lot.

With all the propositions I've received in the past year working at the strip club, I can honestly say I have never been propositioned in the club's parking lot.

But, just then, I jump in surprise when a guy stops and moves in front of me—some young guy, no doubt in a frat or something if the backward hat is anything to go by.

"You're drunk," I tell him in a firm voice when the guy laughs through his slurring.

"I'm not too drunk for you, baby," he tries to counter, pointing at me.

"You're too young for me," I lie, moving to get by as my heart thumps hard in fear. I'm startled once again when the guy roughly grabs my elbow.

“Good enough to take that fifty from me, huh? Like some slut, only to act like a fucking prude now,” the red-eyed man harshly spits at me.

Now I can see that he’s the man from earlier and he followed me out of the club. In my mind, I can see flashes of stripper horror stories about men following them.

Despite my terror, I wrench my arm out of his sweaty grip, immediately heading back toward the strip club’s backstage entrance, where I know I’ll be safe.

When one of the guy’s friends makes a grab for me, I yank my pepper spray out of my pocket and point it directly in the guy’s face.

My hand shakes, but I can only think of my brother, who will have no one to care for him if these men decide to hurt me.

“I swear to God, I will empty this whole can in your eyes if you don’t back the hell off,” I tell him, my voice unwavering.

I’m sick of being seen as an object.

“You’re a bitch,” one of them spits, stumbling toward me on wobbling legs.

“Right, I’m a bitch for not wanting to get taken by three rich jerks who probably have daddy issues,” I snap at them as I back slowly toward the club’s door.

“I’ve called the cops just so you know,” a new, clear voice suddenly adds to the conversation, almost startling me into spraying the pepper spray in my hand.

I turn my head quickly to see a man in a slick suit smoking a cigarette. I can see that the guy is actually standing the legally posted distance from the entrance to the strip club—which no one ever does. He looks as if he belongs right there.

He flicks the butt of his cigarette away, extinguishing the flame with the sole of his shoe as he moves into the parking lot. He belongs in downtown Atlanta, with a denim-and-leather jacket that is clearly expensive, as well as the big shiny watch that’s wrapped around the man’s wrist. His fingers are long and strong looking, and his long, dark hair appears soft

and immaculately untangled. Dark eyes glimmer faintly under the street lamps. He looks like a heavy metal heartthrob from the 80s.

“I said, I called the cops,” the man repeats, his words making the guys jump.

The man steps further into the light, and my heart nearly stops. He is absolutely breathtakingly gorgeous.

Sharp cheekbones and a soft-looking mouth make up what seems to be the man of my dreams. Despite the terrifying situation, I almost know for sure that I want this man. A wave of safety washes over me with him.

“Man, let’s go,” one of the guys says to his other two friends, sounding disgruntled.

The guy with the cap gives me a fleeting look before leaving with the other two, and the three of them climb into an expensive car with shiny, metal rims.

I let out a heavy breath, turning to look at the man with his handsome good looks.

I realize that I don’t hear the wail of sirens or the screech of tires on the pavement. There are only the normal sounds of the city, far off and unintelligible.

“You bluffed,” I state as I push my canister of mace back into my jacket pocket.

The man arches one of his smooth eyebrows at me, silently asking me to explain.

“It only takes the cops a few minutes to arrive on the scene in the west end,” I answer, pointing it out to him. “And there’s a cop car across the street at the diner right there.”

The model-looking man glances across at the diner, catching sight of the cruiser parked in the lot with the other cars there. He lets out a snort, a small smile pulling his mouth up. “I figured those idiots wouldn’t be able to tell my bluff.”

Something about him is strangely familiar to me. I can’t shake the thought.

“Well, thanks,” I tell him, nodding. “I should keep a better look out for would-be kidnappers from now on, huh?” I try to playfully call behind me as I walk, noticing that the guy was staring at me and still feeling shaken by before.

“Wait,” the man calls after me, hurried footsteps following after me. “I wanted to ask you something. Can you slow down for a minute? I want to talk.”

“I can’t deal with this again tonight,” I answer him, feeling disappointed and wishing that Mr. Tall-dark-and-handsome had turned out to be a good guy and not just running the competition off. “I’m really not in the mood. Please.”

“What? What do you mean?” The guy questions me in confusion as he gets closer to me, reaching out a hand to me. “Not in the mood for what? I just want to....”

“I have to get home, and I’m not one of the dancers,” I almost snap as I turn to look at the beautiful man.

He is more attractive up close, and I’m let down. Of course, this man that I feel so enamored by just wants me as the others had.

“Wait...what?” The man looks very confused, which makes me confused.

“I’m not going home with you, okay?” I tell him quickly, trying not to cry.

“Jesus, Kathleen,” the man almost curses under his breath, wide-eyed.

I look up quickly, heart hammering. How does this man know my name?

“You don’t remember me,” the man says, his voice sounding hurt.

I stare at him, still feeling that vague sense that I know this man. There’s some sort of memory in my head struggling to crawl its way to the surface.

As close as he is, I can smell him, and he smells of leather.

It awakens a memory in my head of this man looking over his shoulder as my mom holds my hand. He's waving at me, though the look of him is fuzzy in my shifting thoughts.

It doesn't make any sense to me.

Something in me knows him though and I don't want anyone from my past coming back to see me the way I am now. He's too familiar not to know me.

"I don't know," I tell him, blinking. "Should I know who you are?"

Part of me wonders if this is just some elaborate way to get my guard down so that he can get closer to me, maybe get "friendly" or "lucky."

Men see I work at a place like *The Scarlet Lounge* and assume I want to sell myself quickly to anyone. None of them are ever looking for anything real. But no, I know this man, and I can remember him with shorter hair and tanned skin.

Something about him makes me feel safe, though, and I don't think he means me any harm. Something about him is like a warm blanket, and I want to wrap myself around him.

"I'm Edward Snow," he says quietly, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "Your dad called me Eddie back when we worked together. I own this club now. As of last night."

CHAPTER TWO

Eddie

Kathleen Henderson is so different from what I remember.

She's grown so very beautiful, and my mind immediately latches onto the idea of being hers. I can see us together, locked in an embrace.

This is the woman I want to be mine. This is the one I want by my side, always.

I can vaguely recall her mother's short, blonde hair, though her father's face is more clear to me. I can remember the soft angles of Harlan's features, which are clearly reflected in Kathleen's face.

She is absolutely breathtaking.

No woman has ever stirred any real feeling out of me, no one but her.

"This is your club?" she says, glancing back at the door behind her. "I thought the owner was some man named Peter. I met him a couple of times, I think."

I'm still not sure at all if she remembers me or not, but I think that I can see a hint of recognition in her pale, sea-green eyes. She looks like she wants to remember.

"Peter was my uncle," I tell her, nodding. "He passed away over the weekend, and when the will was read, I found out he left me this place for some reason."

I don't feel much sorrow when I think of him. I didn't know him very well, but with both of my parents retired and uninterested in owning a strip club, I had been his best bet in keeping the business alive.

It isn't my dream, but it's good enough.

She looks taken aback, and I wonder if no one has told the employees that their boss passed. I can see her thinking it over, and she suddenly looks up at me.

Her eyes are big and vulnerable, and I wonder how old she is now.

"So I work for you now, then? Is that right?" she asks me, and I can see she's nervous, but she's either brave or prideful enough to hide it under a facade of dismissiveness.

She raises her chin as if she's challenging me, and I smile.

She doesn't say sorry for my loss, and I'm even more intrigued by her. So many of my friends have offered me platitudes and meaningless words of comfort.

"That's right," I answer, realizing she's waiting for me to talk back to her. "I thought it was you when I saw you inside earlier. And then just now...."

"You knew my Dad," she says suddenly. "You were his friend before he left."

"We worked together at the construction site for years before your dad...."

"Before he started stealing from the company and before he left his family behind in the rearview mirror," she answers, nodding. She doesn't look sad about it at all.

"What are you doing working at a strip club?" I ask her because I really am curious. I want to know what a woman like her is doing in a place like this.

She had always been so bright as a kid. I just assumed she would be interning somewhere right now or maybe even sitting pretty in an office building downtown. I could never have imagined Kathleen in a place like this one.

I'm starting to believe this has all been a product of fate for the two of us now.

Kathleen begins to narrow her sea-glass eyes at me, raising her chin in defiance.

I can tell that she wants to defend herself, and I feel like maybe I've crossed a line by implying she shouldn't be here. She seems young, though, too young to be here in this seedy underbelly of the city.

I wonder if she would even be interested in an older man. I must be at least twenty years her senior by now.

"What are you doing owning a strip club?" she counters, raising an eyebrow.

It's a fair point. I like that she's not afraid to give me an attitude right back.

"My uncle didn't have anyone," I tell her, shrugging. "He didn't have any kids or a wife so he left it all to me for some reason."

"So instead of a beautiful house or a large inheritance," Kathleen points out, dimly lit by the street lamps. "He leaves you a strip club in the rough part of town, huh?"

I can't help but sigh, and my gaze drifts to glance at the diner across the street.

"Do you, I don't know, want to get coffee or something?" I ask her, nodding at the diner where the neon lights flicker faintly. I push my hands into my pockets.

I feel like I've already botched our first meeting, though I've been thinking about her ever since I first saw her again after all this time by the table in the club.

She leans to the side and looks at the diner behind me, stealing a quick glance at the thin leather watch on her wrist. I know it's just a little past ten O'clock right now.

"I need to be home by eleven," she tells me, looking unsure. "Does that work?"

I wonder if she has a boyfriend to get home to.

Is there someone waiting in the coziness of a fireplace-warmed room, eagerly standing by to watch the love of his life walk through the door into his embrace?

The thought makes me feel sick.

“That’s perfect,” I answer, putting a hand out to walk toward the diner.

I try to lie to myself, thinking that Kathleen has agreed to come just because I saved her from a horrific encounter with disgusting men and not because I could remember how much of a crush she had on me when she was a kid.

I had my own heart-rending crush ignited when I witnessed the small smile on her pretty face that she tried to hide. She likes me a little. I know that much of her.

Kathleen Henderson looks like the sun when she smiles, bright and lovely.

Again, the thought comes to me that Kathleen might not be interested in an older man. She’s young, beautiful, and bright. I want this woman. I want to be there for her, but it’s hard to say whether my advances will be reciprocated.

As we make our way across the parking lot, I stay close to her, protecting her from any and all potential dangers. A girl like her is obviously one to garner attention.

A waitress with a name tag that says *Barbara* in worn black letters and a well-used pink uniform dress shows us to our seats.

Inside the diner, most of the well-worn leather booths are empty of hungry customers.

Kathleen smiles at Barbara when she slides a vanilla milkshake toward her, and I take the menu she gives me with what I know is a bemused frown on my face.

“She’s always ravenous after shows,” Barbara explained as she filled my mug with coffee. She gives Kathleen a small wink as she turns to head back to the counter. “Always vanilla.”

Kathleen holds the glass in her hands, looking over the rim at me. “Vanilla is uncomplicated.”

“Come here often?” I ask her casually as I take a sip of my bitter diner coffee.

Kathleen lets out a delicate snort as she unwraps her straw. “I actually work here,” she proudly states as she pushes the straw into the milkshake. Her fingers are long and pretty.

“Really?” I wonder, but I hope I sound more impressed than judgmental.

There must be some reason she’s working two jobs, and she seems pretty young.

She’s supposed to be twenty-one to be working in the club, but I doubt she’s even that.

“Yep,” she answers me in a sing-song voice, taking a long sip of her creamy-looking milkshake. She looks as if it’s something she doesn’t get very often, and the thought makes me angry. “I don’t only serve grubby men and women in the dark. I work tables here too, so they have the pleasure of seeing my ass in the light.”

She sounds a little sad. I keep my eyes on her, thinking carefully about my next words. She’s got a sharp tongue, just like she did when she was a kid.

“It’s okay,” Kathleen states as she leans over the table a little. “You know, you’re the first person to hold a conversation with me and not stare at my backside.”

“I mean, I think that would be difficult to do with you sitting on it,” I counter as I wrap my fingers around my coffee cup and bring it up to take another sip of the hot liquid. Outside the window, the dark of midnight swirls with wet and cold fall air.

Kathleen lets out a pretty laugh, showing her round, white teeth. “So,” she says, licking her tongue over her pink, plump bottom lip. “What were you doing in the back of the club tonight? Other than coming to my rescue, I mean?”

I can’t help but grimace. “It’s my sister’s bachelorette party. I told her she could have it here, and it’s been difficult to get away from. I was hiding back here.”

“Riley or Robin?” Kathleen asks me as her silver fingernails tap across the table.

I look at her in surprise. I didn’t even know that she knew I had two sisters.

She shrugs, blushing. The pink is pretty across her smooth, round cheeks. “I remember my dad dated Robin for a few months after my parents split, and Riley was always around too.”

“Riley,” I tell her quickly, rubbing a hand over my chin. “She insisted I join the party, and she really only got me to come because Robin threatened to send a stripping candy gram. They’re already friends with the girls at the club.”

“Oh, but those candy grams are fun. The girls love doing them.” Kathleen grins at me as she says, “Robin always had a good sense of humor.”

“Not for me, they aren’t,” I tell her with a playful grin, though I really am serious.

I never really approved of the strip club, and I always hated when my mom would bring me around my uncle when I was a kid. It felt like he was taking advantage of the women that worked for him. He would watch them with leering eyes, and I would look away from it. It never seemed right to me to treat women that way.

Right now, I feel that same streak of protective indignance for Kathleen.

“Hey, so what did you want to ask me earlier?” she asks as she looks up at me with those big, light eyes and dark lashes that frame pale green irises. “You said that you wanted to ask me something, right? So what exactly was it?”

I clear my throat, shuffle my weight just a bit, guiltily looking down at my coffee mug. Now I don’t want to ask her. She’s going to see it the wrong way entirely.

“Oh,” Kathleen says softly, and a weight drops in my stomach. “Right, of course, it’s the old ‘how did you end up here’ question, right? That’s what everyone wants to know. Of course, that’s what you want to know too.”

“Not entirely,” I admit, staring at her. “I just want to know what happened.”

Kathleen scoffs, and her eyes glitter. I can see that spark of a temper that her father always carried. “I know what you want to say. I don’t need charity.”

“But you’re working two jobs....,” I begin, trying to convince her.

For some reason, this woman from my memories is taking up residence in my heart. I want to take care of her so badly and ensure she always has what she needs.

She should never be left out in the cold for any reason.

“A lot of people work two jobs, Eddie,” Kathleen snaps, sounding very mature for how young she looks. “Do I have it rough? Yeah, but I don’t need charity.”

“I’m not saying that you need charity,” I tell her in a pacifying tone, raising my hands in surrender. “I’m just saying that this is not like you. You were always a smart kid. Your mom always said you were an A+ student at school. Your dad....”

Kathleen releases a huff of air, her bottom lip quivering. “Don’t you think I know all that? But my life isn’t black and white or good and bad. A lot of it is shitty, and I have had to pull myself off the ground and give up on some dreams so I could keep living—but you know what? I’m alive. My dad is in prison, and I’m doing the best I can, and you don’t understand anything.”

Kathleen moved to stand up, promising to take my heart with her as she does.

“Kat...,” I begin, wondering what I can possibly say to make her stay.

“If you would have thought to ask me,” she snaps, her hands shaking. “I’m working two jobs because my mom is sick, Eddie. I’m taking care of her and my little brother. Okay? Happy? Do you feel good about yourself now?”

Kathleen leaves the diner so fast that I don’t even have time to chase after her, and the heavy feeling in my stomach grows

more nauseating. I can't let her get away. I can't let my pride pull the two of us apart.

CHAPTER THREE

Kathleen

My apartment building is run-down and smells of mold. Water drips from everywhere I look, and there's a draft that never seems to leave in the stairwell.

Stevie wraps me in a bear hug when I open the door. His hair smells of the cheap pumpkin shampoo I've always liked, and he's freshly showered from earlier.

"You brushed your teeth, right?" I ask him, holding his shoulders. He looks just like my dad. "Cavities are not our friend, Stevie. Repeat after me now...."

"Cavities are villains," Stevie nods, grinning. He has my dad's curly, brown hair and my mom's green eyes, my green eyes. "I know, and I brushed them, Kat."

"You are one smart cookie," I tell him, ruffling his hair with my hand.

"Can you bring some back from the diner tomorrow?" My little brother asks me hopefully, following me into the little kitchenette. "Cookies, I mean?"

I grin, reaching up to grab a cup. "Chocolate chip or oatmeal raisin?"

"Oatmeal raisin!" Stevie tells me, doing a little dance of excitement.

Any other child might have jumped at the chance for sugary chocolate, but Stevie has grown up watching me scarf down oatmeal cookies, and we've never had enough money for good chocolate anyway.

"You got it, boss," I tell him as I sip at the water I've just poured. Despite the chilly fall wind, the bus ride to the apartment had been hot and humid, and I'm parched enough for two. "Wait, why are you up right now?"

"I'm on fall break," Stevie tells me as he crawls onto one of the stools by the tiny counter. It wobbles precariously back and forth, and I wonder how old the thing must be. I found it in the trash one day and brought it home. "It's the first of October, remember?"

"Spooky season," I tell him in a sing-song voice, wiggling my fingers.

Stevie laughs, swatting my hands away. I've always loved Halloween.

"Kat?" Stevie questions as I shrug off my hoodie, tucking it over the chair.

"Yeah, kiddo? What do you need?"

I can't help but grin a little bit at my little brother, and I can tell he is obviously too sleepy to function for much longer.

"Are you going to be here tomorrow?" The hope in his voice is like ice in my chest, making my bones ache as if I'm suddenly eons older than I actually am.

"I have to head into work in the morning," I answer reluctantly, and I look away from the sad expression on his face. I don't want to know that I disappointed him.

"But I thought you worked tonight," Stevie questions me as he yawns.

"I did work tonight." I know how good my baby brother is at determining lies, and I don't want to lie to him anyway. The kid is just too smart for his own good. He's going to do great things. I just know it. "But I need to go in again in the

morning. They need me, and I need to work. You know that, don't you, Stevie?"

"Okay," Stevie agrees in a quiet tone. "Will you help me in the afternoon then?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?" I wonder, and then my exhausted brain recalls. Of course, when mom was better, it was a lot easier. "Oh, the reading list, right. Yeah, I'll be home after lunch, and then I'll drop by the library, does that work, kiddo?"

Stevie yawns again, harder than before, and he nods. "Thanks, Kat."

I herd my little brother to his room, and he collapses into his faded race car bed. There are posters on the walls that are a little bit faded. I move to leave the room, my gaze catching sight of the shoes resting on the floor next to the bed.

My chest aches as I stare at the worn canvas of the sneakers, all of them looking the worse for wear.

In my mind, I calculate the portion of my tiny check that I'll need to buy my brother some new, nice-looking second-hand shoes. If I can't get him new ones, that will have to be enough. He deserves that much from this life.

I think about calling the nursing home, but I know I won't get an answer, and maybe I don't actually want one. I don't want to hear that I'm not doing enough.

I bite my lip as I stand in the apartment, the phone at my ear. I have already knocked on Mrs. Maxine's door to let her know I will be back after lunch to get Stevie after I drop him off tomorrow morning.

I've already tried running the numbers in my calculator, and I know that if I take one or two extra shifts at the diner, I can hopefully have a few extra bucks in tips before heading back to the club to waitress.

Maybe I'll have enough money then and be able to just live.

"I don't have any more shifts to give you, girl," Carlos growls down the phone as he pushes some papers around in the

background of the diner.

I can hear the sharp tinkle of the door and the sizzling of the fryer crackling somewhere behind him. He's never been a man who cares about what others need from him.

"Come on, Carlos, please," I know I must sound like a child as I beg for something that I'm most likely not going to get. "There has to be something for me."

"Not unless you want to stop working at the strip club and start working here full time," Carlos counters, sarcasm dripping from his words. It makes me grind my jaw in frustration.

He knows that I won't be able to do that. I know that much.

I stop, though, doing the quick math in my head. There's just no way I can quit the club. Even working at the diner full time for a week wouldn't get me the same amount of money I make at the club in a couple of nights from tips alone.

"I can't quit the club," I tell him, gritting my teeth. "You know I need that job."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Carlos answers me, not at all swayed by my situation and obviously uncaring either way. "I can't just be doing charity cases."

"Carlos, please just listen, okay," I ramble on desperately, ready to plead my case on what's likely to be deaf ears for sure.

I haven't had an ounce of pride for so long when it comes to my brother's life and keeping him comfortable.

"Getting your kid brother a gift for his birthday isn't my problem, girl," Carlos says flippantly over the phone, and I can hear him as he starts to walk away, pushing the phone down. "You'll just have to find more shifts at the club if the diner isn't important enough for you. Now, I've got business to attend to here."

With that, he hangs up the phone and the dial tone blares in my ear. I feel nauseated, and what's left of my snack of crackers at

the club begins to creep back up. I press my hand to my mouth, putting my phone down.

I lean on the kitchen counter for support as my head spins. I pull in deep, aching breaths into my lungs as I fight back against the tears that threaten to spill over.

I can do it, I have to. I have almost a week to go until my little brother's birthday, and I have to make it as extra special as I possibly can.

Things will get better eventually. They have to, or all of this is for nothing.

For years now, it's been just me looking after Stevie. It's my job, though, and Stevie deserves a better life than what he's been given, but I'm doing my best.

I press my fingers to my forehead, pushing against the headache that throbs there.

I need to get some sleep, at least a few hours anyway.

I hear a creak from Stevie's room, though, and my ears perk up, as tired as I am. I hear the creak again.

"Kat?" My little brother's voice calls out. "Can you sit with me until I fall asleep?"

I close my eyes for a moment, digging my fingers into the counter. I'll just make up the sleep tomorrow. It will be fine, and things will work out for us.

On my way to Stevie's room, I spot a packet of instant brownies, and an idea pops up in my tired mind. I can only see Eddie's face, mysterious and ridiculously hot.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eddie

Back at the club, the lights glitter off the wet pavement. Neon signs advertise flashing green breasts and long legs that open and close as the lights blink.

I let out a breath, opening the back door. It makes me feel like a sleaze to run a place like this, but at least I'm around to keep the women safe.

Randall Myers stands with his arms crossed at the back door, and he nods at me when I make my way inside. He's a monster of a man, but he only has eyes for the brassy blonde that dances every week. I've seen him watching her with lovestruck brown eyes.

As I pass by, his humongous arm stops me in my tracks. He narrows his eyes, nodding at the front door and looking as if he wanted to rip someone's head off if he felt it might keep these girls safe. I can echo that sentiment well.

"Myers?" I ask, unsure of my security guard's intentions.

I've only known him for a week, and I'm not sure if his face is just permanently fixed into a menacing scowl or if something is wrong.

"Boss," he says, and it still feels odd to be addressed that way. "There's a group of guys loitering around the front door," he growls. "Want me to take care of them?"

“Not just yet,” I answer, smoothing down my leather jacket. “Do you know them?”

“Hangers-on,” Myers tells me, looking annoyed. His eyes don’t leave the door, though he wants to look at Chrissy I’m sure. “Your uncle let them hang around outside. Men like that pester the dancers. Peter always told them to leave through the back.”

“That’s not going to continue,” I retort, anger burning through me.

I can feel Myers following me like a hulking shadow when I stride quickly across the main floor, staying in the shadows so that I’m hidden from my sister’s raucous party. He’s at my back as we reach the door, right at my heels as I open it wide.

Outside of the club, the same SUV from earlier speeds off into the dark night.

“Bunch of assholes,” Myers grumbles. “Must have been waiting for the girls.”

“Keep an eye out,” I tell him, closing the door behind me. Myers nods at me as I tell him what I need from him. “Don’t let them come back in here, alright?”

“You got it, boss,” Myers answers seriously. He looks ready to destroy them if they come back.

When I leave the club hours later, the music is still pumping and thudding from the dark-tinted windows. My sister’s party has vacated, and I wonder where they’ve gotten off to, though they really may have left hours earlier anyway.

My car gleams in the parking lot, but a hand stops me as I try to leave the club.

“What do I call you?” the dancer with the coppery blonde hair asks when I turn around. She’s tiny, even smaller than Kathleen is, but her eyes burn brightly.

“Sorry?” I return, staring down at her where she’s clad in her glittering lingerie.

“I’m Chrissy,” she says, putting out a hand. “What should I call you then?”

“You can call me Eddie,” I tell her, though I’m not sure where she’s going with this.

“Eddie,” Chrissy nods, blowing her hair away from her eyes. “Kathleen is only nineteen. She turned nineteen about three months ago. She’s not twenty-one yet.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I wonder, squinting in the dark. I was almost sure that Kathleen wasn’t old enough to work in the club earlier. I know now.

I wonder if this woman wants me to fire her or if she just likes to rat out her co-workers. If anything, it just makes me feel even more protective of Kathleen.

“Peter knew she was too young, and he hired her anyway,” Chrissy explains with a hand on her hip. “He thought she might bring in more customers, and he didn’t care about her safety.” She gives me an icy look. “She needs this job, but you’re not Peter.”

“So, what are you saying?” I can’t for the life of me understand what she wants.

Chrissy pats my chest, and her nails are sharp to dig through my shirt. “I’m saying you need to care about her safety more than Peter, but not enough to fire her for it. Can you do that?”

“I would have kept her safe either way,” I tell her. “But she’s not getting fired.”

Chrissy looks as if she can see right through me. “You know her, don’t you?”

She’s much more intuitive than I would have originally given her credit for.

“I should be getting home,” I tell her firmly, turning around again. My whole body feels hot.

Any mention of Kathleen lights me up with heat, it seems.

“Just don’t give up on her!” Chrissy’s voice follows me as I leave.

I wonder if there is something on my face that screams, *I want Kathleen!!!*

Or something similar.

Chrissy continues, as I leave. “She needs someone more than she knows.”

The drive back to my apartment is silent, the sidewalks empty at this time of night.

“Where did you slink off to? We needed you to grab more drinks,” Robin questions from my couch as I push my apartment door open in the early hours of the next morning now.

My sister’s red hair is in shambles, a ridiculous and tangled bird’s nest on her head. I want to laugh, but I’m too tired.

Their company isn’t unwanted, though. My sisters have a way of making my stressed-out mind focus, even if they like to take jabs at me but that’s family.

“I was talking to an old friend,” I tell her grudgingly. “You’re supposed to call first, you know. You can’t just walk into someone’s house.”

I shrug off my leather jacket, smoothing my long hair back with my fingers.

“You pointed Harlan’s daughter out to him, didn’t you?” Robin asks Allison, who is Riley’s best friend and also her maid of honor. Robin *refused* to take the job as maid of honor in order to evade helping out with the wedding planning.

Allison’s hair is just as bad as Robin’s, tangled into a dark, sweaty mess.

Riley looks tired, but she’s the cleanest of the three. Bride’s privilege, I guess.

Allison can’t seem to help her errant smile before she turns an apologetic look on me.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that they wouldn’t stop giving me shots, and I blurted it out—I hope Kathleen wasn’t embarrassed by it all. She was such a cute kid.”

I can’t help but let out a light chuckle, surprisingly pleased at Allison’s genuine, heartfelt apology for being manipulated by

my sisters. I always thought she was too sweet to be friends with Riley. She was even sweet when I told her I didn't reciprocate her crush when we were younger. She was very understanding.

"I can't believe Uncle Peter hired her," Riley comments, twirling her dark hair between her fingers. Up close, her purple lipstick is smudged.

"She's a good waitress," I retort, feeling the odd need to defend Kathleen.

"You're biased," Robin points out, her brown crinkled. "She's too young for it."

"I was sixteen when I started waitressing," Allison says, smiling.

"Yeah, but you weren't serving coffee at a strip club," Riley says, pointing.

"You know, Eddie," Robin says. "I think that girl needs someone to look after her. You might just be the man for the job. We knew she had a crush on you for years."

"I knew," Allison chimes in with her soft voice. "We saw her at the University open house last year. They wanted Allison to be a guest speaker."

"And?" I ask, waving a hand to get them to continue whatever they're implying.

"And she looked lonely," Riley states. "I don't think she really has anyone."

"You two are the worst," I tell both of my sisters, rolling my eyes good-naturedly when they both looked offended. They might be ridiculously annoying, but I do love them both. "You're corrupting Allison. And you guys barely know Kathleen."

"I knew her convict dad," Robin says, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

There's a knock at the door, and when I open the heavy wood, Kathleen Henderson is standing in her diner dress and white

sneakers, wrapped in a warm-looking brown cardigan. Her blonde hair is tucked into a french braid.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know if this is appropriate,” she says quietly. “I just wanted to thank you for saving me in the parking lot. I found your address online.”

“Saving her?” Riley questions.

“Parking lot?” Allison asks in disbelief.

“Thank you?” Robin intones, arching a curious eyebrow.

I shake my head. “You don’t have to thank me for anything. You’re good.”

You’re gorgeous. You’re so damn beautiful. You’re all that I really want now, is what I want to say.

“I do, though,” Kathleen tells me, shrugging. “I think you’re the reason I made it home to my family last night. For what it’s worth, I’m glad you own the club now.”

“I’m glad you work there,” I answer, though it’s a light version of what I really want to say. *It’s fate that we met again after all these years, and I want you.*

“I...um, I made you some fudge brownies last night. They’re a little burnt,”

Kathleen stumbles over her words, and I take pity on her, wanting to smile.

“Thank you,” I tell her quickly, feeling warm all over as she hands over the brownie pan.

Her cheeks go pink.

“Well, that was it. I have to get to the diner for my shift now.”

I can hear the urging whispers at my back, and I give them the finger behind me.

“Do you mind if I drive you there?” I ask her. “That way, I know that you’re safe.”

Kathleen nods, looking happily surprised. “I would really like that, thank you.”

“Alright, let me just go put these brownies on the counter.” I catch my sisters and Allison waiting with mischievous smiles and change my mind. “Never mind, I’ll just take them with me so we can get you there on time. Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” Kathleen tells me, pulling her cardigan tighter around her.

There are catcalls as we leave the apartment, and I sigh, hoping Kathleen hasn’t heard them. She reaches her hand out and squeezes my fingers, though, and when she looks up at me, her cheeks are pink. I can’t help but give her a smile.

The bright leaves on the trees that line the streets shake in the crisp autumn wind. Kathleen appears doll-like in the soft, orange glow just before dawn.

Her pale skin and large eyes are luminous, gleaming in her delicate features.

She’s curvy but frail-looking, though she tries to hide it behind her sharp tongue. An irrational fear washes over me that anyone could snatch her away at any time.

I hold her hand. I don’t let go, even once we’re inside of my car’s warm interior.

“Do your sisters live with you? Or that girl? Is she your girlfriend or something?”

I’m stupidly pleased to hear that sour note of jealousy in her tone.

Of course, she would think that Allison was my girlfriend. Though the thought never crossed my mind, even when I was younger, and she confessed her crush on me.

“Allison is my sister’s best friend,” I tell her, squeezing her fingers gently where our entangled hands rest on the console. It feels so natural. “She’s not really even my type.”

“What is your type then?” Kathleen blurts out and then seems to regret it. “Uh, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to. I don’t know why I asked.”

“Well,” I say, giving her a wink. “I think I have a soft spot for waitresses.”

“Even if they work at strip clubs and talk out of their ass?” Kathleen mutters, but when I glance over at her, she isn’t looking at me as the city streaks by the car.

I squeeze her fingers, making her look over at me. “Don’t worry about that.”

At the diner, purple and orange light streaks across the sky behind the building, silhouetting it against the morning as it paints the clouds in a symphony of color.

Kathleen sighs, tipping her head back tiredly against the seat of the car.

“Do you ever wish you could be someone else—anyone else?”

Her voice is so quiet that I almost don’t hear her. She’s staring at the sky in the distance.

“Who do you want to be?” I ask, turning toward her in the driver’s seat.

I want to know what happens in this woman’s mind that makes her think that just being herself isn’t good enough. She shines like a bright star in the night.

“I just wish life wasn’t so hard,” Kathleen’s voice breaks, and she looks away, staring out of the window into the rising morning’s cold, autumn light.

“When do you need to be in there?” I ask her, keeping my voice quiet. I don’t want to break the soft stillness of the moment. I want to keep her with me in the backseat, but I know we can’t. “Can you sit with me for a minute?”

Kathleen looks over at me under her thick, dark lashes. When she nods, I wrap my hand around hers.

I want to rip apart anyone who would do her harm. I want to tuck her into my chest and keep her there, warm and utterly safe at my side.

“I didn’t mean to be so melodramatic,” Kathleen mutters, shaking her head.

“I don’t think you are,” I assure her. Of course, a pragmatic woman like Kathleen would think that any admission of

weakness is just a symptom of melodramatics. “Tell me about your mom, Kat. How did things get to be where they are today?”

To my surprise, she cups a hand over her mouth and squeezes her eyes shut. A sudden panic floods me, and I wonder what I’ve said to make her look so down.

“It’s just...,” Kathleen whispers as she squeezes my hand. “No one but Chrissy has cared enough to ask me for so long. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m upset.”

When I lean over the console to her, the hair that I twine gently through my fingers is soft and smooth like silk, slipping over the rough calluses on my skin.

“You’re a woman that’s been strong for too long.”

Kathleen looks up at my words with her plump bottom lip trembling, looking as if I’ve just given her the world.

She clears her throat. “The last few years have been harder than I could have ever thought possible. My mom had a stroke, and she’s in the nursing home now.”

“Kat,” I breathe, taken aback.

“My brother has no one but me, and I barely finished high school, though I still had good grades by the end of it,” Kathleen tells me, dull-eyed and weary.

“So, no University of Georgia then?” I know it’s crossing a line, but I have to know.

“Your sisters told you that they saw me at orientation,” she says, though she doesn’t look too surprised. “I asked them about you while they were there.”

“If you remembered me all along, why did you pretend like you didn’t?”

Though I don’t expect her to give me a clear answer, I still want to know. Kathleen seems so distant since last I saw her. But in this hour where the night blossoms into the morning, anything seems possible.

“I was embarrassed,” Kathleen shakes her head, wiping a tear from under her eye. “I didn’t want you to see me the way I am now. I know that you expected more. And it’s been a few years since I last saw you.”

Her admission takes me aback.

I can’t believe that Kathleen would think I would judge her for her choices in life as if I had any sort of need to. I really admire her for who she is. I have never met someone so determined to keep their family safe.

“No one would have blamed you if you had chosen to give up and let someone else take responsibility after your mom fell ill,” I tell her gently. I reach a hand up to brush softly over her jaw, reveling at the feel of the pale, soft skin there.

“There was no one else,” Kathleen whispers, turning her face into my hand. “I should get in there. Carlos is already threatening to cut my hours as it is.”

“Let me pick you up after your shift,” I tell her, and it’s the very least of what I want to do for her. “You don’t need to take the bus. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

Kathleen’s eyes go big and round. “I uh...I have to go to the library after I’m done. My brother needs some books for his fall reading list, and I promised him I would.”

For some reason, this woman already has me wrapped around her finger. She could ask me to pick her up from the surface of Mars, and I wouldn’t hesitate.

“What about your brother? Will he be home alone? He can come too,” I tell her, ready to accept every single piece of her life, good or bad, in spades if I have to.

Kathleen shakes her head. “He’s staying with a neighbor in the building. I was going to just come home right after the library and spend some time with him.”

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do,” I tell her.

When Kathleen presses her lips to mine, there’s a surprising sort of urgency to it, and I can’t seem to get enough.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kathleen

The taste of Eddie Snow's kiss is on my tongue, stuck in my memory.

I tuck my cardigan on the rack by the back door, pushing my purse under it where it's hidden. This part of the city isn't a place where you leave your valuables out.

Carlos' prominent belly meets me before he does, coming around the corner in a stained white wife beater and a crunchy-looking plaid shirt. He looks greasy, like always, and there's a half-used cigarette tucked behind his ear. I wonder if he knows that smoking half of a cigarette doesn't count as trying to quit smoking.

He brushes right by me, mumbling to himself before he finally turns around.

"You," Carlos exclaims, pointing a thick finger in my face as I push my notepad into my apron. "Next time, I want you here on time, girl. Go on and take tables four and five. There's a family at five and a woman at four that hasn't ordered at all yet."

There's a stack of plates on the counter, and Carlos doesn't wait for my answer before he leaves me to it. Table four isn't even close to my section, but I grit my teeth and set my mouth into a painfully bright smile, even though I'm so tired.

I stop short when I realize who is sitting at the table in the early morning light from the window. I swallow hard and don't stop, making my way to the table.

"Can I get a coffee there, sweetie?" the familiar voice calls out to me from four.

My fingers are shaking as I hold the coffee pot in one hand and the mug in the other one. The graying woman in the nurse's uniform looks up at me, and I see the veil of uncertainty lift from her eyes when she realizes who I am.

"Kathleen Henderson?" My mother's nurse says, squinting. "Is that you?"

"Hello, Nurse Shirley," I acknowledge, nodding. "It's good to see you again."

She's beady-eyed, and her creamy white shoes squeak on the floor under her.

"Goodness, I had no idea you worked here, Ms. Henderson," she says brightly, and though she doesn't sound patronizing, I can't help but feel her judgment. "This must be why you're so busy all of the time. My, that makes a lot of sense."

"Busy?" I question her, looking around for anyone to save me from this interaction. The familiar nurse must have just gotten off her shift, and I wonder if she lives close by or not. I would assume not since the nursing home is about a twenty-minute drive from here and the traffic on the interstate is always horrible.

"Oh yes, I just assumed your life must be very hectic," Shirley explains as she takes a sip of her coffee. "You haven't been by to see your mother in weeks. So busy."

"Oh right," I answer her dully, nodding though I feel almost numb. There's a sudden lump of tight emotion in my throat, and my eyes burn with hot tears. I blink, digging my fingers into my palms. "Do you know what you want to eat?"

"Just some toast for me," Shirley tells me with a well-practiced grin. Someone as old as her would be expected to be kind and caring, but I know she's just trying to feel me out. She sees my mother as a victim and me as a careless teen with

no thought for anyone but myself. “And can you bring some strawberry jelly, dear?”

I nod quickly, turning on my heel and nearly falling over my own feet.

I push the order into the ticket holder. Any moment I feel the tears will start, and I hurry to the back door of the diner. A rush of October wind through the opened door makes my teeth chatter.

I press a hand over my mouth and just let myself cry for a moment, leaning against the brick wall beside the door. I feel like I’ve been holding it in for so long, and between the kiss with Eddie and the way Shirley just assumed I was a lazy, uncaring daughter to my mother, my tipping point really has been reached today.

I’ve been at work for less than an hour, and I’m already crying.

Suddenly, my mind takes me to a place that feels a lot like peace. It’s Eddie I see, and his dark, long hair glimmering in the warm sun. Autumn turns the trees orange around him, and he’s wrapping me in his embrace, pulling me so close.

I tip my head back against the brick wall behind me. Too much is happening at once, and I feel overwhelmed in the midst of it all. A kiss is one thing, but it’s hard to believe that a man like Eddie, a man I’ve known since I was a kid, is actually interested in me. I don’t want to imagine that he thinks I’m too young for him.

I don’t want to bring that sort of devastation to my mind. I can’t take it.

If Eddie isn’t actually interested in me, I think the whole world might crumble around me. Sure, I can handle it, but I don’t want to. For all of the stress on my shoulders, all I can think about is Eddie.

I want him so bad that it hurts.

My chest feels tight. My mind whirls with thoughts of him now that some of my sadness has dissipated. Flashes of him

twist and turn in my head. I don't know how I will face him again at the club if I'm wrong about him.

What if he was just being polite when he kissed me back? What if....?

Maybe he won't even show up when I get off at lunch.

Carlos yells at me to get back inside of the diner, and I turn reluctantly to head back inside. I run to clean the table that Shirley has recently vacated.

Somehow, I convince Carlos that I have "feminine issues," and he looks so disturbed that he lets me stack supplies in the back for an hour or so. The new bus boy and Carlos are both taking orders while I'm busy, though Barb will be back tomorrow, so they won't need to suffer for too long just on my account.

When I finally heard Shirley leave the diner while I was outside, the well wishes she had given out to Carlos sounded fake to me. I can't get her opinion of me out of my head for some reason.

I know what some people might think of me and their opinions, but it's never hit me like it is now. I work hard to keep food on the table for my brother, and no one knows it.

My mom's insurance also won't cover her stay at the nursing home for much longer, and I'll have to find a way to pay for that too. I don't know what to do.

I'm drowning and for some reason, Eddie Snow is like the shore.

He feels familiar to me, and the thought of him is comforting, at least as long as I don't imagine him leaving me behind. I can't even begin to think of it that way.

Women must want him, and he must have known other women before me. The thought of Eddie Snow with anyone else is maddening, and it makes my heart ache.

As I'm stacking a case of straws in the back room, I hear the tinkle of the diner's front door, and raucous laughter fills the room. It sends a chill up my spine.

Where do I know that laughter from?

Where have I heard it start before?

“Henderson!” Carlos shouts. “I need you up here now!”

Of course, Carlos has the worst timing, and he doesn’t know about what happened at the club, but I can’t help but feel betrayed as I step out and see the group of men who harassed me last night. Not that Carlos is ever really on my side anyway.

The men are seated at one of my tables. There’s already a mess on the wooden surface from where they put their dirty feet up and made it their own. They’re red-eyed, sallow-faced, and obviously viciously hungover from the night before.

“Hey sweetheart, let me get some..., the man from last night begins, and I’m frozen to the spot. “Well, hell, fate just keeps dropping you in my lap, huh? We were just thinking about you, weren’t we boys?”

My heart is in my throat. “What can I get you? Maybe some coffee?”

I think if I just keep my tone cordial and dull, the men in front of me will get the message and leave me be. Of course, I never usually get the base case scenario.

“Yeah, hell, why not?” he answers with a big, shit-eating grin. His friends laugh as if he’s the funniest man in the world. “And now that I’ve got you here alone, why don’t you come on over here and sit down on my lap? Your man isn’t here now, is he?”

By his tone, I know that he obviously knows Eddie isn’t here. They had come to my job, and obviously, I’m alone. I must have the worst luck in the world.

Though someone calling Eddie my man does make me feel stupidly giddy inside.

“I’ll just give you a minute to decide what you want then,” I tell them, turning quickly on my heel to leave.

“Now wait a minute,” the man says indignantly, and his hand snakes out to grab my arm in a hard grip. “You’re not going anywhere now, are you?”

I turn, ready to yank my arm from his hand, but my heart drops. I can see the gun tucked into the waistband of his pants. He notices when I see it.

“Let me go now,” I grit out, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment.

I don't need this shit. I need to work and help my family, and *I don't need this*.

“Alright now, don't be a bitch,” he snarls, yanking me to him. “You owe me an apology for last night. Now come on, sweetheart, show me how sorry you are.”

He tries to move my hand to his pants, but I scream, throwing my body away from him. I nearly hit the table behind me, and the man looks livid as he pushes up from his seat, throwing it behind him so that it tumbles to the floor. The busboy, who is probably only sixteen, helps me up from the floor and stays behind me.

“You need to leave the diner,” Tyler says in a trembling voice, and the stack of plates that he puts down on the table are clanking together with his shaking. “Leave her alone and get out of here. You heard me, didn't you?”

Tyler's bravery is heartwarming. He reminds me of my little brother.

“What the hell is going on here?” Carlos asked, disgruntled as he steps out from behind the door to the kitchen. He looks annoyed that we're even bothering him.

“You know what?” the red-eyed man snaps, lunging toward me as I reach back for something to protect myself. “If I can't get what I want, I'll just take it.”

Today really just isn't my day, is it?

Somehow, I hear the front door tinkling in the back of my mind, even as I fall backward from the man's reaching fingers.

Finally, I hear myself let out a scream, and I tumble into a warm chest. Someone who smells of leather catches me, and when I look up, Eddie looks as if he wants to tear the men harassing me to pieces.

“Are you alright?” he asks me gently, holding my arms.

I want to cry from relief, but all I can do is nod. Eddie kisses my forehead, and he storms around me, shoving the man to the ground. Fear floods through me.

“He has a gun, Eddie!” I cry, and Tyler scrambles up beside me, hiding there.

Eddie doesn’t show an ounce of fear, and even the family in the back corner of table five has gone silent. The man at Eddie’s feet jumps up, breathing hard.

“I’m going to give you five minutes before you regret ever touching her,” Eddie whispers in a menacing tone. “Actually no, just get the fuck out of here. I don’t want to see you around here again. If I do, you won’t wake up the next day.”

The man puffs up his chest. “This isn’t over, old man. I’ll give you hell.”

Eddie stands his ground, and I can’t help but admire the set of his strong shoulders. His leather jacket strains against the ripple of his muscles, and his dark jeans fit him perfectly. He’s wearing several rings on his fingers. I want him so badly.

I think that if he took me home with him, I wouldn’t say no, at least not now.

“Get out,” Eddie snaps, nodding toward the door. He reaches a hand behind him, and I curl my fingers around his, clinging to him as if he were a lifeline for me.

As the men slink out of the diner, I just can’t help but feel a heavy pit of doubt in my stomach. I have a horrible feeling that this isn’t over, not by a long shot.

Eddie pulls me into his arms as soon as they’re gone, and his protective stance falls into something more gentle and open. He buries his face in my hair, and I cling to him, letting him pull me from the diner. The door lets out a soft squeak as we step outside.

My shift is almost over anyway, and I don’t hear Carlos complaining. He probably just doesn’t want to chance a lawsuit for letting his employees get harassed by aggressive

men and doing nothing about it. He's that kind of a man, it seems.

Eddie starts the car as soon as I'm bundled with my cardigan and purse in the front seat after he had gone back to grab them. He peels out of the parking lot, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

How many times is this man going to save me?

"Thank you, and I'm sorry," I tell him. "What were you doing back so soon?"

Eddie grips the wheel hard in his hands. "I was waiting in the parking lot just in case." He doesn't look embarrassed about it. "Why are you apologizing?"

"I don't know," I tell him in reply, and it's true.

Am I saying sorry because I've brought problems into his life? Is it because I can't seem to stay out of trouble? I don't think so.

Deep down, I'm apologizing because this was once my father's best friend, and I want him like I've never wanted anyone before. For some reason, it makes me feel like a kid again, trailing after him.

Why would he want a woman who is barely that and can't take care of herself?

"Kathleen..." Eddie begins, but I don't let him finish whatever he was going to say.

"Can you just take me to the library, and I'll get the bus home?" I ask him abruptly.

Eddie looks taken aback, and I can't help but watch his long-fingered, ring-covered hands on the steering. I want them on my skin, pushing inside of me.

"Please, Eddie," I beg him quietly. "Please, I just want to be alone right now."

I need to think with a clear head. We shared one kiss. It doesn't mean he wants me.

To him, I must look like a child, unable to do anything for myself, even care for my brother. He obviously has money, and I can barely make a living.

Eddie is silent as he drives me to the public library. He grabs my hand as I get out, and his hazel eyes have a sort of pleading in them. His thumb rubs gently across my knuckles, sending sparks of hot want throughout my entire body.

“You’re not alone, Kat,” he murmurs, licking his lips.

I swallow hard, nodding as I turn away. He doesn’t leave until I’m at the steps.

I am more exhausted than I’ve been in a while, climbing the steps up to the apartment. Though I know, I should count myself lucky to be safe after what happened at the diner, my entire body aches.

What if Eddie hadn’t been there?

It occurs to me now how much danger I’ve really put myself in by working at the club.

Tomorrow I have a shift late into the night, and I begin to dread it as I tuck the bag full of books for Stevie over my shoulder.

What if those men come back? It makes me on edge to think that they know both places where I work now.

At least I’m safe here in the apartment building, no matter how run down it is on the inside. At least I can finally get some real sleep and be in my bed, too.

But no, of course not. For some reason, life doesn’t seem to work out for me.

Everything goes to actual hell when I see my landlord standing at the top of the stairwell and tapping his foot. I manage to shove my bag up even higher on my shoulder, moving toward the man with dread in my heart.

“Kathleen,” the man growls out in greeting. I always feel dirty when he says my name as if I need a shower after the word passes his chapped lips.

“Mr. Howard,” I answer him, trying to keep my voice sounding halfway even as I talk to him. “Is there a problem? I’m not late on my rent. I know I’m not.”

Mr. Howard moves, and he smells of Doritos and cheap beer wafts over me. He pushes an envelope against my chest, leaving it there to fall if I don’t hurry to catch it in my hands. He keeps moving down the stairs, not bothering to give me a second glance because he doesn’t really care at all, and I know that. “Rent has been raised.”

I nearly fall as I drop my canvas tote full of books, catching the letter before it falls to the dirty floor.

“Wait, what? That’s not fair. You already raised it a few months ago,” I call after him as I rip the envelope open, hurrying after my landlord with feverish intent. “This is more than a twenty percent increase! What the hell?”

“You got a problem with that?” Mr. Howard asks me as he turns with raised, wild eyebrows to look back at me. “You gonna do something about it, huh?”

“Yeah, actually, it is a problem for me,” I can’t help but snap at him as I look, bleary-eyed, at the man in front of me, if you can even call him that. “More than half of us could barely afford the last increase, and now you’re raising it again? You can’t do this. It has to be illegal to steal from all of us like this.”

“Well, don’t worry about that. I’m only raising yours,” Mr. Howard replies.

“What? What are you talking about?” I demand, and I can hear my own voice shaking with my barely contained emotions. “You’re not raising the others too?”

“Well, your apartment is a two-bedroom, and I don’t have many of those in the building. The two bedroom ones are highly sought after at the moment,” Mr. Howard boasts with a smarmy grin in my direction. I want to punch him so bad.

“You can’t do that,” I argue with him. “I’m barely making ends meet as it is here. You know that I can’t afford that right now. Please don’t, Mr. Howard.”

It makes me feel sick to grovel to a man like him or any man, but my pride will be damned if my little brother at least has a roof over his head for the moment.

“Maybe get another shift shaking your ass at that club, huh?” Mr. Howard intones again, grinning. “I hear girls get special bonuses if they get fully undressed.”

“I’m not a dancer, and you know that. I’m a waitress.” I’ve told him this several times, but he chooses not to listen to me. “Please, I really can’t...” My voice cuts off. I’m trying very hard not to cry in front of this awful man.

Apparently, most of the men in my life are awful.

Eddie shines like a beacon of hope in my head, and I hold my chin high.

“Please think about this. I can’t pay a higher rent. I can’t make it and you know that. I’ve told you this before. We talked about it.”

“I’m not changing my mind,” Mr. Howard counters with a careless shrug of his round, underdeveloped shoulders, looking proud of himself for being awful.

“Look, please,” I grit my teeth as I beg my landlord, keeping my voice even and mature. “There has to be something I can do. How about payments or a loan of some sort? What about that?”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I know I should have kept my mouth shut, knowing that my night is about to go from bad to worse at the moment. That would be my fault.

I’ve seen how my landlord watches me in the lobby, and his eyes follow the curve of my breasts and ass as I leave.

I should have known better.

“That could work for me. Maybe something could be worked out between us,” Mr. Howard states as he turns to look at me. I

can see the lust there, heavy in his gaze. “Alternative means of payment are always negotiable between friends.”

I immediately stumble back from his disgusting presence when I catch the way his eyes travel over the length of my body.

I know a look of horrible and unwanted lust when I see it—I deal with that look almost every day when I’m at the club, and now even away from *The Scarlet Lounge*, I’m being harassed.

“Not so easy to make a good deal when it counts, huh?” Mr. Howard counters my choice of silence.

Of course, he thinks of me as a little girl he can control.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, and you should know better,” I say calmly, crumpling the rent notice in my hand, ready to walk into my apartment for the night. “You don’t get to manipulate people into giving you what you want.”

“You’re the one that works at a strip club,” Mr. Howard says, scoffing. He looks gross and stinky to me, like a bloated, dead fish. “If you had any intelligence, you would have been something in life. Now, look at you, begging for scraps.”

“I’m not the first person you’ve offered this sort of means of payment, am I?” I ask him as I try to focus on the beating of my heart, making sure to keep calm. I don’t like the thought of showing too much emotion in front of him.

I already know the answer to my question before he opens his mouth.

“Everyone always needs a helping hand every once in a while,” my disgusting landlord replies with a short shrug of his pudgy shoulders as if he isn’t casually talking about taking advantage of desperate people like my little brother and me.

“You’re absolutely repulsive,” I fume at him as he turns to leave. I have to turn quickly when he grabs my arm in his greasy fingers for the second time today.

“Don’t touch me,” I tell him angrily, smacking his hand away. I’m taking a page from Eddie’s book. I don’t want to let this man bully me for no reason other than money. “Don’t ever

think you can touch me, you *pig*. Don't come near my brother or me, ever. I don't want to see you while I'm around here."

"Rent is due at the end of the month," Mr. Howard snaps at me, knowing he still holds all of the cards in this situation. "Don't let it get behind again."

"And I'll make the payment like I always do, don't you worry," I counter, walking back to pick up my brother's discarded bag of books. I stop at the door to my apartment, looking back at my landlord as I go ahead and unlock the door with more force than necessary. "How about you go to hell in the meantime?"

I know I slammed the door too loudly behind me, but I can't seem to contain my rage. It makes my eyes burn, and my head ache. There is just no way I'm going to be able to pay the new rent anytime soon, but there's also absolutely no way I'm letting Mr. Howard have the upper hand.

I can't let these people get to me.

Inside the apartment, I realize that the place has been completely ransacked.

The furniture is turned over, and the pictures are covering the floor, glittering tiny shards of glass on the rough wooden floor and across the living room. The fridge is open, topping all our precious food onto the kitchen floor. I can't breathe.

On the wall, written with what looks like one of my lipsticks, is a message in red.

We know where you live, bitch.

With shaking fingers, I find the number on my phone, dialing it quickly and feeling as if my heart is going to beat out of my chest. I'm so overwhelmed.

The relief makes me gasp when the familiar voice answers on the other end.

"Please, can you come pick me up? I'm sorry, I need you."

Eddie's voice is like a balm to my fears. "Stay put. I'm coming."

CHAPTER SIX

Eddie

Once again, Kathleen is in my apartment.

She's wearing my clothes while hers are in the wash, and I like the sight of it.

This time though, my sisters are gone, and her little brother is yawning on the couch, tucked under the blankets and watching some happy sort of cartoon.

"I really don't know how to thank you for this," Kathleen whispers.

We're standing in the kitchen, and from the apartment's open plan, I can see that Stevie is almost asleep in the living room. Behind us, the coffee gurgles in the pot, filling quickly with my favorite fragrant, dark Colombian coffee.

I fill a mug for Kathleen, handing it over. "You don't have to thank me for anything. We should be calling the police, though. Or at least your landlord, to let him know."

"No," Kathleen says quickly and then clears her throat. Her cheeks grow red, and she looks angry for a moment. "No, I'm not contacting him for anything."

By the set of her shoulders, I can tell that something is weighing on her heavily.

"What happened?" I ask, putting my mug down. I resist the urge to check her over. "Did he do something to you? Did he

hurt you, Kat?"

The anger that burns through me is irrational, but it's there all the same. The thought of anyone putting their hands on Kathleen is maddening for me even to imagine.

I would rip her landlord limb from limb if I found out he hurt her.

I already had to stop myself from hurting those assholes at the diner.

"He didn't hurt me," Kathleen says, letting out a long sigh. "He's just a dick."

"Most of them are," I tell her, nodding and calming myself down a little.

"What's your landlord like?" Kathleen asks me, and I lead her to the breakfast table next to the window. There are flowers there in a vase that Robin must have left for me. She sits down and looks good there as if she's been there before.

"You're looking at him," I murmur, sitting back in my chair. My leg brushes hers. "My Uncle Peter owned this place too. He left it all to me in the will. It's mine."

Kathleen nearly chokes on her coffee. "You own an *entire* apartment building?"

"I do," I nod, feeling a small burst of pride at her impressed expression. "If you need a place, I still have a few open. I wouldn't charge you anything for them."

This comes out of my mouth, but I want to say that I want her with me here. If she doesn't want me the way I want her, if it's not possible to have her at my side and in my bed, at the very least, I can feel comfortable knowing that she's closer to me than before and hopefully safe from harm.

"Oh, Eddie, that's too much," Kathleen exclaims, covering her mouth with her hand. "For what feels like so long now, it's just been Stevie and me."

"You have someone in your corner now, Kat," I remark, and I can't help myself when I brush her hair behind her ear, letting

my fingers caress her jawline. “You don’t have to be alone anymore if you don’t want to be. I’m here for you.”

Kathleen’s coffee cup makes a soft clattering sound when she puts it down on the table. She swallows hard, and I take a moment to admire the woman in front of me.

I feel protective over her, and I already feel as if she is mine to keep safe.

She is soft and curvy in all the right places—nothing like the dancers in the club. Yet, Kathleen has substance to her, something to hold onto for warmth and comfort.

Her green eyes have fire in them, and her plump lips are set in a frown.

Her round, soft cheekbones are highlighted sharply by the street lamps below the window. Her eyebrows, two shades darker than her pale hair, are pulled together.

Her luscious breasts move when she moves, and she has the most glorious ass along with sturdy killer thighs.

A man could get lost in her.

I can only hope.

This is the woman I see in my dreams, the face that lives in my mind without any sort of reserve or restraint.

Kathleen feels like a part of me, sitting across from my body like she hasn’t all but curled into my chest and made me warm where I hadn’t been before. I can see her in a white dress, beautiful and mine forever.

“I don’t know what to say,” Kathleen says, and her bottom lip trembles.

I can hear the soft snoring from the living room, and I know that her little brother is sleeping soundly now. Kids are so resilient. He didn’t even question anything.

“Hey,” I murmur, reaching out to wipe the tear from her cheek. “Come here, Kat.”

Without a word, Kathleen comes around and folds herself into my lap. The curves of her body fit perfectly against me, and

she pushes her pretty face into my neck.

“I think it was the men from the club and the diner that broke into my apartment,” Kathleen says breathlessly. I can hear the terror in her voice. For all that, she acts as if she has everything under control; she is still so very young for her own life.

“Maybe it was a separate incident,” I tell her, though I really don’t believe it myself. “Maybe they aren’t related at all. Either way, you’re staying here for now.”

“One of the clocks had been knocked off the wall, and the time was stopped right after I left to bring you those brownies,” Kathleen’s arms wrap around my neck, and she smells like home to me. “There was a message. You saw it there.”

“You’re safe now,” I murmur, pressing my lips to her temple. I would never let anyone or anything hurt her. “You can relax, and you don’t need to worry.”

“I have to tell you something,” Kathleen whispered, her lips brushing my ear. She hesitates for just a moment. “I lied about my age when I interviewed for the job with Peter. I’m not twenty-one, I’m nineteen, and I turned nineteen about three months ago.”

I can’t help but let out a little chuckle. She looked surprised at my reaction.

“I know that. Your friend Chrissy told me all about it. I know all of that already.”

Kathleen rolls her eyes good-naturedly at me.

“Oh, of course, she did.”

“She was just looking out for you,” I tell her, curling a lock of her silky smooth pale hair around my fingers. “She told me not to give up on you or let you go.”

“She’s a good friend,” Kathleen says, letting out a breath. “She’s the only one I have now. She cares about people, and she cares about me like no one else does.”

“No,” I tell her, shaking my head. “No, Kat. You have me now too.”

“I do,” Kathleen answers. Her eyes are luminous and bewitching in the dark.

From the French restaurant below the apartments, a soft melody trails in through the thin panes of the window, twirling softly enough for us both to hear it but not loud enough to wake up Stevie on the couch. It’s a song I know well enough by now. They play the same sort of tune every night before they close for the day.

“You know,” I murmur into the soft skin of her neck. “I’ve never danced with a woman as beautiful as you are, Kathleen. What do you say? Dance with me?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t really even know how to dance, Eddie.”

“I do,” I answer, pulling her up to stand in front of me. “Just follow my lead.”

Kathleen’s hand curls over mine, and her other palm is pressed to my neck. I pull her in closer, wrapping my arm around her waist.

We sway back and forth to the sound, falling into the mesmerizing dreamlike feeling of a foggy night.

Kathleen stumbles as she looks at me and shakes her head, stepping back.

“I can’t do it, Eddie,” she says, discouraged. “I don’t have any rhythm.”

“Here,” I answer, tucking my arm fully around her waist. I lift her to stand on my feet in her socks. “There, see? Now you don’t have to have rhythm. You have me.”

Kathleen giggles, and it’s the first carefree moment I’ve seen from her in the past few days since I’ve come to know her again.

She looks so young, and I mourn who she thought she would be before life got in the way of her dreams. I decide then and there that I’m not letting her give all that up.

She will have everything.

I spin her around, still holding onto her hand as if she's not standing on my feet. Kathleen smiles and it's like the sun peeking behind the clouds at me.

"You're a great dancer," I murmur, trying not to smile and break character.

"Oh yeah," Kathleen says, letting out a laugh. She presses her body against mine even more than before. "It's almost like I'm not doing any of the work, huh?"

When I lean down, she meets me halfway, brushing her lips over mine gently. Her long, pale hair trails down her back, still damp from the shower she had when she got to the apartment. She and Stevie had been so tired.

This kiss isn't our first one, but it feels as if it should be. Every moment spent with her brings a new sort of emotion to the surface, calming me and waking me all at once.

My hand moves up and down her back, and Kathleen lets out a little moan into my mouth when my hand dips into the back pocket of her sweatpants.

When I squeeze gently, Kathleen lets out a little gasp in my ear and it goes straight to my lower half causing my length to pulse. She pushes herself against me, and I tighten my arm around her body letting her feel me.

"Eddie," she hesitantly says as she pulls back. "I need to tell you...."

"What is it?" I wonder if I've accidentally offended her somehow. "Kat?"

"Uh," she says, looking up at me with big eyes. "I haven't... I'm a virgin."

There's an ache that starts in me at her admission, and it can only be settled by the ache that resides within her.

She wants me to claim her, and I want nothing more than to tattoo my name on her skin and make the two of us one.

Without a word, I haul her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. I close the door to my bedroom, and she's in my lap on

the soft comforter of my bed. She looks damn good, immersed in my life, and rumped on my bedsheets where she belongs.

She moves a little in my lap, and I feel myself growing harder under where her body grinds down onto mine. Her eyes are hazy with lust and need. “Eddie, do you....”

“I want you,” I nod, bringing my mouth to hers in a hard kiss.

This seems to spur Kathleen into a flurry of emotions.

She straddles my lap so that her chest is pressed to mine, and through the T-shirt and sweats I gave her earlier, I can feel her hard nipples against my skin. The deep kiss that comes next feels a lot like a catalyst.

I need to have this woman, and I want her now. But, with Stevie on the sofa, it’s too risky. I have to keep my hunger for her under control for now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kathleen

I'm trying very hard not to laugh as Stevie pulls me out of the car and onto the sidewalk. I keep my eyes closed as instructed, waiting for the signal that I can actually open my eyes. They have been closed since we left the apartment.

It's the day after our impromptu move-in, and Eddie told me not to go into the club.

Night has fallen over the city, and I could hear the sounds of passing cars and honking horns as we were driving. When we finally pulled up at the destination, Stevie made sure to keep me in the dark. Now, he seems so very excited to be the one that keeps whatever secret it is to himself.

"No peeking," Stevie tells me, holding my hand squeezed tightly in his own as he waits for Eddie to get out of the car. "You have to keep them closed."

"I'm not peeking, Stevie," I tell my little brother, finding myself ruffling my little Stevie's hair with my other hand. I am peeking just a little. "I would never."

"Kat, come on," Stevie complains as he draws out the words in his mouth, smacking his lips. He used to always do that when he was younger.

I ruffle his dark hair a little without even looking at him, and he quickly uses his other hand to alter any damage I might have done to his hair.

“Sorry, kiddo,” I say, a faint smile pulling at my lips as I try not to laugh at him.

“You can open your eyes now!” Stevie cries happily, jumping up and down in place. “Look, Kat! Look, look, look!”

I open my eyes, blinking a few times as my sight adjusts to the street lamps and the passing car headlights. I can’t help but pull in a sharp breath when I realize where we are, my eyes falling on the theater’s big, wooden entrance. “We’re here,” I can barely mutter, absolutely gobsmacked. “The Atlanta Shakespeare Company’s theater. I can’t believe I’m back here.”

“You love it here,” Stevie says with a big grin, growing increasingly nervous when I don’t immediately react with what he must have hoped would be surprise excitement. “Mom used to take you here. She told me she would take you in October when she had more money. Because you love Halloween.”

“I liked Macbeth because of the witches,” I nod dully, still so very surprised to be back here. I always loved watching the three witches when I was a little girl.

Stevie looks up at Eddie in his leather jacket, and I know he’s hoping that he understands what’s happening better than him. He must think I’m mad at him or unhappy with him somehow.

It’s not true.

I’m just a little overwhelmed.

I tear my eyes away from staring at the building that resembles a medieval castle, looking down at my little brother as he smiles at me.

“I do, and she did. I just...how did you know that, Stevie? I didn’t think we ever talked about it.”

“I remembered it, silly!” Stevie proudly states with a smile as he looks at me with my same green eyes echoed in his youthful little face. “Eddie asked me what you might like to do, and now we’re here! Isn’t it awesome, Kat? This is so cool!”

“I love it,” I answer him, moving to hug my brother though I’m overwhelmed. The fact that Eddie cares enough to do this makes my heart sing for him even more. “Thank you both.”

It isn’t until we’re actually inside the theater that the full emotions of it hit me where I stand. I realize I haven’t been back inside this place since my mom had her problems, and I put a hand to my chest.

The music is so familiar to me, like a haunting melody, and it feels like I’ve fallen into one of my memories.

Eddie stops me as I go to sit at one of the lower seats in the theater, as I would have with my mom.

The balcony seats are private, exclusive compared to the others, and that’s where Eddie takes us both. I have never been in a box section before, never mind here with my mom, knowing how overpriced the theater often sold them for. I could have never come here without Eddie doing this for us.

I look at the announcement sheet on the table in front of our plush couch seats. The play that’s about to take place is Macbeth. My heart swells with affection.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I tell him in a slightly strangled voice, looking at Eddie as my little brother looks excited and keeps himself busy by looking over the balcony’s railing at the stage below.

“I know,” Eddie answers softly. “But I don’t really get to go to the theater for any reason, and my sisters would applaud me for experiencing some culture for once.”

I let out a laugh, and Eddie leans over, kissing my temple with a gentle press of his lips. Then, he touches our foreheads together, holding us together for a moment.

I keep a steady eye on my little brother, making sure he doesn’t get too excited and try to climb over the railing like I did when I was a kid.

“I’m sorry if it makes you uncomfortable to be here.” Eddie’s voice is quiet in my ear. “I really didn’t think about it. I didn’t know you would be sad about it.”

I can't help but smile softly.

"No, I really do love it here. It makes me feel happy to remember it with my mom. And I want my brother to be able to feel it too."

"It's just a lot to be experiencing again," Eddie offers as an explanation, nodding. He really does seem to get it. "I understand completely, Kat. I'm really sorry."

"A little bit, yeah," I truthfully answer him because I want him to know everything about me now. "But I want to be here, and it's a truly thoughtful thing to do for Stevie and for me."

"Kat, I sincerely hope you're not just lying about this for my sake," Eddie confesses to me with a small, nervous laugh. Seeing him out of sorts is odd, and I want to make it right. "Because we don't have to stay if you don't want to be here."

"I'm not. I promise it does mean a lot to me," I make sure to answer, giving the man at my side a small and intimate smile. I reach my hand out to him, taking hold of Eddie's fingers as he does the same. "Honestly, thank you. This means a lot to me. It's been so long since I did anything fun. I'm always at the diner or the club, so I really needed this."

"Kat, look at them!" Stevie excitedly points his finger at the orchestra playing the haunting melody of Macbeth's life. "People with instruments playing songs!"

I turn my attention to my little brother, realizing that he has never experienced something like this and probably never would have if it hadn't been for Eddie. This man is going to raise my standards one day at a time.

"Yeah, Stevie, don't they sound cool?" I move closer to him from the back couch to take a seat beside my little brother, and I can't help but smile when Eddie takes the seat directly next to me, sitting at my side.

I grab the papers on the table that are in a stack, trying to keep myself busy as I try to stop from sneaking little side glances at Eddie's handsome profile. God, he's gorgeous.

As I'm flipping through the cast announcements and the playbill, I see a familiar name in the cast lineup, among a sea

of other theater actors' names. It makes my stomach flip in annoyance.

"Are you okay, Kat?" Eddie asks me softly, and I know he must see how stiff I've suddenly become in my seat. "Hey, we don't have to stay here if you want to go."

"Fine," I answer him weakly. "Just thought I recognized a name on here."

"Is it someone you went to high school with?" Stevie asks me curiously when I don't give him any other answer. "You always say you don't want to see people you know from school, right?"

"I'm sure none of them are as good of a sister as you are, Kat," Stevie says with a grin, leaning into my seat and examining the cast list that's in my hands. Of course, it's easy for him to determine how much I mean to him. I wish it was that easy for me to see it in myself. "No one is as good as my sister, it's true!"

"Thanks, Stevie," I tell him with a soft sigh, wrapping my arm around my little brother as I smack a kiss into his hair.

"Ew!" Stevie says, wiping his hair, and I can't help but laugh. Eddie chuckles too from where he sits at my side. It feels right to be here with the two of them.

The lights dim just a bit, giving a warning that the middle of the play is about to start up. The curtains open and close. It's time to use the bathroom and all.

My little brother is all but thrumming with excitement as he pulls himself up to see over the box's balcony with his chin on the polished wood, brimming with happiness as the curtains open again.

He's so into the play, just like me.

It's during the start of intermission when I see her, and my heart sinks in my chest, making me feel a bit nauseous. I'm so very thankful that Eddie was the one to take my little brother to the bathroom deep in the theater, hurrying him a little as Stevie tried to pretend that he hadn't been holding it in for the last ten minutes of the show.

He had argued that he didn't want to miss anything, and I knew the feeling well. I know that Eddie is standing outside the bathroom waiting for him right now, and I can't wait for them to get back to me.

I'm just waiting for them both, lingering by the entrance to our balcony seats and wringing the half-crumpled playbill in my hands.

Of course, it has to be her that ended up on stage where we went tonight. She's the lead in my favorite play.

That's just my stupid luck.

It seems I always had the worst time of it.

"Kathleen Hendrix? Is that you?"

I freeze where I stand in the hall waiting for Eddie and Stevie.

I know I'll have to look at her and talk to her, but I don't want to. All I can see is the both of us on stage in the drama club, vying for the front and center role. In her, I can only see my disappointments and my dreams that went up in smoke.

"It's Henderson," I tell her. "But yes."

"Oh my God, it really is you, isn't it?" she states as she moves closer to me as if she can get a better look at me from where she stands. Her golden hair is perfectly curled, and her smile is like a cat with a bird in its mouth. "Wow, you look a lot different."

"Megan," I say, keeping my voice light and airy. I take in her Macbeth costume and I want to laugh when I see that she's still wearing her microphone. What a rookie move on her part. "So great to see you again."

"How have you been? Has life been good to you?" Megan asks me with a slick grin, not bothering to try to make light of our history together when we were still in school.

She never did pretend to forget things. The difference between us is that she went places, and I fell down a deep hole.

"Oh yeah, it's been good," I answer her, nodding my head as if I'm telling the truth. "What are you doing over here? Meet and

greet with the fans?” I’m being sarcastic, but Megan preens like a peacock with new feathers. She always was a sucker for a good compliment.

“Oh, yeah, of course, of course. There are some important watchers up here that need my attention,” Megan offers up, not bothering to divulge just who she needed to talk to. “They are all vying to talk to me. An actress’s job is never done.”

I want to laugh, but I keep it to myself. It’s not so much that I wish for Megan’s life. Acting on stage was fun back in school, but I never really considered it a viable career option. It was just another in a long list of things I might have been if things were different when I graduated.

I might have been someone else, someone new.

“Yeah, sure,” I say because I really have nothing to lose, and I don’t care to be nice to someone like Megan Stark.

I let out a sigh of relief as I lean around her to look down the hallway that leads to the bathrooms.

I’m almost hoping that Eddie has taken my little brother to get a drink at the snack bar or something like that. I don’t want Megan talking to my little brother, and I don’t want to talk to her either.

“Well, what brings you here to our great theater then?” Megan asks me, touching her hair and smoothing the golden strands down. They look greasy to me, though.

“I just wanted to come see the play again after so long,” I tell her, looking away. “And my brother’s birthday is coming up pretty soon, so this is for him as well.”

“Oh really?” Megan asks me, pursing her lips as if she’s trying to remember a lowly peasant like me is such a bother for her to keep up with. “Is that so? I thought that was a few months ago. I could have sworn I saw something about it on your profile. A few people said happy birthday. Like two.”

“No, that was my birthday,” I tell her in a tired-sounding voice. I want to be done with this now. I don’t really care what she thinks of me or what she believes about it.

Megan's lips firmly press into a straight line as if she's trying not to laugh at me outright. "Oh yeah, that's right," she answers, smiling like an oil slick. "So sorry, it's just been really chaotic lately. Been planning a lot of stuff, and I'm super busy."

"Yeah, I guess life has a way of getting away from us when it can," I reply, seriously wanting our conversation to end no matter the cost. "So many things to remember and so many responsibilities to prioritize now. Anyway, I should be...."

"Oh yeah," Megan says, looking smug. "My wedding is coming up next week, and it kind of is running away from me, yeah," she says curtly. She looks very proud of herself. "My fiance proposed to me on the beach in Miami. It was so great."

I want to laugh in her face.

I don't care about her perfect life, and I'm annoyed with her for thinking I would care about anything she does. I stopped caring about most of the people I knew before my life centered around my little brother's happiness. Once I graduated high school, they were all forgotten to me.

"I heard that you're still on stage now, though," Megan tells me knowingly, unable to keep the smirk off her face.

She knows exactly what she's doing.

My shoulders tense up, and my whole body aches with the rigid stance I can't help but take. Somehow, most of the people I knew from school assumed I was a stripper now. Of course, they assume that about me.

None of them are worth the time and effort to change their minds anyway. The fact that they feel strippers are something to be ashamed of proves what kind of people they all are.

"*The Scarlet Lounge*," Megan says on the edge of a laugh as if I need a reminder from someone like her that I work where I do. My blood boils in my veins.

"Oh, yeah?" I ask her quickly, flicking my hair back. If she wants blood, I can go for the jugular too. "Did your fiancé tell you that? I think I saw him under someone the other night. Or maybe he was over her that night. It's hard to remember."

Megan's face grows purple-red, and she opens her mouth to say something else.

"Kat!" My little brother's voice excitedly calls for me down the hallway, his footsteps quick and loud as he runs right toward me where I stand.

"I got you a present, or well, Eddie got it for me to give to you," he says happily, holding up the purple keychain in his hand with a likeness of Megan's face on it to show me. I want to groan.

My brother pauses in his tangent, looking up at where Megan stands. "Oh, sorry about that. Hi," he offers in greeting with a small wave of his hand as he moved to hide behind me partially.

He's shy sometimes. He doesn't usually know how to talk to people he doesn't know.

"Hi there," Megan says to him with a bright sort of smile that I can see right through. She's one of those people that just wants others to like her the most.

"Are you Lady Macbeth?" Stevie asks her, looking excited at her costume, elaborate robes, and fabrics that make up the long, thick skirts around her legs.

"Yes, that's me," Megan says proudly, giving me a sharp grin as if she's better than me. "I've been Lady Macbeth for a whole year now. It's so amazing."

"I used to go to school with Megan," I go ahead and tell my little brother before he asks anything about her, fighting against the urge to hide Stevie behind my back. Megan's attention is annoying while she looks at us. I want her to leave us alone.

"Your sister was a good actress back in school," Megan offers with a shrug, her eyes wandering over to Eddie. She gives me a mean-spirited smile. "Not as good as me, clearly, but we all have our lots in life, right Kathleen? It's totally okay."

"My sister is the best at everything ever," Stevie states proudly, smiling as he reaches out a hand to hold mine. "She's

a really good cook and a good storyteller. She even works at a diner too. She can do anything!”

My heart swells with affection for my little Stevie. I wish I could see myself the way he does right now. If I did, I might feel better about what kind of woman I’ve become this last year.

Megan’s eyes widen some, though I know she’s just playing it up for Stevie. I’m sure she thinks it’s stupid and my life is a mess.

“Wow,” she sarcastically says as she looks from my little brother to where Eddie stands behind him, strong and handsome. I can see her eyes linger on his body. “That’s really something.”

“I haven’t yet introduced myself,” Eddie begins, and he towers over her as he moves forward to offer his hand to Megan. “I’m Eddie. Eddie Snow.”

“Snow? As in Snow Condos and Apartments on Peachtree?” she asks him, wide-eyed. I can tell that she’s impressed and also maybe a little surprised.

“That and more,” Eddie tells her, nodding as he drops her hand.

Megan’s normally pretty features twist into something ugly that looks like jealousy for a moment, and I can’t help the smugness I feel. It makes me feel warm inside. Eddie is a good-looking man, and he’s with me and not with her.

“Right,” Megan echoes as she stares at him with wide eyes.

“And you are?” Eddie asks her in a cool tone of voice, completely calm and at ease around her, something I wonder if he learned while he’d been friends with my father. My dad was always a man to never fold under pressure. Even when he did something, he never relented, which is why he’s probably in jail now.

“Megan,” she softly offers to him, standing up a little bit straighter. “Well, I guess I better be getting back to the stage,” she quickly tells us all, pulling back, so she’s out of our circle completely. It makes me feel giddy and as if I’m finally in

control because of Eddie. “Intermission is almost over, and I’ll be missed.”

“Yeah, sure, so nice meeting you,” Eddie says flippantly, sounding as if he doesn’t care. It makes me unreservedly happy to know that this man is so stuck on me that other women barely exist to him beyond me.

Stevie gives a happy little smile to Megan as she leaves, unaware of the tension between us all. “Good luck out there,” he calls after her. “Break a leg or two!”

“We could only be so lucky,” I whisper, and Eddie lets out a snort of laughter as my little brother joyfully hops back into the balcony toward our seats.

“Hey, are you okay?” Eddie asks me, brushing his fingers under my chin gently. “Kathleen? Are you alright?”

“She was always so annoying,” I tell him instead of answering because it’s true.

“But are you okay?” he asks me again, serious this time. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I think so, yeah,” I answer him honestly, looking at Eddie with eyes I know must hold a hell of a lot of emotion for him. I can’t even fathom the depth of what I feel for this man. “That was a lot to deal with, but you did it well, I think.”

“I’m sorry if I crossed the line with her,” Eddie tells me. “I just didn’t want her to think she could talk to you however she wanted. I don’t think it’s right.”

“You keep throwing that Snow last name around here, and we’re going to have the camera’s chasing us,” I answer him playfully. His features relax some at my ribbing.

“How did you know that would work on her? Knowing you were wealthy? She shriveled up so quickly when she heard who you really were. It was great.”

“Well, she was up here at intermission, right?” Eddie says, shrugging as if it’s an easy thing to know. “The only reason an actress would come up here in the limited amount of time they have to be off stage is to try and secure powerful friends. I

sometimes listen to my sisters when they talk about things like this, though neither of them ever has to know I said so.”

If I remember correctly, Robin had gone to school to be a lawyer but has settled on being a graphic artist, and Riley is some kind of school teacher-turned-internet influencer.

I’m not sure exactly about either one of them, but I do know that they’re both smart women with good heads on their shoulders. I always admired them both when I was younger, and I knew them.

“I won’t tell them. It will just be our little secret,” I tell him, bumping him gently with my shoulder. “They would probably just get a big head about it anyway.”

Eddie laughs softly in agreement, and my mind clings to the sound of it.

When we get back in the car, the night catches up to me, and I fall asleep quickly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eddie

The eggs crack easily into the bowl and I mix them quickly, tipping them into the pan on the stove. At my back, Stevie sits with a cup of orange juice in his hand.

“Does your sister ever have the chance to sleep in?” I ask the little boy, turning a bit to look over my shoulder at him as I cook. “Or does she ever get to relax?”

Stevie takes a moment before he answers.

“Not really. She works most of the time at night, and I stay with Mrs. Maxine. She gets up too early in the mornings.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask him, smiling wryly as I plate the fluffy eggs. “She gets up too early for you, kid? You ever think she’s doing the right thing for you?”

Stevie makes a face. “She’s up before me and gets me ready for school.”

“Not this week, though, huh,” I ponder, wiping my hands on a towel before throwing it over my shoulder. The bacon and sausage crackle in the oven.

“Not this week,” Stevie confirms. “I’m on fall break this week, and it’s fun.”

After I plate the rest of the food for us to eat, I sit at the counter across from Stevie, who digs in happily. He drinks his orange juice, enjoying his meal.

“Hey, Stevie,” I say, as I sip at my third hot coffee of the day. When he looks up, I continue. “Are you okay with this? Living here with me. I mean?”

“I think so,” Stevie says, chewing on his bacon thoughtfully. He’s still in his pajamas, and he looks perfectly content. “It’s nicer here than at our house. There’s no Mrs. Maxine, but it’s still nice. The TV is really big, even bigger than the one at school!”

“It’s a nice TV for sure,” I agree with him, a little bit distractedly. It’s still late morning, and the world is foggy and chilled beyond the windows, with orange leaves tumbling over the sidewalks below the apartment building.

An idea that’s been bouncing around in my head comes to the surface. “I have a spare bedroom, Stevie. What do you say we fix it up today and make it yours? You can have a big TV if you want.”

I’ve been sleeping there in the spare bed for the past few days, but it only makes sense to move Stevie from the couch. I’ll figure out my room later on for me.

Stevie drops his fork, and I think I’ve overstepped.

“No way! That would be so cool!” Stevie jumps from his seat and wraps me in a hug. I pat his back, laughing.

“What’s all this excitement about? I couldn’t sleep anymore,” Kathleen’s tired voice asks. She spots the breakfast. “Wow, that smells amazing.”

She stands in the doorway, rubbing at her big, green eyes that are still hazy with sleep. Her hair is wild and wavy down her back, and her skin is pale. Her cheeks are pink with sleep wrinkles. She’s wearing a big T-shirt that was once mine, and I wonder if she has on any shorts underneath. I clear my throat.

“Here’s some breakfast for you,” I tell her, dragging a hand over her hip as she passes by. I hand her a plate filled with food. “You need to eat something.”

“Eddie is going to get me a big TV, Kat!” Stevie shouts, throwing himself onto his sister in a big bear hug. He grins back at me as he turns back to the TV.

She laughs, nearly dropping her plate as she sits down. She looks at me curiously, with her dark brows furrowed and her pale hair glimmering.

“A big TV?” Kathleen asks me skeptically. “What does that even mean, Eddie?”

Stevie is already in the living room, engrossed in a cartoon show.

“I was thinking we could move him into the spare room, and it could be his. Maybe we can go today and get stuff for him. We can make a day of it and maybe go to an apple farm.” I try to keep my tone light, I don’t want to overstep.

She’s staring at me when I look up, and there’s an unreadable look on her pretty face. Her eyes glitter, and she swallows hard, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Kat? Are you alright there?” I ask her, worried now that I’ve said something wrong and maybe I’ve upset her. Maybe she doesn’t like apples or something?

“Eddie,” she says, shaking her head. “This is too much, but thank you so much.”

After we leave the apartment later in the morning, I can’t help but feel so damn happy with the way things are going for me. The sky is as clear and turquoise blue as an ocean, a stark contrast to the fire-orange leaves of the trees.

A chilly wind cuts across the open car window. Even the days are getting cold now, not just the nights, as October inches further along and we’re getting that much closer to Halloween. I can tell that Kathleen likes it, and she seems happier.

Somehow, even after the hayride and the apple picking at the apple farm, Kathleen has managed to persuade Stevie and me on a further outing to get pumpkins for making jack-o-lanterns later. I can’t say I don’t want to do it too. This kind of outing is something I’ve always wanted for myself.

In the back of the car, there’s a new bed cover with dinosaurs and a brand spanking new TV with Stevie’s name on it. On his feet, there are brand new white sneakers. Those seem to make Kathleen the proudest.

Every time she looks at the shoes I grabbed for him while we were in the city, she looks as if she wants to eat me right up. I can't really say I would be opposed to it.

It blows my mind that only a few days ago I had a strip club dropped on me I didn't want, and now here I am, on my way to pick pumpkins with my ex-best friend's daughter.

I wonder what Harlan would say if he knew. Maybe I don't want to think about what he would say.

I feel so very tired when I think about it. If this thing with us goes somewhere, what will she tell her father? What will I tell him?

Then I look over at Kathleen in the passenger seat as her eyes light up when the pumpkin patch comes into view, and then to Stevie as his face crinkles up in his excitement, and it starts to feel a little less ridiculous to me as I think about it.

Stevie sprints ahead of us into the field full of the giant orange pumpkins arranged as if they have been thrown about randomly in the absence of the plants they grew from. His bright eyes and cheeks rosy around his wide grin cause Kathleen smiles. He looks happier than I have ever seen him before.

Kathleen points at one of the middle-sized pumpkins in the middle of the field, and Stevie runs excitedly over to it right away, patting its surface with his hands.

Jumping this way and that, her brother jovially looks around from pumpkin to pumpkin, delighted by his multitude of choices. He isn't the only one. Many other children run around the little field searching for their perfect pumpkin. It's like a scene out of a postcard, drenched in autumn.

I promise myself then and there that when I have kids, I'll always be there. I'll be the one that is excited at any chance to spend time with my children. Hopefully, this vision includes the woman walking at my side, holding my hand forever.

Kathleen is breathing in the autumn air, looking peaceful as I trail to a stop next to her. She thrives in this sort of environment, and I make a note to take her out more.

I do try not to look at her too much, at least when I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on Stevie, but my eyes always seem to come back to her, and Stevie is close enough that I can hear him well.

Kathleen looks gorgeous today in her deep red peacoat, the high collar of her thick sweater just visible there and keeping her warm from the chill. Her hair is loose down her back, brushed smooth and whirling in the soft wind. She's wearing a short wool skirt and soft-looking light brown tights too.

Her hands are open and by her sides. It appears like she's waiting for the chance to dip her hands into the grass or grab the pumpkins. She looks as if she belongs out here in the peak of autumn, situated amongst the leaves and covered in the crisp, chilly wind.

It's difficult to look at her knowing I want her so badly that it hurts. Damn, if she isn't the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

This sort of thing is nice.

I have to admit to myself, if only to remind myself, that I'm here with the two of them, like a family. This is the kind of family I would want for myself. I let out a sigh, my eyes falling on the phone in my hand.

With a little click, the screen lights up for me, the image of all three of us on the hayride earlier pops up filling the screen, and it only makes the feeling of need for her grow even stronger.

These feelings have been building like a burning fire since the first time I saw her at the club. I have realized what this could mean for me, and that she may feel the same.

I don't want to go back to being without Kathleen.

She is so tempting, so damn lovely all of the time, and her mind is so enthralling. I can't help but sigh again as my hand falls to my side to tuck my phone back into my pocket. My gaze wanders back to the orange pumpkin patch right in front of me.

There is a bubble of familiar laughter as light and joyful as it comes. Twisting my head to the side with a grin, I find Kathleen laughing behind her hand, her pale green eyes twinkling with unbridled amusement.

The look on her face sends a little jolt through my heart, and I have to remind myself not to get too carried away with her. I don't want her to think I'm spending time with the two of them as a means to an end. I want her and whatever else for as long as I can have it all.

Just then, a little rugrat heads straight for me with his head down. I am knocked off balance, straight into a pile of smelly, soggy leaves.

I'm still grinning as I sit up, brushing old leaves that smell of autumn away from my face when they continue to flutter around me. Some undignified spluttering later in the leaves, and a hand appears before my eyes, a familiar, soft-looking hand.

Following up the length of her red coat, I find Kathleen fighting the laughter in her throat but failing as little bursts of giggles still escape her lips. She pulls me to my feet and helps me brush the leaves from my leather jacket and hair.

A completely frazzled mother pulls a red-faced child over to stand in front of us. She forces the little kid to apologize for knocking me over as he accidentally ran into me. He does, reluctantly, rolling his eyes at me.

"Yeah, that's alright, little man," I tell him, and I can feel Kathleen staring at me. "Just watch out there, huh? You don't want to knock anyone else over, do you?"

The little boy shakes his head with a little smile. When the mother and child finally leave, Kathleen turns back to me, not quite looking at me though I can see a pleased smile on her plump, pink lips.

I find that I want more of that smile from her and of that laugh.

I'm happy to see that it's because of me that she's happy. I feel a sense of pride from that, and I want to keep making her happy for as long as I possibly can.

Her smile is like seeing the sun, and it warms me up.

I can see Stevie playing with the other kids close by, engrossed in his pumpkin picking. He's not even glancing over at us at all; he's having so much fun.

"He doesn't get to do stuff like this often," Kathleen says thoughtfully. "So thank you for this. Thank you for all of it, Eddie. It means so much more than you know."

"It's nothing," I tell her, gulping hard. "It feels nice to make someone happy."

"Oh hey, you dropped your phone," Kathleen says as she bends to pick it up, with my heart in my throat. I don't want her to see the front screen.

She makes to pass the phone back to me in an easy motion when the screen lights up under her touch, and her gaze goes to the light automatically.

Of course, the picture of us on the hayride, smiling big and bright, flares to life in her hand. Her green eyes are wide as she stares at the screen even after it's gone completely dark once again. I can't gauge her reaction.

After a moment, I suck in a hard breath, knowing full well that I've been caught, my feelings about her on full display. I move to take the phone back from her. Our fingers brush, and I can hear her breath as she sucks in, and those big eyes turn on me while the light pink of her cheeks deepens into a full-blown blush.

Suddenly, she's right in front of me, looking up at me as if it's the very first time she's ever seen me. Her hand brushes up my side under my leather jacket.

I lean down, and Kathleen presses her lips to mine, giving me a deep kiss like there's no one around. There *are* people around, though, and she pulls away after a moment.

"Stay here," she tells me. "One of Stevie's friends is over there. I'm going to ask her parents to look after him while we go try and find my glasses in the maze."

“In the maze?” I wonder, thoroughly confused at what she just said. “You wear glasses now? And when did you go into the maze? We’ve been with you the whole time, Kat.”

At that, Kathleen just laughs, and when her hand brushes the crotch of my jeans when she passes, I suddenly understand. There are no glasses.

She snatches up my hand when she comes back, and she pulls me into the maze that’s made up of stacked hay bales and creepy-looking scarecrows.

As we go deeper into the maze, the fewer people we see, and when Kathleen yanks me into the shadows, I press her into the walls of hay bales, pushing my tongue into her mouth. I feel her body writhe against mine, warm and wanting me.

“Eddie,” she breathes against my mouth. Her hand squeezes the hardening front of my jeans, and I can’t help the gasp that escapes my lips.

I wait for a moment, making sure no one is going to sneak up on us as the sky darkens overhead. I can feel the shift in the air, like the shift between us two.

“It’s going to storm,” Kat says above me, breathless as I kneel at her feet, pulling her tights down her legs to get to what I need most.

“We have time enough,” I tell her, slipping a hand up her thigh and under her skirt.

She’s already wet, and when my fingers slip inside of her, Kathleen tips her head back, gasping at the feel of it.

I wonder if any man has touched her like this or if I’m really the only one who’s ever been this close to her.

I push open her legs a little more where she stands, leaning against the wall of hay and plastic spiders. Under her skirt, I find her wet folds once again, and when I lick, Kathleen buries her hand in my hair, gripping my long locks and tugging gently. She might just as well be burying her fingers in my heart as well.

Suddenly there's a sound around the corner, and I come back up, lifting Kathleen to carry her over to a hidden shadowy spot where there's a stray bale waiting. She sits and opens her legs for me once again, letting me wrap my hands around her thighs and squeeze as I lap up the slick, hot wetness between her legs.

"God, Eddie," she breathes, sounding wrecked as I kneel in front of her with my face between her legs. "Please, please don't stop what you're doing now."

I lick a slow circle around the bundle of nerves that I know will send her over the edge quickly, and when I begin to pump my fingers in and out, Kathleen lets go, coming hard on my fingers. She pants, going limp, using the wall for support.

When we make our way out of the hay maze, rain begins to fall softly. Kathleen has a death grip on my hand. She grins up at me every now and again, looking smitten. I know I must be looking at her the same way too.

"Eddie!" Stevie comes skidding to a stop before us, and there's a massive pumpkin perched precariously in his little arms. He slows down, the smile growing brighter on his face as the happiness on his sister's face becomes clear to him.

The rain begins in earnest, and yet I can still taste Kathleen on my lips and tongue. The water doesn't wash away her intoxicating scent.

"Is that your pumpkin?" I ask Kathleen's little brother, looking over the large orange monstrosity before I give the thing a hollow little knock just for show.

Stevie's eyes light up again, and he nods excitedly at me, holding the foot tall and just about as wide pumpkin as high up as he dared to show us.

"Are you sure?" Kathleen asks him, still sounding a little breathless from our romp in the hay bales. "That's a big fellow, Stevie."

"Yes, this is the one I want! What about you, Eddie? Where's your pumpkin at?" Stevie asks under the shelter of the trees, looking as if he's going to find it there.

“No, no, it’s already raining and everything. It’s going to storm soon. One for you is good enough for me,” I tell him, smiling because he seems so excited.

I look around and try to see if there are any umbrellas available for us to use or if we’ll have to pay and then run back to the car just as quickly before the full brunt of the storm hits the rolling hills.

I don’t see any, but I don’t want Kathleen in the rain either.

A hand catches my arm, holding me back from stepping into the rain. I glance back at Kathleen, and I’m completely ensnared by the crystalline green of her big eyes, even more vibrant and more beautiful than the stormy sky above us as the rain pours down.

“But Eddie, come on now,” the whine from Stevie is just as mind-changing as one would assume it would be. His sister also aids him, squeezing my fingers as she looks up at me. “You have to get one, and you promised me anyway!”

“Eddie, you agreed to make jack-o-lanterns with us, plural. That can’t be done with just one pumpkin, you know,” Kathleen grins at me, knowing the influence those eyes have on me. “You have to get one for yourself if you want us to do it.”

“Then where’s your pumpkin, Kat?” I ask her, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“Yeah, Kat, where is your pumpkin?” Stevie asks her, pointing at her empty hands.

She stops, looking between the both of us with reluctant affection beginning to spread over her pretty features.

“I should have known you two would be trouble when put together. Of course, I’ll get one in the rain if Eddie does, but I’m happy with this day anyway. I’m happy doing Halloween things and being with the two of you.”

Now it seems it’s my turn to surrender under the combined force of Kathleen and Stevie’s prodding and pouting. Even as I pretend to resist their combined looks, a part of me loves all of this.

The warm glow of happiness is a glowing ember in the dark spaces of my heart that have long been abandoned, reigniting the feelings that had long since felt as though they might never return if they had ever been there in the first place.

I haven't had many women in my life, but the ones who were there only hurt me and were never anything like Kathleen. It's really always just been my sisters and me. This is a return to that familial love, wrapped up in the love I feel for Kathleen as well.

Making a show of it, I sigh at them both and try not to grin, dramatically raising and dropping my shoulders. "I guess I'll have to get the best one out there. I mean, it's only right."

"Well, go on then," Kathleen says, raising an eyebrow at my bravado.

"Well, maybe I'll just wait until the storm is gone before I go out there," I tell her, letting out a little laugh as she grabs my hand with a smile up at me.

"A smart man would wait, yes," she tells me, but it feels like she's talking about something else entirely, and my thoughts race. "Some things are worth it."

"I'll wait as long as I have to," I tell her, tipping her face up a little.

"Maybe I don't want to wait," Kathleen breathes. "Maybe I want it as soon as I can get it. What would you say to that, Eddie?"

I don't know how to answer her. "I would say that you need to be sure, Kat."

"I'm more sure about you than I am about anything else," she tells me firmly.

Luckily, as the rain grows harder, we find a tent with pumpkins already piled up and waiting to be picked out. As we carry our pumpkins to the checkout counter, I realize this has been the best idea I have ever had.

Grinning happily, Stevie ducks down to look through the pumpkins once again, placing his first one by my feet. He

looks over at us and then waves a hand, pulling Kathleen along behind him as he goes to the little setup of apple cider behind the pumpkins, letting his sister pour them both hot, steaming cups.

This time it's my turn again to be a photographer.

This time I won't hide it.

I'm happy, and the scene is just too perfect to pass up.

Standing behind the bright orange pumpkins, Stevie lifts his cup to his sister's, touching them together before they drink them; the two bent together smiling.

I have to tear his gaze away from the picture so that I don't miss the real thing right in front of me, but this image might just be my new favorite.

Maybe though, if I'm a lucky man, we'll be able to take so many more.

CHAPTER NINE

Kathleen

Stevie is in his bed in his new room, snug and warm under his new blankets. The big TV has been hung on the wall across the room, and I know he has to be so happy to finally have one of his own finally.

Eddie is such an amazing man. He loves my brother just as much as I do. He makes me happy, so damn happy.

I want it to be him. I want him to be the man to claim me as his own. I need him to be the first and only man to slip inside of me and make me his own as he is mine.

We're in his bed, covered in the moonlight from outside and wrapped in each other.

I kiss him back, straddling his lap with a grin when I lean down.

"You really are the most beautiful man in the world," I whisper, letting my voice create the melody of my feelings for him, all wrapped up in his touch.

I want him so badly.

I've wanted him since the day he walked back into my life, saving me from the disgusting men that tried to objectify me.

Eddie is the kind of man I want in my life forever, but I'm terrified he might leave me.

My lips are on top of his, and Eddie's hands move to my waist, where the host of butterflies waiting in my belly seem to take flight right away. My heart begins to race, and my pulse quickens, my body tense on top of his.

I'm so very nervous, but it doesn't matter. I have the sudden notion that I never want to stop kissing this man again. The urge to never take my lips off him is strong.

"Don't leave me," is what slips out of my lips, and I'm automatically ashamed.

Eddie must also feel the change in my mood. He lifts my body and flips us over on the bed, where I'm pressed into the mattress.

"I'm right here, Kat," Eddie murmurs, keeping eye contact. "I'm not leaving you."

He slips off his rings, putting them on his bedside table, where they fall into place. I love those rings, and something about them just turns me on somehow.

Eddie holds himself over me like a blanket against the chill outside, warming me from the inside out. His lips never really leave mine, but on a whim, my teeth bite down on his bottom lip, and I tug gently there, earning a little gasp from him.

I push my hands to the skin of his waist and pull at his old band t-shirt, tugging it off of him. The steel hair at his temples glitters in the light from the moon that shines in from outside the window.

He's so good-looking.

I marvel in wonder for a moment at what I see there against his tan skin. My hands cover the intricate tattoos on his chest, and I know I'll dream about them tonight. I don't know why I never thought of them before, but they make sense.

His body covers mine, and I feel born again under the touch of his hands. That touch finds its way up my borrowed shirt, lingering on the clasp of my bra.

I can't believe Eddie will be my first time.

He pulls his lips away from mine reluctantly, breathing hard. "Is this okay?" he asks. As sweet as it is, I just want Eddie not to take it easy on me.

"Do you really have to ask me that now? Really?" I ask breathlessly.

"Kat," he says desperately, cupping my face in his hands. He's waiting for an answer, but I assume he can tell by my actions that I really want him.

I respond with just a nod, just a little gesture to soothe his questions, and I pull his lips back to mine, my tongue pushing wantonly into his mouth.

Though I may not be adept at this sort of thing, I at least know that my kissing is passable.

Eddie's warm hands unclasp my bra and then feverishly move to my breasts, cupping them gently in his hands and then rubbing the nipples between his rough fingers. I let out a mewl in his ear, unable to stem the flow of my need for him.

My body feels like fire is burning its way through my veins. I can't help but moan at the brush of his fingers as he tugs off my shirt, throwing it and my bra to the floor of his bedroom. I think they belong there.

Eddie kisses me slowly at first, his lips lightly brushing over the skin on my chin and neck. A blush spreads over my skin at his touch, making me feel hot.

He sucks hard at my skin, leaving a small purple bruise on my collarbone. Eddie smirks as he runs a finger across the bruise reverently, admiring his work.

His lips move to my chest. He presses open-mouthed kisses along each breast as if he's marking his place there, letting me and anyone else know that I'm his and he is mine. He is slow with his tongue, licking over my nipples with intent.

He quickens the pace now, sending shivers throughout my body. This is my first encounter with a man, and he is breathtaking. Eddie is more than I could have ever hoped for.

His lips move to encompass each breast, teeth tugging at my nipples, the heat pulsing hot dampness between my legs.

I pull at his pants even as my hands tremble, dropping them to the floor. Eddie licks at a nipple softly again and again. Then his fingers dip down into my waistband and push gently inside me, and I can't help but see stars.

Eddie's lips move back to mine, his length hard and heavy as he presses against me. I can feel him twitch as I brush my fingers over the tip of his manhood, barely brushing him but bringing out a response anyway.

It makes me feel powerful, the fact that this man wants me so bad that the slightest touch is enough to send him tumbling right over the edge with it, and me along with him.

His big, hot hands move to my sweats. He curls his hand around my ass and tugs them down all the way, his lips following my waistline with his tongue, and then his teeth drag over the soft silk of my panties, scraping at the fabric that is already dripping wet with my arousal. I arch into him, pushing closer.

"Eddie, please," I gasp, my back arching as he pulls my underwear down all the way and tosses them to the side. I can feel myself aching for his touch now.

His tongue flicks between my folds, where my juices have made a home, lapping up what was already dripping from his touch. He kisses down my thigh, using his mouth to clean me up gently. His long, dark hair tickles my skin, and his hands wrap around my hips, holding me down.

He looks up at me, entranced. His hazel eyes bright. "You are so fucking beautiful, Kat. You know that? I wanna see you come undone. You have no idea."

I can feel myself buzzing with want, aching at his words and wanting them to come true for us. I can see how much he wants to claim me as his own, and I can't think of anything that I want more either.

He looks good between my legs. He looks like a painting, forever etched into my mind.

He continues as he moves down again, his tongue slipping farther inside of me. He dips his long fingers inside once again, pushing them in and out in time with the flicking of his talented tongue. I've never felt anything so good before and never want it to end. It does, though, coiling in my spine and building up slowly.

My back arches with anticipation as my pleasure comes to a head and white-hot warmth spreads through my body. I come around Eddie's fingers, squeezing him.

After lapping up what was left, Eddie returns to my mouth, letting me taste myself on his lips as he slips his tongue inside my mouth once again. I feel absolutely wrecked by him; this man has made me feel something I never have.

Eddie pulls his boxers off, and his hard length falls heavily out of them.

I must have thought about what was inside those tight jeans a hundred times, but now that I'm really here with the heavy heat of him perched in front of me in this position, I realize just how big he really is. It's a lot for me to take in. Literally.

People have always told me, even more in the *Scarlet Lounge* now, that size never matters, but I realize now that they haven't been with someone like Eddie. And they never will be either.

This man is mine now, claimed, and I don't want to ever let him go. The thought of it alone is painful for me to imagine.

I can't help myself, and I'm too impatient not to pull him to my body, my thighs trembling in excitement, with my mouth glued to his. I can't wait for him to push himself inside of me and bury his length in my body until we become one.

His helm touches my wet folds, rubbing gently, and I freeze.

What if I'm not good enough?

What if it's not good for him?

What if I'm the worst he's ever had?

Eddie must feel something change where I'm underneath his warm body, worrying about dumb things. He stops and pulls

away from me, looking worried about me.

“Are you sure about this? We can always just...,” Eddie begins, moving back.

“No. I want this.” I pull him in for another kiss, desperate and so afraid that he’s going to leave me. “Please, Eddie, I want you. I want it to be you.”

“You’re sure, though? Is this okay with you? I don’t want to hurt you, Kat,” Eddie’s voice is soft and gentle, and it lights me up like the orange pumpkin lanterns hung in the trees of Piedmont Park. He has no idea what he means to me, even now.

“Eddie, I trust you more than anyone,” I tell him gently. I let out an elated laugh, kissing him even harder than before. “I’m sure about this, okay? This is okay.”

Eddie doesn’t answer me. He just kisses me back with a surprising amount of energy and feeling. I can almost taste his need in the urgency of his movements. His teeth bite down on the soft swell of my bottom lip, leaving my mouth extra bruised and sensitive to his touch.

His member hardens, standing at attention, and earning a gasp from my lips. He’s still not sure that he isn’t going to hurt me. “One last time. Are you really sure about this? Kathleen, you need....”

“Eddie, I am so sure. I want you,” I tell him quickly, pulling his body to mine.

My fingers grip his back, digging in and leaving marks, a reminder of this night on his skin. I want him to look and feel me there, in the indents of my love for him.

Eddie laughs, kissing me softly and giving me a smirk.

“Gladly,” he says, lust growing in his eyes.

His big hands bring his hard length to my entrance, and then he pushes inside.

I can’t help but groan in discomfort of his heavy length inside of me. Eddie must sense my discomfort because he stops for a moment, letting me catch my breath.

His hands guide his length to my entrance once again, and then he pushes his length inside of me once more, filling me with his throbbing cock.

There is some pain for only a moment, just a pinch, and then a flood of pleasure swallows me in its warm embrace. He is everything and everywhere, all around.

“Kat...,” Eddie’s voice breaks as he thrusts in and out of me, just once, and I’m already aching for more. “Kat, you’re so damn tight. ”

For my brother’s sake and for the person I wanted to be, I pretend that love was a sickness, drowning and rotting people from the inside out. My father torched my mother in his love, leaving her to burn. She was only ashes by the end of it. I never wanted to be left behind and broken. I keep to myself because of it.

At night though, when the moon was high, and stars covered the sky, I dreamed of a love that was so heady, so potent, that it made me drunk at the thought.

What I feel for Eddie right now, as our bodies twine together like climbing vines, is very close to that intoxicating feeling I craved only in the dark.

“Eddie, harder,” I pants, letting the words slip out in a whisper that’s dripping with need. I want to feel myself throbbing around him as he shoves in and out of me.

Eddie’s carved muscles ripple as he holds himself above me and something about how strong he looks makes me ache for him, seeing him as even more handsome.

He complies, pushing himself further inside, filling me fully with his hard length.

I can’t help but gasp as he’s buried inside of me, as close as we can possibly be. He stops for a moment, letting us both enjoy and revel in the feeling of our joined bodies.

This is beginning to feel surreal, and I feel overwhelmed with my love for him. Because I know now that I have always loved him, and I do still.

“I want you to come around me,” Eddie murmurs in my ear, scraping his teeth across my skin. “I want to feel you as you come undone when I’m inside you.”

I can’t do anything but nod breathlessly, and Eddie braces himself on his arm before he moves his other hand to my wet pussy. His fingers trace the bundle of nerves there, circling gently, and as he does, he begins to thrust in and out of me.

I tangle my fingers into the bedsheets with one hand, and my other hand presses into Eddie’s back, digging my nails into his skin. I can feel my release building, ready to send me over the edge as Eddie rocks into me, buried deep over and over.

I let out what sounds like a sharp cry to my ears, letting go around Eddie’s hard length and feeling the most intense sort of pleasure as he moves his hips. My hands are in his hair, and I know he’s getting close.

I’m aching for him to fill me with his seed. I want to feel the way he comes apart inside of me, losing himself to the feeling like I am.

This feels like the beginning of something, the first page in a very long book that I just can’t wait to read.

Eddie’s kisses are addictive, and his touch is like warmth on a very cold day. I can’t help but want him as badly as I need the air to breathe.

Eddie continues his thrusting as I recover from my orgasm. He impales with his kisses, and I can feel his hand down below again, orchestrating my hot button to come again along with him.

My God, this man has stamina, yet, his efforts are not wasted. I feel the familiar tingle, and I know a second orgasm is coming.

He can tell by my body’s reaction that it will be soon. Like a feral madman, Eddie begins to thrust even harder, trying to speak words to me that only sound like heated growls.

I feel his hot release within my walls and shatter again. We come together, a product of our passion, and dare I say, love.

Eddie gives one last thrust and slowly collapses beside me, pulling me close.

Eddie is my salvation, and he is what I want for the rest of my life. The thought of another man touching me the way he is sickens me, and I don't even want to attempt to imagine it at all.

This beautiful man has found something in the very being of who I am that he likes, and I'm not going to question this one stroke of good luck. Whatever merciful god sent Eddie Snow to me has my favor for life.

I can't imagine a more beautiful forever. To be entangled with this man in his bed until the stars have lost their light to the dark. I don't ever want to be parted from his side because now that I've had him, I don't know if I could be without him again.

My whole life since my dad left, I've lived in a cycle of sadness and tragedy. Now, I want to keep this one shining light in my life. I want to be the one that Eddie turns to when he needs the light.

What's growing between us is playing out like a beautiful story in my mind.

Of course, the fairy tale in my mind doesn't line up exactly right.

Suddenly, the phone rings on the bedside table, shrill and bright through the room. Eddie lets out a groan and rolls over to get the phone.

And yeah, that's just my luck, isn't it?

CHAPTER TEN

Eddie

I mourn the loss of Kathleen's warmth already. I want to throw my phone across the room and worry about nothing but her. We've only begun to explore ourselves sexually. I can tell Kathleen has much to give, and I'm more than willing to receive her affection.

I want nothing more than to press Kathleen back into the mattress and slip back inside of her. I want to hear that sweet sound of her release, keening in my ear again. I can smell our lovemaking, and even as she covers up, I can still feel her.

"Hello?" I ask wearily, pulling my boxers back on.

I'm annoyed with the change of plans, very clearly.

What turned out to be an amazing day has been cut short. I have a business now, though, and I swore I would look after the dancers if I could.

I glance from where I sit at the edge of the bed to see her wrapped in the sheets and with her pale hair tumbling wildly around her shoulders like soft silk.

Her cheeks are pink, and her mouth is set in a firm frown. She looks like she's been thoroughly tossed in the sheets, and again, I'm annoyed that we've just been interrupted.

On the phone, there's silence on the other end but for the crackle of the line.

“Hello?” I ask again, more annoyed. I swear if this is some sort of prank call....

“Eddie!” A frantic voice shrieks through the other end of the phone. It’s like something in a movie. I’m instantly on edge, and I can feel Kathleen scoot closer behind me in the sheets.

“Eddie.... Please, it’s Chrissy! Come to the lounge....”

“Chrissy?” Kathleen calls frantically into the speaker. “Chrissy, what’s wrong?”

“Please come...,” Chrissy cries, sounding strangled as the call breaks up once again. “Myers is...so much blood! Eddie, they got inside...they’re inside!”

The call ends abruptly, and I jump to my feet to yank my jeans back on. Kathleen scrambles to get into her clothes beside me.

“Who is *they*?” Kathleen asks, looking scared for her friend.

“No idea, baby,” I tell her, but I do have an idea. I don’t want her to get worked up just yet when it might be nothing. There’s no point in making her upset.

Her eyes are wide as we leave the room, and I wrap my hand around hers, bringing her hand up to kiss her palm and hopefully calm her down. Not that I’m exactly calm, but at least I can help her feel better about the whole thing.

I’m terrified of what we might find at the club, but I need to stay strong for her.

With one urgent text, my sisters are at my door with boxes of snacks in tow for some reason, ready to babysit a half-awake Stevie thanks to all the noise.

“Hey there, kiddo,” Robin says, giving the bleary-eyed little boy a goofy salute. “You want to play with some matches or run with a knife or something?”

“Very funny,” Kathleen says, shaking her head. She pats her brother’s head, and he sinks back into the cushions with a yawn. He’s asleep in mere minutes.

It’s three in the morning, and Riley has a coffee in her hand, sipping it like it’s normal to be awake before the sun is. I guess

she could say the same about me.

“We were doing some wedding planning, and it sort of got out of hand,” she says, shrugging like it doesn’t really matter to her. She doesn’t even look tired. “We brought Chinese food from that 24-hour Chinese restaurant down the street.”

“Good luck with that,” I tell her, patting her shoulder sympathetically. Anything open 24 hours is just a no-go in my book. “Just try to keep him safe here, okay?”

“You got it, big brother,” she tells me, looking as if she wants to make a joke or something. “Go handle your business, then.” She looks at Kathleen, making a wrinkled face that shifts into a grin. “Also, you two smell like a 70’s motel room.”

Kathleen’s face goes red, and I roll my eyes at them. We hurry out of the apartment, and Kathleen holds onto me for dear life. We get into the car, and she clings to me there, too, wrapped around my free arm as if her life depends on it.

“It’s going to be okay, Kat,” I tell her, driving swiftly through the half-empty streets in the center of the city to the other side of town. There are still cars out, though, and people walking the road to nowhere fast. “You know that, don’t you?”

“She sounded so scared, Eddie,” Kathleen whispers with a shivering breath, shaking her head against my bicep. “I have never ever heard Chrissy sound scared. Not since I’ve been working there at the lounge have I heard her that upset.”

“She’s fine,” I reply, though if it’s more for her or me, I’m not quite sure. I’m just as unsure as she is about this whole thing. “She’s going to be fine.”

It’s my job to keep those girls safe, not just the one I’m falling in love with. If anything happens to them, that’s on me completely. For some reason, though, this feels off to me. It feels as if we’re walking straight into some kind of a trap.

The parking lot is dark, but I hear Kathleen’s quiet intake of breath when we both spot the familiar black SUV parked under the streetlamp, making sure to be seen. Usually, even at this early morning hour, there are still a few stragglers

watching the women on stage, but not today. Today, the place seems eerily still.

Across the street, the diner is lit dimly by the flickering signs. Thinking of the encounter from before, I pull Kathleen close to my side, keeping her close to me.

“Something isn’t right,” Kathleen mutters, keeping her voice low and quiet. “There are usually more people here. The lights are off inside too. I don’t like this.”

“Stay here, and I’ll go take a look inside,” I tell her as we stop in front of the front doors. I hold her face in my hands, leaning down to kiss her, but she pulls away. She looks annoyed and smacks my arm with her hand, making a face.

“What do you think this is? A cliché scary movie?” Kathleen says, her eyes going wild. Her mouth is set in a hard line. “Hell no, you’re not going in there to check anything out without me. I’m not someone who’s okay with staying behind.”

Despite the circumstances, I let out a chuckle. I know she will keep me on my toes for the rest of my life if I let her. And yeah, I want to let her.

“No, I should have known you weren’t going to be okay with that.”

Any woman who cares for her entire family without a moment’s doubt is not a woman to be left behind. Kathleen would go to war for me. I can see it on her face.

She would scratch and claw her way out of any situation if it meant keeping me safe. It’s better to stay together anyway, I decide, grabbing her hand.

“This shouldn’t be locked,” I tell her as I realize someone has locked the front door. I know I didn’t lock it, and the club is still supposed to be open right now.

I use my key to unlock the door, and Kathleen sucks in a breath at the darkness that awaits us. It’s eerily quiet inside the club.

I hold Kathleen behind me as we shuffle inside. She grips the back of my shirt, seemingly glad to have something to hold onto. I can feel her breathing as she presses close to me. As we walk, I use my phone to light the way in front of us.

“Chrissy?” Kathleen calls in a cautious whisper. Her voice echoes through the club.

Suddenly there’s a heavy thump from the back room, close to where the doors lead into the girl’s changing area and lockers beyond that. Kathleen goes to step into the room first without me, but I grab the back of her shirt, stopping her.

Again, I’m sure she would all but dance into battle for the people that she loves.

“Let me go first, Kat,” I say into her ear, holding her back at my side. “Please.”

I also want to shield her just in case there’s anything horribly bad that she doesn’t need to see. I’ve heard horror stories about strip clubs, and though I’ve only had this one for a little while, I still don’t want it or the women in it to become a statistic. There’s a groan, and Kathleen takes off, running toward the sound of it.

I can see her phone light bouncing as she disappears into the back of the club.

She lets out a gasp in the darkness, and my heart is in my throat as I run after her. I resist the urge to yell out her name like a madman.

I finally find her in the locker room.

She’s kneeling on the floor, and even though I’m happy and relieved to see that she’s just fine, I realize what she has her light pointed at now.

Myers is slumped against the lockers, bloodied and battered. One of his eyes is swollen shut and his blood drips, half-dried, down the side of his split lip and his broken nose. Blood is also covering his shirt, and he looks terrible.

He looks as if someone wanted to kill him, but they didn’t manage to succeed.

It's jarring seeing someone as big as him knocked down like that on the floor.

"Myers," I call, kneeling down beside him. I move to feel his pulse in his neck. "Myers, can you hear me? Hey, Myers? Are you alright enough to move?"

"I'm alive," the big man grunts, sounding hoarse. His one good eye opens slowly. "It's alright, boss. They didn't get me just yet. You gotta find Chrissy, though."

He tries to get up, but I press a hand to his shoulder, stopping him. He doesn't look to be in any condition to be getting up and helping us look for her himself.

"I'll go look around and see what I can find," Kathleen says, already moving to walk away from me and into the unknown. "We need to find out where she is."

"Hey, wait a minute there." I stop her quickly, grabbing her sleeve so that she doesn't leave. "I don't think you need to go look alone. Just wait for me, okay?"

Kathleen shakes her head at me, smiling placatingly at me. "I won't be long, and I'll be right back. I just want to see where she is, okay? Don't worry about me."

As if any part of me could sit and not worry about Kathleen Henderson, sure. I just really don't think that's possible without going insane.

"I don't want you going in there alone," I counter, not letting her sleeve go. "That SUV is still here, and we don't know if those men are still here as well."

"There's no one here now but Myers and Chrissy," Kathleen says in a tone of voice that's meant to soothe me. It does exactly the opposite of that, though.

Soon enough, Kathleen pulls her sleeve free of my grip, giving me a sort of parting glance to ease my worry. The fear clenches my heart like a vice when her light bobs and disappears into the darkness. It feels as if I'm letting half of my soul walk into the unknown. This woman has no idea the power she holds over me. If she did, she would stay glued to my side at all times instead.

“Boss,” Myers’ weak voice rasps from below where I’m kneeling down. “They want...they came for her. They were looking for her....”

“What?” I ask him, a slow fear filling me with dread. Of course, there’s a new issue. “What the hell are you talking about, Myers? Who were they looking for?”

“Chrissy let the other girls leave early so that she could call the janitor to clean up a mess someone had made on the stage,” Myers grits out, trying to sit up slowly.

“So that’s where all of the girls went then,” I nod, finally understanding. “That’s why it was dark in here. It wasn’t open at the time.” I had told the girls if they were ever having a bad night or something was happening, they could close early.

“It was just the two of us, and I was helping her clean the poles,” Myers says, and I wonder, in the back of my mind, if that’s a euphemism for something else.

“They broke a window in the back. I could tell that they were drunk. There are four of them, boss,” Myers says, the dread building. “They were looking for Kat.”

A type of fear that I have never known before clouds my vision as I scramble from my kneeling position and take off into the darkness of the club. Flashes of Kathleen dance in my head, flickering like a memorial to her, though I promise myself that I won’t lose her.

I see her in my lap and smiling in the diner as we drink coffee. I can see her at the theater house, her eyes lit up like stars as she watches the men and their lady leads go back and forth.

I can almost feel the softness of her skin as I run desperately for her, knowing I’ll be lost if anything happens to her. I would kill for and because of this woman.

Loud laughter is the first thing that I hear, and it makes my heart squeeze in my chest. Anger tips my emotions on the scale, and I feel as if I can’t control myself.

The thought of anyone hurting the woman I love has me in a frenzy, digging my fingers into my skin and hoping against hope that she’s okay.

“Yeah, we got your whore,” calls a sickening voice from behind one of the mirrors where the girls usually sit and get ready. I recognize it as Chrissy’s mirror.

“Let her go, and I won’t kill you,” I growl, whipping around when a gust of wind whirls by me. They’re being sneaky and toying with me, moving quickly around.

There’s another loud burst of laughter, and I hear a smack, followed by a whimper. What comes out of my mouth can only be described as a *roar*.

Rage burns through me, and I stalk around the mirrors, hot in my leather jacket.

Where is my girl?

“Kathleen? Baby?” I call out, my voice breaking desperately. “I’m going to tear them apart, do you hear me? Don’t be scared, baby. I’m coming for you.”

“Go to hell,” the same piss-poor rendition of a man’s voice calls out once more. “She’s mine now, and she’s gonna give me what I want, or I’ll kill you both. You made a stupid ass mistake coming between me and what’s mine. Fuck off.”

She’s gonna give me what I want. This makes my head spin with livid rage.

To think that somewhere back here, Kathleen is being harassed by these men. I grab a chair and slam it into the mirror in front of me, shattering the glass across the floor.

There’s a sudden cry of surprise, this time without the false bravado of before. One of the men tumbles out from behind the other mirror.

He holds up his hands and points away. “Hey, man, I’m not armed. It’s Arnold, man. He’s the one that wants your girl. He’s the one that’s obsessed with her.”

A sudden shot rings out, and I duck for cover, watching as the kid falls to the floor in a pool of his own blood. Well, at least I know they have guns now, and they don’t like being snitched on by their own men.

Though really, these are just boys. Not real men.

“Where is she...,” I begin to shout, stopping dead and cold in my tracks.

A heartbreaking scream rings out, sending a chill through me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kathleen

The room I'm in is dark, yet I can still see the men surrounding me.

I can taste blood in my mouth, but nothing feels as if it's broken. The coppery flavor on my tongue makes me want to lean over and vomit. My eyes feel bleary, and the blow I took to the back of the head might surely have something to do with it.

These men stink of old socks and underarms that have never known deodorant. It's no wonder they felt as if they had to kidnap a woman to get her to talk to them. There's just no other way that someone would care to acknowledge them.

It's obvious that no sane woman would come within five feet of these monsters.

These embarrassing little creatures aren't men, but I won't call them little boys because it would be an insult to my brother. The one from the last two times, the one I rejected, stares at me as if he's never seen a woman up close before.

To be fair, he probably hasn't. I can't imagine one person who would like him.

"Why are you holding me hostage here? What do you want from me?" I ask him, though I think I already know the answer.

Immature boys getting rejected don't normally take it very well. They usually take it out on and blame other people.

"Bitches like you are the reason good men can never find a girlfriend," he spits, waving his gun around.

It's embarrassing, and I feel it secondhand.

I want to laugh at his word vomit, but it's common courtesy not to laugh at the person holding the gun, even if they do look as if they've just crawled out of the bad side of a garbage can. And he does look *that* disgusting.

He looks as if he wouldn't hesitate to eat something off of the ground if it looked good enough.

"Right," I tell him, nodding even though it hurts my head.

We're in the back room, where all of the replacement poles and the extra mats and outfits are kept. I'm zip-tied to a chair by the back wall, and my shoulders ache.

It's been less than ten minutes since I walked stupidly to the back room to look for Chrissy and found myself taken hostage by a bunch of ugly frat boys.

"Good guys are always gonna finish last, am I right? That's how women like you think about us, huh?" he says, pointing the gun and tapping his temple.

I'm most likely going to hell for hoping that it goes off on him. I do, though, hope that he accidentally shoots himself. The other guys around him don't seem keen on keeping with this stupid kidnapping bullshit.

I know they would probably just leave if he accidentally took himself out. A girl can only dream, though.

"Yeah, women tend to like men who don't hate women," I tell him, shaking my head. Of course, these young men blame women for their misfortunes in life.

"Shut up, you bitch," he snarls, spittle flying from his lips. "You know nothing."

"They also don't like being called bitches," I can't help but retort. "Just a thought."

It's so strange that now that I'm here in this terrifying situation, I don't feel much fear. I know that my brother is safe, Eddie is out there, and I'm here. I'm the only one in danger, though it seems these gross men want to toy with him.

Suddenly, I can hear that sweet voice calling for me, and it sounds enraged.

Oh, Eddie is pissed off, that's for sure. I would feel the same way if it was me that had to wait around to see whether or not his kidnapers were going to release him.

One of the men in the group, a small, chubby blonde kid, opens the door to peek outside. He leaves the door open, and my attacker stomps over, wild-eyed.

"Go to hell," he yells as Eddie calls out for me in the vanity room of the club. "She's mine now, and she's gonna give me what I want, or I'll kill you both. You made a stupid ass mistake coming between me and what's mine. Fuck off."

"Never gonna happen," I hear myself whisper, but just as my attacker whips around to strike me, there's a large crash outside, and it sounds like glass breaking with a roar.

Even though I've never heard the sound before, I know that Eddie made it.

The guy at the door falls out of it, tumbling into the vanity room.

I believe I was right when I said that Eddie would kill and die for me, and the first trickle of fear begins to descend over me.

What if Eddie protecting me leads to his death?

"Hey, man, I'm not armed." I can hear the chubby guy say outside in a shaking, terrified voice. I can almost feel his fear as if it were my own. "It's just Arnold, man. He's the one that wants your girl. He's the one that's obsessed with her."

My attacker, Arnold, shoots up from where he's crouched by the door. "That rat bastard!"

He's gone in a blink. There's a shot and I can hear a thump on the ground.

My mind screams at me that it's not Eddie, it's not Eddie, *it can't be Eddie*, but I still fling myself back and forth, trying to free myself from my zip tie bonds.

The other two men flee through the back door that leads into the parking lot. It's ironic that's where I first encountered them, unwilling, and then there was Eddie.

Eddie shouts to me from outside, sounding wrecked, and I feel an urgency once again to get out and go to him. Now that I know he's safe, I can fight to get away once again.

I'm still wondering where Chrissy is, but I'm almost sure she's safe somewhere. Otherwise, Myers would be moving hell and earth to get to her side.

I roll over, and my arms ache, the ties pulling at my skin. Below me, something sticky coats my fingers and my arms. Soon enough, I can smell it.

Below me, on the hard, tiled floor, a pool of blood seeps in from under the door. I can't help it. I let out a bloodcurdling scream that rips and aches at my throat, but I don't care. I feel the urge to vomit. I frantically roll away from the hot blood and smack into one of the poles, nearly knocking the heavy metal on top of me.

All of a sudden, the door bursts open, and Eddie falls in on top of Arnold, knocking his body into the hard floor. My heart thumps an unsteady beat.

They roll, throwing punches and hitting skin with bare-knuckled fists. The gun tumbles under one of the maintenance carts, and I think for a moment about trying to grab it. There's no way it would work with my hands still tied.

They stand, and Eddie slams Arnold into a table, his dark hair flying and his eyes wild. And yes, I'm terrified for the man I love, but I think I can also be forgiven for thinking about how hot he looks beating a man to a pulp.

Arnold hits Eddie in the stomach, though, hard enough that he doubles over with the force of it and stumbles backward. It's like I can feel the hit, and it hurts my soul to see.

“Eddie!” I screech, struggling to sit up. It’s difficult to do anything but flop around like a dying fish when I’ve only got my legs to work with. “Eddie, watch out!”

Arnold has a metal pipe in his hands, and when Eddie turns and ducks, the pipe slams into a stored mirror instead, shattering more glass over the floor. At this point, we’re just made of bad luck and poor choices. One of the shards flies out, though, and Arnold stumbles backward, rubbing at his eye and screeching in pain.

Eddie slams his body into Arnold’s, making him crumble to the floor close to me. I make eye contact with Eddie and nod.

With my legs, I use my momentum to kick at the tall metal poles. With one great groan like the sound of an impending car crash, the heavy pole falls on top of Arnold, knocking him out and pinning him beneath with the force of it.

We sit there, panting for a moment, and then Eddie throws himself toward me. He wraps his arms around me, holding my head tucked against his shoulder. The smell of leather is overwhelmingly sweet and comforting, but my arms ache, and my body feels like it’s in a vice.

“Uh, baby?” I ask him, leaning back. “Got a knife in that leather jacket?”

“Oh, shit,” Eddie replies, jumping back. “I’m sorry, Kat. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s just zip ties, Eddie,” I tell him, leaning forward to kiss the blooming bruise on his cheek. “No big deal. Nothing something sharp can’t fix right up in a jiffy.”

“No,” Eddie says as he cuts the first one, and my wrists get some relief. “I mean, I’m sorry that I wasn’t watching better. I’m sorry that I let them take you from me.”

“They didn’t,” I shake my head. “They didn’t, and you didn’t. I’m right here.”

The whirl of sirens begins to color the darkness outside.

The first dredges of dawn pull their way into the sky as Myers is taken into an ambulance, and Chrissy, who he forced to run

to the nearest gas station, speeds after them in her car. Arnold is taken away, and I fight hard against the urge to give him a kick of my own. The other kid's body is taken, and I feel some sympathy for him.

"This will make for a good story to tell our grandkids," I tell Eddie, glancing over at him where we're both sitting on the back of the remaining ambulance.

Policemen are inside the club, and a dozen reporters wait by the double doors, just itching to see what sort of mayhem has gone down in *The Scarlet Lounge*.

"A good story?" Eddie asks, laughing wryly. "I think I'll stick to fairytales."

"And what about our story?" I ask him. "Is that one worthy of your fine tastes?"

Eddie grins, leaning over to kiss me. His body is battered, and he tastes of blood and sweat, but he's sweet enough on my tongue to make me almost moan.

"The best book I've ever read," he says roughly, putting an arm around me. He glances down at me, very serious. "Kat. I know it's soon and that most people would tell me to wait but I don't want to. I know this is right. I almost lost you. I almost lost the chance to start a life with you. And I want that chance. I know we are meant to be together. I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me? "

"There isn't a being on this planet that could ever possess me to say no," I tell him.

"So that's a hard yes then?" Eddie asks, smiling a little as if he's unsure of my answer.

I nod, and my heart swells with my love for him.

It strikes me as odd that I haven't actually told him how I feel about him yet. This man has my heart in his hands, and he doesn't even know it the way I do.

"Eddie," I tell him, bringing him in for a kiss. "I love you so much."

“I love you,” Eddie breathes, and I brush my fingers through the steel in his hair. “Now, don’t we have some pumpkins to carve with an excited little boy?”

The next few weeks seem to pass by in a blur of smiles and the sort of easy happiness that I’ve never been able to experience before in my life. As I stand at the window of what is now mine, Eddie’s, and Stevie’s apartment, I can’t help but feel as if I’ve fallen into a dream.

I want to stay here forever if that’s what this is. I don’t think so, though. Sweet dreams don’t have stinky, kidnapper frat boys.

“Well,” Eddie’s familiar voice says in my ear. “Do you think he liked the party?”

“I think he really loved it,” I tell him honestly, softly smiling as he kisses my neck with a soft, open mouth. “I also think that if you keep doing that sort of thing, I won’t be able to leave this room to say goodbye to everyone in a few minutes.”

“Mrs. Maxine asked if she could have Stevie over for the night,” he replies, sucking on my earlobe gently with his teeth. “She said she misses him, but she loves her new apartment. It’s so much easier for her to get around the city here.”

“You were sweet to let her have one of the empty ones for free,” I answer, my heart swelling with love for this sweet, giving man who loves me so much. “I think she’s so much safer in this part of town anyway. Closer to Stevie too.”

Eddie nods, and then he shrugs. “Well, selling the club gave us more than enough money that the rent doesn’t really even matter, and Mrs. Maxine already does so much for us anyway. I figured that it was the least that I could do.”

“Do you miss the club?” I wonder, turning in his arms. “Chrissy is going to school to be a dental assistant, and she’s living with Myers. Isn’t that great?”

“It’s amazing,” Eddie agrees with me. “No, I don’t miss it. We have more than enough to keep us happy. The club was dangerous, and all I want is you, Kat.”

“I was thinking,” I tell him, drawing it out. “I was thinking maybe I want to go to school. Like, maybe I want to take classes or something. What do you think?”

Eddie grins at me, spinning me around. “I think that’s a wonderful idea, baby.”

“Yeah, and maybe then we can start looking for a house somewhere up north in the suburbs?” I ask him, looking up with the big round eyes he’s a sucker for.

“Well, were you thinking?” Eddie asks, unable to pretend he’s not grinning like mad. “You’ve obviously thought a lot about this. I think it’s a great idea, but what about Stevie?”

“I’d like for Stevie to stay with me, at least some of the time,” a new voice calls from the hallway where the door is open. I spin around, surprised to see her.

“Mom,” I breathe, stepping around Eddie to catch sight of her in her wheelchair. “They let you out of the nursing home? How..how are you here right now?”

My pale-haired mother looks frail, but her eyes are as sharp as ever, and she looks so much better than she did a few months ago. I knew she was getting better, but I didn’t know how much.

She looks like a brand new woman.

“Sweetheart,” she says as I walk slowly toward her. “I’ve been able to leave for a few weeks now, but no one could get in touch with you. It’s okay, though.

I fall to my knees by my mother’s side. “Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry. It’s been so hard....”

“I know, my love,” she says, reaching down to run her fingers through my hair in what had been a long-lost soothing touch that I never thought I would feel again. “I’m so sorry you grew up so fast.”

She glances back sharply to where Eddie stands in his black jeans and leather jacket. “Eddie, here you are, shackled up and engaged to my daughter. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Mom, I love him,” I tell her. It’s very simple and easy in my mind. “He loves me.”

“Janet,” Eddie says clearly, saying her name with a level of respect that I haven’t heard much from him. “I will never let anything or anyone hurt her. I’ll always keep her safe.”

“I believe you,” my mom says, nodding. She squints at him with bright green eyes. “You always looked out for us, even after I told you to leave us alone. Don’t think I didn’t realize that money in the mailbox every year was from you, Eddie.”

Is Eddie actually blushing? I want to reach forward and touch his cheek, but I resist.

“You did that?” I ask him. I had no idea that he sent us money. “You never said.”

He shrugs, and his arm comes around my waist, warm and familiar to me.

“You can live here,” Eddie says suddenly. “If we get a house in the country. You and Stevie can be close to Mrs. Maxine and to his school, and we can have him in the summer and the fall. If you want, I mean. That would solve the problem easily.”

“Hmm,” my mom says, and I can see she’s clearly impressed by him. “I don’t remember you being so smart, Eddie. I guess I underestimated you, didn’t I?”

“He’s a good man,” I tell my mother, though I suspect she already knows. “He’s been good to us, and he’s the reason I’m not working for scraps anymore, Mom.”

My mom blinks, her face crumpling. “I hate that you had to in the first place.”

“I know, but I got by,” I tell her, nodding. I grab her hand. “Stevie is happy.”

“Are you happy, my love?” she whispers, bringing a hand up to cup my cheek. “Can you truly say that you’re happy now? That this is the life you want?”

“I can’t think of a better life or a better man for me, Mom,” I admit, my eyes burning. I can’t believe I get to have Eddie, Stevie, *and* my mom in my life now.

“Hey!” Robin skids to the door, holding a piñata in her hands. “When are we gonna bust this baby open? Mama needs some sugar in her system.”

“It’s just for the kids, Rob,” Eddie says, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. “Not you.”

“Yes, of course, it is,” Riley agrees from where she stands behind Robin. “But I’m getting married in a month, and that means I have first dibs on the candy in the piñata.”

“Making up your own rules is against the rules,” Allison calls from the other room.

“He has to have a hammer around here somewhere,” Riley says as they leave.

“Nice to meet you there, Mrs. Henderson!” Robin calls from a distance. “You’re really pretty! Sorry I kind of dated your estranged husband for a whole three months!”

My mom looks at me, snorting out a laugh. “Well, at least you won’t ever be bored.” *And isn’t that the understatement of the year*, I think happily.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Eddie

My hands seem to fumble with the buttons of my suit jacket without my permission. I have never been so nervous about anything in my entire life.

For what must actually be the hundredth time, as I make sure yet again that everything is perfect, I smooth a hand over my long hair.

Maybe I should have cut it.

But no, Kathleen has always liked my long hair. And my leather jacket. And my rings. Too bad that sort of outfit isn't allowed at weddings. Is it too late to change? A hand that smells of lavender comes across, quickly moving my hand away from my suit jacket and brushing off where I had just smoothed my hand down.

"It's fine," Robin assures me, uncharacteristically loving as she offers me a warm smile. Of course, my sisters have always loved me, but they usually show their love through sarcasm and pushing my buttons. But that's the way younger siblings are.

"You look perfect, big brother," she says, knocking her forehead gently against mine. "Kat will be completely over the moon when she sees how you look in there."

"If you touch anything else and keep messing with stuff," Riley tells me, fixing her earring. "You're going to end up

breaking something before you can even make it to the altar.”

Yeah, I think that’s more like the sisters I recognize, laughing to myself.

“I just want this day to go perfectly,” I tell them both. I know I’m frowning, spinning around the venue to check over the decorations for any imperfections. “This is the least I can do for her after all the things she’s done for me. I love her, and I want her to be happy. I need it to be perfect.”

I’ve been up since dawn to ensure everything is just how Kathleen imagined it to be.

I am absolutely determined to make our wedding day perfect for the woman I love, no matter how many times she lets me know that it’s actually a day for us both.

I’m not even thinking of myself at all as I fluff the flowers hanging from the chairs and smooth down the seat covers to perfection.

The only thought that is a steady thrumming beat in my mind is her infinite happiness and how I can achieve that for her in this lifetime. This is the woman I want at my side forever, and I’m finally getting what I’ve wanted since I met her again a year ago.

Now, she’s a part of me, ingrained in me like a tattoo.

Riley drops her careless look, and she smiles from beside me, nudging against my hip gently with her elbow.

“You two are perfect for each other, Ed, and one day isn’t going to change that fact. It’s okay either way. We’ve checked everything several times, and there’s absolutely nothing that could go wrong.”

“How can you be so sure?” I wonder and feel like a child, looking to someone for comfort. I’m a grown man, but my sister’s placating words still make me feel that much more at peace than before.

“Well, what if something goes wrong today? The last thing I want is something to mess up this day, especially for Kathleen. Damn, if she doesn’t deserve the world.”

“She’s marrying you, big brother,” Robin asks me. “What could possibly go wrong?”

I can’t help but laugh. “You two are oddly nice today. I think you feel bad for me.”

Riley shakes her head. “We’re all guilty of getting nervous and scared at times, but that’s natural. It’s what makes us human. If you weren’t nervous about getting married and spending the rest of your life with someone, we’d all think something was seriously wrong with you.”

“There probably still is,” Robin says, shrugging. She’s smiling, though.

That does pull a small laugh out of me, one that’s still filled with wrangled nerves, but it’s as good as it’s gonna get, I guess. My hands are clammy, and my heart is pounding harder and harder with each passing second that goes by as I wait for Kathleen’s inevitable arrival.

“Have you seen her dress yet?” Stevie says as he steps inside the room. “She’s getting ready now, I think.”

He’s wearing a tux that looks more neatly put together than mine. Of course, an eleven-year-old is better dressed than I am on my wedding day.

“It’s bad luck,” I tell him, reaching over to ruffle his hair. “She was very clear and secretive about every last detail of the dress. I’m not even sure whether it’s white or not,” I say with a grin. “I think I know what she likes, and I can paint a pretty good picture of it in my head.”

“I think it’s pretty cool,” Stevie says, turning to leave again as someone calls for him. “My mom is waiting for me. See you guys later!”

“See you in there, Stevie,” I nod, giving him a nervous little wave as I turn back to my sisters. Technically, he’s my brother now too.

“I’m sure whatever she’s wearing, she’s going to look absolutely stunning,” Riley says as she smiles beside me.

“You haven’t seen it?” Robin asks, looking smug. “It’s really gorgeous.”

“Why did Kathleen let you see and not me?” Riley complains, making a face. “You don’t have any sense of fashion. I mean, look at your shoes, Rob. What even are those?”

Robin shrugs, glancing down. “Clogs are always in fashion. They’re timeless.”

The group is disturbed by a head peering around the door at the end of the beautifully decorated venue. Straight away, I can recognize Kathleen’s best friend smiling and waving at me from where she sits in the pews.

Chrissy had opted out of being a bridesmaid only because, in the end, we both chose to share Riley and Robin as our bridesmaids/groomsmen. Allison sits, heavily pregnant, in the pews with her new boyfriend. She glances back at us, waving a little too. Soon enough, I’m at the front of the church, waiting with my sisters in their plum-colored dresses.

I look to either side of me where they stand. Robin is gripping tightly onto my suit jacket sleeves to stop me from getting too nervous. Riley’s warm fingers quickly latch onto mine before I can get too fidgety where everyone can see.

“Don’t panic, dummy,” she whispers in some strange version of a pep talk, squeezing my hands tightly in her own. “She’s here for you, and she’s yours now.”

The two of them are quickly ushered behind me as the two thick, polished wooden double doors open up. Straight away, I can feel my jaw nearly brush the floor as I watch the woman I love take her first few cautious steps in her wedding regalia.

Kathleen’s wearing a lovely, beaded vintage dress is exactly what I had imagined it to be; all the little details I knew the love of my life might search for in a dress are there.

Standing behind me, my sisters seem to be speechless as they watch Kathleen make her way down the smooth floor, tapping me gently on the back in a show of solidarity.

My eyes are burning, and this might just be the best day of my life. So much emotion bubbles to the surface and so much love

for Kathleen has yet to reach its peak.

As I glance back at my sisters, I almost can't believe the stunned expressions on their faces that must match mine perfectly.

"She looks so damn good," Robin whispers across to me first, sounding awed by Kathleen's beauty in her dress.

Riley is quick to tap my shoulder, sounding disbelieving. "Now, how the hell did you manage to pull that off, big brother?"

"I really don't know," I laugh, pressing under my eyes while I turn away where Kathleen can't see me shed a tear.

I didn't plan on being such a mess so quickly into my wedding. Damn these emotions.

Kathleen reaches me, radiant in her gown and long hair curled and lovely down her back. She is otherworldly and breathtakingly beautiful, body and soul.

"Have you been crying?" She giggles as I stand in front of her. She looks even more smitten with me than before, and she takes a step forward so that she can use her thumb to wipe the tear away from underneath my eyes.

I can't help but shake my head as I take in the sight of my love for the first time, admiring how beautiful her dress looks against her pale skin.

"You look incredible, Kat," I tell her with a smile that's so wide it hurts my cheeks, squeezing her hand in mine and feeling the familiar way that her fingers fit into mine perfectly.

However, Kathleen can't hide her own tears, and as her eyes water, Robin gently dabs away her tears from behind her to keep her makeup intact for the picture later. She looks perfect after a moment, and their system seems to work well.

As the ceremony begins in earnest, I keep my eyes on my new wife-to-be, keeping my hands holding hers firmly throughout the entire thing.

I don't ever want to let her go.

Nothing will ever part the two of us.

Her pale green eyes remain fixated on my own throughout every word that both of us speak until the all-important ones are proclaimed loudly to the room, echoing like an oath to my ears.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the preacher smiles at us, taking a step back so I can wrap my arms around Kathleen’s soft curvy body, pulling her tightly into my side to press a kiss to her lips. This one is sealed like a promise.

“I can’t believe how gorgeous you look right now,” I whisper into her ear as I pull my new, lovely wife into my chest to hold her close. “That dress is just perfect, more than I could have ever imagined for you. I love it, and I love you even more.”

We’re in the reception room in a few minutes, surrounded by the people who love us and under the twinkling beauty of the fairy lights above us.

Kathleen takes a step back so she can twirl the glittering skirts underneath my arm and show off every detail of the lovely dress she picked out so many months before at the dress shop with her family.

“It was actually the first one I saw,” Kathleen tells me. “When I saw it that day Mom, Stevie, and I went shopping, I knew it would be the one for me. I also knew you’d love it as soon as I saw the lace on the bodice. I remembered how you told me once that you liked lace wedding dresses. I like it just as much as you, and I think this one is vintage from the 1960s.”

“I didn’t even think you were listening to me when I said that,” I tell her over a chuckle, surprised but pleased that she’s remembered things about me. “I love you,” I can’t help but say, and Kathleen’s eyes glisten.

My hands move down her body, over the intricate beading, to rest against the lace design that covers her waist. She looks up at me with those big eyes, and I can see my whole life laid out at her feet.

She leans up to kiss me, brushing those soft lips over my own. Her hands slide under my suit jacket, holding my waist. Her

face is radiant and so very familiar to me.

Kathleen Snow is warm under my hands, my little love, my brand new wife.

EPILOGUE

MONTHS LATER

Kathleen

A groan falls from my lips as I try to sit up and fail at it magnificently, feeling a slight discomfort in the small of my back where the muscle twitches.

Eddie's hazel eyes immediately find me from across the room, taking long striding steps toward me to make sure that I'm alright. He gives me a little bit of space until I looked across at him and nod my head at my husband in a way that serves to reassure him that we were fine.

"I think someone's having a little wriggle today in mommy's belly," I chuckle as Eddie sits down at the edge of the bed, watching me closely as if I'm about to break at any moment. "They haven't really ever been this restless before. I don't know what's going on today, and I don't think I've done anything to make them uncomfortable."

I'm propped on a mountain of pillows at the headboard, yet Eddie still worries that I'm not being gentle enough with myself.

He's a big softie at heart.

Our twins have kick-started his emotions into high gear, even more than mine during the pregnancy.

Eddie's hazel eyes that are absolutely brimming with his concern continue to study me, with my Eddie fretting over me

just as much as he usually does. Only now, there are three of us to worry about.

Ever since I told him that I thought I was pregnant with his baby, he's kept a sharp eye on me, especially as the due date has slowly crawled closer and closer.

He barely leaves my side, preferring to have me where he can at least hear me if I yell for him. It's very sweet but also very maddening.

"Maybe the twins just want a cuddle with their daddy to make them feel better," he suggests, encouraging me with soft, warm hands to lay down on the bed in between the pillows as he crawls onto the bed, too, moving his head as close to the swell of my belly as he can get it.

He refuses to put any weight on my belly, though.

"That seems to help a lot," I tell him with a soft smile. I continue, "I don't know what it is about you holding onto them like that, but it seems to do the trick just about every time. They quiet down when you're near, giving mommy time to recover."

Eddie's strong, tanned arm soon drapes over the top of my belly, drawing over it gently with the tips of his fingers like he always does, hoping that our babies can feel what he's doing too.

"Are you feeling better now, baby?" Eddie asks me, obviously still a little worried about the pain I'd been feeling just moments earlier. "I can go and get you a cushion or something if you need it for your back or your belly."

I shake my head in reply to him. "No, it's okay. I feel much better lying down again like this."

I look at Eddie, admiring him in my sleepy haze. He's wearing a red plaid shirt, unbuttoned very low, so I can see his chest hair and tattoos. If he keeps looking like that, we might have to make another baby really quick.

"If you need anything, then just tell me, and I'll get it for you," he tells me, bringing his eyes down to watch his hand that was drawing nonsensical shapes on my skin. "You know that

nothing is too much trouble for me. I'll do anything for you, Kat. You know that."

I think I've lost count of the number of times I've heard my husband tell me that nothing is too much trouble, chuckling to myself again and feeling warm at his sweetness when it comes to me.

"You know, one day," I tell him, smiling as I run my fingers gently through his hair. "I'm going to figure something out that will be too much trouble. And then what will you do?"

"That would be impossible. You'll never find anything that I won't do for you," Eddie says, kissing my hand with his soft lips.

"Oh, I'm pregnant. I can definitely find something," I assure him, to which he smiles ruefully in response.

Eddie's dark head of hair shakes defiantly.

He says softly, "If you can find something that is too much trouble for me to do, then I'll do it because you think it might be too much trouble. I won't ever stop doing things for you, Kat, pregnant or not."

"Is this a challenge, then?" I ask him, tilting my head. "Because I've got plenty of time on my hands with this bump to do plenty of thinking. I'll find something that you won't be able to do for me. Count on it."

"I bet the babies know that I'll do anything for the three of you already as well," Eddie murmurs, brushing off my challenge most likely because he thinks I might stress myself out about it.

My head shakes in defiance, but as Eddie begins to trace along the left side of my swollen belly with his rings lying on the bedside table, a sudden thud takes me by surprise.

Eddie's hazel eyes look up at me as mine look down, both of us staring at each other to make sure what we both actually felt is what we think it is, and not some sort of dream for us both.

Eddie's dark head nods at me first, keeping his hand exactly where the thud came from out of anticipation for another one

to show up.

I can still feel one of our babies wriggling around in my belly, silently trying to encourage one of them to do what they just did again to make sure we both know that it had happened. I can't help but grin.

"Did one of our babies just kick me?" Eddie asks me after giving himself a moment to let it all sink in and coming back with a new sort of urgency in his tone. Despite that, he sounds very excited.

"I think they kicked because they were agreeing with me," Eddie tells me with a smug little smile on his handsome face, lightly chuckling as my eyes roll and my head shakes, refusing to accept that my little babies are already taking their father's side over mine.

"It was just a coincidence," I try my best to argue his logic. "I'm the one that's growing them in my belly, so they should know that I won't stop until I come up with something for you."

Of course, our little baby's first kick couldn't have come at a worse time for me, knowing that my dear Eddie would hold it against me as the funniest thing in the world for the rest of my pregnancy.

I just can't believe how perfect the timing is for him, as annoying and hilarious as it is to think for a second that our twin girls actually sided with their daddy while in the womb.

"Well," Eddie says, letting his hair brush gently across my belly. "You should know that I'm never leaving your side again now that the baby is kicking, too," he tells me very seriously. "I never want to miss a single one of their kicks. They're just incredible. I still can't believe we made them."

"You're not coming with me to the bathroom," I tell my dear husband. "Those are the kicks, my dear, that unfortunately, you might just have to miss out on, I'm afraid."

"It wouldn't be so bad," Eddie hedges, grinning slowly from ear to ear.

“It’s not happening,” I assure him. I can’t hold back my smile, though, and I shake my head at him.

Eddie’s eyes roll as he taps against the top of his head. He says, thoughtfully, “I wonder if there are things that you can do to encourage babies to kick more. Do you think me tracing around your belly helped at all? I think that’s why it happened the first time.”

“Even if it didn’t help the baby, it helped me,” I admit, letting him cup my face in his big hand. His thumb caresses my skin gently. “I’ve lost count of the number of times you do this has helped ease some of my pain. It really does help.”

“I don’t want you to kick, though, I want the baby,” Eddie says with a groan. He’s joking and his hand is still touching my cheek with a soft sort of peaceful caress.

I let out a snort, and my hand hits the top of Eddie’s head once again as he continues to tease me. I do manage to lift my leg up by some miracle, reaching across to kick it against Eddie’s side gently, making sure that he knows that I’m more than capable of kicking him too.

“I didn’t even do anything to you,” Eddie complains with a laugh, grinning up at me. “I think pregnancy is making you feisty. I mean, you really will attack your poor husband for anything these days. Unwarranted aggression, really.”

I shrug my shoulders innocently as Eddie holds my hand in his own. “Think about it this way, baby. Maybe me kicking you will encourage the baby to kick more because they can see how it’s done. Smart, right? I think so.”

“You definitely can’t use our baby kicking as an excuse to kick me more,” Eddie snorts, kissing my hand affectionately. “My little troublemakers. You and the babies both.”

My foot reaches to him again, but Eddie quickly sits up and grabs it to hold onto it, stopping me in my tracks. A laugh bubbles up from my lips as he places my leg back down, moving so that he can rub the tired sole of my sock-covered foot in his expert hands, gripping me gently.

I can't help but sigh, tipping my head back. He keeps going until I'm nearly asleep, which I'm sure was his plan all along. I can't stop him from touching my belly if I'm too busy sleeping.

His other hand still continues to trace circles over my belly, desperate for a little something from our babies. I think he already feels connected to them, just like I do.

"No movement as of yet," Eddie teases me. Then his voice goes soft. "I love you so damn much, Kathleen."

"I love you," I tell him, pushing every ounce of affection I can into the words.

"I wonder how many kicks we'll be able to feel over the next few months," Eddie whispers to me as if we're sharing a secret that only we're aware of. "I wonder too whether they kick for certain things, like do they kick harder when they're uncomfortable or tired?"

"Eddie," I stop him gently, grabbing his hand to press it to my belly. "There, see?"

The baby kicks at his hand, and Eddie has tears in his eyes when he looks reverently back up at me.

"But what did I do? I don't get it." Eddie shakes his head, sounding so happy but so confused.

The babies thump gently against my belly, and I finally understand it perfectly. It's so beautiful that I can't seem to control my emotions, letting them flow from me.

"I think, my love," I whisper, letting the tears slip down my cheeks. Eddie looks up at me in awe. "That our babies just like the sound of your voice."

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER

Eddie

My car seems to push its way through the countryside, driving slowly but surely through the valleys of autumn-brown hills and the far-off red and orange of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I can't wait to get to the cabin and light up the fireplace, and Kathleen can't wait to decorate for Halloween as soon as we get inside the cabin's warm interior.

A fiery sunset burns its way across the sky, flaring golden over the windshield and glaring like flickering flames. Kathleen smiles gently at me from the passenger's seat, squeezing my hand where our fingers are entangled in a familiar way on the console.

Her pale blonde hair is caught golden in the evening sunlight, and her pale green eyes glow like the bright colors of the autumn sky in the morning. The car's radio plays softly around us, lulling us into a peaceful silence that neither of us brakes until we reach the tree-lined lane that leads into the mountains.

In the backseat, Poppy and Lily sleep peacefully in their little Halloween pajamas, covered in grinning ghosts and smiling skeletons along with their pumpkin blankets.

Yeah, my wife is definitely a fan of Halloween, I think with a quiet chuckle.

A familiar happiness blooms in my chest at the sight of our new (old) home, waiting for us to go ahead and fill the walls and rooms with our special brand of love.

We've stayed at the house every few weeks or so this year, and we have stuffed it full to the brim with beautiful flea market finds, well-used little trinkets, and old furniture for when we plan to move all the way in. It's so amazing to see it come to life.

The cabin in the mountains is a labor of love, and I can tell that my wife absolutely loves the house and the rest of the property as much as I do. She likes that it feels like something straight out of a Halloween movie, and I like all of the space around us.

I plan on filling the rest of the acres of our land outside with little animals to go with the two little cows in our lower field that one of the neighbors gave us as an odd sort of housewarming gift.

We definitely aren't in the city now, that's for sure.

Being this close to our new, beautiful home, I can't stop thinking about how in love I am with my wife. I like to think that our love lives here in this place, forever golden and living peacefully in the high peaks of the mountains.

"I'm so glad to be back," I say aloud, keeping my voice very quiet. The car bumps and jolts a little down the road under the shifting trees above us, following the long path to the end until it opens to a small meadow nestled in a thicket of oaks under the roots of the mountains.

"We're home now," Kathleen murmurs, smiling as if she's just learned how and it feels right to her. I bring her soft little fingers up to my smiling mouth to kiss my wife's hand. Joy fills my mind with happiness, and I really can't help but smile about it.

The woman I love is here with our daughters and me; this is our *home*.

The big cabin in the mountains sits under the trees like an old friend, waiting for us to come back to it while we're away. It feels so damn good to be back here at the cabin.

It's honestly so hard to believe that it has been almost a whole year since I found the cabin and bought it very cheap with the land from one of our sweet, elderly neighbors. Unfortunately, the space had just been too much for them, and they moved to the city.

The trees shift above us, brushing low branches over the pine-covered, green roof and the big, brick chimney. I can't help myself as I nearly run to the little white porch, jumping through the half-dead beds of flowers and then onto the smooth stone path that leads up to the door of the cabin's front entrance.

The place reminds me of my childhood home, and indeed, the town close by is where I grew up, chasing my friends through the dark of the mountains. This place is so beautiful to me, so full of good memories.

Three bright, orange pumpkins sit on the porch, grinning at us from their carved faces. They are new and have very recently been left there.

I smiled to myself, knowing that one of our neighbors came by to spread a little Halloween cheer before we got back.

Kathleen laughs in a bright tone from behind me as I rush to open the door, curling my fingers over the antique knob from outside. I have one twin in my arms, and she has the other in hers. They both yawn as we put them on the couch, curling up together.

Inside, the warm, familiar scent of vanilla greets me, and it feels as if I'm finally home. I guess I am finally where I want to be and who I want to be with.

The wide windows of the cabin let in the evening beauty of the falling dark outside of the cabin's warm interior walls. I brush my fingers over the back of the couch in the living room

that had come from my old apartment, newly redone and restored, and then I go to make my way into the big kitchen with its industrial fridge and antique wallpaper.

A thin layer of dust all but covers our things, everything sitting untouched after the months of our stay back in Atlanta to see the family.

I know that Kathleen must be very glad that she has finally switched the last of her schoolwork to online classes to make it easier on her. She can now spend her days in the peaceful beauty of our home, watching autumn cover the valleys and mountains, which makes her very happy and content.

I can hear Kathleen's soft steps moving lightly through the house in her sneakers, flicking on lights and opening doors to air the rooms out after being away from them for so long. I lean against the sink and watch the moon as it rises slowly in the night sky, full and heavy, on the horizon across the trees. Birds flutter across the sky, flapping their smooth wings as they do. I feel Kathleen wrap her warm arms around me from behind, her sweet voice in my ear.

"You should go light the fireplace in the sitting room for me. I'm cold," she says, grinning at me. Still, our twin daughters sleep soundly on the couch.

"How romantic," I murmur, grinning at my beautiful wife. She turns in my arms, kissing me soundly and making my pants grow a little tight with her touch.

"Let's go make sure the bedroom is okay. I think we need to check."

"Oh no, no," Kathleen laughs, pulling away from me easily. "If you start that right now, we'll never get the candy to the trick or treaters. It's Halloween tomorrow, baby."

I go ahead and slip my hands into Kathleen's back pockets, my voice low and sweet, "Well, maybe we can pretend we're not home then, hmm? How about that?"

"And deny these kids their candy bars?" Kathleen asks with a laugh, kissing my forehead. "Come one, baby. We'll have plenty of time for all of that later."

I sigh without any real sort of annoyance with her, letting out a laugh as I agree with my wife. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m pretty sure we will never be forgiven if I can’t provide candy to the locals. We can’t be the new house with no candy,” I tell her. “Also, I think the town is doing a hayride today too. They usually take the kids all around town for candy and through the woods and stuff like that. I used to go when I was a kid, and we lived in the country for years before we moved to the city.”

“Well, hell, let’s go then!” Kathleen’s eyes are wide with excitement, and I snort a laugh. I love to see my girl looking so damn happy.

“I thought we had to get ready to give out candy?” I ask her, raising an eyebrow and watching her grow more eager as she keeps thinking about it. “You called it tradition, baby.”

“We can take it to the kids on the hayride if you want to, and I’m sure that lots of people will be there, leaving fewer children to come by the cabin later,” Kathleen tells me, nearly bouncing on her feet and speaking in a needling sort of voice.

It’s so very adorable to watch my wife grow so happy just to go into town for a children’s hayride. I know that she’s most likely never been on a hayride other than the one we went on with her brother a few years ago, and I’m happy that I can provide that sort of new excitement and the life that she deserves for her. Finally, it’s all ours.

“Come on, Eddie, let’s go then,” Kathleen urges, grinning as she grabs my hand.

“Where are you going now?” I ask her, laughing as I sit between my little daughters on the couch. They snuggle in close, still sleeping, and my heart is entirely full.

“Costumes,” Kathleen calls as she digs around in the chest under the edge of the couch, pulling out butterfly wings and a fake, orange-looking lion’s mane.

I almost can’t believe that we are actually here now. We’re together in our cabin, and I know we will always be.

I can't help but laugh in my happiness as I pull a quilted blanket from the back of the couch and let Kathleen pull me through the cabin with the babies in tow until we reach the edge of the doorway. Lily is in my arms, looking around with her big, hazel eyes, and Poppy clings to her mother's chest, trying to reach back and grab at her butterfly wings.

I know that Kathleen likes the way the mountains look in the moonlight, though it's really not late at all, and I let her go start the car under the soft melody of the ancient, shifting oak trees above our beautiful cabin. I stand in the doorway and glance back into the big cabin behind little Lily and me, taking in the familiar smells of what is now my home, for now, and forever. I can happily remain here for the rest of my life.

Bright, slanting moonlight covers the original, polished wooden floorboards and the full-to-bursting bookshelves that Kathleen has filled with all of her favorites. The light curls in through the curtained windows, shining over the entire big, open beauty of the cabin. The brick fireplace is just waiting to be lit again, and I can't wait to get back and settle into our little slice of heaven with the people I love the most.

We've come such a long way from where we once began back in that club, and it's true too that we are both different people than who we had been before. This version of me loves the new and improved Kathleen even more than I did before.

I can hear my Kathleen humming *Monster Mash* in an off-tune sort of way from the car, and my heart swells with contentment and peaceful happiness.

For a long time, I didn't know what I wanted from my life. I had never been sure about where my heart felt most at ease, at least not enough for it to matter much. For me, a home was supposed to be a house. It was a few walls and a bathroom, and maybe a bed. I realize now that home is not a place, but it's the people you love.

Because of that, I know I will always be happy here.

I know that everything I have ever wanted is right here, tucked into the hills of a mountain and sitting in the car waiting for

me outside. I can't believe that I'm finally here in this place. I always wanted and hoped for this part of my life.

There's a honk from behind me, and I grin, turning and walking to the car as the chill of fall descends over the early night air. Later, the girls will sleep between us on the couch, and we will eat candy until neither one of us can stand, content and happy.

EPILOGUE

ANOTHER ONE YEAR LATER

Kathleen

I stand on the soft grass of the university, and I marvel at how I got here.

For so long, I had been drowning in my life, stuck underwater without hope of escaping with my wits intact. I didn't even know who I was or who I wanted to be. I was floundering with nowhere to go and a sea of choices.

Eddie came along and wrapped his arms around me to keep me safe. He's still doing that now, and when I look at him, I can only see his love for me, growing and glimmering in his gaze. He keeps me warm when I feel I'm at my lowest.

If he's the sun for me, then I'm the moon for him, always chasing him and forever reaching and shining with the light he freely gives.

In the stands, I see my love's waiting and watching me succeed. I'll lose sight of them when we walk, but at least I know they're actually there. I'm never alone, and I know that now. I always have someone at my back, fighting for me and loving me without restraint.

Graduation day has finally arrived, and here I stand, in line to receive the one thing I have been working towards for a little over four years.

The names of my fellow classmates are reverberating from the speakers onto the walls of the large stadium, which despite the

open air outside, is still stiflingly hot to me.

Yes, I'm sweaty and nervous, fidgeting with the sleeves of the gown covering my dress and the very distracting tassel that keeps flapping in my face, but thankfully no one can see me unless they are looking for me.

As I walk, I try to spot Eddie in the crowd for what feels like the tenth time in a few minutes. There are too many people now to see, and the seats are far too many to scan, so I can barely make out any faces.

My mother is there, I know, along with Stevie, and he has Mrs. Maxine in tow. Poppy and Lily are with them, of course, and I ache to see my girls in the crowd, cheering their mother on.

Most of all, I wish that I could see him.

My first few steps are anxious and hurried until suddenly I notice that the applause and cheering for me as I cross the stage is strangely loud and close by.

My heart swells to about twice its size when I realize why that is.

I walk the rest of the way with pride, and as I'm having my picture taken, I chance a look into the crowd again, and yes, he's still there.

It's Eddie, pressed against the railing closest to the field and holding a huge bundle of roses in his hands.

He's cheering for me like a madman, looking so very proud of me and whistling as loudly as he can. Just behind the love of my life, my family sits and screams for me. They are louder than everyone else, drowning out my doubts and fears.

Robin and Riley are waving homemade signs, and Allison's little son gives me a happy grin. My mother holds Poppy in her lap, and Stevie lets Lily stand up, waving to me with Mrs. Maxine. They all look so very happy, and I feel that same love.

Their voices are like a soft melody that brings peace, and as I hold my degree in my hands, I now know exactly who I am and who I want to be.

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