



ASHBY CRIME FAMILY SERIES BOOK THREE

WICKED

Pleasures

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KB WINTERS

WICKED PLEASURES

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

ASHBY CRIME FAMILY

BOOK 3

KB WINTERS



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ABOUT WICKED PLEASURES

Terry Manning is the devil in disguise.

He's my brother's best friend and totally off limits.

I've been in love with him since I was a kid, but he only sees me as Jasper's little sister.

Now I'm all grown up and determined to show him that I'm not a child anymore.

Even if it means playing with fire...

The moment we touch, the sparks fly. Terry is everything I've ever wanted in a man.

He's strong, passionate, and loyal—the kind of man who will fight for me no matter what.

When our attraction for each other becomes undeniable, I wonder if love is enough to overcome the danger that surrounds us.

Including my deadly brother.

I know I should stay away, but his gentle touch and tender words make it impossible.

Will this forbidden love bring us closer together or tear us apart?

It's a risk I'm willing to take—but is he?

Wicked Pleasures is the third novel in the Ashby Crime Family series. If you like bad boy heroes, steamy romance, and little sisters who know how to take care of themselves, then you'll love Terry and Kat in this brother's best friend romance!

Warning: This book touches on addiction and abuse. It contains strong language and graphic violence.

Previously released as The Devil You Know. Its the same story you know and love only better!

AUTHORS NOTE

GET READY TO DIVE INTO A WORLD OF DARKNESS, PASSION, and danger, inspired by the legendary Tommy Shelby himself. This heart-pounding series will take you on a wild ride through the seedy underbelly of society, where nothing is off-limits and everything is at stake.

Buckle up, because this is not a story for the faint of heart. It's raw, gritty, and as intense as they come. From pulse-pounding action to steamy scenes that will leave you breathless, this is a journey you won't forget.

But beware - this isn't a lighthearted read. The pages are filled with graphic and vivid depictions of the criminal underworld. So, if you're ready to take the plunge, join me on this thrilling adventure. Just be prepared for the ride of your life.

Warning: This book touches on addiction and abuse. It contains strong language and graphic violence.

CHAPTER ONE

KAT

A funeral has an eerie way of uniting families, and ours seemed to be drawing closer with every passing day.

“Does it seem like we’ve done a few too many of these lately?” I muttered, my voice barely audible over the din of the room. We had been paying our respects far too frequently.

I leaned against the long wooden bar at Midnight Mass, surrounded by my brothers and family, and felt a sense of dread wash over me. We were all gathered together to celebrate Lance Decker’s life. And his widow just walked in.

“Fuck, yeah. Too many,” Virgil growled and took a fortifying sip of whiskey before he smacked the bar and walked off toward Maisie, who’d barely escaped this fate a few months back.

“It’s the nature of the business,” Jasper said in his usual gruff, rational tone. “He was a good man, though. A damn good man.”

I nodded as a pretty brunette with big sparkling blue eyes walked around, looking completely overwhelmed. I pushed off the bar, turning to Jasper with a grin.

“Good try at being a human. Add a bit more emotion and say that to his widow, Vanessa.” The poor woman looked devastated and out of place, how I imagined most women would look if they lost the man they loved. “Come on.”

“Do I have to? This is more your thing, or Ma’s.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved away from him. “You’re the big brother, act like it.”

“Jesus, Kat. Do you ever stop?”

“No.” I laughed and shoulder bumped Jasper. “You can kill a man without blinking an eye but an emotional female sends you running? Pathetic.”

I made my way through the crowd, greeting people and accepting condolences as I went. It was a somber affair, but that was to be expected. When I finally reached Vanessa, she looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes.

“Vanessa? I’m Kat Ashby. Lance was an incredible man. I’m terribly sorry for your loss. Really.” I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a tight squeeze that made her breath hitch.

“Thank you for this,” she said softly.

“Of course. Lance was a good man. He will be missed.”

She nodded and took a deep breath.

I reached out and squeezed her hand gently. “It’s the least we can do. If there’s anything else we can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, Ms. Ashby.”

“This is my brother, Jasper. Drink?”

She flashed a hesitant smile at my scowling brother before her blue gaze met mine once again. “I would love a drink. Strong and on the rocks.”

I glared at Jasper until he took a step forward and wrapped his big hands around Vanessa’s delicate, slender hands. “I’m sorry for your loss, Mrs. Decker. Lance was our loss as well.”

His words sounded sincere and she nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Ashby.”

I listened as my brother talked with Vanessa, offering his words of condolence and comfort. We would take care of her, just as Lance would have wanted us to. She was family now.

Family was everything to us. It was the only thing that mattered. And we would do whatever it took to protect our own.

Then with a grunt of sympathy, Jasper took off in the direction of Ma, who looked like she was having a serious work-related discussion with her butler.

“Don’t mind Jasper. He’s a bit of a robot at times. Not good in moments like this, but otherwise, it’s an excellent quality.”

In a leader, sure, but it was also the reason Jasper was single. Perpetually single, in fact. Not that I could talk when it came to matters of the heart, but at least I *knew* my flaws. “Let’s go get that drink.”

Vanessa nodded, her thick chocolate waves falling around her shoulders in a way that had some of the guys eyeing the beautiful widow in ways they shouldn’t. At least not quite so soon.

“Let’s,” she said in a voice that showed the strain of the last few days.

“Clontarf, on the rocks for my friend Vanessa and another for me. Neat.” Midnight Mass had been closed for the memorial celebration so there would be no interruptions. No unwanted guests. “Seriously, your husband was a good man.”

“You knew him well?” she asked, a hint of worry in her tone.

“Not well, no. But he gave me a few pointers on handling a new Springfield Hellcat, said I reminded him of a woman he served with, only she was scrawnier.”

She laughed and shook her head, taking the drink with a smile that made the new bartender blush and lick his lips. Fucking men. No class at all. “That sounds like Lance. Charming as hell when he wanted to be, the rest of the time that size fourteen foot was stuck in his mouth.”

I laughed to keep her company. “I didn’t mind. Growing up with brothers, I got used to the clumsy compliments of tough guys.” It was nice to have someone to shoot the shit with, who only wanted to shoot, not talk until they’d uttered every word in the English language. “Let’s sit.”

We grabbed a booth and sat in silence for a long moment, both of us simply savoring the taste of the alcohol, reconciling the jovial atmosphere with the cloud of sadness hanging over us all.

“I miss him so much already,” she said. Sniffling started and tears welled in her eyes. “We were high school sweethearts. I haven’t been with anyone other than Lance. What am I gonna do without him?”

Her tears began in earnest and unlike the men in the Ashby family, I knew how to comfort someone in grief.

I’d had enough practice at it and this woman’s grief lay at my family’s feet. Sure, Lance knew the deal, but that didn’t change the truth. I slid from my side of the booth and around to Vanessa, wrapping my arms around her while she sobbed against my shoulder.

Her pain was real, so visceral it sent a shockwave of grief through me until I felt my own eyes sting with the threat of tears. I did what I always did when it came to tears, shoved them back down deep where they belonged and focused on the matter at hand.

Vanessa.

I held her close while she cried for the only man she’d ever loved. Now she had to learn to live without that love. *What does that kind of love feel like?* Thoughts of love, of course, sent my gaze in search of the familiar crop of blond hair that belonged to a man I’d loved since I was a teenager. Terry Manning.

He chatted with everyone and wore a big wide smile that made the object of his attention at the moment feel like they were the most important person in the room, the most interesting and engaging individual he’d ever met. Unless you were me. Around me, you’d think I had the plague.

He was the perfect lieutenant for Jasper, friendly and outgoing, better at working the room than my brother. It was probably what made them best friends, closer than brothers. And that closeness meant he could never, ever, be mine. *Ever.*

Terry's gaze caught mine and held me in its grip for several seconds, mocking and sparkling with mischief, before he looked away.

I sighed heavily and hugged Vanessa a little bit tighter, feeling greater sympathy for losing Lance. "I can't say I've ever had the kind of love you and Lance had, Vanessa, but I've experienced loss. Too much fucking loss. I know you might think it's too soon, but the road to healing starts with booze and when that's finished, more booze."

I flagged the bartender for another round, determined to do what I could to make this day just a little easier for her.

She laughed over the sob choking her throat and sat back, reaching for a handful of napkins to dry her tears. "Is that cute blond your man?"

Dammit, I'd been caught. "No. That's my brother's best friend, Terry."

She guessed correctly. "But you want him to be," she said, suddenly less teary-eyed and more interested.

I nodded, figuring any distraction was better than having her thinking about her dead husband, even if it was my own humiliation. "I used to. Fancied myself in love with him as a teenager, but there are plenty of reasons it could never work, mostly because he's my brother's best friend, and he doesn't like me."

Vanessa laughed and the sound was pretty and musical. I could see why Lance was so smitten with her. "Those are stupid reasons; you know that right?"

I shook my head. "I used to think so too but look at them." I pointed to where they were deep in conversation in a dim corner. "They're closer than brothers."

"But he's not *your* brother. Lance was best friends with my older sister, and I always had a crush on him, but a three-year age difference is a lifetime when you're teenagers. Then Sarah, my sister, got leukemia, and Lance and I grew closer. He resisted me, especially after her death. I was barely in High School. It was hard, Kat, but it was worth it. He was worth it,"

she said and burst into tears once more. “Life is too short to not be happy.”

Her words struck me hard, and I tossed back another whiskey with a brittle smile on my face. “Maybe you’re right, Vanessa, but that’s an issue for another day.”

“Vanessa, dear.” Sadie stopped at the table, looking every bit the Irish American matriarch in her black Chanel and matching black pearls. “Lance will be missed by us all. And if you need anything, consider the Ashby family, *your* family.”

Vanessa blinked her pretty blue eyes up at Sadie in confusion. “Are you serious?” she shook her head. “I had no idea this was his security job and you people; you’ve all been so nice. So kind.” More tears came and Sadie looked about as ready to bolt as Virgil had at the sight of tears, vulnerability. “Your son, Calvin, sent a housekeeper and meal delivery last week.”

“Family,” Sadie said and grabbed her hand, giving it a sympathetic squeeze, before she stepped into the middle of the room to get everyone’s attention. “Lance was a good man. A great man with an incredible work ethic and a deep-rooted protective nature that served him well in the Navy as a SEAL, but also within the Ashby organization.”

Terry and Jasper pounded on the bar, whistling loudly and more people joined in. “To Lance. May he watch over us all and rest peacefully while we find the bastards who did this.”

The smile Sadie wore was sweet and innocent, strong enough to fool the untrained eye, but the seething anger she felt was practically a living, breathing thing.

And I knew there’d be hell to pay. More violence and more death, to make up for what we all had lost. And because, as a family, we had to make a point. No one fucked with the Ashbys and lived to tell the tale.

“This is all so strange,” Vanessa said and looked around. “I don’t know any of these people, but they all knew my husband.” She looked overwhelmed, so filled with grief that it made my own heart break, for Ma never grieving like that over

our worthless father, for me for never loving someone that deeply.

“You should talk to them. Find out about the Lance they knew. Share in their memories of your man.”

Her smile was hesitant but as Vanessa looked around the room, her smile grew. “You know what, I think I will.” She stopped at the bar for another drink and inserted herself into the first circle she found.

Vanessa will be all right. I didn’t know much about her beyond what Lance had said, but I knew that much.

There was a whole lot more that I had no fucking clue about, starting with the fact that Lance died protecting that Rhymer bitch, which meant she was as responsible as the fuckers who took her. Not to mention the big fight featuring Ravager. The fight was huge and there was a *ton* of money at stake on both sides. And now there was a distinct possibility that Brendan Rhymer was still alive.

It was so much shit and it was all happening at once, and worse; it was all pretty much out of my control. It was like being the lone little girl in a family dominated by alphas, of both genders.

“Such a shame.” Terry smacked his lips as his lean body cast a shadow over the table. “There’s this nice party going on and *still*, you can’t relax.”

His voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I took a deep, cleansing breath before I turned a bored look up at him.

“This *is* me relaxing. Not all of us need to be the center of attention to relax.”

It was one of his most engaging qualities, always grabbing the limelight, but I’d always hated it because he pulled everyone near him in. Everyone but me.

“I can’t help it if people like to be around me.” He shrugged and dropped down on the booth seat right beside me. “I’m just that kind of guy, I guess.”

He was. Terry was the definition of the life of the party with a ready smile for just about everyone, maybe a compliment too. “And I guess I’m just a girl who can’t relax.” Not that Terry knew what it was like to have the weight of the world on his shoulders and nor would he care about the weight I had to carry.

“Did you come over here to bust my balls or did you want something?”

His blue eyes looked at me, and I swore he could see down to my soul, but that was just wishful thinking. Remnants from a childhood crush that had never fully died.

How could it when he was always around, that nearly white blond hair in such stark contrast to his sun-kissed skin and those blue, blue eyes that made him look so much softer than he was. And, *good God*, that plump bottom lip that pulled beautifully when he smiled. And he was *always* smiling.

“I just came to see why you’re scowling at a mighty fine whiskey.”

“Thinking,” I told him honestly. “There’s a lot going on right now.”

“Yeah, there is. But this is the Ashby family. Something is always going on. Figured you’d be used to it by now.”

I laughed bitterly. “Are you used to your family situation yet?”

He froze and flashed a sarcastic grin. “Nope.”

“Then you understand.”

“A bit too much,” he said before taking a long pull from his beer bottle. “Let your hair down, Kat. Enjoy life a little.” His tone had changed along with his proximity.

Our thighs were side by side, touching ever so slightly as he leaned in and grabbed a lock of my hair, wrapping it slowly, teasingly, around two fingers. He gave it a gentle tug and stared into my eyes for so long that my heart started to race and my mind began to wonder. To hope.

Was this the moment Terry would finally realize the chemistry between us, the fire that arced whenever we were close?

Would he continue to deny it? Or was the truth a little more brutal? That maybe, just maybe, Terry wasn't interested.

Maybe it was all in my head. And I needed to get it on straight.

He leaned forward a little more and I thought—no I hoped—his lips would brush against mine. Instead, he looked into my eyes, smiled and released my hair. So he could walk away.

So fucking stupid. I left the booth soon after and ordered another drink, trying to figure out why he had such a strong hold on me. It wasn't love. It was a crush that I'd let get out of control, intensified by a distinct lack of man-generated orgasms. I longed to wrap my arms and legs around a hard-bodied male and stay there until I couldn't walk.

The memorial was in full swing, and I was on the wrong side of tipsy with an early day tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that.

I pressed speed dial number three and made my way toward the door. "Oliver, it's Kat. Can you give me a lift home?"

"I'll be at the front door in sixty seconds."

"Thanks." It was the perfect amount of time to make hasty goodbyes so I could go home.

Far, far away from Terry Manning and his effect on me.

CHAPTER TWO

TERRY

The walls of The House of Ashby reverberated with the sounds of gloves striking flesh, sneakers pounding concrete and grunts of effort echoing off the brick interior. Everywhere I looked, I saw a sea of determined fighters attempting to hone their skill and reach new heights in the sport they loved.

It was at this place of sweat and struggle, where dreams were born and sacrificed, that I found my younger brother standing next to the ring where Rob “Ravager” Regan was training for his first shot at a belt.

Ravager was a heavyweight star on the rise, and I was in awe at what my brother had helped him achieve.

I couldn't have been prouder.

But Emmett didn't need to know that.

“Rob has good reflexes, but he drops his guard too fucking often. It's a KO waiting to happen.” It wasn't my place to give advice to Emmett. I wasn't a fighter or a trainer, at least not at the caliber of Em, but I knew how to brawl.

“I know,” he growled at me, unhappy that his prize fighter's weakness was so easy to spot. “He's better than he was a year ago, by a lot, plus he's younger and faster than his opponent. The win is practically guaranteed.” Emmett's eyes never left the big man in the ring, working on his combos and defense moves.

I nodded at his words, listening even though I knew something Emmett didn't. The outcome of the fight had already been decided. The only thing necessary was for Ravager to do what the fuck he was told.

"And none of that will fucking matter if he can't protect his noggin. You should probably tell him that," I growled, much harsher than I needed to be.

Emmett, for his part, nodded, accepting the advice even though it was clear that he didn't want it. It was always like that with us, him not wanting my advice.

Even though we were brothers, we hadn't really grown up together until high school, when both of our moms had decided it was time to stop being a parent and start partying. Hard.

"You hear from Dad lately?"

I shook my head, gaze fixed on Ravager's wide-open face, just waiting for a night-night punch. "No. I've been too busy working and dealing with my own shit to worry about our old man. What about you? Are things all right?"

Barely two years had passed since Emmett had been honorably discharged from the Army where he'd caught a severe case of PTSD.

"Things are fine, Terry." He spit out the words, clearly annoyed, which I could deal with as long as I knew he was all right.

"You sure? There's no harm in needing more time."

He wouldn't talk about what happened over there, not to me and not to any type of mental health professional. He put all his energy into fighting inside the ring and then turned to coaching because he refused to deal with his shit and Sadie wouldn't stand for an unstable player. At least not *that* type of unstable.

"I said I'm fine, man. Damn."

"Yeah, I heard you. But your anger says otherwise." He glared at me, and I raised my arms defensively. "Excuse me for

giving a shit.”

Finally, his blue gaze, identical to my own, left Ravager and landed on me. It was the only trait we shared. Both of us inherited it from our old man, but I got my mom’s blonde hair and Emmett’s was the same deep brown as his mother’s.

We couldn’t be more different in demeanor and temperament, but with matching shitty childhoods, we were more alike in the ways that counted.

“I need to talk to Ravager,” he said and walked away calmly, broad shoulders leaving no doubt that he could and would kick ass if he needed to, despite his soft-spoken words and almost shy personality.

I watched Emmett go, hoping he was all right, because as shitty as it sounded, I didn’t have the time to worry about him, too. Savannah Rhymer was in the wind, and Lance’s death was on her fucking head as far as I was concerned.

The front door opened to the testosterone-fueled training center for up and coming fighters, and in walked Kat Ashby. She acted as though she was completely unaware of the effect she had on people as she strode across the floor, finishing up a phone call.

Her gaze was focused on some spot in front of her, but she was oblivious to the stares her fitted black dress caused or the dicks rising at the sight of those fire-engine red, fuck-me heels.

I was convinced she knew precisely the effect she had on men. Still, as I watched Kat walk toward the practice ring where Emmett and Rob spoke in hushed tones, I could admit there was no extra swing in her hips, no pouty lips to tease the boys. Or the girls.

Nope, that was Kat’s style. Instead, she managed to sidestep or skip over every fighter and trainer she encountered as if oblivious to them at the same time. It was quite a talent, one only someone like the Ashby Princess could master so easily. With her phone call finished, she began to swipe across the screen. Always working.

I watched, amused as her steps slowed about five feet from me, her eyes still focused on her phone screen until she practically ran me over.

“Whoa sweetheart, if you want a piece all you have to do is ask.”

I regretted the move instantly because putting my hands on her shoulders, her *bare* shoulders, sent a thunderbolt of want right through me, which was something I couldn't afford. Not now.

Not ever.

My words or maybe it was my proximity, brought those sexy red heels to a screeching halt. She looked up slowly until her gaze met mine. “Terry. Fancy running into you here.”

“Stopped by to have coffee with Emmett. Good morning.”

“Busy morning is more like it,” she said with a sigh that seemed a mix of annoyed and enthused. I could never tell if she was irritated by me or if that was simply her default setting.

“How are you, Terry?” she asked in a tone that sent a chill up my spine and a flash of heat to my dick.

I blinked, surprised at her words though I shouldn't be. Kat was nothing if not nice to everyone. Sure, she gave me shit but it was all good natured. “Good, I suppose. Still fucking pissed off about Lance.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I'll sleep a lot easier when that Rhymer cunt is no longer breathing.”

Kat's words shouldn't have shocked me, but they did. She wasn't the foul-mouthed little girl she'd pretended to be when we were younger, and she didn't seem to have the same bloodlust that drove Jasper and Virgil.

“No shit,” was all I could manage in reply before Emmett joined us, wariness swimming in his eyes.

“Hey Kat, how's it going?” he said with a smile finally breaking out.

I envied the effortless way Emmett and Kat could talk to each other, without the snark and sarcasm—or the bickering. Or maybe I didn't? Getting Kat riled up was one of my guilty pleasures, and she always made it worth it. Always.

“It's nonstop busy until after this fight, which brings me to why I'm here,” she said with a sheepish smile. “I mean, I'm good, Emmett. How are you?”

His lips twitched, and I outright laughed, earning me a sapphire-colored glare that widened my smile. “I'm good, Kat. What brings you by?”

Kat smiled and shook her head. “I need you to do some press leading into fight night. I know you don't like to do it, but the people of Glitz and Vegas love you and your story,” she said with a smile. “A vet and a fighter turned coach, you're practically a unicorn. Besides all that, you show up and talk technical fight shit and you'll solidify your role as a top trainer in the league.”

Emmett rubbed a hand over his thick brown hair and grinned. “Shouldn't you let me give you a few objections first?” His lips twitched in amusement, and I was glad Kat's gaze was on him because my big ass grin would have pissed her off but good.

Kat's smile dimmed, replaced by what I liked to call her uptight corporate chick personality. Like a Stepford, only hotter. Way fucking hotter. She smoothed the nonexistent wrinkles from her black dress and put one hand on her hip while the other held the tablet in a white-knuckle grip.

“I thought I'd save us both the time by presenting all my arguments up front. Besides, the camera loves you. Unless,” she blinked and her expression went from all business to concern. “You have other objections?”

I had to hand it to Kat, she was good. Damn good. Better than Sadie at times because she could find a way to get exactly what she wanted without threats, thinly veiled or otherwise. She managed to bring up Emmett's PTSD without actually saying the words or the letters. He sighed and shook his head.

“No objections right off the top of my head,” he said in defeat, or maybe it was disappointment.

“Perfect. Don’t worry, Em, you’ll do great.”

From anyone else that would have sounded like gloating or maybe an empty compliment, but Kat didn’t give out compliments undeservedly. She didn’t get over-talkative or flowery about it, either. It was just a fact as far as she was concerned and that was what sold my brother in the end.

“Fine, but nothing that interferes with the training schedule. I got half a dozen fighters gearing up for this weekend, starting with the early prelims.”

“I’m aware,” she said with a satisfied smile. “Trust me. I’ll email you the dates and times and you tell me which ones don’t work with your schedule. If you cut out more than five, I’ll just send you five more. Got it?”

Emmett nodded. “Yeah, *I’m* aware Kat.”

Her shoulders relaxed now that business matters were over and her smile came easier. Friendlier.

“Good. Things look great around here. I saw Rachel Cruz when I came in, and her fitness level has definitely increased.”

“Glad you noticed,” he said, acting a little surprised that Kat had noticed. Me too, if I was being honest.

“I did and I don’t want to keep you. Thanks for making my job easy today. I won’t forget it.”

And just like that, Kat turned on her heels and walked away, giving me an eyeful of long, shapely legs, slim waist and a nice, round ass. She was slender but toned, much stronger than she looked at first glance.

“I guess that answers that,” Emmett said, a knowing smile in his voice.

“What?”

“You’re still hung up on the Ashby Princess.”

I frowned. “I was never *hung up* on the Princess.” I lied straight through my teeth because that was my secret, and I’d

take it to the grave.

“Bullshit,” he growled with a grin. “But we all have our secrets, don’t we?”

I knew what he was getting at and it gave me pause. Emmett needed to deal with his shit before it exploded at the most unfortunate time and with irreversible consequences. But I wasn’t ready to share my feelings for Kat with anyone. “For now, we do. But that could change at any moment little brother.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go chase the princess. I saw how she looked at you. There might actually be a chance this time.”

Dammit, I’d been hoping that flare of attraction had been a trick of the light or wishful thinking on my part, but if Emmett saw it too, well that changed things. Or did it? “Is that your way of telling me to get lost?”

“Nah, but I do need to get back to it. Make sure Ravager is on top form.”

He held up a fist and I bumped it with a smile, glad that the shit our folks put us through had turned us into real brothers, not just *half*-brothers, instead of enemies. Really, it could have gone either way.

“See ya around, bro.”

“Later,” he called to my back as I made my way to the door, *not* following Kat, just heading in the same direction.

She was oblivious to the attention she drew as her heels clacked against the cement of the visitor’s lot. Women looked on in awe of her sense of style, the confident way she carried herself even when she was preoccupied with more important matters. And then men, well they drooled as she walked by, probably disappointed they couldn’t muster the courage to approach her before she reached her car.

But one guy stared in a way that wasn’t filled with lust or envy. He had intent in everything from the hunched over set of his shoulders, the way he shoved his fists into the pockets of his jeans, hoodie pulled up to obscure his features and his race.

He didn't look like he wanted her body or her money, and instantly, I was on high alert. My thoughts went to Brendan Rhymer and Jas' insistence that the asshole was still alive. If that motherfucker had risen from the dead to target Kat, I'd be happy to send him straight back to hell.

It wasn't Brendan though, the guy was taller and thinner than that sick fuck, but that didn't mean this guy wasn't sent by Brendan. Or his father or his missing sister.

My gaze slid back to Kat, her eyes still fixed on the phone screen as her long legs carried her to the far end of the lot. I picked up the pace when he started to move toward her, determined to make it to Kat before this asshole did.

"Hey, hot stuff, give me a smile, why don'tcha?" he said, part gangster, part cocky bastard.

Kat froze and turned on her heels with murder in her eyes. "What did you just say to me?" Her outrage made me smile, but the asshole was still advancing, and her anger gave me just enough time to get to her before he did and wrap my arms around her like we were more than kinda, sorta, friends.

"Now is that any way to greet an old friend, sweetheart?" I laid it on thick. Kat was confused and angry as I spun her in a circle to get a better, up-close look at the man following her. He was tall with tan skin but he was a white guy. Built but lean with a tattoo on his right forearm. I noted the details for later as Kat tried to squirm from my grip.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked in a half-whisper, half-yell.

"Be cool," I whispered in her ear, nearly stumbling as the scent of her expensive flowery perfume short-circuited my brain. Kat Ashby was in my arms, where she was meant to be, in another life. I set her down and pulled her close, keeping her pinned to my side as I leveled that motherfucker with an icy stare. "You lost or somethin'?"

Finally, Kat remembered we weren't alone, and her body went stiff with alarm, especially when he aimed an angry glare right at her.

“Nope. Just walking,” he growled, leaning forward to intimidate.

I smiled and held myself a little taller to let him know that I didn't intimidate, ever. “Then get to walking. People might feel threatened by a strange man lurking in a parking lot, and they might do something about it.”

The threat landed perfectly, his eyes flared with acknowledgment and Kat gasped beside me.

Reality had finally crashed in on her and I accepted more of her weight as she leaned into me.

“It's a free country.”

“Yeah? You an Ashby because I've never seen you before and this here is Ashby property. All of it.”

“Fuck you,” he spat and walked away, looking over his shoulder every few feet for his own safety.

I watched until he disappeared from sight, only looking away when Kat stepped out of my grasp and smoothed her dress in an attempt to calm her nerves. Her hands moved in slow, methodical strokes over her flat stomach and the flare of her hips before they moved to her thick brown waves, styled to perfection. When she had her emotions under control, Kat looked up at me with a smirk.

“I guess it's a good thing you're totally obsessed with me since you kinda saved my life. Thanks.”

Her tone pulled a laugh from me, reminding me of the seventeen-year-old version of her, so sassy and sarcastic. “You're welcome, princess.”

Kat spun on her heels and started to walk away, but not before raising her right arm in the air and flipping me off. “There's your princess, Manning.”

“I see her,” I told her as I walked about five feet behind her to make sure she made it to her car and out of the lot safely. “Not a bad view,” I called out, smiling when my words made her stumble slightly.

Yeah maybe Emmett was right. Maybe I still had it bad for the Ashby princess. Not that it mattered.

It couldn't.

Not ever.

There was too much at risk.

CHAPTER THREE

KAT

After getting my butt saved by Terry in the visitor's lot at House of Ashby, I spent the night thinking of all the people who might want to do me harm.

Most of them were probably employees, pissed off because everyone had to work harder and longer hours until after fight night. Some might be men I've turned down for dates, but that was unlikely, given my last name and how infrequently I actually dated.

Which meant it likely had everything to do with the block of rooms that had occupied too much of my attention over the past few months. The Mueller Suites, as I started to call them, after the degenerate bishop connected to the rash of murdered priests.

The rooms had been blocked off through a standing reservation for the foreseeable future, through the Church, of course, to make sure the reservation couldn't be denied. Or revoked.

When I first found out, I was outraged. Angry as hell that neither Ma or Jasper would allow me to lose or double-book the suites, especially considering what those fucking perverts had done to my brothers. But the more I sat on that anger and stewed in it, the more I realized that this was my way to do something.

When we were still kids, and I'd been too young to understand and then when I *was* old enough to understand, I had so much

anger toward the church, I was useless. But now, as a grown woman, I knew exactly how to channel unhealthy emotions into healthy solutions. Including keeping an eagle eye on the pervert suites, watching every move they made.

By any means necessary.

At my desk on the top floor of Emerald Isle, the desert sun brightened up my office and caused a glare on the screen. I was watching a nondescript couple check into one of the Mueller Suites. They're almost *too* non-descript, I mused, her ash blonde hair and plain brown eyes, his blend of silver and brown hair, even plainer brown eyes.

They were unremarkable in every way, their khaki shorts giving them the look of middle-aged vacationers and the plain glasses made them look kind. Normal. Forgettable.

If not for the fact they were checking into one of the pervert suites, they'd seem perfectly harmless. And that was why they were so goddamn dangerous. Watching surveillance footage of them walking side by side down the hall reminded me of my daddy's drunken lessons.

Never trust anybody working too hard to blend in. They're trying to hide something as sure as the day is long.

Colm Ashby was a drunk motherfucker, but knowing people and reading them, manipulating them, *that* was his superpower. He could make you think the bad idea that landed you in trouble was your idea and get you to thank him for the tips. I learned at his hip until the day he didn't come home.

He wasn't a good man or a decent man, but the lessons I learned—good and bad—shaped me into the woman I was today. Currently, that woman was surveillance stalking the too-plain couple.

I watched them walk hand in hand down to one of the hotel restaurants where they each enjoyed one glass of wine with dinner, steak for him and chicken for her, before retiring to their room for the night.

They'd been in the hotel for two days and hadn't made any phone calls, no charges to the room, not even a mini bar water.

There was nothing to comment on and no real reason to keep watching them. Except that it was the Mueller suites which were suspect enough, even when they were empty.

I kept an eye on the couple, but I had too much work to do to keep playing private dick on the almost certain perverts sent by Mueller, or the Church. Fight Night was just around the corner, and I still had to make sure that everything went off without a hitch, even though it wasn't my job.

Jasper had too much shit on his plate with the escape of Savannah Rhymer and the possible return of her shithead brother. It was a big deal that Jasper had even lowered himself to admit that he needed help. So, when he called a meeting with me, I couldn't refuse.

He said, "Kat, I need you to stand in for me at the gym. Be my surrogate. Handle all the shit for fight night."

Once I realized my ears were working properly and I wasn't hearing things, I jumped in with both feet, determined to do a damn good job.

And yeah, maybe showing my big brother that he wasn't the only one who could do the job and do it well, played a small part. I liked my temporary title, Head of Operations, House of Ashby. Yes, that suited me just fine.

I returned to my work, thankful to be the buzz of activity at Emerald Isle after what happened yesterday. There was more security here than at Black Stallion. The Stallion crowd was younger and hipper and a lot less affluent than our clientele. The gym had cameras everywhere. Anyone who meant to harm me or anyone else might succeed, but they would regret it immediately.

Most of all, there was no Terry Manning here, ruining my equilibrium and my ability to think clearly. I'd spent half the day yesterday thinking about how good it felt to be pressed up against his hard chest and the strong muscles in his arms. And the way he smelled, like man and sex and heaven all wrapped up in one delicious package.

He was, to me, a nice bottle of red and a big fat hooter at the end of a long day, but he was also off limits. *Way* off limits. For entirely too many reasons, which is why I was determined to get my mind off Terry and back on the men and women involved in Fight Night.

I had a shit ton of press to do, for trainers like Emmett, but also for the headlining fighters, especially the ones out of House of Ashby. Hotel rooms were booked and double-checked for special diets and other needs. It was my job to make sure everyone else did what they needed to do so that everyone got paid.

Especially the Ashbys.

A knock sounded on the door, startling me out of my thoughts. I looked up, prepared to see my assistant, not my brother.

“Jas, what are you doing here?” I half expected Terry to come in behind him but he was, thankfully, alone.

“We need to talk. About Fight Night.” His expression was somber and when he stepped in and closed the door, I knew he had something serious on his mind. Jasper wasn’t one to beat around the bush, so I leaned back in my chair and watched him closely as he took the seat in front of me and crossed his legs.

“What about it?”

He sighed and leaned forward on his elbows, fingertips steepled together as his gaze met mine.

“We have three belt fights, all Ashby fighters. We can only have two wins.”

I nodded at what he was saying. I understood clearly; it was just the way things were done sometimes and I accepted that. There was just one thing I didn’t get.

“Why are you telling me?”

“Because I need you to inform Ravager without Emmett finding out.”

Shit. Of course, that was what he wanted. Emmett was a stand-up guy, a former military man with a distinct sense of honor and fairness. He would never agree to fix a fight. Especially

when he refused as a fighter even knowing it could've cost him his fighting career.

In the end, it hadn't cost him anything because Ma had respected him for taking a stand. She was strange that way.

"Why me?" Rob had a crazy ass look in his eyes, and I kept my distance whenever I could. "He wants to fuck me, which means he won't listen to a damn thing I have to say, even with my last name." It was the shittiest part of being a woman on either side of the business. Sexism was a motherfucker. "Plus, this is only his sixth pro fight, a belt fight at that. You really think he's gonna take a fall?"

"For fuck's sake Kat, he doesn't need to *take a fall*. What the hell kind of movies have you been watching?" Jasper looked at me like he thought I was crazy. I just smiled. "Rob is undefeated and the bets reflect that, which is why he's gotta do it. If he wants to fuck you, use that to get him to agree to this. We need it to look good. Make it close."

I shook my head in disgust. "I'm not flirting with that maniac for any reason. This is a Jasper task, and since I'm doing everything else, you can handle it."

He nodded and stood, pressing his palms flat against my desk. "Right now, you *are* Jasper. If he's a shit about it, I'll do it."

I sighed and nodded, knowing that when Jasper found a reasonable solution, there was no arguing with him. "Fine." I scribbled a note on my tablet to talk to the middleweight contender and looked back at my brother.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. Terry said some guy tried to mug you?"

I wasn't surprised at all Terry had told Jasper about the parking lot incident, but I was surprised he'd downplayed it because I saw the look in that guy's eyes. He meant to do me harm.

"Yep. It's a good thing Terry spotted me and said something totally sexist and condescending to get my attention."

I realized last night over my third glass of wine, Terry had done it on purpose to get a reaction out of me.

As if I needed another reason to be attracted to Mr. All Wrong For Me. Still, I made a note to send Terry a thank you gift.

“Anything on Mueller?”

“Not yet.” When there was something concrete to tell, I would. “I’m approving another assistant for Maisie. She’s buried in guests wanting her to do everything. She’s one person. And this fight has the place booked full of high rollers for weeks at a time on both sides of Fight Night. She needs the help.”

“Fine,” he said with an easy smile. “Who knew she’d be so capable? Nothing but compliments from the big spenders.”

They loved Maisie and handed out the most lavish gifts that were borderline inappropriate for an engaged woman.

“I’m surprised Virgil hasn’t gone full beast on any of them yet, especially that Greek dude who bought her a pink jet.”

“It was a small jet,” he said as if that made any difference at all. “Well she *did* get him and his teenage daughter tickets and backstage passes to Lady Gaga. Besides, Virgil is the one who’ll fuck her on that jet.”

I groaned and shook my head. “Seriously, Jas? Gross.”

He gave an unapologetic shrug and a matching smile. “They are two adults in love, Kat. They have sex. You *do* remember what sex is, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s when I spread my legs like this and grab a cock like this—” I cupped my hands in a crude gesture that had my brother on his feet and marching toward the exit. I laughed and smacked the desk.

“Anything else?”

“No,” he growled and turned in front of the still closed door. “I’m just a call away if you need anything, Kat. Anything.”

“I know, Jas. Thanks, and stay safe out there.”

“Always,” he said with a nod and patted the spot where he kept the copper gun Dad had left him in the will.

When Jasper left, I turned my attention back to work, but of course, thoughts of Terry began to creep in again. Jasper's fault. On what planet did brothers and sisters talk about their sex lives? Definitely not this one.

Maybe it was time I started making room in my life for personal things. Like sex. And men.

And obscenely amazing orgasms.

CHAPTER FOUR

TERRY

My house was nothing like Ashby Manor in terms of size, grandeur or décor, but it was mine. Even though Sadie had offered me a spot at the Manor, her way of showing that she saw me as a legit member of the family, it just didn't feel right.

Not anymore.

It wasn't the same as spending every day and most nights there when I was a kid because Dad was busy chasing ass and Mom was busy chasing that next high.

Now that I was a grown man, I loved my privacy.

Located only about a mile away from the gates of Ashby Manor, my place was bigger than I needed, but until a few months ago, Emmett had been my reluctant roommate. I liked having the space to roam around when I couldn't sleep, when I needed to think. Besides, I'd spent my childhood in studio and one-bedroom apartments and having more space was a luxury I could now afford.

My space was open and bright with lots of windows that allowed plenty of light to come inside when I wanted to, and the remote controlled black out blinds meant I could have privacy when I wanted it. My favorite spot in the house was the floor-to-ceiling windows just off the kitchen, where I could watch the sun sink below the horizon and the stars twinkle in the sky.

It was late evening and the blinds were activated just in case any enemies thought I'd be an easy mark away from the

Manor. They could try. I had enough weapons stashed to make sure they didn't live to regret it.

The sound of the doorbell took my gaze reluctantly away from the view of the small manmade lake behind my house, the glittering reflection of the stars as they popped in the sky. I took my time going downstairs, ignoring the second, more urgent ring to check the security screen before answering.

Two kids who couldn't have been more than twenty stood on the doorsteps in what looked like chef's whites. I opened the door to their smiling faces and shook my head.

"Not interested."

The guy's smile faltered easily, but the girl wasn't intimidated in the least. Instead, she stepped forward, her smile even brighter.

"Gourmet for Hire, at your service. Everything is prepped, as requested, for your gourmet experience. The only thing left is for Jack and me to plate it up. Then we'll be on our way," she said, hanging onto the charming smile I was sure worked for her more times than it didn't. "Ten minutes. Max." She took another bold step forward, only stopping when my hand went up.

"I didn't order this." And if this was a type of scam to get me to pay for some overpriced meal, they'd regret choosing my house.

"Your girlfriend did." The girl's smile never wavered when I glared at her. She simply produced a small cream-colored card and slid it between my fingers. Then, she waited patiently for me to read it.

Thanks for saving my life, stalker. I owe you one. ~KA

I smiled at Kat's words and stepped back to let the kids enter. I wasn't about to turn down a gourmet meal from a beautiful woman.

"Kitchen is straight back, thanks." As the kids marched down the hall in hushed whispers, I reread the note in disbelief. Kat was nice to everyone, but I'd always gotten the impression that she looked down on me.

Not always, but after one particularly embarrassing evening when my mother showed up, drunk, to Ashby Manor and forced me home for a family dinner of fried bologna sandwiches and generic cheese puffs.

After that, Kat noticed the social differences between us and her schoolgirl crush had vanished.

Instantly.

But this gift? It was different.

Not that I was about to go off daydreaming about my best friend's little sister, which was sheer madness. But it would be rude not to say thanks, wouldn't it?

Thanks for dinner. No poison? Her reply came before I could shove my phone back into a pocket.

Not that I know of. Eat it all and let me know so I can call the right people to complain, yeah?

Her words pulled a laugh from me that echoed in the foyer, reminding me that two young strangers were preparing food for me in the kitchen. But that didn't mean I couldn't indulge in a little harmless flirting while I waited to eat.

You'll be sad when I'm gone.

The truth was it probably wouldn't impact her much at all, beyond the sadness that an honorary member of the family had died. Yet still, I stared at the screen, waiting for another message. Kat didn't disappoint.

Of course I will. Then I'll have to find someone else to sneer at me for the next twenty years.

"What?" I shook my head at the message, reading and re-reading it to make sure I'd read it right. Kat thought all those longing looks I tried to conceal as derisive sneers.

That was better than her knowing the truth and feeling obligated to give the old *it's not you, it's me* speech. I refused to touch that message, knowing my denial would only make her believe it was true.

"Did you have a question, Mr. Manning?"

I blinked and looked up at the freckle-faced chef with the earnest smile. “Sorry, no. That was a rhetorical question,” I stammered.

“Okay, then. The wine has sufficiently breathed. I can pour you a glass if you’d like.”

“Sure.” I wasn’t much of a wine drinker, but this was the meal that Kat had picked out for me, to say thanks for saving her sweet little ass, so I would indulge. Completely. “Thank you.”

I took a tentative sip and paid attention as she enthusiastically detailed the wine’s flavor profile, its subtle undertones, and its full-bodied nature. I didn’t grasp the nuances, nor did I particularly care.

“Damn good wine, thanks.”

Within a matter of minutes, Jack and his freckle-faced companion skillfully arranged a sumptuous, four-course gourmet Italian feast before me. I enjoyed every single bite and savored the flavors and thoughtfulness behind the meal.

All courtesy of one sexy as fuck Kat Ashby.

CHAPTER FIVE

KAT

What truly set the Emerald Isle casino apart from the Black Stallion, was the delightful gem known as The Cute Parisian Bistro.

As the name indicated, it was a cute little Parisian style bistro complete with wrought iron tables and chairs, an ever-changing chalkboard menu, and the subtle allure of French pop music playing softly through strategically placed speakers.

It was my favorite place to have lunch, especially when I felt particularly ravenous, like today. Their steak sandwiches, tender and bursting with flavor, were served with a side of rich au jus, while their thick steak fries were so indulgent that I knew I'd be paying for it at the gym later.

Sure, I could have savored this culinary masterpiece at my desk with the help of my assistant, but today was different. I was exhausted, and the clock had barely struck one.

I needed a break, so I surrendered to the allure of The Cute Parisian Bistro, where I could indulge in people-watching for a blissful forty-five minutes, right in the vibrant heart of the Emerald Isle.

I loved to people watch, to figure out the intimate details of people's lives just by observing them without their knowing it. Was that couple in the corner enjoying a secret rendezvous, or was it as innocent as it appeared on the surface? Were those retirees undercover officers or worse, were they like the couple staying in one of the Mueller Suites?

“Hey, you’re Katherine Ashby, right?”

The sound of my name took my gaze from the teenagers who’d just bounced in looking way too fashionable for the middle of a school day. They were either older than they looked or playing hooky to meet up with some older guys, the same way I had when I was their age. Except I had enough sense to get lost in the bigger casinos that Vegas had to offer.

The question came from a young girl who looked to be no more than sixteen or seventeen. The thin layer of dirt on her skin and the ill-fitting clothes pegged her as a runaway.

“Who’s asking?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, a move that added about two extra years of attitude. “Cute. Look, I know you’re her because I looked you up online and there are a lot of photos of you. A lot. You run this place, is that true?”

The next shakedown is always around the corner, another of those life lessons from dear old Dad. Another tip that had turned out to be more useful than not over the years. I didn’t get the scam artist vibe from this girl, not yet anyway, so I proceeded with caution.

“What can I help you with...?”

“Madison,” she filled in with a sigh. “My name’s Madison.”

I nodded and motioned for her to sit in the unoccupied chair. “have a seat, Madison with no last name. What can I do for you?”

She dropped down in the chair with a reluctant huff and leaned on her elbows with a frown on her face.

“You can tell me why you’re offering safe harbor to freaks and pervs and murderers.” Her voice got louder as she went on and then lowered as she looked around, noticing her volume had drawn stares.

“Those are some pretty serious accusations, Madison. Care to elaborate on that? Over a meal, maybe?” Her gaze narrowed to suspicion, and I couldn’t say I blamed her. Based on her

allegations, she either had a hard life or a very active imagination.

“Just use your inside voice, and I’ll keep an open mind. I promise.”

If nothing else, she was a kid in trouble, and I knew something about that. If I could help her, I would.

“For real?” I nodded, and she sat back, folding her arms defensively. “Why?”

“You said you know who I am, right? Not just that I run this place?”

She nodded, suddenly looking uncomfortable. “Yeah? So?”

“Then you know that I have nothing to fear from you and you also know that I can probably help.” I watched Madison weigh her options, chewing her bottom lip as she decided whether she could trust me, or if I would be just another person to let her down.

“It’s my sister, Molly. She came to Glitz to work as a housekeeper and cook for a *nice Catholic family*.” Madison said the words with derision and disgust. Her emphasis gave me a nasty feeling in my gut. “Anyway, the couple worked for some bigwig in *The Church*, so of course, our parents were happy to fork over the hundred bucks for her bus ticket, especially when she promised to send part of her paycheck home to them.”

“Where are you from?”

Madison blinked as if she hadn’t expected the question. “That’s not important.”

“It’s important to me.” The only way to ensure she was legit, was to check her story out.

“I’ll tell you when I decide if I can trust you or not.” Her words were spoken with the bravado of a street kid who had to be tough just to survive from one day to the next. I’d met plenty of kids like Madison. Hell, I’d almost ended up a kid like her when I was sixteen.

“Fine. Keep going.”

A waiter approached with a friendly smile. “Excuse me, Ms. Ashby, do you need anything else?”

“A coffee for me. Madison?”

She rolled her eyes. “Burger and fries. Well done, lots of ketchup.”

Yep, she was definitely a kid.

“Thanks, Brad.” The waiter left, and I turned my gaze back to Madison. “You were saying?”

Madison nodded and sucked in a deep breath that she had to let out slowly just to calm her nerves. “Three months in and Molly hated the job. Said the couple was weird and evil. Told me she’d caught the guy trying to sneak into her room, and she started pushing the small dresser in front of the door when she slept. Then on month five, I stopped hearing from my sister altogether.”

It was a story I knew well and had heard it at least a thousand times. “Shit, Madison, I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, doing her best to look tough even though I could see she was on the verge of tears.

“I don’t need your pity. I need answers. Molly sent me a photo of her inside their big ass house, so I have their address, but they moved. And I tracked them to your hotel. *This* hotel.”

Her words sent a tingle of awareness up the back of my spine, so much so that I had to tell myself to keep calm. To relax and not get too far ahead of myself. Yet.

“Do you have their names? Or a photo?”

She was a kid who’d done a little detective work, but I wasn’t holding out hope.

“Dennis and Debbie Smith,” she snorted.

Aliases. “I’ll look into it. I promise. Do you have someplace to stay?”

Brad chose that moment to interrupt with our food. “Anything else?”

“We’re good now,” I told him and watched him walk away to check on the other customers. Madison sank into her food like she’d skipped more than a few meals. My heart went out to the kid.

“Well?” I said.

“Well *what?*” She shook her head and took another bite, chewing like the food would disappear if she didn’t eat it all at once. “I don’t need your charity, rich girl. I just want to find my sister.”

I sighed heavily and reached for any patience I could find. Typically, I *was* the patient Ashby. Okay, well, Cal was the patient Ashby, but I came in a close second.

“It’s not charity. I’m terribly busy at the moment, and I won’t always be so easy to find. Do you have a phone, some way I can get a hold of you?”

“Why,” she asked with a sneer. “You gonna offer me a phone too?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you have a phone or don’t you, Madison?”

She looked away, ashamed. “I don’t.”

Dammit, she was just a fucking kid. Too young to have to pretend she could handle all the shit life had already thrown at her.

“Finish your food,” I ordered and went back to my now lukewarm coffee.

Madison finished every bite of food and the iced tea, savoring every bite like she didn’t know where her next meal would come from.

“I’m done.”

“Come with me,” I told her as I stood and straightened the sapphire blue dress that was comfortable enough to wear all day, even after a big meal. When Madison’s light brown eyes started to dart around the restaurant, I groaned to myself. She was scared. Of course, she was scared.

“Just up to my office so we can talk. Privately.”

She glared and then pointed at me. “Don’t try anything funny lady.”

I laughed and nodded for her to follow me to the executive elevator.

“I can barely tolerate talking to teenagers, Madison. I definitely have no interest in doing anything *funny*.”

She stepped onto the elevator behind me and snorted. “*Funny* is in the eyes of the beholder, or haven’t you heard?”

I nodded. “Believe it or not, Madison, your sister isn’t the only one who’s been through this shit.”

“You mean...you?”

“Not me, but some people very close to me.”

“So what do you plan to do then?” The teenager practically nipped at my heels as we exited the elevator and headed toward my office. “Damn, this is even nicer than those church people’s house.”

Inside my office, I closed the door and made my way to the desk while Madison bounced around every corner of my office, in awe of all the lavish furnishings. I sent a quick message to Oliver to come up to my office as soon as he could.

“I’m going to do some digging because I have a feeling we’re both looking for the same people.”

She was a kid so there was no way in hell I’d give her any real details, but Madison needed to know I was just as committed as she was to...whatever this was.

“Yeah, why?”

Luckily, a knock sounded on the door. My assistant announcing Oliver’s arrival.

“He’s setting up a new phone for some reason. I told him I could do it but he insisted.”

“All right. Thanks, Shelby.”

She nodded and left, closing the door quietly behind her. Madison snorted. "It's good to be boss, huh?"

"Not this week. Too much shit to do, kid."

"Sounds like a blow off to me," she said and stood, making a beeline for the door, but Oliver's arrival stopped her dead in her tracks.

"That's the problem with teenagers. They think they know everything when the truth is you don't even know your head from your ass." She turned with an angry stare that I ignored. "This is Oliver, he is our family driver and he's going to take you someplace safe."

She shook her head, dirty blonde hair brushing her shoulders as she backed up to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Terrified once again. "Yeah, I don't fuckin' think so, rich girl."

I held up a hand for Oliver to stay where he was. "For a tough girl you sure do scare easy. Oliver is just taking you to one of our other hotels, where you can sleep safely, get some food and most of all, so I'll know where you are when I have any information for you on your sister. Got it?"

She nodded, but Madison's mind wasn't made up. Not yet. Her dark gaze darted between me and Oliver, trying to decide if we were taking her to a sex dungeon to share her sister's fate or if we were for real. "You don't have any female drivers?"

Oliver covered his laugh with a cough.

"You think men have the market cornered on being sickos and perverts?"

"No," she sighed in defeat. "Fine. Whatever."

"Oliver's worked for the family for years. He's a good guy. I swear."

She didn't look convinced and Oliver shrugged with a charming smile. "My husband thinks so, too."

"Fine, I said! Whatever."

A mere ten minutes later, we found ourselves en route to a nondescript budget hotel where Madison could blend in with

the shadows. As for Calvin, I was torn—should I draw him into my investigation or let him be?

Bonnie was still going through some bizarre shit and acting weird as hell, which meant for the moment, I was on my own.

CHAPTER SIX

TERRY

“Thought you were having Kat deal with Rob.”

Secretly, I was glad Jasper had called and asked me to come with him to deal with the man everyone called Ravager, based on his incredible boxing skills.

The dude was talented as fuck, equally as difficult, but he had a bad habit of looking at Kat like she was a juicy steak he couldn't wait to devour. Not that I could talk, but I only thought about it.

Jasper laughed and looked up at the cement and glass structure that was the House of Ashby. The best fight school and training center in the western hemisphere if you asked Jasper.

“Yeah, I was, but I dropped all the fight shit on her lap so that we could deal with The Crusaders. And Brendan *fucking* Rhymer.” Jasper sighed and his broad shoulders fell just a fraction. “She's doing a damn good job,” he said, leaving the rest of his thought hanging in the air.

“And?” Jasper was my best friend, closer to me than my own blood brother, but he was shit at giving out compliments.

He smirked and shrugged. “And I didn't want her to hurt him right before the right.”

We shared a laugh at that, knowing that Kat was twice as fierce as a woman in her position needed to be, a benefit of growing up with three bad ass brothers. And two equally

rowdy honorary brothers. “She’s a killer, in the boardroom or in the streets and we need this fight to happen. Ready?”

“Yeah,” I sighed and nodded, knowing what needed to be done. It was my job to keep Emmett distracted while Jasper had a private chat with Rob. We couldn’t risk my brother walking in on that convo. I hated the deception, but in this case it was necessary. Emmett wouldn’t like it; he wouldn’t agree to it, and he didn’t have to. As long as Rob did.

“Got some shit to share with him anyway.”

Jasper paused and turned to me. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not more than once,” I snorted and clapped him on the back. “But thanks, Dr. Phil.”

Jasper pulled the glass door open with one hand and flipped me off with the other. “Well you know...I’m here.”

“I know, man. Thanks.” I stepped inside as the cool air washed over me, followed immediately by the stench of sweat and nylon. “Let’s do this.”

Jasper gave a sharp nod. “And then we can head back to Midnight Mass for some fish & chips. And whiskey.”

“Helluva workday,” I said with a grin as we walked through the gym, Jasper’s presence causing a wave of tension. The grin remained because every day I woke up finding it hard to believe that my workday consisted of being at my best friend’s side, shooting the shit, and having each other’s backs in *all* things.

It was a fucking great way to earn a living.

“Gotta earn those dollars somehow,” he grinned. “No more than an hour. I hope.”

It was then that I realized that Jasper was actually worried he might have to apply pressure to Ravager. Not that he ever backed down from a confrontation or a fight, but he preferred to be a businessman when it came to business. And a brawler when it came to the *real* business.

It also told me that I needed to be on my toes and extra observant because this shit with the return of Brendan Rhymer

was fucking with him more than he let on.

Just before we came to the row of octagons, Jasper went right and I went left to Emmett's office and knocked. Hard.

"What is it," he barked, sounding so much like our old man I had to do a double-take before I opened the door and poked my head inside.

"Got a minute?"

Worry instantly clouded Emmett's gaze as he nodded and waved me on. "Yeah. What's up?"

I stepped inside slowly and shut the door. This was private news best shared behind closed doors.

"My mom ran into yours in lockup at County recently. Wasn't sure if you'd heard from her or not."

It was the same story with both of our mothers, in and out of jail on petty charges, mostly stemming from addiction. After a while it just became normal.

"I haven't," he said warily. This was often the intro to some really bad shit.

The laugh that escaped my mouth was bitter more than amused because we both lucked out in the parental department. Moms were both drunk junkies who dabbled in hard drugs and our dad was a dealer who dabbled in everything, legal or otherwise. Sadie had saved us both, ironically.

"Well, you'll be happy to know she's alive and well. Picked up on a theft warrant, stole some shit from one of those boutiques inside the Venetian."

Emmett let out his own bitter laugh and shook his head. "Thanks for letting me know. How's your mom?"

"Just got out and thinking about turning her life around. Again. Got a new boyfriend so I'll hold my breath in anticipation of the wedding announcement or the death notification." With her, I never could tell. "How's fight training going?"

“Fine. Mostly.” He sighed, weighing whether or not to tell me what was on his mind. It was either because he was afraid I’d tell Jasper, or he was more afraid I’d handle it on my own.

“Well?” I asked, impatient to get moving.

“Something is up with Rob. I can’t say for sure, but I know it’s *something*. His fighting is fine, on point as usual but his attitude. It’s different this week. More aggressive but not pre-fight aggression.”

I knew exactly what he meant about pre-fight aggression because we’d gone a few rounds in the days leading up to Emmett’s first few fights.

“Get in the ring with him. Make sure it’s not just nerves. Worked for you.”

“And risk injuring the headline fighter days before the main event? You trying to get me kneecapped?”

“Never,” I responded seriously. It was always a worry when we did the kind of work we did, mingling with the underworld crowd. We always had to be careful. “Let me know if his head isn’t in the game. He’ll end up dead.” In more ways than one.

“I’ll handle it, Terry.”

“Don’t be defensive, Em. I know you can do your fucking job, but you have a problem giving people news they don’t want to hear. Except me, then you have no problem at all.”

He nodded, saying nothing, but the quirk of a smile on his lips said everything. “This fight is a big deal for me too, Terry. I’ll do what needs to be done.”

“You always do, little brother.”

He shook his head. “I’m bigger than you, asshole.”

“I’m still more badass, though.”

We laughed at the old joke that never failed to get a rise out of us. Emmett was younger and big as fuck, but I made up for my wiry frame by being what Jasper called a *crazy motherfucker*.

“Heard you scared off some asshole messin’ with Kat.”

I nodded, still angry that asshole had the nerve to get so close and on Ashby property, no less. “Anything show up on camera?”

“Nope. You can see it if you want, but he was really careful about hiding his face from the cameras. Like he’d been here before and knew where they all were.”

“Any newbies here that set off alarms?” I asked, filing away more bad news.

Emmett shook his head and raked a hand through his thick brown hair. “Plenty of people are in and out of here, mostly fighters and trainers, medical crew. Nobody who caused concern, at least not if you don’t count all the agents and managers looking to poach fighters.”

Shit. Poaching was part of the business; we all knew that. But still it shocked me how many were willing to risk certain death by crossing Sadie or Jasper. Boxing was a money maker and the Ashbys would do anything to stay on top.

“All right. I’ll get security to get me the last two weeks of footage. See what we can find.”

Emmett’s brows dipped low. “Kat is family. I already pulled the past four weeks. I’m sending it now.”

“Thanks.” I’d hit up Cal with what I could remember of the man’s description once I went through the footage.

“Anything for Kat. Right?”

My lips twitched, and I shook my head. “You relentless little shit,” I laughed. “Save that for Rob.”

“But it’s so much more fun to give you shit. Especially about this.” Emmett just laughed when I flipped him off. “Any news on the Kat front?”

“Nothing at all and there won’t be. You know that.” Jasper and Virgil had never reacted well to any of the men Kat had brought home and as Jasper’s best friend, she was strictly one hundred percent off limits.

“That’s some bullshit high school posturing and you know it. I mean, I’d rather have my sister with someone who’d take a

bullet for me than anyone else.”

“Good thing you don’t have a sister, huh?” I nodded, taking his point. It always bothered me too. “Anyway, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Until there is,” he said with a satisfied smile just as Jasper knocked and interrupted.

“Things are looking good, Em. Keep up the good work.”

Jasper stepped inside, confident that his interruption wasn’t unwelcome.

“Thanks. Everyone is working hard.”

“Any problems?” Jasper’s tone was even but I knew him better than that. He was fishing for something he already knew about.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Emmett was tougher than he looked, and I pitied the men who learned that lesson the hard way. My big-little brother was a nice guy. A good guy. He didn’t seem like the vet and pro brawler that he was, which had served him well. In many ways.

“If that changes, I’m a phone call away.”

Emmett nodded but kept quiet. Jasper gave a sharp nod to my brother before he turned and walked out.

“Later,” I told Emmett and caught up with Jasper. “How’d it go?”

“Could’ve gone better, but I hope I made my point. Clearly.” Because if he hadn’t, it would be made crystal clear. After the fight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KAT

Thanks to the information I'd gotten from Madison, I was able to find out more about the couple staying in the Mueller Suites with a credit card and a basic internet search.

Dennis and Deborah Smith were actually Stephen and Donna McLaughlin. He was a forensic accountant and she was a publicist, owners and operators of two small practices, both with just one client. The Las Vegas Diocese.

That couldn't be a coincidence, and I was eager to share my news with the family and see what else Cal could find. But it would have to wait until Sunday dinner since there was too much to do to prepare for the upcoming fight. But that also gave me three more days to dig on my own, before Sadie ordered me to stop. Which she would as soon as I told the family.

The McLaughlins had an open-ended reservation, which was strange, since they lived and worked in Vegas, not to mention they owned a home here in town. Just like Madison said.

Another quick online search showed that the address on the background check was indeed the same house that Madison had seen in the photo Molly sent.

"Definitely not a fucking coincidence," I muttered to no one in particular since I was alone in my office.

It was all starting to add up to *exactly* as I suspected but still with no concrete proof to make any formal accusations. Which meant all I had was a half-baked theory, which was likely true,

but no way to prove it. Yet. With Madison and my own surveillance, I was close.

I knew it.

The phone chimed and vibrated on my desk, the final reminder that I should have left to meet Maisie for lunch about fifteen minutes ago. She was so busy and a stickler for punctuality, I knew she'd give me shit so I grabbed a few singles for luck and made my way to the elevator and down to the lobby floor. Since our family owned the casinos, I couldn't keep any of the winnings if the slots gave any up, but ever since I was a kid, I got a kick out of pulling the lever.

"Breaking the rules again?" Maisie asked from behind me, a smile in her voice. "Such a hardcore little badass you are."

"And don't you forget it." I spun and wrapped her in a hug because even though we worked in the same building, it felt like it had been weeks since I'd last seen her, never mind spending any time together. "Ready to grub?"

Maisie glared. "Been ready for twenty minutes. Everything all right?"

"Not really, no. But I'm working on it. You?"

Maisie shrugged but the brightness of her smile said it all. "Great. Exhausted but I can't complain. Not at all."

"I'm happy for you, Maze." I was happy for her and delighted to have her as part of the family. She was exactly the kind of spitfire that could keep my brother Virgil in check. "Let's eat."

Maisie led the way with a satisfied grin. "One of my high rollers flew in this morning from Chicago, brought deep dish pizza and dipped Italian beef sandwiches so I hope you brought your appetite."

My stomach growled at the sound of all those delicious words strung together in a sentence that meant I'd be eating sooner rather than later.

"I brought my appetite and someone else's."

She laughed and flashed a smile over her shoulder. "You sure Bonnie is the only one pregnant around here?"

“Bite your damn tongue, woman! Besides, I’d have to have sex in order to get pregnant. That hasn’t happened in a long time, so no babies here. That’s for sure. Far too fucking long.”

“I can hook you up with a rental. You know, one night, no strings attached.” Maisie let out a loud bark of a laugh at her joke and scanned her card to one of the auxiliary rooms used for special occasions like private games and secret rendezvous.

“Not a bad idea. I’ll let you know. Oh, damn that smells heavenly. Literally, this is what I imagine heaven would smell like.”

“Greasy pizza?”

I flashed a cheeky grin. “Exactly.”

“My assistant set everything up, and he went a little overboard,” she admitted with a blush staining her cheeks.

I shook my head and took a seat, groaning when my ass hit the plush chairs that made high rollers and penny slot enthusiasts alike sit for hours on end, forking over hard-earned cash to the casino.

“Good employees are hard to find. Hang on to that one. If Virgil doesn’t get outrageously jealous.”

Maisie’s smile softened at the mention of my brother’s name. “He’s already outrageously jealous that a hot young man jumps to do my bidding. I told him he has nothing to worry about unless he continues to question me.” Her serious expression morphed into a laugh that sent us both into a fit of giggles.

“You’re a bigger badass,” I said, reaching for a slice. “Virgil can be intimidating when he wants to be.” He’d been doing it since we were kids and after all the shit went down with those priests, he’d stepped it up a notch. Or twenty.

“So can I,” she said after swallowing a mouthful. “Besides, I know something he doesn’t. Jared aspires to learn everything he can from me and then move on to *become* me. So his interest is about pleasing me, professionally. And then he leaves. Don’t tell Virgil.”

I mimicked locking my lips and then unlocked it to shove a slice of pepperoni deep dish inside. “Your secret is safe with me,” I assured her with a tomato-y grin.

Another bark of laughter escaped, and Maisie shook her head. “You really do need some more women in your life Kat, you’re an animal.”

“Thank you,” I growled and took another, bigger bite. We fell into a short silence while Maisie ate her pizza like a lady, and I scarfed mine like a teenage boy. But girl talk wasn’t the only reason I scheduled this lunch with my soon-to-be sister. “I heard Trevor Stone just checked in.”

Maisie froze, Italian beef sandwich about a breath away from her mouth, blue eyes wide with shock. “*Travis* Stone? The rich techy dude who creates the spy software?”

I nodded. “That’s the one.”

She laughed and shook her head, and then she laughed some more. It was almost insulting. “You are totally barking up the wrong tree, girl, but if you need to find out for yourself, I’ll introduce you.”

“You will?” I let Maisie think I wanted to hook up with the handsome techie because it would make both of our lives a little simpler for just a little bit longer.

“Of course, I will. He’s great. Funny and nice. Smart as hell too.”

I had to stifle the urge to roll my eyes at her matchmaking attempt. Instead, I smiled.

“Well you can’t blame a girl for trying, especially when even her loser brothers are falling...like flies.”

“You mean *falling in love*,” she corrected with a smile.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said and waved off her words, swallowing a bite around the lump of guilt at lying to my friend. It was a necessary evil. Since Maisie was already in the dark about the fight fixing because Ma didn’t want her to know, one more little lie wasn’t so bad. Right? Like they say, the second lie

comes easier than the first. “You’re so in love you haven’t even set a wedding date yet.”

“Not you too, Kat. Sadie drops the *most* heavy-handed hints. She’s worse than Peaches, who keeps sending me color schemes and centerpieces.” Maisie wiped her mouth and sat back, suddenly looking exhausted as hell. “Virgil and I are so damn busy that I’m tempted to just run down to the courthouse to get it over with. But I don’t. I know both moms would have the biggest shit fit the world has ever seen.”

“You’re not wrong about that. Luckily, there are these people called wedding planners who will do just about everything for you. All you have to do is pick what you want.”

It was the biggest perk of having money. I could always throw cash at people to take care of the tasks I didn’t want to or didn’t have time to deal with. “Just an idea.”

“Isn’t that a little too high class for a girl who grew up on a ranch in Texas?” she asked demurely.

“Maybe. If you were still that girl. You now work with the obscenely rich, the famous, and even the infamous, Maze. You are *that* kind of people. Get used to it. Besides, I’d hardly call that sprawling ranch and the other holdings, a farm.”

“You know what I mean,” she said just as her phone buzzed on the table. “Duty calls. If you come now, I’ll introduce you to Travis.”

At those words, I was on my feet, not concerned at all that from Maisie’s point of view I looked a little thirsty for male companionship. I let her believe it because it served my purpose, but the moment the intro was made, we both dropped the act.

Travis raised an eyebrow and said, “You don’t know much about me, do you, Ms. Ashby?”

“Call me Kat. I know you create a suite of surveillance apps and that the media calls you the Spy King.”

Travis smiled and motioned for me to take a seat in the living room of his penthouse suite. “You an investor or looking to catch a cheating boyfriend?”

“Is investing still an option?” I shook my head and held a hand out. “Wait, no. Not at the moment, but I’m definitely interested in that.”

“But not me, right?” He looked amused as he waited for me to answer.

“You’re gorgeous as fuck, but that’s not why I’m here.” I explained in as vague terms as I could my purpose in meeting him. More to the point, what I wanted from him.

“I need to find out if some people are who they say they are, and I need to dig into them in a way that can’t be traced. Period.”

Travis sat on the edge of his seat, elbows resting on his knees with a wide, charming smile. “Well now I’m bummed neither of us are interested, Kat. But yes, I can help. How long do you have?”

“As long as you can spare to explain it all. I’ll even throw in extra ringside seats for the fight, to say thank you.”

“Even better.” He stood and rubbed his hands together, suddenly looking more like the tech geek he was rather than the jet setting billionaire. “First a quick intro and then we can get to the fun stuff. The software. And the hardware.”

Those three hours flew by quickly and by the end I felt like I was more than capable of finding the information I was after without Cal’s help. And just to prove it, I spent the rest of the day in my office, digging into Madison’s sister, Molly. And the McLaughlins.

It was a damn productive day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TERRY

“Sorry I’m late!” Kat rushed into the dining room about seventy seconds after we’d sat down for Sunday dinner, which earned her a death glare from Sadie for her tardiness. “I got lost in a project I’m working on.” She flashed an ominous smile that made me curious about what she was up to.

“Something you want to share with us?” Jasper leaned forward, resting on his elbows with one brow arched in a question.

Bonnie sat quietly next to Cal. Too quietly, I thought.

“Nope,” Kat said simply and poured two and a half fingers of Irish whiskey, drinking half in one big gulp that, like most things where Kat Ashby was concerned, drew my attention. Something was up with her and she was determined to keep it to herself.

As usual, the conversation around the table centered on the various Ashby interests, from the casinos to the gaming rooms, whore houses, and of course, the fight.

“I’m very impressed with the hard work you all have put in to make sure this fight is a success,” Sadie spoke slowly, almost softly, as her gaze bounced around the table, landing on each person seated there. “One more week to go and then we can all relax.”

“Whatever *that* means,” Jasper grumbled from his spot to Sadie’s left, and finished off his second glass of whiskey. I

knew he was still worried about Ravager, even if he hadn't said a word about it.

Virgil let out a low growl from his seat to Sadie's right, Maisie beside him with a serene smile on her face, shot a glare at his brother.

"It means Rachel Cruz will be Emmett's first female champ, and the House of Ashby's first. When that happens, the rest of us can go back to focusing on the Rhymers *and* The Crusaders."

Leave it to Virgil to put everything in perspective.

"Exactly," Sadie said with a satisfied smile. "If she can keep that hunger and aggression that got her this far, we'll have a bona fide star on our hands."

"Too bad she's a half-second slow moving her head. Her opponent ain't called Speedy Morales for nothing."

Emmett glared at me and said, "You're just full of positive feedback, aren't you?"

I shrugged and cast another glance at Kat, who was still preoccupied with *something*.

"Being positive and holding their hands is your job. I just tell you what I see. What you do with that info, baby bro, is up to you. As always."

"In other news," Maisie began with wide, excited blue eyes, "Kat spent the afternoon with Travis Stone."

"The tech billionaire?" My question came out in an outraged growl that had Emmett smirking and Kat frowning.

"Yep," Maisie answered easily, not at all bothered by my tone. "I was sure Kat wasn't his type, but he had nothing but good things to say about you. All day."

Kat groaned and rolled her eyes as I tried to tamp down the angry jealousy that tore through me. I had no right to feel jealous or anything else where Kat was concerned. Stone was exactly the type of guy she ought to be with, rich, smart, and worldly.

“It wasn’t like that, as I already told you. I’m interested in his work and what man doesn’t like to talk about himself?” Her words were right but her tone was off, just slightly. I knew Kat well, knew her every expression, and she was lying. She could play it off to everyone else, but I knew she was lying and it only made me want to know *why*.

“Whatever you say,” she teased. “But Travis isn’t easy to impress, and he was more than impressed by you.”

Kat shrugged. “Well he’s a very smart man, and clearly he has excellent taste.” Her smile was teasing as it always was, but there was mischief in her eyes. “Are we going to have an Ashby wedding soon? Or is that just a way for you two to put off having babies?”

Virgil and Maisie sent a collective groan into the air, while Cal and Jasper laughed. “Thanks for that Kitty Kat.”

She mad-dogged Virgil for using her hated childhood nickname, drawing laughter from the entire table. “It was just a question,” she said innocently.

“A damn good question,” Sadie said as Thomas came in to clear the plates and serve dessert. “A wedding will be a nice distraction. Whenever it happens,” she said with a pointed look at Virgil and then at Maisie.

“All right, Ma. Got it.”

Maisie turned a look toward Kat. “I guess I’ll take that list of wedding planners now,” she said, shoulders relaxed in resignation. “Maybe Travis will be your plus one.”

“Maybe I’ll even bring him to the baby shower,” Kat shot back and stuck her tongue out. They were already like sisters, wedding or not.

Maisie stood and dropped her napkin. “Dinner was fantastic, Sadie, but I need to call my baby brother before it gets too late. See how things are in Texas.” She cast a regretful smile around the table. “I’ll keep you updated on wedding festivities,” she added as an afterthought.

Sadie nodded, brows arched when Virgil stood and put a hand to his fiancée’s waist. “I’ll be back,” he said with finality

before he and Maisie disappeared.

Jasper snorted. “Yeah, he’ll be back. In an hour. Make sure you shower first,” he called after Virgil with a satisfied grin.

Bonnie let out a yawn and Thomas was at her side in an instant, helping her to her feet before he escorted her from the dining room. “Good night everyone.”

“Sleep well Bonnie and baby,” Kat called after her with a genuine but worry-filled smile that had me wondering what that was all about.

Kat, it seemed, was full of secrets lately. I didn’t like it. She was such an open book most days, wore her every thought and feeling on her face.

“What up with her?” She directed the question at a distracted Cal, who shrugged.

“She’s pregnant Kat. What do you expect?”

“For you not to bite my head off for asking a simple question.” With a shake of her head, she turned away from Cal, dismissing whatever he’d been about to say in response.

She flashed a sincere smile and said, “Thanks for encouraging the fighters to do promo Em. It’s had the desired effect.” And then some lever deep inside tripped and she went into corporate drone mode, talking about social media numbers, Q score increases, and sales numbers. She finished with, “We’re all gonna make a lot of money.”

Emmett flashed an embarrassed smile as he stood. “I’m happy to help Kat. Thanks for dinner, Sadie. The roast beef was magnificent, but I have to get back to the gym. Rachel needs some help,” he said with a pointed glare my way.

The room fell silent until Emmett was gone, leaving the inner circle, so to speak, minus Virgil. “No need to retire to the office since we’re among family,” Sadie said as she stood to grab her silver cigarette case and another decanter of whiskey. I appreciated that Sadie considered me family. She always had and never treated me any differently than the rest of her kids. Good or bad.

“Jasper.”

He nodded at her unspoken command and finished his whiskey before he slid the glass her way. I did the same before Jasper gave his report.

“I spoke with Ravager and he was less than receptive to my request and belligerent to my order. He’s not happy that he’s not getting the belt.”

Shit. Emmett was right. I put in my two cents.

“Emmett said Rob’s been acting funny lately. Nothing specific, just jumpy and acting different. Em doesn’t think it’s just nerves.”

“Do you?” Jasper’s green eyes stared at me, detailing my expression to get the answers he was after.

“After hearing what you just said, no, I don’t.”

“Who is the new Lance? Get him on the phone now,” Sadie barked, but my phone was already in my hand and dialing.

“Provo, get to House of Ashby right now. Keep eyes on Ravager until I tell you to stop.” I listened and nodded, noting all eyes in the room were on me. Especially Kat’s. “Great. Keep me updated.”

Sadie flashed a smile at me. “I do love your efficiency, Terry.”

“Thanks. Provo will be there in about fifteen minutes.”

“Excellent.” Sadie nodded her approval. “Kat, anything on Mueller?”

Kat nodded at her mother and then shook her head, thick chocolate brown hair falling around her shoulders temptingly. My fingers itched to touch the silky looking waves. Then she shrugged and blew out a breath before finishing off her whiskey and sliding the glass toward Sadie.

“A girl came to see me. A young girl looking for her sister, Molly, who worked for a couple that worked for the Church.”

Jasper and Sadie both groaned at the mention of their second largest enemy. “How’d you find her?” Jasper asked.

“She found me. Actually, she found the couple her sister worked for the last time she’d heard from her, and then she found me because they checked into one of the Mueller Suites.” Kat let out a long breath and continued. “Between basic internet research and help from Travis Stone, I managed to confirm much of Madison’s story.”

Jasper frowned, but it was Sadie who looked most displeased. In fact she looked ready to kill.

“And the girl?” she asked, her words urgent. Demanding.

“That’s what brought Madison to Glitz. She hasn’t heard from her in a few months. She’s fairly sure the McLaughlins are the reason for the silence. I am too,” she said with a heavy heart. “They checked into the hotel as the Smith family.”

“Fuck.” Cal let out a low, visceral growl from his spot beside Kat and smacked the edge of the table with enough force to make the silverware rattle. “Send me everything you’ve found and I’ll do more digging.” He looked at Jasper, who nodded his approval because that was how things worked in this family.

“Good job, Kitty Kat, but you need to stop digging. Now. It’s too dangerous,” Jasper said.

Kat’s eyes sparkled with fury as she shook her head. “Fuck that, Jas. As long as they’re staying at *my* hotel, I need to know what the fuck they’re doing and that means watching them. Closely. I won’t let them take some kid to fulfill their sick fucking desires, not on my watch. I just fucking...won’t, Jas. I won’t.”

At Kat’s emotional display, Jasper looked at Sadie and they held a silent, minute-long conversation before she nodded. I understood their hesitation, their worry. Given everything the Ashby boys and even my own fucking brother had gone through at the hands of the fucking Church, I knew why this mattered so much. And I would help in any way I could, especially if it meant keeping Kat safe.

“Fine,” Jasper finally conceded. “Terry will keep an eye on them as much as needed, which shouldn’t be much since you

said they checked in alone.”

Kat nodded, her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“If they require more surveillance, he’ll let me know,” Jasper said, his gaze on mine to make sure I understood what was expected.

I nodded because there was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep Kat safe. “I’m on it,” I assured Jasper, Sadie and Kat.

“Good,” Sadie said and stood. “I’m going to my room to relax. Good night.” After Sadie’s farewell, the rest of us stood, ready to go our separate ways for the night.

Cal left first, eager to return to his pregnant girlfriend, or whatever she was to him these days. Kat filled her glass with more whiskey and headed out of the dining room, to the huge guest house she’d been living in since she returned from college.

Jasper grabbed my arm when we were alone, nodding to the staff to give us a moment of privacy. “We both know Kat isn’t gonna let this go, especially after everything that happened to us. Add on what happened to Maisie and Bonnie, and she’s feeling very protective over the women in her life, which now includes those two girls. Keep her safe.”

This was a different version of Jasper, the one I’d only seen half a dozen times over our decades-long friendship. He was vulnerable. Afraid.

“Of course, I’ll keep her safe, man.”

He nodded. “I know you will. You’re the only one I can trust with her Terry.”

I nodded, accepting the compliment for what it was. His trust in me, my love for the Ashby family, was the main reason my feelings for Kat could never come to anything. Would never come to anything.

It would kill my relationship with Jasper. And the rest of the Ashby family, which was effectively, *my* family.

Which is why I still kept my feelings for Kat under wraps. Even after all these fucking years.

CHAPTER NINE

KAT

Fight Night rolled around faster than I expected it to, especially considering I'd been living and breathing this day for the past six months. Maybe longer.

And the day had arrived. Finally. Specifically, the *night* had arrived and the preliminary fights had just finished. So far, the night had been a raging success for House of Ashby fighters, Emmett, and anyone smart enough to bet on Ashby.

Sadie and Vanessa sat in the front row of the arena where the Ashby team could see they had full family support. Next to Vanessa was Jasper and then Maisie and Virgil. Cal was there with a reluctant Bonnie, who had her face buried in her phone.

And of course Terry was around here...somewhere. He'd been around all week, lurking under the guise of additional security but I knew what he was really doing. Watching me. I knew because everywhere I turned, there was that nearly white-blond crop of hair, so high above the average man because he *wasn't* your average man.

Every damn corner I turned; there he was with those sparkling light blue eyes that always seemed to be in on a joke the rest of us weren't privy to. Yeah, he was everywhere. Laughing. Looking at me in ways that did strange things to me. Smiling at me like he wanted to devour me.

And worst of all? Terry made me laugh, which only made me want things I shouldn't.

Things I couldn't have.

Things I didn't have time to think about, especially not tonight.

"Ms. Ashby, they're ready for you now." I stood at the bottom of the steps that led to the octagon and gave the production assistant a nod. "Right this way." He held an arm out automatically and I took it, taking careful steps so millions of people didn't see me fall flat on my face.

"Thank you." I stood dead center of the octagon, looking up at all the lights with a smile on my face. In less than an hour, months of hard work would be over. The results would be final, whatever they were. And we were set to make millions.

So far, so good, I whispered to myself as the television crew did a final check of the lighting and sound.

From this spot everything on the other side of the cage was just a blur of lights, sounds and moving objects. No wonder fighters could tune out everything but the roar of excitement and focus on the battle in front of them. It was exhilarating, being right in the middle of the excitement of Fight Night.

The Emerald Isle Grand Arena had never looked better. With the casino workers, the performers, and the TV network, there were lights everywhere, casting bright white or multi-colored circles all around the fifteen thousand seat arena. Corporate sponsors had done an incredible job of making sure their logos were plastered everywhere since they'd paid a handsome fee for the privilege.

We estimated this night would reach upwards of fifty million people.

And billions of dollars.

Everything was perfect.

Just fucking perfect.

Except the strange feeling I had that I was being watched. All night I'd had this annoying sensation that I'd chalked up to nerves but here inside the ring, I felt vulnerable. Trapped. Hunted.

It made sense to feel watched since every ticket had sold out and all the comps had been claimed at will call. That meant fifteen-thousand fight fans and another thousand or so workers, vendors and suits milling about. *It's just nerves*, I tried to convince myself, shaking said nerves loose through my hands.

The presence of the TV crew was throwing me off. The pay-per-view deal meant more money than we'd ever got for one night, and that had to be what was getting to me.

It had to be that because I didn't have the time or the patience for it to be anything else.

"Thank you, Ms. Ashby." Another assistant or producer in a headset explained the pacing for the three headlining fights but I barely heard a word. "We'll get a commercial or two in between rounds," he said and I nodded as if I was paying attention.

I wasn't, because directly in my line of sight but probably a few hundred feet away, was Terry Manning. Decker out in a dark suit that made his blond hair blonder and his tan skin glow. He looked hot as hell. Way too hot for my already scattered, restless brain. In his usual getup of jeans and a blazer, Terry was irresistible. In that suit, I felt the edges of my lace panties start to smolder.

"Fuck."

"Excuse me?"

"I said fuck," I blurted out to the producer and turned away from that knowing, teasing smirk and back to the person talking. "Just thinking out loud. Anything else I need to know?"

"Uh, no."

"Great. Thanks." The first fight would start soon and I needed to check on a few more things. Taking my time on the steps, I didn't see Travis Stone until it was too late.

"Kat, you're looking beautiful and harried this evening."

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face because Travis really was a likable guy. "Thank you, Travis, that was almost a full compliment."

He shrugged. "I'm sure you get plenty as it is. May I escort you to your seat?"

I shook my head and took his arm. "I'll escort you, but I still have a few more things to do before fists start to fly."

His laugh was deep and full bodied, like a man who laughed a lot. "The most incredible part of watching a fight this close up. Barbaric and invigorating."

I tilted my head up at him and laughed. "You are a strange man, Travis."

"From you, I'll take that as a compliment." To the outside observer we looked like two attractive people flirting, but Travis really was just a fun guy to be around. "I know you have to rush off," he said, "but I have an idea for a fight app that I would love to run by you, when the time is right."

"Yeah? You have all my contact info and even if you didn't, I'm sure you could get it, Spy King."

At my words, Travis threw his head back and laughed, drawing stares from all around us. "I look forward to it, Kat."

"Enjoy the fight. Maisie is just over there if you have any questions, or strange needs." I gave a little wave and then rushed off to make sure the doors were unlocked for the big splashy entrance of the final six fighters of the night.

Time continued to fly and I couldn't shake the feeling I was being watched, which was ridiculous because I was surrounded by tens of thousands of people. Some of them were bound to be staring, but no matter how hard I tried to convince myself of that, I didn't believe it. But each time I turned to spot someone, there was no one there. At least no one who stood out.

"You're doing too much, Princess." Terry's unexpected appearance actually startled me. Okay, he scared me enough that my heart raced with an all too familiar sensation. Fear.

“Whoa, you all right?” he said when he saw my reaction.

The hot singe of his hands on my shoulders settled me instantly, which should have pissed me off, but I was too relieved to give a damn.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” My shoulders fell in frustration. “I’m fine, Terry. Did you need something?”

“Not specifically. You looked a little alarmed and I want to know why.” Gone was the easygoing man who’d flashed that charming smile at me. In his place was the badass, sometimes enforcer I’d known since I was a girl. Arms folded over his broad chest; Terry’s icy blue eyes stared at me expectantly just as the bell sounded for the lightweight belt fight.

“Well?”

“Who says I’m alarmed?”

“Me. You went pale inside the cage and you’ve been looking over your shoulder every two fucking minutes. Somebody following you, Kat?”

“You tell me since you’re watching so closely.” My heart raced and I wanted to kick my own ass for not being honest when Terry was one of the few men here that I knew wasn’t watching me. At least not like that.

At my words, his shoulders relaxed just a little. “No one I could spot, beyond Stone and a few guys checking you out.”

His honesty surprised me. “Well shit, Stalker, I was hoping for more from you.” My attempt at lighthearted humor felt forced even to my own ears. Terry’s full lips didn’t even twitch with amusement.

The bell ending round one sounded, startling a gasp out of me.

“Kat, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. I don’t know, and I have to check on a few things.” Just as the round two bell chimed, I turned away, but Terry grabbed my arm and sent a fire roaring through my blood. “Terry!”

“Kat, I just want to help.”

“Then let me do my job.” The strength of my words was ruined by the loud uproar of the crowd that yanked a loud scream from the depths of my stomach.

Terry’s grip tightened on my shoulders and turned me toward the cage where the Ashby lightweight stood above the unconscious figure of his opponent, arms raised in victory.

“Win number one secured,” he whispered in my ear and I did my best to suppress the shiver his warm breath on my neck caused.

“Oh. Good.” That was good news. Excellent news. Nothing to worry about. “That means Rachel’s fight is next.”

“Stop worrying, Kat. She’s got this fight in the bag. The bantamweight belt is hers.”

I nodded at his words of encouragement, annoyed that it was working to calm my frayed nerves. “Thank you, Terry. Seriously I don’t know what’s going on but...thanks. I have to go.”

He let me go without a word, but I knew Terry. He was a tenacious as they came when he cared.

There was nothing to be done anymore, not when the music began for Rachel Cruz’s opponent. The only doors that opened to the arena were the ones each fighter came from and those were protected by Ashby Security. So, with nothing else to do, I made my way to my seat. And Travis.

“Enjoying the bloodshed?”

His smile lit up and he nodded, his golden wheat colored hair bouncing boyishly. “Much more than I thought I would. Thanks for the ticket.”

“Thanks for the lesson. It was worth both tickets.”

Travis laughed again and stood when the familiar bass of Rachel’s entry music, a popular rap song, blasted through the speakers.

“I’ll remember that for next time. If I had known it would be so fun, I would’ve asked for both.”

The fight got underway and all conversation stopped as we focused on the female warriors in the cage. Rachel was in good form, focused on her strikes and leg kicks, swiftly avoiding the takedown attempts by her opponent, a fighter put up by Ronan. She was good, but not good enough. Had more anger than skill and Rachel took full advantage of it.

Rounds one and two finished in a blur. Rachel, the clear winner without any interference. The smile on her face as round three began was priceless, and I made a note to track down every photographer in the building to get that image. It would make an excellent promo photo.

Round three went to Ronan's fighter once she got Rachel flat on her back, but round four introduced the world to Rachel, the beast.

"Holy shit, that woman is amazing!" Travis clapped and whistled loudly, an instant fan.

Just as round five got underway, the feeling of being watched returned. I stood, looked around the arena casually at thousands of unfamiliar faces, a few hundred semi-familiar ones, but no one looked at me like they wanted me dead.

With one minute to go my phone buzzed in my pocket. The number was unfamiliar but something told me to answer. "Hello?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and I was about to hang up when I heard a faint voice. "Hello."

I looked at the screen again and frowned. The voice was too low and the crowd too loud, so I ended the call and turned back to the fight just as Rachel choked out Ronan's fighter for a submission with twenty-eight seconds left in the match.

"Holy shit!" came out of me in admiration. It was a thing of beauty, and I couldn't stop the thrill of excitement that washed over me. Rachel was a kid who'd come from the streets but she worked hard to get where she was, and now she was a champion.

"Wow!" Travis' shocked grin turned on me. "Is that a look of pride I see, Kat?"

“Well Rachel *is* a House of Ashby fighter. And she’s damn good.”

“So good! Think I can get an intro after the fight?”

“Absolutely. I’ll talk to Maisie, but right now I’ve got to put on a smile for the cameras. Later.”

After five minutes of photos with the new champ, it was time for the main event. Rob “Ravager” Regan against another of Ronan’s fighters, Perry “Choir Boy” Hill, an aging superstar who was part of Ma’s plans for Rob’s career. If he fell in line. And right now, that was a big goddamn if.

As soon as Rob’s fight got underway, my nerves returned tenfold and I could hardly focus on the main event. Instead, my gaze lingered on Terry and his spot right up front where he and Jasper flanked Ma. His gaze never left mine, not the entire fight. Each time I looked at him, his blue eyes seared into mine.

Rounds one and two went to Rob while Choir Boy took round three with an early takedown that let him dominate on the mat. Round four was split, I was pretty fucking sure, despite how hard Rob fought to take it.

“Asshole,” I grumbled during the break between the final round. Ravager was determined to fuck this up which would be unfortunate because Sadie wouldn’t take it well, and that meant it wasn’t just his career he stood to lose.

My phone rang again and this time I picked it up right away, walking backward down the hill so I could at least watch the final five minutes of the match. “Hello?”

“Kat?” It was Madison and she sounded hurt or in distress. “Help me. Please.” I turned away from the fight right away and walked as fast as my legs would carry me toward the nearest exit.

“Madison. What’s wrong? I can barely hear you.” She didn’t say anything else, but the line didn’t go dead right away, instead I heard sounds of a struggle, maybe a fight.

“Madison? Hello?”

She said nothing and I looked up, noticing the door was about one hundred feet away and I willed my feet to move faster as I cursed my four-inch heels that, while they looked incredible, were not made for running.

Frustrated, I kicked off the expensive stilettos and scooped them up with my free hand so I could run out of the arena and to the parking lot. It was a three-minute trip, at least. Two without the heels but only if I ended the call.

Which I couldn't.

CHAPTER TEN

TERRY

I had my eyes on Kat from the moment she'd gotten that call during the bantamweight fight—all night actually. She stuck out in a deep blue dress that was modest compared to some of the outfits the other women wore, but still she was the most beautiful woman there. Something was definitely up with her. The call didn't frighten her, though, but it damn sure worried her. And *that* worried me.

During Ravager's fight, I watched her like a hawk, certain the secrets she was keeping had something to do with why she was so fucking jumpy. The fifth round had barely started when she got another call.

As soon as Kat's long shapely legs started up the aisle, I was right behind her without a word to Jasper. Or Sadie. Kat walked with confidence even when she was distracted.

Now that Kat was moving while the rest of the crowd stayed in place, it was easier to notice who noticed her. Aside from the lecherous stares of a few of the bros who couldn't decide if her ass or the fight was more engaging, there was one man other than me tracking Kat.

The same asshole from the House of Ashby parking lot.

And Kat was completely oblivious as she kicked off her shoes, picked them up, and started for the door at a dead run. She tapped frantically on her phone, dialing and re-dialing, I guessed, as she made her way to the nearest exit. Finally, she

glanced over her shoulder and what I saw there nearly stopped my heart.

Fear. I didn't know what that call was about but now she was terrified. And she hadn't even noticed she had two tails climbing up her back.

With the audience crowding into the aisles, Kat's path got more blocked by the second. Yet, she pushed and elbowed her way through, shoulders set in stiff determination. She made her way to the door with two minutes remaining in the first round and the collective gasp or maybe it was a groan of the crowd, stopped her.

She looked up from her phone and turned to look at the big screen overhead. Anger colored her skin bright red, and though I was reluctant to do it, I took my gaze off her for just a second to see our worst fucking nightmare come true.

Choir Boy was laid out on the mat, KO'd in the fifth fucking round.

"Fucking Ravager piece of shit." He'd have to be dealt with. Sooner rather than later, but right now that asshole had gotten closer to Kat. Too close.

In seconds he was at her side, smoothy wrapping a hand around her waist and pushing her through the door with his body. No aggression. Nothing that would draw any stares if you weren't paying attention.

Too bad for that motherfucker, I was watching.

Taking advantage of the distraction caused by the knockout, I ran through the doors and the first thing I heard was Kat's shout.

"No!" cut through the air.

I ran to help her, but I should have known that Kat could handle herself. I winched for the guy as she shoved a palm up into his nose with all of her strength. It just wasn't enough. "I said no!"

By now, I had picked up speed and gained on them, so I grabbed the asshole by the neck and pulled hard enough to

send him to the floor, which gave me just enough time to land a few solid blows, drawing blood from his nose. I leaned over and snarled into his face, “Who are you?”

He smiled and produced a blade, slicing it across my arm in a downward motion. “Fuck you, asshole.”

“Wrong answer.” I punched him again and looked up at Kat. “You know this guy?”

“No, and I really don’t have time for this. Can you handle it?” She was scared and frustrated, and in typical Kat fashion, annoyed.

I kept my forearm across his throat and my other hand grasped the hand with the knife. “I’m not your maid, princess.”

A low growl came from Kat as she stepped primly into her fuck me stilettos and walked over to us. “Oh for fuck’s *sake* Terry, I *know* that. We grew up together you idiot.”

“Not the time, Kat.” I shook my head and turned back to the man. “Who do you work for?”

He smiled again and struggled to move the arm holding the knife. “Fuck. You.”

Kat knelt down beside him, probably giving him a view of whatever little lacy thing she had under that blue dress. “Look asshole, I do *not* have the time for this. Why are you following me?” she said. Letting her lady bits hang out didn’t bother her, so I kept my mouth shut and my eyes trained on him.

“Maybe I just wanted a taste of the Ashby princess.” He sneered.

Kat looked up at me, her patience close to snapping. “Madison called. She needs help. I have to go.”

“I’m coming with you.” There was no way I would let her run off to some shitty neighborhood alone.

“Seriously?”

I nodded, letting her know that this wasn’t part of our usual banter.

“Fine.” She yanked the knife from his hand and stabbed it in his neck with all her strength. My mouth gaped open as blood squirted out of his neck across the cement floor.

Kat stood and asked, “Can we go now?”

Holy fuck, I didn’t know whether to be afraid or turned on, but dammit, I wanted her even more than ever at that moment. I looked back at the guy as blood poured out of his neck. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I grabbed Kat by the arm, locked the chain on the exit we used and pulled out my phone. “Jasper.”

“What the fuck man? Where are you? Did you see this shit?” The outrage and the anger made his voice vibrate down the line.

“How the *fuck* could we miss it,” Kat grumbled, practically stomping toward the exit that led to the parking lot.

I grabbed Kat’s arm to stop her and pushed her up against the wall, placing a finger to her lips to shut her up.

“Jasper, I need you to focus. That guy who came after Kat before just tried again. He’s bleeding out in the west hall, just past the utility closet. I chained the door but the others are unlocked.”

“What? What the fuck?” Jasper hated when the world didn’t bend to his will, and tonight the universe was testing his strength with an endless string of counter punches.

“Something happened to the girl, Madison. Kat’s going whether I go with her or not.”

“Damn right I am,” she said after biting my finger.

Jasper sighed. “You’re a pain in my ass tonight, Kat. Keep her safe, Terry.”

“Will do,” I told him and ended the call. “All right, Lady Katherine, after you.”

Her blue eyes glared at me for a hot second before she marched off again. “Keep up, Terry or get left behind.”

I smiled and shook my head as I hurried after Kat. It seemed to be a theme in what existed of our current relationship, but like the idiot I was, I opted for keeping up because getting left behind by Kat Ashby wasn't something I was ready for.

Not yet anyway.

Probably not ever if I was honest with myself.

"I damn well will keep up with a woman who kills with such ease," I said and flashed a smile as I caught up with her. "I'm kind of turned on right now."

She groaned and walked faster, daring me to keep up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAT

“I killed that guy.”

Sure, in the moment the move was easy enough, especially at the thought of Madison in trouble and my hurry to get to her combined with the fury of what Ravager had done. Or *not* done.

But now, five minutes later sitting behind the steering wheel while the engine idled, my hands shook and my heart raced so loud, I could *hear* the blood rushing through my veins.

“I killed that guy,” I groaned and smacked the steering wheel. “I should have saved that anger for that Goddamn Ravager.”

Terry leaned back on the headrest and laughed. “First of all, that guy had it coming. Second, Ravager will get what’s coming to him, be sure of that.”

His smile reassured me, but I was too focused on what I did to that guy and Madison to be charmed by Terry’s *oh so charming* grin.

“Yeah, I know,” she said, still surprised by her own power. “It just took me by surprise is all.”

“Want me to drive?” The question came so easily, so casually as if he didn’t care either way, but the gesture warmed me.

“No, but thanks.” When my hands were steady enough to grip the wheel, I put the car in drive and took off toward the motel to meet Oliver.

“It *was* hot,” Terry said out of nowhere. “Just in case you were wondering.”

My lips curled into a pleased smile. “I wasn’t.”

Oliver waited just in front of Madison’s hotel room, which was wrecked, as if a struggle or a fight had occurred. I was comforted by the fact the struggle didn’t look deadly.

“There’s no blood. That’s a good sign,” Terry said in a casual tone that underscored the way his jaws clenched in anger.

“Madison?” I knew it was pointless to call out to her. The motel room had a bathroom and a bedroom with a small table, if I couldn’t see her, she wasn’t there. “Madison, it’s Kat Ashby.” Apparently, my brain wasn’t in the mood for logic at that moment.

“Maybe she just left.” I knew Terry was just trying to be helpful and I appreciated it. Mostly.

“She didn’t. Her voice when she called, it was terrified. Genuinely terrified and she is a tough young lady.”

“Tough maybe, but still young, Kat. Remember how tough you thought you were at that age?”

I nodded, and a small grin turned the corners of my mouth up at just how tough I thought I was back then.

“But I had the safety and comfort of badass brothers to back me up, and Madison wants to find her sister. She wanted to know whether to keep searching for Molly or not, and I’m the key to that. At least she thinks so.”

Madison had no idea how right she was, but I couldn’t tell her everything if I couldn’t keep her safe.

“Why do you care so much?”

Terry’s question stung. “You mean why does the *Ashby Princess* give a shit about some homeless girl?”

The question sounded as bitter and acidic as it felt on my tongue, but I thought he knew me better than that.

“She came to me for help, and I know exactly what these people are capable of *and* the damage they leave behind. The

lasting effect of their sick fucking acts isn't just limited to the victims, but everyone around them.”

I paused. I needed to suck in a deep calming breath. “If I can stop one person from going through that hell, I will. Otherwise, what’s the point of all this fucking money and influence?”

“I didn’t mean anything by—”

“Shut up, Terry,” I said and walked to the other side of the bed. I knelt down to see if there were any clues about who had taken Madison. Or why. Any clues that could help find her were what I focused on instead of another humiliating reason to get over my stupid attraction to my brother’s best friend.

“I’ll check the bathroom.”

I nodded absently at Terry’s words, more focused on kneeling in a pencil skirt without putting my hands on the motel bed. I reached under the bed, hoping my fingertips didn’t happen upon a used condom, or worse. But then I felt it, something hard and plastic.

“Her phone!” Skirt be damned! I flattened myself against the floor with a grunt and reached until the phone was in my palm.

“What?” Terry stood at the foot of the bed, blond brows dipped into a frown.

“Her phone. Madison left it under the bed.” I held it up like a trophy, keeping a death grip on it as Terry helped me up.

“Thanks,” I said, flashing a quick look of gratitude up at him and ignoring the rush of excitement that stole through me at his touch.

“Anytime.”

Yeah, right. I turned back to the phone instead of my ridiculous attraction to a man who thought I was a stuck up rich bitch who only cared about herself. Madison was what mattered right now. The screen was cracked but I tapped it anyway, relieved when it lit up.

“It’s working.” I heard the relief in my voice and looked over at Terry.

He looked at me like he thought more of me than he did five minutes ago, and it reminded me how easily men lied. People in general, but men especially.

“You get that for her?”

I nodded. “I did. So I could let her know if I found anything. Look, the recorder app is still running.” I stopped and saved the recording and then replayed it.

There were two voices, a man and a woman.

“We can’t leave her here. Who knows who she’s talked to?”
The woman’s voice was unfamiliar but I suspected it belonged to Donna McLaughlin.

Then the man spoke. *“We have two options, Montana or Texas.”*

“Texas is closer to the border and bad things happen to girls all the time down there.”

Her words were ominous, but the meaning was clear. It would be better for them, whoever they were, if Madison was dead.

The man grunted, the sound of Madison’s terrified breathing loud in the phone’s speaker.

“She could make a lot more money in Chicago. Not to mention Mueller is a bishop over there.”

Mueller. Another connection to the Church and Rhymer.

“It has to be the McLaughlins and Mueller,” I insisted. I didn’t need Terry to believe me or confirm it; I was sure Mueller was behind Madison’s kidnapping.

“I gotta make a call,” Terry said and stomped off, giving me time to listen to the recording again while he checked in with Jasper.

Since they didn’t know Madison was recording, the man and woman spoke freely, but the end of the recording grew faint because the door was open, and they were farther away from the bed.

“Drop her at The Last Stop with any driver heading south. Get rid of her.”

What followed was what I feared, sounds of Madison struggling against someone stronger, probably bigger too. And angry.

I knew exactly where The Last Stop was, at the crossroads of three different interstate highways that could get you to Mexico in just a few hours. With the phone clutched in my hand, I headed for the door just as Terry stepped inside.

“I talked to Jasper,” he said, but I cut him off.

“I know where they took her. I’m going after her. Oliver will give you a ride back to the arena.” I didn’t stop to get his reaction, at least not until his hand flew out and wrapped around my wrist, giving me no choice but to stop.

He flashed that panty-melting smile at me, and I knew, without a doubt, he felt my pulse jumping and knew he did that to me. He gave me a long look and said, “I don’t think so, Kitty Kat. You go, I go.”

Because it was his job, I reminded myself, *not because he gives a shit*. Terry wasn’t a bad guy, not by any stretch of the imagination, but I was just his best friend’s bitchy little sister. Not a desirable woman, at least not a woman he desired. Nope. Friend zone.

Best to keep that in mind moving forward, so I yanked my wrist out of his grasp, grateful he let go so quickly.

“Fine. Let’s go, Stalker.” His chuckle sounded behind me, but my legs moved quickly, knowing Madison and her captors had at least a forty-minute head start on us.

“Hurry it up,” I snapped, “she could be on the fifteen freeway headed toward Tijuana by now.”

“Go as fast as you want, Kitty Kat. I got the keys,” Terry said, amusement in his voice which both turned me on and pissed me off.

“I’m glad this is amusing to you,” I growled and stood beside the passenger door, tapping my foot impatiently.

Terry’s laughter pissing me off by the second.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TERRY

Kat said nothing to me for the first thirty minutes of our trip to rescue the tough girl who'd gotten to her. She kept her eyes on the road ahead, arms folded and a mostly blank expression. But the way her dark brows dipped low and her lips pinched tight told me just how pissed off she was.

Big time.

Again.

"You're worried."

"No shit. A little girl has been kidnapped by people who specialize in sexually assaulting children and then disposing of them. What kind of monster would—never mind, I know the answer. Me."

She shook her head and grumbled under her breath about blind assholes.

"I never said you were a monster, Kat."

She turned to me, fury blazing in her blue eyes even with the starless night sky darkening everything around us.

"No, you didn't, you only *implied* it. Anyway it doesn't matter," she went on. "The point is I didn't invite you to come on this trip Terry so please don't question *my* motives. Please."

"I'm not. I want to know why you're so worried because this isn't just that." She might think I was just some dumb idiot, but I knew her better than she realized.

“Because I did some digging into these people and they’re awful. The worst kind of motherfuckers around. They do terrible shit to children and pay them off, kill them, or ship them off to parts unknown.” She shook her head and turned back to stare out the passenger side window. “The haunted look in Madison’s eyes when she talked about looking for Molly, the worry and fear that she’s already dead. It was heartbreaking, and I won’t let her down. I won’t.”

The steely determination was exactly the same as it had been when she’d fought Sadie and Jasper about going to college in California instead of UNLV where she’d be close to home. Safe.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

A small gasp escaped, and I felt her stare burning the side of my face. “Why are you sorry?”

My lips curled into a grin because Kat couldn’t just accept the apology. She always needed more. “For implying you were something you’re not. But in my defense, you do go out of your way to play the role of Rich Bitch Who Doesn’t Give A Flying Fuck.”

She smirked. “And you should know me better than that. Then again, why should you?”

Because you’re mine? Because I’ve been in love with you since we were kids?

But she wasn’t mine, and she never would be for about a million different reasons. The most important reason was that she was Jasper’s sister, and he trusted me with her. “I think I do. And I’m starting to see where I was wrong about you.”

The bitchy thing was just a part she played for the outside world, which made me feel stupid for not realizing it sooner.

“You don’t have to say that. Just...let’s get to Madison, okay?”

“We still have about fifty miles, so why don’t you tell me why you care so much about this particular girl and her sister.”

She slid me a look that was nothing but a side eye. “You know why.”

“I *think* I know why, but unless you tell me I have no way of knowing if I’m right.” This was a personal issue for both of us, though no one ever really talked about it.

Our actions, individually and as a whole, said a lot about the stains and scars that particular brand of abuse had left on all of us.

Kat sighed and turned in her seat again, big blue eyes so serious as they took in my face, assessing my sincerity.

“Madison tracked down the McLaughlins and when she realized where they were staying, she came to me because she thought I was in on this whole trafficking thing. Once she realized who I was and that I’m trying to stop child trafficking, she asked for my help. I actually give a damn about her and her sister, even though I don’t have to. When she was in trouble later, she called me. *Me, Terry.*”

The uptight, incredibly competent businesswoman was gorgeous and beyond appealing, but this passionate firebrand, ready to jump into the fire to help out a kid she barely knew? She was fucking irresistible. I nodded.

“And we’ll find her Kitty Kat. You have my word.”

The look of relief and the flash of a smile that played around the edges of her lush mouth had my foot pressing harder on the gas. Time was a key factor because there were a few direct routes straight to Mexico which meant we had to find her before the driver left the truck stop.

An hour later, we pulled into the giant monstrosity of a truck stop and Kat jumped from the car and made her way around to the back of the car. When I caught up to her, the crazy woman had traded those sexy as fuck stilettos for a pair of pink ankle socks and white sneakers. “What? You’ve never heard of a wardrobe change?”

I shrugged. “Uh, not right at this moment. In a truck stop parking lot.”

“Sneakers are made for running, Terry and I need to be able to do that,” she said and pulled a nickel Walther PPK from her

purse, attaching the holster to the back of her shirt. “And this is because pencil skirts are a bitch to run in.”

I scratched my head. “I thought that was a dress.”

Kat rolled her eyes with a playful smile. “It’s a good thing you’re not a girl,” she said and unceremoniously yanked her shirt from the skirt all the way around, flashing a glimpse of toned, pale flesh. “Ready?”

“Yeah. Stay close.”

Kat shook her head. “We don’t have time for you to play overprotective big brother Terry. I’ll go inside and charm the truckers and tourists inside. You go talk to the guys eating in their rigs or buffing their trailers.”

She didn’t wait for me to give her all the reasons that was a bad idea, instead Kat flounced inside with an extra swing in her hips.

I watched for a beat longer than I should and made my way to the first row of trucks preparing to leave the stop. The first three guys hadn’t seen shit and even if they had, they weren’t inclined to share.

“Hey, you seen this girl?”

The guy shook his head with a shrug. “Sorry man, but there are a few lot lizards inside if you’re interested.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I grunted and moved on to three more truckers who hadn’t seen Madison. “Hey man, have you seen this girl?” At his skeptical look, I sighed. “She’s the kid sister of a friend who hired me to find her.”

The trucker scratched his goatee and shook his head. “Saw her about ten minutes ago. Some old dude tried to sell her. Said I could drop her wherever I was headed next. That’s some cold shit. She’s just a kid. I told him to fuck off.”

“Thanks. Any idea where they went?”

“Nah. To the other side is my guess, fewer cops and less visibility from the road if you get my drift.”

I did. “Thanks,” I told him and plowed my way through another half dozen no’s and two more men who’d passed on the offer of transporting or buying a teenage girl.

“Terry.” Kat rushed over to me and put one hand on my shoulder, which I tried to ignore in favor of the rapid words spilling from her lips.

“Slow down.”

Kat sucked in a deep breath, frustration illuminating her blue eyes under the yellow lights of the parking lot. “I got a room number from one of the waitresses.”

She was so excited I didn’t want to be the one to wipe that look from her face, but we had to be careful. “Madison is there?”

She nodded. “Said the guy she works for was willing to pay good money for a few hours of work and once I convinced her I wasn’t looking to home in on her side hustle, she gave me the room number. Said the new girl was there now when I told her my man liked ’em young.”

I glared at her cheeky smile. “Gross, Kitty Kat.”

She shrugged and smiled but the way her gaze kept tracking the rooms behind us proved she was still worried as hell. “We got the room number, Terry. That’s what matters. Let’s go.”

She grabbed my hand and tugged me towards the flat two-story building that held about a dozen rooms.

As soon as we reached the designated room, I yanked Kat back until she was behind me, safe. Protected.

“Door’s open,” I whispered before she could chew me out for manhandling her.

Instead, behind me, I heard the snap of a holster and the sound of her gun being prepared to shoot. *That’s my girl.* At the threshold, she reached around me and pushed the door open, leaving me free to sweep the place.

“Fuck me, it’s empty,” she growled.

It was empty but it hadn't been for long. "The cigarette butt is still smoking. We didn't miss them by much," I told her even though I knew nothing but finding the girl unharmed would ease Kat's guilt and worry.

"We have to keep looking, Terry. I have to find her."

How could I deny her anything when she set those big blue eyes on me like I was some kind of goddamn hero? I was nobody's hero, just a man in a position to help. A man who would do just about anything to help this particular woman. "We will, Kitty Kat. I swear."

Her shoulders relaxed and Kat's lips pulled into a half-hearted smile.

"That's the only reason I'm letting you get away with calling me that dreadful name. Come on, moonlight is burning."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KAT

Three fucking hours later and we were no closer to picking up Madison's scent, which put me in a terrible mood. It was well after midnight and lack of sleep and the long drive was getting to me.

"There's another number programmed in here," I told Terry and I could hear the excitement in my voice as I tapped it and listened to it ring. And ring. And fucking ring.

"She's not answering."

Terry snorted. "She's not on vacation."

I knew I shouldn't have taken offense, but immediately I stiffened at his mocking, condescending tone, refusing to let Terry see just how much his words bothered me. Right. "Of course, she's not on vacation. She was kidnapped and she's probably dead already."

A depressing thought I refused to think about until I was staring at cold, lifeless eyes.

"I didn't mean any—"

"Forget it. Obviously, they're not gonna let her answer the damn phone."

It was time to admit when I was beat and call in reinforcements.

"Hey Cal, I need your help for a quick minute, maybe two." He was the most brilliant person I knew, especially regarding

techy shit and my kid brother was always willing to help.

The line was silent for so long that I thought maybe the connection had dropped. “Hello? Cal?”

“Cal is busy.” Bonnie’s voice was stiff but I ignored it in favor of more pressing business.

“Right, sorry Bonnie. Can you get him please? It’s kind of an emergency.”

“I *said* he’s busy,” she said much more slowly and with a whole lot of fucking attitude.

“And I said put Cal on the fucking phone, Bonnie! I don’t have time for your pregnancy horse shit.” She started to say something else but I was too fired up and too pissed off to listen. “I’m looking for a little girl who was kidnapped by your church perverts. Do you think you could possibly have *my* brother call me back when he’s *not* busy?”

I hung up before I said something I might have to apologize for later and dialed Sadie.

“Kat? Where the hell are you? It’s crazy around here and you’ve disappeared.”

“I guess Jasper’s been too busy to explain,” I said and gave my mother a quick rundown of the past few hours. “She called twice, the final time right before Ravager fucked us royally. I assume he’s being dealt with?”

I could hear my mother’s hot breath through the phone. “As soon as we find that bastard, he’s mine,” she growled, her voice vibrating with anger. Rage. “Any luck finding the girl?”

“Not yet. We just missed her at two different stops. I was hoping Cal could do his computer wizardry to track a number but Bonnie’s being a real bitch right now. What’s up with her?”

She’d been quiet at dinner lately, but things were too crazy in my life right now to worry about a sullen pregnant woman.

Sadie sighed. “I’m not sure. Maybe it’s pregnancy hormones. Maybe it’s everything else on top of being pregnant. I’ll keep an eye on her; just tell me what you need.”

I couldn't help but smile at how Sadie always managed to be top dog of a huge empire while also playing the part of doting mother. She was a fucking hero in my book, and one day I hoped to be just as bad ass. "I just need to track down Madison and then we'll come home so I can deal with...everything else."

A sympathetic sigh sounded down the line and that one sound nearly unraveled my resolve. "It's not your fault, Kat."

"I know," I said. "But I still need to help her and to do that, I have to find her."

"You can't save everyone, Katherine, dear, but I know you know that, so I'll just say this. Be safe. Please." There was a commotion on the other end of the line and then shouting. And then Sadie.

"Lord have mercy. What happened to him?" My gaze slid to Terry, who'd been pretending not to listen. The phone crashed to the floor and there was mayhem on the other end of the line. It was pure fucking chaos and my heart beat so loud it muted everything else, even Terry's words.

Please don't let it be one of my brothers. It was the closest I'd ever come to praying but I figured the good the Ashbys did in the world had to outweigh all the bad.

"Emmett! Who did this?" Virgil's voice came through loud and clear and I tapped the speakerphone button. A few smacks sounded loud in the quiet of the car and then Virgil's voice again. "Emmett just give me a fucking name, man. A name!"

"Ma!" I shouted, my voice frantic and worried. "Pick up the damn phone!"

Someone picked up the phone about a minute later. "Kat?"

"Maisie, thank fuck. What's going on?"

Maisie sniffled, and I braced myself for bad news. "Someone beat up Emmett. Really bad, Kat. He looks...bad."

Shit. I turned to Terry again and the dark look on his face said he was ready to head back to Glitz, with or without me.

"He's all right, though? Is the doctor there?"

“On his way,” Maisie said through her own tears. “He’s just real bloody and bruised, not stabbed or shot or anything. Virgil said Terry is with you?”

“Yeah, he heard everything.”

Maisie gasped. “Shit, I’m so sorry, Terry. We’ll take care of him.”

“Thanks, Maze.” His voice was tight with tension, with emotions he’d never let show in front of me or anyone else.

“Keep me posted,” I told her and ended the call. Terry’s fists were balled tight, and I knew what had to be done. “Take the car and head back to Glitz. I’ll rent one.”

“First of all, I’d never find a place open at one in the morning. But more importantly, you know I can’t just leave you here after what just happened. Not to mention what happened last night.”

But that didn’t change the fact that he was worried about Emmett. I was too, but Emmett would be fine as soon as the doctor fixed him up.

“You’re worried and you want to see that Em’s all right with your own eyes. Go.”

His lips pulled into a crooked smile and he laid a hand on my shoulder. “I appreciate the thought, Kat, but I’m good.”

There it was, that damn condescending tone. Again. “I appreciate the thought, but I don’t need a damn babysitter.”

But that argument would never get any traction because his loyalty was to Jasper first and foremost. Probably forever.

“Fine. Let’s go back to Glitz, then.” I’d have to double back which would decrease my chances of finding Madison, but I had to do this for Terry. “I said let’s go,” I told him. I fastened my seatbelt before I turned my gaze out the window, hoping against hope that I spotted Madison in some passing truck or running along the side of the highway.

I’ll find you, Madison, I promise.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TERRY

The drive back to Glitz was quiet and tense. My thoughts were mostly on Emmett. I knew Jasper and Sadie would make sure he was well taken care of, and more than that, they would spearhead the retaliation with the same level of energy I would. But he was my baby brother, and I wanted to be there.

But I couldn't, not really. Kat might *say* she was fine with returning to Glitz, and on some level, she was. Emmett was a brother to her, too. In almost every sense of the word, and she cared about him a lot.

No one was prouder of his military service or his fight record than Kat, and the fact that she was willing to lose hours to get me back to him, meant the world to me. The whole fucking world. It only made me want her more. If that was even possible.

Still, I knew Kat better than she realized. I knew the moment we were back in Glitz, she'd slide behind the steering wheel and head right back this way to save the girl.

The girl.

“Maisie said the doctor patched Emmett up, just bruises and scrapes, maybe some bruised ribs. Mostly he looks worse than he feels.”

“Thanks,” I grunted and pressed a little harder on the gas. “Still, who the fuck would do this?”

That was the thing that bothered me. Emmett was a well-liked guy and didn't have any enemies as far as I knew, but between our father, his mother, and being part of the Ashby empire, it could have been anyone. *Any-fucking-one.*

Kat reached over and squeezed my thigh. "It doesn't matter who, Terry. We'll find them and make them sorry they thought they could lay hands on an Ashby."

Her words brought a smile to my face and the touch of her hand stripped away my concentration. It was all I could do not to drive the car straight off the road. "I know," was all I said.

Her phone rang again, a generic tone that she picked up right away.

"Hello?" She snapped her fingers to get my attention and mouthed, "It's her." She held up a finger as she listened and I stayed quiet, catching her nodding to the call.

Finally, she said, "Okay, stay calm, Madison. Tell me where you are."

She tapped the speaker button, figuring two sets of ears would be better than one.

Madison came on the line with a shaky voice. "I dunno, another hotel but not by the truck stop. I'm not sure how long we were on the road, but if you have my phone," she whispered, "well *your* phone."

Madison fell quiet as if she was on a time limit and gasped. "Please Ms. Ashby, they're talking about taking me to someone in Mexico like they said they did with Molly. Please."

Kat paled and I didn't wait for her to ask the next question. I took the next exit and headed back in the opposite direction.

"We're about an hour from the truck stop. With no traffic this time of night, we should be there before 4 am. Which way did you go?" Kat asked.

"Toward the border. I heard the man say to stay on 95 and the last town I saw was called Searchlight, but it didn't look like a town to me."

Shit, she sounded even younger than I imagined, like she didn't have a fucking clue, but she was out here, searching for her sister among the predators of the world.

"We're a good hour from Searchlight," I told Kat. "Can she get out and hide somewhere?"

"I'm locked in the motel room," Madison answered. "I can see the parking lot from the window, and I don't see any other cars around."

Her voice was small and shaky, scared as hell and she should be. This time of year, the roadside motels weren't doing steady business, which made it the perfect route for traffickers of any product, especially along this route where motel and hotel managers were happy to forego the need for IDs or legitimate bookings.

For the right amount of cold hard cash, they would do anything.

"Madison, this is Terry, Kat Ashby's friend. I'm helping her find you. Can you see the name of the place?"

"Yeah, Pacific Palms Inn. Room 121."

I entered the name into the fancy navigation system on Madison's phone and my shoulders sank in relief.

"We're not an hour from you. Stay in or close to the bathroom if you can, okay?"

"You're gonna come for me?" Her voice was so damn small and vulnerable, like she was more than a kid. She was an innocent.

"Of course we are."

"Oh, o-okay. Thank you."

"Call back if you need to," Kat told her and ended the call before she settled her gaze on me. "You can still drop me at a rental place, Terry."

"You know I can't do that. Besides, Emmett is fine. We'll be back in plenty of time for me to fuck up the person responsible, personally."

She shrugged. “Still.” The phone ringing in her hand startled a gasp from Kat and she laughed. “Yeah?”

Jasper’s voice came through the phone loud and clear even before she put it on speakerphone. “Good news is that Emmett didn’t go down without a fight. Whoever did this will have evidence of a professional beating all over his face.”

“Good, then I’ll know the piece of shit the minute I see him.” And my face would be the last thing the fucker ever saw.

Jasper chuckled. “Yeah, get in line man. Any news on the girl?”

Kat opened her mouth to speak, but I beat her to it, briefly updating him on the past few hours. “We’re heading to a motel near the border now.”

“Shit,” Jasper growled, knowing exactly what fate awaited her if we didn’t get there in time. “Stay safe and check in later. Emmett is sleeping, but when he’s awake I’ll call you back.”

I nodded, relieved to have all my brothers at my side right now.

“Thanks, Jas.”

“No problem, brother.” The call ended but that one word, *brother*, and the ease that he said it was another subtle reminder of why Kat was completely off limits.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KAT

Pacific Palms wasn't too far from Searchlight and less than a mile from the freeway. My stomach lurched as we pulled into the cracked pavement of the parking lot, which perfectly matched the old and dilapidated structure that was held together with duct tape and glue.

"Exactly the shit hole I expected," I told Terry and opened the door. The first rays of dawn threw a harsh light on the rundown building and parking lot.

"Perfect place to keep people out of your business," Terry said quietly.

His words were terse, and I knew his thoughts were back in Glitz with Emmett.

"Luckily, I have a knack for getting people to tell me things they shouldn't."

His lips pulled into a semi-amused grin that I wanted to kiss because I knew he was here for me instead of back in Glitz.

"I have no problem believing that. I'll take a quick look around and come back. Stay here, Kat."

"I will," I promised with a mischievous grin and slid out of the car.

"Kat," he warned.

"I swear. Scout's honor."

Terry barked out an amused laugh. "You were never a Scout."

“Details. The point is I’ll be right here. Waiting for you,” and carefully closed the car door. It felt like I’d been waiting for years for Terry to see me as a woman and not just Jasper’s annoying little sister.

“Good. Go on inside and work your magic, Kitty Kat,” he said through the window.

I flipped him off as I went inside, the sound of his laughter washing over me and my body tightening up in places it shouldn’t as he eased the car toward the end of the building.

The lobby was cleaner than I expected with bright white fluorescent lights that highlighted the decades old, yellowing floor tiles.

The sofa across from the reception area had seen better days, but when the clerk looked up, finally, I flashed my best Ashby smile. The one that got me just about any damn thing I wanted when I put my mind to it, like getting my MBA when Ma said it was stupid and unnecessary. Or learning Jiu-Jitsu when Virgil thought it was impractical in the age of high-powered weapons.

“Welcome to Pacific Palms,” the young kid deadpanned. “How may I help you this morning?”

“Hi. I’m looking for my kid sister, and I’m wondering if you’ve seen her traveling through here?” The kid had to be about twenty, so I knew exactly how to work him.

“Nope,” he said without thinking and turned his attention back to his phone, giving me a perfect glimpse of the top of his greasy head.

“Thanks,” I said a little too brightly. “When I tell the police officer I stopped here in search of a *kidnapped* minor, I’ll be sure to let them know how helpful,” I scanned his shirt for his nametag, “uhm...*Brian* was.”

He looked up with wide, bloodshot brown eyes suddenly filled with worry. “Ain’t no minors here.”

Bullshit.

“Then you won’t mind if I look around a little bit?” I didn’t wait for an answer, not now that I had his full attention. “Get a lot of bookings last night?”

“Yep,” he shot back quickly even though I hadn’t seen one damn car in the parking lot, just his raggedy scooter.

“Okay,” I said easily and slid a hundred dollar bill through the security window. “How many people are with the girl?”

Brian opened his mouth to lie to me again and I raised a palm to him.

“Before you even think about lying to me, Brian, I want you to think about it long and hard.”

“About what?”

His sneer pissed me off even though it was something I was used to, being underestimated.

“About how painful your recovery will be.” With one hand still on the money, I reached for my piece.

“I won’t kill you, I promise,” I told him with a sickly-sweet smile that had him rethinking his snarky tone. “Now, how many are with the girl?”

Brian nodded and looked down at the money, up at me, and then my gun before his brown eyes landed on his motivation. The money.

“Three. A driver. Can’t tell you what he looks like, but he had a pistol in his hand. And an older man and a middle-ish age woman, bang-able but too uptight to be a MILF. Kinda like you.”

“Thanks,” I told him and slid another hundred dollar bill under my hand while I thought. The driver likely doubled as security, probably armed. “Room number?”

“121.”

“Thank you, Brian. I was never here,” I told him and released the cash.

He shrugged and took the money hungrily. “No one is ever here, lady.”

Exactly what I wanted to hear. “Nice doin’ business with you.”

“Whatever,” he muttered and returned to whatever was so interesting on his phone.

Terry waited out front just out of view of Brian. I slid into the passenger seat with a sly smile.

“Got what you need?”

“You doubt me, Ter?”

“Nevah,” he said around a playful, teasing grin.

His words warmed me, and I was affected no matter how hard I tried to shake them off. So, I focused on the task at hand.

“Three people with her and the driver is probably armed.”

“Not a problem,” he said with a smile. “I’m always strapped, Kitty Kat.”

The more he used that damn nickname, the more it grew on me. Warmed me. The more it felt like an intimate pet name instead of a childish taunt.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

At his raised eyebrow, I returned the same look. “Don’t tell me you haven’t driven around and figured out the best way to get Madison out of there.”

Terry’s playful smile made another appearance, and I squeezed my knees together until they started to sting.

“Yeah, I do have a plan,” he said and drove around behind the squat building while he explained.

It was a simple plan and I smiled. “Guess that G.I. Joe thing runs in the family.”

He barked out a laugh and shook his head, his blue eyes staring at me with something that looked a lot like affection. I couldn’t have that, so I looked away.

“Thanks for that.”

I groaned at his tone, wondering what I’d have to do to get him to see me as a woman. Or better, a *desirable* woman. “Sure.”

“Here’s your phone. Ready your weapon,” he ordered and despite his bossy tone, I felt my nipples harden in response.

“When you’re ready,” he said and drove away.

I took a deep breath and counted until I found the bathroom window for room 121. The faint light at this early morning hour before the sun rose would turn out to be our ally.

TEN, I texted Terry to let him know I was in place.

NINE, he replied, letting me know he was in place. I should now call the room directly.

EIGHT, I sent a confirmation and then made the call.

A deep, slightly cultured voice answered. “I said no goddamn phone calls!” He sounded older than I realized, which meant it wasn’t Stephen McLaughlin, but likely Mueller himself.

The thought threw me off for half a second before I recovered.

“Hello Mr. Evans, this is Joanna Lemmings from Desert Telecom.”

First thing that came to mind. His growl of frustration let me know I hit the mark.

“Not interested. Don’t call back,” he warned and slammed the phone down hard enough to be heard through the shut bathroom window. Madison’s signal to make her move.

SEVEN, The sign to Terry that the call was successful. Madison wasn’t alone.

SIX, Terry replied he was prepared at the front door.

FIVE, I texted Terry when the bathroom light flickered to life and Madison appeared in the window with a black eye that was swollen and a gnarly looking split on her bottom lip. She clutched her side as she reached up on her toes to open the window a little further. “Ms. Ashby?”

I quirked a brow and smiled. “So now I’m Ms. Ashby? Not Kat or Rich Girl?”

She rolled her eyes and winced in pain.

“Trying to be cool since you’re being so helpful, savin’ my life and all.”

Her voice held the appropriate amount of bravado but the flash of fear in her eyes as she looked over her shoulder reminded me that she was just a kid.

“I need a hand,” she said reluctantly, embarrassment heavy in her tone.

It was a risk but I shoved the gun back in the holster and stepped in close to the window, hooking my arms under her pits to give her a good pull out the window. We both fell to the ground with a grunt.

“You all right?”

Madison nodded. “Alive.”

FOUR, I messaged Terry and his message came seconds later.

THREE, My cue to wait, which I did, impatiently.

Though not as much as Madison. “Why are we just standing around? They’ll notice I’m gone in about ten seconds,” she grumbled.

TWO, I confirmed we were waiting by the dumpster.

“It’s called a plan,” I told her and wrapped an arm around Madison so she could lean on me while we waited for Terry.

ONE, One second later, he flashed the lights.

“Come on.”

I held her close and practically dragged her toward the car, shoving her in the back with a quiet slam of the door.

“That was fun!” I flashed a smile at Terry and when he smiled back, I had to resist the urge to lean forward and press my lips to his.

It wasn’t the right moment.

It would never be.

Terry turned the car around toward the street and just as we passed the front of the building, the door opened.

“Wait,” I called out as my eyes tried to focus on the grey-haired man who’d stepped out, that fucking beard etched in my mind.

“Holy fucking shit,” I muttered and reached blindly for my phone to snap a photo at the exact moment the woman, Donna McLaughlin, stepped out beside him.

“Okay, go.” Immediately I sent the photo to Ma.

It was a foolish move, I realized after the fact, designed to bring more heat on the family, especially from the Feds who’d taken up residence in Glitz for the past few months. No matter what she did, I knew Sadie would want to know. Hell, she *needed* to know.

“Uh, Kat?”

Madison’s shaky tone alarmed me and I turned to her. “What’s up?”

“Not that I’m not grateful, ‘cause I am. Totally. But I uh need...” Her eyes fluttered shut and that was when I noticed the place she’d been holding was bleeding.

“Shit! Terry she’s hurt.” I leaned forward between the front seats and lifted the same ratty t-shirt she’d been wearing when she showed up at the hotel. A slice ran about four inches across her abdomen but the blood was black and dried, and it smelled. “She’s been stabbed.”

“Fuck.” That one word from Terry’s mouth held a wealth of emotions as he slammed on the gas and put as much distance between us and Mueller as he could.

Without thinking, I climbed between the seats and held Madison’s head in my lap, stroking her damp, dirty hair. “You’ll be all right,” I whispered, hoping that was the truth.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TERRY

“This room is too much,” I grumbled from my spot leaning against the rail of the balcony because what else would Kat Ashby find for us, but a luxury suite in the middle of fucking nowhere.

“Nonsense,” Kat said with casual ease. “We need someplace that invested in security, cameras and armed guards. More importantly, someplace that has concierge medical services.” Her tone changed when she was reminded of the real reason for our detour.

“How is she?”

Kat shrugged and swirled the amber liquid in her glass before she handed the other glass to me and stretched out in a lounge chair.

“The wound is infected, but he stitched her up and gave her antibiotics. Madison is going to be fine,” she said with a laugh. “Told me she didn’t need to die in luxury. I told her tough because she wasn’t going to die today.”

That quick flash of worry in her blue eyes told me she wasn’t as sure as she sounded.

“You’re picking up quite a few strays lately,” I told her and took the plush chair beside her. The desert stretched out before us, brightly lit and full of life.

“First Bonnie and now Madison. Better be careful or you might lose that barracuda card you love so much.”

An unexpectedly loud laugh erupted from Kat. “I wouldn’t say that I *love* it but being bitchy saves a lot of time.” Her gaze was unfocused as she looked up at the starry night sky and sighed. “It’s not easy being a bitch all the time, ya know.”

A huff of a laugh escaped and I shook my head. “I hate to break it you Kitty Kat, but you’re not a particularly good bitch. Formidable, without a doubt, but not that bitchy.”

One sculpted brow arched, but the messy hair and rumpled clothes gave her a relaxed, casual air that was more appealing than Kat dressed to the nines. “Suddenly you’re the bitch expert?”

“Maybe I’m just a Kat expert.” And maybe the lack of food and sleep forced the quality whiskey to go straight to my brain. “You do a good impression of a bitch, but your real superpower is your willingness to see things through.”

She sighed and a satisfied smile crossed her lips just before she finished off her glass and stood to refill it, bringing the decanter of whiskey back with her.

“Thanks, Terry. My goal isn’t to be a bitch, but men in general are reluctant to deal with the ‘hassle of a bitchy woman’ and that suits me just fine.”

“So you’re saying that picking up strays is the real you?”

“No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know, but I see people who need help and I feel compelled to help if I can.”

She shrugged like it was no big deal that a girl raised in the lap of luxury thought helping people was normal. Natural.

“I like that about you, Kat. Madison would be dead if not for you.”

“Ugh,” she groaned and let her head fall back. “Don’t remind me. I keep replaying that in my head over and over. If we’d been closer to Glitz when she was able to call...”

Her words drifted into silence and she fell deep in thought before she turned to me with a sad smile. “I’m sorry about Emmett.”

“Yeah, me too. Madison too.”

The girl was smaller than I imagined. A tiny little thing with a filthy face, a small voice, and a giant knife wound in her gut, but she'd still reached out to Kat.

"But this is the life we chose, and it goes with the territory."

Kat nodded and crossed her legs before she turned to me. "Did we really choose it, though? I mean, I'm not complaining, but I don't feel like either one of us had much of a choice."

I knew what she meant, had thought about it a lot over the years, but that thought led to madness, so I switched topics.

"You must've made a hell of an impression on her for her to call you when things looked so bad."

"A rich bitch is better than nothing at the end of the day." Her words were flippant but I heard the relief in her voice. "Besides, if you'd gone back to Glitz like I told you, both of us would have died trying to escape. Probably."

"There wasn't a chance in hell I would leave you, Kat."

She flashed a soft, feminine smile. "You don't owe me anything, Terry. I hope you know that."

"Meaning my help isn't appreciated?"

Kat shook her head and sighed. "You are determined to misinterpret everything I say, aren't you?" She held up a hand to stop my response. "I appreciate it and I am grateful for it, but I don't want to be anyone's obligation. Especially yours."

I was too chickenshit to ask her what she meant, but something that felt a lot like hope bloomed in the pit of my stomach. "You're not an obligation, Kitty Kat."

"Yeah? What am I, then?" There was some emotion in her eyes I couldn't recognize, almost expectant, like she was waiting for *something*.

"You're special, Kat. Always have been."

She snorted and shook her head. "Special. Just lock me up in a tower and keep me safe." Her dark hair brushed her shoulders as she shook her head. "Never mind." Kat grumbled incoherently under her breath and poured about three fingers

of whiskey into her glass and then mine. “So, what are we gonna do about Rob?”

“Find him and fuck him up.” There was no question what would happen to that fucker. “He knew what he signed up for and he would’ve been paid as if he’d won the fucking match.”

That was another reason I was eager to get back to Glitz. Jasper was furious and would likely put a bullet in the fucker before getting the intel we needed.

“Men and their egos. Do you think Em found out about the fight?”

I knew what she was asking, and I shook my head, but the truth was I hadn’t considered that until this moment. “I really hope not, but it doesn’t change anything.”

“Why do you stay, Terry? I mean you could go anywhere; do anything you want. But you stay here. Why?”

Because of you. Because I was an idiot. “Because this is my family.”

“Family.”

The word came out of Kat’s mouth filled with a hardness I didn’t understand. She stood and crossed to the railing, stared out for a long minute before she turned to me with another indecipherable look on her face.

“I’m not your sister, Terry.”

“Yeah, Kat, we’re not family. I got it.”

She walked to me, intent in her eyes as she leaned forward and pressed both hands on me, gripping my arms tight.

“No Terry, I really don’t think you do *got it*. We’re as close as family but we are not fucking family.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I got the message loud and clear, but then her plump lips were on mine and I couldn’t even think of any words beyond a few grunts and groans. Kat’s lips were soft and lush, and her tongue warm and demanding as it traced the seam of my mouth back and forth. Back and forth.

One hand slid up the back of my neck and tangled in my hair, gripping it tight enough to sting as her tongue slipped inside my mouth, explored and teased until I was hard as fuck and my hands went to her hips and then her ass, and I squeezed. Hard.

Kat groaned and deepened the kiss. She kissed me like I was a man, not some rando she'd known her whole life. Kat kissed me like I wasn't family, like I was something else. *Someone* else.

That thought had me on my feet and walking her backward until her ass met the concrete balcony and she was trapped, right where I wanted her. My hips pressed against hers as my hands tangled in her thick silky waves and I took over the kiss, loving her mouth the way I'd dreamed of doing since I was seventeen years old.

The kiss went on and on. It felt like decades passed while I tasted her mouth and savored the blend of Kat and whiskey on my tongue.

Her hands slid under my shirt, cool against my overheated skin and I gasped, taking a step back to look at her. Yep, it was still Kat Ashby. The woman I'd wanted more than I ever wanted anything. Or anyone.

"Kat," I growled.

Her lips curled into a satisfied smile. "Definitely not family," she sighed and put one hand on her chest. "Now you know. Sleep well, Terry."

I stayed rooted to the spot on the balcony and watched Kat walk off with a swing in her hips. I stood there long after she disappeared from my sight, not daring to move until I heard the door to the other bedroom shut with a quiet *click*.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KAT

The best thing about working in my home office was that no heels were required, and I could spend a ridiculous amount of time daydreaming, totally uninterrupted. And there was just one episode playing on repeat in my mind. That incredibly hot, panty-melting kiss with Terry.

A low groan escaped, and I covered my face with my hands, still embarrassed over how bold and aggressive I'd been.

I'd love to blame the whiskey and it was damn good whiskey, but the truth was that I saw my shot and took it. And yeah, okay, all that talk about family had hit a sore spot with me, so I felt compelled to act so that—if nothing else—Terry would understand that I was *not* his damn sister.

“Daydreaming about that blond hunk?”

Madison's voice startled a gasp out of me. “Damn girl, do you moonlight as a ninja?” She had the ability to move through the house without making a noise, which I found unsettling, especially since I *was* daydreaming about that blond hunk, as she started calling Terry the second she woke up in the hotel suite.

“No. I'm thinking about work.”

At least I should have work on the brain because it was work hours, and the only reason I was home was to keep an eye on Madison and her stab wound. Well, that and the fact that she refused to sleep in the main house filled with people she didn't know.

“And that *blond hunk* has a name.”

Madison flashed a smile and shrugged her shoulders, a move that produced another wince, which she shook off, so damn reluctant to show a moment of vulnerability. Not that I blamed her.

“It’s all right. I’ve dated a few guys who were just slumming it.”

I whirled around in my chair to stare at her, shock written all over my face.

“First of all, no girl is slumming it with Terry.” He was all man and had done well for himself. “But second, how old are you to have dated *a few guys*?”

Madison flashed her straight smile, chin notched in up an expression that closely resembled pride.

“Twenty. I’m small for my age, but the old dude wouldn’t take my word for it, and the streets don’t require ID.”

There was that tough girl smile that did fuck all to hide the vulnerability she tried so hard to conceal.

“Damn, you *are* small for your age.” I took in Madison’s appearance again, searching for signs I missed about her age. But she had small bones, delicate features, and weighed about one hundred and ten pounds, soaking wet.

“This is what growing up poor and eating what and whenever you can gets you, rich girl.” I flipped Madison the bird and she laughed. “Here’s my ID if you don’t believe me.”

I waved her off. “I believe you until you give me a reason not to. How are you feeling?”

“Like I got stuck with a knife, but the pills help with the pain, and the wound is clean, so thanks.” She shrugged and looked away, seemingly uncomfortable with emotions like gratitude.

“No problem. I’m just glad we found you in time.”

“Me too. My Spanish isn’t all that good.” Her words were glib, but there was relief in her tone and the set of her shoulders.

“So, Madison, are you happy on the streets or do you want to work?”

She was more than old enough to work and earn a living so she could support herself eventually.

Her smile dissolved, replaced with a frown as she folded her arms defensively. “I don’t—”

“—Need charity,” I finished for her with a laugh. “I know and I’m not offering you charity. I’m offering you a job. You do know the difference, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m not stupid.”

“Didn’t think you were but that chip on your shoulder might affect your ability to think clearly. If you want to work, I’ll find something for you to do while we track down your sister. What can you do?”

“Whatever shit job exists, I’ve done it. Cleaned houses and bathrooms. Flipped burgers. I was even a valet for about two weeks. I’m good at math and I can type really fast.”

I wrote down everything she said and sent an email to my assistant.

“By the time you’re healed enough to work, we should have a few options for you.”

“You and that blond hunk, Terry?” she asked and waggled her eyebrows.

“No, my assistant.”

But her eyes brought a smile to my face as I remembered how hard, how turned on Terry had been on that balcony, and it was all because of me. But that was just a fleeting thought. Jasper would kill us both.

A knock sounded on the door and Madison gasped, but her shoulders immediately relaxed when Sadie walked in carrying four oversized shopping bags. “Good morning, girls.”

“Mornin’, Ma. What did you bring me?” I flashed a teasing smile.

“These are for Madison.” She dropped the bags at Madison’s feet, smirking when our guest looked at them like they were toxic waste.

“Kat you need to go into the office. No one has seen Ravager since the fight and rumors are swirling. You need to deal with it.”

Of course, I did. “I thought this was Jasper’s deal?”

“It is, but he’s doing something else right now.” Something more important, which meant this job managing House of Ashby was still mine for the foreseeable future.

“Shit. Yeah. All right.” I stood reluctantly and made my way to the bathroom with a grunt. Was it just a few minutes ago I thought how nice it was to work without heels or makeup? Thirty minutes later, I had my work bag in one hand, phone and coffee in the other as I said goodbye to Madison and strolled out of the guest house toward my car and came up short.

“Terry. What are you doing here?” He looked irresistible in jeans, a t-shirt and a blazer, leaning against my car like all my wildest teenage fantasies had come true.

He flashed a teasing smile and stood to his full height, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

“I’m your personal bodyguard until Ravager is found and all the bullshit passes.”

“Is that how it works? Bullshit actually passes?” Not that I was complaining about spending more time with Terry. It would be a particularly unique form of torture, but maybe it would cure me of these lustful images in my head I had of him.

“So, you’re my bodyguard...*forever*?”

He shrugged. “I guess you’re stuck with me.”

“There are worse people to be stuck with.” I snickered at his words. “Impressive lengths you’ll go to just to get close to me, Stalker.”

His deep laugh bounced off the hot concrete as he held his hand out, waiting impatiently for me to hand over the keys.

“Don’t worry, Kitty Kat, you can ignore me the way you always do.”

That pulled an unladylike bark of laughter from deep in my gut. Ignore him, as if I could.

“If I could ignore you, Terry, I’d be a lot less bothered by you.”

Hot and bothered was more like it, but since he didn’t return my feelings, there was no way in hell that I’d ever say that out loud.

“So, I bother you,” he asked and slipped behind the steering wheel with a teasing smile that sent a bolt of electricity through my entire body.

“You know you do,” I grumbled and slid into the passenger seat, focusing on my seatbelt rather than the problem of being so physically close to this man but no closer to making him mine.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all.

“Yeah, right,” I snorted and motioned for him to get the car moving. “Come on slow poke, we’re burning daylight.”

Terry barked out a laugh that startled me. “Damn, woman, you sound so much like your old man sometimes, I have to look behind me to make sure he’s not looking over my shoulder.”

His words brought a smile to my face. My dad was a son of a bitch most of the time but he was smart as hell when it came to most things. Things, at least, that didn’t involve gambling.

“Thanks. I think.”

“Oh, it’s a definite compliment. Your old man had his flaws, but he was a character and he knew people.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “He really did. Except for that one fucking blind spot,” I growled, thinking of how often we’d hosted priests and other church elders for dinners, fundraisers and the like.

Terry’s grip tightened on the steering wheel and his jaw muscles clenched so hard I thought I’d be able to hear the

grinding of his teeth. He knew what I meant.

“Yeah well, that’s some mighty effective brainwashing they do and it’s fucking difficult to overcome.”

It was. “We managed fine. Eventually.”

His scowl vanished and, in its place, a smile bloomed. “It took us misfits some time, but yeah, we managed to deprogram ourselves.”

Both of us fell silent for a few miles, lost in thought about how our fucked-up childhoods had led us here.

“Now, Kitty Kat, let’s talk more about how much you’re hot and bothered by me.”

Laughter burst out of me so fast, I snorted. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“It’s all part of my charm, Kitty Kat.”

“Charm. Is that what you’re calling it these days?”

He gave an exaggerated nod and pulled into the underground parking garage with a smile. “Damn straight. You’re charmed, aren’t you?”

Yeah, I was, dammit. “Maybe. Keep trying and I’ll let you know when I’m fully charmed, Terry.”

His deep chuckle vibrated in the confines of the car, and I felt each reverberation deep in my belly and shooting out through my nipples. It was so bad I clenched my thighs and slammed my eyes shut to stop the wave of desire that flowed through me.

“You know what, Kat? I just might do that.”

Oh please, for the love of Irish whiskey, don’t let this man try to charm me further. I didn’t think I could handle it.

“I’ll be sure to hold my breath.”

Terry laughed again as he slid into my reserved parking spot and stepped out of the car, the sound he left behind nearly as potent as his scent.

“I don’t mind if you hold your breath, princess.” He smiled and held out a hand to help me from the car. “Blue is a great color on you from what I remember.”

Yeah, I shuddered at his compliment and the heat in his eyes, but I also brushed past him before I did something stupid like kiss him again. The elevator was stifling, his scent wrapped around me like a hug and I felt his gaze taking me in. “Stop.”

“I’m not doing anything.” His voice was pure sex and his lips quirked up into an amused grin. “Not. One. Damn. Thing.”

That’s what he *said* but the minute we were alone in my office, he dropped down on the sofa near the window and pulled out his phone, pretending to ignore me even though I felt his gaze aimed right at my legs.

“I can feel you staring, Terry.”

“Would you rather feel me touching you, Kat?”

Fuck me, why did his voice sound so much like warm honey?

“If I say yes, are you gonna run away and tell my brother on me?”

It was a nasty taunt but we both knew it was true. At least a little bit.

The heat in Terry’s blue eyes told me he wanted, more than anything, to come across my office and touch me. But either he thought I was a stuck-up rich bitch, or he was worried about Jasper.

Either way, the only person touching these legs anytime soon would be me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TERRY

Watching Kat in her element, working and bossing around everyone in sight was torture. Pure fucking torture but I loved every damn minute of it.

Maybe it was the black pantsuit that hugged her tits and ass, and damn, *those* thighs...were those pants painted on? She wore it because she thought it made her look like a badass, and it did, but Kat could wear a trash bag and still look like a badass.

Everything about the woman was sexy as fuck. She was impressive as hell, aggressive and bold, forceful when needed and sweet as pie when honey would get the job done. In fact, she was a lot like Sadie, I realized. When employees came to her for advice, she was happy to offer it up in the plainest way possible, but she expected perfection. Always.

“I don’t want to hear excuses, Jamie. I just want it done. Got it?”

The poor suit didn’t know how to respond to that sapphire glare that was icy enough to freeze him dead, so he nodded and backed away slowly, gently shutting the door behind him.

“Jeez,” she said, shaking her head, “how hard is it to do your fucking job?”

I shrugged. “I always do my job perfectly, so I don’t have an answer for you.” She glared at me and I laughed. “It’s true.”

Kat turned back to her computer and tapped furiously on her keyboard, the way she did when she was pissed and trying to be nice to someone. Eventually, she leaned back in her seat and blew out a long breath.

“All right, I need to get out of here. Lunch?”

I blinked and looked around the empty office before pointing to myself. “With me?”

She rolled her eyes and pushed out of her chair with a groan.

“No, with Jim from marketing. Go ask him for me will ya?”
Kat shook her head and reached for her purse. “Yes or no, Terry?”

My lips curled into a smile as I unfolded myself from the plush sofa.

“Yes. I’ll drive.”

Kat groaned but she didn’t argue. A pity really, since she was so damn sexy when she was all riled up. But the surprises kept coming when she directed me to a funky little bistro in the heart of Glitz.

“There’s customer parking around back,” she said matter-of-factly, her gaze burning the side of my face. “What?”

I shrugged and maneuvered the car around the block and through the narrow alley. “Nothing. Just surprised this is where you want to eat.”

Inside, the place looked like your basic greasy spoon diner, but if it had been purchased by some Warhol wannabe with booths in three different colors, paintings hanging crooked on the wall and light jazz playing in the background.

“Are you fucking with me, Kat?”

She looked around as if trying to see the place from my perspective and laughed. “No, I’m not. They have excellent French onion soup and the service is incredible.”

It was hard to believe her, but as soon as we were seated, a teenager came up to the table with a smirk. I was ready to jump in if I needed to, but he leaned forward and held up a

fist, which Kat bumped, shocking the shit out of me. “Kat, you’re breaking my heart, babe.”

Babe? The kid couldn’t be more than eighteen years old and here he was, flirting with Kat and giving *me* a dirty look. Kat laughed.

“This is my friend Terry, Leander, and you have nothing to worry about. He thinks I’m a princess.”

“You are babe. And I’m trying to make you my Irish queen.”

Damn the kid was smooth and he managed to get a smile out of Kat I’d only started to receive recently.

“If this rich dude is too blind to see that, these eyes see it crystal clear.”

She laughed again. “With lines like that, I’m sure the girls at Glitz High are lining up to make an honest man of you.”

“Age ain’t nuthin’ but a number, Kat.” He laughed and turned to me.

“You really don’t want her?”

Kat giggled on the other side of the booth while the high schooler put me on the spot. “I never said that.”

“So you *do* want her?” His smirk said he already knew the answer.

“Come on dude, she’s hot, badass, and doesn’t think she’s too good for this place. I *know* you want her.”

I opened my mouth when an older woman appeared with a head of salt and pepper curls framing her dark, olive-toned skin.

“Leander, you over here flirting with Kat again? You ain’t man enough to handle a woman like that yet. Keep practicing on the young ’uns.”

Her thick southern accent made her sound like a southern belle, but she was dressed like a biker. Maybe a beatnik.

“How will I know if I don’t try, Miss Pearly?”

“Try with those young girls waiting on their milkshakes.”

At the mention of younger women, Leander's eyes perked up and he flashed a smile at Kat.

"Gotta make sure I'm ready for the big leagues when they come callin'. See you later, beautiful." He walked away and stopped in the middle of the restaurant. "I made the chili fresh last night, hoping I'd see you."

"Thanks, Leander."

He waved and headed toward the outdoor seating area in front. "He wants you, Kat. Trust me."

With a wink, the kid pushed out the front door with a wide smile for the young girls.

Pearly gave me a long look, studying me hard before a wide smile flashed.

"What'll it be?"

I nodded to Kat and Pearly shook her head. "French onion soup and chili cheese fries. Now you."

"I'll have a cheeseburger with bacon. And onion rings."

"Got it," she said and finished scribbling in her leather-bound notebook before she looked up with one hand on her hip and a mischievous smile just for Kat.

"I was beginning to wonder what the point was of all that beauty. Now I see." She aimed her head at me as if I couldn't tell she was talking about me.

"Well done, girl."

"Oh, he's not mine," she said easily, but I could see the tension around her eyes. "Terry is an old family friend, my brother's best friend, in fact."

"I see," Pearly said.

I wanted to ask what the hell she saw because I didn't see a damn thing.

"Well maybe you ought to find a man to make this one jealous. It worked for me and Rod, and twenty-two years later he won't let me forget it." Pearly let out a long laugh and shook

her head. “I’ll be back with food, and drinks since it looks like Leander is occupied.”

Kat laughed and glanced outside. “My money is on the quiet, dark-haired girl.”

“Really? I told Rod it would be the blonde in the red blouse, bet five bucks on it.” Pearly shook her head, grumbling under her breath as she walked away.

Who in the hell was this woman? I knew Kat wasn’t a spoiled princess, even if I gave her shit about it nonstop for the past decade and a half, but this was unexpected even for her.

And when the food came, she dug into it like a regular woman, not a prissy bitch who grew up in the lap of luxury. She wasn’t self-conscious about the messy meal in front of her, smiling and moaning with every bite. Licking her lips and her fingers, making it hard to focus on my own damn food.

Really fucking hard.

“You’re staring,” she said around a bite of chili cheese fries.

I was staring. A lot. And I couldn’t tell her why, so I leaned forward and swiped a bit of chili and cheese from her bottom lip.

“Watching you eat is an experience, Kat.”

She smiled and nodded to my half empty plate. “How do you like the food?”

“It’s delicious, but the sounds you make when you eat are... *distracting.*”

“You mean this sound,” she said and let out a low moan, similar to the one I heard on the balcony. At my obvious discomfort, she laughed. “Guess so.”

“Yeah. It’s almost as good as the one I pulled from you.”

It was my turn to enjoy Kat’s reaction, which included red cheeks and blue eyes that darkened with desire at the memory.

“That was impressive,” she admitted. “But so long ago I barely remember it.”

“Just say the word and I’m happy to remind you.” We were both playing with fire, but lately, it seemed as if Kat had forgotten that fact.

She leaned back, a knowing smile on her face as she folded her arms and notched her chin up slightly.

“Word.”

At my stunned expression, she finished off the last of her fries, licked her fingers and slid from the booth. “Just what I thought. You’re all talk, Manning.”

Kat Ashby was an irresistible challenge, one I found harder and harder to ignore. Especially when she threw down the gauntlet like she just had and walked away with that swing in her hips.

“Man you got it bad with a capital B.” Leander stood beside me, snickering like the kid he was, but he wasn’t wrong.

“It’s complicated,” I said to him even though my frustration wasn’t directed at the kid.

“Naw, man, it ain’t. What’s complicated is watching your girl be happy with someone else ‘cause you’re too much of a nutsac to go for her.”

I chuckled. “A nutsac?”

“Yeah, a nutsac.” The kid shrugged. “Pearly said pussies are stronger than a nutsac, and if I didn’t believe her, she had some birthing videos I could watch.” The kid shuddered visibly. “Gettin’ kicked in the nuts hurts, and I don’t even wanna imagine a baby coming out of my dickhole, so nutsac.”

He pointed to where Kat stood chatting with Pearly as she paid the tab. “Don’t be a nutsac, man.”

I must be losing my mind if I was even thinking about taking advice from a high school kid with a crush on my girl.

Not your girl if you keep pushing her away.

Good point. I stood with a determined smile and went to Kat. It was time to shit or get off the pot.

“YOU’VE GOT some colorful friends, Kitty Kat.” And it only made the woman more likable if that was even fucking possible.

She laughed. “Leander and Pearly, sure, but Rodrigo is as normal as they come.” Her smile for the bistro workers was pure affection as if she were talking about one of her brothers. “He’s a lot like Emmett, actually.”

“Because of the military thing?” The sun was shining bright and hot outside so I blasted the cool air and maneuvered out of the tight parking area.

“Some, sure. I mean they both carry themselves like they were professional, government-trained bad asses. But they both have this quiet strength that just makes you feel like you can trust them.”

“Is that why you offered so much money to send Emmett food?” I appreciated that she thought of my brother as one of her own, but the woman was a horrible negotiator.

“Yes and no. Emmett’s been down since the fight, and he won’t admit it. I figured some greasy food and someone to talk to might do him some good.”

I felt her gaze on my face as we drove through Glitz back toward the casino. “What are you thinking?”

That I want to find the nearest private spot and bury myself deep inside your sweet little cunt. “That your secret is safe with me, Kat.”

Her dark brows dipped low. “What secret? I don’t have secrets.”

“Sure you do. I won’t tell anyone that you’re actually a fuckin’ marshmallow. Not the big bad girl the world thinks you are.”

She was a lot nicer than she let on and I could see exactly why Madison trusted her.

“Take that back right now, Terry or...else.”

“Or else, what?” Dammit, I told myself, no more flirting with Kat until I decided she was worth risking everything.

“Or else...stop! Look!” I slammed on the brakes and stared at her.

“I’m driving, Kat.”

She let out a low, guttural growl and leaned in close so she could grab my chin in her hand and turn as she saw fit.

“Look. Over there. It’s fucking Ravager. Now go!”

I saw him as soon as she swiveled my head and I backed the car up slightly, ignoring all driving laws to make a sharp left.

“Bossy.”

“Are you kidding me? That fucker is lucky if I don’t cram these red-bottomed shoes up his big dumb ass!” Her gaze never left the big man. “Who is that he’s talking to?”

Before the car could come to a complete stop, Kat jumped out and stomped across the street toward the soon-to-be-dead fighter.

“Ravager, you fucking piece of shit! Where have you been?”

At the sound of her angry voice, he looked up with wide eyes and took off running. I was out of the car instantly, chasing his big ass down the street. Still, he was faster than he looked and long gone by the time I caught up to Kat, scowling with her designer heels dangling from her fingertips.

“You all right?”

“I’d be a lot better if I had my stun gun,” she said with a grumpy nod. “Did you see who he was talking to?”

I shook my head. “Just a flash of something. Do you know who it is?”

“No, but I have a few guesses,” she growled and the sound was both angry and erotic, a combination my cock couldn’t resist. Apparently.

“Care to share?”

“Not out here,” she said, eyes darting around in search of any familiar face. “At least we know the idiot hasn’t left town yet.”

She was gorgeous in her fury, stomping back across the street in bare feet, her red toenails glistening in the desert sun.

The next few seconds unraveled slowly as my gaze went from her killer legs up to the curve of her ass.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a nondescript black car and realized it had turned behind us at the corner, but the sound of the engine drew my attention away from Kat.

The car pulled away from the curb and slowly sped up before the squeal of the tires sent my heart beating out of my fucking chest.

“Kat, watch out!”

She turned to me with wide blue eyes and dove across the hood of the car less than a full second before the black car clipped her. “Shit!”

Her word came out on an agonizing crunch while I tried to take in every detail I could remember. Black. Chevy Blazer. 90’s. No plate. Missing passenger side mirror.

“Kat?” I rushed to where she was sprawled on the ground and picked her up in my arms. “You all right, Kitty Kat?”

She nodded and looked around the now empty street in search of clues.

“I think so, yeah. Thanks for the save.”

I didn’t need or want her thanks because I hadn’t protected her. “Don’t thank me. You fucked up your knee,” I told her when I laid eyes on the rip in her pants. “And your arm.”

Kat nodded, her hands shaking until I held them in mine. “Better than being crushed by a piece of shit Chevy. Barely better, but still.”

Her words in that moment, so ridiculous and so snarky, were typical Kat. Nothing ever got her down for long, and I couldn’t help my bark of laughter. “I’m sorry, Kat.”

“Don’t be Terry. You saved me from being crushed by a Chevy. How embarrassing would that have been?” She flashed a playful smile that I wished I could return, hell that I wanted more than anything to return, but I couldn’t.

Because there was only one thought in my mind, aside from how good it felt to have Kat’s hands on me, and that was that someone had just tried to kill my Ashby Princess.

It was on like a motherfucker.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KAT

“I said I was fine! Stop hovering.” My words were harsh, but I was suffocating from all the concern and the literal hovering around me.

Virgil and Jasper stood right beside the sofa while Cal sat at my side holding my hand. Sadie and Maisie looked on with worried expressions near the end of the sofa. Emmett, looking worse than I felt, paced behind the sofa, casting concerned looks my way every few seconds.

“Terry called out to me in the nick of time or else I’d have to gift all my glorious shoes to the poor.” It was a shitty attempt at humor, but they all looked at me like I was at death’s door.

Jasper shook his head, vibrating with so much anger I could almost hear it and I knew he was gonna lose his shit.

“No, Kat, fuck that. I want to know what the fuck happened. Nobody and I mean no fucking body fucks with my sister.”

My eyes connected with Terry’s. He wanted me to let him take the blame. But it wasn’t his fault. He saved me. “We were coming back from lunch and *I* spotted that Ravager motherfucker and shouted for Terry to stop so we could find out what the fuck that asshole was doing. Shit,” I paused as something clicked in my brain.

“They were following us.” My words were for Terry, who nodded his agreement.

“Yeah I figured that out. Too late,” he said the last part to Jasper. “I was focused on Ravager. And not wrecking the car in the process.”

“No! Fuck that, Terry.” I turned my gaze to Jasper who was determined, for some reason, to blame someone else. “If Terry hadn’t been pulled from his job to babysit me, maybe we’d already know who just tried to kill me. He can’t be with me all the time and find Ravager. Deal with your choices, big brother.”

Jasper glared down at me and from the corner of my eyes, I noticed Sadie’s smirk.

“I was trying to protect you!” Jasper bellowed.

I nodded and softened my voice. “And because you put Terry on the case, I’m here. Alive and kicking and giving you a ton of shit. He did his job, Jas. Move the fuck on.”

I couldn’t look at Terry again, because the fact that he *had* saved me and the gentle way he’d touched me afterward, had my mind and my heart going wild.

Sadie cleared her throat and all eyes swung to her. “Did either of you get any details on the car?”

Terry rattled off what he could remember, which was a lot more than I’d managed to see.

“The windows were too dark to see the driver and there was no damn plate. Might be stolen.”

Calvin nodded and stood. “I’ll check surveillance and police reports. You think this could be about the girl,” he asked me, concern in his eyes.

I hadn’t thought it was about Madison, but it was possible. I doubted Ma shared the photo with the boys because they’d already be at Mueller’s door if she had.

“It’s possible but I don’t think they know who took her.”

Jasper nodded slightly. “It has to be The Crusaders. If it’s not about the fight, then it’s because they believe we killed Savannah.”

He was so sure of himself, but I wasn't convinced about who was responsible.

"I have a team searching for Savannah. For now, the focus needs to be on finding Ravager and what the fuck happened. That's the priority."

Sadie's steely gaze landed on Jasper, and they had one of those silent conversations before they reached some kind of agreement. He nodded and Sadie's shoulders relaxed as she pulled a cigarette from her gold case.

"What I want to know is if the attack on Emmett was ego or something else?"

Emmett stopped pacing and shook his head; his bruises had turned an ugly shade of purple. "It wasn't Ravager. The guy who jumped me was shorter than me but beefy as fuck. Street fighter all the way. I held my own until the other asshole showed up. If it had been Ravager, I'd be in the hospital. Or dead." Just thinking about the attack upset Emmett and he shook his head. "I'm out. I need to go lay down."

Terry's eyes were filled with worry for his brother, but also for me. Sadie apparently saw the torment in his eyes and nodded.

"Go talk to your brother. See what else he remembers."

"Thanks Sadie."

Finally, Maisie the drill sergeant spoke. "Everyone out. Now. I'll help get Kat cleaned up and her wounds bandaged, then you guys can get back to talking about whatever it is you aren't telling me."

Virgil opened his mouth to say something, but Maisie put two fingers to his lips. "It's fine. I don't need to know. I don't even want to know. But I want to make sure Kat is all right before I go back to the casino."

And with a clap of her hands, Maisie the magician managed to get the toughest people I knew to disperse without an argument. "That's pretty impressive. Can you teach me that trick?"

Maisie's pink lips curled into a hint of a smile but her blue eyes were filled with worry. "Sure. As soon as you teach me how to dive bomb over the hood of a car. Sounds scary."

"It happened too fast to be scared or anything else." I closed my eyes and thought about the fear and worry that sounded in Terry's voice.

Kat, watch out!

How could three little words hold so much emotion?

CHAPTER TWENTY

TERRY

Emmett was still upset about the attack and I was happy Sadie didn't make a big deal about me going up to check on him. Now, I hoped Emmett didn't make a big deal about it either. Three sharp knocks on the door and I shoved one hand in my pocket and waited while my brother took his sweet ass time opening the door.

"Hey, man. How you doing?"

Emmett shrugged his broad shoulders and stepped back. "I've been better, man. What's up?"

"I haven't gotten a chance to talk to you since you got your ass beat. You okay, man?"

Emmett snorted and turned away, shoving his hand through his hair as he made his way to the other side of the room. "You want to talk about me getting my ass whooped or how I'm doing?" He peered at me over his shoulder, half bitter and half sarcastic.

"Why does it have to be an either or type of situation?" I hated that he questioned if I was here for him or for the Ashby family, but it was the nature of our work.

"It doesn't." His shoulders fell and he dropped down into a sofa near the window, wincing slightly. "Sorry, I guess I'm out of sorts."

I nodded and stepped inside the room, taking the slightly uncomfortable chair pushed up to a desk Em had no reason to

use. “You *should* be out of sorts; I’m fucking furious.”

His lips curled into a grin. “Yeah, thanks. But if you were really furious, you’d send me a shit ton of food like Kat did, since you were having lunch together.” I ignored the taunt because I wasn’t touching that shit with a ten foot pole. Not even a twenty foot one.

“Walk me through what happened.”

Emmett laughed. “So much for being furious,” he snorted under his breath. When his expression sobered, I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and listened to every fucking detail.

“After the fight at Emerald Isle, I went back to the locker room to clear my head. The night was mostly a success but something didn’t feel right about Ravager’s win. I didn’t want to think about it with fuckin’ cameras and microphones in my face.” His gaze damn neared pierced through me and I knew he suspected the truth, knew it in his heart, but he didn’t want confirmation.

“Anyway, the locker room was empty. Suspiciously empty right after a big fight like that. So, it took no time to grab the House of Ashby swag and then I left, thinking I’d talk to the fighters in the morning. Chicken shit, but it is what it is.”

“That’s what you normally do after a fight?”

He nodded. “Not really. Usually, the losing fighters want to talk a bit, maybe look at some tape. But, since they were all gone, I decided to go home and have a drink. Forget about everything until morning.” He blew out a breath and leaned back as if he couldn’t get comfortable.

“Which exit did you use when you left?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I tried to get out through the west hall because it was closest to where I parked, but it was locked down for some reason.” I told him about the asshole following Kat.

“Same guy we spotted on HOA surveillance. Kat made sushi out of the motherfucker.”

Emmett snickered. “You’re proud of her? I don’t know how you’re okay with that.” I just shrugged. No need to confirm or deny anything yet. “Anyway, it took fucking forever to get out of the other exits, and I was too pumped up to pace around my apartment alone, so I went to House of Ashby.”

To an outside observer, Emmett’s activities might look suspicious, but he was a workaholic and I was fairly sure he had some PTSD he hadn’t dealt with, so I understood.

“Did you park out front?”

He nodded. “Yeah. The first spot right out front. Same place I always park. Just as I lifted my hand to shove the key into the lock, someone called my name.” His eyes slammed shut and his head fell forward. “Whoever called my name, it was from a distance. I turned to see who was calling me and the next thing I saw was a fucking fist barreling toward my face. I turned enough that it hit my cheek instead of knocking my eye out of the fuckin’ socket.”

My hands balled into fists and I had to control my anger because Emmett didn’t need this. Not now. Hell, he probably had his own fucking anger. “Shit.”

“I know,” he grinned. “That shot stunned me and took me to my knees, but his first two jabs were weak, and I got back to my feet, landing a cross and a kick to the ribs.”

“Sounds like shit was working in your favor. What happened?”

“That big fucker bull rammed me to the ground and then got on top of me. He landed blow after blow and you know,” he motioned to his face. “You can see the rest for yourself. It was a hell of a fight. Street fighter. Fucker had good reflexes and instincts. If I’d been watching him fight, I would’ve offered to train him.”

That was typical Emmett, able to find a silver lining in the darkest fucking cloud. “It’s a good thing I’m the hot one,” I joked, trying to lighten things up before I busted something. “Because those bruises are hideous.”

The bruises on his face had already started to fade but I could tell the body shots still caused him pain.

“That’s okay, I’m the smart one,” he said and flashed a halfhearted smile. “So smart that even though I didn’t get a look at his face while he pounded mine into the pavement, I saw that he was a white guy. Around six feet, about two-twenty, two-twenty-five. Drove off in an SUV...no wait, he didn’t drive off. He jumped in the passenger seat of a gray or silver SUV.”

“You remember a lot more than I expected you to.” I jotted down his description in one of those note-taking apps and turned back to my brother.

“The bruises are healing nicely but you should take the time off that Sadie offered.” A few weeks away from the gym might be good for him. “A trip to the ocean might be nice.”

Emmett shook his head and let out a snort that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “It wasn’t an offer so much as an order, which I’m used to. Hell, I might end up on babysitting duty too,” he joked. “But at least I’ll know why. Sort of. Kind of.”

I knew what he was getting at, and I wasn’t bothered by it at all.

“Who the fuck else is Jas gonna trust to keep an eye on her?” Virgil was just as capable, but he couldn’t control Kat. Neither could I, but she wasn’t my sister.

Thank God for small favors.

Emmett’s smile softened and he shrugged. “The person who loves her the most. Obviously.”

I barked out a laugh and smacked my palms together.

“Maybe you hit your head a little too hard, baby brother.” There was no way in hell Jasper knew how I felt about Kat. I’d kept it to myself all these years, too afraid to test the bonds of our friendship by revealing it.

“Yeah, maybe I did,” he nodded. “Or maybe I just see you. And Kat too.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “Probably because it’s past time for you to find a girl to spend your time with.”

“Right back atcha, Ter.” Emmett stood and turned towards the window with a sigh. “Be safe out there.”

“Always am,” I told him and left my brother alone with his thoughts.

Jasper and Sadie would be happy to hear I got more details from Emmett about the fucker that fucked him up, so I made my way back down to the main floor, bypassing the empty dining room and headed straight for the sitting room where they’d all gathered around Kat.

“Hey,” I said when I found her alone, lying on the sofa.

“Hey yourself. You here to babysit?” Her lips curled into a teasing grin and she patted the empty spot beside her.

“Nope. I didn’t come for you at all, actually.”

“Bummer,” she said with a hint of mischief in her blue eyes. “It’d be so much cooler if you did.”

“I think it’s time to stop calling you Kitty Kat,” I began and she interrupted me with a loud, almost erotic, groan.

“Yes, please, thank fuck!”

“And start calling you *Trouble*, because it’s more accurate.”

Her laugh sounded again, sweet and husky as her hand fell on my thigh, leaving me frozen in shock as desire snaked through my veins.

“I’ll take it since you guys only started calling me that to piss me off.”

“Not true. It’s because you’re small but vicious.” Her smile softened and I had to ball my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching out to brush a finger down her silky skin.

“Okay, well, if you put it that way, it’s not so bad.”

Thankfully, my phone rang and stopped me from losing my goddamn mind. “Yeah?”

“It’s Cal. You got a minute?”

“Always.” I slid another glance to Kat and stood, walking away so she couldn’t hear whatever he had to say. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been digging into Madison and her sister, Molly and I think there’s a chance she’s still alive. It’s nothing concrete yet, just a few crumbs, but I’m sure Kat is still looking, and chances are good she’ll find her.”

Cal sighed and I knew there was a big ass ‘but’ coming. “These people are evil, so keep a close eye on my sister since you’re watching her anyway.”

“Sure thing, man,” I answered calmly before I hung up. No way was I ever going to let Kat out of my sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KAT

Terry was acting weird. Really fucking weird, and he wouldn't own up to it, but every time I looked past my screen to him, he was pretending *not* to look at me. It was suspicious as hell and I wanted answers.

“What's up with you lately?” Terry blinked and shifted his gaze about an inch to the right so his eyes were on me and arched a brow. “Seriously. If you're angry that you're still on babysitting duty, take it up with Jasper. Not me.”

Having Terry around for what felt like twenty-four-seven was no picnic for me either. Ending every fucking day with a cold shower wasn't exactly how I liked to spend my nights, but I couldn't sleep or focus on anything with his scent wrapped around me.

His gaze sparked a fire to life inside of me, and I crossed my legs under the desk, which those eagle eyes dipped to watch before crawling back up my body, to my face.

“I don't mind watching you at all,” he said slowly, every syllable its own seduction. “The view is great.”

“Yeah right.”

I rolled my eyes at what we both knew to be bullshit. I'd been giving off signs for weeks, giving him the green light, and he wasn't giving me anything. Less than, in fact. It was embarrassing.

“Now I’m sure you’re up to something if you’re resorting to compliments.”

Terry shrugged casually, like he didn’t care if I believed him or not. “I just call it how I see it, *Trouble*.”

“Then what’s your problem?” Because there *was* a problem.

“No problem.”

“Whatever.” I had more important things to worry about, namely Madison who was getting impatient about the lack of news about her sister. I hadn’t told her, or anyone else, that I reached out to a private investigator in California to see if he could find any trace of the girl.

Checking my email every five minutes hadn’t produced any results either and now Terry’s weirdness only heightened my anxiety.

“What’s up with you? Usually, you’re happy to ignore me.”

That was a lie and I refused to engage so I kept my gaze on the screen, nearly hopping out of my seat when an email finally came through from my private investigator.

Did some digging and came across this photo. Could be our girl? Let me know.

Short and to the point. That’s why I kept Rusty on retainer. He was all business and damn good at his job.

“Holy shit.” The words came out in a whisper, but I was vaguely aware of Terry sitting a little taller, looking at me with curiosity in his eyes. For once in weeks, though, he wasn’t at the forefront of my mind.

Molly was.

The photo was grainy, shot from a distance, but if I squinted, I could tell that it just might be Molly. The same dirty blonde hair as Madison’s, but a little longer than when the photo Madison carried with her was taken.

“Holy. Shit.” It really could be her and the photo was taken right in front of the Reno sign.

“Something important?” Terry’s deep voice pulled my eyes from the screen to his own curious stare. Was it possible I’d forgotten he was there?

“Nope. Nothing at all.”

I had to figure out a way to get out of the office without Terry tagging along, which was about as possible as getting the sun to stop shining so brightly. But I had to try. I wanted to get to Reno and find Molly. Without Terry and his weirdness. If he didn’t want me, then I had to move forward. And the first thing on my list was to find Molly.

“I just remembered I have an appointment to get to. No big deal, but I can handle it on my own.”

I kept my gaze down and grabbed my purse, phone, and keys, making a beeline for the door. When I reached it without interruption, I let out a small sigh of relief and headed to the elevator.

It was a small miracle, if I believed in that nonsense, but if I did, I would have been really fucking disappointed.

Just before the elevator doors closed, an arm shot out and forced them open again. Terry stood there, as calm as could be, with an arrogant smile on his face.

“I don’t mind being surrounded by hormonal women for an hour or two.” He stepped inside the elevator and got right in my face. “I might start thinking you don’t want me around, Kitty Kat.” Both hands slid down my arms, the move so erotic, I shivered.

But he fooled me again. I thought he would make a move, but no, it was a fucking ruse to steal my keys.

“Whatever.” I felt stupid again, and that pissed me off. And when I was pissed, I became petty. As soon as the elevator doors opened, I yanked my keys from his hand and high-tailed it to my car.

“You can’t escape me that easily, Kat.”

To prove I was doing no such thing, I slid behind the wheel and changed the seat and mirrors to the pre-sets while I waited

for him to get in the car. Just because Terry didn't want me, didn't mean I was dumb enough to put myself in danger simply because my ego was bruised.

It wasn't the first time and since, *apparently*, I was terrible at learning lessons where this man was concerned, it probably wouldn't be the last.

"Seat belt."

Terry buckled up, and I made my way out of the parking lot and merged into traffic while I tried to gather my thoughts. There was no way I could lose him and now that he was suspicious, he wouldn't leave my side for a second.

"You wanna tell me where we're really going?"

Hell no, I didn't want to tell him anything because I was still seething with anger. No, it worse than anger and worse than humiliation at his actions, that he would use my attraction to him to deceive me. It was...he was...just, fuck that.

I drove for more than an hour in absolute silence. Jaws clenched tight and a death grip on the steering wheel, I got started practicing that Terry Manning didn't exist because as soon as we got back to Glitz, that would be my new reality.

"I guess your silence means we're not talking?" Terry laughed like it was all some big damn joke, but I guess to him, it was. Or rather, *I* was the joke. "Fine," he growled and pulled out his phone as if that was a threat that would work on me.

"Yeah, Jas. Kat's driving us somewhere, don't know where and she won't say."

A few seconds later, Jasper's voice broke through the silence of the car. "What the fuck, Kat?"

"Your babysitter is with me so what the hell does it matter Jas? Just mind your own damn business." I snatched the phone from Terry and tossed it in the back seat. "That goes for you too, you know? You're here like Jas and Ma wanted, so just... shut the fuck up."

He turned to me and I could feel the heaviness of his frown, his stare on the side of my face. "What in the hell did I do?"

“That is not shutting up,” I growled and hit the gas a little harder.

Terry’s hand landed on my thigh with more force than necessary and I had to swallow down a gasp. “You can be mad at me all you want, *Trouble*, but I don’t shut up for anyone. Not even you.”

“Unless you want a hole in your hand, I suggest you remove it. Or are you just trying to steal the keys again?”

Shocked, he pulled back and stared at me but I didn’t care that my thigh still throbbed from his touch, or that my panties were a little wet from the way he growled those words at me, so demanding. “Kat, I—”

“Save it, Terry. I don’t care.”

“Seems like you do,” he taunted, a teasing lilt to his voice.

“Then I guess we’re both good at pretending we give a damn.” And that was all I planned to say about anything *resembling* personal talk. “I’m going to Reno. I got a lead on Madison’s sister, Molly. She works there and rents a bed in one of the hostels.”

“That is not a good idea, Kat.” His voice was suddenly serious and sexy as fuck, but I was not deterred.

“I’m not asking. You’re welcome to stay in the car.”

“Fuck, Kat! We have enough shit to deal with. Why do you want to add more shit to the list? Ravager is in the fucking wind. He fucked up the fight, Emmett’s attack *on* Ashby property and we still don’t have an ID on that shithead. Plus, Madison. And some dickhead tried to run you down. Christ, woman, do you thrive on this kind of chaos?”

“Do you only do the right thing when Jasper or Sadie give you permission to do it?” It was a low blow, but I wasn’t wrong. And it hit its mark. “You *have* to be here but you don’t *have* to like it and you don’t *have* to help. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“All evidence to the contrary?”

“Fuck you, Terry. Let’s see how well you do against an old ass Chevy.” My grip tightened on the wheel. “I already said thanks for that save, but that doesn’t mean you can hold that shit over my head forever.”

Terry had nothing to say for the rest of the trip; that was fine with me.

Finding Molly in Reno was harder than I anticipated. We pulled into a strip mall in a seedy part of town close to low-end motels and began canvassing door to door. The girl, if she’d been here, kept a low profile. Only a handful of people could say with any type of certainty that they’d seen her or knew her. But the answer was the same.

“Quiet girl, but I haven’t seen her around here in a few days.”

“Worked at the diner by the highway, but she hasn’t been there for a few days.”

A different variation on the same answer. Every. Fucking. Time.

After a few hours of this thankless waste of time, I leaned against the trunk of my car and let out a low, frustrated sigh. My lead on Molly had, so far, turned into a big fat pile of nothing. But she’d been here, not more than forty-eight hours ago according to Rusty.

“She can’t be gone already. She can’t be,” I moaned to myself. I wouldn’t allow it. I’d turn over this whole damn town if I had to.

I felt Terry before I saw or heard him. “Maybe it’s time to call it quits?” he asked.

Of course, he’d say that. “You’d be saying that if this was Emmett?” I didn’t even open my eyes to ask the question because I already knew the answer. “You’d burn down the whole fucking world to find him. Even now, I’ll bet that’s your plan to find out who attacked him.”

“He’s my brother.”

“Yeah, well Molly is Madison’s sister and that’s enough for me.”

Opening my eyes, I looked at Terry, and I wondered for the first time in my life, if he was as good a man as my mind made him out to be. Maybe he was just like Jasper, a good man *if* you were part of his circle. Otherwise, you were on your own.

My heart raced as it warred with letting this man, or the idea of this man, go.

“I can drive you to the train station or the car rental place we passed on the way to the hostel. You’ll be back in Glitz before the night is over.”

I’d already planned to grab a room and the first hotel I found, stars be damned.

“You know that’s not gonna happen.” He didn’t want to be here, had no interest in helping this girl who’d suffered the way Jasper and Virgil and Cal had. Emmett, too.

“Well I’m staying here, and I don’t need you here second guessing me every step of the way, so the offer stands.”

We stared each other down for at least one full minute, my heart racing at the thought of giving up on my dreams of him. But I would.

Because I had to, not because I wanted to.

“Kat, be reasonable.”

I hated that word more than I could say. *Reasonable*. Fuck that. It was a word men used to keep women in line when they couldn’t be controlled. A way to make them feel crazy or hysterical when the truth was, I was being perfectly *reasonable*.

“Be a fucking *human being*, Terry, or get gone. I’ll spend tomorrow looking for Molly myself, and if I can’t, then and *only* then will I find someone else to look for her. *After* tomorrow, got it?”

Terry nodded and my shoulders relaxed, which pissed me off.

After a long moment, he said, reluctantly, I thought, “All right.”

I gave a sharp nod before giving myself a mental pep talk.

“Get in,” I said, pointing to the car. It was time to find food and a place to sleep for the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TERRY

“I know this is a hard ask for you with everything that’s going on, but I need you to stay with Kat.”

Jasper’s voice was low and worried because we both knew that nothing would get Kat back to Glitz other than finding Molly. Or her body.

“You can say no, absolutely brother, but I’m hoping you won’t.”

He knew I couldn’t say no to him. Especially when it came to protecting Kat.

Even if she hated me right now.

“I’m here man, whatever you need. We haven’t picked up the girl’s scent yet, but she was here. Recently.”

I wouldn’t tell Kat, but Molly’s vanishing act meant she was right to be worried.

“You know how Kat is,” he growled. “We’re all keeping an eye on Emmett, and I sent some guys to check on both of your moms. But if you don’t find anything tomorrow, I want you both back in Glitz. Period.”

That sounded like exactly what I wanted. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Later, brother.” We ended the call and let out a deep, fortifying breath. Something I did had pissed Kat off but good.

She'd barely said more than a few sentences to me in hours, and I still hadn't figured out what I had done.

She sat inside the diner; her phone pressed to her ear while she ate a stack of pancakes with a salad on the side.

"Jasper is giving us the night."

Kat looked up with a slightly annoyed expression on her face.

"I found us a suite at a nearby lodge, which means we both get a bed this time around. Ready to go?"

She's still upset. "After I finish eating, sure."

"Okay." Her words were short but not clipped, enough for me to know that she was pissed.

I dug into the meatloaf and mashed potatoes like I hadn't eaten all day, which I hadn't because this was, technically, my lunch.

"You gonna tell me what I did to piss you off or you gonna pout all night?"

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping to get a rise out of her, but it didn't work.

"First of all, I don't pout. Second, you don't care so it doesn't really matter, does it?"

She sighed and pushed her plate away before she walked away from the booth, leaving me alone to finish my food.

What the fuck just happened?

She couldn't really be that upset about me taking her keys, could she? I shrugged and dug into my food because Kat was a mystery I had never figured out. Why would I start now?

I took my time eating, figuring she would be back before I finished, but like I said, Kat was a mystery to me. Always had been. Seemed like she would always be a mystery just beyond my comprehension.

After the meal, I got up from the booth and looked outside. Kat sat behind the steering wheel; eyes glued to her phone. I paid the tab and went to the car.

"You plan on ignoring me for the next twenty-four hours?"

Kat looked up and blinked. “I have business to attend to, Terry. I came out here to charge my phone while I made some calls so you could eat your dinner in peace.”

Her tone wasn't even annoyed or angry, it was bland.

Fucking bland.

“All right, let's get to the hotel then.”

Without a word she started the engine and made the short drive to the hotel she'd booked. The suite, if you could call it that, wasn't as big as we were hoping. Her jaw clenched tight as she took in the small suite, the small *one*-bedroom suite.

“All right.” She said the words simply as if she was doing her best to reign in her temper.

“Do we both still get a bed?” It was a dick thing to say, but I still couldn't resist riling Kat up. Even when it didn't work

She turned to me and shrugged; her chin notched high in the air.

“I can handle it if you can, Manning.” Her blue eyes held a challenge I couldn't resist.

“I'll try to keep my masculine urges to my side of the bed.” The sarcasm was thick, and I braced myself for her silver tongue.

But she said...nothing.

“Shotgun on the shower.”

Kat didn't reply, so I grabbed the towels and toiletries she'd bought at some point between leaving the diner and making calls and locked myself inside the bathroom with a separate shower and bathtub. I cranked the water to ice cold because that's what spending days on end with Kat did to a man. I refused to think about sharing a bed with Kat and the temptation it presented. She was pissed so nothing would happen.

Nothing will happen because I don't want it to.

I tried to reason even as I stroked my cock until I exploded in the confines of the shower. The shower lasted much longer

than needed, but I took my time. It was more important not to seem like a creeper than to keep her waiting.

Thirty minutes later, I stepped out of the bathroom and found Kat sitting cross legged in the middle of the bed, laptop in front of her. She looked up with a wide smile for the first time all day.

“This place has around-the-clock room service and guest services.”

“That’s great,” I said absently, trying to figure out why she was so excited. “But where are my clothes?”

Kat laughed. “Pajamas will be here in fifteen minutes. Our clothes will be laundered and returned in the morning, but first I need to rinse off so they only have to make one trip. Listen for the door and try not to shoot anyone.”

Ten minutes after the shower sounded, I tried to think of anything other than Kat naked in the other room with nothing more than a door between us. I closed my eyes, refusing to think about the water running down her body, the way the soap made her skin slick and soft.

“Fuck!”

Of course, that was the moment a knock sounded at the door, and I was forced to answer in nothing but a plush off-white towel. I wasn’t embarrassed, but I didn’t appreciate being in such a vulnerable position in front of a complete stranger.

“Yeah?” I called out.

No answer, so I opened the door. The petite woman blinked and stuttered when she spoke. “I have dessert, wine and clothing for you, sir.”

“Thanks,” I told the woman gruffly and grabbed the bags while she rolled the tray of food inside the room.

Her face lit up when I handed her a tip. “Oh, thank you sir. Call me if you need anything. Good night.”

I nodded and engaged both locks behind her before looking inside the bags. Kat had thought of everything.

When she emerged from the bathroom, skin pale and slightly pink from the hot water, a towel doing absolutely nothing to hide the delicious curves she hid behind her businesswoman armor, I was speechless. This was more intimate than I'd ever seen her, and at that moment, I wanted her more than I ever had.

"Did I hear someone knock?"

"You did," I nodded. "They brought the whole damn store, including some pajamas for me."

They were pajamas if you considered silk shorts suitable sleeping attire.

"Perfect!" She went to the bags I set on the floor, completely oblivious to the effect she had on me wearing nothing but a towel. Kat bent and rifled through the bags, giving me a long look at her endless bare legs.

Even the gap between her thighs was just barely visible, and I had to look away before I did something stupid, like strip that towel from her and lick every fucking inch of her body.

She grabbed a few things and slipped back into the bathroom.

I took advantage of the moment of privacy to put on the silk shorts, no shirt. Part of me wanted to believe it was a deliberate mistake so she could look at me, but I knew better. Whatever flirting had taken place over the past few weeks was harmless. Meaningless.

Still, that didn't mean I couldn't taunt her a little. Tease her.

But when she stepped out of the bathroom this time, smelling like vanilla and wearing a shockingly innocent red and white nightgown that did nothing to hide the round shape of her perfect tits, or the outline of hard, braless nipples, it took all of my willpower not to tear it off and show her exactly how much I wanted her.

But I couldn't. My job was to protect her, not to fuck her. *Not* to claim her. *Not* to make her mine.

"You're staring again," she said, her voice tense and annoyed.

"I'm a man, Kat, not a fucking saint."

She looked down at her nightgown, completely fucking oblivious to the inner turmoil she was causing, and then up at me.

“Are you saying that you like this nightgown on me, Terry?”

“Don’t play with me, Kat.”

The smile she wore in that moment was devious, and she gave an innocent shrug. “Who’s playing? I’m just your best friend’s sister, no big deal. Right?”

“Right,” I growled and reached for a pillow to cover the erection that threatened to embarrass me, or worse.

“No. Big. Deal.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes, but it was there so quickly, I was sure I imagined it. Instead of torturing myself, I went to the mini bar and grabbed four small bottles of Jameson. “Whiskey?”

“Sure, I could use a stiff drink.” Her words were careful, deliberate. Teasing.

“Kat,” I growled.

“Terry,” she growled back with a mischievous smile. “What’s the big deal? You don’t want a rich bitch or the Ashby Princess, right? Just think of me as nothing more than your sister or a cousin.”

“You’re not my fucking sister,” I growled and tossed two of the small bottles on the bed. Angry. Horny. Frustrated.

“I know that. I was beginning to wonder if you did.”

She flashed a sweet, innocent smile that might have worked on someone who didn’t know her so well. All that smile did to me was make me want to kiss her until the real Kat showed up.

I tossed a pillow at her and she laughed.

“I’m taking the side closest to the door.”

It didn’t matter that she was dressed in next to nothing or that we’d be sharing a bed. My job was to keep Kat safe and I would do it, not just because Jasper trusted me to keep her

safe, but because I would rather die a thousand fucking times than see Kat hurt.

“Fine by me. But fair warning, I’m a cuddler.”

Kat tossed her head back, dark hair cascading down her back, and let out a low husky laugh. Amused but also aroused.

“It’s true. Ask Madison. Why do you think she jumped at the chance to move into the big house?”

She was a cuddler. Why did that sound like both a threat and a promise? “I don’t cuddle.”

She laughed again. “You’ve been warned.” Kat reached for the second small bottle, twisted the cap and lifted it in the air.

“To resisting temptation.”

We touched glasses and I swallowed the whiskey down in one gulp, wishing for something stronger because it was going to be a long fucking night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KAT

The sound of a car door slamming in the distance pulled me from a deep sleep and I sat up straight, blinking to bring my eyes into focus. *A hotel room. A hot body, a hot male body* turned and wrapped an arm around my waist, snuggling me close. Then a few more details came into focus.

I'm in a hotel room with Terry.

My body went stiff at the touch of his big strong hands holding me close, the feel of cock, hard and pressing against my ass. I froze and slammed my eyes shut against the sensations that rocketed through me, waiting for Terry to wake up and realize who he was cuddling before he recoiled in disgust.

Despite his compliments and flirty words, or the way his gaze wandered to my nipples earlier, I knew what he really thought of me.

Baby sister. Off limits. Friend zone.

But with Terry's hard muscular body pressed against mine, it was hard to think of anything other than how much I wanted him. And seeing him in nothing but a towel with his tattoos on full display, reminding me that he was no longer the boy of my dreams, but the man, wasn't helping at all right now. Especially when he released a sleepy groan as his hand slid up from my belly to cup my breast.

Oh. Shit. His palm grazed my nipple and I let out a shocked gasp when I really wanted to lean into it. Into *him*. Instead, I

froze, again waiting to see if he woke up and jumped away from me.

He didn't.

Terry groaned and pressed his hips against my body, and I knew the moment he woke up. His body tensed briefly and then he squeezed my breast again. A moan escaped before I could stop it and Terry's body stilled, but his hands didn't move away.

"Kat."

"Yeah?" My voice was tense and strained, even to my own ears, and I was tempted to turn to see his face as he spoke. But I wasn't ready. Not yet.

"You good?" His voice was thick with sleep or maybe it was desire, or maybe I just hoped it was desire.

I nodded. "Yep. I'm good." I was more than good as long as Terry kept his body so close. "Real good."

"Me too," he growled and ground his cock into me as his lips pressed to my neck. I shuddered and arched my back so his cock buried deeper against my ass cheeks. "So good."

On its own, my neck tilted to take more of Terry's kisses and that was all he needed to take things further. His grip tightened and his hip thrust against me again, and I turned in his arms, so we were face to face. "Yeah?"

"Hell yeah." Those two little words came out on a low, almost feral growl before Terry's lips crashed down on mine. The kiss was different than the one in the *other* hotel. For one thing, we were sharing a bed and there was nothing but flimsy pajamas to separate us.

He deepened the kiss, and I groaned at the whiskey I could still taste on his tongue and it made me feel bold. Bold enough to reach between us and wrap my hand around the silk covered erection between us. Terry was so fucking hard, but he wasn't just hard, he was big. And thick. My pussy pulsed in anticipation.

“Kat.” My name sounded like a curse on his lips and I arched into him, squeezed his cock tighter until he nipped my bottom lip. “Tease.”

I laughed at the accusation and gave his cock a stroke.

“It’s even better than I imagined it would be. Bigger too.”

This was happening and there was no point holding back now. Tonight was ours and whatever happened after this, well that was a matter for another day. That thought left me feeling even bolder, or maybe it was the cock in my hand that my mouth and my pussy watered to taste. To have.

“Soft on the outside and hard on the inside.” I slid my hand into the waistband until his silky hot cock landed heavy in my palm. *God, I need this. I need him.*

“Oh fuck, Kat!” Terry’s blue eyes rolled back and his head fell onto the pillow with a sigh, leaving his muscular upper body on full display. My eyes ate him up first and then my lips and my tongue. His skin smelled fresh but manly, with just a hint of me in there and that made me smile.

“Shit, woman,” he growled when my tongue started at the waistband of his silk boxers and I licked my way up the length of his torso, stopping only to swipe my tongue across the pink disks of his nipples. “Kat.”

“Yes?” I felt playful and nipped his chin and then his earlobe, smiling as I thought of how giddy my teenage self would be, knowing I was here right now. With Terry. Fucking. Manning.

“You have something to say?”

“Don’t tease.” The growl came out dark and intense, almost angry and when I looked up at those blue eyes, nearly as dark as mine with desire, my body responded.

“No? What have you been doing to me the past few weeks?”

I didn’t wait for an answer because I didn’t want to talk about it. I wanted to take advantage of his nearly naked, completely turned on state, and I did, kissing my way back down his body until I reached his pajama shorts. “Teasing. Nonstop. Teasing.”

“Kat,” he growled, his voice a warning I refused to heed.

My fingertips wrapped around the silk shorts and tugged until his hips lifted in the air and I had Terry Manning naked in my bed, cock jutting out like a pole I was more than ready to climb. *But not yet.*

“Yes?” It was an innocent enough question, or it would have been if I wasn’t holding his cock in my hand like a lollipop, tongue ready to swipe at the bead of liquid emerging from the tip.

“Ah,” he said when my tongue made contact. The sound was low and deep and gravelly and I felt my pussy quench in answer. “Fuck.”

I only teased him for a moment because I was too desperate to have him, to taste him and when the weight of his cock landed on my tongue, it was better than I imagined.

Terry tasted sweet and musky, the way a man should taste. His strong thighs bunched and clenched on either side of me as I took him deeper and deeper into my mouth, using my tongue to swipe at his balls because each time I did, he made a guttural sound that drove me wild.

I might have gone a little mad, closing my eyes and tasting his cock like it was a twelve course tasting menu, devouring every inch of him. Nine if my count was accurate.

“Kat,” he growled once but I didn’t stop. Hell, I couldn’t stop, especially with the way his hips started to thrust up. I took him as deep as I could with every thrust and his hands speared through my hair, holding me right where he wanted me for *his* pleasure. What Terry didn’t know, couldn’t know, was that I was moments from orgasm just from tasting him. “Kat.”

I took him as deep as I could, practically impaling myself on his cock as pleasure roared through me, vibrating my whole body for long seconds until I was spent. Totally fucking spent.

“Did you just come from sucking me off?”

“Mm-hmm,” I answered, his cock still in my mouth so the vibrations made his hips buck up.

“Fuck!” A moment later the bed shook like a fucking earthquake when Terry yanked me by the ankle and flipped me

over, towering over me like some kind of sex god.

“That’s so fucking hot, but I’m not sure I believe you.” His hands, slightly calloused, slid up and down my thighs, first the outside and then the inside before he stripped the panties from my body. My nightgown went next.

Feeling sexy and honestly, still horny as fuck, I spread my legs wide. “See for yourself.” The way his blue gaze intensified at my words had my pussy clenching with desire, waiting in anticipation of what was to come.

With his gaze nailed to mine, Terry rubbed two fingers up and down my pussy, from my opening to my still pulsing clit, and then plunged them deep. I arched into his touch with a smile. “Still wet and quivering,” he growled and slid those same fingers in his mouth. “Sweet.”

“Now who’s the tease?”

“Don’t worry, Kitty Kat,” he said playfully and knelt on the floor before he tossed one leg over each of his shoulders and smiled.

“I don’t tease. I please.” Then he kept true to his word, burying his face between my thighs, licking me until I shook and quivered, until the most ungodly noises came from my mouth.

“Oh Terry, fuck...yes!” He laughed but I didn’t care. I felt too good to care about anything except how his tongue speared in and out of my pussy, fucking me while his thumb flicked my clit into submission.

“Terry,” I gasped and reached down to tangle my fingers in his hair.

His deep laugh made my whole body tremble and it all culminated at the apex in my thighs, ready to explode. Then the dirty man flattened his tongue and licked me roughly, up and down. Up and down. Up and down until wild animal cries echoed in the room.

My back arched off the bed as my orgasm barreled out of me like a Mack truck, and still Terry licked me until every ounce of pleasure had been wrung from my body.

“Fuck. Me. Hell, *yes.*”

My heart raced, my body was on fire and my lungs couldn't suck in enough air, but I felt better than I had in a long fucking time, which was saying a lot considering how much shit had gone on lately.

Just when I thought I couldn't feel better, Terry was situated between my thighs, his eyes darkened with desire, his hair slicked back as his cock slowly invaded my body.

“So. Fucking. Tight.”

“Glad you...noticed,” I sighed when he was fully seated, balls resting against my body. “Move. Please.”

“Begging again, Kitty Kat?” Terry didn't fool me. His voice was just as strained as I felt, but just to be sure, I pulsed around his rock-hard erection. “You know how much I love that.”

He had mentioned it a time or two and my smile turned mischievous as I remembered my plan to enjoy this night. Fully. “Yeah?”

Terry nodded; jaws still clenched tight. “Then Terry, fuck me. Please.” My heart smacked against my chest as I waited for him to respond, to move, to do *something*.

And then Terry's hips were on the move, pulling back until our bodies were nearly separated and then plunging deep. So deep I ached even as my body begged for more.

Sex with Terry was definitely an experience. I didn't know if it was because it was Terry and what that meant to me or if it was being in a hotel out of town, but the whole thing felt like a fucking dream sequence from a movie.

It was slow and intense with a raw quality that I felt in the pit of my stomach. Everything was a little hazy when my eyes fluttered open to watch Terry, so beautifully masculine as his body moved gracefully against mine.

“Oh fuck,” he growled and gripped my hip with one hand, leaning over to grab my throat with the other as his mouth captured mine.

That one erotic move, so kinky and so fucking hot, was just enough to send me right over the edge. He kissed me gently even as he fucked me hard and rough, until pleasure exploded from every pore, every molecule that made me who I was.

Only a strangled cry of satisfaction escaped before my body went slack. Pleasure flooded my body, coating his cock in so much wetness his own orgasm came moments later. “Damn.”

Terry smiled and kissed me, this time slow and sweet while his body continued to fill mine with pleasure. He pulled back, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Better than just *damn*.” His hips slowed and eventually stopped as he collapsed on top of me, brushing soft butterfly kisses on my neck.

“Fuck,” rolling off.

I laughed, wincing slightly when he put just an inch of space between us. Still, it was too much. I felt the distance immediately.

“Yes Terry, we did just fuck.” Though calling it ‘fucking’ felt a bit wrong because it felt like so much more than a quick hard fuck. It felt like...more. “And it was fantastic.”

“It was even better than fucking fantastic Kat,” he growled and turned over to look at me, his blue gaze gravely serious. “But it can’t happen again.”

The air *whooshed* out of my body at his words even though they weren’t a shock. Not at all. I just figured the words would come a little later, like maybe in the morning. “Well, it’s too late to go back to hating me now.”

Terry laid a gentle hand on my hip. “I don’t hate you, Kat. Believe me, my life would be a hell of a lot simpler if I did.”

I wondered what that meant, but my body still hummed with pleasure and the way his thumb grazed my hip bone made it hard to focus on his ominous words.

“Right.” My word came out in an erotic whisper.

“It’s complicated, Kat.”

An angry growl escaped at his words. “Our whole fucking lives are complicated, Terry, period. One more time, here, tonight, won’t make it less complicated.”

Feeling brave and bold, and knowing it would all probably be nothing but a memory in the morning, I kicked a leg over his hip until I straddled his lean body. “Will it?”

The way Terry looked up at me with that wicked grin was all the answer I needed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TERRY

I fucked Kat Ashby. The Ashby fucking princess. I had my way with her last night. All night. In just about every fucking way imaginable. It was hot as fuck and every time I thought about it, I had to fight a mental battle to control my dick.

Even now, behind the wheel of her car, I couldn't stop thinking about the way she'd made herself come while sucking my cock, the little cries of pleasure when I licked her cunt, or the way she rode me like a cowgirl on Spring Break.

It was hotter than I'd fantasized about all these fucking years, and I had done *a lot* of fantasizing about it. Dreaming about it. Thinking about what I'd do if the stars ever aligned and I had a shot with her.

Twenty years of thinking about her hadn't come anywhere close to reality.

"Shit," I growled as my cock grew again, this time refusing to listen. Not baseball stats, not my brother, or even Jasper's angry face could stop the dirty little fucker from wanting more of what last night held.

I was fucked. The sexy woman in the passenger seat was all I could think about, and I couldn't have her again. Not just because we'd already checked out of the hotel and made our way back to Molly's hostel, but because like I told Kat last night, shit was complicated.

"Let me do the talking," Kat said, completely out of the blue. If it wasn't for the light flush of pink on her skin, I might think

she was unaffected by last night. She was, but she was trying hard *not* to be. At my frown she shrugged.

“I can get answers out of these kids without threatening them. I’m sure they’ve had enough of that.” She shook her head, her hair falling around her shoulders as she absently checked her phone. “If I can’t get anything from them, you can step in. Deal?”

“I don’t like it but fine.”

I didn’t like any part of it, especially where she made the ground rules, but it was a solid plan. It would’ve helped if she was wearing one of those tight business suits she favored as the barracuda because they were hot as fuck, but not nearly as hot as Kat in jeans and a red leather jacket with nothing but a white tank underneath it.

Nothing.

“My eyes are up here,” she said, laughter in her voice as I killed the engine inside the hostel parking lot.

“But your tits are right there,” I told her and pointed to the hard tips of her nipples, which I now knew tasted like strawberry cream. I got out of the car first before I did something like make her come with my mouth on those titties right there in the car.

I stayed by Kat’s side and let her do the talking.

“You guys know Molly?”

Two teens with stringy hair looked up and took in her outfit with disgust. “Who’s asking?”

“I am. So?” Kat held a fifty dollar bill in her hand and I tensed, hoping like hell she knew what she was doing.

“It’ll cost ya,” the blond boy said with a greedy smile.

Kat wasn’t affected at all. “Tell me something useful and I’m happy to pay.”

He snorted and shook his head. “What’s useful?”

“Easy. Tell me if you know Molly and where I can find her. If I believe you, the cash is yours.” She held a photo up so they

could both see, determining quickly they had nothing. “Too bad. Thanks anyway.”

“Hey, wait,” the younger girl called after her, but Kat was already moving forward. I felt like a fucking puppy on her heels. More like a dog with the way I couldn’t keep my eyes off her ass and those legs.

“No thanks,” she said with a wave and stepped outside, making her way to a group of three girls huddled in a circle, too young to be sucking on the cigarettes they inhaled like grizzled old factory workers.

“Hey ladies, do any of you know Molly?”

These girls weren’t as green as the kids inside. They took one look at Kat in her expensive clothes and scoffed. “Who’s askin’?”

The tall girl with dark hair was the spokeswoman for the group, the tough one.

“Her sister Madison works for me, and she got hurt on the job,” she lied easily. “Been asking for her sister who she hasn’t seen in months. I offered to help.” It was a good story that stuck close to the truth, but the dark haired girl wasn’t buying it.

The girl snorted and folded her arms over tits entirely too big for her baby face. “And you’re doing this, what, out of the goodness of your heart? Sure, lady, go sell that shit somewhere else.”

Kat stiffened. I was sure she would snap at the girls, but she surprised me.

“The goodness of my heart? Hell no. Madison is a damn good employee. I just don’t want her distracted over her sister when she returns to work. If this will do it, that’s all I give a shit about. So do you know her or don’t you?”

“Her sister is alive?” The petite blonde gasped at her mistake and looked away.

“She is and she’s worried that Molly is hurt or worse. That’s why I’m here, not to hurt her.” The firmness in her voice took

the girls off guard and they all stared at me with wide, frightened eyes. Kat shrugged.

“The first few hostels weren’t quite as friendly as this one, so I hired a hot bodyguard.”

“Wow,” they all said at once, openly staring at me.

“She slings hash at the roadside diner a few miles away from that highway brothel.” The leader’s eyes sparked with relief, maybe happiness that one of them would be saved.

Kat narrowed her eyes with a touch of menace. “Honestly?”

They all nodded.

“She paid for our room for another week with her tips,” the girl offered up reluctantly and looked away, embarrassed.

Kat dug in her pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. “What do you want, cash or a month paid up inside?”

“Are you for real, lady?”

Kat nodded. “Fuck yeah, I’m for real. I don’t joke about money.”

“The room,” they all answered without discussing it.

“Give me a name.”

The leader volunteered hers and Kat made a quick stop inside the office. She paid for two months and then we headed to the diner.

“THERE SHE IS,” Kat whispered as if Molly could hear us from the parking lot.

Molly looked a lot like Madison only thinner and with a hard look to her face, like she’d had a much rougher life. Her hair was pulled back and her cheeks gaunt, her body skin and bone underneath the waitress uniform.

“Looks like Madison nailed it.”

“Shit, look!” Kat jumped out of the car when a man grabbed Molly by the waist and carried her out of the diner to a small one floor shack out back.

“Slow down,” I warned. “You don’t know what’s going on yet, Kat.”

She glared at me over her shoulder. “I’m not an idiot.”

She stomped toward a side window and peeked inside, leaving room for me to join her.

I wished I hadn’t because the man who was at least fifty with a beer gut, unsnapped his jeans and shoved them to his ankles before he crawled on the bed and lifted Molly’s skirt. She didn’t look frightened, just a little disgusted, when he slid a finger inside her pussy and smiled.

“Good. I love a wet cunt.” Then he shoved his cock deep, grunted like a stuck pig for about thirty seconds before busting a nut and rolling away.

“See ya next week, doll face.” The fat fuck grinned as he pulled up his pants and fastened them, leaving a few bills on the bed before he walked out.

“What the fucking fuck?” Kat’s voice radiated anger as she tapped on the window, startling Molly.

“Couples are extra,” she grunted, not bothering to cover herself which told me more than I needed to know about her life.

“How much?” Kat flashed more cash, and I groaned.

“Three fifty,” Molly shot back with attitude.

“Perfect.” Kat turned with a satisfied smile for me. “Don’t scare her,” she whispered and rounded the house before she stepped inside.

“I, uh, need to clean up first,” she said, suddenly realizing she still had jizz leaking between her legs.

“Later,” Kat said. “Your sister Madison sent me. She’s been looking for you everywhere.”

Suspicion spread across her face, coupled with disbelief. “You know Maddie?”

Kat nodded and told her the story of their meeting. “She wouldn’t take my help at first, but then the same people she believes took you, took her.”

Molly gasped. “Is Maddie all right?”

“A little beat up but she’s with my family now and they will keep her safe. You too if you’ll let me.”

Molly sighed and shook her head. “I can’t. The old preacher man said if I ran away, he’d go after her. It’s why I’m still here. I don’t want anybody fucking with her.”

“He won’t go after her. I promise you that. And if he does, he won’t live long enough to regret it.”

Kat sounded so protective and fierce; it was a fucking turn on.

“No. I can’t. When you get sick of her, she’ll have no one and then that fucker, Miller will pounce.”

“Miller?”

Kat’s blue gaze found mine. I knew what she thought before she even said it. “Mueller?”

Molly shrugged. “Some shit like that, yeah.”

Kat sighed and pulled out her phone. “If you won’t come with us, will you at least call Madison so she can stop worrying?”

“No. I can’t, dammit. If you care about Maddie at all, and it seems like you do, then tell her I’m dead so she can get on with her life.”

“You obviously don’t know your sister very well. She nearly got herself beat to death and sold off in Mexico trying to find you. Even then, she refused to stop looking. If I go back and tell her you’re dead, she’ll want to see the body and plan a funeral.”

Molly’s neutral expression hardened.

“Tell her whatever you want. Just don’t tell her where I am.” Finally, she slid off the bed and headed toward the doorless

bathroom.

“Wow,” Kat said, shooting an eyeful of scorn at Molly. “Here I thought you were a victim, but you don’t give a shit about your sister, do you? I’ll let her know I found you, and you told her to fuck off. If you change your mind, give me a call.”

She left a card on top of the money and motioned for me to follow her out of the shack.

“That was harsh, don’t you think?”

“A little, she needs to see things from Madison’s perspective.” Kat’s shoulders fell in disappointment. “I guess we’re headed back to Glitz.”

I hated that her disappointment felt like my disappointment, and even more, that I wanted to fix things for her.

“Or we can see if Molly changes her mind. Maybe the dinner shift will give her some time to think. How about I buy you a burger, Kitty Kat?” I was playing with fire and in that moment, I didn’t give a damn.

“I could eat, I suppose.”

“It’s a long drive back to Glitz,” I told her. “Maybe we ought to get in a nap before dinner, just to be safe.”

Heat sparked in her eyes at my words and a slow smile spread across her luscious lips. “There’s a lodge a few miles up the road, perfect for a cat nap.”

“A Kat nap. I like the sound of that.”

Whatever the hell craziness had taken over my mind, I was going with it.

There would be plenty of time for regret.

Later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KAT

“How is it possible that no one has seen that big ugly fuck *anywhere?*”

There was still massive fallout from Ravager’s fight. Now that we were back in Glitz, it had to be dealt with. All of it. There were plenty of people who expected to be paid for their off-book bets, and even more who wanted to know why the fuck they weren’t rolling in the cash they were promised.

Because stupid fucking Ravager refused to throw the fight. He was a pain in my ass, and I wanted to find him first and stick my stiletto in his throat, not to kill him, just to let him know how fucking pissed I was. Because I was *really* fucking pissed.

Terry sat in his usual spot in my office, the sofa against the wall that gave him an uninterrupted view of me. All day long.

“He might be a lot of things,” he said, “but Rob is no fool. He knows he fucked up and knows there will be hell to pay when we catch up to him.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but it was the truth. Whatever was going on between us, I could always count on Terry to give it to me straight.

“Someone has to be helping him, and I’ll bet it’s either the guy he was talking to when we last saw him or whoever tried to run me over.”

“Kill you, you mean,” Terry clarified, his voice dark and intense. “They tried to kill you, Kat.”

I rolled my eyes at his serious words, but my heart rate picked up. “I know that.” I couldn’t escape the fact that, other than the nights I spent in his arms, those few seconds dodging two tons of steel played in my mind all night. On repeat. And when I actually slept, they played in my dreams.

“Nightmares?” His tone was soft and sweet, at odds with the tough guy I knew him to be, and yeah, it melted me like butter.

“Some,” I admitted reluctantly because the last thing I wanted was for Terry to see me as anything less than desirable and capable. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having nightmares, Kat. Especially after a traumatic experience.” His blue eyes bore into mine, making sure I was unable to look away until I understood what he said.

I wanted to believe his long looks meant something was changing between us, but he didn’t give me anything to go on. No endearments, no talk of a future, of going public. What choice did I have but to keep my guard up with this man, otherwise my heart could get broken into so many pieces, I might never be able to put it back together again.

I scoffed, despite his tender tone. I couldn’t help myself. “My life has been a clusterfuck, filled with trauma, and I refuse to let some insignificant jackass fuck with my sleep.”

He nodded and stood, his long legs slowly carrying him closer to my desk. Terry sat on the edge and gave me a gentle, sympathetic smile. “So you are having nightmares. Tell me about them.”

“You first,” I shot back to more snark than I meant to, but he couldn’t just expect me to bare my soul when he refused to do the same. If he cared, he’d open up, right?

“I sleep just fine, Kitty Kat.” He tugged on a strand of my hair like he used to when I was a little girl, before he decided he hated my guts. “I want to know why you’re not sleeping.”

I looked up at him, blond hair gleaming in the sun that spilled in from two walls of windows, light blue eyes intense and hungry as they connected with mine.

“What if I told you that I wasn’t sleeping because you’re not with me?” It was as much of the truth as I was willing to admit to him. For now.

“You know why I can’t.” The only thing that softened the blow of his words was the regret I heard in his voice.

“I know why you *say* we can’t, but I don’t agree.” Of course, I knew that Jasper would always be a problem between us, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. “Jasper is my brother, not my father. Not my keeper. Or yours, last time I checked.”

He sighed and stood, putting a little distance between us. “Kat,” he groaned, slightly annoyed. “You know this is bad.”

I held up my hands and shook my head. “Don’t worry about it, Ter. Jasper is a good excuse. I get it.”

It stung but I refused to show him just how much.

Our little exchange proved I was right to keep an emotional distance from him. He was feeding me bullshit. I saw it coming a mile down the road. No way, Mr. Manning, will I let my guard down only for you to crush every good feeling I have. I’ll keep things as they are, friends with benefits. That’s all. Nothing would make me change my mind.

“I have some calls to make.” I picked up my cell phone and stared at Terry until he took the hint and gave me some space. For some reason, I flashed on Vanessa and her love for her late husband. But that train of thought would do me no good.

I’ll never have what she and Lance had, certainly not with Terry since he was using my brother as an excuse to keep me at arm’s length.

My first call was to my investigator since Molly had held firm on her decision not to return to Glitz with me or reach out to her sister. She was determined that Mueller was more powerful than he was, and I understood that from her perspective. How would I explain that to Madison, though? Until I figured this out, I needed Rusty to keep an eye on Molly. Make sure she was safe until Mueller was no longer a problem.

Before I could make any more calls, my office and cell phone lit up like a switchboard.

“As soon as I know, you’ll have answers,” I assured one of Sadie’s associates who’d lost six figures on the fight. “Yes, that’s straight from Sadie.”

“You should speak with Jasper about that,” I told another who wanted to know why he still hadn’t been paid for his winning bet.

“I called *you*, sweetheart.”

“The name is Kat, not sweetheart, Dale. And Jasper can give you a concrete answer, whereas I cannot.”

Sometimes I hated dealing with those douchebags, but they made up a good chunk of Ashby money because they were big time gamblers who couldn’t pick a winner if their lives depended on it. But in their minds, they were winners.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened, over dinner?”

I rolled my eyes and had to suppress the urge to vomit. “That sounds great, but you know Jasper would break your legs if he ever found out.”

My gaze lingered on Terry. I could see his ears had pricked up at this conversation. I said, “My big brother still treats me like I’m a little girl, you know?”

Dale’s deep laughter was so loud, he could be heard across the room.

“You’re definitely not a little girl, Katherine. You are all woman and definitely worth the risk.”

My dark brows arched in Terry’s direction, but I looked away because there was no point poking the bear.

“That’s nice of you to say, but this is a big win for you.” And rare. Chances were good we’d get that money back right away, and then some.

“True. Maybe another time,” he said, true regret sounding in his voice.

“Don’t forget to call Jasper,” I reminded him and ended the call with a smile. I didn’t want Dale or any other man but Terry, who apparently didn’t want me enough to deal with the fallout from Jasper.

“You are, you know.” Terry’s deep voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I looked up at him, a question in my eyes.

“Worth the risk.”

“Totally,” I said, my tone mocking his words.

“Kat, it’s true.”

I rolled my eyes at him, shaking my head. I wanted to believe him, but I couldn’t.

“I don’t need you to soothe my ego. We had a ton of fun in Reno but now we’re back in Glitz and our lives are returning to normal.” It wasn’t what I wanted, but when had that ever mattered in my life?

“I’m not trying to soothe anything. I’m just telling you the truth, even if it’s hard for you to hear.”

I laughed. “My ears work fine, Manning. I heard you loud and clear, I just don’t believe what you said.”

Our eyes locked for several long seconds, a war waging between us, with no clear winner when I finally looked away.

It was useless. What I thought might be the start of something, even if it had to be a secret for a little while, had turned out to be just another one-night stand. It was a depressing thought, one I had no desire to wallow in, so I went back to expense and booking reports. Back to the tedious details of everyday life.

And that’s how it went on Tuesday and Wednesday. A silent war between us. Terry was determined to get me to accept that Jasper was a legitimate reason that we couldn’t be together.

I refused, just as he refused to acknowledge that I was a grown ass woman who was perfectly capable of making my own decisions about who I had sex with, who I dated, and who I fell for. No matter how stupid it was.

When Thursday rolled around, Terry was feeling playful. “You plan to ignore me forever, Kat?” he said with a tease in his voice. But I wasn’t there.

It was just another sign that he didn’t care as much as I did. And that stung. Men seem to only care when their dick was hard, then they go back to their business of not caring.

“I’m not ignoring you, Terry. I am reverting back to our previous relationship. Just like you wanted.”

He’d insisted on lunch at The Bistro, during which we’d been silent and tense. Hell, it was pure torture and even Leander’s flirting couldn’t bring me out of my funk.

Later, he leaned on the top of the car. “It’s not what I want, Kat.” I yanked the door open and sat in the passenger seat.

“Bullshit.”

Since this conversation was getting us nowhere, I pulled out my phone to return a few emails and put out some corporate fires that should have been moved back to Jasper’s plate and would have been, if we weren’t still hunting down Ravager.

Terry shut the engine off, and I reached for my purse, prepared to head right to the elevator and back to my office, where I could work in tense silence for the rest of the afternoon.

But when I looked up, we weren’t at the Black Stallion. We weren’t even in Glitz, but a cozy little boutique hotel in downtown Mayhem.

“I want you, Kat. I want you more than I realized I wanted you, until I had you.”

“You want to fuck me,” I clarified angrily even as my nipples tightened to peaks and my clit throbbed in anticipation of the next hour. Maybe two.

“That’s not all I want, but it’s a damn good start.”

He’s not being honest with himself. Terry wasn’t a cruel man by nature, so I knew he had to be lying to himself. This relationship could never be more than sneaking around, which meant it could never be more than sex. *Really great sex, though.*

“It’s all we have, and I guess I’m fine with that.” At least I was trying *really* hard to be fine with it, and by the time we were locked inside the floral decorated room and tearing each other’s clothes off, I was more than a little fine with it.

On Friday, I booked a reservation at a little inn on the outskirts of Vegas and by the time we returned to my office after lunch, a little flush and a lot satisfied, I knew that just like Terry, I was also lying to myself.

It wasn’t enough.

It never would be when it came to this man.

I wanted all of him, and everything that came with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TERRY

When Sunday rolled around, I was not prepared, at least not mentally, for Sunday Dinner at Ashby Mansion. Thoughts of Kat invaded my brain and I couldn't stop thinking about her, not that I had time to erase her from my mind when we'd spent Thursday and Friday getting lost in each other.

But nothing compared to yesterday because I had four full hours to explore her beautiful body, to make her come, and to hear her scream my name. But the best part, and I knew it made me sound like a pussy, was having her in my arms while we watched some stupid comedy on the hotel television.

I was a fucking idiot for letting it continue, but the thought of Kat hating me, of thinking that I didn't want to be with her when I wanted it—badly—didn't fucking sit well with me. At all. The whole situation had disaster written all over it, but the problem was, when Kat was around, I didn't give a damn. I couldn't think of anything but her and how much I wanted her.

The family settled around the dinner table, including Emmett and Madison. "How's Kat?" Jasper, sitting next to me, leaned in and whispered the question to avoid drawing attention from the others.

"She's fine," I grunted. "You know Kat, resilient as ever."

"You find anything on *the sister*, yet?" His question had an edge to it, and I turned to look at my best friend. He was concerned, nothing more, but the fact that I thought it could be more, meant I was fucked. Eventually, I knew he'd find out.

I shook my head. “Nothing concrete,” I told him quietly, turning my head away from Madison. She missed nothing. “Just a bunch of loose ends, so far.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Kat said as she breezed into the dining room wearing jeans—again—that hugged her ass and long shapely legs. More distracting than the jeans, was the low cut pink top she wore that showed off more than a hint of cleavage. “Had some things to take care of.”

Sadie let out a huff of laughter. “That should be your theme song these days, *sorry I’m late*. We’ve been waiting.”

Said without anger or frustration, just a hint of amusement.

Kat froze, halfway to sitting and looked around the table with a frown. “Scuse me. I don’t see Bonnie, either so it’s not just me holding up dinner.”

The decanter of whiskey was in her hand before her cute little ass hit the seat, pouring three oversized glugs straight into a wine glass.

“Bonnie isn’t feeling well,” Cal said defensively.

“Yeah, what else is new,” Kat mumbled loud enough for the whole table to hear. “Fine, I’m sorry. I have so much fucking work that I don’t even get a day to myself.”

The wine glass looked close to snapping at the stem with her white-knuckled grip and I wondered what had Kat so on edge.

“What’s up with her?” Jasper’s whispered question echoed in the room as the dining room door opened and the platters of food delivered to the table.

Before I could say a word, Kat jumped in. “Why don’t you fucking ask me what’s wrong, Jas, if you actually give a damn?” She held up a hand. “Never mind, I don’t care if you do. Or not.”

The room fell silent for a quick moment, but Sadie didn’t let tension linger at the dinner table, especially on Sundays.

“I spoke to Ronan this week, several times in fact, and I’m confident he had nothing to do with the attempt on Kat’s life.”

Madison gasped and looked at the woman she thought of as a hero.

“Are you all right?” She put a worried hand on Kat’s forearm and it was the first smile she flashed since she arrived.

“I’m fine. It happened a long time ago.”

“A week isn’t that long ago, Kat.” Virgil glared at his sister, worry and anger still swimming in his eyes. “If not Ronan, who?”

“Ten days,” Kat clarified, “give or take. And my money is on Mueller. He’s got a better, more pressing reason to come after me than Ronan.”

“Because of me and Molly?” For all her toughness and street smarts, Madison was shit at hiding her emotions. She wore her guilt all over her face.

“No, Maddie, it’s because he’s a piece of shit. Got it?”

Madison nodded but from the scowl on her face, she didn’t buy it.

Smart girl.

“I’ll take care of it,” Sadie declared with the air of a queen.

Jasper shook his head and sent a worried glare my way because we both knew what that meant.

“No Ma, *I’ll* handle it. Don’t get involved. Please.”

Sadie lifted a shoulder in acknowledgement of his words, but I didn’t miss the fact that she hadn’t actually agreed not to get involved.

“Let’s eat,” she said instead and picked up two slices of roast, gracing the table with an easy, maternal smile.

“What’s up with you man, you seem distracted?” Jasper was focused today, which meant he noticed every fucking detail, including the fact that I couldn’t focus. Not on anything but Kat, anyway.

“Nothing, man. Just...everything. Ravager. Emmett. Mueller. The Rhymers. Take your pick.”

“No fucking shit,” he growled and shook his head. “And we still have no line on who killed Lance. We’ll figure it out, though,” he said confidently.

“Of course, we will,” I agreed. One thing I knew was that we’d get to the bottom of everything. Eventually. We always did.

We were a damn good team, and the only way that would continue was for Jasper to never find out I was banging his sister. His kid sister. “We always do.”

Sadie placed her fork loudly on her plate and cleared her throat. All eyes swiveled to the head of the table as she announced, “Where is Savannah Rhymer? No one has seen hide nor hair of her. I find it worrisome.”

She was more than worried if she voiced her concerns out loud because that wasn’t Sadie’s style.

“I have an investigator,” Kat offered. “He’s damn good.”

Sadie looked interested, but Jasper shut it down. “I said I have it handled,” he growled.

“Obviously not or we’d know where she’s at. It’s time to use your digital skills to see if there’s been any trace of her, Cal. If she hasn’t found her way back to Ronan yet, she’s still out there on her own.”

Cal nodded and continued to chew his dinner. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Perfect. Let me know the moment you—”

Bonnie stepped into the room with a scowl on her face, “Calvin, I need you,” she said without bothering to offer a greeting for anyone at the table.

“Oh, look who decided to show up for dinner,” Kat said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “It’s Bonnie the bitch.” Her smile was more of a sneer, and I wondered what the hell that was about.

Bonnie glared, but wisely, she stayed silent.

“Calvin,” Sadie continued. “One of my contacts managed to dig up an ali—”

“Calvin,” Bonnie whined. “I need you. Please.”

Sadie glared at the rude woman, but, strangely, said nothing to her. But to Cal she said, “Oh, for fuck’s sake. Go!” shooing him away, her anger evident in the red crawling up her neck, the way her jaws clenched.

Jasper smacked the table and stood, staring at his brother and then Bonnie. “You don’t come to dinner,” he growled, “then you don’t fucking interrupt dinner. You need a doctor, call one. This is your only warning.” To Calvin he said, “Go,” a little gentler, who then stood and hurried after his woman.

“Well,” Kat sighed. “As fun as this has been, I need to get back to the office. Someone has to keep the empire running smoothly.”

She finished off her second wine glass of whiskey with a loud, exaggerated smack of her lips, her gaze aimed at Jasper. “Do I need my babysitter or can I head to the office alone?” Her gaze glossed right over me, which was odd because yesterday we’d been fine.

Until Jasper called, a small voice reminded me.

“You’re not going alone,” Jasper told her and turned to me. “You mind spending a few hours keeping an eye on Kat? It won’t be more than a few hours, will it Kat?”

She folded her arms, a challenge in her sapphire eyes. “It’ll take however long it takes, Jas. It’s business, not a fucking fight.”

She tossed her napkin down and left the table after a quick squeeze of Sadie’s shoulder and a short hug for Maisie.

I followed Kat out to her car, where she hurriedly snapped in the seatbelt and her gaze focused on the phone in her hand.

As soon as I got in and started the car, I said, “You’re in a fine mood today.”

She shrugged. “I am who I am, Terry.”

She was pissed, and I was sure I was the reason. “You mad at me, Kitty Kat?” Before she could answer, I put the car in gear and placed my right hand on her thigh.

“To be mad at you, Terry, we’d have to be more than fuck buddies. Which we are not.”

“We’re also friends.” My hand slid up her denim covered thigh as the car rolled through the gates of Ashby Manor. “Aren’t we?” I let my pinky finger brush her pussy through her jeans until she moaned.

“Mutual acquaintances,” she said on a lusty gasp. “At best.”

“That’s not true,” I told her and added more pressure to the seam that covered her clit, making her gasp and moan inside the quiet car. “Say it’s not true, Kat.”

“No,” she insisted with a mischievous smile. “It is true. Absolutely true,” she moaned as I applied more pressure.

“Stubborn little bitch,” I laughed because she could deny it all she wanted, but by the time we pulled into the parking garage, she was halfway to an orgasm. Her skin was flushed pink and slightly slick from exertion, she was fucking beautiful.

“That’s Miss Bitch, to you, Manning.” Her lips curled into a devious smile as we stepped onto the elevator because she knew there was nothing I could do with all the cameras in the garage and the elevator.

But I was good at biding my time. “I was thinking sexy bitch, maybe even kinky bitch.”

Kat arched a dark brow at me. “Or your personal favorite? Rich bitch.”

The doors slid open, and I moved in close enough to whisper in her ear. “*You’re* my favorite, Kat. Period.”

I didn’t miss the gasp she let out as she marched to her office to get away from me and the way I made her feel. I didn’t blame her at all, one of us had to be smart about this, and I was incapable of being anything but stupid where Kat was concerned. “Don’t confuse things, Terry. I don’t like it.”

I closed the door and frowned at Kat when she got in my face, her blue eyes practically black with some emotion I couldn't name.

"I'm just as confused as you are, Kitty Kat."

"Bullshit," she growled and pushed at my chest.

I grabbed her by the wrists and pulled her close. "It's not bullshit, it's the truth. Even if it scares you."

"Scares me?" She laughed. "Nothing scares me, Terry. Not even you."

She pushed at my chest again and walked over to her desk, unbuttoning her jeans as her gaze lasered in on mine.

"But we do want the same thing right now." She shoved her jeans down her legs and turned to bend over her desk, giving me the perfect view of her heart shaped ass.

Shit. She was right about one thing and that was how much I wanted her. Right now. Even from a few feet away I could see how wet her pussy was, how it glistened between her thighs.

"Kat," I said on a tortured breath.

"Come on, Terry. Fuck me. Give us both what we want. What we need."

She wiggled her ass and it was like a magnet, pulling me closer and closer until I had a handful of her ass in my hands, squeezing and kneading while her moans echoed off the walls.

Her head fell to the desk when I slid two fingers inside her and found her dripping wet.

"Yes!" she said, telling me I'd found the spot.

"All for me?"

"Terry," she growled, her voice a warning that made my dick even harder. "Now."

"Right now?" Even as I teased her with my fingers, my other hand worked quickly to free my cock and get inside her.

"Oh fuck. Such a sweet little cunt," I told her and licked her juices off my fingers.

Her pussy clenched and pulsed around me and I knew she was close to orgasm. “Fuck. Yes!”

This was a much different fuck from yesterday where I held her through a powerful orgasm that brought tears to her eyes. Today she wanted it hard and fast to match her anger, and I was too hard, too far gone to do anything but give Kat what she wanted.

I hated that I couldn't see her blue eyes or the way she bit down on her bottom lip when pleasure overwhelmed her, but this was what she wanted. What she needed. And I was a man who loved a fine ass and Kat's was one of the finest, with just enough jiggle. Smacking her ass hard while I fucked her from behind made my cock harder and harder.

But it wasn't enough.

I grabbed her by the hair and pulled until her back was pressed to my chest. I wrapped one hand around her throat and used the other to play with her clit while my dick invaded every inch of her cunt. She gasped in my arms as I tightened my grip on her throat and slammed into her until she trembled and vibrated.

“Terry, oh fuck! Yes!”

I fucked her hard. Fast. The air around us thick with desire and tension, the only sound was her moans of pleasure, my grunts and the sound of my cock plunging into her wet pussy.

“I love the way your pussy is so greedy for my cock,” I growled in her ear.

“Then give me more,” she choked out on a labored breath.

I did just that, bending her over so she was trapped between me and the desk. I pumped into her cunt until pleasure exploded and her pussy nearly strangled my cock.

“Oh, fuck yes! Yes! Fuck...yes!” Even after she collapsed against the desk, her pussy continued to milk my cock until my own orgasm shot from my body and straight into hers.

“Fuck, Kat! Babe, yes!” I continued to thrust into her, unwilling to step away from the wet heat of her pulsing cunt.

Or how good she made me feel.

I was so thoroughly fucked but being buried inside Kat, I didn't give a shit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KAT

I'd spent more time daydreaming about Terry over the past two days than I had throughout most of my teens, which was pretty fucking sad because I was a grown woman in charge of a multi-million dollar operation.

I wasn't some lovelorn teenager. *Oh yes you are!* that sarcastic little bitch who lived inside my head reminded me, and the kicker was, she was right.

Even though I knew I shouldn't be daydreaming about the man, or the way he'd fucked me on my desk two nights ago, I was.

But it wasn't just his cock or the orgasms that had me drooling over him, the worst part was the way he made me laugh. The way he held me last night, like I was precious, or the way he'd made shrimp scampi for me because he remembered how much I liked it. Put all of that together, and I had no doubt, I was in love with Terry Manning.

A man who was currently doing a pretty impressive impersonation of rock or stone at the moment. He was entirely too fucking good at hiding his emotions. He gave nothing away, not with his gaze or his touch, and certainly not with his words. I felt like I was in love all by myself and that feeling sucked.

A quick glance at the man of stone as he maneuvered into the parking lot of House of Ashby, and the truth was, I *was* in this

alone. Completely and totally alone. Even if Terry felt what I felt, he respected Jasper more. Which also sucked.

But I wasn't going to pout about it or push him. I wasn't even going to be the angry, passive-aggressive bitch I'd been at Sunday dinner. I was going to be the strong, independent woman I was, and slowly learn how to live without him. While enjoying the crazy hot sex for however long it lasted.

As soon as the car came to a stop, I grabbed my bag and stepped out.

"I'll be about twenty minutes. I hope." Ravager still hadn't surfaced and at this point, it was no surprise. But I still needed to talk to Rachel Cruz and the other winners about doing more promo. Right now, the whole world was talking about them, and we needed to capitalize on that to make up for the money Ravager had cost us.

Even though my thoughts were on business, I couldn't help but feel like I was being watched as I walked across the parking lot. Again, maybe even still. At this point, I wasn't sure anymore. I wasn't even sure someone *was* watching me, but the feeling lingered whenever I was out in public. I walked a little faster, ignoring Terry's masculine scent or his proximity.

The creepy sensation followed me inside the gym, so I tried to focus on my job. I studied the fighters lifting weights and jumping rope, sparring. I watched their movement exercises, the way they hit the bag, and all of those details helped me worry about what was important. The company. The fighters. Yet, through all that, the feeling stuck with me that there were eyes on me, but I shook it off and slipped easily into the role of barracuda. It was what everyone expected, and I was happy to do it. More than happy, at the moment.

"Emmett, you're looking much better." I wrapped him in a hug and smiled, happy to see he was getting back to his old self.

"Much better than hell? Thanks, I think." He stepped back with a friendly smile on his face, the bruises fading and cut healing. But I could see the way tension had settled in his

shoulders and the wary tone in his voice. “What brings you by?”

“A few things. I need to talk to a few fighters about promo stuff, but I wanted to check in with you to see if you’d seen or heard from Ravager?”

It was a long shot and I knew he would have said something if his fighter had reached out to him, but I had to ask.

Emmett shook his head and raked a hand through brown hair that had grown longer than I’d ever seen it.

“Nah, haven’t seen him and I don’t think I will. But I’ve had plenty of time to think while waiting for the bruises to heal.” He let out a bitter laugh and shook his head, “and I think someone put him up to it.”

Interesting. “Really? What makes you think that?”

“I don’t have any proof, but a couple of days before the fight I spotted a new gold watch on his wrist. At first, I just chalked it up to him getting an advance based on the odds released before the fight. Now, after all that’s happened, I don’t know.”

He shrugged again and his eyes took on a far-off look that said he wasn’t finished. “I know what went down, Kat. I wouldn’t have agreed to it, but I know how these things work sometimes.”

I nodded, acknowledging his words. “I know, Em, but I didn’t want to put you in that position.”

“And the others?” I knew what he was asking. I could feel Terry’s gaze on us from across the gym, so I shook my head.

“Just Rob. If you see him or if he reaches out, tell him he needs to talk to Jasper, will you?”

“Sure will. Believe me.”

I laughed at the hint of vengeance in his tone. “I do. But now we need to talk to a few fighters.” Emmett groaned and I laughed. “Since I’m already here, it’ll be easier to get them all scheduled for press and photo ops at once. We don’t want the public forgetting about our fight card.”

He nodded reluctantly and thirty minutes later, we had interviews, signings, and youth outreach scheduled for our champs. “It’s all on the books,” Emmett told them all, “but put them in your personal schedules, because I’ll only remind you the day before. Back to work.”

The fighters dispersed and I turned back to Emmett with a smile. “As soon as your face isn’t green and yellow, we’ll get you back out there too.”

He nodded and let out a loud laugh. “Never thought I’d be so damn happy to be all busted up and ugly.”

“Hey, I’ll bet you get tons of women if you did some press like this,” I motioned to his face with a laugh. “In fact, if that’s what you want—”

“I’m good, Kat. Thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” I told him with a shrug. “And thanks, Em.”

“My pleasure, Kat.” His smile changed a little, and my stomach tightened in anticipation. “So, you and Terry, huh?”

I froze, wondering if Terry had said something, a thought that pushed a bitter laugh from deep in my gut. *Of course, he didn’t say anything, he’s too worried about Jasper finding out.*

“Nope. Not at all.”

“Not even a little bit?” He smiled and held up his thumb and forefinger a few centimeters apart.

“If you must know, it’s just sex. For now.” When Emmett’s shoulders fell in disappointment, I felt an even greater fondness for him.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Me too, but it is what it is. I’ll see you around, Em.”

I couldn’t think of the confusion that was me and Terry, not now. Not with him so close and my feelings so raw. I kept my head held high and signaled Terry we were leaving. We marched through House of Ashby until we were outside and the feeling of being watched intensified.

“What’s the hurry?” Terry’s long legs caught up to me quickly. “Can’t stand the stench of gym sweat?”

I glared at him and shook my head. “No, I feel like someone is watching me.”

Terry smiled. “You’re a beautiful woman. People are always watching you. Don’t tell me this is the first time you’ve noticed?”

The honesty mixed with amusement in his voice made my heart skip a beat, because that was how far gone I was over this man. Even backhanded compliments made me feel good, and I blushed like a schoolgirl.

I shook my head, refusing to respond to his unintended compliment. Terry was trying to be a peacekeeper, to keep me from getting upset about our lack of a future without decimating my confidence. I appreciated it and loved him even more for it, but I couldn’t let it matter.

“Emmett thinks Ravager came into some cash right before the fight.” I texted Cal and Jasper the information to see if anything came of it.

“You think someone else paid him to win the fight?”

“Possibly.”

That narrowed the list considerably if that was the case. There were only a few people who knew enough to know the damage his win would do to the Ashby family.

“It’s getting late. Want to have dinner with me in Mayhem, Kitty Kat?”

I should have told him to shove his invitation up his gorgeous ass. I should have just said no, but the smile that spread across my face at his question was unstoppable, as was the rapid beat of my heart. I was too gone, too in love to say no. I’d grab any chance I had to spend time with him.

“I’d love to.”

It was probably the closest I’d ever get to saying *those* words to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TERRY

“Any progress on Madison’s sister?” Jasper and I shared a back booth at Midnight Mass, catching up since I’d been spending most of my time with another Ashby. *Kat*. Dinner in Mayhem had been more romantic than I’d intended, but the Japanese steakhouse had offered up a private terrace for a starlight meal and a little too much Japanese whisky.

“Well?”

I blinked away the memories of that whisky and the tangled hotel sheets, the thick brown hair draped across my chest. The slow, sensual goodbye later that morning.

“Nothing good. She’s alive but not willing to give us any details or provide her sister with any peace. Kat and I are both fairly sure the old dude called Miller is actually Mueller.”

“Fuck. It was too much to hope that it was all some big fucking coincidence, I suppose.”

Lines of strain showed around his eyes and mouth, the uncharacteristic way he raked his hands through his hair. “You think he’ll come after Madison?”

I nodded and took another pull of my beer.

“If I were him, I wouldn’t let it go. She might not be able to name him, but she’s seen his face. If she sees one local mass service or one of his many appearances in the newspaper, it could be all over for him.”

In response, Jasper drained his beer and motioned to the waitress for another. “Between Mueller, the fucking green Lambo fiasco and the mysterious fucking resurrection of Brendan Rhymer and his sister who’s in the wind, I’m about to lose my shit, man.”

I could see the truth of his words in the tense set of his shoulders, the way his gaze jumped around the room, from other diners, to the servers, and finally back to me.

“No other sightings of Brendan?” I asked to get his attention.

Jasper shook his head. “Or Savannah, goddammit.” His hand smacked the table hard enough to draw stares just as two more beers arrived at the table.

“Thanks,” I said and smiled at the server to assure her all was good.

“Look man, we know Brendan is alive and that he was probably the figure Bonnie saw in the parking lot.” If she even saw anyone. With her behavior lately, she wasn’t a reliable witness in my eyes. “He seems to be getting off on this cloak and dagger shit. We should put a team on finding him and nothing else.”

He gave me a guarded look over his beer. Before he took a swig, he asked, “And where would you like them to start?”

I shrugged. “Who gives a shit? Tear every inch of Glitz apart until they find him. Casinos and card rooms, whore houses, clubs, and anywhere else he might have an ally or a place to hide.”

Brendan was hiding out somewhere, that much I knew. We just had to find out where.

“Do it. Can’t make things any worse.”

And that was exactly why I couldn’t let this thing with Kat go too far, because it was one more *thing* and that might be the *thing* that forced Jasper to do something reckless. Or worse.

“Anyone laid eyes on Ravager yet?”

Jasper shook his head and sucked back half of his beer. “Don’t even fucking get me started on that fucker.”

Frustration rolled off of him in waves. I felt bad for the guy, but it was the burden of being the man in charge.

Maureen sauntered over to our booth, her giant tits leading the way and her dimpled smile aimed right at Jasper. “Hey Boss Man, figured you might need this.” She set down two double shot glasses and a bottle of Black Barrel Jameson.

Jasper looked up, his gaze lingered on the strawberry blonde’s tits for just a moment before the disappointed slope of his brows told me he remembered she was twenty-two and his employee.

“Not that I don’t appreciate a good shot of whiskey, Maureen, but why do I need Jameson’s? Christ, don’t tell me you’re leaving.”

His tone and the pleading in his eyes said Jas couldn’t take another blow. Not today.

Maureen’s dimpled smile widened. “Like you could get rid of me that easily, handsome. I figured you must’ve heard by now.”

The amusement in her eyes dimmed as she nodded towards the TV mounted on the wall. “I guess not. Hang on.” Even in anger and frustration, his gaze lingered on her ass when she turned to grab the remote and unmute the TV.

That meant he wasn’t anywhere close to the breaking point. Yet.

Maureen cranked the volume on the TV closest to our table and Jasper groaned as the story aired.

“Parochial Vicar, deputy to beloved local priest Bishop Dietrich Mueller was found murdered earlier today in an alley off of Seventh Street and Liddell Avenue known for drugs, prostitution and crime. Authorities say robbery does not appear to be the motive as he was found with his wallet and valuables. Is this part of a recent crime spree or another hate crime against members of the clergy? Tanya Torres has more. Tanya?”

Jasper grabbed the Jameson’s with fire in his eyes. “Fuck me, this shit doesn’t end!” He pulled the cork on the bottle and

poured until both glasses were filled to the brim. “Thanks Mo.”

“No problem. You boys want something to soak up the booze?” Her gaze bounced between us, a haunted look now in her eyes.

“Fish and chips with extra tartar for me, thanks Mo.”

She glared at me. “Mo now, am I, Ter?”

I shrugged. “Extra fries too. *Maureen.*”

“That’s better. And you Jasper, what’ll it be?”

“Just the stew of the day and biscuits. Lots and lots of biscuits. Please.”

Her lips quirked into an amused grin that Jasper missed and she shrugged. “Coming up soon. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I figured you wanted to know.”

“You did the right thing, and I appreciate it.”

“Yep.”

As soon as Maureen was out of ear shot, Jasper turned to me with a look of disbelief on his face. “What the fuck?”

We both knew exactly *what* the fuck, or rather who. “Another dead priest isn’t exactly a reason to mourn. I’m just sad it’s not Mueller. That would make both our lives a little easier.”

“A lot fucking easier,” he growled. “But this is close enough to Mueller to be seen as a threat.” And the Ashby family was the only group brave enough to take that fucker on, and it was no secret in certain circles in Glitz.

It wasn’t a threat so much as it was a promise that more dead priests would turn up, and soon, until the matter was solved. Until then, every so-called man of God should be worried. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I want you to keep an eye on Kat. She’s not gonna like it, and she’ll probably fight you every step of the way, but I need you to keep her safe.”

“You know I will.” There was nothing I wouldn’t do for the Ashby family and Kat especially, but Jasper didn’t need to know that. He had enough shit on his plate as it was. “I’ll head over to Emerald Isle as soon as I finish my fish and fries.”

Jasper shook his head. “Another dead priest means the Feds will show their heads around again. And soon.”

And when law enforcement started digging around, they always found a reason to stick around until they found something to justify their digging.

“Fucking Feds,” I grumbled. “You have any idea who’s killing the priests? Isn’t Rhymer in with them?” I took one last shot of whiskey just before Maureen arrived with the food. I needed to be clear headed to keep Kat safe, and to avoid any stupid mistakes that might make shit weird between me and my best friend.

“No idea. But I’ll get to the bottom of it.” Jasper took another long drink and said, “These fuckers think they can get over on us, but they have another think coming.”

I just nodded.

We finished most of our meal in silence, both of us lost in thought about too much shit to voice. We had done as much talking as either of us planned to do, so we let the carbs and the grease soak up the alcohol until I stood, ready to see Kat. Again.

“We should have Cal look into who purchased that green Lambo,” I said, “just for peace of mind.”

Jas looked up from his pool of troubled thoughts. “He’s already on it. Brendan had to get it from somewhere if it was even him. See ya later, man.”

I gave one last wave and walked out of Midnight Mass just as the sun started to sink below the horizon. It was a quick drive to the casino, just enough for the crisp desert air to give me a much needed burst of energy. As the elevator rose to the top floor, I took several deep breaths and waited for the nervousness, the anticipation at seeing Kat again to fade.

Her effect on me should have lessened by now since I'd had her—multiple times—but when I opened the door and she looked up with an excited smile and slightly aroused look on her face, I swear that fucking feeling intensified.

“I don't remember ordering a hot blond for dinner.” When she flashed that smile at me, I knew I was in deep trouble.

Deep *fucking* trouble.

Because out of all the beautiful women in Glitz, hell in Las Vegas proper, I had to go and fall for Kat Ashby.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KAT

“Kat, so nice of you to join us.”

Sadie’s smile softened the blow of her words and I just rolled my eyes.

“I left the office as soon as I could, Ma.”

The truth was that I left as soon as I could tear myself out of Terry’s arms and even that was too soon as far as I was concerned.

“Did I miss anything?”

“Nothing but a few drinks.” Sadie had decided it would be nice to have a dinner with just the girls since Sunday dinners had mostly become a de facto business meeting. That left Madison and Bonnie out of those conversations, though honestly it was unclear if Bonnie even wanted to be part of the family. Not that she had a choice.

Sadie brought her glass to her lips and asked, “How are things?” before taking a sip.

“Fine,” I sighed and took the empty seat between Sadie at the head of the table and Madison to my right. Bonnie sulked across from us.

“Busy but everything is going just as it should, well except for the never-ending fallout from Ravager’s disappearance.”

I was sure he had help from somewhere but until Jasper believed the same thing, it was a moot point.

“It will sort itself out, I promise.”

She flashed a tight smile that said Ma wasn't as calm as she pretended to be, but her message was clear. Pretend for the sake of the other women at the table.

“I know this is supposed to be some kind of ladies bonding type of meal,” Madison leaned over and whispered with a smirk, “but I'm dying to know if you have any news on Molly?”

Shit. I knew Madison wouldn't let it go, and I didn't blame her, but with the death of Mueller's deputy, keeping her safe was top priority.

“So far all dead ends. I haven't found any evidence that she's dead but every time we have a lead, we've just missed her.”

That wasn't technically a lie and I hadn't given up on changing Molly's mind yet. But Mueller had to be dealt with permanently, first.

“Well that's shitty,” she grumbled, pouting into a glass of red wine as the food came out.

“I know and I'm sorry, but I promise to keep you in the loop, Madison.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And I appreciate it Kat. Thanks.”

The pain was alive in her eyes. The agony of not knowing whether or not her family was still alive touched me to the core. I wouldn't stop trying with Molly until one of us was dead.

“No worries. How's work?” I asked to switch topics. Ma had put her wicked math skills to use at one of the off-books card games, and Madison used her sharp wit and smart mouth to score a hit as well.

“The players are salty and the money is good, so I can't complain.” She dug into the food on the table, a sign she was done talking, probably for the night.

Maisie and Bonnie had both been suspiciously quiet, but I didn't have the patience to deal with Bonnie's shit, so I turned

my focus to my girl Maisie. “How are wedding plans coming along, Maze?”

She perked up at the topic of conversation, a bright smile lighting up her face. “Slow but I’m making progress.” Her gaze turned hesitant and wary as she slid a glance to a sullen Bonnie.

“Actually Kat, I wanted to ask if you wouldn’t mind helping me out? You’re better at all this fancy wedding shit.”

Sadie laughed. “It’s your wedding honey, you pick what will make the day most memorable for you. Virgil only cares that the day ends with you as his wife.”

Bonnie’s derisive snort drew an ice-cold look from Sadie, who surprisingly said nothing.

“I know, but I’d like some input. I always wanted it to be me and my girls doing the planning,” she sighed, “but with everything going on it’s been mostly a solo effort.”

And judging by her glaring silence, Bonnie was being an unhelpful asshole. *Bitch*. I didn’t know what her deal was, but I planned to find out soon. Like I didn’t already have enough on my plate.

“I didn’t realize that was a thing, but I’m happy to offer my expert advice on your wedding.” I smirked and Maisie’s smile widened.

“Thanks. Smart ass.”

“Precisely why you need my advice.”

She flipped me off and I laughed because, damn it was nice to have a sister.

“To Maisie and Virgil for giving us another reason to celebrate!”

“Cheers to that shit,” Madison said with a grin and finished off her glass of wine. “Sadie, dinner was great, but I’m gonna try to get a nap in before tonight’s card game.”

She walked out of the dining room with a bounce in her step that told me she was doing better than when she’d arrived. Her

scars had healed, mostly, and she was showing more signs of life, despite the uncertainty about her sister.

“She seems to be doing well,” Maisie observed when Madison was gone.

“She is,” Sadie agreed. “That haunted look is still there, but it will be until she has her sister back.”

“Maybe helping plan Bonnie’s baby shower will be another nice distraction,” Maisie offered with a cautious smile that pissed me off. Why should any of us be walking on eggshells for Bonnie, who couldn’t be bothered to act like she wanted to be part of the family?

“I don’t want a baby shower.” Bonnie’s words were quiet but there was a hint of steel in them that said she’d given this decision a lot of thought.

Maisie frowned. “Why not? This baby is a reason to celebrate.”

“I just don’t, Maisie. Is that all right with you?” The table fell silent at her outburst.

“Fine. Whatever.” The hurt that shone in Maisie’s blue eyes set my gut on fire.

“What’s with the bitchy fucking attitude lately, Bonnie? If you don’t want to be a part of this family, you know where the door is.”

Sadie might be willing to let her behavior go since she was carrying an Ashby child, but I wouldn’t.

She looked up, feigned hurt in her eyes that I didn’t give a fuck about. “I just don’t want a baby shower,” she snapped.

“Don’t worry, none of us want to celebrate a fucking thing with you anyway.” I snorted in disgust and took a sip of wine, refusing to let Bonnie ruin my night. “There’s a boutique that just opened up in Mayhem, Maze, we can look there for dresses. Maybe you want to invite your aunt?”

She perked up at that idea and nodded. “Send me the details and I’ll set something up.” Her excitement was palpable, and I

couldn't help but love a girl who was so eager to marry one of my lug head brothers.

I picked up my phone and shot over the details with a smile. "Done. Oh, and you should talk to the casino event planner, Lana. Even if you don't want her help, she can give you all the good places to go for all your wedding needs."

Maisie laughed. "You sound like a commercial for the casino."

"Job hazard."

"Are we all just gonna pretend like another priest didn't get murdered?" Bonnie's question was angry and dark and came out of nowhere.

Sadie sighed with more patience than I knew she possessed and put her fork down. "Would you like to talk about it, Bonnie?"

She shrugged; gaze fixed on her plate. "What's there to say?"

"You brought it up," I growled. "So fucking talk about it if you have something to say."

"Did they find out who killed him?"

"No, but the police are investigating. If you have any information," Sadie said slowly, "I'm sure they would welcome the help."

Shit. That was a dare wrapped up in a threat if I've ever heard one. Bonnie had better tread carefully.

"What would be the point? They probably won't find anything," she shot back angrily. "Or will they?"

"If there's no evidence, probably not. Given how wrong they were about you murdering Father Eric and what it cost you, I would think you'd be happy they're taking their time to solve the crime."

Sadie's reminder had the desired effect of shutting Bonnie the hell up.

Thank goodness.

“So Kat, how was your road trip with Terry?” The sparkle in Sadie’s eyes made me wonder if she’d seen something she shouldn’t.

“It was...*interesting*.”

Ma’s bark of laughter had my hand reaching for the decanter of whisky.

“Oh please, that boy has had it bad for you since his balls dropped.”

She fucking snorted at that. So did Maisie, surprisingly.

“No, he doesn’t. Terry barely tolerates me. And what do you know about his balls, anyway?” Way less than I did for sure. “He’s only around because Jas asked him to babysit me.”

“Bullshit,” Sadie laughed. Again. “You’re so clueless that I almost feel sorry for you.”

Maisie shook her head in disbelief. “How can someone be so good at business and so oblivious when it comes to her love life?” To bring her point home, she raised a fresh glass of wine in my direction. “To Kat, finally figuring it out.”

I shook my head, not because they were wrong, but because I refused to let that hope take up residence in my heart. It was foolish and would only lead to inevitable heartbreak. The fact that we were still running around, enjoying each other’s company on the sly, told me he would never be mine. Not really.

“Jasper won’t be happy about it, but it’s up to you and Terry,” Ma advised. “He’s protective, possessive of you both. His best friend and his only sister,” she sighed. “Where will that leave him?”

“Exactly where he is now, with Terry at his side and me filling in for him at HOA. He has nothing to worry about, trust me.”

But I couldn’t stop thinking about Ma’s words during dinner and afterwards.

Was Jasper really worried about losing his best friend to his younger sister? *No*, the answer came quickly. He would be pissed because it was something he couldn’t control.

Well he can't control me, I thought later as I paced the length of my living room, anxious and unable to stop thinking about Terry. Thinking was getting me nowhere, so after a quick shower and change, I grabbed my keys and went to the man in person. The drive was too short for me to gather my thoughts, so I went straight to the front door and knocked while my heart beat like crazy inside my chest.

The locks disengaged and the door opened to reveal Terry's squinting face. "Kat?"

I nodded and took a step forward. "It's me. Invite me in, Terry."

He stood up taller and slid one hand through his mussed hair, a smile slowly spreading across his face as he took a step back.

"You don't need an invite Kat."

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Terry's tone was half sleepy and half curious, his shirtless body making my mouth water.

"I knew you wouldn't come to me, and I wanted to see you. Is that all right?"

Suddenly I felt nervous, like the gawky teenage girl who'd fallen for him all those years ago. My heart raced against my chest like a runaway train, expecting the worst.

"It is. I just saw you. Earlier." His lips quirked into a lazy grin that I desperately wanted to kiss.

I took a step forward. "That was earlier. This is now." I felt as if this was something different between us. Something new. The heat swirled around us; the air electrified as we each moved until we were toe to toe. Eye to eye.

"Hey, Ter."

His lips curled up again. "Hey, Kat. Good to see you."

I put a hand on his shoulder and slid it up until the slight scruff of his jaw scraped against my palm. “It’s good to be seen by you.” *Finally*, my heart whispered. It was so damn good to look into those blue eyes and see the heat and appreciation. So, so good.

“Yeah?” His smile stole my breath and nearly melted my panties, so I just nodded. “Good,” he growled and brushed my hair aside so he could put his lips to that strip of skin between my neck and shoulder. “Very good.”

I moaned at the feel of his lips on my skin, his hands gripping my ass gently. “Terry.”

“I’m right here, Kitty Kat.”

I laughed, wondering how I ever could have hated that damn nickname because now, nothing sounded better coming from his lips. Except the moan I pulled from him when the back of my hand grazed his cock over his gray sweatpants.

“I can feel that,” he moaned.

I couldn’t wait any longer to taste those smiling lips, practically attacking him the way I wanted to do from the moment I knew what kissing a man felt like. This kiss was different, it wasn’t just hot and hungry and full of need. I mean, it *was* all those things but it was also something more. Something deeper as I slid my tongue between his lips, savoring the taste of maple syrup. “Pancakes?”

Terry laughed. “Waffles. For dinner,” he shrugged as if he thought I might judge him.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any more of that maple syrup, would you?”

It was my turn to laugh when his blue eyes darkened with heat and his hands tightened on my ass.

“You tryin’ to kill me, Kat?”

I took a step back and shook my head. “No, Terry, I’m trying to taste you.” I licked my lips and stuck my hand into the elastic waistband of his sweatpants that did nothing to hide the effect I had on him. His cock was hot and hard, that layer of

velvet skin so irresistible I groaned as I gripped him and stroked in long slow strokes that pulled an erotic moan from him.

“Kat,” he growled and reached for my wrist, removing it from his sweatpants and tossing me over his shoulder in one smooth move, making only one short stop before he deposited me in the middle of his bed.

His mattress was firm but with a pillowtop that gave it just enough bounce to be fun. He stood at the foot of the bed; face twisted into carnal agony thanks to the erection tenting his sweats. In his hand, a small bottle of maple syrup.

“Gimme,” I smirked.

He smiled and held the bottle just out of my reach, forcing me off the bed.

“Come and get it.”

Oh, the teasing version of Terry was my absolute favorite, especially with his hair all mussed and his lips parted in a smile. I stood and grabbed the sash on my dress, giving it a tug until the knot unraveled and let the black wraparound fall to his bedroom floor.

“Fuck,” he growled at the sight of me in barely there lace the exact color of his eyes.

“That’s the idea, but first...the syrup.”

Before he could play more games, I grabbed the bottle and dropped to my knees, thankful he’d sprung for the plush carpeting even though nothing could have kept me from tasting his cock in that moment. In one quick yank, those sweatpants were around his ankles, his cock jutted out right in my face, a small pearl of liquid teasing me at his slit.

“Such a pretty cock.”

He grunted out a laugh as I took his cock in one hand and wrapped my mouth around the tip, sucking hard enough to make his legs quiver.

“Kat.”

“That’s me,” I told him with a smile as I popped the lid on the bottle and poured a light drizzle of syrup at the base of his cock, mesmerized by the path the liquid took over the thick vein that snaked toward the head of his shaft. “And this...is you,” I moaned and slowly licked and sucked the syrup from his cock. His balls. It was, without a doubt, the best, the hottest fucking blow job I’d ever given and my panties were soaked, my own body shook in anticipation as I savored the taste of him, knowing our time together was limited.

“Oh fuck, Kat!” One hand fisted in my hair, gently but tight enough to make my pussy clench. I took him deeper, loving the way his cock swelled and hardened in my mouth.

“Kat,” he growled once more as his hips started to move. He was close.

So fucking close.

I moaned as I felt his precome coat my tongue and took him even deeper so he could feel my throat close around the tip of his cock and he lost it. Knowing that I, Kat Ashby, had the skills to make this big strong man lose all sense of control, was empowering. I kept this cock in my mouth, licking up every drop and sucking until he was completely spent.

“Definitely a fan of you plus syrup,” I told him with a laugh.

But Terry wasn’t laughing, his expression was a blend of serious and aroused as he pulled me to my feet and pushed me onto the bed.

“Definitely a fan of you sucking me off like I’m your last meal.”

Last meal. It sounded ominous as hell and I didn’t want to think about our last anything. Not now. Not ever. I licked my lips and spread my legs, teasing him. “I’m hoping that was just an appetizer.” In more ways than one.

Terry said nothing, just smiled a salacious smile as he knelt on the bed and crawled between my legs. He didn’t even slide a finger inside to see if I was wet, just put his mouth to my pussy with no regard for the lingerie which only caused more friction in combination with his lips and tongue and teeth. He

tortured my pussy with his mouth and the scratchy lace like he had something to prove and I was happy, deliriously happy with every stroke of his tongue, every nibble of his teeth.

“Oh my...fuck!” My hips bucked off the bed once and Terry held me down, forcing me to take every lashing of his tongue without moving. His lips puckered around my clit, the motion making the little button vibrate vigorously which only caused more friction with the lace.

“Terry...please. I. Need. You.”

He sucked even harder at my words until my body shook with the force of an earthquake, the orgasm roaring through me until I felt as though I was drowning in ecstasy. Until I was certain that he could see the love I had for him written all over my face.

“Need, huh?” His words came out on a growl and all I could do was nod as wave after wave of pleasure rolled over my body.

“Tell me,” he demanded, and my eyes popped open.

His blue eyes were intense. Serious. Patient as if he really wanted an answer. “I need you, Terry. Now. I need you on me. I need you inside me.” *I just need you.*

My orgasm was still going when his cock slid deep, filling me so slowly that it only stretched out my pleasure as he touched all my exposed nerves until he was right where I needed him.

“Feel the way your pussy wraps around my cock? Almost as good as the way your mouth sucked me.”

His words forced a blush up my entire body. “Almost?”

Terry gripped my hips and his slow strokes had rainbow sparks shooting off behind my eyes as he gripped my thighs and pushed them towards my chest. “When I fuck you like this, your pussy is sucking my cock.”

“Terry,” I gasped as every stroke rubbed my clit and sent another earthquake through my body.

“And when I fuck you hard and fast like this,” he growled and pounded into my body over and over again until my eyes

rolled in the back of my head. “Your tits jiggle so beautifully it’s like a real-life fucking porno right here in my bed.”

His hands gripped my tits and he fucked me hard, the jackhammer motion even better than my vibrator.

“Who needs batteries when I have you?”

His hips kept a furious pace as my body screamed pleasure. I was powerless to do anything but take what he gave me, accept the pleasure he pumped into my body.

“Kat. What are you doing to me, woman?” He stopped abruptly and I let out a cry of despair, but he flipped me over and raised my hips. I winced when his palm flew across my ass. Then the back of his hand. Over and over. The heat from his hand intensified, making my nerves more sensitive and when his slick finger found my asshole, I bucked against him so hard he almost toppled over.

“Terry! Yes!” Like a rabid dog, I growled out, “Fuck me!” and pushed my hips back to take all of him. He leaned forward, his chest flush against my back, his lips and tongue on my neck once again as his deep strokes worked my body into an unstoppable frenzy. One hand gripped my hip and the other found a nipple to knead and tease as his cock drove into me, hard and deep.

The orgasm started in my toes and moved up my body at a glacial pace, allowing me to savor each time his cock plunged into me. One tear slid down my cheek and then another. And another. When the orgasm hit my core, everything poured out of me. Tears flooded my cheeks and sweat dripped from my body as it convulsed with pleasure. Between my thighs, a rush of liquid made Terry’s strokes smoother, more intense as he found his own pleasure. “Terry,” I gasped.

“Kat,” he grunted in response.

“I love you, Terry.”

The words came out barely above a whisper, and I wondered if he heard me, if he’d responded. I drifted off to sleep before I had an answer.

CHAPTER THIRTY

TERRY

I love you Terry.

Kat told me last night before she drifted off to sleep that she loved me. She said them again when I filled her pussy with my cock and her sweet little ass with a finger, bringing her so much pleasure it brought tears to her eyes. *I love you.* The words came easily and even in the heat of passion, I knew she meant them.

I was just too much of a fucking coward to say them back. I wanted to, fuck, how I wanted to say those words to her freely. To have the right to say them to her and not blow up my whole fucking life. But I didn't.

I couldn't.

And asshole that I was, I felt relief when I woke up this morning and found Kat's side of the bed empty and cold. I wasn't prepared to deal with Kat's emotions because I wasn't ready to face the consequences of my actions. And based on her actions, neither was Kat. Sneaking around was hot and maybe a little exciting, but it was also stupid and dangerous, something we both knew even though we never talked about it.

Even knowing all that, I wasn't ready to give her up.

Maybe eventually I would, but not now.

Not today.

After I savored one more minute in the bed I'd shared with Kat, all night, I took a quick shower that took longer than anticipated as I was slammed with memories of Kat. I imagined the water sliding down her body, the soapy water dipping between the gap in her legs, remembering the way she arched into my touch. Moaned my name.

My cock stood at attention, and I closed my eyes, letting the memory of Kat down on her knees sucking me off with a smile wash over me while I stroked my cock to satisfaction. It wasn't enough.

I was scared it would never be enough.

Kat fucking Ashby was in my soul, in my heart and deep in my bones, and she'd made a home there.

I dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with no plans for the day other than meeting up with Jasper later for updates. So far, the team chasing Brendan hadn't found him and no sightings of Ravager anywhere. Made me wonder if whoever paid him off might have killed him.

And Jasper's stress levels were through the roof, which meant I needed to get all thoughts of Kat out of my head before I met up with him.

Sniffing a delicious aroma on my way toward the kitchen, I called bacon. And coffee. Which was odd because I knew Kat didn't cook, like, *never*.

"What the hell?" The oven was on the warm setting that I'd never used in all the years since I bought the stove. Then I found the note taped to the refrigerator.

Hey Ter—Don't get excited, I didn't cook but I did order you a breakfast that you richly deserved. Bon appetit!—KA

That was it, no words of love or affection, just typical Kat snark and a doodled smiley face. Inside the oven was a huge breakfast. Two containers filled with bacon, scrambled eggs, hash brown potatoes, waffles, sausage patties, biscuits and jam. The only thing that would have made the breakfast better, was sharing it with Kat.

Instead, I snapped a selfie getting ready to dig in and sent it to her with a word of thanks. Then I ate every bite to replenish the energy I'd used fucking Kat all night. And all morning.

A text came back quickly but it wasn't Kat.

Midnight Mass. Noon. Jasper's message was short and to the point like all of his messages, but something about it set me on edge.

Sure I shot back, ignoring the acid that built up in my stomach. It was probably nothing but my own guilty conscience for lying to my best friend and sleeping with his sister. It was a violation of the Bro Code and I knew it, but I'd denied myself too long and Kat was too tempting.

By the time I strolled into Midnight Mass and found Jasper in his back office, I'd convinced myself it was nothing. He didn't know. He couldn't possibly know.

No one did.

"Hey Jas. Why are we meeting here?"

He glared up at me but face became impassive as he motioned for me to sit.

"Just in case any shit pops off again, I'd rather be here instead of the casino."

It made sense and slowly the feeling in my stomach began to disappear. "You expect any shit in particular to pop off or just in general?"

Jasper shrugged, and I noticed he looked tired. No, not tired, he was exhausted. "Had a visitor last night."

"Yeah, who?" I leaned forward, elbows on my knees as I mentally prepared myself for another shit storm. For more violence. More bullshit.

"Brendan fucking Rhymer." His words were calm, eerily so and that bad feeling returned with intensity. "God, that fucker is even more hideous now. His skin looks like a melted fucking candle, and he smells like Hannibal Lecter had a barbecue."

My lips kicked up into a half-hearted grin, but I wanted more details. “What did he want?”

Jasper sat back with a smirk. “To let me know he was the one who blew up that Lambo in the parking lot.”

“Big fucking shocker. Did he say why?” He had to have a plan if he met with Jasper. In person.

“Wanted me to know it was him. Him. Not Daddy Dearest and not the pervert priest.” Jasper shook his head, disbelief written all over his face.

“Crazy asshole got it in his head that his old man doesn’t give a fuck about him and won’t ever hand over power, so he came to let me know we now have two Rhymers to worry about.”

I could buy that explanation. Almost. “But why tip his hand now? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Hates Mueller and thinks if he’s out of the picture, it’ll make the old man more vulnerable. He’s not wrong. Without the protection provided by the church, The Crusaders would be in shambles.”

His gaze remained fixed on mine, gauging my reaction to everything like he suddenly didn’t trust me. “He’s been watching Mueller. And Mueller’s been watching Kat.”

Ice slid through my veins at his words, and my skin went cold.

“Where is she?”

“Safe,” he growled and produced an envelope, which he tossed across the desk. It landed right in front of me. “Open it.”

I did, hoping like hell that it wasn’t photos of Kat being stalked by one of Mueller’s crazy followers. What the black & white photos were of, was worse. Much fucking worse. Photo after photo of me and Kat.

Kissing.

Laughing.

Eating.

Fucking.

Making love.

In every fucking photo we looked like a couple in love. So deep in love that an ache formed in my chest because in that moment I realized what I had with Kat. At the same time that I realized it was over. *We* were over.

“Nothing to say?”

He leaned forward, an angry look on his face that I knew well, but it had never been aimed at me. Not once in more than twenty years.

I leaned back and sighed, knowing I was caught and knowing that I had to take this, whatever it was, like a man.

“What do you want me to say, Jas?”

He smacked the deck in anger. “I want you to tell me that you’re not *fucking* my sister.”

“I could tell you that, but I’m not a liar.”

“That’s up for fucking debate,” he growled and glared at me. “You fucking lied to me every time you were supposed to be protecting Kat. But no, you weren’t protecting her, you were fucking her!”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Ashby! Be pissed at me all you want, but don’t act like Kat is too stupid to know the fucking difference.”

It pissed me off that he even though Kat would let any man use her. Ever.

“So, what, now I’m supposed to believe you have *feelings* for her? Give me a fucking break man, I know you.”

“Do you?” I sat back and examined Jasper closely as I wondered if he did know me. “Because if you knew me as well as you seem to think, you’d know that I’ve been in love with your sister for years. Years, Jasper. And you know why I never did anything about it?”

“Because you were worried I’d kill you?”

I flashed a bitter smile at his words, ignoring the ache they caused.

“Because of our friendship. At least I thought it was a friendship, now I’m not so sure.” And that hurt worse than anything.

Jasper shook his head, refusing to let my words sink in. “She’s my sister, man. My fucking sister. That’s Bro Code 101.”

I shrugged. “I’m just a dumb fuck who never went to college. I guess I missed that lesson because here I was thinking you and I were brothers. Thicker than blood.” I stood on heavy legs and shook my head.

“But that was all bullshit, wasn’t it, Jas? Meant to keep me close, to be your fucking lapdog, not your friend.” All the years I stayed away from Kat, denied my heart the one thing it desired, and it was all for nothing. “That’s what I thought.”

There was nothing more to say.

Jasper sighed and raked a hand through his hair, clear green eyes still shooting fire in my direction. “How can I...”

“How can you what, trust me? If you have to ask then you *don’t* fucking trust me, man.”

And there it was, my biggest fear realized. My best friend, my brother, hell my family, all gone in one fucking minute.

“After this,” he motioned to the photos, “how can I?”

I nodded, acknowledging the truth from Jasper’s perspective. The end of my time with the Ashby family.

“You can’t.” I turned on my heels and walked away, knowing this was it.

The end.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KAT

Terry had been absent the past few days. As much as I worried about him, it was also nice to not be watched like a hawk for the past fifty-odd hours. Jasper hadn't said anything about putting Terry on another assignment, then again, he wouldn't tell me anything because he was in charge and didn't have to.

Asshole.

Sitting in my office, well *Jasper's* office, I picked up my cell and tried to call Terry for what was the tenth time in the past two days. Once again, I got no answer.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demanded of the phone as if it could answer. Then I smiled at the photo of Terry's sleeping form that I managed to snap when he was asleep the other night. That was the last time I'd seen him, and now I feared those three little words had ruined everything.

Everything.

There was one way to find out, so I dialed the number of the one person who could give me a definitive answer on Terry's whereabouts.

"What is it, Kat?"

The annoyance in his voice pissed me off immediately. "What's your problem, Jas? I just called to see where my babysitter was."

Jasper let out one of his exasperated older brother sighs, which provoked an eyeroll that unfortunately, he couldn't see.

“Terry is no longer employed by the Ashby Organization.” His words were stern and short, slightly bitter.

“Oh. Okay.” The news was too shocking for me to process in the moment, so that was the best I could manage. It wasn’t eloquent or sophisticated, but it was all I had.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Jasper snorted and let out a low growl to indicate he was pissed off. “What the fuck did you think would happen when I found out about you two, Kat?”

There it is, I thought with a stab of pain in my heart.

“And? Who I sleep with is none of your fucking business, Jasper. Maybe you ought to get laid so you can stop trying to run everyone else’s life! You might be in charge of the business, but you are sure as shit *not* in charge of me.”

Instead of waiting for whatever condescending shit he had to say, I ended the call and when Jasper called back, I muted the call.

There was nothing to say to Jasper, or Terry apparently, who decided to ghost me. At least now I knew why. *Fuck him! And fuck this whole damn place!*

I packed up my shit and decided to call it an early day. A small part of me wanted to go to Terry and demand answers, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear the truth. Not yet. So I did what any girl in my position would do, I went to talk to my mother.

I found Ma reclining on one of the lounge chairs on the back terrace “Kat, what are you doing here in the middle of the day?” she asked with a surprised smile. Just enough sun flooded the back of the house to feel good without getting the brunt of the desert heat.

I tossed my bag on the table beside Sadie’s bottle of whiskey and sat with a groan. “I came here to talk to you.”

Her brows rose, but that was all I could see of her expression with her sunglasses shielding her eyes. “Things must be bad if you’ve come to me for advice.”

I snorted and reached for the whiskey bottle, taking one big gulp for strength. “Somehow Jasper found out about Terry and me.” I was curious as hell to know *how* he found out. “I know Terry didn’t tell him. He wouldn’t because he was too afraid of what would happen.”

Sadie took a drag off her cigarette and blew the smoke out. “And Jasper is pissed off. How did you think he would react?” Her calm question put me on edge. I grabbed her gold cigarette case and pulled out a cigarette.

“Smoking will kill you, Kat.”

I took a long draw and glared at Sadie. “I don’t fucking care. My sex life is none of Jasper’s business. He doesn’t own Terry, and he doesn’t own me.” I knew he’d be pissed, of course I knew that, but this was ridiculous. “I guess you approve of the fact that *Terry is no longer employed by the Ashby Organization*,” I told her, mocking Jasper’s superior tone.

Sadie pushed the sunglasses onto her head, green eyes wide with shock. “I didn’t know, and I don’t approve.”

I didn’t think she would. Terry was family. He’d spent more time in this house than in his own over the years. He stood side by side with Jasper during every battle, put his own safety on the line to protect us, and he’d done it all because he loved us. He was one of us.

“Well that’s what happened when you anointed him king.”

“He’s the oldest, Kat.”

“He is in charge of the *business*, Ma. Not me or my life. Sometimes I’m not sure either of you realize there’s a difference.”

“As far as I’m concerned, there is no difference,” Jasper chimed in from the door.

I whirled around and frowned at him. “It’s a good thing I don’t give a flying fuck what you think, Jas.”

“That’s too bad. And don’t be pissed off at me. Terry should have known better. And so should you.”

“Fuck you, Jasper. What’s the real problem here? You want Terry for yourself? Because at least that would make sense for why you think you can control who we spend time with.”

I was so angry that I felt my hands vibrating, and I knew there was a good chance I might say something that would be difficult to walk back.

“He’s my friend, and you’re off limits.”

“Since you have so much time to meddle in business that’s not yours, you can get back to work at the casino because I’m done.”

The words flew out of my mouth before I even thought about them, but the moment they were out, I felt a sense of relief.

“No, you’re not.”

“Wanna bet?” I shrugged and stamped out the cigarette. “Since you don’t know the difference between business and personal, we should just take a break from each other for a while.”

“You can’t be serious.” His incredulity was even more insulting than the fact he thought he could dictate my love life.

“I’m done with the casino, and I’m sure as fuck done with you.”

I loved my brother and put up with a lot of overprotective behavior, but this was too far. It was too much.

“I’m your brother.”

“But you apparently think that makes you king. No one runs my life but me, so fuck you and stay out of my life. See you later, Ma.”

“Come back here Kat! We’re not done with this conversation.”

I smiled with every step I took away from Jasper, refusing to respond to his words. Or his demands.

It was time to seek out Terry.

I was ready.

I used the drive over to Terry’s place to gather my thoughts and prepare what I wanted to say, but by the time my fists

rapped on the door, all thoughts had fled.

“Hey,” I said when he opened the door.

Terry looked...*awful*. His hair was all disheveled but not in the usual sexy way, this was more of a dirty hobo look. There were red stains on his white t-shirt, probably pizza and he had a beer in his hand.

“What are you doing here?”

“I haven’t heard from you in a few days, so I came to check on you. Plus, my asshole brother said you stopped working for AO.”

He hadn’t made it clear whether Terry had quit or gotten fired, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing, especially since it looked like he wasn’t going to let me inside. “What happened?”

“What do you think happened, *Katherine*?” His words were sharp like daggers, every syllable slicing open my skin.

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be asking, *Terry*.” Just because I loved him and wanted this to work, didn’t mean I would take his shit, or let him take his anger out on me.

“Is this about being let go? If so I’m happy to find a place for you.”

“So I can be at the Ashbys whim again?” He took a long swallow of his beer and said with a pop, “No thanks.”

The disdain, the anger in his voice made me wonder if he had some other underlying issue I wasn’t privy to. I winced again at his words, feeling them filet my heart wide open. “You’re not blaming me for this, are you?”

His blue gaze narrowed as he stood taller, still not inviting me in. His face reddened in anger.

“Of course, I am,” he snorted at me. “I’ve tried to keep my distance from you for years. *Fucking* years, Kat. And it was easy when you were strutting around all high and mighty. The bitch. Acting like you were better than everyone else.” His words were filled with anger, maybe even hate.

“I wasn’t,” I insisted, cutting off his diatribe before tears filled my eyes. “I always thought you hated me; guess I wasn’t far off.” I blinked and looked away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing that he hurt me. More. Of hurting me *more*.

“I know that’s not who you are, Kat! You were nothing at all like you presented yourself to the world, which only made everything worse. Every *fucking* thing. How could I resist that smart mouth and those sexy designer clothes you prance around every damn day? You eat like a frat boy, cuss like a sailor and you do it all with the grace of goddamn princess. I didn’t stand a fucking chance.”

I swear, I swooned a little at his sweet words, his compliments, even though I was apparently the only person who was happy about it. But the more I thought about it, I wasn’t happy about this either.

“Yeah well, right back at you, Terry! You think I wanted this? Knowing that heartbreak was certain? Knowing that you would never in a million years choose me? Well I didn’t, but I couldn’t resist you. Not your smile, your laugh, your attention. Your body.” I shook my head and looked away again, threatening every tear gathering behind my eyes with certain death if they fell before I made it back to my car.

“So? Where does that leave us, Terry?”

“Where does it *leave* us?” His voice was thick with sarcasm. I took a step back at the anger that darkened his blue eyes.

“Just...fuck. Go back to your fucking life, Kat.”

Go back to your fucking life. It was the same as if he’d said, *you’re not welcome—or wanted—here.*

“So that’s it? Jasper throws a goddamn hissy fit and now that we can actually go public and be together, you tell me to go away?”

I stared at him, looking for any sign, any hint that this wasn’t what he wanted, but I could see the signs of resolve in his squared shoulders, his stick straight spine and the white line of his lips.

“Oh. Okay. Right. I get it now, you’re a fucking coward.”

He said nothing. There was no indication my words had even registered because Terry was done. With me, anyway.

“I love you, Terry, I meant those words when I said them, and I mean them now. I was hoping this was, finally, the start of something good and real for us. I guess I was wrong. Again.”

“You were.”

Ouch. “Yeah, well, fuck you and have a miserable life!”

I walked away with my head held high, my steps slow and deliberate because I refused to run away like a heartbroken little girl. I took my time walking back to the car, and since I didn’t have any place to be, I headed to Mayhem and booked a suite for the next week.

That was where I’d drown my sorrows in expensive alcohol and room service, and then I would put all thoughts of Terry Manning away and get on with the rest of my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

TERRY

“I’m an asshole.”

That was my mantra over the past three days, ever since my idiotic blow up with Kat. “Such a fucking asshole.” And according to her, a coward as well.

Kat was right. We both knew it, me in particular, which is why I’d spent the last three days drinking away my sorrows with the curtains drawn and rock music blocking out all thoughts of anything.

Or anyone.

No visitors, no phone calls. No people whatsoever.

The only person I couldn’t seem to shake was Kat and the look of hurt and betrayal in her eyes, watery with tears she was too damn strong to let fall in front of me. It only made me love her more.

“Not that it fucking matters. God, I really am an asshole.”

“You are but we love you anyway.”

The deep voice scared the shit out of me, and I grabbed my piece and aimed it in the direction of the intruder.

“Goddammit, Emmett, I could have shot you.”

Emmett laughed and shook his head. “You’d have to figure which one of me is the right one first. And I’ve been here for five fucking minutes so if I wanted to kill ya, you’d be dead already.”

I lowered the gun with a sigh. “Five minutes, really?”

“Yep. You’re too drunk to be aware of your surroundings, a dangerous habit in your line of work. Wanna tell me why you’re drunk in the middle of the week?”

“No reason. Just taking a sabbatical to figure out...some shit.”

Emmett took in my surroundings. The discarded delivery bags and boxes, the empty bottles and half unpacked grocery bags. He shrugged and took a seat in the chair beside the window, far enough away that I couldn’t just slug him and make him leave.

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Looks like something, a really big something if I had to guess. Plus, you stink.”

He fanned a hand in front of his face just in case I didn’t get the picture.

“Feel free to leave at any time, Em.”

“And miss out on some world class moping from my older brother? Not a fucking chance.” He sighed and looked out the window, trying to wait me out.

“It’s not gonna happen.”

“What?”

I groaned. “You sitting there in silence isn’t gonna get me to talk. Don’t you have fighters to train or something?”

“I do, and I will, but now I’m here. For you.”

That was all he said for a long time, his silence doing fuck all but making me think. About Kat. “I was surprised when I called Jasper to find out why you weren’t answering my calls, and he said you didn’t work for the Ashbys anymore.”

“I don’t.” And I hadn’t heard one fucking word from my alleged best friend since I left.

“Why?”

“You don’t have to do this, Em.”

“Duh. You’re my brother, and I love your dumb ass, so let’s just skip to the part where you tell me what happened?”

It wasn't like I had anyone else to confide in. I lost everything I thought I wanted, everything I thought was un-fucking-touchable. No Kat. No Jasper. No Ashby family. No Ashby Organization. Nothing.

"Fine," I moaned and told him the whole sordid story about kissing Kat and then fucking her, and all about falling for her.

"He found out and he wasn't happy about it. Said he couldn't trust me."

"And you walked away?"

I nodded and Emmett whistled. "I'm surprised, even a little bit impressed."

"Yeah well, don't be," I snorted. "When Kat found out she came to me and told me, again, that she loved me. Me, Em. She said she was in love with me, a gutter rat from the wrong side of the tracks."

"Hey, that's my brother you're talking about." He flashed a sympathetic grin and motioned for me to continue.

"I threw it back in her face. Told her to go back to her life because there was no us, no future for us." Shook my head as those images played in my mind again. "She refused to cry, but I saw the tears. I made her fucking cry, man."

"Of course you did, Terry. Kat has been in love with you for as long as I've known her, and yeah, some of that was just a crush or puppy love back in the day, but it's been obvious from the start."

It has? "Not to me." And it didn't matter anyway. "There you have it, the whole damn story. Now you can go away, please and thanks."

I tried for a smile, but it felt wrong, strange to my facial muscles.

Emmett nodded, taking in all the details of everything I just told him because he was thoughtful like that. He was a guy who took his time to make decisions, to offer up advice. And he took his sweet goddamn time as I reached for the bottle of Jack on the table.

“I get why you walked away from Jasper and all, but I don’t get why you’d give up Kat right now when the path is clear for you guys to be together.”

I shook my head and waved my empty hand dismissively, taking another slow sip. “I screwed that up too, by throwing her love back in her face. Didn’t I say that part already?”

“You did, but it still doesn’t make a damn lick of sense. She loves you, and you love her, which all sounds like a good thing to me. You don’t have to work for her family to be with her. Would probably make things easier if you didn’t.”

“It’s all too fucked up now. It’s over for me. I’m done with the Ashby family. All of them.”

“Bullshit,” he snorted. “My advice is that you figure out which Ashby you want more, and then go make it right with Kat.” A smile flickered at the edges of his mouth, the smart ass.

“Yeah, maybe I should, but for now, I’m just gonna drink. I’m gonna get drunk as fuck and not give a fuck about anyone. Not even Kat.”

I planned to drink until I could get the image of Kat’s blue eyes, slick with tears, out of my mind. Or until my heart stopped aching. Whichever came first.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KAT

My phone pinged, but I had no interest in talking to anyone who wasn't Terry.

Except for my best friend.

"Hey Maze, what's up?" My voice sounded as tired as my body felt, as tired and as heavy as my heart.

"You okay, Kat?" Though I couldn't see her face, her concern came through loud and clear. "I haven't seen you in a while."

I hated the worry in her voice, and I refused to share the tale of my heartbreak with Maisie while she was planning her wedding.

"I'm fine, just tired I guess." I was distracted and hurt and goddammit, I was angry. Angry at Jasper for butting into my personal business and angry at Terry for breaking my heart.

"What's up?" I said, attempting to put some sunshine into my question.

"Oh, right. Well I managed to get an appointment at Wicked Wedding Apparel in Mayhem because someone else's wedding was postponed. Indefinitely. Makes ya wonder, huh?"

I laughed at the wince I heard come down the line.

"It happens, Maisie, and it's no reflection on your own vows. Besides, I happen to know Virgil would just take you to the courthouse before he let you go. The man is going to fit his big ass body into a tux. Just for you."

“He is pretty great, isn’t he?” The smile in her voice brought a smile to my face. Just because love didn’t work out for me, didn’t mean I wasn’t happy for Maisie and Virgil. They deserved this happiness, and I would help them get it any way I could.

“He’s all right, I mean as far as brothers go.”

Maisie laughed. “Right. The thing is that the appointment is for today. At five.” She groaned before I could even respond. “I know it’s totally last minute, but I told them to call with *any* opening, and I’ve been looking at their inventory online and it’s pretty badass.”

“I’ll be there, Maze.”

“You will? But Virgil said things are crazy busy at Emerald Isle.” I appreciated her worry, but Maisie already had too much on her plate.

“That’s Jasper’s problem. I’m at Black Stallion where I belong so my schedule can accommodate an impromptu wedding session.” Maybe focusing on the details of Maisie and Virgil’s wedding would ease my own heartbreak, if not erase it altogether.

“That sounds like a story I need to hear. Hang on a sec.” The sounds of the casino told me Maisie was still at work or maybe at work again, who could tell the difference these days? I took advantage of the moment of peace and slid behind the steering wheel of my car. Even though I was done being Jasper’s stand in, marketing and promotions were still part of my job and the interest in House of Ashby fighters hadn’t died down since the fight.

“Kat?”

“Still here, Maze.”

She laughed. “Sorry about that, one of my high rollers just requested a twelve-course meal around molecular gastronomy, if you can believe it.”

“I can,” I told her, my tone dry, almost droll.

“Anyway, tonight at five works for you, right? Also, I’m thinking of inviting Vanessa or would that be too insensitive since she just lost Lance?”

Leave it to Maisie to think of everyone else while she planned her own damn wedding.

“Why don’t you ask her and see what she says? Tell her she’s had a wedding and you could use her input. Give her something to do while she grieves.”

Over the past week I’d learned a valuable lesson in the art of burying one’s heartache in the monotony of work.

“That’s a really good idea, Kat. Thanks.”

“No problem. You want me to pick you up from Emerald Isle?”

“Yes,” Maisie said on a relieved sigh. “GPS said it’ll take twelve minutes to get there so, quarter ‘til five?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

“Perfect. Later, Sis.” The call disconnected and I couldn’t help but smile at the endearment, or the abrupt way she ended the call. Maisie didn’t realize it yet, but she was starting to be a true Ashby.

Wedding planning was exactly the distraction I needed, but it was just after noon and there was still work to be done, starting at House of Ashby. For some damn reason, the parking lot was packed, but I learned my lesson last time and drove up and down the aisles in search of a spot that was out in the open and visible to the security cameras.

“Yes!” I got a little too excited about the little red car that backed out of a convenient spot. I pumped my fist while the car filled with fight groupies honked and whooped at the guys standing at the entrance, waving with big goofy grins on their faces. *Gotta find my happiness where I can.*

It had been five days and not one fucking word from Terry, which pissed me off. And hurt my feelings. The sadness didn’t come right away because I thought, deep in my heart, that he’d realize he had his head too far up his ass and come to me. But

days passed and he didn't even call or text. Simply put, Terry had dumped me and forgotten me. Easily.

Now my anger blended with hurt. A fucked up combination that made it easy to work through the pain. So I worked. A lot. Catching up on the things I'd let slide while filling in for fuck face Jasper, which included responding to emails while I marched toward the gleaming glass doors of House of Ashby.

A publication wanted to interview Rachel Cruz, and several wanted Emmett to do a few speaking engagements on mental toughness. Rachel was a team player and happy to be at the top of her game, but Emmett was another story altogether. The man's dislike of the public eye was almost pathological.

I should have been paying attention to where I was going, given everything that was going on with Brendan Rhymer, Mueller and even The Crusaders, but my head was too full of too many other things and my forward momentum was halted by a big wall of muscle.

"Excuse me," I said absently without looking up.

I moved to the right and the wall moved with me. "Ms. Ashby."

I looked up at the unfamiliar deep voice that sounded almost shy. I frowned and stopped on the asphalt driveway. "Rob, it's you." Ravager, the dude who refused to take a dive for us at the big fight and caused too much shit to measure. "Where have you been?"

He shrugged. "Look, Ms. Ashby, I'm sorry about all the shit that went down, but I really need to talk to—"

"Oh shit!" I screamed as a brown van slammed into Ravager's right side and sent his big body flying through the air. I couldn't look away as time seemed to slow while his body made its way back to earth with a sickening crack of bones and breaking glass.

"Rob!" I took two steps toward the big man, splayed out on top of a crushed silver sedan before someone grabbed my hair and yanked me back. Hard.

"What the...fuck?" Another yank took me to the ground.

“You should really learn to mind your own fucking business, bitch.” The unfamiliar deep voice struck me dumb for a moment, and when I tried to blink my eyes into focus, the only thing I saw was a big black silencer pointed at my head.

I rolled away just before the hitman fired the first shot and scrambled to my feet, nearly twisting my ankle on the gravel that kicked up from a pothole somewhere nearby. I got a good look at him, but it did me no good as I took one step back and then another. Cowardly bastard wore a mask.

“Mind my own business, got it,” I said trying to put real estate between us.

His smile spread, white and gleaming, behind the black mask covering his nose and mouth. He took aim once again. “Too late for that bitch.” His smile widened and a spark of life lit his eyes as he squeezed the trigger.

The pain didn't come right away; the shock came first. It took a moment for me to realize what happened. I looked at those laughing green eyes and then down at my body, at the blood spreading across the midsection of my white pantsuit. The stain grew and grew, and I watched, mesmerized by the way the blood ate up the fabric as another loud pop tore through the air and sent me falling backwards. I landed on my back, but my head throbbed too just as the pain in my abdomen came to life.

“Oh. Fuck.”

Those words and the sound of screeching tires were my last memories before darkness consumed me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TERRY

Emmett was right, wallowing wasn't a good look for me. Staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I hated the image that stared back. Dark circles under my eyes, blond hair greasy as fuck because I hadn't left the house in more than a week. Maybe two weeks. I didn't want to risk running into anyone, especially Kat. Especially Jasper.

Fuck Jasper.

That thought came immediately as it always did when I thought of my former best friend and what he had cost me. Every-fucking-thing. I stepped under the hot shower spray to wash away all thoughts of my former life and my former family. Dwelling on that shit wouldn't solve a damn thing, and I was determined to put it all behind me.

To forget and move forward.

The water turned cold before that happened so I stepped out, dried off and threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, my uniform lately because I didn't need to look good if I never left the house. The delivery guys didn't give a damn what I looked like as long as I tipped well. And I tipped extremely well just to make sure I didn't end up with pubes or spit in my food.

The sound of the doorbell startled me out of my thoughts and I groaned at the intrusion. Emmett had mostly given up on getting me to talk to Kat or to leave the house. Instead, he called twice a day to make sure I hadn't drunk myself to death. A quick look at my phone put the time at just past two, which

meant he was late for his morning call. I now knew who would be on the other side of the door.

I opened it with a grin. “Came to give me another pep...Sadie? What are you doing here?”

Hers was the last face I expected to see on my doorstep, but there she was, keen green eyes looking intimidating as hell despite her petite frame. She arched a brow the way she'd always done to keep us boys in line and instinctively, I stepped back. “Come in.”

She shook her head. “Can't.”

That one word sounded odd. Off. Like she'd been crying, which would be pretty fucking terrifying because Sadie hadn't even cried when we got the news about Colm's death. Hell, I didn't think she even cried when she finally learned the truth of what that fucking priest had been up to.

“Kat's been shot. Something told me that you'd want to know.”

Kat's been shot. It took a moment before the words held any real meaning and when they sank into my dumbfounded brain, I nearly fell to my knees. It was like someone had stabbed me in the heart, kicked me in the balls, and sucker punched me, all at once. Kat was shot but she had to be all right or else Sadie would be falling apart now. Right?

“Is she okay? Who?” It was the only thing I could focus on, because the thought of Kat lying in a hospital bed, pale and lifeless, was too much to fucking bear.

“She's at the hospital. We don't know who yet, but you better believe I plan to find out. Are you coming, Terry?”

When Sadie took on that haughty tone, you knew she was pissed off but still, I risked life and limb by shaking my head.

“No. I'm the last person she needs to see right now, but send me the info you have, and I'll take care of it.”

That was what I could do for Kat. I'd find the fucker who shot her and make him pay for daring to destroy her.

“Thanks, for uh, letting me know.” It sounded fucked up to my own ears, but there was nothing else to say.

“So that’s it, then? Jasper acts like a fucking baby and you’re done with all of us? Your whole goddamn family? Kat especially?”

I shrugged. “What can I say? It is what it is, Sadie. If Jasper doesn’t trust me, then I can’t do my job. And we both know Jasper will make her life hell if we stay together.”

As much as it hurt right now, it taught me a valuable lesson about belonging. I’d never believe I belonged anywhere else ever again. “You should get to Kat, she needs you.”

Sadie’s delicate shoulders fell but the icy look in her eyes only intensified. “She needs you, Manning. If it matters to you.”

“It matters, dammit. That’s why I’m going to take care of it. For Kat.”

“Bullshit. That’s the easy thing to do. To go out and get revenge. Big bad Terry’s going to make him pay. Well, you know what’s hard? Getting your ass to the hospital no matter what Jasper says. Being a man. Being there for Kat. But you and Jasper both want to use your big bad guns instead of your brains.”

“She needs to get better and she can’t do that if me and Jas are arguing. My guess is she’s still pissed at him too.”

“She’s still in surgery getting the bullets removed and fighting for her life, so right now she’s not pissed off at anyone. But both of you are doing a damn good job of pissing me off.”

“Get to the hospital, Sadie.”

She nodded and made her way to the door. “What a pity. I really thought you were a real man for my Kat. Guess I was wrong.”

I snorted a bitter laugh. “Lots of that going around lately.”

“Glitz Memorial Trauma Center, just in case you find your balls and decide to go after the woman you’ve loved your whole fucking life.” She shook her head in disappointment,

turning one last time at the door. “Happened just outside House of Ashby.”

Shit. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. Show up for Kat.”

With those parting words, Sadie left me alone with my thoughts, which all centered on Kat. She was hurt and as much as I wanted to go to her, to be with her and see for myself that she was okay, I didn’t have that right. I wasn’t family and I wasn’t a friend. I was the man who had purposely broken her heart and seeing me wouldn’t help her, no matter what Sadie thought.

There was one thing I could do and that was give Kat the peace of mind to know that the fucker who shot her was no longer walking the streets, was no longer a threat to her safety. To know that the fucker was no longer breathing.

To do that there was one Ashby I needed to reach out to.

“Calvin, you think you can get me surveillance from House of Ashby?”

“Terry? Why the fuck aren’t you at the hospital, man?” His lack of anger said he probably didn’t know about everything that had gone down, especially given the divide between his girl and the rest of the Ashbys. Right now, I didn’t feel like getting into it.

“This isn’t about me, Cal. It’s for Kat. Can you get me that footage?”

“Yeah,” he said eventually, sounding worried and exhausted as I was sure the rest of Kat’s family was.

“Sending it now. Terry?”

I held my breath and nodded even though the youngest Ashby couldn’t see me and prepared myself for whatever threat he wanted to lob my way. “Yeah?”

“Make this motherfucker pay.”

“I plan to Cal. Thanks.” The call ended, and I went to the safe in my home gym, gathering everything I would need to hunt

down the motherfucker who did this and make the rest of his short life miserable.

TWO DAYS later I snuck into the trauma center after hours, desperate to see for myself that Kat was getting better. With a baseball cap pulled down low to hide my face, I walked the halls of the hospital as if I belonged there, the damn maze of corridors making it impossible to find her room number.

I turned a corner and ran into a petite woman with dark hair. “Oh my goodness, I’m so...Terry, right?”

I blinked and looked at the woman I instantly recognized as Lance’s widow.

“Vanessa? What are you doing here? Stupid question,” I said even as she flashed a knowing smile. “How is she?”

“Still out of it, but the surgery was pretty major. Doctors said she’ll probably wake up tomorrow.”

My heart stopped. “She hasn’t woken up? Is she in a coma?” I felt panic rise up my throat and fear took hold deep in my gut. Kat had to be all right. She *had* to.

“No, but the pain’s been so bad they’ve kept her pretty sedated. Want to see her?”

I nodded first and then shook my head. “Yes. No. Hell, I don’t know.” A hand dropped on my shoulder and I turned, ready to fuck someone up.

“Hey man, you can’t...Terry. Oh shit, I almost put you down.” Emmett smiled and clapped me on the back again. “I still might, man. It’s been two fucking days. Where have you been?”

“Taking care of business, where else?”

“Here,” he growled. “Kat needed you here, bro.”

“She doesn’t need me.”

Emmett let out a bitter laugh. “But yet, here you are. Why?”

“I needed to see her, to make sure she’s all right.” Emmett refused to call with updates, Sadie too, which meant it was up to me to come here and see for myself.

With his hand on the small of Vanessa’s back, Emmett nodded for me to follow him. “You can’t go inside but there she is.”

Took a few hesitant steps forward, heart beating wildly out of control as I prepared myself for what I was about to see. Except nothing could prepare me for the sight of Kat Ashby, normally so lively and bright, dimmed by an ugly hospital gown and flat yellow lighting that took away her life force. The drabness, the bleakness of it all, seemed to diminish all the things that made Kat who she was. It was a shame, and I couldn’t see her like this.

I wouldn’t.

“I have to go.”

“You have to stop running at some point, Terry. That’s what our folks do, not us. You and me, we face our demons head on. We kick them in the balls until they submit.”

My gaze bounced between him and Vanessa, noticing his protective stance, close almost hovering. “Do we?”

Vanessa blushed and shook her head, but Emmett nodded. “We do, goddammit. None of the women are to be alone until we figure out who did this,” he said by way of an explanation, but Vanessa’s blush told me everything I needed to know. Em was interested in the pretty widow. *Good for him.*

“Right.” I nodded, knowing Ashby protocol because I’d help create it.

“Good. I’ll see you around.” I leaned in and gave my brother a side hug. “Take good care of Kat, bro.”

“I will but only until you get your head out of your ass and come back for her.” He flashed a grin, but Emmett was a romantic. He fully expected I’d be back with a big bouquet of roses and probably a poem or some shit.

“Don’t hold your breath, little brother. Take it easy, Vanessa.” With a half a wave, I tugged the cap lower and strode out of

the hospital, satisfied to see Kat was healing. She was fine without me.

And better off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KAT

“Good to see your color returning, Kat.”

Oliver’s smile beamed wide and bright in the rearview mirror as Ma and Vanessa worked tenderly to make me comfortable for the ride home from the hospital.

“Color? Is that what this greenish-gray shade is supposed to be?” I was only mostly joking but I’d caught a glimpse of myself under the fluorescent bathroom lights inside the hospital. Now I knew what the expression ‘death warmed over’ meant.

“It’s good to be outside of a casket, Oliver. Thanks for the lift.”

“My pleasure.” Oliver turned his gaze back toward the road when I was finally settled in back. Sadie was in the front seat, and we were on the move.

“How are you feeling, Kat?” Vanessa’s piercing blue eyes scanned my face with worry. Her hand rested on top of mine and gave a gentle squeeze. I hated to be fussed over, but I could only imagine how my brush with death made her relive Lance’s fate.

“I feel like I got shot, Nessa. Otherwise, I think I’m all right.”

The painkillers worked for the nonstop ache in my abdomen caused by the two bullets that went through my stomach and spleen and the surgery to remove the bullets and repair the organs. It was a shame they didn’t work on heartbreak. That

was a pain that no drug could soothe. I felt like a dumb fuck for still being upset about a man who hadn't bothered to come see me in the hospital.

Not one fucking time. And I had no doubt Emmett had shared the news because he'd shown up every day I was bed bound.

Vanessa smiled. "That's what Lance would call me when he was annoyed with me."

I managed a smile, with difficulty. "I'm not annoyed, but with the ponytail and fresh-faced look, Nessa seemed more appropriate."

Vanessa had been my most frequent visitor, sitting by my side throughout visiting hours, brushing my hair and keeping my lips from turning to leather.

"Thank you for...hell, for everything. I haven't heard so much celebrity gossip since I was a teenager."

She laughed and blushed prettily. "I didn't know what you liked and real world news seemed too heavy given everything you'd already been through. And I wasn't sure if romance would be welcome."

I snorted and shook my head. "I'd rather hear about anything else at the moment, thanks."

"Come on now, Kat. It's not that bad, is it? You're on your way home to rest and recover. Your shooter was found bright and early this morning in a dumpster behind Mother Mary Cathedral. Agent Beck stopped by with the news first thing."

Sadie's lips curled into a satisfied, almost amused grin, as she turned to me to deliver the news.

"Who was it? Did Jasper get any information before?"

Sadie's lips pulled into another grin.

"It wasn't Jasper." I sighed at Sadie's cryptic words because I refused to play this game. Sitting up was still painful, breathing and talking even more so.

"Take a look for yourself."

She handed me the phone, and I snuck a glance at Vanessa who focused her gaze on the scenery just outside the window.

“What is this?” I asked as I scanned the screen.

“Look.” Sadie nodded at the video she’d queued up.

“Who hired you?” That voice, undoubtedly, belonged to the man who held my heart but didn’t want it.

“No one, I just wanted to shoot some dumb bitch.”

“Bullshit,” Terry growled. “You told her to mind her business. Who hired you?” The man shook his head with a cheeky grin that quickly vanished when Terry slid a knife into his abdomen, slowly, as if he wanted to savor the sound of his tortured screams. “Answer the fucking question.”

“Fine,” the guy panted, and I knew it was him, knew that slightly squeaky voice because it haunted my sleeping hours for the past five days.

“Some old guy, think he’s a preacher or something.”

“You think or you know?” Terry held the knife, the tip pressed less than a centimeter at the center of the man’s chest.

He panted, close to panicking in anticipation of the next second.

“Miller. He said his name was Miller.”

“I don’t believe you,” Terry said and tapped the handle of the blade, sending it deeper into the thug’s skin as one line of blood spilled out.

“Mueller. The guy is some fucking bigwig in the church out here. I’ve done work for his brother in the Midwest and his cousin on the east coast. He’s a fat fuck with gray hair and a black and gray beard. Some MILF- type bitch paid me when the job was done. That’s it. I swear.”

Terry sighed. “Thanks for that.” The video stopped abruptly and I swiped, hoping for more but there was no more.

“That’s it?”

Sadie nodded and took the phone from my hand, tapping the screen half a dozen times before she turned a photo to me.

“No, this is it.” The same man was face up in a dumpster surrounded by spaghetti, black bags, used needles, and condoms, plus a few bible pages. His throat was slashed, his skin pale and eyes open in a kind of resigned terror.

Dead. He was dead. “Am I supposed to swoon over this, Ma?” I snorted.

“How you react is up to you, Kat. I’m just the messenger.” Her tone was even, but that little quirk of her lips told me different.

“I’m glad the guy is dead, but Terry made his feelings clear and his distinct absence from the hospital doubled down on the message.”

Vanessa gasped.

“What? No. Terry came to see you. More than once.” I shook my head because it couldn’t be true. “The first night he came about an hour after your surgery to make sure you were ... alive,” she stammered. “He came every night other than last night. He’s been there. He’s the one who brought me your favorite lip balm and lotion.”

My eyes slammed shut at the thoughtful gestures. They didn’t matter, those deeds done out of guilt hardly meant a damn thing. His presence was what I wanted in my life.

“He feels guilty, that’s all. What about Ravager?” I needed to focus on the business, because honestly? The Ashby business was all I had. And that had to fuel me from here on out.

“He confirmed that Brendan Rhymer gave him double the purse if he won the fight so it was an easy deal to take since he *wanted* to win anyway. He didn’t like my story arc for him and decided to make the money now.”

Sadie snorted a laugh and shook her head. “Good thing he did, because he won’t be fighting for a long time.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of things. “Why would Brendan do that, knowing his old man would lose big at the

unexpected outcome? Screwing with us is one thing, but Ronan?”

“According to Jasper, Brendan has gone rogue. Thinks Ronan is never gonna hand over power to him. He’s been causing a lot of fucking trouble since his return from the grave.”

Sadie’s annoyance came through clearly and I couldn’t help but wonder what this meant for the rest of us. “He knows how things work and figured fucking over the old man *and* the Ashby’s was a double win situation.”

Thankfully, the car came to a stop at Ashby Manor, and I was free to make my escape, though progress was a slow and only with the help of Vanessa.

“Don’t go too fast,” she warned. “The doctor said to take it easy with those stitches and staples for another week.”

“Fucking staples,” I groaned. “Nessa, whatever you do, never get shot. Hurts like hell, and the recovery is worse.”

Her full lips pulled into a sardonic grin. “I’ll try to remember that. Thanks.” A few minutes later we were inside my private space. It looked fit for a sixteen-year old’s slumber party.

“What the hell is all this?”

“This was Maisie’s contribution to your homecoming. She had to get back to the casino because some aerospace billionaire showed up unannounced with a thousand different wants. Her words, not mine.”

I half listened to Vanessa with tears in my eyes because somehow Maisie knew how to make me feel better. The place was decorated in my favorite flowers; hip hop music blared from the sound system, and I ran into stacks of fast food and junk food everywhere I turned.

“In case I get famished on my way to the bathroom?” I joked but regretted it when my laugh brought a stab of pain.

Vanessa’s eyes twinkled when she shook her head. “To encourage you to keep going when you don’t think you can.”

“Shit. Don’t make me cry. I’m already limping around; I don’t need to look like a bloated pig on top of that.”

“Like you could if you tried. Have a seat.”

I did as I was told and looked around my living room with a watery smile while Vanessa grabbed one of my bags that Oliver set by the door.

“How’s your pain?”

“In my gut or my chest?” She arched dark brows at me and smiled.

“About a seven.” But it was a solid fifteen in my heart.

“Okay, I’ll give you a full pill now with your antibiotics since we have all this food around. Later you only get half a pill.”

“Got it, Doc.” Vanessa’s cheeks turned pink, and she rolled her eyes.

“Hey, not that I don’t appreciate it but why are you playing nurse to me when we could just hire someone?”

“I wanted to help because you were so kind to me at Lance’s memorial, making me smile when I didn’t think I’d ever smile again.”

Damn, did I know anyone in the world who was just sweet as pie like Vanessa?

“You could’ve just called and told me to eat, Nessa. You don’t need to nurse me back to health. You know Jas owns the hospital; we have great nurses.”

She shrugged. “This gives me something to do, someone to take care of, which my shrink says will help with my grief. So once again, you’re helping me out.”

“Glad I could help,” I told her sarcastically.

“Me too,” she shot back, showing a glimpse of the spitfire Lance always said she was. “Pizza or burgers?”

“What’s the rush?”

“The painkillers will knock you out quickly so we need to get food in you so you don’t get sick. So?”

Hands on her hips and determination on her unfairly beautiful face, I realized I only knew the grief-stricken Vanessa. Now, I

was curious to know the woman.

“Pizza, not spicy. Fingers crossed I can get that down.” My appetite was coming back, but abdominal wounds made my return to normal eating slow.

She smiled. “Coming right up.”

We chatted about nothing in particular while we ate and as promised, I was knocked out before I finished my slice of cheese pizza.

A LIGHT but insistent knock in the distance pulled me from a deep sleep. I sat up slowly, wincing with every inch that brought me to a sitting position. Looking around with unfocused eyes and a foggy mind, my shoulders relaxed when I realized where I was.

Home.

I just returned home today after spending a week in the hospital because I'd been shot. It was the same way I'd woken up every single day since it happened, disoriented and then remembering all the fucking details. The masked dickhead and his crazy eyes and satisfied smirk. The thick black silencer. The world fading away from me.

Only now a more macabre image settled in my brain and, strangely, provided me with comfort. Lifeless eyes, pale skin, a slit throat. He was dead and I was alive.

Alive and safe.

And bothered if the nonstop knocking was any indication.

“One damn minute,” I grumbled, though not loud enough for the incessant knocker to hear me. Vanessa was nowhere to be found and all the lights were off except for the one in the hall that led to the front door. I stood slowly and found a note on the counter in an unfamiliar handwriting.

At the main house so you can sleep peacefully. My number is in your phone if you need me. 'Nessa.

More knocking.

I took my sweet ass time and not just because every step caused a shooting pain to dart from my head to my toe, blurring my vision and nearly buckling my knees. But the constant knocking was already starting to piss me off and I wasn't at anyone's beck and call. Exercising more caution than I had at House of Ashby, I opened the wall panel to reveal the hidden cameras aimed at the spot outside my front door and gasped at the sight.

Terry, holding a stupidly big bouquet of flowers as he knocked. Impatiently.

Several deep breaths later, when I was sure I had my silly heart under control, I opened the door with an impassive expression. "Terry. What are you doing here?"

He took a step forward, and I took a step back, refusing to let his masculine scent intoxicate me, or make me act like a fool. Again. "I came to see you."

"A little late for that, don't you think?"

His broad shoulders fell and his light blue eyes turned sad but resigned. "I don't know. Is it too late, Kat?"

My mouth formed to say the word 'yes,' but my heart zipped my lips, willing me not to do something stupid. Something rash.

"Why now, Terry? Why not before I was shot? Why not when I was in the hospital near death?"

"I had some business to take care of," he admitted. "These are for you." He shoved the flowers at me like an anxious little boy, as if they would bite.

I eyed the oversized arrangement and the heavy crystal vase that housed them and backed away.

"I can't carry them. Too heavy. Doctor's orders."

Somehow, he'd won the first battle, an unintended invitation into my home, a place he'd steadfastly avoided since I moved in right after college.

“How are you feeling?”

I shook my head. “Don’t act like you care, not now. I wanted you there when I was lying on that table waiting for the anesthesia to kick in, not knowing if I would live or die. I needed you there when I woke up in the middle of the night, screaming in pain. Screaming at the memories that wouldn’t quit. That’s when I needed you, Terry. Not now.”

His blond head bobbed up and down in understanding. “I know and I’m an asshole. Worse, I’m a coward.”

“Definitely an asshole,” I shot back and crossed my arms, but the effect was ruined by the yelp of pain I let out. *Okay, can’t be too bitchy just yet.*

“Where do you want these?” He nodded at the vase and took a few steps back, his eyes silently pleading with me to follow him.

I did because it was Terry, and what the hell else could I do?

“I’m not sure yet. Why are you here?”

“I love you, Kat. I am in love with you.” His shoulders relaxed completely as the words, totally sincere, left his mouth. “I don’t deserve your love, and I sure as shit don’t deserve a second chance, but that’s why I’m here. To beg you to give me—give us—another chance.”

Hell yes. I went to cross my arms again before my brain reminded me of the blinding pain from moments before.

“Why now? Because you feel guilty that I could’ve died without knowing or because I almost died?”

“Neither. Both.” His lips lifted into an uncertain, vulnerable smile that turned my insides to mush. “Because the few short weeks we had together, they were amazing. Hell, they were the best goddamn weeks of my life, and not just hearing you scream my name and learning what makes you come.”

My heart raced at his words, and if it could have, my belly would have clenched with desire. As it was, his words caused an uncomfortable wetness between my thighs.

“That’s not on the calendar anytime soon. With you or anyone else,” I added because dammit, he’d broken me.

Terry nodded and took a step forward, grabbing my hand and gently guiding me into the living room and back to the sofa.

“Don’t worry Kitty Kat, memories of you have gotten me through the last couple of weeks. They can get me through a few more if it means you’ll give me a chance.”

“Why should I, Terry? You chose Jasper over me. You left me. The moment we could have been something great. Something real, you ran.”

“I did. I ran because I’m a coward, because I’ve loved you for so long that I didn’t really believe I could have you. That I could keep you. But,” he sighed and grabbed my hands, kissing each of my knuckles hungrily, like he was afraid it might be the last time he got to touch me. “Those weeks, as great as they were, they weren’t enough. Not for me, and I don’t think they were enough for you either.”

They weren’t. Not by a fucking long shot. “Why now?”

“Because the thought of you dying and those few weeks being all we had together, it fucking pissed me off. It made me realize that if I stopped being a punk ass bitch, I could have years, possibly even decades like those weeks. And I want decades, Kat. I want decades with you so damn bad I can taste it.”

A smile spread across my face at his words, so heartfelt and so difficult for him to say that his cheeks were a deep shade of red.

“And Jasper?”

Terry shrugged. “Fuck him.”

I snorted a laugh of disbelief and he smiled. “That’s quite a turnaround from the last time we spoke.”

“I was wrong. You were right. It isn’t his business, no matter what kind of relationship you or I have with him. This love, this thing that I feel for you, the way you’ve buried yourself under my skin and taken over my heart, it’s bigger and better

than anything in this whole fucking world. It's too important, too special to let anything or anyone get in the way of it. Anyone."

Holy. Shit. "You really believe that?"

"Damn right I do. The love I have for you, Kat, it shocked the hell out of me. I mean, I've always loved you, but when I watched you walk away, so strong and so damn determined not to cry, I realized what I'd lost. What I'd thrown away." He shook his head, smile bittersweet. "I'm not willing to live my life without you, not if there's still a chance for us." His gaze met mine, intense and filled with emotion. "Is there? Still a chance?"

I wanted to say no. wanted to tell him to go to hell for breaking my heart and leaving me so distracted I'd nearly gotten myself killed. But I couldn't. And I didn't want to. "How can I turn you away when you've owned my heart since I was sixteen?"

"Fifteen," he corrected. "I still have the note you wrote."

My eyes went wide. "You do not."

"Silky locks the color of spun gold. Eyes as blue as the early morning sky."

He chuckled when I shook my head. "I can go on."

"No need. If I tell you that I love you, too, that I want to be with you, for real and out in the open, will you burn that letter?"

He shook his head. "Hell no. It was the first time I knew I was worthy of love from someone other than Emmett and Jas."

"Terry." The word came out on a whisper and I felt my heart race as I reached my hand out to him, out to an uncertain future with the man of my dreams. "You are so worthy of love and you have it, all the love I have to give and more. I'll tell you and show you, every day until you believe it."

"Kitty Kat," he growled and wrapped his arms around me, apologizing when I groaned in pain. "Shit. Sorry, babe." He flashed a teasing smile and cupped my face, kissing me until I

couldn't breathe, until I couldn't see straight. He kissed me until I was sure that I owned his heart just as surely as he owned mine.

"I love you Terry Manning and don't you ever doubt it for one fucking minute."

He laughed. "Right back at you." His blue gaze seared into mine, the moment electric between us, more so because we couldn't act on it. Our smiles spread like goofy kids who'd just discovered the pleasures of a really good make out session.

"Now, who gets to tell Jasper?"

Terry kissed me again. "We tell him together. Along with the rest of the family."

I smiled and dropped my head to his chest, reveling in the feel of his heart beating steady against my palm. "Okay, together. That sounds perfect."

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CHAPTER ONE

EMMETT

Sunday dinner at Ashby Manor was always a chaotic affair with housekeepers frantically running around to make sure the formal dining room was set to Sadie's exacting standards.

Two uniformed servers busied themselves uncorking wine and organizing serving dishes and spoons and whatever else was required to make sure Sunday dinner felt like the family time it was meant to be.

"Five minutes," Sadie told the head housekeeper, a warning in her voice. Even though she had a ruthless streak that ran deep in her petite body, Sadie always seemed a little anxious about making sure things were perfect. Every single Sunday.

"Emmett," she smiled as I walked into the dining room. "Come, let's have a drink."

"Sure, thanks." It was just me and Sadie together in the dining room, waiting for the room to clear. We only had a few minutes to ourselves before the rest of the family and their guests would arrive in the next five minutes. Otherwise, they'd be late.

"Wine or whiskey?" I said, walking behind the bar.

Her lips curled into a grin. "Whiskey, of course."

I poured two fingers into two crystal tumblers and handed one off to her. "How are things?" I wasn't all that involved in the Ashby Organization beyond House of Ashby, training champion fighters, but I also wasn't a fool.

I knew a good portion of the Ashby wealth came from underground card games, prostitution, extortion and even some drug trafficking. I'd stop letting it bother me a long time ago, and I never judged them for it. Ever.

Sadie sighed and leaned against the heavy oak hutch. "Things are as they always are, Emmett. Hectic. Crazy. Dangerous. Take your pick." She took a long sip from her tumbler, sharp green eyes taking in every detail of my face. "How are you adjusting to being back at the gym? No aftereffects of the attack?"

Always, but I shook my head, deciding to keep my own secrets. I'd gotten caught in the crossfire when the Rhymers came after the Ashbys, but I wasn't getting paid to whine to Sadie. We'd get our revenge.

"None that I'm aware of," I said, the whiskey smoothing down the lie, "other than being a bit more cautious of my surroundings."

I really should start carrying my piece again, for peace of mind, not because I thought I was still in danger. Then again, being as close as I was to the Ashby family, there was always *some* danger.

"I'm fine," I said, raising my glass to our mutual good health. "The fighters are looking good, and we have a few new trainees who appear...promising."

"That's good to hear." Sadie nodded; her gaze focused just over my shoulder as if her mind was someplace else. "Keep an eye out for anyone to replace Ravager on our roster until he's healed." I was more than grateful that Sadie didn't blame me for that shit show because it could have ended my career as a fight trainer.

"I have someone in mind. He's not as young as Rob, but he's stronger with a harder punch. Come by the gym some time and check him out."

She nodded and flashed a grateful grin. "I will. And Emmett, I want to thank you for making time for Vanessa. She's still

fragile and in need of a friend, and I'm told you've been a good one to her."

I shrugged off her praise, feeling uncomfortable with it. "No thanks necessary. She's a nice lady, and we kind of get each other."

"Doesn't hurt that she's beautiful, does it?"

I took a long sip from my own glass, trying to figure out how to answer without giving anything away. "Doesn't it always?"

Sadie laughed. "I always appreciate a good piece of eye candy." Her eyes twinkled with mischief, and I wondered what the woman who had been more like a mother to me than my own drug and booze addicted mom was up to.

Hearing footsteps, I turned then to the doorway. Sadie'd seen her sons before I did.

"Jasper. Virgil," she said, waving them into the dining room. "I was just about to have Emmett send up smoke signals to announce dinner."

Virgil rolled his eyes and dropped down in his seat at the middle of the table. "Ma, we're two minutes late."

"Two minutes late is not on time," she reminded him and took her seat at the head of the table, Jasper seated right beside her. "Where is Maisie?"

"I'm right here," she said breathlessly, rushing into the dining room. She flung her handbag onto an empty chair beside the window before she took her seat beside Virgil. "Sorry I'm late. Twin billionaires had me running around all day in search of red-headed twin acrobats. They settled for black-haired twins because they used to be Cirque du Soleil dancers."

She rolled her eyes affectionately and grabbed Virgil's glass of whiskey, finishing it in one gulp. "Hey, everyone."

Sadie's lips curled into an amused grin. "Hello, Maisie."

"Hey, Maze," I added with a welcoming smile.

"Your face is looking much better, Em. Much," she added, a twinkle in her blue eyes.

“Thanks, uh, yours too.”

Maisie laughed when Virgil frowned at her and said, “I’m your fiancé, you’re supposed to tell me I look good.”

She shrugged. “You look all right, but now that Emmett’s scars have healed, we can see his handsome face again. It’s a good thing, Virgil. Relax.”

I knew Virgil was just giving her shit because from the moment I met Maisie, she’d become just like Kat to me. Another sister. “Yeah, Virg, relax,” I prodded, laughing when he flipped me off.

Cal showed up, alone once again, and silently took his seat beside Jasper, hoping his arrival would go unnoticed.

It didn’t.

“And where is Bonnie?” Sadie’s question stopped all side conversations, her tone icy and demanding.

“She’s not feeling well, Ma.” The fact that he wouldn’t look up when he answered spoke volumes, but Sadie let that part slide.

“For fuck’s sake, you’d think she was the first human woman to give birth with the way she’s acting. Do we need to call the doctor?”

“No,” he said quickly. “She’ll be fine, just needs to rest.”

Sadie nodded but her jaws clenched in anger. “If Bonnie wants to be a part of this family, she’s doing a piss poor job of showing it.” She snapped her napkin onto her lap for emphasis. “And if she doesn’t, well that can also be arranged.”

It wasn’t *exactly* a threat, but it was close enough to one that Cal nodded with more energy than I’d seen from him in weeks, possibly months.

Madison snuck in moments later, shooting a mischievous grin around the table as she took her seat across from me.

Kat showed up last, as usual. “Hey, bums, why so glum?” she said, unusually cheery, this time on the arm of my brother.

Terry had a mile-wide grin on his face that told me Kat's tardiness had nothing to do with work.

Sadie's lips spread into a grin when her daughter appeared. "Katherine. Glad you could join us." She nodded at Terry and Kat holding hands. "Does this mean you two have patched things up?"

Kat looked at Terry with love shining in her eyes and grinned before she turned back to the table at large. "It does. Terry and I are...a thing." She seemed to struggle over the word, her voice thick with emotion. "We're giving this love thing a shot, as they say."

"Who says that?" Maisie asked with a teasing glint in her eyes.

"Everyone says that, duh." Kat rolled her eyes and let out a little sigh when Terry brought her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles.

"This is us, both of us," he clarified, his icy blue eyes aimed right at his best friend and boss, Jasper, "telling you all that we are a couple. Officially. Whatever the *hell* that means. She's my woman, and I love her."

Maisie let out a wistful sigh, hands to her chest like the southern belle she tried so hard not to be. "So sweet."

"Right?" Kat's face lit up like a neon sign, and she wrapped her arms around Terry, beaming with pride that he'd finally made the Ashby Princess his and pressed her lips to his. "I love you too, babe."

When they finally parted, their two sets of eyes swung to Jasper, who for some odd reason had a stick up his ass about Terry dating Kat. It didn't make sense to me since, over the years, Terry and Jasper had been closer than brothers. If there was one man in the world he could trust with his sister, it would be my brother.

Jasper polished off a glass of red wine and smacked his lips together with a sigh as he leaned back in the high back dining chair. "I still don't like the idea of you fucking my sister," he began with a growl.

“We’re in love, asshole, not just fucking,” Terry added, sending Sadie an apologetic smile.

“Well, I still don’t like it, but as Kat so astutely pointed out, it’s not my place to tell her who she can and can’t love. Especially when she loves the best man I know, and one I know will put his life on the line to keep her safe.”

“Damn fucking straight,” Terry added as he pulled Kat close.

“And if he doesn’t, I’ll kick his fucking ass,” Jasper added with a smile. “I’m happy for you as long as I don’t have to hear the details of your sex life.”

Kat flashed a wide grin and hopped over to Jasper, smacking a grateful kiss on his cheek. “Terry can agree to that, but I have to tell you about this thing he does with his tongue—”

“Goddammit, Kat,” he growled and pushed her away with a laugh.

“Kidding,” she said and took her seat. “I don’t want to make you jealous, Jas. But thanks for not being a dickhead about it. Anymore.”

Terry took his usual seat beside Jasper and whispered a word of thanks, which Jas accepted and clapped Terry on the back.

“Since I’m being *not* a dickhead, I think it’s time we make some changes.” He stood and grabbed his recently refilled glass of wine and took the seat that had remained empty for the past twenty odd years, at the other end of the table.

A collective gasp went up around the table from my brothers and Kat as Jasper strode toward the chair once occupied by their father. He sank into the seat we’d honored every Sunday dinner by setting a place though it remained empty as tribute to the man who once headed this family.

By that move, Jasper officially announced his position as the head of all that Ashby surveyed, and pointed to his just vacated place beside Sadie.

“Take it, Terry,” he said, his voice and presence indicating his authority. “That seat is yours now, brother.”

Sadie raised her glass in the air with a smile. “It’s about damn time,” she said, her gaze bounding from Kat to Jasper and finally landing on Terry. “For all of you. Now, let’s eat and talk business.”

This was usually the part of dinner where I tuned out and focused on the platters piled high with delicious food and the endless supply of top shelf alcohol. But lately, I was more invested in learning as much as I could about Ashby’s enemies, since knowing them could mean the difference between life and death. So I shoveled roast and carrots and potatoes in my mouth while doing my best to look mildly uninterested.

Jasper’s words meant more to me now that he’d taken over his father’s spot, technically Sadie’s former spot, at the foot of the table. “Still no word about Savannah Rhymer,” he growled.

“Mueller is laying low,” Kat said, “but his *friends* are still staying in one of the suites.”

“Any word on Molly?” Madison mostly—and wisely—stayed silent during talk of Ashby business, other than to ask about her missing sister.

Guilt flashed in Kat’s eyes and she shook her head. “Nothing yet, but that means she hasn’t turned up at a morgue either.” Kat was definitely hiding something but Madison didn’t seem to realize it. “Oh, and I spotted a certain redheaded Fed snooping around Emerald Isle.”

Sadie and Jasper sat up straighter simultaneously. “What?” I couldn’t say who actually asked the question since they both spoke at once.

“She didn’t question anyone, just sat in the lobby and observed who came and who went. Poor idiot doesn’t realize she’s barking up the wrong tree.”

The crowning jewel of Ashby’s legitimate enterprises, Emerald Isle, remained untarnished by their more clandestine dealings. “I wouldn’t be opposed to Jas assigning a few watchful eyes on her, though.”

“Consider it done,” he replied, anger simmering beneath the surface. “We have enough on our plate with Brendan seeking to carve out his own legacy away from his father’s shadow.”

And so unfolded our Sunday dinner, an enigmatic blend of familial warmth, unrelenting business dealings, and sharp-witted banter.

The anticipation of what lay ahead made it all the more exhilarating.

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THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Hey there bookworms! Just wanted to shout out a big THANK YOU for devouring my books! I seriously appreciate all of you—my beta readers, ARC readers, and Facebook fans—you're all rockstars! And a HUGE thanks to Helen, who's basically my literary guardian angel. Without her, my words would be a hot mess.

And let's not forget my family who have to deal with my bookish obsessions—you guys are the real MVPs. Thanks for putting up with me and my crazy writer ways!

Hugs!

KB xoxo



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I love coffee, tattoos and hard-bodied alpha males. The men in my books are super sexy and protective. Some are military badasses who swore an oath to their country, some are full blown bad boys. Some are dark and dangerous killers. But all of them find their happily ever after.

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