

A Single Dad
Boss Romance

Billionaire
GRUMP

ALLISON WEST
WILLOW FOX

BILLIONAIRE GRUMP

BOSSY SINGLE DAD

BOOK 1

WILLOW FOX
ALLISON WEST



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

I am Levi Luxenberg. Forty-year-old billionaire. CEO of Luxenberg Enterprises. And apparently, father of one.

A week ago, having kids wasn't even in my ten-year plan.

Now, I have a five-year-old daughter who will hardly look in my direction.

I am aware that Amelia is grieving her mother's death, and I swear I'm not a complete jerk, but I jumped on a private jet to Chicago at a moment's notice, and the kid won't even say a word to me.

As if that wasn't bad enough, our pilot just got sick and I have to fly commercial for the first time in years.

You'd think that would be the end of it, but no.

The cherry on top?

Amelia would rather interact with Clare, the divorced, jobless, tipsy woman sitting right in front of us, than me.

She chats with her, she smiles at her—she even draws her a freaking picture.

I would be really mad if I didn't actually need a nanny. Urgently.

Since my assistant screwed my wanted ad over and made me look like a grumpy billionaire desperately looking for a wife, Clare suddenly seems perfect for the job.

She has no place to live, no idea who I am, and no qualms about being my live-in nanny on a trial basis.

The problem is, I think I might want to keep her around longer...

ONE

Levi

“Grumpy Billionaire desperately seeks a nanny for his five-year-old daughter. Expect to work late nights, have no social life, lots of tears, and absolutely no alcohol, drugs, parties, or fun.”

That was the ad that went out this morning. My assistant, fed up with my shenanigans, decided to give me a taste of my own medicine. I can't believe Nancy thought that's what I wanted the ad to say, that I'm a billionaire. Is she trying to attract every gold digger?

I'll admit that I haven't always been kind to my assistant. She's been required to field calls from previous dates, forced to tell them I'm not interested.

Is this her idea of payback?

“What?” I answer my phone. It's my assistant.

“Did you get the text that your flight home has been canceled?”

“No,” I growl, and put Nancy on speakerphone while I open up my messages. There are dozens of messages and even more emails that have been ignored.

I'm a busy man, and I haven't had time over the past forty-eight hours to deal with work.

I just discovered I'm a father, and the little girl was whisked into a temporary foster home after her mother died in an automobile accident.

My attorney handled a comparative DNA test and requested Amelia's DNA. I saw the truth for myself on paper. Although after staring at the young girl, her eyes as blue as the depths of the ocean, I know the kid is undoubtedly mine. She has Katelyn's blonde hair and build. She's small for her age, but Amelia's birth certificate indeed has my name as the father. And the kid's date of birth matches up to when Katelyn and I had been together.

Amelia hasn't said a word since I met her. I'm sure the kid talks, but the silence is heavier than anything I could have imagined.

I'm sure it's because she's grieving.

Me too.

But for different reasons.

I'm not ready to be a father.

I glance down at the little girl seated across from me. She hasn't touched her breakfast, and I practically ordered one of everything on the menu because she refused to give the waitress her order.

"I can book you two first-class tickets direct from O'Hare to JFK."

"Inform Douglas of the travel situation and that we'll need to be picked up from JFK."

"I'm on it," Nancy says. "I'll text you the flight details."

"I hate flying commercial," I grumble.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Luxenberg."

"Yeah, me too." I end the call and shove my phone into my jacket pocket.

Amelia stares at me, her pancakes untouched. Just like the strawberry milkshake, with whipped cream that dribbles down the side of the glass.

I steal a piece of her bacon, and her eyes narrow at me like it's hers and I shouldn't touch it. But she doesn't scold me.

I'm only met with further silence. I'd almost rather her yell, scream, cry, and throw a temper tantrum. Not that I'd be good with handling that type of outburst, but the silence hurts my heart so damn much.

I'm in over my head, and I desperately need a nanny, someone who is good with kids.

My phone pings in my pocket, and I grab it, glancing at the text from Nancy confirming the seat assignments. We're both on the same flight, but Amelia is assigned to the row in front of me.

The seats aren't together.

"Fuck!"

Amelia's eyes widen, and her jaw drops as she stares at me.

"Don't say that word," I scold before she can repeat it.

We finish at the restaurant and head straight for the airport. I don't have any checked baggage, only the carry-on suitcase and backpack. The kid didn't come with many clothes, only a small knapsack with a handful of outfits.

Last night and again this morning, Amelia refused to change out of the bright-pink frilly tutu, white tights, and white T-shirt. It's amazing her white shirt is still clean after sleeping at the hotel.

Stubborn.

Another reason I need a nanny. I'm not the most patient person.

We board the plane early, and I explain to the stewardess about our seating arrangement. It's a full flight, but the woman seated next to me offers to switch. She's cute, with long blonde hair and a full figure that makes my cock twitch admiring her curves.

"Hi, I'm Clare," the blonde says, smiling at Amelia.

Amelia squeezes her stuffed unicorn tighter. Its mane is rainbow and sparkly, and it's the only toy the kid brought with her.

"She's shy," I say, not wanting to elaborate on the recent trauma in her life to this stranger.

"I was shy when I was her age, too," Clare says, her eyes entirely on Amelia. It's as though I don't exist. "What's your friend's name?" she asks, pointing at the unicorn.

Clare shuffles into her new row in front of us on the airplane. She doesn't sit. She hovers, leaning on the headrest, trying to engage with Amelia.

Amelia doesn't respond, but I do. And it's more of a bite.

"That's enough questions for today," I say, my temper short. I gesture for her to turn around in her seat.

"You don't have to be rude," Clare says, and spins around, sitting in her seat.

Amelia's nose scrunches, and I can't tell what she's thinking. She brings the unicorn to her face, and her mouth moves ever so quietly, but I can't hear what she's saying. It's like a secret between her and her fluffy friend.

I don't apologize to the girl seated in the row in front of us. Maybe I should since she is doing me a favor, switching seats.

"Have you ever been on an airplane?" I ask Amelia.

She doesn't answer me. Her mother didn't always live in Chicago. I met her in New York. We were a short romance that burned bright and hot early on.

At take-off, Amelia grips the chair handle. I rest my hand over hers. "It's okay. Just a little bumpy. It's supposed to be like this," I assure her.

There's no sign of her nodding or saying anything to indicate that she understands me. Her mother, Katelyn, didn't speak any other languages, as far as I'm aware.

After we've reached cruising altitude, the stewardess asks us for our drink orders. I refrain from having any alcohol. I'd

love a stiff drink right now, but it's not going to help me forget why I was in Chicago.

I retrieve a few children's menus and crayons from the backpack. One side has drawings to color along with the menu, and the opposite side is blank. Thankfully, the restaurant gave us extra for the flight. Pulling down the tray table in front of Amelia, I put the items down, letting her color.

She stares at them and then glances back at me.

"Go ahead. You can color," I say.

I don't know much about kids, let alone raising one. My younger brother, Connor, is a dipshit, and thank god he hasn't procreated.

I've tried to look out for him. Hell, I gave him a job in management at the New York hotel. But he has a knack for either firing decent employees or making them want to quit. But I'm not going to just hand him a paycheck and not make him get his ass into work five days a week. Where else can I put him?

I may have inherited the company, but I also turned this place around. It was barely profitable when I took over after our father's death. I had no choice but to shake things up and make it better, because otherwise, who would take care of Mom?

Dad left me the business, which meant taking care of my mother and handling my younger brother. I'm not a complete dick. I didn't put either of them out on the street, though it was tempting with Connor.

The seatbelt fasten light is turned off, and the girl in the row in front of us turns around, watching Amelia.

"What are you drawing?" Clare asks.

Amelia scrunches her nose. The paper is completely blank.

"How about you draw a picture of your balding dad?" Clare grins.

"I'm not balding," I snarl. Why can't she turn around and mind her own business?

“Right,” Clare says, and snaps. “What’s that called again with the hair that’s spikey?” She gestures above her own head like her hair is sticking up two feet high.

Amelia chuckles and points at my head. “Troll hair,” Amelia says with a giggle.

I suppose it’s better than being called balding at my age. “Do you think I’ve got troll hair?” I force a smile, grateful to have heard little Amelia’s voice.

Amelia shrugs, the smile vanishing, and my heart aches.

I want to hear her laugh and be carefree. She’s five. She should be over the moon with curiosity and talkative. This quiet side is frustrating to deal with.

Clare stares at us, and before I have time to comprehend what she’s doing, her fingers are running through my hair. She’s making my hair spiky and stand on end.

Amelia giggles and smiles the biggest grin, pointing at my head. “Troll hair.”

“Can you draw me a troll?” Clare asks.

Amelia nods and reaches for the purple crayon, gripping it tight as she begins coloring on the blank white paper.

I breathe a sigh of relief and run my hand through my unkempt hair, trying to fix the mess before our plane lands. There’s enough press in New York to spot me the minute I step off the plane, and I don’t need ridiculous pictures in the newspaper and on social media of me with troll hair.

As it is, I’ll have to put out a press release and make a public announcement about Amelia before I’m bludgeoned with accusations.

Clare gives me a thousand-watt smile, but it’s clearly forced. She turns around and heads toward the stewardess, saying something quietly to her.

Both of their eyes latch on me before looking away.

I’m used to the stares and curiosity. She must have realized that I’m billionaire Levi Luxenberg. I’ve been on magazine

covers and interviewed by celebrities. I'm used to the attention. Usually, I ignore it.

But now I'm not just looking after myself. I have Amelia, and I can't keep my daughter a secret. I just have to ask everyone to respect our privacy.

I keep an eye on the stewardess once Clare is back in her seat, making sure no one is snapping photos of Amelia and me on the plane together.

Thirty minutes later, Clare turns around to check on Amelia. "How's the drawing?"

Amelia is still very hard at work on her troll drawing. I didn't expect much, but the kid has a knack for artwork. She doesn't answer Clare, but that's okay because I know that she can, and eventually, she'll speak when she's ready.

The stewardess brings Clare a mini bottle of vodka, and she mixes it with orange juice, holding it while talking. I haven't been paying attention to how much she's been drinking in front of us, but this isn't the first drink that she's been served.

I opted to get Amelia an apple juice, which she's sipped a few times.

Clare's cheeks are red and her lips glossy. "I wish we could stay in the air forever, just keep flying."

"Why?" Amelia asks, glancing up from her crayons.

My kid seems to be enthralled with the tipsy woman seated in the row in front of us. Great.

"I don't want to face New York. After a loveless marriage and finally growing the balls to leave my narcissistic and emotionally abusive ex, I have to find a job and a home with nothing lined up. I spent six years as a preschool teacher, and I loved every minute of it. But the minute we got married, *he* made me leave my job. He didn't like that I wasn't home when he wasn't home. Afraid that I'd have a life outside of him. Jealous douch—" She slaps a hand over her mouth and looks at Amelia. "Oops, I meant jealous guy."

Mostly unfazed, she continues to ramble, not the least bit done with her overshare.

“My best friend let me stay in Chicago with her during the divorce, but I’ve worn out my welcome. Newlyweds,” she says with a laugh. “See why I’d rather just stay in the air and fly free?”

“And you thought spending money on a first-class plane ticket would be smart?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I stole these airline miles from my ex.”

I offer a wayward smile. “Good for you.”

Amelia stares up at Clare, perplexed. I imagine that most of that went right over the kid’s head.

“What are your plans when you land in New York?” I ask.

She sips the orange juice and vodka from the clear plastic cup. “I don’t know. I’ve been in survival mode for the past eight months. My ex bled me dry with the divorce. I’ll probably flip burgers or something and sleep in a cardboard box.”

Amelia hands the troll drawing to Clare.

“Is this for me?” Clare asks with wide eyes. Amelia nods. “Why don’t you give it to your dad? I’ll bet he’d like to hang it on the fridge.”

“I don’t have a dad,” Amelia whispers, staring up at Clare.

My stomach clenches at her remark. “I’m her father,” I say, clearing my throat.

Clare stares pointedly at me like she doesn’t believe me. “The kid obviously doesn’t think you are. Maybe I should sit with her.”

“Excuse me?” I’m appalled by her suggestion.

“Would you like me to sit with you, sweetie?” Clare asks Amelia.

Amelia glances from me to Clare. The kid doesn’t know what the hell is going on, and neither does the woman sitting one

row in front of us.

Amelia unlatches her seatbelt and wiggles around me to get out of the aisle. I grab her waist, not letting her run around like a maniac on an airplane. Now isn't the time or place for her to run free.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to remove your hands from the little girl," the stewardess says, exchanging a brief glance with Clare.

"For fuck's sake, I'm her father!"

"You need to calm down, sir," the flight attendant says.

Amelia's eyes widen, and she scurries away from me after I lash out at the stewardess. She climbs into Clare's lap, which is not helping matters.

"She's my daughter," I say.

The stewardess bends down to Amelia's level. "Is that man your father?" she asks the little girl.

Amelia's eyes widen, and she glances from me back to the stewardess. We're all met with silence.

Fuck.

"Amelia, come back to your seat," I seethe, trying my best not to raise my voice, but my jaw is tight, and my hands are bunched into fists.

I don't blame Amelia. It's the stewardess and the nosey blonde who have decided to muck into other people's business.

Amelia doesn't respond to me, and why would she? We barely know each other. Doesn't she get that if she leaves me, she'll be back in foster care? She had to be put in emergency placement with a family until I arrived. Does she want to go back?

"Sir, sit down in your seat," the stewardess says.

"Is this how you treat your first-class passengers? You kidnap their children?"

“You’re right, sir. I apologize. How about you show us photos of your daughter on your phone? Then we can clear up this entire misunderstanding before having to get the authorities involved.”

Amelia has been in my custody for less than a day. I don’t have pictures of her on my phone.

“I can’t do that,” I say.

There are no emails from the social worker regarding Amelia, either. Everything was handled by phone or by my assistant.

“That’s what I thought,” the stewardess says.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” I stand to explain the situation without Amelia overhearing it all over again.

“Sir, you’re going to have to sit down. We’re going to be landing soon.”

Not soon enough.

I grumble and plop back down into my seat. I swear I’ll never fly commercial again.

The young gentleman who was in seat 1A climbs into the row beside me, trading seats with Amelia while Clare buckles her seatbelt.

I should be the one fastening her seatbelt and looking after her. She’s *my* daughter.

As we land, the flight crew announces that no one is to get up from their seats because there’s been a hiccup, and the authorities need to be brought onto the plane.

Fuck.

Could this week get any worse?

The authorities are brought onto the plane and ask me to get up and come with them. “Only if my daughter is

accompanying me,” I say.

“Amelia isn’t his daughter,” Clare says, defiant.

“Is she *your* daughter, ma’am?” the officer asks.

“No.”

At least Clare isn’t trying to kidnap Amelia.

I grab the backpack from the floor and open the overhead compartment for my luggage. I help Amelia out of her seat, unbuckling her and lifting her into my arms. One arm holds my daughter to my hip while the other carries the luggage behind me.

I’m not letting anyone come between my daughter and me.

“We’ll get this sorted as soon as we’re inside,” the officer says.

Clare follows behind us, and whether she’s invited or not, she’s given herself an invitation.

“Does she have to come?” I jab my thumb behind me at the blonde.

“Yes, she needs to give her statement while we investigate.”

“What’s there to investigate? I flew to Chicago to pick up my daughter. Do you want to know where her mother is? She’s dead.”

Clare gasps. “Did you kill her?”

“What the hell?” I spin around on my heels. “No, I didn’t kill her, you psychopath. She died in an automobile accident.”

Amelia bursts out into tears and squirms in my arms. I’d want to run away from me too if I were her.

I don’t let go, my grip tight without hurting the little girl. “I know, baby girl. Your mom misses you too,” I say, trying to console her.

Her tears turn to hysterical sobs, and she relents, pouring her grief into my neck and chest.

Clare seems lost for words for a moment. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she finally says, patting my shoulder awkwardly.

I glance at her hand on me. “Remove your hand from my shoulder. We’re not friends. You’re just a girl from the airplane who had too much to drink and decided to make wild accusations.”

The officer clears his throat as we approach his office. “Unfortunately, because I removed you from the plane, I have to write up a report and will need to investigate. This will all go smoothly if we can remain calm, and all of you can be on your way shortly.”

It isn’t the least bit short or quick. And remaining calm isn’t easy, either.

One officer gathers Clare’s statement while Amelia is kept with me in a separate room. There are no windows to the outside, only a one-way mirror.

I’m not a terrorist.

I didn’t kidnap my daughter.

This is absurd.

After the officer confirms that Amelia is legally in my custody, I’m told I can leave. He brings my backpack and carry-on into the room, which apparently has been searched without my permission.

I rezip the compartments. “Not even an apology.” I’m disgusted by their treatment and the baseless accusations.

“You can file a complaint with—”

“Oh, I plan to, along with suing your asses,” I say. I slide the knapsack over my shoulder and lift Amelia into my arms. “It’s time to go home, kid.”

I lift the telescoping handle and drag the carry-on behind me.

Amelia is back to being silent. How could I expect anything else after my outburst earlier in the airport? I had tried so damn hard to keep my shit together, but suddenly, having a kid

thrust onto you is heavy as hell. And I'm not talking about the weight of carrying her.

We're escorted out of the back rooms and into the main area of the airport. We don't have any additional luggage, so I grab my phone from my pocket and call my driver, Douglas, letting him know that we're ready.

He's probably waiting in the nearest cell phone lot to pull up and pick us up. He's been instructed to purchase a specialty car seat for a five-year-old girl. Douglas has kids of his own, so I expect he knows what type of car seat to purchase, whereas I'm clueless. There are too many out there to figure out which one is the right one to buy.

I hang up the call, shove my phone into my pocket and catch sight of Clare heading for the same exit.

"You again," I seethe.

Her eyes are bright and heavy, the color of seafoam, a bluish green. "I'm sorry," Clare says, not that it helps.

"It's too late for your apology." I remove my coat, wrapping it around Amelia as I carry her outside. It's the best I can do on such short notice. The weather in Chicago is warm enough for early October that I didn't think twice about bringing a jacket. But now it's late at night, and the air matches my mood—chilly.

I shuffle the backpack on again and keep Amelia nestled up against my chest. Between our body heat and the blazer, she's at least warm enough not to shiver. Thankfully, it's not the middle of winter yet.

Clare walks outside with me. "Listen, I really am sorry about that back there."

"I get it. You were looking out for *my* daughter."

"Yes," Clare says. "She didn't seem like she was comfortable with you. It never crossed my mind that it might be because of ... what happened." She's tiptoeing around the words, since I'm holding Amelia in my arms. "I am so sorry, sir. If there is anything I can do to make it up to you. I swear I was just

looking out for her best interests. You hear about children being kidnapped or trafficked, and I just wanted to help.”

“Apology not accepted. You tried to have me arrested, *Airplane Girl*. What did I do to warrant your baseless accusations?”

Clare sighs heavily. “Nothing. I’m the one to blame. It’s my fault.”

“Yes, it is your fault,” I say, pinning her with my stare. “And I thought, wow, this girl really knows how to interact with kids. Shame on me for falling for your ‘poor me, I’m going to be homeless’ speech.”

“My what?”

“You’re going to live in a cardboard box while flipping burgers,” I repeat.

I listen a little too well sometimes.

She cringes as I repeat her words. “Again, I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can do to make it up to you, anything at all—”

Amelia squirms in my arms, reaching out for Clare.

“No, sweetie. You have to stay with your father,” Clare says.

Amelia leans back, pushing against me, struggling to understand what’s happening. It’s been a tiresome day. She wants to get down, and I’d be fine with that if I knew the kid wouldn’t bolt in front of a car.

I have trust issues right now, with Clare and Amelia.

Amelia reaches her arms out to Clare, again. The kid prefers this stranger over me, although I’m not exactly a person she knows either.

“Do you really not have a place to stay?” I ask, my jaw tight.

Why am I asking? Why am I considering offering her a roof over her head? The girl is trouble. I ought to walk away and never see her again. It would be better for everyone involved.

“I’ll be fine. I can couch surf with my friend. I mean, assuming her Russian Mafia fiancé doesn’t mind me staying

over.”

I cough at her words. “You aren’t serious.” The longer we talk to Clare, the more Amelia seems to settle down. My little girl rests her head on my chest, watching the blonde the entire time, never taking her eyes off the woman.

Yeah, baby girl, me either. She’s gorgeous and sexy, yet irritates me all at the same time. Not to mention the age difference. I’d guess she’s barely cresting thirty, and I just hit forty.

It’s frustrating.

“I wish I were joking. But he is hot, and maybe he has a brother who’s available,” Clare says with a smirk.

I pray that she’s joking, but something tells me otherwise.

“Absolutely not.” I pause for a moment, hesitant to say the words. “I need a nanny for Amelia. You can stay with us.” She had mentioned on the airplane that she spent six years working at a preschool.

“Excuse me?” Her eyes widen, and she tilts her head, staring at me like I’ve lost my mind. I think I might have, after what happened today. It’s late; not enough sleep and being thrown into the mix with a kid has done something to my mind.

Am I so desperate for a nanny that I’ve offered nosey airplane girl a job working for me?

“You’ll get room and board. There will be a trial period. If you don’t screw things up, I might hire you permanently.”

Amelia stares up at me, her long, dark lashes fluttering closed. She seems to relax in my arms, like the weight of the world was just lifted from her chest.

Mine too.

Assuming that Clare says yes.

TWO

CLARE

“You want to hire me after what happened in there?” I ask, gesturing toward the airport. I fucked up big time, shoving my nose into someone else’s business where it didn’t belong.

There’s a spacious, luxury black SUV that pulls up in front of the gentleman. I never caught his name. He didn’t give it to me, and I’d been too busy hounding him to ask for it now.

He stalls, and I really think he’s going to tell me it’s a cruel joke and to get lost.

“I don’t want to, but I think you’re what Amelia needs.”

I chuckle at his remark. I’m certainly not a soft touch. “And the pay?”

“Room and board during the trial period,” he says gruffly.

I’ll bet he can afford more based on the fancy ride and driver, but maybe he hired someone to pick him up. It’s not like he always has someone chauffeur him around, right?

I have nowhere to go, and I can look for other work while I’m living under his roof. At least it’s a bed to sleep in and food in the fridge. Besides, my ungracious ex-husband, Zander, won’t know where I am. He’ll never guess I’m staying with a stranger. Which means I’ll be safe.

“I’ll take it.”

His driver opens the back door and helps Amelia into the car seat. He seems like he's had more practice than the handsome troll. Not that he looks like a troll, because he doesn't. Trolls aren't easy on the eyes and don't make your heart swoon.

I really thought he was a bad guy kidnapping a little girl. I'm hanging around with Sadie too much, listening to her crazy stories after she swore me to secrecy. Yeah, as if either one of us can keep a secret.

I open the front door to sit up front, and he shakes his head. "Backseat," he says, putting me in the back with Amelia.

I have my carry-on luggage with me, nothing else, thankfully, or else it would have been a hassle to retrieve after spending nearly three hours dealing with the officers at the airport.

"Where to?" the driver asks, glancing at me.

"She's coming home with us," the gruff troll says.

I buckle my seatbelt and lean forward. "Hey, I never got your name."

He clears his throat. "Good."

"What?" I don't understand. "What am I supposed to call you?" I ask. Why is he being so freaking difficult? Does he enjoy this as some type of payback for what I did and the way I treated him? I swear it was just because I was looking out for Amelia. The kid was clearly in trouble. I just didn't realize that he'd gotten her out of it.

"Sir works for me," he says.

I huff under my breath. "I'm not calling you sir."

My cheeks burn at the thought of why I would call him that, down on my knees, begging him to let me undo his belt buckle and—nope, I won't allow myself to go there with such naughty thoughts.

He's off-limits and a thorn in my side. There's no chance I'll sleep with the father of the little girl I nanny for—well, little chance. Never say never.

He is hot.

Grumpalicious.

Alphalicious.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“His name is Levi,” the driver says.

“I ought to fire you, Douglas,” Levi grunts.

“But you won’t. We’re too much like family.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he mutters.

I exhale a heavy breath, and for the first time today since boarding the flight, I’m quiet. Amelia wiggles in her car seat and shows me her sparkly unicorn as if I haven’t seen her cuddle the stuffed animal for the past couple of hours.

“Does your friend have a name?” I ask, tapping the unicorn’s nose.

Amelia stares up at me. “Airplane Girl,” she says.

Levi’s head snaps back, watching our interaction. Does he worry that I won’t know how to look after his kid? I’ve been around children my entire life. I worked at a preschool before I got married. I could probably call the director and ask if there are any openings. But the pay was never great, and finding an apartment on minimum wage will be brutal.

“That’s right,” I say, smiling reassuringly. “I’m Clare.”

“Amelia,” the little girl says, pointing at herself.

Levi’s phone buzzes. “What is it, Nancy?”

The fact that he’s talking to a woman has me eavesdropping. Though it’s not like there’s an inch of privacy in the vehicle.

Is Nancy his girlfriend?

Wife?

I didn’t look at his finger to see if he’s married, but if he’s in a committed relationship, wouldn’t she have at least shown up at the airport to welcome the two of them home?

I hope, for his sake, he’s not that serious about Nancy.

“I know I’m late, and I haven’t checked my voicemails. There was an issue at the airport.” He pauses, and I wait for him to elaborate to the caller. “I found someone temporarily to help with Amelia. No thanks to you.”

Ouch. He’s in a pissy mood, although I’m sure I didn’t help. Am I to blame? Probably. Too bad. I’ve already made a mess of things; it can’t get much worse.

While I can’t hear Nancy’s side of the conversation, I get an earful from Levi. “I can’t make it into the office tomorrow or this week. I need to keep an eye on Amelia and get her settled. Email me the details, and when my lawyer contacts you, let him know that he can reach me on my cell phone.”

Lawyer?

Is he planning on suing me for what happened at the airport?

I’m sure we can work out some type of arrangement. I could watch Amelia to make up for the embarrassment and humiliation I caused him. However, I’ve already offered to do that for room and board.

He hangs up testily.

“You’re in a mood,” Douglas says. He’s not afraid to speak his mind. I like that.

“*She* put me in one,” he says, jabbing his thumb in our direction. I can only assume that he’s referring to me, not his little princess. Amelia is seriously perfect. Adorable. Sweet. The girl, it seems, has been through an ordeal from what I’ve overheard, but she’s resilient.

“Then why are you bringing her home?” Douglas asks. While he tries to keep his voice low, it’s not quiet enough for me not to overhear their conversation. If they were smart, they’d turn up the radio.

“I need a nanny, and it’s clear that Airplane Girl is good with Amelia. Turns out she was a preschool teacher or something. She knows how to deal with kids.”

“Give yourself more credit,” Douglas says. “It’s barely been twenty-four hours with the child. You two will bond. She just

needs some time adjusting to her new situation.”

He grumbles and reaches for the radio, masking the rest of their conversation.

“I don’t think your daddy likes me very much,” I say, tapping the sparkly horn on the unicorn.

“He’s not my daddy,” Amelia says. She exhales a loud sigh, her lips vibrating together. The motion causes her to giggle, and she does it again.

Levi’s phone rings again, and while I can’t hear who he’s talking to this time, it’s clear that he’s important and busy. He hasn’t even made it home, and he’s had two phone calls. How many other people will be reaching out to him tonight?

“You look like a princess,” I say, smiling warmly at Amelia and tugging on her hot pink tutu.

Her eyes widen, and with one hand, her fingernails dig into the sparkly unicorn. With the other, she clutches my hand.

I don’t know what to make of her expression. She recently lost her mother. Does the little girl understand that she’s not coming back?

“You know what would go great with that tutu?”

Amelia stares at me blankly, waiting for me to answer.

“A crown.”

Levi hangs up his call. “Princess and Airplane Girl,” he chimes, glancing over his shoulder at us. “First order of business is getting my little princess into pajamas.”

“No!” Amelia shouts and scrunches her face.

“Even princesses wear pajamas to bed. We just have to find you jammies fit for a queen,” I say.

Amelia’s shoulders relax, and she pokes my arm, stabbing me with her finger.

“What is it?” I ask, trying to keep an even temper. The kid is persistent, but it’s been a long day, and she needs to run around and get some exercise. Sitting on a plane and then in

the back corridor with her father under police surveillance isn't great for her.

Again, my fault.

"Hungry."

"Dad, do you have any snacks?" I ask.

"Don't call me that," Levi scolds.

"Okay, Grumpypants." I win another giggle from his little girl. Apparently, she agrees with me.

"That isn't any better," he mutters. "You can call me sir."

"Sir Grumps-a-lot?" I joke.

He unzips the backpack at his feet and hands me a package of fruit snacks. It's not the healthiest choice, but she holds out her hand and snaps her fingers together like a crocodile demanding the sweet treat.

I tear the foil packet and hand it to her.

Hungrily, she chomps on the fruit snack. I didn't see if she ate anything on the flight, but there was a meal service provided in first class. The girl is one lucky lady, getting to fly first class. When I was her age, I had never even been on an airplane.

The remainder of the drive is rather quiet. Amelia settles in with her snack, and the driver pulls up toward a wrought iron gate. He rolls down the window, punches in the code for the property, and the gate slowly opens.

"Wow, fancy," I say, unable to keep my mouth shut.

The towering hedges make it impossible to see the property in the distance.

Douglas drives us up to the front entrance, and I'm sure my mouth has hit the floor. The brick pathway circles in front of the entrance with an overhang to keep everyone dry, not that it's raining.

Based on the size of the house, there has to be an attached garage around the back. I'm sure it holds more than two or

three vehicles.

Does he live here alone? The house is big for one person. It could house a family of four.

Levi opens the car door, stepping out and stretching.

I follow, stepping out of the SUV. The brick pavers are perfectly aligned, and the driveway is smooth and pristine. It pales in comparison to the rest of the house and property.

Three stories tall, the building expands outward and easily could be three houses in size if not more. The cream color reflects the sun, brightening it into a soft yellow as the building towers over us. White trim sparkles in the light of day. The windows are gorgeous and clearly floor length on the first floor, bringing a lot of light into the home.

“You live here?” I rasp, my mouth dry.

Levi steps around and helps unbuckle Amelia from her car seat. Her eyelids are heavy and droopy. The kid has finally settled down and is about to doze off when we arrive.

Figures.

She’s not nearly as impressed as I am by the digs. What kind of place did her mom have for her not to be floored? Maybe it’s the fact that she’s five.

“My fortress of solitude.”

I swear I haven’t picked my mouth up off the floor yet.

“It’s a joke. Superman? Never mind,” Levi says, glancing at the two of us for recognition.

“I know Superman,” I say. I wasn’t born yesterday, I know my comic book characters. Well, the ones that have their own film and television franchise.

The little girl seems to wake up at our chatter. “You do?” Amelia’s eyes widen, and she rubs the sleep away. “Can I meet him? No, wait. I want to meet Supergirl.”

How am I supposed to tell this kid that Supergirl and Superman aren’t real?

I don't want to break her heart. She's so sweet and innocent. I head for the trunk, and Douglas opens the lid, retrieving my luggage for me. I didn't bring much, just one suitcase with a bunch of dirty laundry.

I reach for my luggage, and Levi scolds me. "Let Douglas carry your bag to your room."

"I can handle it," I say.

Douglas grabs the second suitcase and carries Levi's bag to the front door, leaving it in the foyer for him.

"Are you always this difficult?"

"I like to think I'm self-sufficient."

He chuckles under his breath, and I wait for him to make some snide comment, but he doesn't. Instead, he heads in through the front door, carrying Amelia as she squirms in his grasp.

I follow behind him, lugging my heavy-ass suitcase from the vehicle, up the front steps, and into the foyer. The house is grand. Magnificent. A royal orgasm.

"Are you a prince or something? Because that would explain this place and your daughter being a princess." I realize that Amelia isn't a real princess, but the house is just overwhelming.

"Quit sucking up. You already have room and board, *Airplane Girl*." He puts Amelia down, and she hurries away from him, running down the hallway, arms wide out like an airplane. "Aww shit," he mutters.

"Didn't remove the antique vases and expensive artwork from her level?" I should bite my tongue and thank him for giving me this opportunity. I get to live like a princess for a week until he realizes I'm worthless and tosses me on the street.

It's inevitable.

"She's five. I didn't need to babyproof the place," he says, and pauses, his jaw tight. He hurries down the hallway after Amelia, to see what trouble she's stormed into.

I leave my heavy suitcase by the front door. I should have taken the offer for Douglas to carry my luggage to my room. For starters, I don't know which room is mine, but he might have known where the guest room is. Not to mention the bag is heavy. And I don't think Levi would appreciate my cheap-ass bag scuffing up the marble floor.

Douglas pulls the car away, and I shut the front door, locking it.

Holy hell. This place is huge.

From the outside, it was grandiose, and it doesn't appear any smaller on the inside.

So, this is how the rich live. Damn, it must be nice. I'm jealous, but at least I get to spend a week here.

"Hey, is there a hot tub?" I shout.

I glance around the empty foyer. Is it just the three of us, or does Levi have staff that tends to his every whim?

"You're not getting naked in my pool," Levi says, carrying Amelia back into the entrance of the house. Her arms are straight out like she's flying, and he's zipping her through the air.

The kid is smiling and giggling, and Levi looks a hell of a lot lighter. Happier.

"Supergirl!" Amelia shouts.

"Follow us upstairs, *Airplane Girl*," Levi says. The name almost sounds endearing, but I don't think he means it in any sweet manner.

I grab my pink suitcase and refrain from groaning as I lug it up the stairwell. The second floor is at least carpeted, so I roll the bag the rest of the way until he leads me to my accommodations.

"Your room is right next door to Amelia," Levi says. He opens the bedroom door for me. The bed is made, and there are yellow lacy curtains hanging in the window. They don't do much to keep the sunlight out. I'll be up at dawn. Wonderful.

I leave my bag near the inside of the door and follow Levi next door to get a glimpse at Amelia's digs.

He opens the door and places the little girl on the bed.

"Bed!" she says, and while I almost think that she might lie down and crawl under the covers, I'm dead wrong.

She begins bouncing on the queen-sized mattress. The bed is huge for such a little girl, but I don't suppose he knew he was going to have a kid around the house.

Levi drops the backpack at his feet and bends, unzipping the compartment, and retrieving a set of pajamas. The cotton material is pink and covered in yellow ducks. The jammies are cute, but they're not princess-esque if that's what Amelia is going for.

Amelia flies into the air, giggling as she jumps on the bed.

"Princess! Princess!" she squeals, and I capture her before her feet can land on the mattress.

"I think you need to get this little princess a trampoline," I say.

"No, they're too dangerous," Levi says.

"And jumping on the bed isn't dangerous?"

"I didn't say that she could jump on the bed," he snaps. I swear I hear him growl. He's steaming. I've annoyed him once again. How many times is my limit in one day?

"How about we take a bath and then read a story?" I suggest, helping her climb onto my back for a ride.

The kid is heavy, and it's a struggle, but I'll do anything to make this little girl happy. Her father, on the other hand, can kiss my ass any time that he'd like.

"Give her here," Levi says, and bends down. "Give your mo—nanny a break."

Was he seriously about to slip and call me Mommy? My cheeks burn, and I help Amelia climb down off me. She instantly snuggles around his back, her arms tight around his neck while he carries her off to the bathroom.

I stand there awkwardly in her bedroom.

“Are you coming, *Airplane Girl*?” Levi shouts to me from down the hall.

I grab the pajamas and head out of the little girl’s bedroom, following his voice down the hallway. I shuffle into the bathroom as Levi guides her feet back to the floor. Like the rest of the house, the bathroom is ridiculously large.

There’s a glass shower stall and a separate claw bathtub.

“Bath or shower?” he asks Amelia.

“Out!” she demands, pointing at him to leave her alone.

“If you want your privacy, then you’re going to have to take a shower,” he says. “I’m not taking a chance that you’ll drown in the tub.”

Amelia scrunches her nose at him and sticks out her tongue.

“I can help her,” I say.

“No boys allowed.” Amelia points at Levi and then at the door.

“Are you sure you’ve got this?” Levi asks, his brows raised. He looks worried.

“I promise she’s in good hands.”

“Don’t lock the bathroom door,” he demands as he slowly retreats, but he never fully leaves the room. His eyes are foggy like he’s trying to decide whether to trust me alone with his daughter.

“Hop in the shower,” I say to Amelia, sliding open the glass door, giving her a semblance of privacy while Levi stands in the doorjamb, his arms folded across his chest. He hasn’t retreated any farther, and I doubt that he will.

Amelia shimmies out of her clothes, the hot pink skirt coming off last. Once I have the dirty clothes, I hand them off to Levi to deal with. I adjust the shower spray, pointing it at the wall while I turn it on and wait for the temperature to rise, before turning it to the center of the shower.

I slide the door closed. The glass is frosted, which allows the little girl her privacy while also assuring both of us that she hasn't fallen or gotten hurt.

She twirls under the spray, and there are fits of giggles as she stomps on the shower water.

"You should make sure that she's actually washing with shampoo and soap."

I give her another minute before checking on her. "Amelia, would you like me to wash your hair?" I ask.

"Yes, Mommy always does the bubble song."

"The bubble song?" I ask, glancing at Levi for help.

He shrugs and shakes his head, at a loss as to what the bubble song is or how it may go.

"Can you sing it for me, Amelia?" I ask, sliding the glass door open. I lean into the shower to grab the shampoo, and my shirt gets wet. It's unavoidable without moving the showerhead away from Amelia.

"No, you sing it, silly." Amelia dips her head back, and I lather up my hand with shampoo, running them through her long blonde tresses.

"Do you have conditioner?" I shout to Levi.

"Umm, no," he says. "But I can call Douglas and have him pick up a bottle."

"That won't work for tonight," I say with a heavy sigh. "I think I have a small bottle in my bag. Can you grab it?"

"Yeah, sure."

We make a good team. I rinse the shampoo bubbles from Amelia's hair, and she dips her head back, making sure I don't get any soap in her eyes. "While your daddy grabs the conditioner, how about you soap up your body?" I hand her a bar of soap, and it slips right out of her hands.

Amelia giggles and bends down to capture the soap as it slides across the floor. "Please be careful," I warn her. If she falls and gets hurt, Levi will blame me.

She chases after the soap, and it slides across the shower tile at her feet until she sits on the water, covering the drain hole, turning her shower into a bath.

I can't imagine Levi will be pleased if the water starts seeping out of the tub. "Come on, stand like a big girl. Unless you want me to draw you a bath?"

She climbs to her feet and tosses the soap at me, although in all honesty, I'm not sure that it doesn't just slip out of her hands, either.

"Levi?"

How long does it take him to grab the conditioner from my luggage?

Amelia finally soaps up her body, cleaning herself while he returns to the bathroom. His cheeks are red, and I swear he looks like he was caught doing something that he shouldn't have, but I'm not sure what.

"I uh—"

"Got lost in there?" I joke, and yank the conditioner from his hands.

He runs his fingers through his hair and turns his back to me, but he's still in the doorway. "You really don't trust me?"

I get it. I'm a stranger, and Amelia is his kid, but it's clear that she's not comfortable having him bathe her. Which means someone has to help her out until she's able to handle it on her own.

I pop the lid off the conditioner bottle and rub my hands together before sliding my fingers through Amelia's long hair. I don't want her to have knots and for brushing her hair to become a chore. I remember my mother yanking on my hair, attempting to brush mine when I was a kid, and the tears that followed.

Amelia decides to splash me because why the hell not? It's not like I'm dry anyhow. The kid makes sure that my shirt is soaked by the time I'm finished rinsing her hair.

She's all giggles and points at my shirt, and she can now see my purple lace bra, which happens to leave little to the imagination. My nipples show right through the fabric.

Crap.

I pull back, finishing with Amelia in the shower and turning the water off when she's done. I wrap a towel around her and keep my back to the door, not letting Levi get a free show.

But there's only one towel.

"Hey, can you spare us another towel?" I ask.

"For Amelia?"

"Actually, no, for me. Your daughter thought it'd be funny to splash me." I glance over my shoulder at him.

He shakes his head. "Sorry, we're fresh out. Laundry day."

"You're a terrible liar," I shoot over my shoulder at him, and shut the bathroom door on him with the heel of my foot.

He's standing in the doorway, and the door doesn't latch, but it closes most of the way.

I help Amelia slip her pajamas on after she's dry. The towel is completely soaked. There's not even a small corner that I can use to help dry my shirt.

I grab the wet towel and use it to cover my breasts with it scrunched up. It's damp but not nearly as wet as my shirt.

Amelia pulls open the bathroom door. With Levi's attention on his cell phone, his daughter slams into him like a battering ram. Thankfully, it's just his legs, and he steadies himself with a hand to the wall.

"I'll have to call you back." Levi ends the call, shoving his cell phone into his pants pocket. "I can take that," he offers, holding out his hand for the damp towel.

"I've got it. I need to throw my clothes in the washer anyhow. I'm sure you have a washing machine around this place somewhere."

"Laundry is down the hall. Second to the last door on the left."

He clears his throat and opens his mouth, but the words don't come.

"What?" I ask, glancing down to make sure the towel is covering my breasts. He doesn't deserve a show.

"The clothes in your suitcase were dirty?"

I nod. "Why?" I just came back from vacation. Well, not actually vacation but staying with a friend during the divorce. What makes him think I'd have clean clothes in my luggage?

His tongue darts out to the side of his mouth, and he exhales a heavy breath. His face is red. "No reason." He shakes his head and lifts Amelia into his arms. "Come on, story time."

"No bed!" Amelia protests, seemingly knowing what's coming.

I head to my bedroom, the door open and, with it, my suitcase is left unzipped. He closed the lid, but that was it. I zip the suitcase and drag it across the hallway to the laundry room.

Opening the laundry room door, I drop the damp towel in an empty bin, unzip my suitcase, and staring back is my bright-pink vibrator.

I tug my teeth between my lips. I guess he saw that, and that's what left him flustered. I shrug it off and tuck it into the side compartment of my luggage. Lifting the lid for the washing machine, I toss my laundry in and start a load of clothes, leaving my undergarments for the next wash.

I pull my soaked shirt over my head, open the dryer, and toss it in. I'm left in my bra, but I'm not planning on leaving the room until my shirt is done.

There's not a chair in the room, and after a few minutes, I grab a book from my bag and prop myself on the washing machine to sit.

The spicy scene in the novel carries me away, making me momentarily forget about the past eight months. I hungrily flip the page, reading one after the next, devouring the novel like it's dessert. It's sure as hell just as sweet and delicious.

The rumble of the washing machine offers itself up as a giant vibrator, and I try not to giggle at the sensation as my hips thrust in unison. My eyes shut, and the first image that pops into my head is Levi.

He bends between my legs, spreading them, begging to taste me as he kisses a trail to my heated center.

My insides throb, and my head dips back, gasping for air.

Am I delirious? Has it been that long since I've had good sex that I'm using washing machines and fantasies of my new boss, Sir-Grumps-a lot, to get off?

The rumbling of the washer thumps beneath my weight, and gosh, does it feel good. The machine grows louder as it becomes off balance, and Levi thrusts open the door, interrupting my pleasant mood and impending orgasm.

Damn.

“Get off the machine before you break it.”

THREE

Levi

I can't believe I caught Clare sitting on my washing machine. The appliance is top-notch and brand-spanking new.

Does she have to ruin everything?

Her hand comes up and slaps me across the face as she slides down off the machine.

I growl at her and grab her wrist before she can pull it back and slap me again. "This is the thanks that I get, letting you into my home?"

"You insinuated that I'm fat," Clare shoots back.

"What?" I stare at her blankly. "When the hell did I do that?" I'm sure I didn't insinuate anything. The girl isn't fat. She's curvy with a rocking body that I'd like to dominate every inch of—fuck, I can't have these tempestuous thoughts.

She's the nanny, she's a decade younger than I am, and more importantly, she's been a big pain in my ass since we met on the airplane.

"You told me I'd break the washing machine. Hence, fat."

She shuffles her feet and holds her book up to her chest, but it's centered and does nothing to cover or hide her perky breasts from me.

Sleeping with her is out of the question. Not even if we were the last two people on the planet and had to procreate for

survival, would I bed her.

Nope.

My cock says otherwise as I stare at her full tits bursting through her lacy bra. I've always been more of a tits man than an ass man.

The dark purple fabric is thin and sheer. It barely serves its purpose other than to taunt me, and boy, does it ever. I want to rip the fabric away from her skin and free her breasts, taking a mouthful, tasting and sucking.

If I were an honest man, I'd tell her that she's not fat, that she's curvy and voluptuous, and how I'd love to lick and taste every inch of her skin before fucking her raw.

But that's too honest, and we're not romantically involved. We're not anything. She's my kid's nanny.

"Anyone sitting on the washing machine would break it. What book are you reading?" I ask, desperate to change the subject.

"It's none of your business," she says, clinging to the book, keeping it tight to her chest.

"A naughty book," I surmise by her reluctance to show me the cover and clinging to it as though her life depends on it.

"Books aren't naughty. Men are naughty," Clare retorts.

"So are women," I say.

She snorts under her breath. "I don't know what you mean." She shuffles closer to me, and her hand reaches out. I swear if she grazes my cock with her hand, I might just explode.

Her fingers dip into my pants pocket, retrieving her bright-red bikini bottoms. "Really? You're not the naughty one here, stealing my dirty panties?"

"I don't know how that got there," I say with a laugh.

"Right. It must have fallen into your pocket when you went searching for my conditioner, *Panty Thief*." She spins around. Her back is pressed up against my chest.

I take a step back, making sure that she can't feel my hard-on pressing into her. It's clearly biological. She's a woman. I'm a man.

She's got great tits. I blame it on her breasts.

And those panties, I swear that I didn't steal them. I may have touched them and examined them a little too closely, but I swear I didn't put them in my pocket.

Shit.

I don't remember shoving them in my pocket, but she had called me from the bathroom, and I may have inadvertently snatched them in a rush to make sure that she didn't need my help.

Oh.

I am a panty thief!

Airplane girl is never going to let me live it down.

Clare bends forward, opens the dryer, and retrieves her shirt. With her back to me, she slides her arms into the material and spins around, the view no longer nearly as sexy.

I stifle the whimper of disappointment.

What the hell is wrong with me? This woman is a menace. I run a hand through my hair and take a step back. I need air. And an ice-cold shower. Ever since opening her luggage and stumbling through her panties, bras, and pink vibrator, my cock has been aching.

I breeze out of the room, letting her finish her laundry. Hopefully, she doesn't break my damn washing machine. It's not like I can't afford a new one, but that isn't the point. She should be respectful of my property and my things.

I'm careful not to wake a sleeping Amelia as I stumble off into my bedroom and shut the door. I head for my private bathroom, strip down and turn the water on hot.

A cold shower isn't going to help tonight. I'll just be tormented with dreams of Clare, which I don't need.

I want to release this pent-up frustration and move on.

Standing under the tepid water, I roll my neck from side to side, letting the tension release.

I crank the water hotter.

My body is on fire, and the only way to satisfy the urges building inside of me is to match the heat. I stand under the spray, the water beating down on me. With one hand, I stroke my shaft, the other, I rest against the cold tile wall. The extreme hot to cold is like ice on a raging fire. Steam pelts and sizzles.

I don't want to think about Clare or her gorgeous tits that were encased in the purple lacy bra.

Fuck.

It's the only thing I can think about as I stroke my shaft and imagine her taking my cock into her mouth. My fingers wrapped in her hair, fucking her pouty lips.

I let the orgasm wash over me, as the shower hides the evidence. I finish in the stall, turn the water off before it gets cold and grab a fluffy white towel to dry off.

Yeah, I had plenty of towels in the hall closet and my bathroom. But I didn't want to give her one.

I was being a dick.

Payback's a bitch. Isn't that how it goes?

I wrap the towel around my waist and head into my bedroom to grab a clean pair of boxers to change into before bed.

She's all I think about, with her blue-green eyes and long blonde hair. She could easily be mistaken for Amelia's mother. Hell, I can't believe in my overtiredness and emotional exhaustion that I almost referred to her as "Mommy".

What the hell is wrong with me?

How has she managed to get under my skin in a matter of a couple of hours? Which happens to fall in the longest week of my life?

First, Amelia is thrust into my life. Now, Clare. No, it has to stop. I won't let it go any farther. She's just a fantasy. The girl

is too young. What I feel isn't real. I don't know her. She's a woman who needed a job, and she's clearly good with Amelia.

One week.

I'll get her out of my house and never see her again.

I just need to hire another nanny, one who's even better. That shouldn't be too hard after I have my assistant weed through the gold diggers and nannies looking to land a billionaire husband.

There has to be someone who's qualified and good with Amelia. Clare can't be the only woman out there.

While I'd like to avoid her for the next few days, I don't entirely trust her with my daughter. But I can't afford to take a week off work when I have to shore up specifics with my assistant on travel arrangements for my trip to Europe.

And it can't be postponed, which is fine, since I'm not leaving for a week. But that doesn't give me a lot of time to deal with my Clare situation. Or the Amelia situation, either, for that matter. Even if I fire the nanny, I can't bring a five-year-old to my meetings at the hotels that I'm looking to purchase.

My assistant isn't going to offer to watch Amelia. Besides, I'm not leaving Amelia alone for a week after just meeting her and bringing her home. She needs stability.

Is a new nanny going to help with her settling in? Not likely, but Clare needs to prove herself capable over the next week.

And I need to get my dick in check as well.

I can't be having lurid thoughts about the sexy blonde sleeping across the hall from me. And that vibrator she had sitting on top of her clothes in her suitcase.

The dark-pink shaft and girth of that fucker. There's no way a piece of plastic is getting her off.

My cheeks burn, imagining her putting it between her legs. Her hands caress her body, play with her breasts, and trail toward her pink pussy.

What does she fantasize about?

I'm not foolish enough to think it's me. I just met the girl.

I run a hand through my unkempt, wet hair and collapse onto the cool mattress. It does nothing to still my raging cock that has decided to wake up for round two.

Not tonight, buddy.

I can't let her get inside my head.

The next morning, I wake as the sun comes up. I shower and dress before coming out of my room, donning work attire even though I don't intend on going into the office. But that doesn't mean the office might not come to me.

My assistant has already texted that she's going to swing by this afternoon with the documents I need, and I wouldn't be surprised if a half dozen other employees show up at my door as well.

Especially with the rumors circling about Amelia.

How could they not with the shit my assistant Nancy did? How many billionaires are in New York City? And the contact number, thankfully, wasn't my cell phone, but it was my direct line at the company.

Does Nancy want me to fire her ass? Because it's tempting as hell. But the better punishment would be to make her deal with the money-hungry ladies lining up to nanny for my daughter.

The vultures are coming in for the kill, wanting to see Amelia. I wouldn't be surprised if the media outlets and news vans are lined up outside the gate.

Another reason not to go anywhere for the next week. And then to fly private to Europe. I don't need the hassle of my face, or my daughter's, plastered all over the television.

I want to protect her.

I head out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind me. I haven't even glanced at my phone this morning, an unusual

occurrence. That's typically the first thing I do when I wake up, reach for my cell phone.

Except I'm not interested in the numerous texts and missed calls. There will be voicemail messages from countless people whom I interact with, trying to weasel their way into my life for the inside scoop. Probably so they can try to sell it to the media bastards who want to ruin anyone's life at the first chance of a hefty payday.

Yeah, I've dealt with their shenanigans far too many times. It was one of the reasons that Katelyn and I didn't stay together. She couldn't handle the pressure of constantly being under the spotlight.

I never blamed her for breaking things off, but I also hadn't known she was pregnant. Had she realized it when she ended our relationship?

Hell, is that even what we had?

We spent most nights screwing at her place or mine. We rarely went out. She hated the media circus when it came to dining out.

It goes with the territory of fame. Not that I'm famous, I'm just wealthy. They're not mutually exclusive, but I've been in enough magazines as Most Eligible Bachelor that it makes some girls uncomfortable.

Usually, it doesn't bother me, but now that I have a daughter, I want to shield her from the unnecessary scrutiny of the media. She's not a wild animal to be photographed.

I glance in at Amelia, and she's lying in bed, her eyes open. She's quiet, and while I hate waking her, I'm not sure if she'd come to find me. The house is big, and I'm still new to her.

I pull the door closed, hoping she might still get a little more sleep, but she sits up in bed. "No!" she shouts at me, proclaiming she's awake and ready to start her day.

Amelia climbs off the bed that is much too big for her and plops down with two feet on the floor, scurrying over to me.

“How about we check and see if your nanny is awake?” I say. At least if I refer to her as the nanny, it’ll put some much-needed distance between us.

Amelia bobs her head excitedly and takes my hand as we walk next door. I give a firm knock. I don’t want to just waltz in if she’s sleeping in her underwear.

Well, maybe I do. She probably shouldn’t sleep like that, or naked, since my daughter is in the next room over and she’s supposed to be caring for her.

“What?” Clare’s grumpy sleep-filled groan mutters through the door.

My cock twitches at her voice, imagining her lying in bed beside me.

No.

That’s not going to happen. Zero chance. We are a ticking time bomb. Just being in the same vicinity as her is dangerous.

“Come in,” she grumbles when I don’t respond quickly enough.

I turn the handle, relieved that the door is unlocked.

Clare sits up in bed. Her tank top hugs her breasts, her nipples on full display through the thin blue fabric.

I try not to stare, but it’s damn hard to keep my eyes on hers. “Amelia is awake. I have work to do.” I shuffle my daughter into Clare’s room.

Amelia rushes toward the bed, climbing onto the queen-sized mattress.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Clare says, grabbing Amelia before she can jump on the bed.

I shut the door, leaving the two of them to handle breakfast and get Amelia dressed for the day. Heading down the back stairwell, I slip my phone out of my pocket. I scroll through the dozen or so missed calls and texts.

Most I don’t care about, but Connor, my younger brother, left a message. I rub my jaw. I should have told him about Amelia

before he heard the news through the grapevine.

I don't bother hitting play on the message. I'm sure he's scolding me and giving me a piece of his mind.

Heading into the kitchen, I flip on the lights and grab coffee beans to make a fresh pot while I call Connor back. I've got a basic coffee pot in addition to an espresso machine. This morning, I want coffee, black. Anything else would be too sweet.

"Hey, Asshat," Connor says when he answers the call.

"Nice to talk to you too," I grumble. I add water to the coffee maker and start the brew cycle. It can't come fast enough.

"Were you going to tell me you have a daughter, or let me find out from the girls at the office blabbing on about it?"

"Shit," I mutter, and run a hand over my eyes. "Has word already traveled that fast?" The question is more to myself, but Connor takes it as his cue to answer.

"How could you expect it not to when you put the word 'billionaire' in the nanny wanted ad?"

He's right. "Not my doing," I say. But it doesn't matter. It's too late for it to matter, because the damage has been done.

"So, when do I get to meet your little hellion?" Connor asks.

"Her name is Amelia, and I'm not sure. I've got a trip planned next week for Europe, so timing is sort of an issue at the moment."

Connor laughs, but he doesn't sound amused. It's more of an annoyed chuckle. "Can't even make time for family. Damn, that hurts."

But I don't think that it does. Connor and I haven't gotten along very well since Dad's passing.

"Did you call Mom and tell her the news?" Connor asks.

"Fuck," I mutter. "I haven't exactly had time with flying to Chicago to pick the kid up. You know, her mother, Katelyn, died," I say sharply.

“Shit, no, I didn’t. Katelyn was her mother? Isn’t that the girl you were going to propose to?”

The coffee pot beeps, just in record time for me to drown myself in caffeine. I want to end this conversation before it becomes even more difficult to stomach. “It was the girl I discussed marrying,” I say. I never bought the ring. I went to Tiffany’s and browsed through the store, but I knew that deep down, Katelyn wouldn’t say yes.

I grab a mug from the cabinet and pour myself a steaming cup.

A bitter cup for a bitter old man.

That’s all I deserve.

I take a sip, the coffee burning the roof of my mouth. I grimace and swallow the liquid as it burns all the way down.

“Damn, and to think if you’d have married Katelyn ...” His words trail off. I’m not sure where he’s going with this conversation.

I’m aware that Amelia was kept from me for the past five years, and I’m not the least bit happy about it.

“Anyways, how are you handling the kid with work? Did you manage to hire a nanny? I’ll bet they’re all after your big paycheck.” He snickers at his remark.

I’m less than amused. “I found someone on a temporary basis.” I won’t elaborate on how Clare and I met. It’s none of his damn business.

“Good. Good,” he says, and there’s a long stretch of silence. “Are you in the office today?”

“No,” I say, and rub the back of my neck. Since when did Connor ever show up or care if I was in the office? He manages the New York hotel. We’re in the same city, but we barely see each other.

It’s how we both prefer it, to visit on Christmas and call each other on our birthdays unless it’s work-related, which is him calling asking for money because his hotel needs an upgrade.

“I’m working from home for the week. I want to make sure that Amelia is settled in and comfortable before I return to the office. She’s been through a lot, and there are enough changes going on around her that I need to make sure she doesn’t become withdrawn.”

Having witnessed her mother’s death, it wouldn’t surprise me if the kid has permanent emotional scarring.

Another reason to call that child psychiatrist and get the appointment made for this week. Perhaps I can have her come to the house to work with Amelia. I’m sure if I offer to pay her enough, she’d be willing to do it.

“That makes sense. I’d love to stop by, meet the kid and the nanny you hired,” Connor says, “and of course, see you, *Big Brother*.”

“You don’t give a rat’s ass about me.”

“True. True.” Connor doesn’t beat around the bush. “I am curious about the kid, and seeing as I’m her uncle, wouldn’t it be nice for us to become closer?”

“Really? You’re not doing this just because you’re a curious bastard?” I ask.

He laughs. “Yeah, actually, I am. I thought I could come by, be the dotting uncle and bring the kid some presents. Lord knows your house is not child friendly.”

“I plan on sending Douglas shopping,” I say. I was going to hand the kid one of those holiday catalogs and let her pick out whatever the hell she wants. Then send my driver on an expedition to buy everything today. Of course, finding one of those holiday catalogs is a chore in itself. It’s not like I keep that shit lying around my house.

“You know they have internet for that, *Dinosaur*,” Connor says.

“That will take too long.”

“You ever heard of two-day shipping?”

I down the rest of my coffee. “I’m hanging up now. I have work to do.”

“And like I don’t?” Connor chuckles. “I’m coming by this afternoon. Will you and the kid be home?”

“Yeah, text me when you’re on the way.” I end the call with Connor and exhale a sigh of relief, not realizing how tense and stressful it is dealing with my younger brother. Mom spent more time bailing his ass out rather than teaching the kid a lesson growing up.

There’s a soft patter of footsteps in the hallway and massive giggles that follow.

“You can come in,” I say. It sounds like they’re just outside of the kitchen. How much of the conversation did they hear?

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to interrupt,” Clare says as she carries a giggling Amelia in her arms. She plants the little one’s feet back on the ground.

“Up!” Amelia squeals, and shoves her arms back up in the air.

Clare grunts and lifts my daughter in her arms, pretending to fly her around like an airplane. I can tell she’s doing it to entertain Amelia, but it isn’t easy on her. I’d offer to help, but I’ve got work to do.

“There’s plenty of food in the fridge and pantry. Find something healthy for Amelia. If you want anything, there’s a list on the fridge. Add to it.”

“Thanks,” Clare says, her voice soft.

I try not to stare at her. She’s still in her pajamas, and so is Amelia.

“I’m going to have Douglas pick up some playthings for Amelia along with clothes. She should have one more outfit in the backpack upstairs that she can wear today.”

“Okay.” Clare is softer this morning when she speaks, quieter and less rambunctious than yesterday.

I’m not sure why. Perhaps she feels out of her element in my home.

Good.

Keep the woman on her toes. I don't need her mouthing off to me in front of Amelia.

"I'll be in my office. If you need anything, it's the first door on the left." I point in the direction that I'm heading.

"Thanks. We should be fine."

I pour a second cup of coffee and take it with me into my home office. I haven't used this place in what feels like forever. I don't typically take work home with me. Instead, I spend late nights at the office if I have to pore over documents and contracts.

I text Douglas to pick up clothes for Amelia along with the sizes on her last outfit, which was mostly the T-shirt and leggings. The frilly tutu didn't have a size. It might have been handmade.

Is that why Amelia hadn't wanted to part with it?

I also mention to him that she likes Supergirl and everything princess related.

What kid doesn't? he texts back.

He makes a good point. I let him handle the clothing, and he suggests grabbing one of my old tablets and letting Amelia pick out some toys on an app. I can text him what she likes, and he can pick up whatever is in store and in stock.

If that's enough to distract me, I also need to enroll Amelia in kindergarten. Which means investigating the private schools around the city and finding the one that offers the best curriculum.

I have a lot on my plate in addition to my typical workload, which is overwhelming at the moment.

I take a swig of the coffee, the added jolt helping me focus and knock out one task at a time.

After an hour, I receive a text from my assistant that she's pulling up out front of the house. While she has her own code to enter the premises, the front door is manually locked, and no one but Douglas has a spare key.

Douglas is my right-hand man; he's not just my driver. I'd trust the man with my life.

I head out of the office and for the front door, yanking it open. Nancy is carrying a stack of folders and files.

I shut the door behind her and lock the latch. "Here," I say, taking the files from her before she drops them all over my floor.

"Thanks." She glances around. It's not the first time she's been here. A few months ago, I needed emergency surgery after my appendix nearly burst, and she came by with a get-well basket and a dozen files of shit that needed doing while I was recuperating.

Her wayward glance tells me she's looking for Amelia, or maybe the nanny.

"How are you holding up?" Nancy asks.

I've worked with her since my father was alive and ran Luxenberg Enterprises. She was my assistant then as well. She's astute.

"Fine," I answer gruffly. She doesn't get more out of me.

"And the new nanny? I didn't forward any names over to you. But I brought three files of women who are qualified to look after your daughter."

I exhale a sigh and gesture for Nancy to join me in my office. I leave the door open and take a seat behind my desk, placing the files on the mahogany wood surface.

She sits across from me. "The top stack of files are resumes that I personally vetted. I mean, I didn't call their references, but they look like solid candidates," Nancy says.

"Are they married?"

"I don't know."

I drop the files into the trashcan without even reviewing them. "Unless they're happily married, I'm not interested."

Her brow tightens. "You do realize that isn't a question that we can legally ask a candidate?"

I'm aware of the particulars when it comes to hiring, but I don't need another temptation under my roof. Clare is enough trouble.

I could consider hiring a male nanny, but I'm not comfortable with letting a man around my five-year-old daughter.

"Figure it out. Do some sleuthing," I say.

Nancy emits a heavy sigh and stands. "You do realize this isn't part of my job description."

"Are you asking for a raise?" I glare at her. Is this her way of telling me that she's underappreciated and overworked?

"No, I just don't think you realize how much time this has taken me to comb through thousands of resumes. I brought you the three best candidates."

"And you would trust them with your own child?" I ask.

"If I had children, I would," Nancy says. She's happily married but childless.

"I will consider the applicants," I say, glancing at the metal wastebasket. At least it is empty of anything else inside. While I don't have staff constantly handling my home, I do have a woman who comes twice a week to clean and tidy up the place. She's been part of the family for ages.

"Thank you."

"Is there anything else?" I need her to keep me up to speed, since I'm not in the office. If things happen, I need her to be my eyes and ears.

"I've arranged your itinerary for Europe, sir. But I do have a few questions."

I nod, waiting for her to continue.

"Will it just be you traveling, sir? Or do you plan on bringing your daughter with you? I realize you haven't settled permanently on a nanny, so I wasn't sure what you wanted to do."

I sigh and stroke my jaw, thinking her words over. "The situation with Europe has crossed my mind extensively these

past few days. At this point, I'd like for you to book an adjoining room for all of the hotel accommodations. Make sure that the car that picks us up has a booster seat for my daughter. Reservations for restaurants should all include three people."

"Sir?"

"I will be bringing Amelia with me and whomever I hire as her nanny. At the moment, I'm working on a trial basis with Clare, but I'm not sure that she will be a good fit for a permanent position. And I'm not going to leave my daughter with a brand-new nanny and stranger while I'm overseas."

"Understood. I will make those changes, sir, and if I may—"

I expect nothing less from Nancy. She has always been forthcoming and honest, sometimes brutally so and to the point.

"Yes?"

"Have you told your mother about the child?"

I shift back in my chair. It's the same question Connor brought up. I know it's something I'm going to have to face. But it's not a moment I look forward to, either.

The woman spent years hounding me to get married, have children, and start a proper family.

How's she going to take the news when I bring Amelia to meet her, and she's five years old? I can already envision the scathing comments on how I kept her from meeting her granddaughter and how could I not have known that Katelyn was pregnant. Undoubtedly, she will blame me.

And maybe she's right. Perhaps it is my fault. If I'd pushed harder with Katelyn to make it work and met her demands, then I might have known about Amelia.

"I haven't picked up the phone and called her. My brother mentioned the same thing," I mutter.

"The only reason I bring it up, aside from her hearing about it through another method, is that she might be able to help while you're away."

My jaw tightens. “My mother is not looking after Amelia.”

“She can’t be that bad. I mean, she raised you,” Nancy says.

“Exactly,” I mutter. “I don’t need my little Amelia to turn out like this.” I gesture at myself.

Nancy stands and shuffles her feet, staring at me. “Just think about it.”

I walk her out of my office and to the front door, escorting her outside.

I glance at my watch. It’s barely ten in the morning, and I have too much to do before the day ends. The list of qualified nannies that Nancy dropped off will have to wait another day.

Clare rounds the corner, smacking right into my chest. “Whoa, slow down there,” I say, steadying her from falling.

Her eyes are wide, frantic. She’s dressed, unlike earlier while she was in her pajamas. She’s wearing a floral top and blue jean shorts that barely cover her ass. They’re ripped and torn; I can only assume it’s the style and she bought them like that, but I can’t even fathom why.

“I can’t—” Her breathing is fast and erratic.

“Slow down. What’s wrong?” I ask. I glance behind her, not seeing any sign of my daughter. “Where’s Amelia?”

FOUR

CLARE

“I can’t find her.”

I thought it would be fun, a nice little game to pass the time. But Amelia decided to take hide and seek a little too seriously.

Levi stares at me incredulously. “What do you mean you can’t find my daughter?”

I inhale a sharp breath. I had this coming. It’s totally my fault. Playing a game with a kid you barely know in a house that’s easy enough to get lost in without trying is insane.

I’m an idiot, and he’s going to fire me.

“Amelia and I were trying to come up with something to do. It looks like rain outside, so I suggested we play hide and seek in the house.”

“I see,” he says, stroking his jaw. The stubble is hot, and the flecks of silver sprinkled into the dark brown make me swoon. His piercing blue gaze is locked on me.

“We’ve been playing for hours since we got dressed after breakfast, and I still can’t find her.”

“This is a big house,” Levi says, a little too calmly.

“How are you not panicked right now?” I ask. My stomach is balled up in a giant knot.

“The doors are locked. There are cameras all around the property, and she couldn’t have escaped through the gate unless someone opened it.” His brow tightens, and the ease seems to disappear. He hurries to glance out the window at the open gate. He curses and throws open the front door, having a look around.

The kid could be anywhere. I should have specified that we weren’t going outside. But it did look like rain. She wouldn’t have ventured out by herself. At least, I hope not.

“I can’t believe you lost her,” Levi growls.

“It’s not my fault. I was trying to come up with an indoor activity. It’s not like you have a playroom or video games set up for her. There isn’t much to do.”

“You could both use your imagination.”

He’s right. I shouldn’t have suggested hide and seek. The house is massive. I’ll never forgive myself if she left through the front door and escaped the yard.

“Do we call the police?” I ask, my voice trembling.

“No. We don’t want to scare her if she’s hiding in the house. And I certainly don’t need my mother learning about this on the five o’clock news,” Levi mutters.

“That’s what you’re worried about? Your mother finding out.” I laugh at the absurdity of his suggestion.

He grunts and doesn’t answer me. I’m not blaming him; I screwed up, and he’s angry with me. “You take upstairs. I’ll take the third floor. We’ll both come down and try the main level. Tell her that you’ve got cookies or candy. Something that will make her want to show herself.”

“You want me to lie to your daughter?” I can’t believe his suggestion. I’m trying to gain her trust, not manipulate her.

“No, I want you to find Amelia.” He brushes past me, heading up two flights of stairs to the third floor.

I hurry behind him, checking each bedroom, the laundry room, and the bathroom. I search high and low again from behind the shower curtain to the cupboard under the bathroom sink.

There's no sign of Amelia.

"Cookies! Your dad made freshly baked cookies," I shout through the hallway. I try my bedroom again and stumble over the pink suitcase that's left slightly open.

I'm sure I zipped it closed last night, but it was late after I finished doing my laundry and putting my clothes away.

I lean down, and the suitcase is far heavier than it should be as I nudge it toward the wall.

A fit of giggles surfaces, and I pull back the lid, revealing a shrieking little girl. She jumps up and down inside my hard-cover suitcase, cracking the case.

Her eyes widen as she breaks the shell's outer lining.

"I found her!" I shout, hoping that Levi can hear me.

"Cookies?" Her eyes brighten at the prospect of cookies. "What kind?"

Levi's heavy footfalls stomp over the carpet as he enters my bedroom without knocking. Not that he needs to announce his presence; it's quite obvious he's here.

"Where were you—" He's met with the answer when he sees the bottom shell of the suitcase is damaged, and Amelia is still inside, wiggling and dancing her victory.

Levi lifts her into the air, carrying her downstairs.

"Airplane Girl said you made cookies," Amelia proclaims.

"Oh, she did?" Levi glances back at me over his shoulder as we head down to the main level.

"Cookies were your suggestion," I remind him. I'm not going to break this little girl's heart because he doesn't have cookies in the house.

"Yes, they were."

"What kind? Chocolate chip?" Amelia asks, squirming in his embrace.

"*Airplane Girl*, do you know how to bake?" Levi asks.

Amelia holds out her arms, wanting him to fly her through the air like Supergirl. Or maybe she's making fun of me. But I'd like to think she prefers to be a superhero, flying through the hallway.

"If I have a recipe book. Although I can probably dig something up on the internet," I say. I haven't tried to get online since arriving at the mansion. I've been rather preoccupied with Panty Thief and his adorable daughter. Besides, I've tucked my phone away in the nightstand drawer. The only person who texts or calls is my ex-husband, and I don't want to communicate with him.

"You'll need the internet passcode," he says.

"That would be helpful." I follow the two of them into the kitchen. Levi places Amelia on the counter, sitting her on the edge while blocking her from falling. He reaches to the right on a shelf attached to the wall with a half dozen hardcover cookbooks.

He places it on the counter and flips it open, finding the recipe for chocolate chip cookies.

"Can't we just use cookie dough?" I ask. I'm not much of a baker. I can make a cake from a box or cupcakes, again from a premade package, but mixing ingredients and putting it all together I haven't tried. And I'm bound to make a mess even without the help of a little girl.

"I don't store cookie dough," Levi says. He points at the pantry. "The flour and granulated sugar are in there. There are fresh eggs in the fridge."

I'm impressed by how stocked his pantry and fridge are. For a bachelor, I would have expected everything to be bare or expired.

I also grab the bag of chocolate chips that we'll need for the recipe. "What else?"

"Butter, brown sugar, baking soda, salt, and vanilla extract."

"Slow down," I say, grabbing one item at a time as he lists them off for me again. I'm unfamiliar with his kitchen. It takes a few extra seconds to locate each ingredient. He grabs the

bowls and mixes the ingredients, following the directions in the book. “I’m surprised you know how to cook.”

“When we were kids, Mom wanted to open up her own bakery. She’d make cookies, cupcakes, pies, anything that you could put into an oven. Except she never wanted to sell the baked goods. She’d give them away.”

Levi turns on the oven, allowing it to preheat while he points for me to grab a baking sheet.

“That’s kind of sweet,” I say.

In a matter of minutes, we spread the cookie dough onto a greased pan and slide the tray into the oven.

Amelia reaches her hands into the leftover batter, but Levi stops her. “You can’t eat it yet, sweetheart. There are raw eggs in there. It could make you sick.”

“I want chocolate chip cookies,” she says, and squirms until Levi puts her down on the floor.

“They’ll be ready in a little bit,” I say. “Do you want to watch them bake in the oven?” I flip the oven light on, and she stares through the glass door, watching the cookies.

“You’re good with her,” he says.

“Is that a compliment?” I’m taken aback by his words. It’s the first nice thing he’s said to me.

“You didn’t let me finish my sentence. You’re good with her when you don’t lose her.”

“Ouch.” I bring my hand to my chest like I’ve been shot. “Harsh words coming from the panty thief.”

Levi’s eyes widen, and he glances past me at Amelia. Is he worried that she could overhear our conversation? “You’re not to call me that, *Airplane Girl*.”

“What should I call you? *Bossy Grump*?” I ask.

He straightens his shoulders. “That’s a new one.”

“Well, you are being bossy and constantly grumpy.”

“Am not.”

“Are too,” I quip, realizing how childish the two of us sound. I hide my smile as I rest my hand momentarily on my jaw and spin around to pay attention to Amelia. She’s by the oven, and while she’s only looking inside, I don’t want her to get burned or hurt.

Panty Thief’s phone buzzes and pulls us out of our little reverie. “My brother is on his way over. Amelia, you’re going to meet Uncle Connor.”

She doesn’t seem fazed by his remark.

I’m not sure whether Amelia fully recognizes and understands that Levi is her father. It’s not my place to meddle.

When the cookies beep, Panty Thief grabs an oven mitt and pulls the hot tray out of the oven while I hold Amelia back, keeping her out of harm’s way. “We have to be careful. The oven is hot,” I say, wanting to teach her not to get burned.

I’d like to assume her mother ingrained the same basic principles in the kitchen before she came to live with her father. But if she gets hurt on my watch, he’ll never let me live it down.

I’m surprised he still isn’t giving me hell for losing her. At least she was in my bedroom. And I swear I searched that room inside out. Well, except for my luggage.

Kids are sneaky, and Amelia is no different.

“Listen, I should warn you. Connor can be a bit abrasive.”

“Are you warning your daughter or me?” I ask.

“You, *Airplane Girl*. I want you to be aware of what you’re in for if you stick around.”

“I can handle him,” I say, muttering, “He can’t be any more difficult than you.”

Levi must hear my comment because he spins around, pinning me with his stare. “Connor tends to be obnoxious and likes to think he’s in control. I am in control. There’s a difference.”

“You like to think you’re a Dom,” I say a little too loudly. But I don’t think Amelia understands and she’s certainly not

paying attention. Her gaze is transfixed on the tray of cookies that Levi scoops off onto a plate to cool.

“What do you know about Doms?” Panty Thief asks, glancing at me over his shoulder.

Does he want me to school him? He’s got to be kidding me! “I know they like to think they’re in charge, but really, it’s the girl who’s taking the reins.”

“Is that so?”

Levi’s phone buzzes again, and I curse under my breath. “Watch Amelia and the cookies. Connor is pulling up.”

The minute Levi is out of the kitchen, Amelia reaches for the plate of cookies. “They’re hot,” I say. Never mind that it’s early for her to have sweets before lunch.

Levi doesn’t have any kid-friendly plates. There’s nothing made of plastic in the cabinets or even paper plates lying around.

I grab a small plate and place a single cookie on it. “How about we get you seated at the table?” I suggest, carrying the plate to the table. The last thing I want is for her to drop the dishware and end up hurt from the slivered shards.

She climbs onto the wooden chair and sits on her knees, reaching for the cookie. “It’s hot,” I remind her, blowing on it.

She mimics my actions before touching it carefully. When she’s satisfied it isn’t too hot, her tiny fingers grab the cookie, and it falls apart between her mouth, the table, and the plate.

Amelia is a mess, but the girl doesn’t mind, grabbing every morsel and crumb as if leaving one behind were a crime.

Panty Thief joins us in the kitchen at the small table with two chairs. I don’t sit. I stand beside Amelia, keeping a close eye on her. I grab a few napkins, cleaning up the sticky, chocolatey mess she leaves behind.

“Well, hello,” the gentleman accompanying Levi says.

I assume it’s Connor, but the two look nothing alike. Are they half-siblings or step-siblings? There’s not even a slight

resemblance. Where Levi is easy on the eyes and makes my heart pitter-patter in my chest, Connor doesn't give off the same sex appeal or vibe.

He's quite a bit shorter, and his shoulders slouch forward. He's wearing a wrinkled collared shirt and slacks that look a little too tight. Is that on purpose, or does he not know how to pick out his clothes?

Not only is he shorter than his brother, but he could also use a little trim. His eyebrows are bushy, and I swear there's ear hair sticking out. It seems his hair grows everywhere except the top of his head—poor fellow.

I offer him a friendly smile as he holds out his hand. "You must be the new nanny my brother told me about. I'm Connor, the good-looking brother," he says.

I try not to laugh. I'm glad the guy has good self-esteem and confidence, because there's no way in hell that Connor is anywhere near the attractive level of Levi. It's like one son got the good genes and the other, well, he missed out.

Not that I should be comparing brothers. I'm not into exploring that level of spice in my love life. Or lack thereof, if I'm to be honest with myself. The most heat I get is from my trusty vibrator and those romance novels I read late at night.

At least it's trusty. Hell, even my ex, when we were married, couldn't find that special button to press that would make walls shake—such a shame.

"I'm Clare," I say.

"She's Airplane Girl," Amelia chimes, licking her fingers clean of chocolate, but her face is quite messy.

So much for cleaning up the table. The kid is wearing more chocolate than cookie.

"Airplane Girl?" Connor asks with a chuckle like he's somehow part of the joke. "I like it. I like her," Connor says, jabbing a finger at me. "And let me guess, young lady, you must be Amelia."

The little girl sits up straighter and holds out her messy, sticky, chocolate-covered hand. “How do you do?” she asks.

Connor cracks up laughing, quite amused by her attitude, or maybe it’s her cuteness. Already, she could be a little version of Levi, and they’ve only just met. Imagine her mannerisms after a few months of living with him.

I just hope his grumpiness doesn’t rub off on her.

“Amelia,” Levi says, “this is your Uncle Connor. He’s my younger brother.”

“And the better-looking Luxenberg in the family,” Connor chimes.

Amelia’s face scrunches and shakes her head. “Nu-uh.” She points at her father.

“Maybe we should leave the tie-breaker down to your new nanny,” Connor says, and winks at me. “I’ll bet she has amazing taste in men.”

I’m grateful that I didn’t eat a cookie, or my stomach would be bringing it back up. How do I get out of this one? Connor isn’t the least bit attractive to me, and Levi, well, I can’t admit that he’s hot.

He’s my boss. And a grumpy one at that! There’s no way I’d want him even to suspect he could turn my head.

Nope.

I shrug and laugh. “I only date women,” I say. “You both look like men. I can’t really judge the opposite sex.”

Levi brushes past me, grabbing Amelia’s dirty plate. “Cop out,” he whispers under his breath. His body lingers for a second longer than it should, and I swear he’s trying to get a reaction out of me, proving that he’s the hotter brother.

But he doesn’t push the question or the boundaries between us any further.

“Wow. Girls, huh?” Connor says with a wry smirk. “Ever add a guy into the mix?”

“Are you seriously asking my nanny if she’ll have a three-way with you?” Levi seethes. I swear there’s steam coming from his head. His jaw is tight, and he’s washing the dish by hand with a sponge that I think might disintegrate at any moment.

“What’s a three-way?” Amelia asks.

“Okay, that’s enough chatter about my love life.” I warn both boys to watch their mouths, pointing at Connor and then at Levi.

“What did I say?” Levi asks, his mouth agape.

“Just don’t start.” I know he has a knack for panty thievery. I’m not sure what he’s up to, but I don’t trust that he won’t get my heart racing at the most inopportune time.

Amelia climbs down from the chair, and I wipe the sticky mess from the table and the little girl’s hands and face.

Levi’s jaw is tight, and his hands bunch into fists at his side. “Can I have a word with you in private, Clare?”

The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. “Yes, of course, sir.” He pulls me out into the hallway, but the entire time he has sight of Amelia.

“I think it would be best if you took the rest of the day off.”

“I’m sorry. Did I do something to offend you?” I can’t fathom what I did to irritate Levi, but it doesn’t take much to turn him from Panty Thief into Panty Grump. Maybe that should be his new nickname.

Levi’s jaw is tight. He doesn’t answer my question. “You can borrow one of my cars and spend the afternoon shopping.”

“Shopping? Do you need me to get you groceries or something?” He has a fully stocked fridge, but maybe he needs me to pick up some things like conditioner and whatnot for Amelia.

He shifts his weight on his feet and shoves his hand into his back pocket, retrieving his wallet. He opens the billfold and hands me several crisp one-hundred-dollar bills.

Shit.

He really wants me to get lost.

Okay, for four hundred dollars, I can do that. No more questions. Got it.

“Is there anything you want me to spend this on? Clothes for Amelia?” I ask.

He leans closer and glances me over. I swear he’s going to say lingerie and a bra that isn’t quite so see-through. “Whatever you think, *Airplane Girl*.”

I exhale a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

So we’re back to that. “You can’t come up with a more original nickname for me?”

“Oh, I can, but seeing how you’re my employee, I’d hate for you to sue me for sexual harassment.”

“Okay, *Panty Thief*.” I smirk, stuffing his crisp wad of hundreds into my boobs.

He bites down on his bottom lip for a fraction of a second. “Don’t you have a wallet?”

“Yeah, upstairs,” I say, and point toward the stairs.

“Well, go get it,” he snaps.

I nod and take a tentative step, but before I turn around, I can’t help but ask, “Are you doing this because you don’t trust me around your brother, or you don’t trust your brother around me?”

“I don’t trust myself around you,” he snarls, and turns on his heels. “Don’t return until after dinner.”

“And what about Amelia?” I ask. Doesn’t Levi have work he has to do today from home? How will he get anything done with a five-year-old following him around and his younger brother visiting?

“She stays here with me.”

FIVE

Levi

I'm a dick, tossing money at the nanny and telling her to get lost.

But if I don't get her out of the house, Connor won't let up, and with the fact that she told me she dates girls, I just can't focus right now.

Did she say that because Connor put her in a difficult position? Or does she actually not like men?

Fuck.

I run my hand through my hair, grateful when she takes the car from the garage and heads out through the gate.

I should be able to breathe a sigh of relief, but all I feel is dread. I'd rather Connor would have left, but Clare will be back.

She doesn't have any place else to stay, and while I gave her a few hundred dollars to occupy herself with for the afternoon, it's not enough to cover rent or a hotel long-term.

She'll be back.

Besides, I have her clothes and luggage—which happens to be broken. I need to replace her suitcase with something more durable if Amelia has access to it. Besides, it's the least I can do after she had to deal with my dunce of a brother.

I put Amelia in front of the television and find a channel with cartoons to keep her occupied.

“You didn’t have to chase the nanny out. I could have kept it in my pants,” Connor says.

“Doubtful. You were practically salivating at her. She’s good with Amelia. I don’t want her quitting because you made her uncomfortable.”

“I can’t help the fact she’s hot. And I love the way that you tossed money at her and told her to get lost. Sugar daddy much?”

“She’s my daughter’s nanny. That’s all.”

“And one I’d like to bang. Any chance she’s single?”

My stomach clenches at the thought of Connor coming near my daughter’s nanny. “You heard her. She only dates girls,” I say, and clear my throat.

We should not be talking about Clare.

After dinner, Amelia is fussy and won’t settle down for a bath or a bedtime story.

“I want Clare Bear,” Amelia says, slipping out of my grasp and running down the hallway naked.

“And I want you to take a bath.”

“No bath!” Amelia shrieks and slips past my legs, running down the stairs.

My stomach is in my throat, and I pray the kid doesn’t fall and hurt herself. She slides on the marble floor but catches her footing when the front door squeaks.

“Clare Bear!” Amelia chimes, and throws her arms up in the air.

“You’re naked,” Clare says, matter-of-fact.

I humph on my way down the stairs. “Someone escaped from the bathroom before I could run the tub.”

“No bath!” she shrieks, and tries to bolt past Clare, but the nanny sweeps my daughter up in her arms.

“Nice try,” Clare says, slipping out of her shoes while holding my little monster. I come down the stairs to take Amelia from her arms and carry her back up toward the bathroom.

“You were out late,” I say. It isn’t meant as an accusation, but it does sound like one the way it slips out. If I’m honest, I’m a little annoyed that she didn’t come home right after dinner like I requested.

“You told me—you know what, never mind.” Clare doesn’t fight with me. She holds a hand up as she follows me up the stairs. “When you’re done giving Amelia a bath, I’ve got bags in the trunk and backseat that I could use a hand with.”

“You couldn’t carry your stuff inside?” I mutter under my breath.

“I could use the help. Some of it is quite heavy,” she says.

What in the world did she buy that’s heavy and she can’t carry? And how the hell will she lug it wherever her next adventure takes her? I drove her to the house. She borrowed my car.

“New suitcase?” I guess, not that it should be too heavy for her to carry.

“No, I didn’t even think of that. I probably should have replaced mine,” Clare says. She grimaces like she’s regretting her purchases.

“Don’t worry about it. Let me know what it costs, and I’ll give you the replacement value.”

“Is that like amortized based on the age of the suitcase and its wear and tear?”

I’m not sure if she intends to be snarky, but it sure comes out that way, with a lot of attitude.

I need a minute away from Clare, and with her following me up the stairs and Amelia squirming again and defiant, I need a new tactic.

“How about you get her ready for bed, bathed, and dressed? I’ll grab the stuff out of the car.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Clare says.

I place Amelia in the bathroom and shut the door, leaving the two of them to fend for themselves. If she wants to give Amelia a shower, so be it. I just want a minute of peace and quiet.

I head down the stairs, slip on my shoes, and step outside. The air is cool, but it’s nice out. The vehicle is unlocked, and I open the trunk, revealing bags of books, toys, and even a few dress-up clothes. Everything appears to be for Amelia.

Douglas stopped by around dinner with three shopping bags of clothes for Amelia, but it’s nowhere near enough given the mess that kid makes when eating. Besides, everything he bought was for the current autumn weather, and she’s likely to outgrow everything in a few months.

I lug the bags into the foyer and head back to the car to grab the rest. There are even a few boxes in the backseat.

I’d given Clare the money to spend on herself. I hadn’t expected that she’d buy Amelia enough toys for a playroom.

After carrying everything inside, I pull the car into the garage and lock up the house, ensuring it’s secure.

I haven’t thought about a playroom for Amelia. I’d wanted to buy her a few toys and give her something educational and fun to do while she wasn’t at school, which reminds me that I still need to get her enrolled in kindergarten first thing tomorrow.

My day today felt wasted. Not necessarily in a bad way. I still haven’t reached out to my mother, but Connor met Amelia. It was a good first step.

I drag the toys and books into one of the downstairs rooms. I’ll have to rearrange furniture and make it kid-friendly, but at least the bags and boxes of playthings for Amelia won’t be lying in the middle of the floor. I don’t need Clare to trip over them.

I grab a children’s book from the bookstore bag and carry it upstairs.

After Amelia finishes bathing and changes for bed, I tuck her into bed with a story. Her eyes light up as she climbs under the covers.

Clare watches from the doorway for a minute with a pensive smile before leaving the two of us alone.

I shut off the lights, kiss Amelia goodnight, and close the door to her bedroom. Clare is in the laundry room, the light on.

My heart flutters, remembering what happened in the laundry room last night, her discovering a pair of silk panties in my pocket. I double-check my pockets, not that I'm expecting another pair to have magically appeared in there unless she put them there as a trick.

No trick.

My pockets are empty, except for my phone and wallet.

She shoves the towels into the washing machine, turning on a load of laundry.

"I didn't expect you to buy all that stuff for Amelia," I say, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"You gave me four hundred dollars, sir. I couldn't just spend it on nonsensical items."

"It was meant for you," I say, taking a step closer.

She inhales a sharp breath. "You don't have to buy my—whatever this is." She gestures between us.

My brow tightens. "I'm not buying anything from you," I sneer. "I was being nice. You didn't bring much to my house. I thought you could use some clothes, toiletries, whatever."

Part of me was hoping she'd buy some sexy lingerie, maybe a dress that's a little too short when she bends over so I can see her perfectly taut ass.

I shift uncomfortably. I should not be having such lewd thoughts about the nanny. She's what, twenty-seven? I'm forty.

"I thought you were getting rid of me for the day because of Connor's three-way comment," Clare says, bringing that conversation back around.

I grimace and rub my forehead. “I’m sorry that he said that to you, Clare. It was highly inappropriate.”

“More inappropriate than me lying to him about dating girls?”

Relief floods through me. I’d been wondering all afternoon since she left whether she really dates girls or if that was her way of politely turning my brother down. I was hoping it was the latter because that meant my fantasies might one day come true.

My cock twitches in my trousers.

Down, boy.

Now isn’t the day. She’s Amelia’s nanny. Clare works for me. I’m not going to fuck that up.

“You mentioned on the plane that you were previously married. I wasn’t sure the specifics,” I say, trying not to make her comment from earlier into a big deal.

“Oh, I like men,” she whispers, staring straight into my soul. “Handsome, dark-haired, brooding men who tell it like it is and know what they want.”

Damn, she’s describing me. Isn’t she?

She doesn’t even flinch as her gaze is latched onto mine. It’s a shame this can’t happen. The sexual tension is insurmountable, but I won’t fuck things up for my own pleasure.

Amelia deserves better than that.

So does Clare.

“It’s too bad you don’t have a thing for grumpy single dads,” I quip, “because I’m that guy.”

She tugs her bottom lip between her teeth, and I step closer. I shouldn’t.

This laundry room has already caused more drama between us than necessary. It’s no longer a safe space but a room filled with sexual tension. The small space traps her and makes my pulse quicken and my blood boil.

I have her between me and the washing machine.

Clare exhales an anxious breath. Her lips part and cheeks redden the longer I stare into her blue-green gaze.

“Sir?” Clare’s voice is raspy and thick. I could just imagine her screaming my name in the height of passion.

My cock strains against my trousers. I’m going to need an icy cold shower after being in her proximity. We haven’t even touched, and I’m dying inside, aching with want. She sizzles my blood and makes me feel every inch like a man.

I shouldn’t be this addicted to a woman I haven’t even fucked.

And we can’t.

We shouldn’t.

She’s my daughter’s nanny! I barely know her.

“*Panty Thief*,” Clare says, daring me to retaliate. I feel it in her heated gaze. She wants me to kiss her, taste her, and drive her wild with passion. She’s un-fucking-believable, and I reach out slowly, my fingers pushing a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear.

“You’re never going to let me live that down,” I say, grateful that she hadn’t called me that little nickname in front of Connor. Another reason I needed to send her out of the house this afternoon.

There are some things that my younger brother doesn’t need to know. The fact that I sport a raging hard-on for the nanny is one of those.

Clare smiles deviously and leans in, brushing her lips against my ear. “If you wanted a pair of my panties, all you had to do was ask.”

I open my mouth to tell her that I didn’t plan on stealing them. Hell, I don’t know how they got into my pocket, but those words don’t come.

Instead, I lean in, closing the distance, the smallest gap of air between us. My lips hungrily crush hers, bruising and rough as

I pull her hips against mine, wanting her to feel what she does to me.

Clare gasps. The softness and surprise that spills out of her lips are like heaven, until I realize she's not kissing me back.

SIX

CLARE

I meant to kiss him back. He startled me. Yes, we were flirting, and I thought that's as far as it would ever get.

Levi doesn't like me. I'm just the hired help, the nanny for his daughter. And whatever feelings he thinks he has for me are mixed up in the fact that I'm taking care of Amelia.

He probably has some type of fantasy conjured up that we could be a happy family. His daughter would have a new mother, and he'd have someone to take care of the house and his kid while he works all day.

Well, guess what, *Panty Thief*. That's not going to happen.

I dart past him before he has time to stop me and head for my bedroom, closing the door abruptly and locking it. He can't talk to me if he can't get ahold of me.

Am I acting childish? Perhaps, but I'd rather avoid Levi right now than deal with what just happened.

I grab a change of clothes and wait until the coast is clear to sneak out into the hallway and skirt into the bathroom to shower. There's a fluffy white towel on the bathroom shelf, so at least I don't have to ask Levi where the towels are or come face-to-face with him again this evening.

A shower doesn't help my mood or ease the tension in my neck or tingling throughout my entire body.

He kissed me.

Levi Luxenberg, the grump among all grumps, kissed me.

I groan and soak myself in the shower, the water hot and the room filling with steam. I should have taken a bath. That would have been far more relaxing than pining over my boss.

After I finish in the shower, I dry off and begin to dress, realizing I left my pajama shorts in my bedroom.

I grumble under my breath, slip on my panties and then the button shirt that barely covers my ass.

The towel is soaked and isn't big enough to wrap fully around my curvy waist without seeing my undies. Whatever. I'll scurry across the hall. Hopefully, Levi is nowhere to be seen.

Steam fills the bathroom, and I creak the door open. There's no sign of Levi.

Phew.

I hurry out of the bathroom and rush toward the bedroom door, grabbing the handle to yank it open.

"Forgetting something?" Levi stands in the hallway, his gaze on me or, more specifically, my ass.

At least I remembered my panties.

"Go away," I toss at him, like that will help. So much for sneaking into the bedroom unannounced. I scurry inside and shut the door a little too loudly. Wincing, I hope I don't wake Amelia.

Levi would have every right to be angry with me if I did, and I'll have no choice but to try to get her back to sleep.

On my bed are the pajama bottoms that I grabbed and haphazardly forgot to bring into the bathroom.

Am I trying to humiliate myself in front of Panty Thief? I grumble. He'd probably steal the panties I'm wearing if he could.

I slip on the pajama bottoms and slide under the covers. I want this night to be over, and I never want to face Levi again.

But tomorrow will come, and I'll have to pretend the kiss and then him seeing me in my underwear never happened.

I'll just catalog it as an experience to learn from.

You don't kiss your boss.

Well, technically, he kissed me.

And I fumbled the play.

I'm not into sports, and even I get the analogy. Groaning, I reach onto the bedside table for my book. At least I can bury myself in a few minutes of blissfulness before falling asleep.



The next morning Amelia stalks into my room without warning.

Did she wake her father yesterday? Is that why he came to my room to let me know that she was up and needed tending to?

"Clare Bear," Amelia chimes, climbing onto my mattress. I get the feeling she's going to jump on the bed, and I don't want her to ruin a perfectly good mattress.

Okay, it's honestly the most comfortable bed I've ever been in. The man knows luxury. I would never have expected the guest bed to be quite so welcoming and cozy. Levi surprises me, even when I don't want him to.

I pull Amelia down before she can fly through the air, and tickle her stomach. She squirms and giggles excitedly. "I want pancakes," she announces.

"I think we can do that," I say, climbing from the mattress, and she jumps down with me. Her feet make a loud thud. I swear it vibrates the house, but she lands like a champ.

Amelia scurries for the door, and Levi is already in the hallway by the time I pull open the handle. He's standing outside the bedroom door like he was debating on entering or knocking first.

“Everything okay?” he asks. His eyes are weary, and he looks like he just jumped out of bed. He’s wearing only his boxers, and I swear he’s sporting morning wood.

I try not to stare. I’m sure it’s just—I don’t even know. I try not to glance down at the very large tent that he’s pitching.

If he notices, he’s pretending not to or at least not be bothered by it. Maybe he wants me to see it!

Well, I don’t want Amelia to witness it or ask any questions. I cover her eyes, especially since she’s at eye level, and steer her toward the stairs.

“I can’t see!” Amelia proclaims.

Kid, that’s the point.

“We’re fine. All is good. Awake and ready for pancakes,” I say. “You should get dressed.” It’s difficult as hell to meet his stare without my gaze raking over his chiseled abs.

Every inch I’ve seen of him is glorious and sexy as hell. How does he not have a new woman crawling into his bed every night?

Maybe he typically does, and Amelia has ruined his routine the last two nights.

Good.

The thought of him bringing any skirt up into his room sends goosebumps down my arms.

“I’ll help with breakfast after I get showered and dressed. There are chocolate chips—”

“In the cupboard, I remember.”

“And blueberries in the fridge,” he adds.

“Yeah, blueberries and chocolate chips don’t really go together,” I quip over my shoulder. Just like him and me. I’m the sweet blueberry, and he’s the bitter and delectable dark chocolate that you know is bad for you and you shouldn’t have for breakfast.

I uncover Amelia's eyes as we approach the stairs and take her hand, hurrying her down to the main level while Levi showers.

I can't help but imagine him pulling down those boxers, stepping under the spray in all his naked glory, his cock thick and hard.

No doubt he'll be releasing himself of that morning tension he woke up with. Who will he be thinking about while he strokes his cock?

I shake the thought right out of my head.

It was one silly kiss.

He's not going to be thinking about me, the curvy, younger nanny who gets under his skin.

That's not the only thing I'd like to get under. I bite down on my bottom lip. Thankfully, Levi isn't around and can't read my mind. My thoughts are insanely wicked this morning.

"Can I have chocolate chip pancakes?" Amelia asks when we reach the kitchen.

"Of course," I say. Her father mentioned the chocolate chips, so I don't see why he would have done that if he didn't want her to have them.

I search through the pantry and retrieve the chocolate chips, but there's no premade box of pancake mix. "I guess we're making these from scratch," I mutter, and grab the recipe book from the shelf.

Fingering through the pages, I land on the recipe for pancakes and retrieve the necessary ingredients and measuring utensils, along with a giant bowl.

After the pancakes are finished cooking and on the table, Levi comes down dressed in his suit and looking fine as hell.

Does the man own any casual clothes?

"Good morning," I say, trying to be cool after what I know he had to be doing in the shower. I mean, otherwise, wouldn't he be sore with a case of blue balls? He doesn't look irritated or equally frustrated.

Why do I care what he did in the privacy of his bathroom?
This is his home.

Why am I even thinking such lewd thoughts?

“Morning,” he says, and grabs a pancake from the stack, forgoing a plate. He brings the silver-dollar-sized pancake to his lips and takes a bite.

I don’t think he’s trying to be sexy, but damn, the man gives off vibes even when he’s playing it cool.

Maybe I need a night off, a warm body to pounce, and I’ll be over this boss crush with the grump. Except for this morning, he’s not acting like the grump that I’d expect.

“I need to interview a few private schools today, and Amelia will be with me.”

“Oh, okay,” I say. I’m not sure what that means for me. Does he want me to join him? Would he prefer that I stay here for the day? I’m waiting for him to elaborate, because the suspense is killing me, and quite frankly, being in his presence all day might as well.

“My assistant set up three appointments. I’d like to have Amelia dressed and ready to go after breakfast. Douglas bought her a plaid jumper that I think would look appropriate for her interview.”

“Interview?” I need coffee, stat.

I head toward the coffee pot, and Levi joins me, grabbing the coffee beans and pouring water into the tank. I’m really just standing around looking pretty while he makes me coffee. Though I’m sure he’s making a cup for himself, too, since he’s making a pot.

“Nancy managed to set up three last-minute interviews for the most prestigious private schools in the area. I want Amelia to have the brightest future, and that starts with giving her the best education.”

“With rich snobs?” The words leave my lips before I can take them back. I really wish I had that steaming hot mug of coffee

that I could drown myself in. Instead, I shift the weight between my feet awkwardly and grimace.

“Tell me what you really think of me.”

While I doubt he means it, the word vomit keeps on coming. “Other than you live in a mansion and probably spend more on laundry detergent than I make in a year.”

“What?” His nose crinkles.

“The stuff you buy doesn’t even exist in stores.”

“It’s organic and biodegradable. The packaging is recyclable, and it’s good for the environment.”

“It’s soap.” I just can’t stop myself. “You think you can buy your way out of anything. Take me, for example. You sent me off with four hundred dollars yesterday to get rid of me. Do you know how insulting that is!”

He raises an eyebrow and folds his arms across his chest. “I’m sure you’re going to tell me.” His tongue darts out to the side of his mouth for a moment. He’s irritated with me.

Good.

Then maybe he won’t try to kiss me again or jack off in the bathroom thinking about me. I inwardly grimace at the mental thoughts.

“Don’t stop now,” Levi challenges.

I huff and grab a mug. The coffee still isn’t ready yet. I need my caffeine fix. “Do you really think a top-notch education when she’s in kindergarten is going to make a difference for her future? She’s going to be sent to school with other rich kids and not realize that isn’t how most of us live.”

“Is it wrong of me to want to give her every opportunity to succeed?”

“No,” I whisper, feeling his wrath.

“I may not have been there for her for the first five years of her life, but I’m damn well going to make sure that I’m there for the rest. If that means paying the school a million dollars to

fund a new science lab and secure her enrollment when they don't have any openings, I'll do it."

I gasp at how easily he'd spend his money on his daughter. "A million dollars?"

I've never made six figures before, let alone known anyone who broke seven figures. "You're a millionaire?" I rasp. It's rude. I shouldn't even be asking. I mean, it's obvious with the house, the fancy cars, the way he tosses hundreds at me like they're twenties.

"Billionaire," he corrects me, and glances past me at Amelia. "She's done eating. Take my daughter upstairs and get her dressed. We need to be out of here in thirty minutes."

SEVEN

Levi

I didn't intend on telling her that I'm a billionaire. Clare irritates me to no end. And to think that I wouldn't do anything in my power to give Amelia the world, what kind of a man does the nanny think I am?

I may not be the kindest or gentlest, but I have my reasons, and no one has ever complained before. Well, at least not to my face.

Money buys a lot of things and not just tuition to a private school. Without my name, the academies we're interviewing with today would never have considered allowing Amelia to enroll.

The school year has already started, and this is an unusual situation.

Amelia comes hurrying down the stairs while I wait by the front door, checking my watch.

"Clare?" I shout, waiting for her to emerge from upstairs as well.

She's still in her pajamas, but unlike last night, she's got the entire ensemble on. Too bad. I really liked seeing her in her panties.

Clare pokes her head over the banister. She isn't dressed yet to come with me. "Yes, sir?"

I'm not sure whether I prefer her to call me sir or Panty Thief. I'd rather her not be quite so formal. At least when she teases me with that scandalous nickname, I know she likes me.

She's flirting with me, isn't she?

I thought she was, hell, I was sure of it. Up until I kissed her. The heat between us had been tantalizing, my insides aching to feel her against me.

And when I leaned in, she didn't return the kiss.

What was that?

I must have read the signs wrong.

It's for the best. I can't go around sleeping with anyone I hire. She could try to sue me, and I can't afford a lawsuit. It's not the money that would be the issue; it's the fact that Amelia wouldn't be able to see Clare every day.

Although I doubt Clare could afford a lawyer, either. But I'm sure some sucker would be happy to work for free, knowing that a man like me would settle before allowing the case to go to trial.

Clare isn't like Avril. I need to put my fears aside. That woman has been itching to get ahold of my wallet or my last name, whichever she can snag first.

I force a smile, staring up at Clare. "You're coming with us. Get dressed and meet us in the car. Two minutes."

"Two minutes?" she shrieks. "I need at least five."

"You have two."

I take Amelia's hand and lead her outside to the awaiting vehicle. Douglas is pulled up under the canopy, the engine running. I buckle Amelia into her car seat while I wait for Clare, the back door open.

I tap my watch as Clare scurries out the front door, shoes in hand. She's got a simple black dress on that hugs her curves but reveals no skin. With the dress, she's wearing a deep gold cardigan. Her hair is a bit messy, but she has a clip between her teeth.

I'm impressed with her taking only two minutes.

She slips into the backseat, and I shut the door, leaving her to finish getting ready.

I climb into the front with Douglas. He already has the itinerary that was sent to him by my assistant.

"I didn't expect you to bring the nanny," Douglas says, glancing at me.

He's got more questions, but he's careful about what he's asking while in the presence of a young lady. Amelia, that is. I'm not sure he'd be so cautious in front of Clare. Douglas has always been rather direct.

"During the interview, I'll be speaking with the headmaster. I'm sure that Amelia will be antsy, and should anyone from the academy be watching, I don't want to risk her enrollment. Clare can make sure that she's on her best behavior."

"You're trusting the nanny to keep the kid on her best manners? Man, you've got it backward," Douglas says with a hearty laugh.

"What?" I glare at him.

"Kids are usually on their best behavior for their parents or authority figures. Not the nanny."

I glance back over my shoulder. "Clare will keep her in line if she wants to remain employed," I say, making sure the nanny hears my threat.

"Grumphole," Clare mutters under her breath.

"What was that?" I shuffle around in the front seat, meeting her stare. If I were driving, I'd have stopped the vehicle for effect. However, that wouldn't help us arrive at our appointment on time.

"I'll do my best," she says, forcing a smile.

"Do better than your best." I shift back around, facing the front. I don't want to admit I'm nervous for Amelia. My assistant explained that Amelia will be required to take an entrance exam for all three academies. Even money can't

guarantee placement if she's too far behind. I could hire a tutor, if necessary, but she wouldn't be allowed in until next fall if she doesn't pass the exam.

She's five.

What kind of exam are they doing?

Is she expected to know how to read? Write? Color in the lines?

I don't know what the kid is capable of doing. Katelyn was in charge of her preschool education. I'm sure that she was sent to some type of early education program, but they might not have focused on anything more than teaching her letters and numbers.

I pray she knows that much. I should have sat with her yesterday and worked with her on flashcards while Connor was over. But I hadn't known the extent of what would be asked of her until late last night.

When we arrive at the first school, one of the officials takes us on a tour of the academy before bringing Amelia to a small office. I ask Clare to wait in the hallway while they administer the exam.

She obliges without a word of concern.

I follow the headmistress into her office to speak candidly about Amelia.

"As your assistant and I discussed on the phone, Mr. Luxenberg, it all comes down to Amelia's test scores. We need to feel confident that she will be able to thrive with our curriculum." The woman pushes her glasses up her nose as they seem to keep sliding down.

"I understand that, and please know that if I need to secure her a tutor, I am more than willing to do that to ensure she has the best education available to her."

"If I may be candid with you, it's highly unusual for a child to enroll after the school year has begun."

Had Nancy not explained the situation? "Amelia's mother, Katelyn, died just a few days ago. They were living in

Chicago. This whole situation is not what any of us expected.”

“Can you tell me about the school that your daughter was attending? We haven’t received any records yet of her previous placement.”

“It’s only been a few weeks. It’s not like there are transcripts for the first part of a semester in her first year.”

She sighs, realizing her mistake. “Was she in a private school in Chicago?”

“I don’t believe so, but only because I had been unaware of the situation.”

“Unaware? How could you be unaware of your daughter’s enrollment at a school if you were actively a part of your daughter’s life?”

“Her mother never told me about Amelia.”

“And why is that?” she asks. I know she’s judging me, thinking that I must not be worthy because I didn’t know my daughter existed.

“I suppose because of my wealth and the extensive amount of fame that follows. Katelyn didn’t enjoy being in the spotlight and didn’t want that for our daughter.”

“To be honest, Mr. Luxenberg, I’m not sure that our school is the right fit for your daughter. We like parents who are involved in their education, their upbringing, and we can mold the proper values that we believe make our students worthy of success.”

“Are you seriously telling me my kid isn’t good enough for your school because I didn’t know that she existed until this past week?” I stand, the chair squeaking against the floor as it slides out from under me. “You know what, never mind. Amelia is too good for your snobbish academy.”

I bolt for the door.

Clare sits in the hallway with Amelia at her side.

“We’re leaving. Now!” I snap, grabbing Amelia’s hand and practically dragging her from the chair.

Clare's brow is pinched, but she follows behind me. I open the door on our way out of the building as I stalk out in silence.

It isn't until Amelia is buckled in the backseat and Clare slides in beside her that she speaks. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," I say with a huff. "Amelia isn't going to that school."

"Okay." Clare doesn't ask any further questions, and I'm relieved, because that academy wasn't a good fit.

Neither is the next one, which has me worried because we only have one more school to go.

"May I make a suggestion?" Clare says, her voice soft and calm.

"I'm sure you will, whether I want to hear it or not."

These pretentious headmasters have put me in a mood. I thought they'd have been grateful for the chance to build a new science lab or add a wing to one of the classrooms. A million-dollar donation can go a long way, but apparently, when all the parents already offer massive donations, it doesn't seem like much.

Or maybe it's just me and has nothing to do with the money.

Doubtful.

I'm not Mr. Sunshine, but I can handle an interview for my kid.

"What if we go into the interview together?"

"What, like a couple?" I scoff at her suggestion.

We're not a couple.

She can't even kiss me back. Not that she should have. I was over the line last night, brushing my lips against hers. Wanting her is nothing more than a dirty fantasy. I'm sure it's because she's the nanny. She's like forbidden fruit; I want what I can't have. Or rather, shouldn't have.

"No, like you're her father, and I'm her nanny. I'll keep you from whatever fuckery you've done to butcher the last two

interviews.”

“Language!” I scold, not wanting my daughter to learn any new curse words, especially right before her exam.

“Sorry,” Clare says, and her cheeks redden. Is she embarrassed or angry with me? I haven’t made it easy on her the last couple of days that we’ve known each other.

I rub my forehead, considering her suggestion, as Douglas pulls up to the front of the school. “This is the last one for today,” he says. “Clare is right. Sometimes a soft touch can help.”

“And you think this one is soft?” I jab my thumb at the backseat. Clare is anything but soft.

The woman has been a pain in my ass since the moment we met. Am I really going to trust her that the interview will be a success? And that assumes that Amelia passes the exam. Neither school indicated to us if she had been a realistic candidate for enrollment. I had stormed out before the results returned.

“I think she offers a soft touch,” Douglas says. “You’ve already said you botched two interviews. This is the last school unless you plan on flying your kid via jet every morning to kindergarten.”

“It’s crossing my mind,” I say.

Clare unbuckles Amelia, and we head out of the vehicle. I hope Douglas is right and that Clare doesn’t royally screw up my daughter’s chance at getting into private school.

Amelia walks ahead of us while Clare is at my side. I grab her wrist, pulling her close. “Don’t fuck this up,” I whisper into her ear, a warning.

Clare raises a curious eye. “I didn’t butcher the last two interviews.”

Does she think she’s so high and mighty?

We are given a tour of the school and property. Each school that we’ve seen is similar enough, with jungle gym equipment, computer lab, science lab, classrooms, the works. I’m not

getting a vibe that one private school is significantly different from another.

Maybe that's for the best, since I've gotten Amelia blacklisted from two of the three establishments.

"Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Luxenberg," the gentleman says, holding out his hand for us. "I'm the headmaster, Martin Walker."

"Miss Raine," Clare says, offering her hand. "We're not—I'm his nanny," she says with a nervous laugh.

Is she flirting with him?

My stomach flops, and my hands bunch into fists.

"Oh, that's highly unusual. We don't normally meet the nanny," Martin says.

I force a smile. "She's been a real asset these last few days."

Amelia is off with one of the staff members, taking another test for the day. It's too bad she couldn't do one exam and bring it with her, but I suppose she's gotten a lot of practice for the final.

"Tell me about Amelia," the headmaster says.

I open my mouth, but Clare takes control of the topic. "She's so bright and eager to learn. I've only been with Amelia for a few days, given the recent situation, but she loves reading. Every night, she curls up with a book before going to bed. And she spends a solid hour reading with her father."

"That's good," Martin says with a nod. "What about the recent loss of her mother? I'm sorry if I'm being quite so direct, but we do need to know if we're in for any behavioral issues."

My cheeks burn, and I'm fuming. I open my mouth, but Clare beats me to it, again.

"I'm sure you can imagine how difficult this situation is for such a young child. To be uprooted and brought to a new city. I'd say, given the circumstances, she's done amazing. I'm sure that she is grieving and will be for some time, given the loss of

her mother, but Amelia has not shown any sign of any behavioral issues that would be of concern.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Walker, that I have scheduled a child psychiatrist to meet with my daughter later this week.”

“As a precautionary measure,” Clare adds. “Losing one’s mother in such unfortunate circumstances and witnessing it can be traumatic. Her father wants to get ahead of it before any behavioral issues come up.”

“Good. Good.” He nods. “Let me check and see if Amelia has finished her exam. If you two would wait here.” Martin lets himself out of the office, closing the door and leaving the two of us alone.

“That went well,” Clare says, giving me a winning grin.

“Did it?” I can’t tell. I feel jaded after the last two interviews blew up in my face.

She smiles widely. “Now, we just wait to see if Amelia is ready to join these pretentious—”

I glare at her as the door opens to the office, and she shuts her trap. I swear if that woman ruins the last chance Amelia has of enrolling in a private school, I will bring the fires of hell and let it rain down on her.

“Wonderful news,” Mr. Walker says, and I’m relieved he didn’t happen to catch Clare’s remark upon entering the room. “Amelia did fantastic and is ready for enrollment.”

“Great. There’s one more thing. I’ll be taking her out of school next week for a trip to Europe. I need to travel for work, and given the recent circumstances, I’m sure that you can understand why I wouldn’t want to leave her in anyone else’s care.”

“Even your nanny’s?” Mr. Walker says, his brow furrowed.

Have I gone too far? Perhaps I should have waited another week before scheduling the interviews. It’s too late now.

“Clare will be accompanying us on the trip. As I said, I think it’s in the best interest of Amelia’s mental health.”

He's quiet, pensive. "I'm not happy about this, and we can't start her this week to pull her out of school next. If you'd like, we can begin her enrollment online, and your nanny, Miss Clare, could help with her assignments until she's back in the country to begin her proper education."

"That sounds perfect," Clare says, offering her hand before I can intervene and screw up the arrangements.

Clare and Amelia head outside while I fill out some last-minute paperwork and a check for Amelia's enrollment. Once I'm finished, I join the two of them.

Amelia has discovered the monkey bars and is hanging upside down on the jungle gym.

"Come on, it's time to head home." I grab Amelia from the playset, and she whines. I'm not ready for the waterworks.

"I'll bet you're hungry," Clare says. "I have some snacks in the car."

Amelia's eyes light up, and she grabs Clare's hand as the two of them jog toward our awaiting ride. Douglas stands outside, his back against the vehicle, his phone in hand. He puts his phone down when he sees us approach.

"Good news?" he asks, but I'm sure that Clare's bright smile is telling enough that it went well.

We climb back into the vehicle, and Clare taps my shoulder once we're back on the road.

I glance back at her. "Yes?"

"What was that about Europe?" she asks.

It just kind of slipped out in the spur of the moment, trying to fix the disaster that was happening around me type of scenario.

"Please tell me that you have a passport," I say.

"I do. It's in my bag back at your house."

I breathe a sigh of relief. Typically, getting a passport, even expedited, would take a couple of weeks.

"You really are taking me to Europe?"

I text my assistant to add Clare and Amelia to the flight itinerary. While I'd mentioned to my assistant to get adjoining rooms in the hotel, I want to verify that Amelia is accounted for on the flight.

Thankfully, Amelia also has a passport. Katelyn took her to Australia for an exotic trip two summers ago, the stamp on her passport evidence of their adventure together.

I doubt Amelia remembers it, but I'm grateful that both women have passports, and I won't have to postpone the trip.

"Paris, if all goes according to plan," I say. "I should warn you that we're going strictly for business, not pleasure."

Douglas glances at me, probably wondering what the hell I'm doing.

"Of course," Clare says. "You never told me what you did for a living."

I suppose I haven't. "I run Luxenberg Enterprises," I say.

"The hotel chain?" she squeaks.

I glance back over my shoulder at her. "Yes. Why?"

"You own the Luxenberg Hotel. The one in New York, too?"

"That's affirmative." What is she getting at?

"Oh my gosh. Connor, your brother, he's the same Connor who works at the Luxenberg in the city. Isn't he?" Her mouth hangs agape.

I'm not seeing the problem. Does she know of him?

"Yes, he's management for that specific hotel." I leave off the part where I won't let him anywhere near the rest of the brand. I'd have rather he lived in some small Podunk town and ran that hotel, not one of our biggest in the country.

She gasps and pulls out her phone.

"Who are you texting?" I reach for her phone, but she keeps it out of my grasp. I swear if she's planning on telling a reporter that she's nannying for me, I'll fire her faster than she can

jump out of a moving vehicle. Because that's what she's going to want to do if she betrays me.

Run.

Hide.

Try to escape my wrath.

"Your brother fired my best friend and made inappropriate sexual comments to her."

I stare at Clare. This is the first I'm hearing about it. "She didn't file a report with HR," I say. If the woman had, any kind of details involving sexual harassment would have been investigated and discussed among the higher-ups, myself included.

"How was she supposed to when he fired her? Told her he'd let her keep her job if she gave him a blow job."

"What's a blow job?" Amelia asks.

"Fuck," I growl at Clare and Amelia.

"It's not a nice word," Clare says, offering a weak smile, perhaps realizing her mistake and trying to rectify it before the damage gets any worse.

I don't correct Clare that it can be a really nice word, when used correctly between consenting adults.

But she's right. I don't need my kid using that word when she attends kindergarten. Day one, suspended. Yeah, that will go over really well when she's called into the headmaster's office.

"I'll kill him," I mutter a little too loudly. "Give me the name of the girl making the allegations."

"No way," Clare says, and shoves her phone into her purse.

"Let me talk to her," I snap. Why is it that Clare can so easily frustrate and irritate me? I'm trying to do a good thing. I'd like to hear this woman's side of the story and help her. If she was fired unjustly, then I could offer her a different role, another position away from my scum-sucking brother.

Connor will still be a problem, though, any way you dice it. But I can't fire him. The man has no ability to work anywhere else. And he's family.

Even if I think his work ethic and morals are shit. Every time I've shown up at the hotel, the staff informs me that he's never around. It seems like he doesn't spend more than a couple of hours a week at work. He shows up for the paycheck.

Letting him remain in management for the hotel, though, if what Clare says is true and her friend was sexually harassed, I can't just let it go. If he's done it with this one girl, how many others has he intimidated, or worse, forced himself on?

My stomach roils at the awful scenarios running through my head.

"Give me her number." It's not a question. I will get the information out of Clare, one way or another.

"No." She folds her arms across her chest. Her phone is out of my reach, and unless I can get ahold of it, unlock it, and determine who the contact is, I'm not going to have much luck.

"Why not? Why won't you help her?" I ask. "I thought you were her friend."

Douglas pulls up out front of the house and punches in the code to enter the property. He's been silent this whole time. Smart man.

The moment he stops the car, I open the door. I don't wait for him to come around and open it for me.

I open Clare's door while she helps Amelia out of her car seat.

"I'm not giving you her name, but I'll tell her that you'd like to talk. If she agrees, then I'll arrange a meeting."

"If?" I squawk at her suggestion. "You're not her lawyer, Clare. You don't have to protect her. She's a grown woman."

"A grown woman who probably wants privacy. Besides, do you remember that day I told you I could stay on my friend's couch, the one who lived with the *bratva*?"

I clear my throat, getting uncomfortable with where this conversation is going. I open the front door, letting Amelia into the house. She doesn't need to hear this, but I can't exactly send her to the playroom to occupy her. The room isn't set up yet. It's not ready for her.

Hell, I'm still not ready for a kid, but she's here, and this is real.

This is my life.

And I don't want to go anywhere near the bratva. They're the Russian Mafia. They're cunning, cruel, ruthless, and will kill anyone who gets in their way.

It's why I jumped at bringing Clare into my home, to protect her. She was a pain in the ass when I first met her and still is, but she doesn't deserve to be around men who slaughter innocent people and probably hang their heads like trophies on the wall.

"Where is this going?" I grit my teeth and shut the door behind us.

Douglas leaves, giving us plenty of privacy, but then again, Amelia is staring at the two of us.

"Amelia, go in there. Clare bought you some new toys yesterday." I point at the room where I shoved all the presents. There's enough for it to be like Christmas for the kid. And while I'd like to see her surprise, I'd rather her not witness the two of us arguing.

Amelia skips off into the room that will be designated as a playroom after I shuffle the furniture around and paint the walls. Not to mention unbox all the toys. I'm not sure Amelia will be able to open all of them, but there was at least one stuffed animal I saw that wasn't encased in plastic and cardboard.

Clare shuffles her feet and folds her arms across her chest. "Now, what was this about the bratva?" I angrily whisper, grabbing Clare by the arm and pulling her closer. I don't want Amelia to overhear a word of our conversation.

The nanny stares back at me, her gaze never wavering. “My friend,” she says, careful not to reveal the woman’s name or identity, “lives with the bratva. Her boyfriend is bratva. Well, technically, fiancé. They’re engaged.”

“I don’t want you going anywhere near the bratva,” I warn.

“Or what?”

“I’ll fire your ass,” I snarl. “If that friend of yours or any of his buddies are within eyesight of my daughter, you’ll regret the day you met me.”

“That’s a big threat,” Clare says.

I half expect her to mutter that she already does regret meeting me, but I’m grateful the conversation doesn’t go in that direction.

“And I mean it,” I say, dropping my hold on her. My hands bunch into fists at my side. “Those men are monsters, and I don’t want my daughter anywhere near them.”

“I promise you that she’ll be safe.”

“You let me be the judge of that,” I say. If she thinks being friends with anyone associating with the bratva is safe, she’s wrong.

Dead wrong.

EIGHT

CLARE

I'd love to avoid Levi's heated stare, but it's impossible. We've both agreed to put a pin in the discussion about my friend Sadie. Not that I've given him her name.

I also make sure to erase the text messages she sent me when she asked me to meet her for drinks several months earlier.

It's not that I don't trust Levi to respect my boundaries and leave my phone alone, but, well, I don't know him that well.

And after being married to a man who would grab my phone and enter my passcode, which was my birthday, to view my texts and photos without my permission, I have difficulty trusting people.

I want to trust Levi, but we've been on rocky ground from the start. My fault. I rightfully earned the name Airplane Girl, and I'm lucky that it wasn't something harsher. I deserved his anger, but instead, he allowed me into his home.

I still can't make sense of how I got here, working for a billionaire and his amazing little girl.

We're only a few days in, and it feels oddly like home.

The following afternoon, Amelia helps pick out the paint for the playroom. Levi and Douglas shuffle the furniture around, some of it making its way out of the room. I cover what's left with drop cloths before we break open the paint.

Perpetual Petal. That was the color Amelia picked for the playroom, a very rosy and bright shade of pink.

I thought Levi would have a fit and insist that any other color but pink would be acceptable. Instead, he bought a can, a set of brushes, and rollers.

I don't have a ratty old T-shirt, so Levi loans me one of his. There are a few holes in the sleeves. It's soft, obviously well-loved, and smells uniquely of him. The masculine aroma tickles my nose, and I try not to inhale a huge whiff, but my body responds to the scent like a lioness in heat.

Why do I have to be turned on by my boss, the grump of all grumps? Mr. Panty Thief himself.

What I wouldn't give for a night off and out with friends. However, he's made it clear that Sadie is off-limits. He only knows of her because I spilled the news about her living with the bratva.

Maybe it wasn't entirely by accident. He's been moody and grumpy.

What would it be like to have that energy surrounding me to protect me?

I sigh. It's not something I should be thinking about. He's my boss.

"What is it?" Levi asks. He must have heard me sigh, because I didn't say anything. I keep painting the wall with the roller, trying to knock this room out fast. It's not that I don't enjoy painting, but the smell is strong, and I doubt it's good for Amelia.

"Nothing," I say dismissively. I'm not telling him what's going through my head—how he stirs up feelings and desires that have been asleep since before I got married.

"It's not nothing," he says. His paintbrush smacks me on the ass.

"Hey, now!" I shriek.

Levi chuckles. "What? You don't like a little color to your cheeks?"

My mouth drops. His kid is in the room! “Levi!” I gasp and widen my eyes.

Amelia is oblivious. She keeps painting the wall with her brush, the strokes wild and carefree. He didn’t give her much paint, though, so at least it’s not dripping. We’ll have to go over the area she paints with the roller.

“Relax,” he says, and steps closer.

I involuntarily shiver, hoping that he doesn’t know the effect he has on me.

“You stained my shirt,” I say, pretending to be offended.

“My shirt,” he growls, and steps closer.

I can practically taste him. His lips are close to mine. It is technically his shirt, but I’m wearing it. “Mine now,” I say with a cocky grin.

He shakes his head and grabs and spanks my ass, his hand landing in wet paint. “You’re a brat. You know that?”

I laugh, surprised by the smack to my bottom. I didn’t expect that from him. The paintbrush was one thing, but his hand sends tingles through my entire body.

“What’d you expect?” I shrug like I don’t care. The smile I try to downplay, glancing away, turning my back to him. But I can’t wipe the grin away even as I try to think about anything else.

“I expect the nanny to obey me.” He pulls me against him.

I gasp when his cock bumps against me. I reach behind myself, needing proof that what I’m feeling isn’t the paintbrush handle and actually what I think.

“Woman,” he grunts, trying hard to control himself. “I swear if you continue ...”

“You’ll what?” I spin around to face him, staring up into his darkened, heated gaze. I wait for his threat.

He glances down at my mouth, his eyes heavy, but he doesn’t lean in.

He doesn't kiss me like I want. Maybe I should lean in and show him what I want.

But by the time I start to move onto my tiptoes, he pulls back, stepping away.

"I'll finish up. Get Amelia showered and cleaned up for dinner."

"Are you sure? I can finish helping."

"You've done enough," he growls at me.

Why is he so damn grumpy?

Without another word, I gracefully drop the paint roller onto the tray and take Amelia's brush, placing it with mine before we head for the stairs.

I carry Amelia up the stairs, not wanting her to leave a trail of paint on the floor, banister, or walls. At least I can be careful.

She strips down in the bathroom, and I run the shower, waiting for the temperature to rise before she steps into the stall.

I help her scrub the paint off, using extra soap to get the bright pink from her hair, skin, and just about everywhere imaginable.

For using such a small brush, Amelia seems to be wearing more paint than she had in her cup.

"That was fun." Amelia beams up at me with the widest grin I've ever seen.

I shouldn't be surprised that she enjoyed painting. The kid probably loves everything that involves getting messy. After she's clean, I send her to her bedroom to play quietly while I hop in the shower and scrub the paint off my own body.

It takes longer. The paint has dried even more since Amelia's shower. I scrub at the remnants, most of it on my hands, a little at the bottom of my hair. The shirt Levi loaned me is toast, but that's his fault. At least my jean shorts somehow managed to survive the onslaught of paint since his shirt covered the denim.

I finish the shower and shut the water off. Opening the glass door, I grumble when there are no clean towels in the bathroom. I used the last one on Amelia.

“Levi!” I shout, but he doesn’t come.

He’s busy painting, or maybe he’s ignoring me. What bug crawled up his ass today?

I squeeze the excess moisture from my hair before cracking the bathroom door open. I make a beeline for the laundry room when I hear Levi’s footsteps coming up the stairs.

Shit.

I hurry to the laundry room and slam the door shut, exhaling a sigh of relief.

Except now I have towels, but my clothes are still in the bathroom.

I swear I have the worst luck.

I open the dryer, retrieving a towel when the laundry door breezes open. I kick it shut with my foot.

“Clare, what the hell is going on?”

“I need a towel,” I say, yanking one from the clean laundry. I wrap it hastily around myself. If I were forty pounds lighter, it might fit around my body, maybe. I swear the man bought towels only appropriate for his little princess.

Not that he knew he was a father before this week.

I grab a second towel, using it to finish covering my midsection, suspecting he’s still standing on the opposite side of the door.

Once I’m covered, but not exactly dressed, I open the laundry room door. Levi is standing on the opposite side. He’s still covered in paint, but he’s not wearing a shirt.

“I was just going to throw this in the laundry,” he says, balling up his T-shirt. “I should grab the clothes that you had too. Are they still in the bathroom?”

Before I can answer, he turns and heads for the bathroom, grabbing my dirty clothes along with Amelia's, which are lying on the floor in a pile.

On top are my panties, the same red satin pair that he had tucked into his pocket just days ago.

Embarrassment burns my cheeks. It's not like he doesn't know I wear panties and a bra, but him seeing my undergarments makes me highly uncomfortable. It's not like they're tiny, scantily clad things.

"Don't throw my panties and bra in with the paint stuff," I say and then think better of it. I yank my underthings from the top of the pile.

"I know how to do laundry."

"Of course, you're the Panty Thief."

He groans and steps closer, invading my personal space, while blocking the door. I'm wearing two towels to keep my body from being exposed, and he's half undressed.

I tug my bottom lip between my teeth.

I will not get turned on by my boss.

I chant the silent mantra in my head. Does it work? No, but at least it keeps me distracted.

Levi stares at me, longer than he should, before he leans in, and his lips brush my ear.

My eyes involuntarily shut, and I try not to shudder. "I like the red. I hope you wore those for me."

The air is sucked out of my lungs, and Levi turns around, taking the dirty clothes with him back to the laundry room, and I stand there dumbfounded, my legs trembling. Why does he have the ability to make me feel like I'm a virgin all over again?

I don't see Levi for the next four days. And they feel long and excruciating. There's no flirting, no second guessing everything that one of us says.

He's buried himself in his office at work and made himself unavailable to Amelia and me.

Did I do something wrong?

Is it something I said? Or perhaps didn't say?

He likes me. I mean, I think he does. He flirts with me. That's a given. But I'm not great at flirting, and I don't always take the bait. Maybe he decided that he's done and just wants to keep the relationship strictly professional.

I wouldn't blame him. Hell, it's probably for the best, even if it's not necessarily what I want.

I want him.

I crave him, his body, his touch, the smell of him wrapped around me. After I spent the afternoon painting in his shirt, even after my shower, I could still smell him.

It's been well over a week since we first met. Exactly eight days, and he hasn't fired me or tossed me out yet. I consider that progress.

Levi also hasn't mentioned whether he's still interested in interviewing and hiring a different nanny or if I've passed the trial period. I suppose that'll wait until after we get back from the trip to Europe.

My phone pings, and I grab it, expecting a message from Levi checking on us.

It's my ex-husband, Zander.

There's no message, just a photo of duct tape.

"What the hell?" I mutter to myself. Something is seriously wrong with that man. I'm glad I finally got away from him. I still can't believe it took me six years. It's time I'll never get back.

I dread the texts that come from Zander, unlike the messages I get from Levi.

While Levi has been at work, he texts updates, asking how Amelia is doing, if she's been eating enough of her meals, that sort of thing. It's sweet, and it's clear that he cares about his daughter.

He's still at work. The house is quiet.

Amelia is downstairs playing with her toys while I pack her clothes for the trip. I open his bedroom door. It's like breaking the seal of the Ark of the Covenant. I shouldn't be going in his bedroom.

But he instructed me to do so via text.

I roll out his bag from his bedroom and drag it into Amelia's room. I lay it on the floor and unzip it, pulling the lid open. He does have quite a bit of room, and the suitcase has a divider, with one side completely empty.

The entire suitcase smells like Levi, intoxicating with woody notes, leather, and one hundred percent alpha male.

I drink the scent in, my body tingling and on fire.

Not being around Levi hasn't diminished my desires in the slightest.

Opening Amelia's dresser, I retrieve the new clothes that Douglas purchased. I'm amazed at how well everything fits. I fold several outfits along with a few extra and pack her unicorn before zipping up the suitcase.

He asked me to text him when it's done, and I do.

Good, he texts back. Go into the garage. Open the back door of the pickup truck. There's a surprise for you.

I don't know what kind of surprise there would be.

I shove my phone into the back pocket of my jeans and head downstairs. Levi is still a few hours from finishing work. Douglas will be picking us up and swinging by the office to grab Levi for our flight to Paris.

I'm excited to travel to Europe. I've never been. Especially flying via a private jet. I hurry to the garage. He's got several

cars but only one pickup truck, which makes it easy to at least locate the right vehicle.

I open the back door and inside there's a brand new, pink, hard-shell suitcase. It's the same size as the one Amelia crushed.

I grab the suitcase and carry it into the house, dragging it upstairs.

Thank you, I text him back before packing my clothes for our trip. I debate whether I should bring my vibrator or not. When am I going to have the privacy to use it? If I'm sharing a room with Amelia, that's out of the question. But I could take it into the bathroom. It's supposed to be waterproof.

I shove the device into my purse.

Hopefully, the hotel has a decent bathroom fan to keep the noise at bay. I zip up my luggage and carry my bag down to the front door, both pieces ready for when Douglas arrives.

"Clare Bear," Amelia chimes, bouncing out of the playroom. She's wearing a bright pink cape with her matching tutu.

"Hey." I bend down to scoop her up in a hug.

"Guess who my favorite comic book character is. Supergirl!" she proclaims, and holds her arms out to fly. "Will you fly me around? Pretty please."

At least she's not calling me Airplane Girl anymore. I'm sure her father will think up some wicked nickname for me while we're on this trip together.

My phone buzzes, and I fly her around for a second before placing her feet firmly on the ground. I reach into my back pocket. It's Levi with another text.

I have our passports. Bring yours.

I double-check my purse to make sure I have my passport.

Done, I text.

Tablet for schoolwork?

Crap. I hurry to the makeshift office where Amelia has been practicing her schooling. I grab the iPad off the table along with the Bluetooth keyboard and headphones. I pop both into my purse.

Done.

You would have forgotten it.

I don't answer his text. It's an accusation, and I didn't forget because he reminded me, anyways. Amelia spends her mornings at school, and by noon she's done for the day.

Within the hour, Douglas pulls up out front. Levi texts me to let me know that he's arrived.

Douglas loads our luggage into the trunk while I buckle Amelia into the backseat, climbing in beside her.

"Do you have everything, ma'am?"

"I hope so," I say.

"Passports?"

"I have mine. Levi mentioned that he had Amelia's and his with him."

We pull away from the house, and Douglas drives us into the city to where Levi works. I've seen the hotel that he owns in New York, but I don't know where Luxenberg Enterprises itself is located.

The building stands tall, looming above us among other skyscrapers. Do they own the entire building or just a handful of floors?

We wait outside in the loading zone when Levi climbs into the front seat.

"Do you have your passports, sir?" Douglas asks, reaffirming that we're ready for our flight.

Levi taps his interior jacket pocket. "Amelia's and mine." He glances over his shoulder at me.

"My passport is in my purse. I double and triple-checked."

"Good."

Douglas whisks us away toward the nearest airfield, which happens to be where Levi's private plane is located.

It's already gassed up and waiting for us.

Douglas grabs our bags and carries them over to the plane, making sure we have everything while I unbuckle Amelia from her seat.

"Will we need the car seat for the airplane?" I ask, gesturing to the vehicle.

"She'll be fine for a couple of hours on the flight. I have one waiting for us when we get our ride in Paris." Levi holds out his arms to take Amelia. He carries her up the stairs and into the private jet.

I follow behind, taking all of it in.

It's swanky, spacious for such a small plane, and it looks super comfortable compared to flying coach. It's even nicer than first class, and that was a once-in-a-lifetime event for me.

We get on the airplane. Levi buckles Amelia into a seat and sits down in the nearest one beside her.

I opt to sit behind their row.

Amelia spins around, her chair turning to face me. She giggles excitedly. "This is fun!"

"You have to sit forward when we take off," Levi says, turning her seat back around and locking it in place.

"You're a stinky poo," Amelia says, sticking her tongue out at her father.

Levi turns and directs his attention at me. "Did you teach her that?"

I laugh under my breath. "No, but she's right."

"Oh, is she?"

I keep hoping that he'll flirt with me. That we'll return to the flirty and undeniable banter between us. Where the sexual tension gets so thick that you need a knife to cut through it.

I've never been into knife play, but for this man, I'd do anything.

I swallow that thought down.

Levi's attentive gaze never leaves mine. "I've never known you to be quiet, *Airplane Girl*."

"Really? Do you want to go there?" I ask. I've refrained from calling him Panty Thief in front of his daughter, but I just might have to take things up a notch.

The tension seems to slide right off his shoulders as he stalks closer. His hands fall to the armrest, trapping me in my seat as the flight crew head to their cabin.

"Where's Amelia's iPad?" he asks, his breath practically teasing mine.

"In my purse," I say before thinking about what else is in my bag. I point at the bag on the floor.

The top is a single snap button, and it's already open. He digs his hand into the bag for the iPad.

"Clare, what's this?" he asks. His fist is wrapped around the shaft of my vibrator. He's lifted it, but not out of the bag, making it visible to me but no one else.

"What does it look like?" I smack his hand away and snag the tablet from my bag and shove it at him. "This is what you were looking for."

The airplane is stifling, and the flight crew shuts the door to prepare for departure.

Levi takes his seat next to his daughter and glances over his shoulder at me. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"You don't have to ever bring it up. This conversation is done," I say. I'd sooner die of embarrassment than discuss my vibrator with him.

I should have put it in my suitcase, out of sight, where he'd never find it.

After we take off, Amelia is watching a video on the tablet while Levi stands and stretches. We're at cruising altitude, and

we have several hours in the air.

I should feign sleeping.

“Do you want something to drink?” Levi asks, opening the mini fridge.

“Whatever’s strong,” I say.

He pulls out a half dozen options of mini bottles of alcohol and shows them to me. “What’ll it be?”

While I know that drinking won’t erase the last twenty minutes of my humiliation, at least I can get buzzed and try to forget about it.

I grab the rum and vodka, and keep reaching for the remainder of the bottles in his hands when he realizes that I want all of them.

“You’re not getting trashed, Clare. Pick one.”

“I’m not a child, and we have several hours until we land.”

“If you were a child, you’d have apple juice,” he says.

I open the bottle of rum first, and Levi snatches the vodka from me.

I tip the small bottle back and take the shot, downing it in seconds.

“You’re mean.” I unbuckle my seatbelt and stand, searching for a trashcan to toss the empty bottle.

“Where are you going? Joining the mile-high club by yourself? Usually it involves two people, sunshine.”

“Why are you being such a grump?” I mutter, brushing past him. I can’t get far enough away from him.

He grabs a juice box from the fridge for Amelia and watches me, blocking me from my seat. I could go hide in the bathroom, but what good would that do?

“You’re still on the clock,” Levi says.

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere, and she’s busy watching a movie.” I gesture toward Amelia. She’s facing the opposite

direction and, thankfully, wearing a set of headphones and can't hear us fight.

Levi grumbles, but I can't hear what he says.

"God, you need to get laid," I mutter loud enough for him to hear me.

"Excuse me?" He whips his head around to face me.

"You heard me. You're such a grump. I'm guessing it's because you're used to bringing women home and haven't for the past week. That's it, isn't it? You need to get laid, and since you can't, you're making it miserable for the rest of us." He stares me down. I cover my mouth with my hand. I can't believe I said that to his face.

"Who is the rest of us?" Levi asks. "You?"

"I'm sorry," I say, quick to apologize.

"No, you're not. You meant every word." He stalks closer, and I take a step back. "The only woman who has me turning into a grump is you."

"Me?" I squeak. "What did I do?" I've looked after his daughter and been a decent nanny.

"Wearing nothing but a towel across the hall. Seeing you in that bra the first night," he growls, and leans closer, invading my personal space. "Woman, if you want nothing to do with me, you should say as much."

My lips part. "I need this job," I whisper. It's not as if I've even seen a paycheck. The billionaire kept his word that I'd have room and board. That's all he's given me, that and sweaty dreams at night, making me restless and antsy.

"I'm not firing you," Levi says, clear as day. "I'm not even interested in any other nannies. You're good with Amelia."

"I like her a lot," I say. It's her dad who has me twisted up inside.

He reaches out, his fingers tangling in my hair as he grabs a fistful and brings my lips up toward his. He tilts my chin, making me stare into his heated gaze.

“And what about me?” Levi asks.

My lips part, and already, I’m breathless. “You rile me up inside. I hate it,” I whisper, staring up at him.

“You hate it?” That seems to take him by surprise. He releases his grip on me.

“I hate the way you make me feel like I’m losing control of myself and my senses. I can’t sleep without dreaming about you. I can’t breathe without inhaling your intoxicating scent. You’re everywhere, even when you’re at work and I don’t see you.”

“I feel the exact same way. That’s why I’ve been at the office for the past few days,” Levi says.

“But I’m your daughter’s nanny. We can’t act on it,” I say. Even if I want him more than anyone I’ve ever wanted, I can’t risk screwing up their new family dynamic.

Levi growls. “Why not?”

“Like I said before, I’m your nanny.”

“You’re Amelia’s nanny,” Levi clarifies, “not mine. And as your boss, I give you permission to explore your feelings for me.”

I laugh. “I don’t think that’s how this works.”

“Why not? You don’t work for a nanny agency, Clare. You work for me. And to be honest, I haven’t been particularly fair to you.”

“Wait, you mean not letting me have a towel after your daughter soaked me our first night wasn’t fair?” I tease.

Levi cracks a wry grin. “Not what I was thinking of, but damn, I’m glad she did. Although next time, I really think the two of us should shower together.”

I smile up at him, my heart fluttering in my chest. “Somehow, I think you’d be the one to hog all the water.”

“I know how to share,” Levi says. His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me tight against him. “I might have to invest in a double showerhead.”

I inhale a nervous breath. Leaning on my tiptoes, I brush my lips against his. This time, I kiss him first. I'm ready for it. Our lips clash, and he sucks on my bottom lip, tugging it between his teeth.

"I've been wanting to do that since we met."

"Liar." We definitely didn't get off to a great start.

"Okay, maybe the first night when you were in your bra." Levi grins.

I smack his arm. "*Mr. Panty Thief*, you are entirely to blame for that debacle."

He raises an eyebrow at me. "Really? We're still on the childish nicknames, *Airplane Girl*?"

I shrug, pretending not to be annoyed by the nickname he's bestowed on me, since it's clear he doesn't like to be called Panty Thief.

"You know, Clare"—he leans in, his lips brushing against my ear—"it's been a while since I've stolen a pair. I'm awfully rusty in that department."

I double over in laughter. "You're rusty in *that* department, as in ... " I glance down and gesture toward his cock.

"God, no! I meant the thievery. It's been a while since I stole a pair. I'm *not* rusty with my cock," he snarls, and I swear he's going to nip me for saying such things. "I know perfectly well how to use it."

"I should think so, beating off in the shower." I'm teasing him, curious about his limits. How far he'll let this banter go between us.

"You have no proof of that. On the other hand, someone brought her trusty vibrator on a work trip," Levi whispers, pinning me with his stare.

And I think I'm dead.

It wasn't bad enough his hand was wrapped around the shaft earlier when he discovered it, but he had to bring it up, again. "It's just a stress relief tool," I say.

He snorts, unconvinced.

“I swear, I just use it when my shoulders and neck get tight.”

“It’s in the shape of a cock.” Levi raises an eyebrow. “You’re a terrible liar, *Airplane Girl*.”

“Would you rather me tell you that I slide it between my thighs at night and moan your name?”

He shifts on his feet. Is there sweat glistening on his forehead?

“Woman, the things you do to me.”

“Yeah?” I smile, my gaze moving down his body. He’s in an expensive suit. The man must be hot. “You can take off your jacket. It’s a long flight.”

That’s not the only thing the man probably wants to take off, but I’m not about to suggest he drop his pants with his daughter a few feet away. Thankfully, she’s still facing away from us and engrossed in her movie.

He loosens his tie, but his eyes never leave mine. He’s watching me. Is he trying to gauge my reaction? I swallow, my mouth dry, and my tongue darts out across my lips.

“I could use another drink,” I rasp, and brush past him for the mini fridge.

Levi captures my arm, pulling me back against him. “Is the heat too much for you?” he asks.

I was the one in control, doing the flirting. Damn him!

“I was going to grab us both a drink.” I clear my throat, trying like hell to sound convincing. “I mean, you do look parched.”

His eyes flicker, and his gaze travels down my body slowly, like he’s taking it all in, imagining every inch of me naked. Or maybe he’s remembering what I looked like in my bra or with the towels clutched to my body.

“Are you always such a tease?” Levi asks. He removes his jacket, hanging it over one of the empty leather chairs, and rolls up his sleeves.

“You’re the one undressing on an airplane.”

Levi smirks and rolls his eyes. He exhales a heavy breath and pulls me closer, tighter. His cock presses into my thighs. It's unmistakable, and it's huge. "You feel that?" he says, without a doubt knowing that he's pressed against me.

My lips part, and I can't form a coherent thought.

I nod slowly, gasping for breath.

He looks smug, proud, and like he's just won and ready for his victory dance. "When was the last time you had sex, kitten?"

"Kitten?" I squeak. The airplane definitely got hotter.

Am I blushing?

What happened to him calling me Airplane Girl? That was at least his grumpiness showing, but now this sexy side of him has my insides tingling, and I'm trembling in his arms.

And he's inescapable; I'm trapped on an airplane with my hot billionaire boss.

Damn him!

"You didn't answer my question." He stares at me, almost like he's looking right into my soul. With one hand, he brushes a few strands of hair from my face. His other hand is latched to my hip, teasing me, grazing the hem between my shirt and pants.

I lean into his touch.

"A few ... months," I whisper, and pray he isn't about to make fun of me. I didn't even like sex that much with my husband. It was a chore, like a duty of marriage on special occasions. "When I was married."

He was *that* bad in bed that I wanted it over and done with and not a minute sooner than necessary.

"A girl who's not afraid of commitment. I like it," he says, and leans down, closer to my lips. "You're trembling."

I hate that he notices. That he can make my head swoon and my body weak and uncontrollable.

“Am not,” I say, and clear my throat, trying to sound convincing, but it’s obvious I’m nervous. Why isn’t he nervous? Does he do this with all the girls who work for him?

He pulls me with him to sit on one of the seats, keeping me in his lap.

It feels weird, to be sitting on my boss’s lap on his private jet. I tug my lip between my teeth.

“I like you, Clare, a lot.” He’s calm, far calmer than I feel. “But if you’re not ready or don’t want to, I’d never force you.”

Is that what he thinks?

I swallow my fears and grip the lapels of his shirt, crushing his lips with mine. I want to kiss him. I definitely desire every inch of him. I’m just not typically great at making the first move, or even the second. I freeze. Panic. My nerves steal me away and tend to screw everything up.

It takes a second for his brain to register that I’m kissing him, because he doesn’t kiss me back. I gasp and begin to pull back, but his hold on me tightens.

His lips envelop mine, hard and warm, seeking entrance with his tongue as he glides it over my teeth, wanting in. I get the feeling that’s not the only thing he wants inside of me.

I moan with the intensity of the kiss, and my stomach flutters, chasing butterflies.

He is everything and more than I’ve ever dreamt up.

And for the first time, I don’t care that I’m the nanny, and this isn’t something a good nanny would do.

Screw the rules.

Fuck boundaries.

Lines are meant to be crossed.

NINE

Levi

Damn, kissing Clare is like paradise. I knew it'd be good, but I didn't realize how amazing until we started, and I don't want to let go.

Her warm body is on my lap, my fingers trailing across her hip, teasing her skin, touching her.

I crave more, but my daughter is just a few feet away, and I can't have her catching the two of us making out.

She'll ask questions, and I'm not ready to give them to a five-year-old.

Has she even had the 'where do babies come from' speech? That is not something I want to deal with now or possibly ever.

Clare's hips rock against mine, our kisses fervent and unending. My fingers tangle in her hair, bruising her lips.

I want to mark her.

Claim her.

Let the entire world know she belongs to me.

Amelia begins to stir, and the second I hear the commotion of her headphones drop to the floor and the seatbelt unbuckle, Clare jumps off me. Her hair is messy, her face flushed, and lips swollen.

My cock twitches angrily from being denied any further pleasure.

I clear my throat and stand, brushing past Clare while I help Amelia find another movie to watch on her tablet.

“What were you doing?” Amelia asks, glancing at Clare. “Your hair looks funny.”

Clare’s eyes widen, and she bolts into the bathroom, slamming and locking the door.

Leave it to the kid to ruin the moment. I thought Clare looked sexy as hell. My cock certainly agreed.

I guide Amelia back to her seat and grab her a snack and a juice box before putting another princess movie on.

Clare spends far too much time hiding in the bathroom, fixing her hair, and avoiding me for her eReader the rest of the flight.

She’s embarrassed and probably worried that Amelia saw something. She didn’t. But I let it slide.

We land in Paris, and it takes a bit of time to deal with customs before we are chauffeured to the hotel.

The hotel is older and needs a few upgrades. It’s one of the reasons the owner is considering selling us the establishment. It’s not far from the Eiffel Tower, and I’ve been assured that the view from the penthouse will be spectacular.

While I want to tour the standard rooms, I’m being put up in the penthouse suite. I’d expect nothing less, and if the owner hadn’t offered to do so freely, I’d have paid handsomely for the experience.

The penthouse consists of two bedrooms, a spacious living room, and a kitchen. Amelia scurries inside excitedly, running in to find her bedroom.

I explore the suite, pleased with the accommodations and the cleanliness, and while most of the hotel itself is old and needs repair, this suite is top notch. It’s already been upgraded. Was that done for my benefit?

The paint is fresh. The linens look pristine and brand new. Even the bath towels are upgraded from standard white to a thick gray. The tags are still on.

Clare is quiet, taking the sight in while I peruse the bedrooms, bringing my luggage with me and dropping it in the room with a single king bed.

“Umm, Levi.” Clare’s voice catches in her throat.

Across the hallway is a second bedroom, and I step in, expecting to find two queen beds. Nope. There’s a single king bed again.

“I can’t share a bed with Amelia,” she says.

Amelia climbs onto the mattress and begins jumping excitedly. I don’t blame her. After the long flight, she’s bound to have pent-up energy.

She’s not the only one.

“I can call downstairs and request another room,” I say with a heavy sigh, and rub my jaw. How is she going to look after Amelia if she’s in a different room on a different floor? That won’t be ideal. “We can have a rollaway bed brought into Amelia’s room.”

“Right, that should work.”

I make a quick phone call and am assured they will bring in an additional bed. I can always have Amelia sleep on the rollaway, since it’s likely to be a twin.

Amelia squeals with delight while I pop into the girls’ room to see what’s going on.

My little monster keeps jumping sky-high on the mattress. “Little Miss, you’re going to break Clare’s bed,” I say, catching her midair.

“My bed,” Amelia proclaims proudly.

“Your bed will be brought up soon.”

“It’s fine, I can sleep anywhere,” Clare says.

“Amelia can sleep on the twin rollaway.”

Amelia squirms from my grasp and keeps jumping, ignoring my requests to stop. The kid is defiant. She gets that from me. "I need to get some food into her before she melts down." We snacked on the flight but haven't had a real meal in hours.

"Are you ready?" I ask Clare as she flips open her luggage. I'm not sure if she's about to put her clothes away or change after the flight.

"Can you give me ten minutes?"

"I've seen you get ready in two."

"That was mean," she says, grabbing a dark-red dress. My trousers tighten. "Five."

"Deal." I'd gladly give her all ten minutes if I get to see her in a sexy dress for dinner. On her way to the bathroom, I grab her wrist, stopping her while I whisper into her ear, "Forget the panties."

Her cheeks burn, matching the dress in her hand, before she slips into the bathroom.

I'm disappointed I don't get to watch her strip down and change. I'd love to see what's under her clothes, and eventually, I will.

I'd say we're taking things slowly, but it's more like a glacial pace. No, glaciers melt faster. Not that I'm saying Airplane Girl is an ice queen. She's proven she's anything but that with the fiery heart-stopping kiss on the airplane.

There's a firm knock at the door, and I allow them inside with the twin mattress, showing them where to put the rollaway bed.

The minute they leave, Amelia climbs onto the new bed, deciding to toss the sheets by jumping. She tries to touch the ceiling but can't reach it. So she jumps higher.

"Are you my little monkey?" I ask, grabbing Amelia and spinning her around.

She giggles and squeals with delight.

The bathroom door clicks, and Clare saunters out in her sexy red dress that has thin spaghetti straps and stops just below her knees. The top dips, giving me an ample view of her cleavage, and based on not seeing any bra straps, I'm going to hope she took my orders like a good girl and skipped the panties too.

I place Amelia on the bed, my attention stolen away by the nanny.

I never thought I'd be chasing a twenty-something girl when I hit forty.

Although, is chasing technically the right word?

We clash. We battle with nicknames and snarky insults. But chase?

I would chase her to the ends of the earth if she ever left Amelia and me, but I don't plan on letting her go. Not now. Not ever.

One kiss, and I'm heavily addicted.

She's my drug of choice.

Amelia begins bouncing on the bed again, the mattress groaning under her weight.

Clare grabs her heels from her bag. I'm glad she wore them. They look sexy as hell on her, and I don't often see her dressed up. It's usually not appropriate with being a nanny. She has to sit and entertain my kid all day. No one wants to sit on the floor in a fancy dress.

"Almost ready," Clare says, offering me a shy smile.

Amelia starts jumping and squealing until the mattress wheezes and makes a strange popping sound.

"Amelia, that's enough!" I snap, not wanting to call guest services for a replacement mattress because my kid broke the damn thing.

She plops down, her face scrunching as she rubs the mattress. "Ouch."

"What's ouch?" I ask, and sit on the bed, discovering the broken spring.

Nice job, kid. I groan and run a hand through my hair. “I need to call guest services.”

“Why?” Clare asks, following me into the living room. Her heels are on, and she looks dynamite. It takes everything for me not to back her up against the wall and shove my tongue down her throat.

One glance at her, and I’m rock hard.

“Amelia broke one of the springs in the mattress. Neither of you can sleep on there.”

“I can take the sofa. I’m sure it unfolds into a bed.”

“A lumpy uncomfortable one that will be worse than the broken spring. Let me just call downstairs,” I say, and reach for the hotel room phone.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’ll just break another bed if you bring it in.”

“No, she won’t,” I state, glaring at Amelia. I’m waiting for guest services to pick up, but it keeps ringing endlessly. They’re either incredibly busy or ignoring my call. I’m not happy about either option.

Amelia sits on the king bed, smiling innocently like she didn’t just destroy hotel furniture.

“Seriously, Levi.” The way Clare says my name squeezes at my heart and my cock simultaneously. How the hell does she do that? “You’re here on business. Don’t worry about the bed. The couch is fine.”

“You’re not sleeping on the couch,” I growl, and slam the phone down when they don’t answer. “We’ll go downstairs, and I’ll complain.”

“Please don’t do that,” Clare says. “The hotel is so nice, and it isn’t their fault the mattress broke. I’m fine with the couch.”

“Fine doesn’t cut it.” How can she agree to sleep on a lumpy folded mattress when she deserves better?

We head downstairs, and I insist on speaking with guest services. We’re informed that because of a wedding and

convention, the hotel is already overbooked, and there are no additional rollaway beds or rooms.

“Fuck!” I curse, forgetting my daughter is right at my side.

Clare’s eyes widen, and she grabs Amelia’s hand, pulling her away from the front desk.

“Do you mean to tell me that you don’t have any other mattresses that can be brought in? I’m in the penthouse suite.” I won’t name-drop, but I might as well in this instance.

“I’m sorry, sir. I can assure you that I’ve checked and rechecked the system. If you’d like, I can put in a request, and if anyone checks out early, I can make sure that you are given priority.”

I grumble, unsatisfied, and walk away from guest services. “Well, that was unsuccessful,” I mutter.

Clare is carrying Amelia, my daughter’s head resting on her chest. “Are you getting sleepy?” I ask, rubbing Amelia’s back and taking her from Clare’s arms. “Don’t fall asleep just yet. We have to get dinner.”

“Any luck with the bed situation?” Clare asks.

“No. I can’t believe they’re unwilling to fix the issue,” I say. We head outside, walking to one of the restaurants nearby. There were several not far from the hotel.

“And how would you suggest they fix it? Go and buy another mattress just for you?” she snaps. “The poor guy is barely old enough to drink, and you’re taking your frustration out on him. You don’t have to be such a billionaire grumphole.”

Grumphole. Is that what she thinks of me? I was trying to do her a favor. Doesn’t she see that?

She grimaces. “Sorry, my tongue got the better of me,” Clare says. “I don’t mind taking the couch. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal, and you won’t.”

“Are you going to take it?” she quips, wondering what I mean.

“No, you’ll share my bed.”

The silence is deafening. I'm waiting for her to tell me that she can't do that. It's unprofessional or a million other excuses to reject the offer.

She inhales a breath and stares at me. "Yeah, okay. I'm sure there's enough room."

It's a king bed. Of course there's enough room. But I don't plan on giving her half the mattress. This isn't a pillow divide type situation. I like Clare.

Hell, I want her.

And just as importantly, I like the bedroom cold when I sleep, and I fully intend to turn the air conditioning on, make the room chilly, and force her to curl up against me if she wants any covers.

I'm wicked and a grumphole, just like she said. I may as well wear the badge with pride. It's an honor.

We cruise past a few restaurants, viewing their menus outside. All the English menus look quite similar, and I can't tell if they have different items on the French menu that aren't being shown to us.

I've been to France a few times, not for work, but it's been years. My French is more than a little rusty. It's stone age, archaic.

Clare doesn't seem to speak or read French either, and while we both try a little to be polite, I'm sure we butcher even the simplest of phrases.

I order duck on the menu, Clare orders chicken, and I get Amelia spaghetti. She can try my meal if she wants, but I'm not sure how adventurous she is with new foods.

My phone interrupts us after we order, and I pull it from my pocket with a heavy groan. My mother. I contemplate not answering it, but how much longer can I avoid speaking with her?

"Hello, Mom." I feel two sets of eyes on me, and I have half a mind to get up from the table and excuse myself.

"Levi, how are you?"

“I’m fine. I have some news,” I say, smiling at Amelia. I’m sure that’s why my mother is calling. She doesn’t just call out of the blue unless I make the headlines, or she wants to set me up with one of her church friends.

I’d sooner drown myself than go on one of her blind dates. How come she doesn’t harass Connor?

“I know, your brother told me,” she says, sounding disappointed. “How old’s the child?”

“Five,” I say. “She’ll be six on Halloween.” I haven’t even thought about what to do to celebrate her birthday, but it’s only a couple of weeks away. I’ll have to do something memorable for her.

“Connor told me you hired a nanny.”

What didn’t Connor tell her? I rub the back of my neck, this conversation already making me itchy and uncomfortable. Fidgety.

“I did. She’s here with me right now, helping with Amelia. Listen, Mom. I hate to do this, but I have to go. We’re at a restaurant, and dinner will be served any moment.”

“Of course, dear,” she says, and I get the feeling she’s not happy that I’m ending the call. “Do let me know when you’re back home. I’d like to meet my granddaughter before her twenty-first birthday.”

I grimace. “And you will.”

“I could have come to Paris to help with the child, Levi. You didn’t have to bring a nanny with you.”

“She’s five, Mom. I know you mean well, but there’s no way you can keep up with her bubbly energy.”

“I’ll choose not to be offended by that remark.”

“I need to go. Dinner is coming.”

“Very well. Call me when you get home.”

I end the call and am relieved that the worst is over. I’m not sure if I should thank Connor for shoving me in front of traffic

or not. It isn't easy to deal with Mom, but the longer I wait, it won't get any better.

Clare glances at her cell phone, and the minute I'm off my call, she shoves her phone into her purse.

"Everything okay?" she asks, her voice higher than usual. Like she's been caught doing something she shouldn't.

Is she looking for a date? Trying to swipe right? Or is it left? I never remember which way you're supposed to swipe when you like someone. I prefer meeting women in person, where they're not out to catfish you.

"Don't tell me you're playing on one of those dating apps," I say, reaching for my glass of water. My mouth is parched.

"No, just a stupid text." She waves her hand dismissively. "I take it that didn't go well with your mother?"

"I've had worse conversations," I admit. "At least she's on the other side of the ocean or I'd have bet she'd show during dinner."

Dinner goes well, uneventful aside from the phone call, which for me is a home run after the long day. I'm ready for bed when we get back to the hotel, and Amelia is already asleep in my arms.

I could technically put her on the sleep sofa, but it's not fair to make either of them sleep on that contraption. I tuck Amelia into bed and close the door.

Clare sits at the edge of my mattress and wrinkles her nose. "I left my luggage in with Amelia."

"You can borrow something of mine to wear," I say. My bag is open, unzipped but left on the floor near the window. The view during the day had been magnificent with the Eiffel Tower outside, but at night it's even more enchanting.

Dare I say romantic?

There's a balcony attached to the bedroom, and I open the door, letting the cool air whisk into the room. It's quiet outside, and we're high enough up there are no sounds from traffic or tourists down below.

I step out onto the balcony, staring at the city and the people walking back from the train station or visiting the Eiffel Tower.

“Do you want to grab me a T-shirt, or should I just pick one out?” Clare asks from behind.

I glance over my shoulder, and see her standing over my luggage.

“Relax, you’re not going to find any sex toys or vibrators tucked away.”

Her cheeks redden, and she glances away, bending down, scooping up the first T-shirt she finds.

“I’m never going to live that down,” Clare says.

“Maybe one day—” I pause, thinking about it. “Yeah, you’re probably right. It’s perfect teasing material for a lifetime.”

She groans and snags my shirt, taking it to the bathroom to undress.

I crank the air conditioning cooler, making sure the room will be plenty cold tonight when we’re sleeping.

Staring out over the balcony, I watch the stars twinkle overhead. I observe the quiet of night and how different the city is from New York.

The bathroom door creaks, and I glance over my shoulder at Clare. She looks hot in my gray T-shirt. It rides just below her bottom. I growl when I see her, stalking into the room, and my hands land on her hips.

“Woman, the things you do to me,” I say.

Clare smiles, leaning up on her tiptoes. “Touché.” She presses her lips chastely to mine, and I take the opportunity to show her how much she means to me. I want her to know the fire building inside of me, burning to come out, is all because of her.

The simple kiss deepens, and I pull her close and tight. While I desperately want to discover whether she’s wearing anything under my T-shirt, I don’t move in for the kill.

This is a slow dance, and I don't want to spook her. We're just getting started.

She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me tighter. Her fingers trail through my hair, teasing my scalp.

Her touch is heavenly and tantalizing, making my brain fuzzy the longer our lips lock together.

We fall to the bed in a heap, hands wandering, tongues exploring. Every moan and gasp sends my body into overdrive, desperately craving to taste her, feel her, and bury my cock deep inside of her.

Clare scoots back on the mattress as I tower over her, lips clashing together. Her touch is fire, setting my world ablaze. She unbuckles my pants, helping me out of them as I undo the buttons on my dress shirt.

I'm wearing far too many clothes.

The shirt is tossed across the room. I kick my pants off and hear them hit the floor with a soft thud.

My hand skims over Clare's hip, inching the shirt up, gasping at the sight of her dark purple, lace bikini bottoms. I growl, wanting to rip them off with my teeth.

"Shirt off," I command, and she sits up while I help her disrobe. So much for innocently sharing a bed and sleeping. Hell, sleep is overrated, anyway.

She's not wearing a bra, and her breasts are perky and calling my attention, screaming at me to lavish them equally.

My mouth descends on her pert nipple, and I flick my tongue over the sensitive mound.

Her back arches, and her chest pushes into me, demanding more without words. She doesn't need to speak. I can read her body and know what she needs.

She's restless against the mattress as I move from one breast to the other. I can smell her womanly scent. It tingles my senses and makes my cock rock hard.

I move down her breasts, kissing over the curve of her stomach. “Clare, you’re so damn sexy and irresistible,” I rasp as I nuzzle her panties with my nose, drinking in her scent.

She’s wet, and it’s all for me. I’ve made her that way.

I tease her with my tongue through the thin fabric, and her fists tangle the bedsheets. I move her hands into my hair, wanting to feel every inch of her experience.

She tugs her lip between her teeth, moaning and shifting her hips as I lick her pussy through her panties.

“Do you want more?” I ask, wanting her consent.

“Don’t you dare stop,” Clare rasps, and her eyes fly open.

“Good girl,” I praise her, and grab another pillow, placing it under her as I tug her purple panties down with my teeth.

She whimpers, and it’s one of the best damn sounds I’ve ever heard in my life. She smells like sex, and we haven’t even fucked yet. Her folds are glistening; her pussy wet and swollen.

“I’m going to make you scream my name,” I warn before grabbing one of her thighs and lifting it over my shoulder. My lips move down to her pussy as I tongue fuck her.

She gasps and moans, her sounds soft and quiet. I can’t tell if she’s usually this quiet or afraid someone else might overhear.

My tongue teases her clit, circling her pearl, flicking it as her body begins to shudder.

That’s a good girl.

I keep the momentum, two fingers sliding into her pussy. She’s virgin-tight with my thick fingers, and I’m going to have to slide three in to properly stretch her before burying my cock deep inside of her.

Her lips part wider, her mouth agape as each breath grows louder and more erratic. One hand tangles in the bedsheets. The other is in my hair. Her insides pulsate and tighten, and I withdraw my fingers and my lips just as she’s teetering on the edge.

Her eyes flash open with hatred. “Grumphole,” she gasps, panting hard.

“You’ll come with my cock inside you,” I command, climbing over her, my lips teasing her mouth.

She gulps and stares up at me, the heated glare turning primal. Clare attempts to wrestle us around, wanting to take control or maybe chase her orgasm, but I don’t let her dominate.

Our first time is going to be with me in charge, bringing her to the brink. When I give the order that she can come, only then, she’ll obey.

She keeps kissing me, and the third time she tries to roll us around I slide our hands together and pin them above her head. “I’m in charge.”

She strains against me, fighting for her freedom, but all she has to do is say stop, and I’d let go.

“Apparently, you don’t only steal panties,” she challenges, staring up at me with a heat I’ve never seen in her gaze. Not like this.

“What’s that?”

“You steal orgasms too.”

I chuckle and move my lips to her ear, teasing the lobe, feeling her squirm under my touch. “It’s called edging, *sweetheart*.”

She inhales sharply and leans in, biting my bottom lip, bringing it between her teeth. She doesn’t hurt me. There’s no blood, just a small amount of pain mixed with the sensation of pleasure.

“Fuck,” I mutter. Her lips are sinful as her kisses move to my neck. My hands keep her wrists pressed against the bed. If my tie weren’t somewhere on the floor, I’d have used it to keep her hands in place above her head.

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” she growls at me, and I swear she’s a lioness in heat. And I’m just the man to tame her.

“Soon.” I shove my lips over hers, hard, and her tongue seeks out mine. It’s like fireworks igniting. She whimpers as I climb

off her.

“Where the hell are you going?”

“Condom,” I say, and head for my luggage.

I groan when I rummage through my bag and can’t find any.

“Fuck,” I curse. “I left them at home.”

“It’s fine. I’m on the pill,” Clare says. “I haven’t been with anyone since my ex-husband.”

I shuffle back toward the bed. “Me either.”

“You haven’t been with anyone since my ex-husband?” Clare smiles and laughs.

“I meant since I’ve been tested. I’m clean,” I assure her. “But we can wait, and I can see if there’s a drug store open.”

“It’s fine. Get back in bed, *Panty Licker*.”

I groan. “That nickname cannot stick,” I warn as I pull her against me and cover her body with mine.

“Or what?” She smiles up at me.

“I’ll spank you,” I threaten. And it’s not an empty threat. I had a girlfriend years ago who enjoyed being disciplined. I’ve had plenty of experience taming a brat.

Her eyes widen, and she stares up at me. “Seriously?”

“I don’t want to, but if you call me *Panty Licker* again, I’ll have no choice.”

She exhales a heavy sigh and sticks her tongue out at me.

“Fine, you can be the one and only *Panty Thief*.”

“I didn’t steal your panties,” I growl at Clare, but I’m not angry. My lips crash against hers, her fingers raking over my back and down my hips, helping me out of my boxers. She gasps at the sight of my hardened cock.

“That’s—you’re huge.” Her voice catches in her throat.

I quirk a grin, and her eyes widen. Is she nervous?

I go slowly, inching my way inside her warmth. Her legs wrap around me, pulling me deeper.

Her eyes slide shut, and I pause, wanting her stare on me. “Look at me,” I command, slowly working up a rhythm that we both enjoy.

Her fingernails dig into my arm, my back, and my shoulders. Everywhere that she touches, she marks.

The pain is good. It’s refreshing and real, helping me realize this isn’t a dream as I move deeper inside of her.

Clare’s head tilts back, and her back arches up into me. “Not yet.” I haven’t given her permission.

She stares up at me, needy and fueled with desire. “Please.” Her voice is soft, raspy, and I swear she’s about to beg. The thought of her getting on her knees, begging to take me, to suck me and swallow every drop, flashes through my mind.

One fantasy at a time.

Her moan brings me back, her pleas as I pound into her, and her insides tighten and tremble.

I keep the tempo, not wanting to deprive her of anything. “Come for me,” I command. She’s on the edge, and I want to be the one taking her over, catching her when she falls into oblivion.

She gasps and moans, and I silence her sweet noises with kisses. I don’t want to wake Amelia, and even across the hallway in the penthouse suite, I’m sure that Clare’s moans carry. She’s enjoying my cock in her tight pussy. That makes two of us.

Her pussy trembling on my cock, the sweet music of her sounds that she makes, all of it combined drives me over the edge.

Gasping for breath, I roll off her and onto my back. The air doesn’t feel like it reaches my lungs quickly enough.

“I know, right?” Clare says with a laugh.

I’m covered in a sheen of sweat and pull her against me, my lips crushing hers in another searing kiss.

I don't want this night ever to end, for morning to come and to have to deal with business and leave my two favorite girls alone to explore the city without me. I trust Clare with my daughter, but I still wish I could be there, spending time together like a family.

Except we're not a family. She's the nanny.

I push the heavy thoughts aside and drape my arm across her hip, keeping Clare snug against me as I let myself drift to sleep.

TEN

CLARE

The bed is warm with Levi curled up against me. He's managed to steal nearly all the blankets, cocooned around him. But it doesn't bother me.

The amount of heat the man gives off should be unnatural.

The alarm clock jars him awake.

Me, I was already awake, admiring him.

It's still dark outside, but the sun is beginning to rise. I pull him tighter, closer against me.

Levi grumbles. I can't tell if he's protesting waking up or me keeping him hostage in his bed. "I have work."

"Can't you run late?" I ask. "Who is going to know?" If he's the CEO, does he answer to anyone else? A board of directors?

"I have a meeting already scheduled. I can't miss it." His lips brush against mine, rolling me onto my back while his fingers move across my hips and down between my thighs.

He dips his fingers between my legs, discovering my secret.

"God, I want you," he rasps against my lips, his kisses hot and passionate, heated and fierce. Levi pulls away, and his fingers slide into his mouth, tasting me. "I could eat you all day," he says.

I stare at him in shock. I've never had a man do that. Taste me so openly, so blatantly, and say something sexy about it afterward.

My heart pitter-patters in my chest as he climbs off the mattress.

"Can I join you in the shower?" I ask.

Amelia is sound asleep, and I need to wash up at some point. A hot, steamy shower sounds a lot more fun with Levi in the same stall.

Levi groans. "I can't say no to you." He gestures for me to come with him.

I can't seem to get enough of this man, and the shower takes twice as long. Thankfully, it's a hotel, or we'd probably have been given an icy shower by the time we are done.

He grabs an oversized, fluffy gray towel, wrapping it around my shoulders. "My cell phone has international coverage. If you need anything, I don't care what it is, you call me."

"We'll be fine," I say. He's in overprotective papa bear mode, worried about Amelia. I can handle his daughter in a foreign city. We're in Paris. It's not like this is the middle of a war zone.

"Text me when you leave the hotel and when you get back."

"Okay, *Panty Thief*," I joke, and he leans in, biting my bottom lip, tugging it between his teeth.

"I'm serious. And if you keep calling me that, then I will have to steal your panties."

"You already did," I say with a wicked grin. I remain nestled in the warmth of the clean, dry towel.

"Not intentionally." Levi dries off and opens the bathroom door, stalking into the bedroom to get dressed.

"Right." I roll my eyes, unconvinced. Although by now, he doesn't have to lie to me. Early on, it was probably his pride, and he didn't want to bruise his ego.

I hate to admit it's fun as hell to tease him. The banter between us is its own brand of foreplay, exclusive to Levi Luxenberg.

"You'll text me," he says, wanting assurances.

"Yes, I will text you, but I'm sending you the bill. I don't have international roaming."

"When we get back to New York, I'm putting you on my phone plan. In the meantime, don't worry about the cost. I've got it covered."

"That's crazy, Levi. I can get a SIM card, and it'll be a lot less money."

His eyes glint, and he reaches for his wallet. He hands me a credit card that reads *Currency Passport*. "It's preloaded with foreign currency. Not that I want you to waste it on a SIM card, but you'll need money for admission if you want to take Amelia to a museum or go up inside the Eiffel Tower. And if you need cash for a vendor, you can take it out at an ATM with that card."

"I'll need the pin number."

"It's Amelia's month and day of birth, October 31st. The pin is 1031."

I didn't realize her birthday is in less than two weeks. We'll have to plan something magnificent for her to celebrate turning six. "You don't want to join us when we go up inside the Eiffel Tower?" I ask.

"This isn't my first trip to Paris. Amelia should have fun. I don't want you girls cooped up inside this place all day."

"How much is on the card?" I ask, placing it beside my phone while I get dressed.

"More than you should be able to spend in a day. Several thousand."

I try to hide my shock that he's handing me so much money, but I won't spend all of it. Unlike when he left me shopping for hours, and I realized Amelia had nothing to play with or anything educational. That money I used to make her feel at home with Levi.

I'm still nestled tight in my towel. Levi is fully dressed and glances me up and down. "Your luggage is in Amelia's room," he says with a sigh. "Stay here."

He's quiet as he sneaks through the penthouse and opens the bedroom door, careful not to wake his sleeping daughter. He carries the suitcase instead of rolling it, probably not wanting to alert Amelia to his presence.

"Here you go," Levi says, placing the suitcase on the floor.

I keep the towel secure while I bend down, unzip the suitcase, and grab a short sundress with yellow daisies. It's not like Levi didn't just see me naked in the shower, but somehow in the bedroom, I'm trying to be modest.

"Thanks," I say. I gesture for him to get out.

He chuckles and grabs his last few items: wallet, watch, and phone from the bedside table.

"Will you be done before dinner?" I ask.

"Yes, I'm hoping to finish around three o'clock."

He pulls me against him, his lips crashing down on mine as his fingers tangle in my wet hair. "Woman," he growls, trying to pull back, but I keep leaning in, my lips meeting his again and again. "You're going to make me late."

"Very late," I whisper, running my fingers over his suit and dropping my towel.

His face reddens, and he shifts his weight on his feet, like he's trying to decide if being good and making it to the meeting on time is really that important.

The kisses are heated and passionate, but I don't undress him. My hand rests against his chest, his heart pounding against my palm.

"Go," I say with a laugh, glancing down, "before I rip your clothes off."

"And what if I want you to rip my clothes off?" he asks, and then shakes his head. "Don't."

Don't rip his clothes or don't answer the question?

I press one final kiss to his lips. “I’ll see you later.”

There’s movement across the hallway. A soft plop as Amelia likely jumps down from the bed.

He holds me, his hand on my lower back, pressing me against him, before he finally relents and heads out of the bedroom.

I scurry into the bathroom to get dressed before Amelia comes prancing into the bedroom.

Just as I slam the bathroom door shut, Amelia is running across the living room, her squeal unmistakable.

Did she say goodbye to her dad this morning before he left or was he able to sneak out?

I slip on my undergarments and then the dress. I open the bathroom door while I finish getting ready.

Amelia is sitting at the edge of the bed, kicking her legs. I’m impressed that she’s not jumping on our mattress, but maybe she understood what she did was wrong.

She’s not a toddler. Amelia is old enough to understand she broke the mattress.

“What do you want to do today?” I ask Amelia.

“Disney!”

I laugh, and somehow, I don’t think that’s what Levi had in mind when he said museums. “How about we talk to your dad about Disney Paris tonight? He might want to join us,” I say.

I’m also not sure how I’ll tell the kid no when it comes to her wanting to buy every souvenir at Disney. Would Levi approve of spoiling his little girl, or would he want her to take home more memories than presents?

Amelia shrugs and stares up at me as I finish getting dressed. “Let’s get you ready, and we can go out for breakfast.”

Amelia doesn’t need any help undressing, and I grab a pair of shorts and a fancy T-shirt from the shared luggage with her father.

She dresses herself, not needing or wanting any of my help. Already such a contrast from a few days ago when I was helping her into her pajamas the first night.

I grab the room key and shove it into my purse. We head down to the elevator and outside. I text Levi, *Leaving the apartment.*

Penthouse, he texts back.

I roll my eyes. *Same difference.*

There are three dots like he's responding, and then it vanishes. I shove my phone into my purse and take Amelia's hand, insisting that she keep close as we venture through Paris.

I can't risk losing her, and it's not like either of us are familiar with the city. How safe is Paris? Do I need to worry that someone will snatch her from me?

"Where are we going?" she asks as we head outside, and I take her across the street and down a block where the restaurants and shops are all located, right across from one of the train stations.

"Breakfast."

"I know that," Amelia says, and points at the different cafés. "Which one?"

I drag her inside the first one, which has a glass case with dozens of different pastries and croissants. Each looks more scrumptious than the last.

"I want that." Amelia points at the croissant with a chocolate drizzle.

"Okay, but we're getting a bowl of fruit too."

After breakfast, we walk to the nearest metro station and take the train before switching lines and arriving at the Louvre. The museum from the outside is grandiose, and the pyramid is even more eye-catching.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. "Hold on a sec, your dad is calling."

"Yes, *Prince of Darkness, Destroyer of Fun*," I say as I answer my phone.

“What is with the nicknames—never mind,” Levi grunts as I stare at Amelia.

She giggles when I poke fun at her father.

“Yes?” I say again, waiting to hear why he called.

“Where are you?”

“At the Louvre. You said to take Amelia to a museum.” He said a lot of things but that one stuck, and I figured it would be a good educational experience.

“Good. I’ll meet you there,” Levi says.

Did something happen? Levi was only a few minutes late this morning. “Don’t you have to work?” I ask.

“I was supposed to, but the man I’m meeting with had food poisoning last night and is being taken to the hospital.”

“Oh, that sounds awful.”

“Yeah, I’m going to grab a cab, and I’ll meet you two inside. I’ll text you when I arrive.”

“Great.” I hang up the phone and shove it into my purse. “Your dad is going to join us today.”

We head inside the museum and get two tickets to see the exhibits. I try to keep an eye on the time and, after about thirty minutes, find myself glancing at my phone every so often for a text from Levi.

There’s barely a signal. I have one bar. I’m not sure if it’s my phone or the museum itself. But I still have service, just limited.

Amelia is quiet, staring up at the masterpieces but isn’t overly excited about the artwork. I read her the captions nearby, explaining what I can to her.

My phone buzzes with a text.

“What’s it say?” Amelia asks.

I’m here. What exhibit are you in?

“Your dad is here. Let’s go find him.” I take her hand and lead her toward the front entrance while texting Levi. *We’re coming*

to find you.

In a matter of minutes, we've weaved through the museum, and Amelia lets go of my hand and goes running into his arms like she hasn't seen him in weeks. "Daddy!" she squeals.

The smile on his face brightens, and he bends down, scooping her into his arms. "Are you having fun with your nanny?" Levi asks as he glances at me.

"Clare Bear is the best nanny," Amelia swoons, and wiggles in his arms, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You're tired already?" I'm surprised she's sleepy. Maybe art museums aren't her thing. She can't run free through the exhibits.

"Probably from the jetlag," Levi says. "Do you want me to carry you?"

Amelia nods excitedly and wraps one arm around his neck.

I don't dare admit that I'm jealous of the kid, stealing away all his attention. But he needs to be there for her. She's his daughter. And he doesn't ignore me or forget that I'm beside him as we walk farther into the museum.

"Have you seen the *Mona Lisa* yet?" Levi asks.

"No, I was saving that for you once you said you were coming." I nudge him as we walk, and while he has one arm around Amelia, keeping her nestled against his chest, his other hand grazes my lower back. "Lead the way."

We've spent enough time here this morning that I've gotten a decent idea of the layout. First, we head for the *Mona Lisa* and then wander through the museum to view as much as we can for the next couple of hours.

My stomach grumbles, and Amelia gets restless in Levi's arms. The kid is probably hungry. "Do you want to grab lunch soon?" I ask.

"Can we go to Disney?" Amelia asks as she squirms in his grip.

“For lunch? No.” Levi chuckles. “But as a full-day adventure, maybe in a couple of days.”

“How long is this trip?” I ask. Levi never did specify how long we’d be staying in Paris. I didn’t even expect that I’d still be the nanny after the first week.

“As long as it takes to sign over the hotel to Luxenberg Enterprises.”

I let out a heavy sigh. Days? Weeks? Months? He’s not being incredibly specific.

“Why? Is there somewhere you have to be when we return home?”

“No,” I say. It isn’t like that.

“Good.” He’s short, curt, like he’s making it clear the schedule is on his terms. No kidding, this isn’t a honeymoon. We’re here for business.

“But you do have Amelia’s school to contend with,” I say. “We can’t keep her out forever.”

“We should be back to New York over the weekend. She can work on her assignments this afternoon before dinner or in the evening.”

I’m surprised he isn’t making her do her schoolwork before going out for the day, but it’s not my place to tell him how to raise his daughter. He’s obviously done well for himself. Maybe he’s on to something that I don’t know.

“Don’t fight,” Amelia whines, and wiggles down from his arms. She latches onto my hand.

Levi’s brow pinches like he just realized his daughter picked sides, even if it was inadvertently.

“We’re not fighting, I promise,” I say, picking Amelia up. “We’re just discussing your schooling.”

Her nose wrinkles at the mention of school.

“You’re not excited to start a new school?” Levi asks, pausing as we walk, his undivided attention on his daughter.

“I don’t have any friends there.”

“You’ll make friends,” I say. I don’t want to ask her how many friends she left behind and cause her stress, but now I can’t help but wonder what her life was like before everything happened. Did she have a lot of friends at school? How many kids came to her last birthday party?

We head out of the museum and walk down the block, searching for a café to eat lunch. We land on a quaint restaurant in the middle of the bustling city. The seats are outside, the sun hidden behind the canopy, offering the perfect amount of shade to keep it from being too warm.

The waiter brings us menus in English when he realizes we don’t speak French, and three glasses of water.

Levi sips Amelia’s water, making sure that she won’t spill it all over her clothes since it’s filled to the brim.

“Daddy,” Amelia says as she reaches for her water glass, pushing his face away. “That’s mine.”

“I know, baby girl. I was just making sure that it’s not too full.”

“I’m not a baby,” Amelia says, although the slight whine in her voice from annoyance begs to differ.

“Of course not. I just don’t want you to spill your drink all over your clothes,” Levi says.

Amelia sits on her knees and leans forward, sipping the water glass before using two hands to lift it once it’s low enough past the rim. “See, I’m a big girl,” Amelia says proudly.

“Yes, you are,” I chime in. “Amelia was a big help today, pointing out all the beautiful scenery on the way to the train station. I’ve never been in a city quite so old and well-maintained. It’s rather enchanting, the city. There’s still so much that I’d love to explore.”

I sip my water and feel a woman glaring at us as she heads in the direction of the café. Perhaps the sun is in her eyes, and I’m over exaggerating the nasty stare.

“Levi, is that you?” the woman says, coming in through the main entrance and up to our table, ignoring the fact that she might not be welcome or invited.

“Avril,” Levi says, and clears his throat. “It’s been some time.”

He shifts awkwardly and looks incredibly uncomfortable.

There’s clearly something that happened between the two of them.

She’s absolutely stunning with long red hair and warm smile, though it seems fake as hell. Her blue eyes sparkle in the sunlight as she leans down and gives him air kisses on both cheeks. I swear I hate this woman already.

“Not as long as you’d think.” She smiles at Amelia but doesn’t so much as meet my stare. “Your mommy must be very lucky to snag a billionaire.”

I want to rip her throat right out for saying that to a child.

Who is this woman other than a jealous ex? It’s obvious they slept together, by the way she rests her arm on Levi’s shoulder, her fingers possessively caressing his skin.

His hand lands firmly on hers, but it’s not in any endearing way. He’s trying to stop her from touching him or maybe embarrassing him.

“You need to leave, Avril,” he seethes.

She smiles and waves at Amelia.

Amelia smiles and waves back, not understanding that this woman is the very definition of trouble. She also is likely well-versed in creating scandals. I can feel the drama brewing between Levi and Avril.

The tension is thick, but it’s not sexual in nature, at least not from Levi. His other hand is bunched into a fist in his lap.

I reach out, taking his hand in mine. “It was so lovely to meet you, but this is a family lunch, and you’re not invited.”

Avril’s mouth opens, slightly parted, and she exhales a puff of air, a half-laugh. She’s surprised. Whether it’s my boldness or the fact I didn’t cower, it doesn’t matter. I won. Not her.

“You didn’t tell me you were in town,” Avril says, her fingers moving into Levi’s hair. She runs her fingers through the thick, dark locks, and I swear I want to lunge across the table and tackle her to the ground. My inner beast has awakened.

Feral.

Primal.

I’m ready to fight for Levi.

“Why would I?” Levi asks.

“For old time’s sake?” Avril says with a shrug, pretending that Amelia and I aren’t right at the table. “You don’t seem much like the daddy type. Why are you dating a woman with a kid?”

Levi stands, growling as he grabs Avril by the wrist and drags her away from Amelia and me. I can’t hear what’s being said, and I’m trying really hard to listen to their conversation.

“I don’t like that lady,” Amelia chimes, loud enough for the entire restaurant to overhear.

“Yeah, me either,” I say.

“Do you think Daddy is going to date her, Clare Bear?”

I don’t think he’s stupid enough to fall down that rabbit hole, at least not again. “No, she’s not his type.” At least I hope she’s not his type anymore, because Avril and I are nothing alike. And I don’t want to tell the kid I’m sleeping with her father.

But are we dating?

No one said anything about being exclusive.

I shift uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair. What am I going to do if he decides to go out on a date with her?

What if he wants to bring her back to the apartment?

I grimace. Will he make me sleep on the couch? No, he’ll probably just insist that he go back to her place to avoid Amelia and me.

Avril brings her hand up to Levi’s face like she’s cupping his cheek and about to kiss him.

I inhale a sharp breath, unable to watch, but can't tear my gaze away, either.

He brings her hand down, points for her to leave, and storms off.

"That woman is a menace," he mutters, coming back to his seat at the table.

"She's quite... That's your type?" I ask.

I don't fit the mold if he's into redheads who are absolute bitches.

"Oh, no. I don't know," he stammers, and rubs a hand through his hair. Is he nervous? "She's just a friend."

"I don't like your friends," Amelia says.

The waiter brings our lunch to the table, and I'm sure Levi is grateful for the reprieve from answering questions while we all eat.

"Yeah, me either," I quip, taking a bite of my sandwich. I should keep my mouth shut and not intervene in this already messy conversation, but I can't help myself. I want it stated on the record that I don't like Avril.

"Wow, both of you?" Levi says. "I expect it from her"—he nods toward his daughter—"but you, too?"

"I call it as I see it."

"She was just surprised that I have a daughter."

"Yeah, I'm sure that was the surprise," I mutter under my breath.

"What does that mean?" Levi asks, pinning me with his stare.

I reach for my glass, sipping my water, my mouth dry. I can't think. Answer. Respond.

"Well?" Levi asks, before taking a bite of his sandwich. He's waiting for me to answer.

"The woman was practically flinging herself at you and was insulting to your daughter."

“Yeah, I don’t like her,” Amelia chimes, making sure she gets to voice her opinion. “Don’t date her, Daddy. She’s not very nice. I don’t want her to become my mommy. I want Clare Bear to be my new mommy.”

With a full bite of the sandwich in my mouth, my eyes widen, and all I can do is chew. I’m kind of grateful that I can’t speak, because this conversation just became even more awkward.

Levi’s eyes tighten. “Did you put her up to this?” he asks, pointing at Amelia.

I wait for a second and swallow my last bite, grabbing some water to down it before speaking. “No, of course not.” Why is he getting upset with me? “What are you talking about?”

“Marriage. Being Amelia’s mother. The kid didn’t just come up with that on her own.”

“Levi, lower your voice,” I say. It feels like several other tables are staring at us.

“We sleep together once, and what, you want me to put a ring on it? You’re the nanny, Clare. Don’t ever forget that.”

I stand. I can’t take his attitude or his brashness.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

“I need to take a walk,” I say, the chair sliding out from under me as I stand and step away from the table.

“Sit. You’re making a scene,” he seethes.

“No, Levi. You’re the one making a scene.”

If I had cash, I’d have left enough for my share of the bill. Since Levi is off the rest of the day, I leave Amelia in his care. They can do whatever they want. I need time to myself to cool off.

ELEVEN

Levi

“What was that?” I scold Amelia after Clare leaves.

She stares up at me with bright-blue eyes and thick, dark lashes. It’s easy to see where someone might mistake Amelia for Clare’s daughter.

But Avril was wrong. Amelia is *mine*. And I made it known when I pulled her aside and reamed her for speaking like that to my nanny and daughter.

Avril and I had a smoking-hot connection, but it was purely physical. When I knew that I’d be coming to town, I’d reach out, and we’d get together and hook up at night after work.

But I never wanted more with Avril.

“You’re mean,” Amelia says, and folds her arms across her chest.

“Eat the rest of your lunch,” I say, and nod toward the plate in front of her.

“No.”

The kid is certainly defiant.

I let out a heavy breath, exhausted. I could blame it on the jetlag, but I think it’s as much Clare as it is running into Avril.

Avril always made it clear she wanted our hookups to become more. Not that we’d have to live in the same city or even the

same country, but she wanted to be tied down long enough to have someone take care of her. Pay her bills. She was looking for a sugar daddy.

I may be a real daddy, but the other part I'm not interested in playing, which is why I can't fathom what the hell just happened.

Amelia's mother just died. Why would she be speaking about wanting a new mother? It doesn't make sense. The kid should be grieving.

Unless Clare put that thought into my daughter's head while I was talking with Avril. That's the only explanation that makes sense.

Clare told Amelia to say that she wanted her as her mother, not Avril.

Amelia bursts into tears, her bottom lip jutting out and pouty.

With an exhausted sigh, I slide my chair out from under the table. "Come here, Amelia."

"I want Clare Bear," she says, the tears heavy and falling quickly like a rainstorm in the heat of summer, unleashing its fury.

"It's okay. We'll see her back at the hotel." I can't imagine that she'd go anyplace else. She's still my daughter's nanny, and she doesn't have much money on her. The prepaid card I gave her could get her a few nights in another hotel, but she'll be hard-pressed to fly home last minute.

"You're mean," Amelia says, and I grab a clean napkin, wiping my daughter's tears and runny nose.

"I wasn't trying to be mean. I was being honest. There's a difference." Not that I expect Amelia to fully understand.

I always have women vying for my attention, wanting me solely because of my wallet and not who I am.

Clare isn't like that. At least, I thought she wasn't. Maybe Avril got into my head.

I pull Amelia into my lap and sit back down at the table. Her sobs are silent, less dramatic, but still as emotionally raw.

“Do you promise that Clare didn’t put you up to this?”

“Up to what?” She snuffles and rubs her snot on my shirt. I’m glad I changed out of my suit before meeting the girls at the Louvre.

“You said you wanted Clare to be your mommy. Why did you say that?”

“I like Clare Bear,” Amelia says. “She’s nice to me. And I know my real mommy still loves me, but I can’t be with her.” The tears come crashing down again, barreling out, and I realize she hasn’t had much time to grieve.

Maybe this is her way of dealing with the trauma.

Is this my doing, or is she still struggling with her mother’s passing?

She had one appointment with the child psychiatrist the previous week. Most of that appointment had been with me, going over Amelia’s history and discussing what happened at great length. After which, Amelia did some play therapy and drawing with the psychiatrist.

We’re skipping the second week, since we’re in Europe, and she’ll meet the woman again when we return.

I rub Amelia’s back, trying to soothe her in the best way I know how. I haven’t had to deal with grief at such a young age as her. This is all new to me.

She buries her face in my chest, soaking my shirt with tears and snot. I don’t care. I can change when I get back to the hotel.

I eat most of my lunch, and Amelia eats less than I’d like, but I doubt she’s going to eat now that she’s crying and upset. She’s probably lost her appetite.

“Are you done?” I ask.

She nods, and the waiter brings us a few more napkins with a sympathetic look. “Thank you,” I say. I wipe Amelia’s tears

and help her blow her nose.

We take it easy the rest of the day, finding some macaroons and souvenirs for Amelia to take home. The tears stop, but she still doesn't seem like her bright and sunny self.

I carry Amelia for a while before letting her walk beside me. Especially once I have several shopping bags filled with new toys and stuffed animals, it's hard to carry her and the souvenirs back to the hotel room.

We head up the elevator, and I use the key to unlock access to the penthouse suite.

The ride only takes a few seconds as we're launched directly up to the top floor. Stepping off the elevator, I escort Amelia inside and place the shopping bags on the floor by the sofa. I'll deal with packing everything later. I might want to buy an extra suitcase to fit everything for the way home.

Amelia rushes into my bedroom. "Clare Bear!"

I follow after my daughter, and Clare is zipping up her suitcase on the floor, putting it right-side up as she grabs the telescoping handle, dragging it across the floor.

"Where are you going?"

"I should probably get another room," she says. "The couch isn't going to be comfortable for either of us."

"In case you forgot, there weren't any additional rooms or beds open," I remind her.

She exhales a heavy breath. "Right." Clare glances at the door like she's debating on whether she should leave.

"You're staying here with us." I don't want her to get any ideas that she should go to a different hotel.

"Fine." She drags the bag toward the open door that leads to the living room.

I block her from leaving.

"Where are you taking your luggage?" I ask.

"If you must know, I was going to put it in my room."

“In your room,” I repeat. I thought we had already established that she’s staying here at this hotel in the penthouse suite.

“It’s either the sleep sofa or the floor in Amelia’s room,” Clare says, making it clear that neither of those options include sharing a bed with me.

“My room!” Amelia squeals, not realizing that is the worst of the two options. The sofa bed has to be more comfortable; even lumpy, it has to win over the floor. The carpet has been washed but not replaced in decades. Even with an extra blanket on the floor, it’s hard and gross.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

“I think everything that needed to be said was today, at lunch.” Clare grips the handle of her luggage.

I don’t move from the doorframe.

It’s difficult to have this intense and intimate conversation in front of my daughter. I need to find Amelia a distraction and one that doesn’t involve the nanny playing games with her and ignoring me.

“Amelia, it’s time for you to do your schoolwork. Grab your tablet from the living room table.” I plugged the device in on my way out this morning for the meeting. It’s had plenty of time to charge.

She grumbles and grabs her iPad, taking it to the sofa to do her schoolwork. We went over how to access the assignments and she’s rather intuitive with using it. She pops on her headphones to listen to the instructions the teacher gives.

Now we have some privacy.

“Put your bag back,” I say, pinning Clare with my heated stare.

She huffs and shoves it to the side of the bed as she stands just a few inches from me. “There isn’t anything to say,” Clare challenges me, her own stare matching mine in intensity.

“There’s plenty to say.” I step closer, breaking the distance between us. With Amelia preoccupied, I can talk openly with Clare. “For starters, were you planning on quitting?”

“What? No.” Her mouth drops. “I told you, I was going to get a separate room so we don’t have to share the same bed, and you can bring that redhead up or anyone else you want. I won’t be in the way.”

I growl and lean into her personal space, my fingers wrapping around her hair, tilting her gaze up to meet my stare. “There is no one else I want, Clare. Get that into your pretty, thick skull.”

She huffs. “Wow, what a compliment.” Her eyes scowl, and she tries to squirm away from me, but I tighten my grip, not letting her go quite so easily. My other hand wraps around her waist, keeping her pressed tightly against me.

I want her to feel what she does to me. These aren’t feelings that I get for anyone else.

“Stop trying to use your charms on me,” she sneers up at me. Clare’s cheeks are red, and I wonder if this is the wrong move. She could slap me or punch me for being too forward.

That wouldn’t hurt nearly as much as her leaving or quitting.

I won’t let her do that. Amelia needs her almost as much as I do.

“You think I’m charming?” I say, trying to defuse the situation.

Her nose twitches, and it’s absolutely adorable. But her cheeks don’t lighten up. If anything, they get even redder. I loosen my intense grip on her hair and run my fingers through the locks, before guiding my hand to her cheek.

“I used to think you were charming until I met Avril.” Clare doesn’t beat around the bush. That’s one of the things I usually love about her. But right now, it makes me nervous.

Avril was a mistake. A long line in a list of women I bedded and had no connection to emotionally. “She’s in my past, Clare. I didn’t come to Paris to sleep with her.”

“I know that. I’m not naïve, but I don’t like that whatever issues you have with her, you’ve dumped on me.”

I inhale a sharp breath. “That’s fair,” I say. At least, I think she may be getting to the root of the problem. “Amelia just surprised me earlier, and Avril always kept pushing for me to give her a ring, to propose.”

“She’s after your money,” Clare says, realizing the connection. “I’m not Avril. I don’t want your money. In case you forgot, you’re paying me room and board for nannying Amelia. Nothing else.”

I hate how right she is. Even when I gave Clare several hundred dollars to get lost while my annoying younger brother was at the house, she spent the entirety of it on my daughter. She didn’t spend it on herself, which is what the money had been intended for, not Amelia.

“I should be paying you a stipend for your work,” I say. It crossed my mind when I didn’t fire her after the first week, but we haven’t spoken again about finances or what account to put money into for her.

That has entirely been my fault. I’ve been caught up in the Paris trip and the hotel we are interested in purchasing.

“I don’t want your money.” Clare shuffles her feet. “When we get back to New York, you should hire a new nanny. Someone with more qualifications.”

“What?” I can’t believe I’m hearing her correctly. “Clare, no.”

“It’s not up to you. I’m resigning. I’ll give you enough notice that you can hire someone else and interview however many nannies you need, but this arrangement between us has to end.”

My hands fall from her skin like she’s fire and I’m ice. I can’t do this, not now, not when I have a huge meeting this week and need to focus on the particulars of the business. I take a step back and run my fingers through my hair.

My heart hurts, and my stomach tumbles. I head for the front door.

“Where are you going?” Clare asks.

“Out.” I can’t deal with her. If she wants this to be strictly business, then she can watch my kid and focus on being the best nanny she can while Amelia is still in her care.

I ride the elevator down and storm outside, needing the fresh air to help me regroup. Focus.

But all I can think about is her body under me; her fingers digging into my back, clawing at me.

One night, and I’m going to have to forget it ever happened.

One damn good night. The best I’ve had. And it wasn’t just the act itself that was dynamite, it was *her*. The fact that I’m falling head over heels for a girl I shouldn’t care about.

She’s my kid’s nanny.

Not to mention the age difference. Plus, I’m the fucking boss. *Her* boss. Screwing her was a mistake.

Even if it was unbelievable, in a good way. The best way. Perhaps what happens in Paris should stay in Paris. Can we walk away from what happened and pretend it was just a dream, a fantasy?

I stalk through the city, walking until my legs are tired but not nearly as sore as my heart, the wound that I caused by sleeping with my employee.

It’s not like we’re not grown adults. We both knew what could happen.

I didn’t expect Avril to appear and screw everything up. I head back toward the hotel when my legs ache and burn. I keep the pace up, sweat beading on my forehead.

Clare doesn’t call or text. Not that I expect she would. Amelia should be distracted with schoolwork, and with the headphones on, hopefully she missed our fight.

Up ahead, I can see the tall building, our hotel, around the corner. I jog across the street and turn the corner, ramming right into Avril.

For fuck’s sake. Do I have to deal with her twice in one day?

“This must be a cruel joke,” I mutter.

“Really, is it that bad being in my presence?” Avril asks. Her eyes are cool but alluring as she reaches for my arm. “Your daughter isn’t around?”

“She’s back at the hotel with the nanny,” I say. I shake her hand off my arm. I’m not interested in starting up anything with Avril. She was a fuck buddy, nothing else. We had always agreed to keep it casual between us. Although, that had been more my doing. She wanted a ring, an exotic wedding, and the digits to my bank account.

Her fingers reach for my chest, her hand soft and delicate as she tries to seduce me. Usually, I’m wearing a suit, a tie, and she’s coy, even if it’s an act. “Do you want to come back to my place?” Avril asks, being straightforward with what she wants.

“While I appreciate the offer, I can’t do that.”

“Because of the nanny or your daughter?” Avril asks.

“Both.” I grimace and decide that I’m not answering any more of her questions. I head back toward the hotel, wanting to get away from Avril and go inside and cool off, rest, and maybe even grab a beer and a shower.

Avril gets the hint and leaves me be. Maybe she realizes that it’s over, that I’m done with whatever it was that we had. Friends with benefits? We were never friends. We solely embraced the benefits part of that arrangement.

I’m sure I smell like the outdoors from my walk. My feet are sore, and I slip out of my shoes the minute I make it up to the penthouse.

Amelia is still on the couch in front of her tablet, working on her assignments and homework.

Clare stands by the fridge, grabbing herself a bottle of water. She glances up when I step inside, noticing I’m back, but she doesn’t say anything.

Her silence breaks my heart a thousand times over.

“I’m sorry,” I say, wanting to undo the mistakes I’ve made.

“For what?” Clare asks. She opens the water and takes a swig, her eyes never leaving mine.

I don't answer her, at least not yet.

“Are you apologizing because you slept with me, for what you said, or maybe it's because you hired me in the first place and realized what a mistake that was?” Her lips squeeze the water bottle, and she tilts her neck back.

Fuck, even the way she drinks water gives me a hard-on.

“Don't put words into my mouth,” I say, grabbing the bottle from her. I take a swig, thirsty and wanting to hide the real reason for my grumpiness from her.

Why can't I shut that part down? I shouldn't be aching to see her naked. Hell, I've already seen her when we showered together and felt her when we were tangled in the sheets last night.

Clare's eyes tighten and she brushes past me, grabbing a second water bottle from the fridge, since I was a jackass and stole hers.

She doesn't argue. I wait for it, but it doesn't come.

The silence is almost too much to endure.

“It doesn't matter. I saw you on the street with that redhead.”

“What?” I can't believe what I'm hearing.

She points at the giant windows. They have no curtains, and while they offer a magnificent view of the Eiffel Tower, they also look down on the street below.

“Are you two planning a hookup tonight?” she asks. “If you are, just tell me when and I can take Amelia out for dessert or a walk down the street.”

I swear there's a hint of jealousy in her tone. Is that what has her riled up? Does she think I want anything to do with Avril? Because I don't.

Avril showing up near the hotel wasn't a coincidence. She knows this is one of the places where I stay. There are a few hotels, and each of them, I had planned on staying a few nights to expand our brand into Europe.

But traveling with Amelia across Europe seems like a lot right now, especially with Clare accompanying us. I'll have to schedule another visit for the other individual properties when things settle down and I can give them more attention.

I need to focus on my daughter, especially if that means finding her a new nanny when we get home.

"I'm not hooking up with anyone," I seethe as my hands bunch into fists at my sides. "I didn't go stalking out Avril. She stumbled into us."

"And just now, outside?"

"Less of a coincidence, but I didn't invite her over. I want nothing to do with her." I take a long gulp of my water, rehydrating myself. "I'm sorry that you feel insecure in what we have, but she isn't the woman I want to fuck."

Clare's mouth hangs agape. "You're a bastard," she says, and breezes past me for Amelia's bedroom. No doubt she's trying to hide from me.

I don't let her.

I grab her wrist and pull her back into my arms, spinning her around to face me. "We're not done."

She inhales a shaky breath, staring up at me. She glances briefly at my lips and then into my heated stare.

"I shouldn't have said what I did at the café. I'm sorry."

"That's a shitty apology," Clare says, pulling out of my grasp. "You don't get to be a jackass and then pretend everything is fine ten minutes later. I'm still angry with you!"

Why is this woman so damn infuriating?

"I know, I get it," I say. "But you have to see it from my side —"

"I really don't," Clare interrupts.

Why does she frustrate me so easily? I shouldn't care. It was one wild and passionate night, but that was it.

Except she's great with Amelia, and that makes me feel even more connected to her, emotionally and physically. The way that she cares about my kid, it's a part of who she is. I can't just walk away from that.

"I don't accept your letter of resignation," I say.

"What?" Her brow pinches. "Is this because I don't have access to a computer and can't physically write you a hard copy? Because I will do that as soon as we get back home and I can go to the library."

"No." I hold up my hand. "You're not quitting. You're the best thing that's happened to Amelia. The kid is excelling in so many ways." I don't want to think about what it'll be like with Clare gone and her replacement trying to engage with Amelia.

I'm not sure my daughter can go through another transition.

I certainly don't want another nanny living under my roof, caring for my daughter.

I want Clare.

TWELVE

CLARE

Levi is infuriating!

How can he not accept my resignation? It isn't negotiable. I'm not trying to stay employed and convince him to pay me more money, although frankly, the billionaire is a cheap bastard. He hasn't paid me a cent above room and board.

I ought to go on a shopping spree with the *Passport Currency* card that he gave me. Spend all of it on luxury goods that he'll have to fly home and carry for me.

Pfft. Some fantasy. There's no way he's going to offer to carry my bag onto the plane after this week.

The man hates me, and I didn't even do anything wrong. It's like he's going through PMS—pissy male syndrome.

Although I admit that I don't like the redhead, and seeing her touching him outside of the hotel definitely rocked the boat.

We barely spend two minutes together the rest of the trip, and we head back sooner than anticipated, probably because Levi has been crashing on the couch.

He's even more grumpy and impossible to be around. At least Amelia has her headphones and movie to keep her entertained on the flight.

My eReader dies. I'm guessing the cheap converter plug did something to fry the device, so I'm stuck staring out the

window, avoiding any discussions with Levi.

Since we don't fly from a major airport, I can't even grab a paperback book at the airport lounge. Bummer.

Levi paces the length of the plane. He's restless and agitated. Is that my doing?

I glance at him, open my mouth, but think better of it.

I've had one good flight with him and another flight from hell. I don't want a repeat performance of our first encounter. I shut my eyes, pretending to sleep and get a few minutes of rest.

Levi stops pacing, standing in the aisle right by my seat. I can feel his presence. Is he staring at me or brooding over something else?

It's me. It has to be, because getting along seems an impossible feat.

"Are you sleeping?" he asks, but he knows the answer.

My eyes flash open, and I turn to face him. "Apparently not."

"Are you really going to make me hire a new nanny for Amelia?"

Are we still on that argument? I sigh and run a hand through my hair. I unbuckle my seatbelt and stand, wanting to be eye-level with him, well, closer to his level. He's still quite a bit taller than I am.

"You don't want me around, Levi. You can barely look at me."

His tongue darts out and presses against the corner of his lips. "That's not true." He stares at me, trying to prove his point, but I can sense the inward struggle. I feel it too. It's too heavy, too intense. Too much to bear.

"We shouldn't have slept together," I say. That's what's bothering him, isn't it? Regret. It's the only emotion that I can make sense of with the way he's behaving.

"You're right." He's terse. Have I annoyed him, yet again? "Well, we don't have to worry, since it won't happen again."

I try to hide my disappointment. “That’s probably for the best. I mean, it wasn’t that good anyway.” It’s a lie, and I slink away from him and flop back down in the leather recliner, staring out the window.

We’re high above the clouds. There’s not much of a view. Besides, the ocean is the only thing around for miles and miles.

“Is that what you really think?” Levi asks. He stalks toward my seat, blocking the aisle. Not that I plan on getting up again.

“Are you calling me a liar?” I ask, staring up at him, challenging him. He’s been grumpy. Dishing it back is all I can do to deal with him.

His gaze tightens. “I’m saying that you’re mistaken. You’re so angry with me that you can’t even remember how good the sex was between us.”

“It wasn’t that good.” Another lie. Even I’m not convinced, but I force a smile. “Trust me, Levi. I’ve had better.”

“Who?”

“Seriously? Do you want names?” I’m shocked that he’s not walking away and leaving me alone.

“You mentioned you were married, and your husband was shit in the sack.”

“Did I?” I shrug and really wish I had a book to pretend to read right now. The window isn’t all that interesting, and Levi isn’t dumb enough to think it is. “It was before him.”

He presses his lips together. “I can do better.”

“What?” I say, glancing at him.

“If you think the sex between us was mediocre, I can do better. I was under a lot of pressure, with Amelia next door, and being with you for the first time just threw me off my game.”

I cover my mouth to keep from laughing. The sex wasn’t mediocre. It was downright sinful and made my heart race until I thought it would explode.

Not that I'm about to stroke his ego or anything else for that matter.

"Yeah, to be honest, I had to fake it." Another lie, and this time his eyes widen.

"You're shitting me," Levi says. "Now I know you're full of it. I can tell the difference between a woman coming and a woman faking it."

"Can you? Are you sure?" It takes everything in my power to keep a straight face. I'm not sure my cheeks aren't giving it away, because the small plane is a few degrees warmer than it had been minutes earlier.

"Woman." His gaze tightens, and he glances me over. "Are you telling me that you felt nothing? Because I know your panties were soaked before I licked you through them."

"The idea of you was sexy," I say, and clear my throat, having momentarily lost my voice. "But you and me in bed, it was a disaster."

There's truth to that. He has to see it. We can't be in a relationship. He's too possessive and demanding. Too bossy, even outside of work. He accused me of planting what, the mommy seed, in Amelia's little head? What kind of a monster does he take me for?

Oh, right, one of the gold-digging varieties. Well, he'll regret to find out that I don't want his money. I never took it to spend on myself.

Good luck finding another nanny half as good and not doing it because he's a billionaire.

"I don't believe you," Levi says.

"I don't care." I shrug and shift in my seat.

He's brooding, and hell, when he's angry, he's even hotter. It's unfair how irresistible this man is, especially when he's not the least bit charming.

"Kiss me."

“What?” I meet his stare. How is kissing him going to prove anything?

“If you think I’m a shitty lay, the least you can do is kiss me to prove that there’s no spark.”

It’s just a kiss. I can fake disinterest. “Fine.” I stand and brush at my legs like there’s dirt on me from sitting all of five minutes while talking.

I’m trying to distract myself from the fact Levi is all sex appeal. Instead of a suit, he’s wearing tight jeans and a black T-shirt that hugs him perfectly. Did he plan this, dressing in something that would make me even more attracted to him? That should be a crime.

His hand grabs my arm roughly, pulling me closer. But he doesn’t drag me into the aisle. Instead, he keeps me between my seat and the window.

All I have to do is kiss him and pretend it doesn’t mean anything.

No big deal.

It’s not like we haven’t kissed before. Besides, I still want to quit, leave him behind, and forget his accusation that ripped me to my core. One kiss can’t undo that pain.

One hand grips my arm while the other moves up my cheek, pushing the hair behind my ear as he takes my mouth like he claims me.

He kisses me, and I don’t kiss back, my lips not giving him what he wants.

“Wow, really no spark.” He smirks and smacks my bottom.

My mouth opens in shock, and he leans in again, this time winning his prize.

He kisses me, his tongue pushing inside of my mouth, and while I’m startled and surprised, he does melt the ice around my heart. And I hate him for it.

Levi shouldn’t be able to kiss me into submission and get his way.

He doesn't stop there. His fingers curl in my hair, fisting my locks, deepening the kiss. His hand that was on my arm moves to my hip, pulling me close as his fingers move down my hips and over my ass. He's stroking me through my clothes. The blue chiffon dress was not the best choice for a long flight and especially during a massive fight with Grumpalicious.

He hasn't delved below my dress, not crossing any lines without asking first, and he's asked to kiss me. That's all he's given me, although this does border on making out.

My head is in the clouds with the kiss, my body set ablaze, but I don't want him to see or feel the effect he has on me.

Levi pulls back. "Let me guess, nothing. You're a stone-cold ice queen."

I smack his arm. "Don't be a jerk."

"You're the one who said I don't do it for you."

Was he expecting me to fall onto my knees? I shuffle backward away from him and move for my seat.

"We're not done," Levi says.

"Oh, we're done, *Panty Thief*. It's over."

His gaze hardens, and he opens his mouth but shakes his head. I suppose he's had enough of my smartass remarks. He stalks toward his seat but doesn't sit.

He ignores me for the rest of the flight.

The longer the silence stretches on, the more I realize how cruel I was to him and likely his ego. He's probably bruised, worried that all the other women before me were faking it too.

But that doesn't make him any less of a dick for the crap he pulled at the café. I really should let it go. I've always been a bit of a grudge holder. It's not the best trait, and I wish I could let painful memories slide right off my shoulders. Instead, they always seep in, reminding me that I'm not good enough.

Those weren't Levi's words, but they were Zander's.

I don't want Levi thinking I'm the dick. Even though I'm angry, I shouldn't be taking all my anger out on him. I stand

and head for his seat.

He has a newspaper and at least pretends to be interested in whatever article he's reading. Or maybe he's able to concentrate with someone staring over him, hovering. I've never been good at that. I'm easily distracted.

"Yes?" he asks, but doesn't look up at me.

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling crushed. He's hurting, and this time it is my fault.

"For what? You can't help it if I'm shitty in the sack."

I grimace and pinch the bridge of my nose. "You know that's not true."

"I don't need your pity, Clare. Go sit back down in your seat."

That may be what he wants me to do, but I don't follow his orders. When have I ever listened to him and done what he asked of me?

"I just said those things to get even with you for hurting me." I stare at him, waiting for him to glance up and acknowledge me. "None of it was true."

"So, you're a liar?" he shoots, glancing up at me with daggers in his eyes.

I shrug. "If that's what you want to call it." I'm not going to win this round. Neither of us will. We're both too bullheaded and stubborn.

Levi bites down on his bottom lip. "How about a truce? We keep the sexual stuff on the back burner, and you return as Amelia's nanny?"

I exhale a heavy sigh. "You win."

He raises an eyebrow, unsure what I mean. He shakes his head, waiting for me to elaborate.

"I'll stay on as her nanny."

THIRTEEN

Levi

I'm relieved when we're back in New York and I can avoid being locked in an airplane cabin with Clare. At least the house is larger than the hotel penthouse. I don't have to share a bed with her, let alone a suite.

It's too bad we're not on opposite sides of the house, although I contemplate moving her sleeping quarters if I don't get enough sleep.

Amelia is oblivious to the tension between us. It's thick and impossible to cut through as we do our best to avoid one another.

Am I that much of a prick? Maybe living with me is hell. It's no picnic living with Clare. She's all smiles and sunshine.

We're complete opposites.

She's bubbly and carefree. I stick to schedules and business, even when I'm not on the clock. I don't spend as much time with Amelia during the first week that I'm home, not because I don't want to, but because I'm busy handling the contract for the Paris hotel.

The place needs a lot of work, and for the price, I expected a better experience. Not that the relationship explosion was their fault. But the entire trip leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

Maybe I should send Connor to look into any hotels next time. Although I honestly don't trust him with that level of

responsibility, and maybe that's for the best, given what Clare told me in confidence.

I never did get the name of the girl he harassed and fired. My assistant, Nancy, was supposed to dig up employment records and try to get me a name, but the number of employees who have quit is insane. We've never had such a high turnover at any other location.

Connor is the problem.

Maybe it's the Luxenberg brothers who are the issue. It's not like I handled things well with Clare, either.

Nancy pages me in my office. "Your mother is calling again, sir."

I groan and throw my head back. "Can't you send it to voicemail?"

"She'll just keep calling. She wants to meet Amelia."

Is Nancy seriously siding with my mother? "Fine." I take the call, not that I want to talk to her right now. I need to be in a good mood and this week has been spiraling in the other direction.

"Hey, Mom," I say, forcing a smile.

"I thought you were going to call when you were back in the city?"

I exhale a sigh. "I've been busy, but I know you want to meet Amelia."

"I want to see my son as well," she chimes. "But yes, I'd like to meet my granddaughter. Can you do dinner tonight?"

If I say no, she'll probably show up at the house anyway. It's not unlike her to drop by unannounced. I'm lucky she hasn't shown up already for a surprise visit.

"Yes, dinner tonight at my house. Can you come around seven?" I ask.

"Seven? Goodness, Levi. What time do you put the child to bed?"

Clare has been the one setting a bedtime and ushering Amelia to bed. I haven't been around much with work.

"I'll be there at five," she says. "That gives you plenty of time to order takeout and give me extra time with my little grandbaby."

"She's five, Mom."

We hang up, and I finish all I can at the office, grabbing my phone and dialing Clare. I don't want to surprise her, although I usually text.

"Is everything okay?" Clare asks, answering her phone. "You don't usually call."

"My mother ambushed us into having dinner tonight."

"Oh," Clare says, her voice soft. "Do you need me to get lost for a few hours?"

I frown. Why would she think that? "No, she knows I have a nanny for Amelia. It's fine. I'm going to order takeout. Is there anything that you're in the mood for?"

I inhale a sharp breath, realizing my words could easily have another meaning.

She doesn't take the bait, or else she lets it slide. "Italian, sushi, Chinese, anything is fine. Can you text me a link to the menu, and I'll pick out something to eat?"

"You don't like it when I order for you?"

"When you order takeout for me, you buy way too much food. Enough to feed the entire neighborhood, and it will go bad before we eat it all as leftovers."

She's right. "Fine, I'll send you a menu as soon as I narrow down our restaurant options. I'm tempted to pick sushi because my mother refuses to eat raw fish."

Clare chuckles. "You're bad!"

"Hey, she invited herself over for dinner. I'm just the one picking up the food."

"And ordering it," Clare says.

We hang up and I text Clare the menu for a sushi restaurant around the corner. They have wonderful entrees as well as rolls. As it gets closer to five o'clock, I put in the order and have Douglas pick it up on the way home from work.

I stroll in through the front door. My mother has already invited herself in. It's two minutes after five.

"Dear, you didn't tell me your nanny was gorgeous and funny," my mother says, giving me a hug when she greets me.

I smile and feign innocence. "I didn't notice. She's Amelia's nanny, not mine." I drop the takeout bag on the dining room table.

The table is already set, and I imagine Clare is responsible for helping. She grabs the dishes out of the bag, opening each one while I grab the proper utensils and hand out chopsticks.

"Raw fish?" my mother says, and clears her throat.

Amelia raises an eyebrow. "You forgot to cook my dinner?"

"No, sweetie, this is how you eat it," Clare says, and breaks the wooden chopsticks apart. She grabs a roll and brings it to her plate before taking a bite.

I grab one piece of each for Amelia to try. I didn't even consider that she might never have had sushi before. I can't remember eating sushi with Katelyn, her mother, but it was such a long time ago.

Amelia pokes her sushi roll, deciding whether she wants to try it or not.

"How'd you find this girl?" Mom asks, pointing at Clare. "She's cute and good with the kid."

"Funny story, but not a great one to tell over dinner," I say, trying to change the subject. "And she's amazing with Amelia."

"I used to be a preschool teacher," Clare says, "I have a bit of experience with picky eaters."

"I'm not picky," Amelia retorts, and shoves the piece, using her hand, into her mouth. Her eyes widen when she realizes

she grabbed the spicy piece, and she spits it back out onto her plate.

“I don’t think she likes spicy crab,” Clare says.

“Hot! Hot!” Amelia fans her mouth, and her tongue sticks out like she’s panting.

I try a piece of the spicy crab, and it’s got a decent kick, but it’s not half-bad. That had been one of Clare’s requests. I hope she doesn’t mind all of us sharing the rolls.

“Try this,” Clare says, putting a piece of an avocado roll on her plate.

Amelia picks it up, examines it, and sniffs it before popping it into her mouth.

“Clare, if you don’t mind my asking, how old are you, twenty?”

“Twenty-seven,” she says, “I don’t think I could have worked at a preschool while I was still in high school myself.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Mom says. “You are so young. I honestly thought when Levi said he hired a nanny, it would be someone who was quite a bit older.”

“Are you concerned about my experience?” Clare asks. She’s direct and not afraid of my mother. I like it.

“No, I just wasn’t expecting someone quite so young. Given my boy just turned forty, I thought he’d look for someone closer to his own age.”

I tilt my head, staring at my mother. Is she seriously trying to pimp me out to the nanny? There are no boundaries with that woman. “She’s the nanny, not the woman I bring into my bed.”

Well, not anymore.

“Good,” Mom says. “That would complicate things, and the age difference, my goodness. That would hardly be appropriate.”

“Appropriate?” I glance from my mother to Clare. “We’re adults. What we decide to do or not do is entirely up to us.

Why are we even having this discussion?”

Clare smiles and shoves another piece of sushi into her mouth. She’s avoiding talking. Smart. I wish I could do the same.

“I just want to see my son happy, settle down. You have a child, and it would be nice if you had another person to share that joy with in your life.”

“I swear, Mom, if you try to set me up with one of your church friends again—”

“I won’t, I promise. But I did meet this wonderful older lady at flute group, and she has a daughter who’s about your age, Levi.”

When is it ever enough with my mother? Her constant meddling in my private life is exhausting. I have tried being a good son, visiting, and having dinner together. But she enjoys playing matchmaker. Does she think I can’t get my own dates? That I’m not capable enough of finding love on my own? The worst part is that she doesn’t do this crap to Connor.

“That’s enough!” I bark.

“I was just trying to help.”

“You’re meddling,” I say, pointing at her with my chopsticks. “And you’ll stop if you want to see your granddaughter again before her twenty-first birthday.”

I’m grateful when dinner is over and Mom finally leaves. Clare offers to take Amelia up to shower and get ready for bed. I let her handle the responsibilities of looking after my kid. Not only is she the nanny, but I trust her. Not to mention, I need a break.

I’m exhausted from work, and dealing with my mother made my night that much worse. But I’m not ready to sleep. I’m not anywhere close to ready for bed. And like an idiot, I grab a mug and flip on the espresso machine. The water heats up before I can press the button for a brew.

“Coffee at this hour?” Clare’s voice startles me. “Are you trying not to sleep?”

I glance at the clock. It's nearly midnight. Mom left hours ago, but I still feel out of kilter. "Something like that," I say.

Had Clare been asleep?

That makes one of us. I've hardly gotten more than a couple of hours of sleep a night. I'd blame it on jetlag, but we've been home a week, and it has nothing to do with the time difference and everything to do with the woman standing in front of me in a long T-shirt that covers down to her thighs.

She's got bedhead and rubs at her eyes like she just woke.

"Headache?" I guess, trying to figure out why she looks half-fucked and sexy as hell.

My cock stirs.

Down, boy. Now isn't the time.

"Something like that." She avoids my stare, distant and distracted. Her eyes are red, blotchy.

Has she been crying? Was tonight that awful for her too?

"What's wrong?" I ask, and grimace. If she says it's me, I don't think I can live with myself. I know that I hurt her. She hurt me back. If she says it's my mother, I can apologize and promise that she never has to deal with that wretched woman again. "Is this because of my mother?"

"What? Of course not." She wipes a stray tear from her cheek. "Your mother was fine. She was kind of sweet."

"Mom playing matchmaker isn't sweet."

Clare shrugs. "She just wants what's best for her son. She loves you." Another tear glides down her cheek.

"What is it?"

"It's stupid," she whispers, and her voice breaks as the tears glisten in her eyes. She folds her arms across her chest and swipes the tears away, but they keep falling.

I want to hug her, embrace her, pull her against me and soothe the pain. But that's not appropriate if I'm nothing more than her boss.

“Tell me,” I say. “Whoever made you cry doesn’t deserve your tears.”

I momentarily hold my breath, hoping I’m not the reason.

“It’s my ex,” Clare says, and her voice cracks while the tears rain down her cheeks.

I let my guard down and pull her into my arms. “What did he do?” My stomach sinks at the knowledge that anyone would hurt Clare.

“What didn’t he do?” she says, and wipes the dampness from her cheek before glancing up at me. “He’s been calling, leaving messages on my phone, texting me inappropriate images.”

My blood boils, and my hands bunch into fists. “Let me see your phone.”

She shuffles her feet and grabs it off the kitchen counter, pushing it into my hands. I’m expecting the inappropriate images to be dick pics or some other crassness, but instead I’m met with death threats, and it’s clear he’s been stalking her.

“How long?”

“What?” she asks, momentarily confused.

I flip through the images and texts, trying to determine when this started. Was it after we came back from Europe?

“How long has he been threatening you?” I ask.

Clare sighs and leans back against the counter. “I don’t know. It never really stopped. I’m sorry, I should have warned you. I mean, living under your roof, it puts you and your daughter at risk.”

“We have top-notch security. No one is getting in without me knowing about it. I’m worried about you, though. You look like you haven’t slept since we got back from Paris.”

“That’s probably because I haven’t,” she says, and glances down at her feet, dragging her toes over the floor. “The texts were less often, like he didn’t know where I was and maybe

didn't care. As soon as we landed, they started flooding in at record speed."

"First thing tomorrow, we're changing your phone number."

I flip through the threatening images. Most are graphic in nature, suggestive, and threatening. A picture of duct tape and rope. A noose.

It's the images taken outside the house that have me on edge.

There are pictures from the gate outside, in both broad daylight and the cover of night.

"He knows where we live?" The pictures are being used to intimidate Clare. I open her recent texts from her ex, and my stomach flops.

You always liked it a little rough. Does your new boyfriend know what you asked me to do in bed?

Clare didn't answer his texts. There's picture after picture and then another message.

This is just foreplay, baby. I plan on tying you up and teaching you and that little brat a lesson.

I remove the battery and SIM card. However, it's a little too late for that. He's clearly been tracking her phone.

I grab my phone from my jacket pocket. I'm still dressed for work even though I should be getting ready for bed. I dial Declan, a friend of mine from when we both served in the military. He's out west in Montana, working for a private security firm. If anyone can offer some advice, it's him, and I trust him implicitly.

At least it's a little earlier in Breckenridge.

"Hello?" Declan answers.

"I need a favor."

"Not even a 'hello, how are you?'"

I grumble, "Hello, how are you, Declan?"

He chuckles, and there's something in his tone that I don't quite recognize. Is that happiness? "I'm with the love of my

life. I was good until you called. Are you dragging my ass out of bed?”

“It’s just after ten o’clock,” I say. “And the love of your life? Did you get hitched?” I didn’t know he was dating anyone.

“Don’t go putting any ideas in Katie’s head,” Declan says with a chuckle.

He shuffles around, and I imagine that he’s climbing out of bed and heading for his in-home office. He does have one of those, doesn’t he? I haven’t seen his place since he lived above his garage and owned the only car repair shop in town.

He left those days behind years ago, but he still owns the shop, letting someone else manage the day-to-day aspect.

“Katie,” I repeat. The name sounds familiar. “Wait. Is she that girl you were pining over back home while you were in training?”

“Shut it!”

I’ve clearly pushed a button. A smile grows on my face. “The reason I’m calling is that I need a favor. My nanny is being stalked by her ex.”

“We’re a few too many miles away to go rough the guy up,” Declan says, “but if you want to send your private jet over, we’d be happy to do you the honor.”

I run a hand through my hair. “That wasn’t what I had in mind.” Although now he mentions it, maybe it would be a good idea to keep the asshole away.

“Then what can I do for you?” Declan asks.

Clare stares at me, watching the entire time. Her bottom lip is tugged between her teeth, chewing the skin raw. I reach out, brushing my thumb over her lip, trying to stop her gesture, not wanting her to hurt herself.

“I need everything that you can dig up on the guy. Any dirt. Arrest warrants. Whatever you can find.”

“He doesn’t have any,” Clare says.

“We’ll look for the skeletons in his closet,” Declan says. “Got it. But can I make a suggestion? You could offer to pay him to go away. If he’s bothering the nanny, offer him a sum of cash to leave her alone and abandon New York. Put it into writing, and if he ever returns, you can threaten to sue his ass for breach of contract.”

“Isn’t that a tad harsh? New York isn’t a small state,” I say.

“It’s smaller than, say, Texas. Anyways, that’s my two cents. But do us a favor and don’t suggest that he come to Montana. We have enough shenanigans that we deal with ourselves. No sense in bringing more to our town.”

“I’ll think about it. But in the meantime, can you run that deep background?” I ask.

“Text me the guy’s information. The more detailed, the better.”

“Will do.” I hang up, and Clare gives me his full name, date of birth, and social security number. If I knew she had all that, I could have joked with Declan about selling the scumbag’s details on the black market. “Zander even sounds like a pompous ass,” I mutter when she gives me his name.

“Who’s Declan?” Clare asks. She opens the fridge and grabs a bottle of water, taking a swig.

The espresso machine was ready but has now gone silent and in sleep mode. That’s what I should be doing, sleeping. But I power it back on and wait another couple of minutes for the system to heat.

“Old military friend. We served together.”

“I didn’t know you were in the military,” Clare says. “What branch?”

“Army.”

She purses her lips, and it takes everything in my power not to kiss her and make her forget her lousy ex.

Just staring at her makes my cock twitch, and I’m grateful I’m not in boxers that would reveal how easily she makes me rock hard.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention the texts sooner. I thought after the divorce, he’d leave me alone. Especially when he didn’t know where I was living.”

I run a hand through my hair, trying to remain calm. “He’s not getting inside. I’m more concerned about Amelia at school and while you both are out and about in the city.”

Maybe there is some truth to let the Eagle Tactical crew fly in and rough up the bastard who threatened my daughter’s nanny.

But Declan may be right, and offering him a buyout to leave the city, state, and anywhere near Clare may be the better way to go.

The police won’t do anything with a restraining order. I’ve seen how little gets done in terms of protection. I’ll hire additional guards to watch the girls when they’re out of the house. I already have all surveillance footage being monitored and am alerted whenever anyone approaches the gated premises.

“I may know a few ways to keep this man from bothering you,” I say.

Clare’s eyes narrow. “Tell me. You can’t go roughing him up.”

“You heard that suggestion?” I ask, surprised she had gotten so much as an inkling from half the conversation.

The espresso drips into the cup, and I sip the hot drink. My body melts from the taste and temperature. It’s not nearly as good as Clare’s lips against mine, but it’s second best.

“No, but a friend of mine, her boyfriend offered to bury my ex,” she says. “Joked about having a shovel in the trunk.”

“Does this jokester work for the bratva?” I’m guessing it wasn’t an actual joke but an offer to oust the guy.

“I can’t give all my secrets away.” She brings the water bottle back to her lips for another swig. “Espresso after midnight. Do you ever sleep?”

I haven’t gotten much shuteye since being back home. “Sleep is overrated.” Especially if it means tossing and turning all night, missing Clare’s warm body nestled against mine.

One night with her is all it took to destroy me.

She reaches for my espresso, and I think she's going to take a sip, but instead, she tosses the rest of it down the sink, handing me her water bottle. "Drink."

"That was perfectly good espresso," I mutter.

I'm trying to do the girl a favor, and she has to go and make my life miserable. Why?

"And you look like you haven't slept in a week. I'm putting you to bed. Dealing with Zander can wait until morning." Clare takes my hand and leads me upstairs to my bedroom. "Do I need to tuck you in?" she asks when I don't step foot in my bedroom.

It's cold.

Lonely.

And not where I want to sleep, unless she's tangled in the bedsheets beside me. But we've agreed that we're better off as boss and employee. She's good with Amelia, and I can't risk losing her.

At least this way I see her every day, even if I don't spend any time with her, barely speak to her, and find myself in desperate need of a cold shower.

"Since when are you the one in charge?" I lock eyes with her. I rest my hand on the doorframe, but I don't do what she wants.

"Well, I put your daughter to bed." Clare shrugs, and her cheeks redden. "I suppose it's no different putting a grown man to bed."

I groan at her remark. That's not what I want, her sending me to my bedroom. "Are you going to tuck me in?" I ask, my voice raspy. I shouldn't be tempted to flirt with her. This went down in the worst way the last time we fell into bed together in Paris.

"Levi." Her tone holds a no-nonsense warning, but her cheeks are flaming.

The T-shirt that hugs her body is too long. I wish I could steal a peek at her panties. Is she wearing the red lacy ones that she accused me of stealing? What I wouldn't give to let my fingers trail along the juncture of her thigh and up over the material.

She would be wet for me.

Her pussy swollen, and her clit begging to be touched.

"It's a fair question. You tuck my daughter into bed every night," I say, and she glances down, avoiding my stare.

I don't accept her silence. My fingers guide her chin up to face me, one hand in her hair, bringing her lips closer.

"I've wanted you since that stupid fight," I say, breathless.

The tension builds and burns. She tugs her bottom lip between her teeth. "Have you? You could have any girl, Levi. I don't believe that you want me."

"Believe it," I growl, and pull her tighter, letting her feel my cock as it strains against my trousers. "I've wanted you since the moment you were in that purple see-through bra and never stopped wanting you. Hell, I wanted you before that incident."

"When I nearly got you arrested?" she jokes.

I'm not smiling, but I raise an inquisitive eyebrow. "No, since you helped bathe Amelia and got soaked in the process. You were damn fine then, and you're even sexier now that I know the real you."

"The real me?" she whispers.

"You hide behind your insecurities, but you're gorgeous, funny, great with Amelia, and would do anything for my daughter. Hell, I gave you money to spend on yourself, and you went and spent it on toys and books for Amelia. I don't know anyone else who would have done that. You're generous and kind, even though you're stubborn and always have to be right."

"Your flattery will get you nowhere," Clare says as she sighs.

"You hurt me when you accused me of being a gold digger."

I hadn't used those exact words, but that had been the gist. "And I'm sorry." I mean every word. "I will make it up to you for the rest of my life, but we're both to blame. You said some awful, hurtful words on the flight home."

"I did," Clare says, and glances down, her gaze on my lips. "I shouldn't have said those things. They weren't true. I was hurt and just wanted to retaliate. That wasn't right of me or fair to you."

"Are you sure there wasn't a small modicum of truth?" I ask. "It's okay if you didn't feel like the sex between us wasn't orgasmic. I mean, it's been a while since I slept with a woman and it wasn't solely about fucking her."

"I don't know what to say to that," Clare whispers.

"We'll do better." I brush my lips tenderly against hers. "If it wasn't good, I'll read every book, watch every movie, take every class—"

The softness in her voice is gone. "What? The hell you will. You're not doing any of those things without me." Her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me close, our lips close but not quite kissing yet.

She's waiting, and I'm at about wit's end with dragging out our kiss.

I want to fucking plant my lips on her and listen to her moans. We don't have to jump back into bed. We can take things as slowly as she wants. As long as she's mine.

I cover her lips with mine, hard and rough, my fingers in her hair, backing her up against the hardwood of the door.

She moans, the sound delightful. She tastes like honey and vanilla and she smells even more amazing. I want to drink her in, ravish her until we're both desperate for air.

Her hands bunch at my clothes, trying to undo my suit and pull my dress shirt from my trousers.

I reach for the door handle, push it open, walking her backward into my bedroom. I don't need Amelia hearing us outside in the hallway like two giddy teenagers.

I remove my jacket and tie, laying them across a nearby chair. My shirt follows while Clare helps me remove my pants, working the belt buckle free and then my zipper. She slides the material down, and it falls to the floor at my feet.

I step out of my pants, and I'm clad only in my boxers. She takes the sight in and inhales a sharp breath as I push my boxers down and kick them off.

"Your turn," I say, pulling her close and tight against me. My fingers are rough and heated as I skim over her naked torso, bringing the shirt over her head. Her breasts are the first thing I see, and she's even more glorious than the last time we did this.

My gaze roams down her body, and I drop to my knees, at the level with her blue cotton panties. I leave a path of warm, gentle kisses across her stomach and down the juncture of her thighs, kissing over her skin.

I drag her panties down, slow and methodically, not giving her the full attention that she's craving where she wants it most. I drop soft kisses over her thighs, behind her knees, and listen to her breaths and gasps as I stir her desires.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, and I help her step out of her panties before picking her up and carrying her to the bed.

She giggles, and I hope that whatever is making her laugh doesn't kill the mood.

FOURTEEN

CLARE

I've never had a man sweep me off my feet, literally.

"Put me down," I squeal as he carries me to the bed, but it's too late. I'm already on the mattress, and he doesn't seem the least bit out of breath.

Levi climbs above, straddling me, but he takes his time.

His eyes are bright, and it's as though a fire has been stoked and fuel tossed onto the burning embers. The heat between us sizzles, and I'm not sure how much teasing I can take.

"Have you used your vibrator recently?" Levi asks, smirking as he stares down at me.

My stomach does a flop, and I inhale a sharp breath.

Do I answer him honestly or tell him that I haven't touched it yet?

I take too long to answer, and Levi flips me over before I know what's going on. I'm on my stomach, and he's rubbing his large palm over my bare ass. "I'm going to ask you again, and this time, I expect you to answer."

"Umm." I glance over my shoulder at him, and he leans down, marking me, biting my ass.

I shriek and moan, realizing the sensation is a good kind of pain. It's unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Where the hell did he learn to do that?

“Do I have to spank you?” Levi asks with a throaty chuckle.

“What? You would do that?” I try to spin around, but he keeps me from moving and presses his cock between my thighs. His weight traps me, but it feels so damn good.

“Answer the question, *sweetheart*,” he whispers into my ear, his lips kissing and sucking the lobe. He knows just what to do to make me feel full of butterflies.

“Yes,” I whisper, and bury my face in the pillow.

“And who were you thinking of when you pressed that pretty pink vibrator between your pussy lips?”

I moan. The contact from his body is overwhelming and absolutely sinful. I no longer care that he’s my boss. We’ll make this work, we have to, because I can’t live without the two of them in my life.

Not that I’m ready to admit that freely.

“You, sir,” I say, remembering how he once told me he wanted to be called sir. I wasn’t sure if that was a kink or not, but he grinds into me, pleased with my answer.

His hand firmly caresses my bottom, and I’m not sure if he’s going to play with me, tease me, or give me what I so desperately want—release.

“Good girl,” he says, and rolls me around. My head presses back into the pillow. I stare up into his blue eyes.

Levi brushes his lips against mine, hungrily tasting me, his tongue pushing past my lips as his fingers move across my hip and up my stomach. His touch is tantalizing and slow, memorizing every detail until he reaches my breast.

He shuffles down on the mattress, caressing my breast, his lips moving over my nipple. His tongue is doing wonders, making me restless beneath him.

My fingers tease through his hair and down his neck, bringing his mouth to mine.

I want him.

“Slow down,” Levi commands with a wicked grin.

Does the man like toying with me? My heart is racing. My body feels like it’s on fire, and he wants to slow down?

He guides my right leg onto his shoulder as he trails kisses from the back of my knee, up my inner thigh. He goes higher, slowly, with his lips dropping a soft path, his tongue barely a whisper over my skin.

Is this payback for what I said on the airplane?

I deserve it.

He can torture me until the end of eternity, as long as I get to chase my orgasm with him. “Fuck, you’re taking your time,” I mutter through clenched teeth.

“Savoring every inch of you,” Levi says. His eyes lock on mine and the air is stolen out of my lungs.

He’s not just a panty thief. He’s a stealer of hearts and breaths. He guides my left leg onto his shoulder, paying the same adequate attention up my leg, slowly and with a purpose.

“Savor something else.”

He chuckles, clearly pleased with himself. “This is your doing, Clare. You insisted that I didn’t give you enough attention the last time.”

Fuck me.

No, literally, that’s the one thing he’s not doing.

I groan and cover my face with my hand. I never thought being in heaven with Levi would be such pure torture.

With one hand, he captures my wrist, lifting it above my head, and pinning it to the mattress. “If I have to pin you down, it’s going to be hard to lick you. Will you be a good girl for me?”

“Yes, sir,” I whimper, my insides melting as he releases his grip on my wrist.

“Good girl.” He smiles, and a dimple I never noticed before shines before he delves down, kissing my center.

I'm on fire, his tongue doing wonders, making my insides ache and throb. My fingers tangle in his hair, my fingernails scraping over his skin as he brings me closer to the edge. I want Levi, every inch of him, nestled tight inside me.

My breathing grows ragged as my heart slams against my ribcage. Stars align my vision and sparkle all around me.

I tug the sheets between my fists, toes curling, tightening, and trembling in his embrace.

He doesn't slow. He doesn't stop, knowing exactly what I need as he takes me over the edge.

When I finally come down, he shifts on the mattress and opens the bedside table, reaching for a condom.

He's hard and glistening. I've barely touched him.

"My turn," I say, tugging on his arm, trying to drag him to the edge of the bed while I intend to get on my hands and knees.

A low, guttural moan emits from the back of his throat as I lick his shaft, my tongue circling the head before taking him into my mouth.

I suck him, bringing him deeper as my fingers tease his balls. I stare up into his eyes as he struggles to focus.

"Sweetheart, if you keep that up—" he growls, not finishing his sentence. He grabs my arm and tugs for me to stop.

I release my mouth with a whimper, and he covers my lips with his. "God, you're perfect. Now get back onto the bed, this time on all fours." He swats my ass as I climb onto the mattress, and my cheeks clench.

"I swear, Levi, if you're into butt stuff, I'll make you regret it."

He chuckles. "That sounds like a challenge, Clare. Maybe for next time."

His words *next time* spring my heart into further action. He wants there to be a next time. My head is in a fog. I wiggle my ass at him and glance over my shoulder as he tears the condom packet open and unsheathes it onto his cock.

“You’d better hold on to that headrail,” he says, and nods toward the top of the bed.

I reach for the bars and moan as Levi inches his cock inside me. My head hangs forward, gasping for breath as he fills me.

“I’m not even halfway inside of you, *sweetheart*,” he rasps. “You’re so tight.”

My pussy throbs as he fills me, stretching me as he slowly begins thrusting. My hands grip the wooden railing, and he leisurely begins to withdraw before slamming fully inside of me.

I gasp, the intensity overwhelming in the best possible way.

“Do you like that?” he asks, his voice throaty and thick, full of arousal.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” he asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good girl,” he says, and I swoon. My heart balloons, and my pussy trembles against his cock.

Is his head high above the clouds like mine? Soaring and never wanting to come down.

I think I just uncovered one of Levi’s kinks, being called sir, and I’m all for it. It may be one of my own, as well. Maybe it’s the fact that he’s my boss. We don’t have to roleplay this scenario because it’s real and it’s naughty.

He slams his cock deep inside of me, thrusting with a fierce intensity that has me holding on to the railing of the headboard and hoping it doesn’t break.

My insides shudder and quiver. Levi must sense I’m growing close. With one hand, he reaches between us, stroking and teasing my clit. “Tell me, did you use that vibrator and think of me this week?” Levi asks.

I swear his breath against my neck and his fingers on my clit are my absolute undoing. “Yes!” I gasp, confessing what he probably knew all along.

Had he heard the high-pitched hum when he'd been across the hall?

He smacks my pussy and I gasp. "I'm the one who will be giving you orgasms from this point forward," Levi says.

I smile and bite down on my bottom lip. "Is that so?" I sass, glancing back at him over my shoulder.

"Woman," he growls, and slides out.

I whimper in protest, and he flips me onto my back before taking me again, driving his cock inside me. Wrapping my legs around him, I keep him to me, my fingernails dragging over his back.

"You can't control me," I say, staring up at him, our eyes meeting.

"Just your orgasms," he clarifies as if that makes it better.

Levi doesn't know the damage to my psyche and my heart from Zander, and it's not a story to tell in the middle of the most gratifying sex ever.

Never being allowed to see your friends, family, or have a life outside of that one person that you married. Always being kept under lock and key. Never free.

I don't answer, and he pins my arms above my head. "Look at me," he commands as he keeps thrusting, his hips gyrating against mine.

Sweat beads on my brow. I gasp for breath. It's a struggle to stare into his piercing blue gaze as my pussy trembles and clenches onto him.

My legs tighten around him like a vice, unwilling to let him go. I tremble and gasp, back arching off the bed as he intertwines our fingers together. My hands squeeze his, toes curling as my heart pounds against my ribcage, trying to break free.

Gasping for breath, Levi is right there with me. One, two, three more strokes, and he's spilling himself before sliding out, disposing of the condom.

I try to catch my breath, sliding under the covers.

Levi flips the bathroom light on, and it's too bright and blinding. I shut my eyes and bring the blanket up over my face to hide any hint of light.

The bed dips, and Levi shuffles in beside me. He pulls me into his arms, cocooning me as I drift off to sleep.

The sun steals my slumber, awakening me as I attempt to roll over, but Levi's grip tightens around my waist. "Not yet," he murmurs.

I force my eyes open and glance at the clock. "I need to get Amelia ready for school."

Levi growls and rolls me onto my back, pinning me beneath him. "I'll write her a note. She'll be excused."

Smiling, I rise up and kiss him. "I don't think it works like that. Besides, what are you going to write? *I'm sorry my daughter couldn't come to school on time because I was banging it out with her nanny.*"

Levi chuckles and presses his mouth firmly against mine. "I like your sassiness. Have I told you that? Most people would be afraid to talk to me the way you do."

I shrug, not seeing why. Is it because they're intimidated by the fact that he's a billionaire? It's just money. "I have nothing to lose," I say.

His gaze tightens. "That's where you're wrong," he says, and presses his lips against my neck, teasing a path south. "You'd miss this, with me."

Levi is right. I would miss it. "I don't have to worry. You won't let me resign," I remind him.

Amelia's soft patter of footsteps charges through the hallway.

"The little tyrant is awake," Levi jokes, and moves off me. "I guess playtime is over."

I whimper, already missing his strong, warm body covering mine. “Tonight?” I ask, hoping that we can make this a regular occurrence between the two of us.

Levi climbs out of bed and opens the dresser, pulling on a fresh pair of boxers. He tosses a T-shirt at me. “In case she bursts through the door; I can’t remember if I locked it.”

My eyes widen, and I grab the T-shirt, slipping it on just in time as Amelia bounces into the bedroom, oblivious to the fact that I’m in Levi’s bed and what it means.

“How about I get her ready for school? Douglas will drive her, and I want to have a word with him about Z.”

“Z?” Amelia asks.

Levi should have tried a better code name, but at least she doesn’t know who Zander is.

“Don’t you have to get to work?” I ask. It’s not his job to get his child off to school. That’s why I’m Amelia’s nanny.

“It can wait,” he says with a smile. “Just stay there. Give us twenty minutes.”

Levi hurries Amelia out of his bedroom and closes the door behind himself.

I sit up and reach for the bedside table, opening it, curious about what’s inside. A box of condoms, a blank notepad, and two black pens. The condoms aren’t much of a surprise, and there are certainly no dirty secrets in that drawer.

There’s movement on the opposite side of the door, and I pause near Levi’s dresser. He’s probably sending her into her room to get dressed, before walking her downstairs for her ride.

I poke through his dresser. There’s nothing exciting. I grab a pair of his boxers and slide them on, stepping out of the bedroom.

Levi is downstairs, the front door open. There’s commotion outside. He’s probably warning Douglas to watch out for my ex-husband. Although Douglas won’t know what he looks like unless he searches for him on the internet.

A few minutes later, Levi steps inside and glances up as I stand at the top of the stairs. “You’re looking mighty sexy, *Panty Thief*,” he chides.

“It’s more like Boxer Thief,” I correct him. “These aren’t panties.” I point at the plaid fabric and wiggle my hips for emphasis. They’re soft and super comfy. Does he wear them to bed?

He stalks up the stairs and chases after me as I run down the hallway. I don’t know where the hell I’m going. His house is huge, and it’s been weeks since he gave me a tour.

Levi is taller and while he closes in on me, there’s a second set of stairs that spiral up to the third floor.

I glance over my shoulder at him, and that extra second allows him time to catch up. He grabs me by the hips and tosses me up over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I laugh. “I’m going to give you a heart attack.” Why does the man have to prove that he can carry me?

He smacks my bottom and carries me back to his bedroom, pulling open the door. He tosses me down on the bed.

Laughter spills past my lips.

“You’re in trouble,” he growls, and leans down, covering my body with his.

“I like this kind of trouble,” I say with a smirk as he kisses me. My mouth opens and I relax against the bed, not wanting him to go anywhere today. He’s still in his boxers and not wearing anything else.

My fingers tease his waistband, wanting to rid him of his clothes.

Levi chuckles and pulls back after an intense make-out session. “We have a busy day ahead of us. I need you to do something for me.”

“Sure, anything,” I say, staring up into Levi’s heated stare.

“Stay dressed exactly like that all day.”

“You’re kidding?” I laugh, my cheeks burning.

He shakes his head. “You look hot as hell, and it’ll make me leave work early, knowing that you’re wearing my boxers and nothing else,” he says, lifting the shirt he loaned me over my head and tossing it across the room.

“What about when Amelia comes home?” Is he crazy? Has he lost his mind? He hasn’t been getting enough sleep.

“Then I guess I’ll have to beat her home.” He drops a kiss to my lips and pulls back with a groan. “I want to kiss you a thousand times more, but if I do, I’ll never leave.”

“So stay,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck, bringing him down closer against me. “I don’t see the problem.”

He chuckles and presses his lips hard against mine. “Woman, if I could stay in bed all day with you, I would. I need to make sure you and Amelia are safe.”

My body tenses at his words. “Zander.”

Levi nods and climbs off the bed. “Are you coming?” he asks, and grins wickedly.

FIFTEEN

Levi

While I hired Declan to handle a thorough background on Zander Mitchell, I also have my private security team ramping up added measures.

In addition, Douglas, my driver, is with Amelia all day. He has orders to keep an eye on her school premises to make sure Zander doesn't show up.

Douglas is former military and has special ops training. It's why he's my driver. It may seem below him, but he's my security detail, bodyguard when I venture out, and he has mad skills if we're ever involved in a high-speed chase.

I pay him handsomely for his service, and while most know that he's my driver, very few realize his combat and special skills training.

It's safer that way, protecting him and his family. He's got a wife and kids.

If anything happened to Douglas, his wife, Maria, would have me killed.

I reach out to my security team and Declan, grabbing everything imaginable on Zander. There isn't much that's intriguing. No record. No warrants out for his arrest. Too bad. The guy is clean. His bank account is considerably low, and the incoming deposits aren't that big. A nice windfall from me and demanding that he leave the city might actually work.

I reach out to my corporate attorney and have him draft the paperwork we will send to Zander. I should probably run it by Clare before going through with the offer. She knows him best and how he'll react.

Seated at my desk at the office, I text her on her new phone with a new number.

What are you wearing?

I imagine her smiling at the text. I prefer her to think that I'm bold and not cheesy.

She texts me back, and I swear the grin can't get any bigger. *Nothing but a smile.*

Can I call you? Business stuff.

Sure. I'll put on my big girl panties. I mean your panties. I mean boxers. We'll blame autocorrect.

Smiling, I click on her contact and hit the phone button on my cell phone. I should have opted for a video call. However, that wouldn't have helped me settle down any with the flirting.

"Hey, what's up?" Clare asks. There's a hint of concern in her tone.

"Nothing bad. I wanted to run an idea by you."

"Shoot."

I smile and lean back in my leather chair. "I spoke with Declan and the Eagle Tactical team. There's nothing damning on Zander."

"I didn't think there would be. He does more emotional damage than physical," Clare says. "He's a typical narcissist."

My stomach tightens at her remark. "We did a bit of a digging, and it definitely seems like he's stretched pretty thin, living paycheck to paycheck."

"Aren't we all?" There's a heavy silence on the line. "Sorry, I just mean that, yeah, his job barely pays the bills on its own. When he made me quit my job, it was tough paying the mortgage and utilities on time. What's your point?"

“We draw up a contract with my attorney and offer to pay Zander to go away.”

“Go away?” Clare asks. “I don’t understand. Where is he going to go? He’s not living across the street. He’s harassing me.”

“I know. And in the contract, it will stipulate no contact with you, Amelia, or myself. That includes phone, internet, texting, emails, snail mail, all of it. He can’t live in the state of New York or within seventy-five miles of New York City.”

“And do you really think that will work?” she asks. “He would have to move. His job and apartment are in the city.”

“That’s why I’m calling you,” I say. “If I offered him one million dollars, do you think he’d take it?”

Clare exhales a heavy breath. “I know that I would.”

My brow tightens at her remark. I don’t like hearing that for a million dollars, she’d leave Amelia and me behind.

“You’d take a million dollars and never see me again?” I ask. I shouldn’t go there. I should drop the question before it spirals out of control.

“I—that’s a lot of money, Levi. I don’t think you realize how much that is, what I could do with one million dollars.”

I exhale a heavy breath and grimace. “Wow.” Now isn’t the time to start a fight or argue with her.

“You do realize that no amount of money would be enough to keep me away from your daughter.”

“That sounds stalkerish,” I playfully warn.

“Well, it wasn’t intended that way. But the more I think about it, I do think Zander will accept your terms. But you should lay out specifically the consequences if he breaks the rules.”

“Of course,” I say. “My lawyer will handle all of it. I just wanted to run it by you before sending the letter.”

“Can I see what you guys draft before you send it?” Clare asks.

“Sure.”

I finish up at the office, print out a hard copy of the contract my attorney has drafted, and shove it into a manila file folder. I toss it into my briefcase with a dozen other files my assistant has left for me to look over and review.

Heading out, I won't beat Amelia home. That's a near impossible task. She gets out at noon for kindergarten. It's nearly five o'clock. The day breezed by, and I'm looking forward to spending tonight with Clare wrapped up in my arms.

Douglas picks me up from the office.

“Any news?” I ask.

“No sign of the loser,” Douglas says. “I've got a security team watching your house. How long do you think he's going to pose a problem?”

“Not long. My attorney and I have a solid plan that will keep him away from the girls.”

Douglas nods. “I hope what you've got planned works. I'd never want to come up against you.”

I smile and relax in the backseat. I'm even more at ease when we head inside the front gates. I bring the briefcase with me into the house.

There's laughter and giggles emanating from the kitchen.

August stands by the entrance to the kitchen. He comes highly recommended and worked extensively overseas with Douglas. He gives me a curt nod, his attention on the premises and ensuring my two girls are safe.

Clare and Amelia are cooking dinner together, each of them wearing an apron. It's positively adorable.

I could get used to Clare being here, and not just as the nanny.

“Hey, you're home!” Clare says with a smile and wide eyes. She undoes the apron and pulls it up over her head.

“You don't have to do that on my account,” I say. My eyes rake over her body. It's too bad she's not still in my boxers, but

she is wearing my T-shirt and her black leggings.

Everything on Clare is positively sexy. How does she do it?

We eat as a family, finish dinner, and clean up the dishes. After, Clare hangs out in the bathroom while Amelia showers and gets ready for bed. I read my baby girl a bedtime story and tuck her in, before shutting off the lights.

“It’s just the two of us,” Clare says, glancing me up and down with a wicked grin.

“August is downstairs.” I remind her that we have company. However, it isn’t like he’s a guest. He’s here on business, and everyone who works for me always signs an NDA. “Besides, I wanted you to look over the paperwork the lawyer drafted. Tell me what you honestly think.”

“You worry that I won’t be honest?”

“Never,” I say, and take her hand, leading her downstairs. I grab my briefcase and the stack of folders, taking them into the home office. I flip the lights on and drop the stack of files on top of the ones currently on my desk.

“You brought home a lot of work.”

“Not a lot, just stuff Nancy wants me to look over.”

“Nancy is...” She trails off.

“My assistant. Are you jealous?” A smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

“No.” She folds her arms across her chest, her bottom lip all pouty and sexy.

“Have you ever had sex in your office?” Clare asks, and then grimaces. “Wait, I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that.”

“Never with an employee.” I glance her up and down. Is she suggesting what I think?

She sweeps the files off my desk. The papers don’t stay together in their respective folders, instead flying haphazardly everywhere.

I groan and scramble to clean up the mess. I'm not even sure what was in the file folders and how difficult they will be to reorganize. Nancy is going to kill me tomorrow when I hand them back completely out of order with the wrong items in the wrong folders.

And if I tell her why, I'll never hear the end of it.

I'm bent down, grabbing the contents and trying to clean up what I can, keeping the pages that are still half-sorted and sticking out of their folders back in the correct order.

Clare squats down to help. "Sorry, I guess I got a little carried away." Her voice trails off as she grabs a sheet that's abandoned from its file. "You're still looking for a replacement nanny?"

"I was keeping my options open in case you decided to quit. But I don't want a replacement nanny for Amelia. I want you."

"For Amelia," she says.

"Well, I don't want you to be my nanny." I grin and pull her to her feet, forgetting the files for a moment. "I really like you, Clare, or as Amelia likes to call you, Clare Bear."

"You're going to call me that, too?" Her nose scrunches in the most adorable way, and her cheeks redden.

How could I not? My daughter has been raving about Clare Bear and how she's the best nanny and her favorite person in the whole world. Of course, minus her mother, whom she misses. Sometimes, I think Amelia even prefers Clare over me. But she does spend more time with her nanny than me.

I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her in for a hug. "I promise, my interest in hiring another nanny is non-existent. But you did tell me that you were tendering your resignation on the flight home."

"And you didn't accept."

"Doesn't mean you can't walk out the front door."

"Do you honestly think I would do that?" she asks, staring up at me.

I cup her cheek, my thumb stroking her jaw. “I hope not, but we’re still learning a lot about each other.” We’ve only been together a few weeks. It’s all still new.

“True.”

“Which reminds me, I haven’t paid you for your services as a nanny.”

She pulls back out of my reach. “What? I have a wonderful house to live in and plenty of food. I don’t need anything else.”

“Well, if I hired any of those floor nannies,” I say, gesturing toward the marble flooring and the dozens of scattered pages covering our feet, “I’d have to pay them a stipend. And seeing as how I’m about to make a generous offer to your shit-faced ex-husband, the least I can do is pay you adequately.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth shuts. She rolls her lips together. “I don’t know what to say.”

“How is two hundred thousand a year?” I ask, “And that’s just for you. Any funds that you spend on Amelia will be reimbursed.”

“It’s too much,” Clare says. “I don’t—you shouldn’t be paying me.” She slips out of my grasp, folding her arms defensively across her chest. Her brow is tight, pinched. She looks troubled.

Did I say or do something wrong?

“Why not?” I ask.

“We’re sleeping together, Levi. It feels dirty, like I’m a prostitute.”

I step closer, grabbing her hand, and pulling her to me. “We’ll stop sleeping together if that will resolve this issue.”

“You know it won’t,” she says, and glances down at our entwined hands. “Twice, we’ve fallen into bed together. It seems rather inevitable.” There’s a faint smile on her face like she doesn’t want to give that part up, and apparently, she’d rather return the money than the two of us end what we’re exploring.

“I promise, if I wasn’t sleeping with you and hired another nanny, I’d still be paying them as much to keep them. Hiring decent help costs money.”

“You’re overpaying me,” Clare says.

“Would you rather I pay you half?” I can’t believe she’s arguing and trying to talk me out of giving her a more than fair salary. It has nothing to do with the two of us sleeping together.

“No, I...” She trails off, tugging her bottom lip between her teeth.

I lean forward, kissing her, forcing her to stop the gesture, and she relaxes under my touch. “I want you, Clare. I want you in Amelia’s life. I want you in my life. And I want to pay you what you’re worth. Why can’t you accept that?”

“Okay,” she says sheepishly. “Twist my arm.”

I laugh. Leaning my forehead against hers, I brush a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Honestly, I thought you were going to choke up a million for me because you were paying a million to Zander.”

“A million you’d have accepted, but less than a quarter of that is too much?” Sometimes I can’t wrap my head around the way her mind works.

“No, I’m just saying, that was the first thought that popped into my head, and I panicked. And then when you said two hundred thousand, it still sounded like a lot. I’m rambling.”

I press my lips against hers, my hands on her hips, lifting her onto my desk. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” I say, guiding Clare onto her back.

“Yes, but honestly, can we just go up to your bedroom? That guard you hired, he can probably hear us, and honestly, I’m not into voyeurism.”

“That’s too bad. It could have been extra spicy, and we could have given him a show.”

“One that would wind up on the internet.” She smacks my shoulder and sits up.

“Nah, he signed an NDA. I trust he knows that I’d sue his ass, and he’d never get hired anywhere else.” I have a reputation for being tough but fair.

She climbs off the desk, and we grab the files and folders from the floor and stack them haphazardly on the desk. It’s going to be a mess to deal with tomorrow at work. Clare grabs a file, and the lawyer’s letter spills out, falling gracefully to the floor.

I pick it up. “This is the correspondence we plan on sending to your ex.” I let her read it, waiting for her input.

“I think it’s good. I mean, he’ll think he won the lottery with the type of offer you’re making.”

“You don’t think it’s too low?” I ask. Not that I want to give the bastard a cent, but I want the offer to be enough to turn his head and make him walk away, not challenge us for a bigger payday.

“One million dollars? He’d be crazy not to accept it.”

I stare at her. Unblinking.

She laughs, realizing that he is crazy. “It’s fine. He’ll accept it. I was married to him for six years. I know him well enough to judge that he’ll take the deal. He was a gold digger, always loved money more than me.” She pauses and her eyes flinch.

“What is it?”

“He knows that I work for you. It’s no secret that you’re a billionaire. I wonder if this was somehow his endgame all along. Try and get a massive payout.”

I shift uncomfortably at her remark.

Zander could have gone after Amelia or Clare for ransom and gotten far more than one million dollars. But that’s why I have Douglas around and a top-notch, state-of-the-art security system. The bastard wouldn’t be the only man that’s ever thought of kidnapping a family member of a billionaire.

This has to work.

And if the money isn't enough to make him walk away, there are other ways to silence him and keep him away from my family.

"How soon would he be required to leave the city?" Clare asks.

"The details are all in here." I tap the folder. "Well, they were. The first page was the basic logistics. The specifics and consequences of failure to abide by the terms in the agreement are somewhere on the floor. But he'll have seven days, or if he'd like the payment wired immediately, then he's expected to leave within twelve hours."

"That doesn't give him much time to pack."

"That's part of the agreement. We would provide movers and take care of the expense of getting his ass out of New York City. The first month's rent would be handled as part of the relocation expense package, and we'd buy out whatever term is on his lease."

"Wow."

"It's a good deal," I say.

"More than what the bastard deserves. He tormented me, terrorized me, and he gets rewarded for his behavior. It isn't fair, not by a long shot. We could tear this up, and the three of us move somewhere warm like Hawaii or the Caribbean. Can't you work from anywhere? Or we could buy a hotel in one of those exotic destinations and run it ourselves."

A smile grazes my features. "Amelia is in school, and as delightful as that thought is, I don't want to chance that this crazy ex-husband of yours chases us around the world."

"And what about if we move?" Clare asks.

"We can't forbid him from living where he wants, as long as he's nowhere near us. If we move, we'll look into his whereabouts. If he follows us, we'll fight it, and believe me, I have the best lawyers on staff."

She squeezes my hand and pulls me against her in a tight embrace. "Thank you."

I run my hand over her back in soft, soothing circles. “I’d do anything for you. I hope you know that.”

“I do,” she says with a nervous laugh.

“What?” I ask, curious what has her cheeks red.

“I just said I do.” She smiles and pinches her eyes shut. She looks like Amelia, young, carefree, without a concern in the world. I know we have a long, winding road ahead of us, but with Clare, I trust that she won’t break my heart, and I know I’ll never shatter hers.

EPILOGUE

CLARE

One Year Later

“Daddy, can I swim with the dolphins?” Amelia asks as we’re camped out on the beach in Hawaii.

The sky is bright and sunny, the air warm but not enough to demand I sink my feet into the water yet. I lounge in a beach chair, a book in my hands, but my attention isn’t on the novel.

I can’t stop staring at Levi.

He stands. His wet swim trunks cling to his body and water drips down his legs. He’s got a tan from the first two weeks of our epic vacation, and we have another two weeks together planned to island hop from Hawaii to Kauai, where it’s more remote and less busy.

I’m not sure how Amelia will do with that, but Levi insists he’s planned hikes and beach days for us.

“Let’s go!” Levi grabs Amelia and lifts her into the air above his head like she’s Supergirl as he playfully runs towards the ocean.

“Don’t let go!” she squeals as the first waves break on his legs.

“Be careful!” I shout from my beach chair. If he drops her, there will be too many tears. She’s not afraid of the water, and I’d hate for that to change.

Levi brings Amelia down to the water level, and she shrieks and giggles, probably from the temperature change. While the water isn't icy cold, it still takes a few seconds to get used to. It's not bathwater.

A few months before our trip, Levi signed Amelia up for swim lessons. She'd already had basic lessons in the past; she could tread water, but she wasn't comfortable getting her face wet. It gave the instructor a good starting point.

Now, the girl wants to swim with dolphins. I glance at my book and realize I'm not going to get another word in while the two of them are swimming in the Pacific.

Standing, I remove my sunglasses and abandon them on the beach chair with my book, while I head down to the water.

I can't believe it's been a year since I started working as Amelia's nanny. She's grown a lot, barely recognizable as she's come into her own self.

We've all changed.

And there have been changes all around us.

Connor got axed from running the Luxenberg. He still works for the company; Levi insists that if he's getting a paycheck, he's making him work. Instead, Connor is in the office, working under Levi and handling hotel chain orders for guest products like shampoos, conditioners, soaps. It's not nearly as luxurious as it sounds.

"Clare Bear!" Amelia shouts and waves to me as she sees me coming down to join them. I hurry into the water, diving between the waves, letting the droplets soak me to get used to the chill.

After a few seconds, the water feels good compared to the baking sun on my skin. My face is hot. I'm probably as red as a lobster, but Levi did put sunscreen on me, multiple times. His hands always lingering a little longer than necessary in front of Amelia's innocent gaze.

"You joined us," Levi says, beaming as he stands on the sandbar. We're not far out, but the ocean dips and then rises. In the distance, when we first got to the beach, there was old,

hardened lava rock to navigate. This beach is perfect for swimming, with soft, sandy shores, unlike a few spots earlier we investigated that turned out to be fun snorkeling enclaves but not great for lounging on the sand.

“Daddy.” Amelia swims to Levi and wraps her arms around his neck.

He holds her waist, helping her stay above water. While it isn’t deep for us, it’s still above her head if she stands.

“I’ve got you,” Levi says. “I won’t let anything happen to you, to either of you.” He stares straight into my soul, and I know he means every word.

He protected me from Zander. The offer sent by the lawyer to my ex-husband was enough to have him pack his carry-on bag and move to Mexico, where he could live lavishly.

Levi still kept tabs on him. The Eagle Tactical guys will alert us if Zander’s passport is used to enter the country.

It’s only been a year, but it’s been the best radio-silent year that I could hope for, and by the sound of it, he found himself an eighteen-year-old to obsess over, which makes me happy. His attention is no longer focused on me.

It’s like a weight has been lifted and I can finally breathe again.

“Daddy.” Amelia’s voice is sing-song, sweet and cheerful. “Can I have a baby sister?”

“You have to ask your mommy that question,” Levi says with a growing smile.

“Can we?” Amelia asks, her eyes wide. Levi not having said no apparently means yes to the kid. “You’re not getting any younger.”

My eyes widen. “Did you teach her that? Did you tell her to ask me if she can have a baby sister?” I ask, pinching Levi.

“Ow!” he squawks, and laughs, splashing me. “What was that for?”

“She didn’t learn that on her own. If you want a baby, all you have to do is ask.” I stare, grinning up at him. I’d kiss him, but Amelia is wrapped around his neck, and I don’t want her drowning while the two of us are making out like two teens with raging hormones.

“I want a baby sister!” Amelia declares. “Can we have one?”

“I meant your father,” I say, and press a kiss to Amelia’s cheek and then one to Levi’s lips. It’s soft and sweet, a promise of things to come later, tonight, while we’re in bed together.

“Can we have a baby sister?” Levi asks, his cheeks burning as he tilts his head, his blue eyes and long lashes stealing my heart.

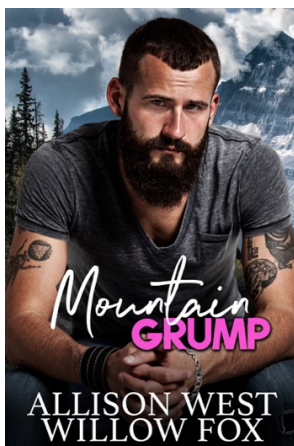
“And if it’s a boy?” I ask, smiling.

“Then I guess we’ll have to keep trying.” Levi chuckles and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

Thank you for reading Billionaire Grump. I hope you enjoyed Levi and Clare’s story.

One-click [Mountain Grump](#), the second book in the Bossy Single Dad series now!



I know she came here to judge me. Well, she can be my guest...

The average single father would probably tell you they have a lot on their plate. And they wouldn’t be lying.

But do they have an entire ski lodge to manage on top of everything else?

I don’t think so.

I might be a billionaire, but trust me, turning the Blue Sky Resort in

Breckenridge, Montana into a skier's go-to destination has been no piece of cake—not even for me.

And my 15-year-old daughter sure isn't making things easier.

Did she *have* to befriend the woman who threw a tantrum over our prices right in the middle of the gift shop?

Sure, Cali Sinclair *is* a famous resort vlogger, and Julianna just won't stop talking about apps, influencers, and social media, but would it hurt her to find another influencer to intern for?

Someone who doesn't rile me up every chance she gets?

As if that wasn't enough, the woman keeps tripping all over the place. If I'm not careful enough, before I know it, I might have a lawsuit on my hands.

For now, I just owe her dinner.

One quiet meal. One hour—maybe two—of civil conversation.

The question is, can we go one night without being at each other's throats?

To my surprise, it turns out we can.

But I'm not sure I like this outcome better...

Because now I'm starting to wish that she keeps falling.

I'll just have to be there to catch her each time...

Mountain Grump is a standalone romance with no cliffhanger, no cheating, and a happily ever after.

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And I'm thrilled to offer a sneak peek of [Expose: Jaxson](#), a spicy slow burn romance with a happily ever after.

Ariella

I ran for my life, and it was all *his* fault. Secrets had brought me over a thousand miles from home. I fled with only one thought in mind: a second chance. Starting over was my only option for survival.

I squinted through my sunglasses, shucking them to the empty passenger seat, finding it difficult to see. My vision adjusted, but the night was setting in fast as daylight fell over the horizon.

I struggled to see the narrow, snow-covered road ahead.

The streets at the bottom of the mountain had been freshly plowed and salted. The headlights on my five-speed were angled at odd intervals, casting shadows over the road covered in potholes beneath the slush.

The car jolted and bounced with my foot on the gas, splashing my scalding, stale coffee from the cup holder.

My eyes burned and welled.

“Shit!”

Tears threatened the surface, but I wouldn't cry. It wasn't the sting of blistering liquid that hurt. I'd done this to myself. I blamed him, but it was as much my fault.

Secrets surrounded my past. Benjamin Ryan had been part of those secrets, but there was more than even he knew. There were secrets I could never tell him, even as he was whisked away in handcuffs.

I packed my car with my possessions and hurried out of the state of New York. Of course, not before finding a small log cabin in the woods that I could afford in cash, sight unseen.

I also lined up a job interview at a nearby resort, but there was no guarantee of landing a position right away. My last one had ruined my life, and I couldn't even put it on my resume.

I'd have to be frugal with the few dollars left to my name, which consisted of a few ones in my wallet.

Was I bitter?

Sure as shit, but I moved on, started over, and prayed for a second chance. A fresh start is what I did, what I craved, and the only way to get that was to move.

I went back to using my maiden name: Ariella Cole. I wasn't in hiding per se. After all, I had done nothing wrong or criminal.

I couldn't say the same for him.

I didn't want to get mixed up in his illegal affairs.

I had planned on arriving at my new home before dark, but the interview had been in the afternoon at Blue Sky Resort, a ski lodge just outside of Breckenridge, Montana.

It was for a position covering other worker's shifts, everything from waitressing at the restaurant to doing housekeeping tasks and handling the ski rental equipment. I'd take whatever I could get.

The interview had seemed to go well, and they had asked to run a background check. I wasn't keen on it but I didn't have a choice, so they'd see that my ex-husband, Ben, had run up our credit. They couldn't deny me a job because of that, right?

He was serving time in federal prison for several felonies. That couldn't count against me, right?

When I'd left the resort, with my piping hot, burnt coffee, it had grown dark. The front desk attendant had given me directions since my phone died, and GPS was sketchy as to whether it worked in the mountains.

I headed for my new house, weary, tired, and worn after a lengthy interview and an even longer drive across the country. I wanted to discover my new home, climb into bed under the warm covers and sleep for a week.

The interviewer informed me they'd run my references, and I had to submit to a background check.

It sounded all good, and while I hoped the job was mine, there were no guarantees. They hadn't offered me anything yet.

I downshifted my car, but I struggled to get up the mountain.

The bald tires spun as I white-knuckled the steering wheel. The back of the vehicle fishtailed.

I downshifted again and stomped on the gas to climb the godforsaken beast of a mountain when the car slipped and slid backward downhill.

"Shit!" I screamed and stomped on the brakes hard, which only had me doing donuts as I spun and slid down the icy path of the mountain. I would have braced for impact if I had known how, but I just wanted to survive. I needed to survive.

My stomach ached with dread. My palms were sweaty, and I clung to the steering wheel, attempting to maneuver my car out of danger.

I had no control over the vehicle, like it had a mind of its own.

The car spun and smacked into a tree. The window smashed. It wasn't enough to stop the momentum from sliding down the mountain, and the back wheels skidded off the road.

By some miracle, the vehicle came to a halt. The back wheels teetered off the edge of a ravine.

The car's front appeared stable, but would it propel me downward and into oblivion if I made any sudden movements?

I glanced in the rearview mirror.

It grew darker by the minute, and I couldn't ascertain how far down the ditch went, but given the fact the entire drive up the mountain was switchbacks and dangerous, without a doubt, it was deadly.

Exhaling a soft, slow breath, I couldn't stay in the car. I needed to get help.

I hadn't seen a car on the road since I attempted to climb the damned mountain. Was there a reason for that? Did anyone live up in Breckenridge, or was I the only one crazy enough to head up there on the cusp of winter?

I probably should have traded my car in for a vehicle with all-wheel drive or a truck, but it wasn't like I could afford it.

I was strapped for cash. I spent every dime on getting to Breckenridge and paying cash for the cabin I found on one of the realtor sites online.

The place looked like a gem, backed up to a gorgeous river, and within walking distance to a few local shops in town.

This had to mean I wasn't the only one in Breckenridge, but they were smart enough not to travel at night up the mountain.

My phone was dead, and even if it had any juice left, I knew without a doubt there would be no cell service around here.

There had been no service at the bottom of the mountain. That had been when my phone still had a tiny amount of battery power.

Not that I didn't have anyone to call. My sister would expect to hear from me, but we weren't on the best speaking terms. She was pissed that I moved to Breckenridge instead of staying in New York with her.

I couldn't stay. I had to get as far away from New York and the enemies we'd made.

I glanced behind me at my knapsack. I couldn't risk reaching for it. Not until I was out of the car.

With slow precision, I unlocked the door and eased the driver's side open. I made no sudden movements.

While I'd have preferred to stay in the confines of the car that offered shelter, it teetered on the edge of a ravine. I wasn't ready to meet death.

The car creaked and groaned as I was careful to shift my weight from one foot and then the other out from the vehicle.

The vehicle didn't launch off the cliff as I had first feared. I shivered and pulled my jacket tight.

I couldn't easily open the back door from my position. The snow was several inches thick, and I had stuffed my boots in the trunk.

There was no way I could maneuver myself to grab my warm and comfy shoes. My fancy heels would have to suffice because I wasn't going barefoot. That would be even stupider in this weather.

"Okay, I can do this," I said to myself.

There wasn't another soul on the road, and I didn't even want to consider what wild animals like bears or wolves come out at night. I hadn't the slightest idea if they were nocturnal. I hoped I didn't run into any creatures because I had nothing but my hands to protect me, and well, I may as well just lie down and play dead.

Okay, so getting my bag from the backseat wasn't as easy as I thought. I exhaled a nervous breath, my stomach in knots as I climbed back into the driver's seat, reached for my knapsack in the back, along with my purse on the passenger seat.

I didn't make any sudden movements, and I backed away from the car, shut the car door, shoved my purse into the bag, and swung it over my shoulder.

My hands shook from the cold and the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I dug into my pockets, retrieving a pair of leather driving gloves. They would have to suffice.

With daylight nearly gone, I headed for the main road of the mountain.

I kept to the center of the snow-covered path. I'd probably hear something long before I'd see anything, but I wasn't holding my breath.

The moon offered the faintest bit of light to illuminate the snow-covered road.

I had no flashlight, and the darkness of night seeped in, which reminded me there wasn't a town for miles because there were no city lights nearby.

I glanced up at the heavens, the frigid night air offering way to a sparkle of stars peppering the night sky. It would be a beautiful sight if it wasn't so cold and I didn't worry about freezing to death.

My lungs hurt from the cold. With each breath inward, a thousand knives were stabbing at my lungs.

With my jacket zipped up tight, I leaned my head down toward my coat. I needed to find shelter. With sundown, the night would only grow colder.

My hands trembled even with the warmth of my gloves. The edge of the road was difficult to see with no light. It seemed even more impossible to determine if there was any evidence of shelter.

I kept walking up the mountain. The only way I could tell I was headed in the correct direction was because the wind assaulted my face, and my footprints were evidence of where I'd been.

I could no longer see my car in the distance. The broken windows may have offered little shelter from the wind, but I could have been warmer had I stayed inside the vehicle. I could also have been catapulted down the ravine had I so much as shifted the car's weight.

There was no use second-guessing my decision. I just hoped that the main road would lead off to a driveway, a house, a cabin, or some sign of civilization.

The chill of the cold brought tears to my eyes, freezing my eyelashes, stinging my cheeks. My hands were numb, and my knapsack offered no clothes. Frozen inside and out.

I stumbled over my feet.

My toes burned from the frigid air that assaulted every inch of my body. The sensation went beyond numb and tingling.

I tripped and braced myself as I hit hard-packed snow on the road, eating a mouthful. I spit out the contents as best I could.

My lips were numb, along with my cheeks.

I shivered and curled up in the fetal position in the middle of the snow-covered road. I buried my face away from the chill.

Shielding my cheeks from the cold, getting an ounce of warmth and a reprieve from the elements. I pulled my bag closer to protect me from the wind. I shut my eyes.

My body trembled, but I wasn't cold. Not like I had been earlier. Numb. Nothing but emptiness, a cold and lonely existence stabbing at me.

One-click [EXPOSE: JAXSON](#) now!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willow Fox has loved writing since she was in high school (many ages ago). Her small town romances are reflective of living in a small town in rural America.

Whether she's writing romance or sitting outside by the bonfire reading a good book, Willow loves the magic of the written word.

She dreams of being swept off her feet and hopes to do that to her readers!

Visit her website at:

<https://authorwillowfox.com>



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