



Mr.

GRUMP

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LESLIE NORTH

BILLIONAIRE BOSSHOLE

Mr. Grump

Mr. Jerk

Mr. Cocky

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Mr. Grump

BLURB

I have a confession.

I *hate* bachelorette parties.

A night of dick straws, awkward dancing and being told “it’ll be you soon, Kaitlyn!”

Especially when it’s at a super swanky Miami club, exactly where I don’t belong.

Couldn’t get any worse, right?

Enter Mr. Tall, Dark and *I-didn’t-know-they-made-people-this-gorgeous*.

Grump supreme. His scowl has a scowl.

Especially after I knock a drink onto a VIP and myself.

He must be the manager of the club because he has keys to the penthouse above it.

A penthouse he offers to let me change clothes in.

A penthouse we screw *all over*.

Then, he gets a call and kicks me out.

Told you it got worse.

Ready for worser?

First day at my new job as a nanny and Mr. Scowl is my boss.

James Morris.

Billionaire club owner, deal maker, and first grade bosshole—
if the tabloids are to be believed.

Also a single dad to an adorable daughter who needs my help.

But there's no way I can take this job—every time I look at
him, I'm back in that penthouse.

And from the way he smiles when he looks at me, he's
thinking the same.

Then he tells me why this has to work. Why he needs me.
Why I can't say no.

New confession?

I hate my boss.

MAILING LIST

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(Billionaire Bossholes Book One)

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JAMES

“Well, good evening, Mr. Morris.”

The beautiful blonde in the zippered white catsuit behind the hostess stand looked up at me through her lashes, in a way that would *almost* seem flirtatious if it weren't for my strict rules on not dating my employees. There are some boundaries that I won't cross, no matter how tempted I might be. After all, the people I hired to work for me were all carefully curated for their skills *and* looks. Some might consider the value I place on appearance to be superficial—and more than a few have accused me of just wanting eye candy for myself—but that wasn't the case. The eye candy was for my customers, not me. Looks sell, and I'm in business to make money.

I mentally scrolled through the current employee list. Was she Brandy? Or Carly? I made a point of knowing each and every name of everyone who works for me, so what was it?

Tiffany Warner. The name popped in my head right on cue.

“Good evening, Miss Warner,” I answered, my tone cool and professional. Reacting to it, she immediately straightened her back. “How are tonight's reservations? Are we busy?”

“Yes sir, very.” Tiffany cleared her throat, all business. “We have several private parties, and all of the VIP booths are booked.”

“Excellent. And is that DJ influencer here?”

“Yes sir, MC Havoc is getting set up. It’s going to be an amazing night.”

“As usual. Thank you, Miss Warner.” I gave her a curt nod and strolled into the club’s main room, which was only a quarter full.

Not that I was worried. Miami nightlife didn’t get started until after eleven, so the few people milling around the cavernous room were in no way an indication of how the evening would end up. After more than ten years and just as many clubs, I could chart the ebb and flow of a typical night like a psychic.

First, the tourists and middle-aged thrill seekers would show up, the ones who read about Bloom on some “best of Miami” website and thought that dropping in at nine for a single margarita counted as “experiencing the nightlife.” An hour or so later the rowdy groups would begin to trickle in, composed of bleary-eyed women endlessly toasting the bride-to-be and sweaty tech bros on the prowl. Finally, an hour or so after that, my bread and butter would show up. The beautiful people who don’t bother to check the price of champagne and tip the bottle service girls with hundred-dollar bills. On a good night, some of my servers might clear a grand or more in tips on top of the generous salary I pay them.

Bloom existed for that crowd—catered to exactly what they wanted, which was why I was so damn particular about who works for me. Having spent enough time throwing money around in clubs like mine, I knew what people wanted when they were looking for a good time and how to give it to them. I currently had my sights set on opening yet another club. My jaw clenched at the thought of the stalled deal. I hated waiting for anything.

After a quick walk and talk with my manager and a status report with the bar staff, I made my way to the window to check the night sky. The view from the top of one of the tallest buildings in the city was part of the reason why I bought a condo a few floors below the club, so I could *truly* enjoy it when I took a break from work.

I turned back to the club to take in the elegant space. My designer had insisted on monochromatic navy everywhere. I was glad I finally gave in, because there was nothing like Bloom in all of Miami. The low leather banquettes surrounding the dancefloor, the blue-black paint on the walls, and the chandeliers that shimmered like rain all made Bloom feel like a posh members-only club. Everything was lush and decadently comfortable—high-end and luxurious from floor to ceiling—but the minimalistic decor allowed my gorgeous clientele to take center stage.

I took a deep breath and inhaled the vibe in the room. Tonight was going to be perfect. As usual.

I didn't see her at first, the woman standing alone in the shadows. I couldn't quite make her out, but I could tell she was fidgeting, her hair obscuring her face as she checked her phone. Nervous? Upset? For some reason this stranger was a puzzle I wanted to decipher. She clearly wasn't a regular. No one from the glitterati would be caught dead in that formless black shift that hid her assets. Though when she turned I noted that not *all* of them were hidden.

Now *that* was an ass.

Unfortunately, she didn't seem to notice the server heading her way holding a tray loaded with drinks high above his head. Fernando was the handsome go-to waiter for all bachelorette parties and moms' nights out. His eyes were trained on the table filled with ladies hooting at him to hurry up when the woman in the shadows, glued to her phone, took an abrupt step forward, only to collide with him, sending the tray of drinks ...

Directly on top of Candy Ortega, the flame-haired divorcee co-owner of a fleet of car dealerships and self-proclaimed Queen of Miami.

I closed my eyes for a millisecond to compose myself. I knew exactly how this was going to play out.

Her shrieking almost drowned out the bassline. By the time I got to Candy she was nearly hopping up and down, angrily gesturing to the front of her silk blouse.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman from the shadows said. “I’ll pay for your blouse.”

“As if you could,” Candy shouted at her. “This is Versace! Brand new! Do you have any idea—”

“Candy, what’s going on? How can I help?” I asked, sliding between her and the woman.

“I’m sorry, boss,” Fernando said from his position on the floor, where he was carefully picking up the larger pieces of broken glass while he waited for a broom.

“*James!*” Candy’s tone immediately flipped to pouty. “Look at what they did to my beautiful blouse!” She jutted out her bottom lip and plucked at the fabric, which was indeed splattered with something.

Candy had been coming to my club since it opened and considered herself a founding member. She had every expectation of being treated like royalty, and my entire staff knew to comply. The amount of damage that woman could do on social media could kill my club.

“Well, that just won’t do for a beautiful woman like you,” I responded, smiling. “Rita, our wonderful ladies’ lounge attendant, has an entire dry cleaner’s closet of supplies and will get you tidied right up for the rest of the evening. All of tonight’s festivities are on me, of course, as well as a replacement blouse at Versace.”

My offer to pay was exactly what she wanted to hear. Candy Ortega was rich as hell, but she still loved a freebie.

“Why thank you, sweetheart. But only if you come shopping with me,” she purred, running her hand up and down my arm.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be much help,” I demurred. “I’m too impatient, but I’ll make sure my personal shopper Elena is there to assist.”

One of the bottle service girls swept in to deliver Candy to the ladies’ room, and I finally turned my attention to the reason for the expensive mistake, only to see her walking away.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She turned back to me looking absolutely miserable, pinching the wet fabric of her dress away from her torso. But even the sour expression on her face couldn't camouflage how stunning she was.

"That's a mess," I said, unable to come up with anything else now that she was looking at me.

"Yeah, thanks for noticing," she replied, her eyes narrowing. "Now if you'll excuse me, *I* need to clean up too."

I realized I'd been so caught up in making sure Candy was okay that I'd completely ignored her. I cleared my throat. "Rita would be happy to assist you as well. Please..." I trailed off and gestured toward the ladies' lounge.

"Not necessary, I can *assist* myself. Anyway, I don't think I'll be here long. At least I hope not."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and attempted to spin away but between the wet floor and her towering heels, she slipped. I shot to her side and caught her by the arm before she could tumble to the ground.

I wasn't expecting the eyes. When she looked up at me everything went quiet for a moment. Even in the semi-darkness I could tell they were icy blue, so clear and striking that she looked almost otherworldly. I allowed myself two seconds to take her in, especially her pert breasts peeking above the neckline of her drab dress. When I let my gaze dip lower, those blue eyes burned into me.

Whoops.

She righted herself and slipped out of reach. "I skipped my glasses *and* wore heels. Clearly the dumbest idea ever."

She was adorable. No, she was *sexy*, but not in the way most of the women who came to the club were. Instead of looking primed and shiny, the beauty in front of me was one hundred percent natural. It seemed like she wasn't wearing makeup except for the gloss on her full lips. And her hair hung below her shoulders in simple honey-colored waves, as if she'd woken up from a nap and simply run her fingers through it. There was no artifice in her, and it was irresistible.

So irresistible that I had trouble coming up with anything to say. And she didn't seem to want my help, which was refreshing. Everyone at Bloom constantly wanted something from me, whether it was a free round or the master password to our POS system.

“Katie!” A voice rang out across the room. “There you are!”

So her name was Katie? It fit.

A tornado of white ruffles and a tulle headdress crashed into Katie, enveloping her in a hug. The woman in all white pulled away quickly. “Ew, you're soaked! What in the world happened?”

I took in the gaggle of other girls in tight dresses and glowing necklaces behind her and realized that the group was one of the bachelorette parties booked that night. While we frequently hosted them, this group didn't seem to understand that Bloom was different from the clubs and bars on The Strip. Matching necklaces courtesy of the bride were common enough—but they were more likely to be made of diamonds than cheap glow strips. It made me wonder how they'd ended up here in the first place...but then I got a better look at the guest of honor and realized who she was.

“We had a little run-in, it was totally our fault,” I lied. “Cassandra, welcome to Bloom. I wish it was a smoother introduction.”

“James, hey!” She laughed as she threw her arm around Katie. “What did you do to my sister?”

I glanced between the women and saw the resemblance, though to my eyes, the lovely Katie far eclipsed her sister. But no doubt, my old frat brother, Scott, thought differently. He was Cassandra's fiancé, and it was as a favor to him that they'd gotten the reservation here.

Katie started to speak but I cut her off. “My apologies to all of you. I want to make sure you enjoy your evening, so champagne is on Bloom tonight, ladies.” I pulled out my phone and quickly dashed off a text to let my staff know.

The group *woo*-ed and pushed closer to me. To my surprise, Katie was the only one who didn't seem pleased about the upgrade.

"That's what I'm talking about," the bride-to-be whooped, shooting me a smile. "Thank you so much!"

"There's more. I'm upgrading you to the Night Sky Suite, which has a private powder room and a prime VIP banquette above the dancefloor."

The shout from the ladies was almost deafening. What I didn't want to let on was that the suite, which was normally reserved for celebrities, would give me a prime view of the group for the rest of the night.

Because for some reason I wanted to keep my eye on Katie.

The other women chattered amongst themselves, and Katie stepped closer to me, her eyes locked on mine. "You didn't have to do that. *I owe you* for the drinks I spilled, not the other way around."

She stared up at me, waiting for me to respond, but once again I found myself rendered speechless by her. She started to frown, and I finally managed to recover.

"Nonsense, I'm happy to help make your sister's celebration even more special. Your evening got off to a rough start, but I want this to be a night to remember. For all of you." I held her gaze for a beat longer than necessary.

"Well, thank you. I appreciate it." Katie finally managed the smallest grin, and I felt myself smiling back at her like a schoolboy with a crush. "But are you sure it's okay? It won't get you in trouble with the boss?"

Ah, so she didn't realize I owned the club? That was adorable—and refreshing. Finally, a woman in my club who *didn't* know by sight everyone who showed up in the society pages. "Don't worry about the boss," I assured her. "I've got it covered."

She smiled a little hesitantly. "All right, then, if you say so. I just hate that I caused such a fuss. Honestly, this dumb club

scene is more Cassie's thing than mine, but I've got no choice. Maid of Honor duties."

I ignored her accidental slight about my club and opened my mouth to respond, but Cassandra grabbed her by the arm.

"We need to get some drinks *in* you instead of *on* you, so let's go!"

"Duty calls," Katie shrugged, looking unsteady in her heels as she allowed herself to be dragged away. "Thanks again."

The group followed one of my servers to the suite and I had duties of my own to attend to.

I finally tracked down my floor manager Ted to fill him in.

"Hey, boss," he said when he finally looked up from his tablet. "Everything good?"

"Yup, we are now. Listen, the group I'm putting in the Night Sky are VIPs from here on out, okay?"

"Okay." He glanced past me to the open area overlooking the dancefloor. "I don't recognize any of them. Should I?"

I shook my head. "It's a favor for a friend. I upgraded them since the suite is open tonight. One of them had a run-in with Fernando and a tray full of drinks, so please send a stack of wash cloths, a couple of bottles of seltzer, and some towels up there."

"Done. You staying until close tonight?"

"If you guys need me."

My staff knew that when I was on premise I was there to help. I believed in the value of work. I enjoyed it. I let my eyes wander to the VIP suite where Katie was hanging over the railing staring at the dancefloor while the rest of her group was jumping on the banquettes.

Especially when I had a view like *that*.

KAITLYN

I quickly discovered that it was almost impossible to have fun while wearing a cold, wet bra.

Despite the half dozen napkins I'd used to mop myself up, I felt like a used dishtowel. Still, I wasn't even tempted to take up the hot guy's offer to visit the lounge since I was afraid to run into the red-haired demon again. And I wasn't about to let on that I was uncomfortable to the other girls. There was no way I wanted to ruin my little sister's bachelorette party, so I suffered in silence—not just around my cleavage but everywhere else, too. My feet were killing me.

The rest of the girls looked so at home in their dresses and heels, but this getup was so far from my every day. Given my job, flats—or better yet, sneakers—were a way of life. But I had wanted to at least try to fit in for the night. I'd even skipped my glasses, which was exactly why I was in this mess. I hadn't seen the waiter-shaped blob right in my path until it was too late.

“Time for games!” Cassie's oldest friend Maddy shouted, holding her champagne glass above her head while the rest of the girls screamed and cheered. “Let's play ‘Never Have I Ever’!”

I choked down a groan and managed a smile then jumped up to refill everyone's glasses.

“The bride goes first,” Cassie said, shimmying her shoulders with a wicked smile on her face. “Okay, never have I ever... had a one-night stand!”

The group laughed knowingly, and I watched every one of the six women take a gulp of champagne. My glass remained on the table in front of me.

“Katie!” Hope shrieked, and I tried not to wince. The volume was...extreme, but also, I didn’t actually like the nickname Katie. Cassie got little-sister privileges, so I didn’t mind it from her, but I preferred going by my full name, Kaitlyn. Trying to explain that to Cassie’s friends when they were drunk didn’t seem likely to go well, so I let it slide. “Seriously? *Never?*”

“Well, you need to define one-night stand...” I managed, feeling my face flush with heat. “I mean, I’ve like, kissed guys I just met, and one time a guy felt me up on the dancefloor.”

“One-night stand means fucking,” Nia said simply. “It means finding a hot guy, taking him home, and fucking his brains out.”

The cackling was loud enough to turn heads in the lounge next to us.

“Well, no, then I guess I haven’t.”

“There’s always tonight,” Hope said, raising her glass to me. “The guy who hooked us up with this suite was *hot!* And he couldn’t stop staring at you.”

I felt my face go warm again. So I *hadn’t* been imagining it. It didn’t seem possible that the tall, dark, and incredibly handsome stranger would want anything to do with me. The woman I’d knocked the drinks onto had clearly been all over him, and she outclassed me by just about every metric I could think of. And yet I had the distinct sense that he’d been very... focused. On me.

And of course, I hadn’t been able to help noticing him. Who could? He was tall, way taller than me even in heels. His black shirt was cut to show off that he was lean but well built, and that face looked like it should be selling cologne or fancy wristwatches or the kind of liquor that costs a month’s paycheck. Perfect features, a flawless smile, and the most electric blue eyes I’ve ever seen. *Intensely* blue. And just

intense in general. Each time his eyes landed on me I had to look away. When he turned his full attention to me, it felt like I was trapped in a force field. There was something about his confidence, the way he acted like he just knew he could make everything right...it was almost as sexy as the way he looked.

Of course I'd been an absolute dork the entire time we talked. I could barely get any words out, and I kept hunching over to keep the wet fabric away from my body. I didn't even want to imagine what he must think of me. So it was a good thing I didn't care, right? Because hot or not, that guy didn't matter. I was here for Cassie, and I was absolutely not looking to hook up. At all. Definitely not.

"What?" I asked Cassie, who was staring at me.

"You need to loosen up," she said, narrowing her eyes at me. It made her look like our mother, and I shook off a shiver at the thought.

"I'm loose!" I lied. "Do you want me to dance on the table or something?"

"You're so focused on grad school that you're forgetting to live your life and have fun."

"Well, grad school is sort of important, Cassie," I replied, chafing at the scolding. I was *here*, wasn't I? Out at the last kind of place I'd ever choose to spend time at, just to make her happy. Why wasn't that enough?

"And I get that, but you can still break out and get a little crazy now and then. It might be good for you," Cassie said, her tone gentler. "Say yes to something new."

"Yeah, and you can start by tracking down that dude," Hope snorted. Then she punched the air and started chanting. "Find that man! Find that man!"

Encouraged by the free-flowing champagne, the rest of the women joined the chant.

"Stop, stop!" I couldn't keep myself from laughing at their encouragement. "Enough, you guys."

The chant quieted and they moved onto the next question.

“Okay, my turn. Never have I ever...” Nia began. “Hm, I’m thinking I want to bring up threesomes but maybe it’s still too early?”

I hopped up as everyone groaned. “On that note, please excuse me. I have to hit the bathroom to dry out the insides of my shoes.”

They tried to make me feel bad about leaving in the middle of the game, but I wasn’t having it. I needed a quick breather from the *fun*. I loved my sister, and her girlfriends were all amazing women, but I just wasn’t in the right headspace to have it rubbed in my face all the ways in which my sex life fell short compared to theirs.

To be honest, my sex life fell short compared to just about anyone’s. I was so dead set on making the money to pay for grad school without resorting to student loans that I barely had time for anything else. Thank God for the new temporary gig I’d just lined up. Six months of private, in-house service for a rich family would set me up nicely.

I threaded through the crowd that seemed to have multiplied since we’d arrived. The music was intense, and the dancefloor was crowded with beautiful people. Cassie and the rest of them would eventually find their way out there, and I was *definitely* not going to take part in that portion of the evening. But hiding out in the bathroom didn’t seem like a good long-term plan either...

I spotted a door that opened to a balcony that was mercifully empty and made a break for it, sliding the door closed behind me and drinking in the peace. The skyline shimmered in the distance, thousands of tiny gemstones twinkling against a blanket of black. It was odd that no one else was drawn outside to admire the beautiful view.

I closed my eyes and tried to talk myself into going back to the madness just beyond the door. Maybe I could tell my sister I had a headache and the lights were making it worse.

“Quite a view, huh?”

I jumped and squealed at the unexpected voice, then tried to make out the form walking toward me in the darkness.

It was *him*.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, leaning on the railing next to me, giving me a quick glance and then gazing out at the skyline. “Are you all dried off?”

I recovered enough to answer. “Sort of? No matter how much toweling off I do I feel like I’m going to be rosé all day *and* all night.”

He chuckled.

“You’re Katie, right? And I’m James.” He held out his hand and I shook it, shocked by the way it swallowed mine. It was surprisingly soft.

I couldn’t quite manage to tell him that no one called me Katie but my sister, because I was back to the can’t-find-my-words idiot I’d been when I met him. He looked even better close up, his hair inky blue-black in the dim light and the planes of his face highlighted by the moon. He was hands-down the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen, and he was *right* beside me. I fought the urge to peek at the way his pants fit around his ass as he leaned over.

James filled the silence. “Having fun?”

I shrugged. “Not really?”

“I can tell,” he nodded, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. “You seem...I don’t know, out of place, maybe?”

I whirled to face him. I knew I didn’t exactly fit in, but I didn’t think I stood out *that* badly. “*Excuse me?*”

“No offense,” he backpedaled, his forehead creasing. “Not everyone likes the club scene. I can usually tell fairly quickly who wants to be here and who doesn’t. And I just got the sense you’d rather be out here under the stars instead of inside rubbing elbows with them.”

“Well...you’re right. Crowds make me feel a little overwhelmed, and the noise...” I made circles with my hands near my ears. “It gets to be too much after a while.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

I frowned at him. “You work here, you deal with it every day.”

“Exactly, it’s *work*. But life happens out here.” He gestured to the horizon.

We both stared out at it in silence for a few minutes. Instead of feeling odd I felt...comfortable. James seemed like he was more than happy to escape the madness to drink in the moonlight with me.

“Whoops, looks like the lone glass of red wine on that tray got you,” he said, pointing to the back of my shoulder. “You missed a spot.”

I craned my neck to try to see what he was pointing at. Before I could stop him he used his thumb to swipe at the stain, sending a shiver along my spine.

“Stubborn,” he said, rubbing a little harder.

I leaned into his hand, relishing the way it felt to be touched by a man, even if he was just cleaning me up out of courtesy.

He turned my body gently, placing his hands on my upper arms, and leaned closer to examine my skin in the faint light sifting out from the club. “There we go,” he murmured, slowly dragging his thumb where the stain had been, his voice a whisper warming my shoulder. “Perfect.”

I felt like my knees were about to give out, but I fought against every instinct and turned to him so our faces were just inches apart.

“Thank you,” I managed, willing myself not to move away, despite the butterflies dancing in my stomach.

His eyes darted to my lips. My breath went shallow and shaky as we both paused, waiting for the next moment to unfold.

This wasn’t my life. Standing on the balcony of a glamorous nightclub with a guy who looked like he dated supermodels but for some reason seemed incredibly interested in little old me.

“I’d like to kiss you,” he murmured, moving closer still. It wasn’t a request, it sounded like he was letting me know something that we both understood was inevitable.

I heard Cassie’s voice in my head urging me to live a little, and before I realized what I was doing, I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

He smiled against my mouth, like he was surprised but pleased that I made the first move, then he relaxed into the kiss.

We remained hands-off for the first few seconds as our mouths came together, as if giving each other the chance to back away. But when I let my tongue dart into his mouth he groaned and circled his arms around my waist, drawing me closer. I linked my hands behind his neck, wishing I could freeze the moment.

Because I’d never been kissed this way.

It blotted out everything around me, so that all I could focus on was the way his lips felt pressed against mine. He was tender, kissing me softly at first like I was precious, then more forceful, pushing his body against mine and tightening his grip on my waist. The longer we kissed the more frantic I felt, because it couldn’t end yet.

I needed to feel his hands all over my body.

We managed to pull apart at almost the exact moment, breathing in heavy tandem. I felt shocked that a kiss could leave me so undone, but then again, it wasn’t a normal kiss. It was a promise of more to come.

We spoke at the same time too, our jumble of breathy words tripping on top of each other.

“You first,” I whispered, trying hard not to kiss him again before he could say what he needed to say.

“I asked if you wanted to come downstairs to my place,” he murmured, then leaned in to kiss me again before I could answer, as if he needed to try to convince me.

“Yes,” I whispered against his mouth, “...but kiss me again, first.”

With a grin, he complied. Suddenly his hands were everywhere, racing along the bare skin of my back and inching the hem of my dress up my legs. It didn't matter that we were just a few feet away from crowds of people who could probably see us. I peeked around him to find the windows covered with blinds that hadn't been there when I walked out, so we had complete privacy.

"How did ...?" I pointed to the obscured windows.

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve," he said with a wicked grin.

"And I can't wait to show you more of them. But ..."

"But what?"

"Before we go," James grasped my arms and looked down at me with a serious expression. "I just want to avoid confusion. I very much want to share a night with you, but that's all I can offer. I understand if that's not what you're looking for." The corner of his mouth kicked up. "I'll be very disappointed, but I'll understand."

Instead of answering him I went up on my tip toes and pushed my lips to his. He smiled against my mouth again, then started walking backward toward a door hidden behind a grouping of decorative trees, never breaking off the kiss. It felt like we were dancing, step for step.

As we tumbled through the door, I got ready to say yes to whatever was going to happen next.

KAITLYN

Why hadn't I done this before?

I looked over at the perfect man dozing beside me in the darkness and stifled a giggle. I barely knew him, and he'd managed to give me not one, not two, but three orgasms since we'd stumbled into his place. First with his fingertips as we rushed to strip off our clothes, then with his tongue after he'd thrown me on the bed, and finally with his impressive cock. I could still feel the tingly aftershocks of our lovemaking.

Or *fucking*, I guess I should say. Because according to the bachelorette party girls, that's what happened during a one-night stand. Whatever word was assigned to it, it had been *fantastic*. If all one-night stands were like this, then I really had been missing out.

A Cheshire Cat smile crept onto my face. I debated telling the girls that the deed was done or keeping it to myself, a sexy, delicious secret I'd revisit any time my own fingertips needed an assist.

I rolled onto my side to stare at James. His arm was draped across his face so that most of it was obscured beneath his bicep. I tingled remembering how easily James had lifted and moved me as we explored one another. He was powerful and gentle in a way I'd never experienced. One second I was pinned beneath him, helpless as he devoured me, and the next I was riding on top of him, making him beg for more with the motion of my hips.

I couldn't wait to do it again.

His steady breathing quieted and he slid his arm away from his eyes, catching me staring.

“Hey there,” he whispered, a playful smile teasing the corner of his mouth.

“Hey.”

“That was fun.” James reached over to run his finger down my cheek, smoothing a tendril of hair away.

“That’s one way to put it.”

His light touch was all it took to rev me up again. I slid closer to him and kissed his gorgeous mouth as heat spread throughout my body and pooled between my legs.

“Again?” He laughed against my mouth and slid his arm beneath me. In a single, effortless motion he rolled me on top of him so I could feel that at least one part of him was definitely on board with another round.

“Well, only if you have the time,” I murmured, teasing him with a few slow undulations. “I did steal you away from work. The club doesn’t close for a few hours, and your boss might be looking for you.”

He laughed and bucked his hips up against me. “Still haven’t figured it out? I *am* the boss. I own Bloom.”

I froze. “Seriously?”

He paused to study my face. “Yeah. Is that a problem?”

No wonder he could snap his fingers and make things happen. No wonder his penthouse was practically on the premises and looked like it belonged in a magazine spread. James was in a totally different league.

“No, of course not,” I recovered quickly. “Especially if it means you don’t have to rush back, so we can go a few more rounds.”

I leaned down to kiss him, my nipples brushing against the hair sprinkled along his chest. I paused, dragging my tongue along his lips, then placed my hand on his pec and pushed back so I was sitting directly on top of his hardness. It took all

my strength not to slip him inside of me. But he's not *quite* hot enough to make me forget all about practical matters like condoms. Close, but not quite.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," he breathed, reaching up to cup my breasts. James ran his thumbs across my nipples, and I fought the urge to purr with pleasure. "Have I told you that?"

Laughter bubbled out of me. "You have, about a hundred times. But I don't mind." I straightened my back and tried to look serious. "Say it again."

"You're *gorgeous*."

I squeezed my thighs against him. "Again."

"You're absolutely breathtaking, Katie, but I'm not taking orders from you this time."

With that he flipped me onto my back and caught my wrists in his hands, pinning them above my head. I squirmed in protest, but he shook his head.

"Uh, uh, young lady. This time I'm making the rules."

He pushed against me, teasing along the wetness between my legs. I slid my thighs farther apart and was shocked by the whimper that escaped from me as he bumped even closer to me.

I was desperate for him.

"Hold on," he said, reaching toward the nightstand for a condom. How he managed to slip it on so quickly was beyond me, but the next thing I knew he was poised above me again.

"Do you want this?" James whispered, raising his hips to place the tip of his cock against my swollen nub.

"Please." I didn't care that I sounded like I was begging.

He slipped his hand down between my legs and touched me with a steady, circular pressure, already aware of how easily he could get me to come. "Or do you want this?"

"Yes...no...*both*," I managed as he coaxed me along.

He continued caressing me with his fingertips as he slid his hardness inside of me. The sensation of him filling me while he expertly massaged my clit was almost too much to bear. I squeezed my eyes shut as my muscles contracted, silent, focused, until the orgasm ripped through me.

I didn't recognize the noises that came out of me.

"I love to hear you come," he whispered in my ear. "Now it's my turn."

He rocked against me as the sensations of my climax first faded and then immediately started building again. I could hear his breath going shallow against my ear, and I knew he was close.

Until the loudest ring I'd ever heard sounded off on the nightstand beside us.

"Shit," he exclaimed. He paused, seeming to weigh the nearness of his orgasm with the potential importance of the call, then pulled away from me with a frustrated sigh.

He answered the phone at the edge of the bed with his sweat-glistened back toward me.

"This better be important," he barked as a greeting. I could hear indistinct chatter in the background as James stood up abruptly. "Okay. Fine. Yes."

With those three words, the temperature in the room shifted to ice cold. I pulled the sheet over me as James sprinted out of the room.

It was two thirty in the morning. What the hell was going on?

I debated getting dressed, but I opted to wait until James came back to explain what had happened. Maybe it was a minor club issue that could be fixed quickly, and he'd come back to bed to finish what we'd started.

A few minutes later he strode into the room, fully dressed and looking harried.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, clutching the sheet against my naked body.

He swiveled to me abruptly, like he'd forgotten I was there—an impression that was only reinforced by his next words.

“You need to leave.”

A wave of shock and humiliation flooded through me. Was this some sick rich boy game? Fuck the clueless girl and then drop-kick her out the door? But his change in personality didn't make sense; he'd seemed so sincere just a few minutes before. What had happened between us felt...real. Or was I just fooling myself, believing that? Would someone else, someone more experienced, have known better?

I snapped my gaping mouth shut. “*Excuse me?*”

“Grab your stuff, please. I have something I need to take care of.”

He strode away, typing on his phone in the dim light from the hallway, giving me privacy to pull myself together.

Where was my damn dress? I chewed on my lip as I remembered him whipping it off my body and tossing it across the main room just inside the door. At least my bra and panties were close by in a pile by the bed. I gathered them and shut the bathroom door behind me.

I glanced in the mirror. Any of the post-sex glow I might've had was lost to shock over what had just happened. I looked pale, disheveled. *Embarrassed*. I slipped my undies on and washed up a little before steeling myself for whatever confrontation was about to go down with James as I searched for my missing dress.

I tiptoed out of the bathroom stupidly holding one arm across my chest in an attempt at modesty, as if James hadn't just had his lips on my nipples. But everything was different now. I had been harshly reminded that the man who'd just spent hours teasing and complimenting me was a stranger.

I easily remembered where I'd taken off my shoes. James had asked me to keep them on as he dove between my legs. I'd kicked them off near the bed after my second orgasm.

You need to leave.

His words echoed in my head as I crept through his massive penthouse. There was no telling where he might be, but all I knew was that I was happy he was making himself scarce. I already felt hurt and humiliated, and I didn't imagine the situation would improve at all after a confrontation with him. I tiptoed down the hallway toward the main room.

Where the hell was that stupid, wine-stained dress that had gotten me into this nightmare? I was too mortified to take in the opulence around me, too pissed at myself for falling for a hot billionaire's lines. *This* was exactly why I didn't have one-night stands.

I replayed the first few harried moments as we crashed through the door to try to remember exactly where I'd shed my dress. James had been kissing me, his hands sliding the thin fabric up my body. I involuntarily shuddered as a sense memory of his touch rolled through me. *No!* I wasn't going to let the animal instinct short circuit my brain. Focus.

There, in a puddle of black next to the grand piano, was the ruined thing. I slipped my dress on, happy that it was finally dry. Now all I needed was my purse. I spied it upside down next to the door.

What a mess.

Dressed and ready to go, I paused with my hand on the doorknob. His voice echoed down the hallway. For a moment I considered giving him a piece of my mind for the way he'd acted. But then I realized something.

James didn't owe me a thing.

This wasn't a relationship, it was a one-night stand and he'd said as much. We'd made no promises to each other. Sure, he'd acted like a complete asshole right there at the end, but at least I'd gotten off one last time and he'd been left hanging. I hoped his blue balls were throbbing.

It was a tiny victory, but it was what I carried with me as I slammed the door. I wasn't going to let a billionaire playboy get the best of me. I held my head high as I strode down the long hallway and realized that I had no clue where the elevator

was. We'd never stopped kissing from the second the elevator doors closed until we crossed the threshold into his apartment.

I hoped he wasn't laughing at me from a surveillance room in his penthouse. Maybe this was part of his game, watching me scamper around the halls like a rat in a maze.

When I finally found my way out, I realized that I was absolutely exhausted. I'd texted Cassie before I'd stolen away with James, and when I checked my phone I found text after text from the girls, giving me emoji high fives for what they assumed was going down. The last text was from fifteen minutes prior, a photo of Hope pouring champagne into Cassie's mouth.

Should I go back to the club?

Absolutely not. The potential of running into James canceled out any desire to go back to the party. Not that I even wanted to. I was wrung out, physically and emotionally.

I dashed off a quick text to Cassie and added Nia to it, knowing that she was probably the most sober in the group at the moment. Told them I was fine but tired and I'd catch up with them tomorrow. A few seconds later a string of nonsensical emojis showed up from Cassie followed by a thumbs up from Nia.

I was free to go.

The elevator doors opened to the ground floor and even though I wanted to run from the place my stupid heels forced me into a clumsy speed walk. When I finally made it outside, I took a gulp of air and leaned against the side of the building.

I knew this feeling, of being tossed out like I didn't matter. Never again.

A taxi appeared out of nowhere and I flagged it down, grateful that I'd soon be home in bed. There was at least a little bit of comfort in leaving this night in the rearview mirror. It was over now, and I'd never have to see that asshole again.

JAMES

Miguel gave me a quick salute as I sped up the driveway, my security guard as diligent as always, even in the middle of the night. Having him on site helped with many of my concerns, but there were some safety issues Miguel wasn't capable of addressing. I peered in the rearview mirror to make sure the iron gate at the end of the driveway swung closed behind me. Couldn't be too careful.

I took the marble steps to my front door two at a time, scanning the windows and glass door to see if I could spot them. The second I stepped into the foyer, I heard the wailing.

"Harper, honey, I'm here," I shouted, my voice echoing around the space. "Jess? Where are you?"

Her footsteps echoed down the hall long before I saw her.

Jessica came around the corner clutching Harper, her cheek pressed against my daughter's white-blond hair. Seeing Harper's tiny face, red and splotchy, fractured my heart for the millionth time.

"See? I told you he'd be home soon," Jessica cooed, stroking her back. My wild-child sister was shockingly good at comforting her niece. "Auntie Jess would never lie to you."

"Thanks," I mouthed as she shifted Harper into my arms.

"Daddy," she hiccupped, snuggling into my neck. "I had another bad dream."

Jess nodded, her mouth in a tight line. "It's been l-o-u-d and i-n-t-e-n-s-e," she spelled out so Harper wouldn't understand.

“Like nothing I’ve experienced.”

We were both used to speaking in code about Harper’s issues. My baby girl had been having a rough time of it for a while now—but hopefully the latest hiring decision I’d made would help with that. *Something* had to get better. The situation wasn’t sustainable.

I stomped down the guilt at not being there for my daughter. Harper was finally calming in my arms, her breathing evening out to occasional hiccups. “Thank you for looking after her tonight, Jess. You can head out now if you want.”

She pulled out her phone to check the time. “No way, I’m too tired to drive.”

We exchanged a glance. Jess and late-night driving weren’t a great combination.

“Your room is always ready, feel free.” I jutted my head toward the staircase. “Will you stay for breakfast with us?”

She yawned. “I’ll never turn down Bernardo’s huevos rancheros, you know that. And we need to talk, so give me a few minutes before you rush out the door tomorrow. Good night, you two.”

Harper pulled back and pouted up at me. “I’m hungry. Can you get Bernardo to make me something?”

“Honey, Bernardo’s left for the day. But I can do it. Anything you want!”

She frowned. “Daddy, you don’t know how to cook.”

“Well, that’s not true. I can cook cereal. And a bowl of fruit. And pretzels.”

The beginnings of a smile played around Harper’s mouth. “That’s not cooking!”

“Hm, let’s think... Oh, I can also cook *ice cream!*” I rocked her back and forth and finally coaxed a laugh out of her. The juxtaposition of her tear-stained face and crooked smile was an all-too-familiar sight, but I still wasn’t used to my daughter’s shifting emotions. I never knew when the storms would show up.

“Yes, ice cream, Daddy!”

“Off we go, then,” I said, galloping down the marble hallway to the kitchen, my exhaustion forgotten in my efforts to cheer her. The sound of her laughter echoing around me was enough to convince me we’d weathered this storm—at least for now.

After depositing Harper on the wide center island in the kitchen, I got to work opening and closing cabinets, looking for the right bowls. Thanks to Bernardo, it wasn’t like I spent much time in here. Why did I have so many different sized wine glasses? And how many plates were enough for a family of two?

But then again, everything in my house was outsized. I’d wanted a beautiful spot to raise my daughter and I’d gotten it. Our home looked like an Italian villa, with tall arched windows and a half dozen balconies off the back that overlooked the pool and the blue waters of Biscayne Bay. It was paradise, but since the incident, it had felt a little closer to hell on earth.

“Bowls are over there, Daddy,” Harper laughed, pointing to a cupboard on the other side of the room.

I winced at the reminder that my daughter knew where the bowls were because she was spending too much time in the kitchen. My housekeeper, Vida, had been filling in as nanny temporarily. I felt horrible asking it of her, knowing how busy she was, but she was one of the few people Harper still trusted.

Now wasn’t the time to think about it.

“Two ice cream sundaes, coming right up!” I said, holding the bowls in the air. At least I knew where we kept the damn ice cream. I pulled open the doublewide Subzero and surveyed our many choices. “Chocolate, Miss Morris?”

“Yes please. With sprinkles and chocolate sauce. And whippy.”

“*Oui, oui*, whipped cream, of course,” I replied in a French accent as I collected the rest of the ingredients. Long ago, before the incident, Harper had been learning French with a private tutor. Back when she was just an eager, clever little girl

who trusted everyone and didn't realize there were bad people out there. How I missed that version of her.

I scooped tiny servings into each bowl, hiding the fact that it wasn't much ice cream under some artfully arranged whipped cream. It was three thirty in the morning and neither of us needed anything too rich on our stomachs before trying to go back to sleep.

"Can we eat it in your room, Daddy?"

I paused with a spoonful of sprinkles hovering over the bowl, a scandalized look on my face. "Ice cream? In *bed*?"

She nodded, her little face glowing with hope.

"Well, I suppose I could make that happen. If you insist."

"I in-sits!" she shot back, slapping a little hand on the counter.

"Done," I said, palming the bowls in one hand and sweeping her off the counter with the other.

Harper stole a spoon from the bowl and licked it as I carried her up the back stairs to my room. My bedroom was one of my favorite spots in the house, and now it seemed it was Harper's as well, despite the fact that hers was a sparkly pink dream. She hadn't slept in it since the kidnapping.

I nudged open the door with my elbow and was greeted by the lights turned low, just the way I liked them. After the music and energy of my clubs, I appreciated the Zen-like tranquility of the space. There were few decorations, just a series of simple Japanese prints, a potted tree, and windows everywhere. I'd had my bed specially made, low enough that I could trip into it at the end of a long day and wide enough that I could fit a few friends if I wanted. Tonight, it was the perfect spot for an ice cream party.

I settled next to Harper and began the delicate dance of asking about her day, hoping I could ease my way into the reason for her latest breakdown.

"I had a very busy day today," I said, digging into the ice cream. "But it was good. I like being busy."

Katie's shocked face flashed through my mind, and I felt a flash of regret. I'd been so caught up in my concern for Harper that I'd been abrupt with her, practically kicking her out of my bed. I wished there was a way I could apologize to her, but odds were good I wouldn't be seeing her again. Maybe that was for the best. As I had told her, I didn't have room in my life for anything more than one-night stands. Not when Harper needed so much of my attention. But the time I'd spent with Katie was almost enough to make me second-guess that decision. A heat came over me, remembering how we'd connected. I'd had more random hookups than I could count, but there was something about Katie that felt different.

"I was busy with Aunt Jessie too," Harper said with her mouth full of whipped cream. "We went swimming, then we colored, then we tried to catch birds."

"You *what?*" My sister was always coming up with insane childcare ideas.

"Yup, we got a box and tied a string on it and put it up on a stick and then put some bread underneath it. Then we hid behind a tree and waited."

"And did you catch anything?"

She shook her head, her platinum curls swinging. "Nuh uh, but we almost did!"

"Maybe next time," I said, polishing off my too-small bowl.

"That's what Aunt Jessie said!"

"She's a smart lady." In some things, anyway. Less so in others. "So...can you tell me what happened tonight? Why you got upset?"

Harper pushed her bowl away and leaned against my arm. "I had a bad dream," she whispered.

She didn't immediately shut me down, which I appreciated, but I knew to tread carefully. "What was it about?"

She went silent for a few minutes, and I waited her out, stroking her arm.

“I dreamed I was back in the little room and she wouldn’t let me come home.” Harper’s voice was thin.

Of course. There was no doubt who the monster was plaguing my daughter’s dreams. Emily Duncan, the nanny I’d hired to watch Harper, had turned out to be a desperate opportunist who’d looked at my daughter as her meal ticket out of crippling gambling debt. She’d passed our background checks, but not long after I’d hired her, her addiction had spiraled out of control. Emily’s kidnap and ransom plan was never going to be successful, but she’d been wily enough to steal Harper away to a cheap motel in Fort Lauderdale for three harrowing days. I still had flashbacks to the terrifying time, so I could only imagine the scars Harper carried from it.

They manifested in night terrors, panic attacks, and an unwillingness to set foot off the property. She felt safe behind the walls, with people she knew and trusted nearby. But part of the problem was that she’d trusted Emily, and now Harper didn’t know how to function around new people. On Monday, the therapist I’d hired would start. I could only hope she would be able to make progress, because I hated seeing my outgoing child stunted by fear.

“Honey, I’m sure that dream was scary, but you know that’s all in the past, right?” I leaned over and kissed the top of her baby shampoo-scented hair. My heart seized at the thought of something happening to her. “You’re safe. I promise.”

“But...what if she comes back?” Harper looked up at me with wide eyes. “What if she tricks Miguel and Vida, and gets into the house, and *takes* me?” Her breathing got faster, and I worried that another breakdown was coming on.

“Shh, shh,” I said pulling her onto my lap. “That’s not going to happen. Emily can’t get to you now.”

“But what if her *mom* comes and takes me?” Harper wrapped her arms around me and hugged tight, like she was afraid I was going to disappear.

My daughter had a curious understanding of parental relationships, mostly based on what she’d picked up from storybooks and TV shows. Her own mother, Nicole—a short-

term fling who unexpectedly ended up pregnant—had given up her rights to her. Nicole’s parents had made an effort to be a part of their granddaughter’s life, but Nicole herself had kept her distance. Harper was close to *my* mom, but the fact that she didn’t have a mother of her own left her a little confused about what mothers meant and what they could and would do for their children.

“Not going to happen, I promise, promise, promise.” The triple promise had become my mantra, and it usually worked. “I’ll *always* keep you safe.”

Except the one time I hadn’t. There had been no way for me to predict what Emily was going to do, but I still carried the guilt of what had happened to my daughter. What I hadn’t been able to prevent.

“Okay, Daddy,” Harper replied, her voice softer and thick with fatigue.

I didn’t move, hoping she was finally settling into sleep. My bed had become *our* bed, so once her breathing evened out I pulled back the sheet and tucked her in. It was late, or early, and I was exhausted too. I gingerly scooted down and placed my head on the pillow next to her, still in my dress shirt and pants, and finally drifted off to a mercifully dreamless sleep.

KAITLYN

“Tell me where you’re headed again,” Adam said as I handed him the keys to my apartment. I was lucky to find a subletter that I knew and trusted. “Temporary private counseling?”

As a fellow counselor at the New Horizons Clinic, Adam was well aware I couldn’t get into the specifics of my new gig—but he was also an avid gossip, so I wasn’t surprised he was pushing for as much info as I was willing to share. “Yup. It’s a six-month position and it pays well enough to get me finally ahead of some of those student loan payments.”

“Lucky you,” he said, glancing at the last two boxes stacked in the sunny lobby of my apartment building.

“Yeah, it sort of feels like a dream job. I’m excited.”

I was more than excited. After reading through the case files, I was convinced that I could make a difference with the patient. Plus, it was a chance to reset the course of my life. I’d finally be done treading water, living paycheck to paycheck. I would be one step closer to my PhD and eventually opening my own private practice.

“Where is it?”

I bit my lip before answering. If Adam had been envious before, he was about to turn positively green.

“Indian Creek Island.”

His eyes bugged out behind his glasses. “Are you kidding me? Billionaire Bunker? I bet that case is a doozy. More money,

more problems. Doesn't matter what the kid is facing, I'm guessing you'll be dealing with narcissistic tendencies or paranoid personality disorder in the parent—and maybe in the kid, too.” He let out a low whistle. “Hmm, could it be early onset ADHD? OCD?”

“You're not even close, but that's all I can say.”

The truth was I could've sketched out the big picture for him, but I'd always gone above and beyond to protect the privacy of my patients. Even though I hadn't met this one yet, I was already invested. My heart had ached as I'd read through the case file.

“Don't worry, I'll take good care of your apartment while you're off coddling the richies,” Adam said with a smirk. “Are they putting you up somewhere?”

“They said I'd have a room in the guest wing.”

Adam shook his head again. “Like I said, good luck with that one.”

“Thanks,” I answered breezily as I picked up the boxes and headed for my car. I wasn't about to let him knock me off my game.

I thought about my patient as I made the drive. I'd dealt with similar cases before, so I wasn't concerned about my ability to handle the child's crippling anxiety. I was more concerned about whether the little girl would be willing to let me in. That part of the healing process could take time, and hopefully the family members would be able to recognize that and not get impatient or annoyed if there weren't visible changes right away. Adam was right in that the stakes were higher with VIP patients. I'd dealt with a few throughout my career, and I knew they could be demanding, exacting, and yes, frustrating as hell if they didn't get their way. I mentally prepared myself to establish expectations for everyone before I got to work.

The closer I got to the address programmed into my phone, the more conspicuous my sensible Honda felt. I passed a Bentley, a gigantic Cadillac SUV with blacked-out windows, and a low-profile red sportscar that looked like it belonged on a race

track. When I arrived at the address, I wasn't surprised by the tall iron gate at the end of the driveway, but the fierce expression on the security guy staring me down was more than a little intimidating. He strode to my car with one hand touching his hip.

"Miss Thorn, may I see your ID?"

I handed it over obediently, and he examined it like it held the secrets of the universe.

"Glasses off, please."

I was actually wearing my glasses in the picture, so I wasn't sure why he needed them off. To make sure my eye color matched the description, maybe?

"Okay," he finally said, glancing between the photo and my face a few more times. "You can go through. Vida will meet you at the front door and get you settled."

"And what's your name?" I asked, squinting up at him in the sunlight.

He looked startled by the question.

"I'm going to be here for a while so we might as well get to know one another, right?" I shoved my hand out the window toward him, and he stared at it like he wasn't sure what to do with it.

"I'm... I'm Miguel," he stuttered, finally grasping my hand and giving it a shake.

Finally, *finally* a smile cracked through his hard expression. Victory! I didn't want to feel like I was crossing hostile territory every time I left the compound to get groceries. I wanted this scary guy to be my ally.

"Nice to meet you, Miguel! I guess we'll be seeing quite a bit of each other for the next few months."

He gave me a nod before he pulled a small remote control out of his pocket and hit a button, causing the gate to slowly roll open. I headed in.

When the home finally came into view at the end of the driveway I swallowed hard, because it wasn't a house—it was a *mansion*. Blinding white in the sunshine, I had to let my eyes adjust to the grandeur. It seemed to go on forever, a wing here, a balcony there, and tall arched windows everywhere. I'd been expecting something flashy and over-the-top, but there was nothing gaudy about the place. Every inch of it was perfection, from the bricked driveway to the manicured grounds.

I parked in the shade of a massive palm tree, took a steadying breath, and headed for the marble steps. I wasn't surprised to see a figure hovering just beyond the glass door. Probably the "Vida" Miguel had mentioned. The file had said the girl's mother wasn't in the picture, so I could only assume Vida was the housekeeper or maybe an assistant.

The door swung open as I fumbled to put on my glasses, and I was finally greeted by a genuine smile. The petite gray-haired woman with a smooth, low bun was positively beaming at me. I was pleased to see that she wasn't wearing a traditional dress uniform, but instead was in a black t-shirt and khaki pants. It suggested that the owner didn't feel the need to force an obvious hierarchy on the place.

"Welcome, Miss Thorn, we're so happy that you're here. I'm Vida Diaz." She held out her hand, and when I grasped it she cupped it gently.

"It's lovely to meet you, please call me Kaitlyn!"

I stepped into the foyer and tried not to gasp. It was as elegant as a five-star hotel, with a suspended, glass-enclosed staircase that seemed to float along the wall and a chandelier made from long glass daggers. The space was all hushed creams, whites, and grays, designed to put the spotlight on what was just beyond it: massive sliding doors that opened to the blue waters of Biscayne Bay.

"I'll have someone unload your things and bring them to your room. Let's start with a tour of the property."

I nodded and tried to pretend I wasn't completely overwhelmed by what I'd just gotten myself into.

“We usually keep those doors open,” she said, pointing to the massive sliders that opened to the bay. “Mr. Morris doesn’t mind that the AC has to work overtime to keep it comfortable in here, he loves bringing the outside in.”

I didn’t realize I was frozen in place staring at the gorgeous view outside until Vida called to me.

“There’s plenty more to see, please follow me!”

I jogged to catch up with her. As we speed walked through, I noticed there was nothing that revealed what the owner was like, or even the fact that a child lived there.

“This is the library. Or *sky-brary*, as Mr. Morris calls it. See?”

Vida stepped into the spacious room and pointed up. Sure enough, the ceiling was made of glass and brought the bright blue sky into the space. I glanced around at the books lining the room. “Does Mr. Morris read a lot?”

Vida laughed. “I think he wishes he could. He’s a very busy man. Let’s keep walking.”

She was halfway down the long hallway, pointing out rooms as we sped past. “Formal dining room, sitting room, that area leads to the bar and brick oven on the veranda. The kitchen is down that way. You might wind up spending some time in the kitchen, a certain young lady likes to hang out with us in there.” She winked at me.

I was still trying to process everything I was seeing, but Vida didn’t stop moving through the sprawling estate. “The gym and infrared sauna are down those stairs. I’m going to take you up one of the back staircases since your room will be on the staff side of the house. But don’t worry, you’ll be very comfortable.”

“How much live-in staff is here?”

“Mr. Morris has an extensive team, including a full security detail, chef, housekeepers, and gardeners, but you and I are the only live-ins at the moment. He has enough rooms for four if necessary.”

Four *extra* rooms for live-in staff, plus however many staff members left at the end of the day. I could barely comprehend it. After a quick walk-through of the beautiful room that would be mine for the next six months, we headed down the hall to the main staircase in the foyer.

“Mr. Morris will meet you in his home office after he finishes a conference call,” Vida said over her shoulder. “What can I get you to drink? Are you hungry? Would you like a snack?”

My stomach turned over at the thought of food. I needed to acclimate to my new life before I could even think of eating. “Water would be great, thanks.”

Vida led me down yet another corridor and ushered me into yet another elegant room. I tried to count how many I’d seen to calm my nerves, but the sheer vastness and richness of the estate was the opposite of comforting.

“Please make yourself comfortable and Mr. Morris will be right in. I’ll be back with your water and something to nibble on.”

I still had half a dozen questions I wanted to ask her, the most important one being where the little girl was. But I realized that meeting with her father first made sense. Most likely, it was one last test before I began my work, to make sure that I was the best fit for the job. I hadn’t met him yet, which was both surprising and not. I understood he was a busy, important person so of course, he had his security staff and personal assistant take care of my vetting process. On the other hand, why wouldn’t he want to sit down with me to make sure I was a fit for *him*? I mean, I was going to be working closely with him as treatment progressed, and I was going to live in his home, so why wouldn’t he want to make sure we at the very least *liked* one another?

I tried to check everything out without actually looking like I was because I felt sure there were cameras in the space. The room was a calming white oasis, with just a single framed photograph on the desk that I couldn’t make out from where I was standing. There wasn’t a single sheet of paper on it, just a closed laptop. The giant painting behind the desk was a series

of white and black scrawls that didn't make sense to me but I'm sure cost more than my car. Given the apparent open-door policy throughout the estate, it wasn't surprising that the sliding doors were thrown wide. I walked out to the balcony and immediately regretted it when the bright sun left me squinting. At the same moment footsteps sounded behind me, so I turned, eyes half closed, and struggled to compose myself. I could see a man-shaped form heading toward me.

"Hello, I'm Kaitlyn Thorn. It's great to finally meet you, Mr. Morris."

I stepped back inside, my eyes slowly adjusted to the difference in light, and realized that the man had stopped moving. A three-second count later, I realized why.

"Katie."

"James?"

And there he was. The man who'd kicked me out of his bed a few nights before was now going to be signing my paychecks.

JAMES

My poker face was normally unbeatable, but this time?

This time I felt my jaw drop as the stranger on the balcony transformed into the woman I'd last seen in my bed.

Katie, or should I say Kaitlyn, looked completely different in the light of day. For one, she was wearing glasses, and the hair that I'd twirled around my fingers and, oh my God, *pulled*, was up in a tidy twist. She was in slim black pants and a short sleeve drapery blue top that completely covered the body I'd kissed from her ankles to her...*stop*.

"This...uh, this is unexpected," I finally managed.

She didn't respond, still shaking her head like she was staring at a nightmare. "You kicked me out."

I took a deep breath. Before we figured out what we were going to do, we needed to address...that. She'd known that all I could offer her was one night, but I wasn't proud of the way the night had ended. I'd acted like an asshole, there was no denying it.

"Katie, I mean, *Kaitlyn*, I have to apologize." Her face finally softened. "I was rude to you, but now I can explain everything, and I think you'll understand. Let's sit." I pointed to the chairs in the shade on the balcony. "We need to get past what happened between us if we expect this situation to work out the way both of us want."

She didn't move, and for a moment I envisioned having to start the hiring process all over again. Vida, Jessica, and my

mother were already doing way more than they should to fill the gaps in Harper's care. How much longer would I be able to call them into service? My heart sank. If Kaitlyn refused the job, we were back to square one. And it killed me because on paper, she seemed like a perfect fit for my daughter.

"Fine," she finally said, and moved past me leaving a wide space between us.

I sat across from her feeling slightly more hopeful. "You've read Harper's file, so you know how unexpected some of her panic attacks can be. The night we...the night you and I met, she had a nightmare about her former nanny, Emily, and nothing could calm her down but me." The image of her little tear-stained face flitted through my head. "As you know, I've been without outside childcare since the episode with Emily, and I've been asking Vida and my family members to help out. I thought she was improving, moving past some of her fears, but then that night reminded me of how far she still has to go. I was worried about her and wanted to get home right away. You were collateral damage."

"That's one way to put it," Kaitlyn said softly, shuffling the folder she'd placed on the table in front of her.

"I hope you understand that my priority is my daughter. And that's why you're here. Kaitlyn, you're the very best option I've found to help her. Your qualifications are stellar. I know there's...awkwardness...between us, but I can assure you the only thing that matters to me is Harper feeling like herself again. We can forget that night and start over, as two people who just want to help a special little girl."

I felt like I was holding my breath as she weighed her options.

"You said she was improving. Why? What's changed?"

"She hadn't had a nightmare in weeks. And she was getting bolder about being outside."

Kaitlyn flipped open the folder then pulled a pen from her pocket. "So she's left the property? Gone beyond the fence?"

"Well, no," I answered slowly. "I meant that she's more comfortable visiting the edges of our property line, places

she'd been avoiding. Spots where she and Emily used to go, like down to the dock."

"Okay, that's great." Kaitlyn nodded and bowed her head to write a few notes. It didn't seem like the behavior of someone who was on their way out.

"I saw in Harper's file that her pediatrician suggested SSRIs," she continued, flipping through the papers. "Have you started a medication protocol yet?"

I leaned forward. "No—and I don't intend to. I'm not comfortable turning my daughter into a zombie just to make life easier for us."

She finally looked up at me, her eyes soft. "I understand that medication feels like—"

"Like a cop-out," I finished for her.

"Like a big step," she corrected gently. "And I agree that we have a few more avenues to try before we have to seriously consider it. If we can get Harper where she needs to be with cognitive behavioral therapy and gradual exposure with positive reinforcement, then that would be my preference, too. But I think we need to consider medication as a possibility, if our other treatment options don't provide her with some relief. Because that's the heart of the issue. Harper is suffering right now."

To hear her say it, to lay it out so plainly, was a knife to my heart. My beautiful little girl was in pain.

"You said 'we,'" I stated as the realization hit me. "Does that mean you're taking the position?"

Her mouth went into a tight line, all business. "You said exactly what I needed to hear. The focus is on Harper. I want to help her, and I'm confident I can. Let's forget that night at Bloom happened and move forward."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Excellent. I appreciate your understanding."

"Can we go over a few of my treatment plans? Then I'd like to meet her."

I leaned forward, eager for her insights. As she outlined her treatment plans, there was finally a light at the end of the tunnel.

For the first time in a long time, I felt hope.

“Treatment protocols evolve based on the response to them, so there’s a chance I’ll have to rework some of this on the fly,” Kaitlyn said as she wrapped up her presentation. “But I’m nimble and willing to do whatever it takes to help Harper stabilize, and eventually find herself again.”

“Thank you. Impressive outline.”

I sounded official, maybe even curt, but I couldn’t let on how desperate I was for Kaitlyn to treat my daughter. Despite what we’d agreed to, there was still a chance she could change her mind. We were employer and employee now, and even though I knew what she looked like under her business casual clothing, I had to keep all interactions with Kaitlyn completely professional.

I was *not* going to let my dick get in the way.

“So where is Harper?” Kaitlyn asked. “I’m excited to meet her.”

I smiled and pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Let me text Vida and find out what she’s up to.” I received an almost immediate response. “As expected, she’s in the kitchen giving my chef Bernardo a run for his money. He’s trying to prepare lunch, and she’s sweet talked him into letting her ‘help’ make cupcakes.”

Kaitlyn laughed and I realized that it was the first time I’d heard the sound since she’d arrived. I hoped to hear more of it. “I’m guessing she runs the place?”

“You don’t even know. Come on, let’s go down before I get called into another meeting.”

We headed down the hallway, and I paused outside the kitchen door. “Don’t be surprised if she’s standoffish at first. It takes a while for her to warm up to new people.”

Kaitlyn cocked her head at me, and I realized I was telling the professional I'd just hired about a part of her job she probably knew much better than me.

We pushed into the kitchen and Harper squealed from her spot on top of the counter when she saw me. Bernardo glanced up from the cutting board where he was chopping berries and gave me a nod.

“Daddy, look what I’m making! Strawberry cupcakes!” She held up a spatula dripping with pink frosting.

“I bet they’ll be delicious,” I answered, beaming at my adorable daughter. “Can I eat one right now?”

“No, they’re not done. Bernardo said we have to wait until they’re cool to put the frosting on top.” She froze when she saw Kaitlyn standing beside me.

“Hi, Harper, my name is Kaitlyn.” She gave a little wave. “Nice to meet you!”

“Hi.”

I watched Harper to see how she was going to react to the stranger in the room. This was it, the first step in my daughter’s journey toward feeling whole again. I had no doubt Kaitlyn would know how to recover if the initial meeting didn’t go well, but my hope was that we’d start off on the right foot.

“I’ve never made strawberry cupcakes before,” Kaitlyn continued in a casual, familiar tone, like they were already old friends. I noticed she kept her distance, choosing to lean against the wall across from where Bernardo and Harper were working. “My favorite flavor is chocolate. Is strawberry your favorite?”

Harper shrugged and looked down at the bowl of frosting in front of her, and tension flooded through my body. This was her go-to reaction when she was stressed. Shutting down.

“Bernardo, it’s nice to meet you too,” Kaitlyn said in a cheerful voice. “What kind of berries are you chopping? They don’t look like strawberries to me.”

He seemed to understand what was going on, shooting a sideways glance at Harper. “You’re right, they’re not. We thought it would be fun to add a mix of berries on top of the frosting, so these are raspberries. Would you like to try one?”

I gave Bernardo a nod of thanks for going with the flow. I was lucky to have such good people surrounding my daughter.

“Thank you, I’d love to!” Kaitlyn said, still leaning against the wall. “Harper, is it okay if I eat one of those berries? You can tell me ‘no’ if you prefer not to share. It’s up to you.”

Harper finally looked up and nodded. She was going to let Kaitlyn get close to her—score! Kaitlyn walked over to where they were working, choosing to stand on Bernardo’s side of the counter.

“Hmm,” she said, peering at the berries. “Which one do you think I should pick?”

Something started boiling over on the stove and Bernardo turned to attend to it, leaving Kaitlyn and Harper alone. Harper looked up at Kaitlyn then silently pointed to a berry.

“That one? Okay.” Kaitlyn reached for it then paused, placing the raspberry on top of her pinkie like it was a little hat then holding it out toward Harper. “Silly, right?”

Harper smiled shyly, and I realized that Bernardo probably hadn’t let her play with the berries. He was always patient and gentle with her, but he was dead serious about food prep.

“You try,” Kaitlyn said, pushing the cutting board closer to Harper.

She took a berry and placed it on her pointer finger then giggled.

“It looks like a little person, right?” Kaitlyn said, laughing with her. “Like a little person in a big hat, going to a fancy party. I wonder what kind of party it is? What do you think?”

“Ummm...” Harper reached for another raspberry and put it on her middle finger. “A princess party?”

Her voice was soft, but the fact that she was engaging with Kaitlyn made me want to cheer. I took a step backward,

hoping that Harper wouldn't notice.

"That's exactly what I was thinking!" Kaitlyn exclaimed.
"Maybe a princess party for...*fairies*?"

Harper's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Uh-huh. I bet all the woodland fairies go, and they all wear special hats. Let's try to think of another kind of hat for the fairy party."

"A blueberry hat?" Harper asked shyly.

"Yes, that would be perfect! Now it's my turn to think of one." Kaitlyn twisted her mouth and pretended to think hard. "I bet one of them would wear a little toadstool. Do you know what that is? The red mushroom with white dots on it?"

"Yes!" Harper said, nodding vigorously, pausing to eat the berries off her fingertips. "Aunt Jess reads me a book that has one. And there's a rabbit in it too!"

"That sounds like a fun book. Maybe we can read it together some day?"

Harper was halfway off the counter before Kaitlyn had even finished speaking.

"I'll go get it."

She ran past me and out of the room without a second glance.

After months of tension and heartache, the relief that flooded through my body felt like a hit of oxytocin.

"That went...better than I expected," I managed. It was an epic understatement.

"She's amazing," Kaitlyn replied, still staring at the door Harper had just run through. "We're off to a strong start."

All I could do was nod in agreement. What she didn't realize was that she'd gotten through to my daughter faster than anyone. I'd basically just witnessed a miracle, all thanks to Kaitlyn Thorn.

KAITLYN

“Done!”

Harper threw her spoon into the empty cereal bowl with a clatter and stood up on her chair at the outdoor table, letting out a victorious shout that seemed entirely out of place in the quiet, peaceful house. It was yet another reminder that the little girl had lived a lawless life since the kidnapping. Everyone in the household was still tip-toeing around her, trying to keep from upsetting her and shaking her off of her foundation...and in the process had allowed Harper to occasionally veer into *Lord of the Flies* territory.

“Harper, please put your bum on the seat,” I said, gesturing to the omelet in front of me. “I’m not finished yet, and we still need to talk about what we’re going to do today.”

My first two weeks with Harper had been shockingly easy so far, minus the underlying permissiveness. She was a delightful child—clever, funny, and emotionally intelligent. But the very things that made her so special also played a role in making her more susceptible to her demons. She could see through some of the exposure therapy exercises I suggested, which made it difficult to stick to my plan. I was slowly learning her “tells,” the little behaviors that meant she was about to shut down. Today, though, I had a plan that would enable us to make some real progress.

Harper plopped down and frowned at me. “You’re bossy.”

“No, I’m *polite*. Besides, I like spending time with you at breakfast. It’s fun to plan out our day.”

It was one of the many rituals I was weaving into our time together, to make the disguised therapy I was attempting with her easier for her to anticipate. Children with anxiety liked predictability.

She propped her chin up on her palms. “I want to read books. That’s all.”

Translation—she didn’t want to play outside. Despite the progress Harper had made with the staff and her family, she was still at square one with me. We’d spent the first week exclusively inside the house. It was only in the past few days that she had become comfortable enough with me to eat outside in the shade of the veranda. Today, I wanted to stretch our borders a little further.

“That sounds good, we can definitely add that to our list,” I agreed as I scraped the last of my omelet up. “I thought we could try something *really* fun. Something you’ve never done before.”

Harper perked up. “Like what?”

I paused to add dramatic tension. “Like...a safari!”

She scrunched up her face, trying to recall what the word meant. “We’re going to find elephants and tigers?”

I laughed. “Not quite. The creatures we need to find are much smaller than that. But you’ve got the right idea—it *is* all about looking for animals and plants. Look at this.”

I tapped through a few screens on my tablet to the checklist I’d made the night before, featuring photos of flora and fauna native to this part of Florida.

“Wow,” Harper breathed as she scrolled through the images. “We’re going to find all of these frogs and turtles?”

“Maybe, if we try really hard. And don’t forget the butterflies. Flowers too.”

She looked up at me with her mouth wide. “Do we get to wear the outfits?”

I laughed again. The little girl was a fashionista through and through, and I’m sure if I’d told James we needed matching

safari outfits, he would've seen to having them delivered in our sizes before the sun came up. "Maybe next time."

Harper eyed my plate. "Are you done now? Can we start looking?"

"I am, and we can. But we need to map out our plan first."

Harper jumped off her chair and ran toward the house.

"Excuse me," I called to her from my spot next to the table. "Did you forget something?"

"My dishes!" she exclaimed, and ran back to the table. James had told me that even though his daughter was growing up amid immense privilege, he wanted to try to keep her grounded, and one way to do that was not relying on the staff for simple tasks.

I followed behind her to the kitchen and thanked Bernardo for yet another perfect meal.

"First, we need to get your shoes. Do you want flipflops or sneakers?" It was best to give Harper two choices rather than overwhelming her with options.

She froze, her eyes wide. "Why?"

There it was. The first sign. I hoped that I could use her excitement for the safari to cancel out what I could see was bubbling beneath the surface.

"Because people on a safari need to keep their feet safe! You wouldn't want a centipede to crawl all over your toes, would you?"

I hoped she'd laugh, but her face remained a mask of worry.

"I'm going to wear my sneakers so I can move fast, in case I want to chase a butterfly," I continued. "Want to come to my room with me and grab them, then we can get your shoes?"

She nodded, and I took her willingness to press on as a victory. After we had our shoe selections figured out, I used the list on the pad to keep her busy as we made our way back out to the veranda.

“What’s the first critter we need to find? And keep in mind it’s okay if we go out of order.”

Harper scrolled. “Umm...first is a turtle.”

“A turtle, got it,” I nodded. “And where do you think turtles like to hang out?”

“Water?”

“Exactly! So let’s head to the water and see what we can find. I think a quiet spot is probably best, so not near the dock.” I took a few steps out into the grass and turned to her. “Ready?”

Harper stood frozen like the edge of the patio was a line in the sand, a demarcation point that she was unable to cross. Damn, this wasn’t going as I’d hoped. But there was still a chance I could turn things around. I shifted on the fly.

“You know what might be easier to start with? A butterfly. They like to be around pretty flowers, so let’s go to that bush with the pink ones in front, right by the driveway. We can walk through the house and go out the front door.”

The idea of going back in the house seemed to ground Harper, and she nodded. The fact that she wasn’t talking had me worried, but we pressed on.

“You two look like you’re going on an adventure,” Vida said as she hustled by us. I’d filled her in on my plans the night before. “Have fun, and don’t let the mosquitoes get you!”

“We don’t have them on our list, do we Harper?” I asked, hoping that recentering her on a task would keep her from worrying about what we were about to do.

She didn’t respond.

I placed my hand on the front door handle, pulled the massive thing open, and walked out onto the front step. “The pink flowers are in full bloom; let’s go see what we can find!”

The crash of the tablet hitting the marble floor jerked me back inside.

“Noooooo!”

Harper threw back her head and let out an otherworldly wail. She dropped onto the ground and started beating and kicking the floor.

I'd worried she was going to be resistant to going outside, but I'd never imagined that her fears would manifest like *this*. In the two weeks we'd been together, I'd seen her get quiet when she was scared, but a little patience and coaxing usually worked her through it, which was why I was ready to push her out of her comfort zone a little. But what I'd assumed was a baby step seemed to be much more.

"Harper!" I ran to her and dropped to my knees. "Stop, you're going to hurt yourself."

I attempted to pick her up, but she pushed against me with surprising strength and writhed on the ground.

"Nooo!"

Her screams echoed through the foyer, drawing Vida back.

"Oh," Vida pursed her lips and shook her head while I tried to gather Harper to me. "I'll call Mr. Morris."

"No," I said, more sharply than I'd intended. I deliberately calmed my voice for what I said next, projecting as much authority as I could. "Let me handle it for now." Vida looked uncertain, but she seemed to understand that I was about to do exactly what I'd been hired to do. Mentioning James again might make Harper fixate on him. Part of my job would be giving her the tools to self-soothe without James's help.

Vida nodded then retreated, leaving me to work with Harper on my own.

"Harper," I said in a quiet voice. She paused and looked at me over her shoulder, still crying. The fact that she was responding was a good sign, and I gave her a little smile. "Remember those breathing exercises we've been doing? I'm going to go through the series now. You can do them with me if you want, it might make you feel a little better. It's up to you."

She let out a few more sobs while I crossed my legs and sat up straight next to her.

“Just like we’ve been doing,” I started in a calm voice. “I’m going to put my hand on my belly, like this.” I placed my palm flat on my stomach. “Then I’m going to take a deep breath while I count to three, which makes my belly go out. And after that, I’m going to let that breath flow out of my nose.”

I went through the sequence we’d been practicing in calm moments, hoping the groundwork we’d done would be enough to help center her in this moment of need. I closed my eyes and continued the process while Harper’s cries subsided to whimpers. After a few minutes of quiet, I finally peeked at her and wanted to shout for joy when I spotted her sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed and one hand on her belly. Her deep breaths were interrupted by hiccups, but I was thrilled she was attempting it. We kept at it until her breathing fully evened out.

“Okay,” I said softly. “That was fantastic. Feel a little better?”

Harper nodded.

“I’m glad. I want you to know that I’ll never make you go somewhere you don’t want to go, okay? But I need to ask you a favor. When you’re feeling uncomfortable I’d like you to use your words to describe how you’re feeling. Because when you do this,” I gestured to where she’d been having her breakdown, “I can’t help you. I don’t know what’s going on in your head. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes.”

“Great. The best thing to do now is to get Bernardo to fix you a snack, then I think we should head up to your room for a book then a nap.”

“Two books.”

“Two books *what?*”

“Two books please!”

I smiled at her. “You got it. Off we go.”

She got up and dashed toward the kitchen. I passed Vida, and she gave me a surprised look.

“That was fast.”

“Thanks. We’ve been working on foundational stuff, and it really helped. She’s going to take a nap after she has a snack.”

Vida nodded. “I’m happy to see that she’s feeling like herself again so quickly. Those episodes usually last much longer. You’re wonderful with her.”

“Thanks,” I answered. “*She’s* wonderful.”

Vida reached out and squeezed my hand then hustled off. I found Harper bossing Bernardo around in the kitchen. I reminded her of her manners, then once she finished her snack, I herded her off to her bedroom. I’d managed to help her feel comfortable napping in there as a precursor to transitioning her out of James’s bedroom.

Two books later and Harper was fighting to keep her eyes open. I slipped out of the room just as James texted me for his daily update.

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?” I responded, and a second later my phone was ringing.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded as his way of greeting me.

“Nothing now, we’re fine,” I responded, slightly put off by his tone. “But Harper had her first episode with me. I tried to get her to go out on the driveway with me for a safari, and she broke down.”

“Why, though? She’s been on the driveway a million times since the kidnapping.”

“She’s done it with you, and other people she knows well, but she’s still figuring me out. I’m not surprised it happened, but I’ll admit that the intensity of her meltdown caught me off guard.”

“I’m coming home.”

“James, no. She’s fine now. And I need her to start to trust me if we want this program to work. She needs to learn coping strategies on her own.”

I held my breath as I waited for him to answer. There was no denying that James was a devoted father, but a part of me believed that James got something out of his daughter’s

dependence on him. I'd seen it before—parents who liked being needed and therefore, consciously or unconsciously, encouraged their children to stay needy and clingy.

“Okay, fine. You know what’s best.”

I let out a silent sigh. “Thank you. I’m going to revamp my initial treatment plans based on this new development. I can go over it when you get home. Or...” There were some evenings when James didn’t get back until well after I was in bed. I didn’t allow myself to wonder what he was up to. It wasn’t my business.

“I’ll be home in time for dinner tonight, and we can discuss everything once Harper goes to bed. I hope you don’t mind working a little late.”

“Anything for Harper.”

I wouldn’t let myself admit that I was looking forward to spending time with James as well. As promised, our relationship had been perfectly professional since I had moved in, but there was just something about being around him that gave me a charge.

Plus, there were moments, when he watched me intently as I explained something to him, when all I could see was the way he looked at me the night he’d made love to me. I enjoyed those moments maybe a little more than I should have.

Or maybe a lot more.

JAMES

“It happens. Sorry boss.”

“No, it *keeps* happening, and that’s what’s upsetting me. How many bartenders has Lucas Rushing managed to snag from us?”

Brian, my GM at Bloom, had called me with the news that we’d lost yet another new staff member in that window between us making the offer and them signing the employment agreement. Finding help that was up to my standards was already hard enough, and this was yet another setback thanks to that asshole Lucas. What had my sister ever seen in him?

“That makes three. But we’ll find someone, don’t worry.”

“*Someone* doesn’t cut it at Bloom and you know it.”

I hated that my frustration was making me short with Brian, but my clubs were known for staff with the perfect mix of jaw-dropping good looks and superlative white glove service. Everyone was excellent at their job, and they looked good doing it, but our bartenders were on another level. Sure, they slung drinks, but they were also part of the entertainment, showing off impressive bottle tricks in between mixing unbelievable concoctions. It wasn’t easy to find the right fit, which made losing yet another candidate, and losing her to *Lucas Rushing*, that much more painful.

“Back to the drawing board. I’ll keep you posted, boss.”

“Thanks, Brian.”

We hung up and I swiveled my chair to look out the window. I'd been working from home since Harper's breakdown despite the fact that Kaitlyn told me it wasn't necessary. Part of me hoped that Harper would pop in to see me throughout the day, but Kaitlyn kept her days structured. She'd asked me not to interrupt them, and I'd honored her request.

I didn't like it, but I listened to her. Things seemed to be going well, and I wasn't about to risk derailing their progress.

I looked back at my laptop screen and closed the photo of the woman who had been poached from Bloom. Lucas Rushing refused to stop shitting on my businesses, and it was driving me insane.

"Hey, are you ready for me?"

I glanced toward the doorway and saw my sister peeking in. "Jessica, what are you doing here?"

She was dressed up, at least for her, in a navy blazer, white t-shirt and white jeans. I still couldn't figure out how my sister got her naturally dark brown hair, the exact shade as mine, to the natural looking bright blonde shade she always sported.

"We have a meeting on the books! Remember, when I spent the night after Harper's last, uh, thing? I specifically asked you to set aside some time for me, and I *saw* you add it to your calendar."

Ah yes, the meeting I'd dismissed the day prior and forgotten to tell her.

"Hey listen, I'm dealing with some stuff—"

"James, *no*. You're not going to push me aside again. I booked a slot and I'm keeping it. I spent time preparing and everything."

She held up a thick black binder.

I sighed and steepled my hands beneath my chin. Better to get it out of the way now and talk her down from whatever crazy scheme she was cooking up before she got too excited about it.

"Sit. You have fifteen minutes."

Jess pulled a face as she plopped in the chair opposite me.
“You don’t have to be an asshole.”

“Lucas just stole another bartender.”

“Oh no.” She froze. “He just won’t quit.”

“Seems that way. Can you please explain to me what appeal he had? Why you had to—”

“Enough. We’ve gone over it, there’s no point talking about him, okay? Dating Lucas Rushing was the biggest mistake of my life, and you’re still making me pay for it.”

Even though she was talking a tough game, I could tell by her expression that I’d struck a nerve. Just mentioning him seemed to trigger insecurity on her part, and I felt like an asshole for bringing it up.

“Fine. No more Lucas talk. You have the floor.”

I sat back and waited for my sister to get herself organized. While most of the ideas she’d brought to me weren’t sound businesses, I could appreciate the time she put into getting ready to pitch to me. She wanted so desperately to strike out on her own, to invest her inheritance in something that would really take off so she could make a name for herself without relying on the family reputation. So there was always the risk of her rushing into something without thinking it through. That was why it had been agreed that an investment for her would need my approval first. I hoped maybe this idea would be the one I could happily greenlight.

But I doubted it.

Jess cleared her throat to signal she was ready to begin. “I met Henri Fournier during my semester in Paris. He became a dear friend to me. He’s doing amazing things with...”

I raised my eyebrows. With wine? Cheese?

“...with fashion,” Jess continued. “He’s the most gifted designer I know, and trust me, I’ve worn them all. Chanel, Lavin, Chloe, Marant, McQueen, you name it.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of your clothing budget,” I deadpanned.

She ignored me. “He’s getting ready to open his own place, and you might think he’d stay in France, or maybe try New York or Dubai, but he wants to open a fashion house in *Raleigh*.”

I frowned. “Why there?”

“He loves Raleigh, and he thinks it’s the perfect place to launch. More accessible than the big cities, but people still have money to spend. He can buy half a city block there for what he’d pay for a closet in any major city. And he’s good enough that people will travel to him no matter where he is. Here, look.”

Jess pushed the binder to me and I flipped through, noting a few models I’d bedded. I couldn’t argue with Jess; his work was impeccable.

“He’s looking for a major investor, and I want in.”

I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words to let her down easy. “Jess, I’m sorry but I can’t okay this. Fashion is unpredictable, and his plan to put a high-dollar fashion house outside of the major fashion hubs just doesn’t make sense to me. I’m sorry.”

She blinked fast and I could tell she was fighting off tears. “You barely even considered it, that was just a knee-jerk no. Like, the king has spoken.”

“Hold on—”

“No! You still don’t believe in me, or trust me to make good decisions. What happened with Lucas was a mistake for a bunch of different reasons, I get that. But it happened ages ago. I’ve learned my lesson. So why are you still punishing me?”

“I’m not punishing you. I’m making a business decision based on common sense. Investing in fashion is a risk I’m not willing to take. I hope you understand.”

She snorted and snatched the binder away from me. “I don’t. Thanks for the meeting, Mr. Morris.”

I tried to think of something to say to placate her, but I came up with nothing as she stormed out and slammed the door behind her.

My phone buzzed and when I saw the message from Miguel my heart sank. The day was definitely on a downswing.

Again? Those fucking people were going to put us through the stupid charade *again?*

I jumped up and headed for the front door to save Vida the trip. It was me they were here to see, after all, might as well face it.

Well, me and Harper.

The chime sounded right as I got to the door. I swung it open and saw the usual Child Protective Services officer, Annette Lane, the one who'd been to my house six times in the past two months, along with a police officer I hadn't met yet.

"Mr. Morris, I am so sorry to do this to you again," the petite woman said, keeping her distance on the front step like she was a vampire and couldn't come in until I invited her.

"Please, Mrs. Lane. I know you're just doing your job." I stepped back and gestured for them to enter. "Officer."

"It's a formality, you know that, right?" she said as she walked in, giving me a wide berth.

I nodded, trying not to let on that I was boiling inside.

"Shall we?"

Mrs. Lane and I were well-versed in the choreography of a reported child protection welfare visit seeing as Harper's maternal grandparents had been calling them in regularly.

"Let's do a quick food and home check, then I'll peek in on Harper. We'll be ten minutes, I promise. I know how busy you must be."

Once the home tour was completed, I led the pair to the library, which had been transformed into Harper and Kaitlyn's base camp. The space was so airy and cheerful that my

daughter barely seemed to realize she was undergoing behavioral therapy in it each day.

Mrs. Lane peeked her head in the room where Harper was sitting at a table wearing headphones and repeating anchoring phrases.

“Hello, I’m Annette Lane from CPS. I’m here for a routine wellness visit.”

I watched Kaitlyn’s face, but it didn’t betray an ounce of shock. I’d hate to go up against her in a poker tournament. She stood up and walked over to the woman with her hand outstretched. Mrs. Lane took it.

“Hi, I’m Kaitlyn Thorn, MSW, and I’m working with Harper. She’s in the middle of a session, do you need to speak to her?”

Mrs. Lane shook her head. “No, I’ve seen everything I need to see. Thank you, and my apologies for disturbing you all.”

Once the rest of the visit was completed, I showed them out. I wasn’t surprised to find Kaitlyn heading down the hallway to me a few minutes later. Even though I was irate, I wasn’t too red zoned to notice that she looked incredible in her simple sundress.

“What was *that* about?” she asked, frowning.

“Is Harper busy? Still wearing headphones?”

“Yes, she loves doing those exercises, so I have a few minutes.” Her eyes were wide. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

I sighed and leaned back against the wall. “Harper’s maternal grandparents, Mitch and Maureen Drescher, are behind it. I’m sorry I didn’t mention it to you during our initial planning meetings. I guess I was hoping it would all go away. Clearly it remains an issue.”

“But...why? They have to know that Harper has everything she needs and more.”

“They refuse to believe her psychiatric diagnosis.” I scoffed. I could feel my fists curling into balls as I thought about what they’d been putting us through. “They keep saying she’s too

young to be experiencing agoraphobia and panic attacks, and they think I'm purposely keeping her from going to visit them, the way she used to. My door is open and they're welcome to stop by, but I think they're uncomfortable being with her here, under my supervision. The fact that they can't take her off-premises is an issue for them, so this is how they're retaliating. Trying to chip away at us."

"Well, my professional opinion is that these types of visits aren't good for her. Having a policeman show up in her house after what she went through could easily trigger a regression."

"Oh, don't worry about that part. After the first visit, it was obvious to CPS what was going on. You'll notice the officer didn't go near the library. They know. They have to follow up on the call, but what they do here is far from a standard walk-through."

Kaitlyn crossed her arms and glanced back toward the library. "What can I do to help you with it?"

She looked so concerned, so upset about what we'd been enduring. Kaitlyn's devotion to Harper and loyalty to me made it feel like she'd been a part of our household for ages.

I was so incredibly lucky to have her.

"There's absolutely nothing you can do about the CPS bullshit. Just stay the course with your treatment plans. Once she's better, we can end the nonsense with the Dreshers."

Something flickered across Kaitlyn's face. "James... I need to remind you that 'better' is difficult to pinpoint. Progress isn't always linear, which means that Harper will have wonderful days and days that feel like she's losing all the progress we've made. We have a goal to get her ready for school, but even if she hits that milestone we still might have ancillary issues to address. Plus, she'll have to start actually attending school."

We both chose not to mention that her contract was up once school began. For a few minutes, I felt a creeping sense of dread when I considered finding new support staff to fill her position after that point. Based on what I'd seen in their short time together, no one would be able to replace Kaitlyn.

Kaitlyn took a step toward me and placed her hand on my arm, as if to bring me back to the present. “Does that make sense?”

We hadn’t touched since she’d arrived, an unspoken agreement to keep our boundaries firmly established. My sleeves were rolled up, and her soft touch on my skin sent an unexpected tremor through me.

I didn’t want to move away, but I also didn’t trust myself to let her delicate hand linger on me, especially with the way she was looking at me. Worried, resolute...and so very caring, as if *I* mattered to her and not just Harper.

No, no, I was imagining it. Kaitlyn had been nothing but professional since she arrived. She had no interest in me, and I wasn’t about to take any chances with her employment by doing something stupid.

“James?”

I finally grounded myself enough to answer her. “Yes. That’s fine.”

I shook off her touch, turned on my heel, and walked away quickly, unwilling to let her see the effect she still had on me.

KAITLYN

Okay, so comfort wasn't something the high-and-mighty James Morris was willing to accept. At least, not from me. Duly noted.

But still. Why did he have to act like such a jerk, shaking me off like I'd *sullied* him or something and then stomping back to his office like that? I was just trying to let him know he wasn't alone, that I was on his side. But maybe he didn't appreciate *the help* getting familiar like that. If he wanted to treat me like nothing more than his hired help, then so be it. I mean, that's what I technically was. I just didn't appreciate the boss-hole vibes.

I glanced down at the tired little girl curled up in her bed and noticed that her eyes were finally shut. We'd barely made it through one book before she drifted off for her nap, which meant our morning activities had taken a lot out of her. I was relieved she hadn't picked up on the CPS people. Seeing scary-looking official people was the last thing she needed when she was already struggling.

Slipping out of bed was always a challenge, but she barely stirred as my feet touched the ground. I glanced at her once more when I reached the door. Such a sweet child.

But her father...*grrr*. Moody, unpredictable, dismissive.

The more I thought about his reaction the angrier I felt. I had at least two hours before Harper woke up, and I decided the best way to move past my feelings of aggravation would be a quick workout and shower. I'd started running regularly to

vent some of the frustration I felt, taking advantage of the manicured trails that ran through the neighborhood. It helped to keep me sane. I quickly changed into a tank top and shorts and headed for the door.

Once outside the gate, officially off James's estate, I took in the beautiful view of the ultra-ritzy community for a few minutes, finishing up my pre-workout stretches. I hated to admit that I felt a little weary. I briefly considered going back inside for a quick nap instead but it would be better for my mental health to sweat out my frustrations about my boss.

Five miles later, as I slowed my pace to a brisk walk, I was glad that I'd pushed myself. Sure, the heat was relentless, but the community planners had made sure the running path was well shaded. Everything about the property was designed with the comfort of the inhabitants in mind, to offer them all the beauty of nature without any of the hassles. Smooth trails. Not a weed in sight. Swans in the ponds. Beautiful teak benches nestled in idyllic flower patches where residents could sit and think about...well, whatever billionaires thought about when they weren't out making more money.

I was distracted from my thoughts when my phone rang. It was Cassie, probably on her lunch break.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked.

"Did I tell you about Lacey McCall?"

It was a typical Cassie non-sequitur. She always acted like I could read her mind—or like we were just continuing a conversation she didn't realize she'd started without me. "Nope, not that I remember."

"Lacey is the wedding planner Scott's mom 'gifted' us, to help plan the wedding. Well, lemme tell ya, the woman's got some nerve!"

"Oh no," I said, continuing along the trail's loop back toward James's house. "What did she do?"

Cassie made a frustrated growl. "It's so stupid but *so* annoying! Scott and I are trying to decide on the cake flavor.

He wants red velvet, I want classic vanilla. I asked Lacey to be the tie-breaker and you know what she said?”

“Tell me.” I tried to keep the laughter out of my voice.

“Neither! She said both options are—what was her exact phrase? She said the flavors were ‘very 2010.’ How the hell can a cake flavor go out of style? Huh?”

I chuckled. “Hey, she’s in the biz so she must know.”

“Oh my God, Katie, are you *siding* with her?” Cassie’s screech was loud enough to make me pull my phone away from my ear.

“No, no, of course not,” I backpedaled quickly. Cassie was usually very level-headed, but the stress of wedding planning was clearly doing something to her. “You’re the bride, you should get what you want. Did she have a suggestion for a fashionable cake flavor?” I stifled a giggle at the thought.

“Ugh, yes,” Cassie groaned. “Pineapple upside-down cake! Disgusting, right? I’d rather serve Ring Dings at my reception.”

“Yikes, I agree. Listen, if you want my vote please tell her that I’ll be more than happy to eat very unfashionable vanilla or red velvet cake, and I’m sure the rest of the guests will too.”

“*Thank* you! I’ll let her know that my maid of honor agrees with me. Scott’s too chickenshit to take sides—he doesn’t want it getting back to his mom and becoming a whole *thing*. Ugh. I love the man, but he can drive me crazy sometimes.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered under my breath...but not *quite* quietly enough.

“What was that?” Cassie demanded. “Are you having problems with James? Do I need to get Scott to go kick his ass?”

“Okay, first off, what are the odds Scott could even come close to kicking James’s ass? Scott’s a great guy, but come on. His idea of a workout is a foosball tournament with his friends. Meanwhile, James has a whole private gym that he uses, like, a *lot*.”

“Fair point. Well then, do *I* need to come kick James’s ass?”

I laughed. “I love you for offering, but I don’t think any amount of kicking would knock that stick out of his ass.”

“Ouch. That bad?”

“He’s just...infuriating sometimes,” I admitted. “Sometimes, he can be great—he’s amazing with Harper, and she absolutely adores him—but then he turns around and makes me feel...”

“Horny?”

“No!” Definitely not horny. Definitely. Not. That wasn’t an option. “He signs my checks, I don’t think of him that way.”

It was a lie, but she didn’t have to know that.

“You sure about that? It’s not every guy who can get under your skin. You’re basically calm for a living. Don’t you think it means something that this guy has you so riled up?”

“Yeah, it means he’s an asshole who treated me like garbage the one time we hooked up. Believe me, I’m in no hurry to go back there.” *That* actually was true...more or less.

“Oh, hold on,” Cassie said, her voice muffled. “I just saw the time. Lunch break is over, I need to get back to the bank. Love you so much, and thanks for weighing in on the cake drama!”

She hung up before I had a chance to answer. Typical Cass, always in a hurry.

I paused next to a lamppost to stretch out my leg, kicking it out in front of me and bending at the waist.

“Tight hammies, huh?”

I whipped around and discovered a sweaty but handsome man behind me. He was tall and lean with a head of floppy, sandy-colored hair that made him look like a grown-up frat boy. He had the confident aura of a man who knew he could have whatever he wanted. When he walked closer, I noticed the faint lines in the corners of his eyes. He was a few years older than me but still hot as hell.

I finally collected myself enough to answer him. “Uh, yeah. I haven’t been running as much lately so I’m already a little

sore.”

He had an easy, smiley way about him, like we were already old friends.

“But that’s the best feeling, right?” he enthused. “That muscle tension right after a run. Makes you realize you *did* something!”

“You’re right,” I said and switched to the other leg.

“I haven’t seen you around before. I’m Lou.”

He offered his hand.

“And I’m sweaty. Really sweaty,” I said as I quickly wiped my palm on my shorts.

“Nice to meet you, Sweaty!”

We clasped hands and I laughed. “I’m *Kaitlyn*, nice to meet you.”

“Are you headed this way?” He pointed to the trail in front of us. “I’m gonna walk a bit to cool down.”

The path he was about to walk headed to the Morris house, and I had no choice but to agree to it. But he seemed so friendly, so easy to talk to. It was a welcome change after dealing with standoffish James.

“Sure, I need to cool off a bit more before I head in.”

“You new to the community?”

“Sort of, I’m here for the next six months.” I declined to say more.

“Isn’t it great?” Lou asked gesturing toward our lush surroundings. “I love it here.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s actually perfect. I need to get out and use these trails more, too.”

He paused and turned to look at me. “I’m out here quite a bit. I hope we’ll bump into each other again.”

There was that smile. Our accidental meeting started to feel like flirting, and I wasn’t sure I was on board with that. He seemed nice, but I couldn’t really muster up much enthusiasm

for the idea of a relationship at the moment. It just didn't feel right.

"Sure, it's always nice to find a new running buddy."

"Where are you staying?" His face immediately shifted to a pained expression, as if realizing the question was overstepping. "That is, if you don't mind my asking. You don't have to give me the address or anything." He looked so concerned that I laughed.

"No worries, I can tell you're not a stalker. I'm staying over there."

I pointed to the Morris property and Lou let out a low whistle.

"Um hm, *that* place. Interesting. Guy's a bit of a control freak, huh? Can't imagine he's easy to work for."

As much as I wanted to go off on James there was no way I'd compromise my working relationship with him or my relationship to Harper. I shrugged. "Every employer has their flaws, right?"

"Some more than others," he said with a sympathetic smile. "Believe me, I've heard stories. Maybe I'll fill you in the next time we cross paths, and you can dish on your own tale of woe. I promise, I'm a great listener."

As much as I wanted to hear the gossip, I opted to avoid the topic. James felt like an unknowable entity, and I would've loved to get some intel, but I sensed that Lou would want some gossip in return and I didn't want to potentially breach the gigantic nondisclosure I'd signed. "I run three times a week, either at lunchtime or super early. I'm sure we'll see each other again," I said casually, keeping it noncommittal.

"I hope so, Sweaty. I mean, Kaitlyn."

There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he waved and headed down the parallel path, and it made me smile. Even if we couldn't share gossip, he seemed fun. It would be nice to have a friend I could relax with—someone who wasn't as frustrating and mercurial as my confusing, maddening, sexy bastard of a boss.

KAITLYN

Either I was wearing the poor child out or Harper was going through a major growth spurt—or possibly both—because she was ready for bed by six. She managed to stay awake for one book but actually turned over and dozed off before I could even ask her about another. I knew I was pushing her, encouraging her to move outside her comfort zone, and she was slowly starting to blossom. The side effect of the combination of stress and excitement was a very sleepy little student at the end of each day.

I was doing my own share of stretching and growing as I rewrote Harper's plans on the fly. The work was rewarding, and even though I was a subject matter expert I was still learning new things every day. I was loving every bit of my job.

Well, except for the curmudgeon in charge.

I hadn't seen him since he stormed off earlier that afternoon, and there'd been no mention of his after-work plans, so I padded down toward the kitchen barefoot in shorts and a tank top to grab dinner before Bernardo left for the day.

"Kaitlyn."

I jumped and whirled around to find James staring at me from his office doorway, like he'd heard my bare feet from down the hall.

"Yes?" I kept my tone cool.

"Do you have a minute?"

Normally I didn't watch the clock, but given how he'd been so dismissive of me a few hours prior I considered telling him that I was off duty. But...he looked tired. Stressed. Sleeves rolled up and hair slightly messy as if the day had put him through the wringer. I reminded myself that even if he was used to it, a visit from CPS questioning his parenting had to be stressful. Not to mention the other demands on him. In spite of myself, I softened.

"I do."

He walked down the hall toward me. I braced myself, unsure what to expect. Would he be the same cold, dismissive man he'd been earlier, or would I see a different side of him? With James, there was just no way to tell.

"Listen, I want to apologize for being short with you. I'm just not...the best at accepting sympathy. Even when I really do appreciate it. But I shouldn't have brushed you off. That wasn't fair, and I'm sorry."

I wobbled a little at the sincerity in his eyes—all the more because I actually understood where he was coming from. Given my background and training, I was much more comfortable being the shoulder people cried on instead of turning to anyone else for comfort or support. If someone had reached out to me when I was having a low moment and trying to hide it, would I have reacted any better than James? I couldn't be sure.

"Um...thanks. I accept your apology, and I appreciate it."

It felt like a momentous exchange—like we were actually connecting as people, not just as mutual caregivers for Harper. This moment was just about *us*.

His face shifted and the hint of a smile played around his mouth. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I was actually heading down to grab something now," I said.

I worried that he was going to pull me into his office for an impromptu strategy session. I was always game to work on

Harper's plans, but the truth was I was *starving*. My stomach rumbled at the thought of food.

"Let me take you to dinner then. My favorite spot. Vida can keep an eye on Harper."

Dinner with James? I tried to play off my shock.

"That would be great but..." I gestured to my grubby tank top and shorts and tried to figure out what I could change into that would be worthy of his favorite restaurant. Did I even *own* anything dressy enough to qualify? "I'll need to clean up."

"Not necessary, you look fine just the way you are."

I gaped at him. "I am *not* going out wearing this. Give me ten minutes."

He grinned. "Fine, but seriously, this place isn't fancy. Just wear something comfortable."

"Meet you out front," I said as I jogged toward the stairs.

Comfortable. I wasn't sure what he meant by that, and a quick scan of the clothes I'd brought didn't reveal anything fancy, so I opted for a simple yellow sundress. I eyed my platform espadrilles, but something told me to go for flipflops instead. After brushing out my hair and doing the most basic of makeup applications, I headed out to meet him.

I walked out to an empty driveway. Where was his personal chauffeur Armand? I'd never seen James drive himself anywhere; he was always sliding in the back of a black Mercedes Maybach. I wasn't sure if he even knew how to drive.

A few seconds later, I heard the roar of an engine and a sleek white convertible two-seater came to a screeching stop in front of me.

"You look perfect. Hop in."

I blushed at his compliment. But *was* it a compliment, or was he merely saying that I looked appropriate for wherever we were going?

"Does that thing have seatbelts?"

“Originally, this baby only had lap belts, but I had it retrofitted for safety.” He patted the steering wheel. “1967 Jag.”

“It’s gorgeous,” I said, still eyeing it from the safety of the front steps.

“I thought you were hungry, why aren’t you getting in? Is it my driving?” He revved the engine a few times.

“Maybe.”

He laughed. “I promise I’ll take it easy on you. Let’s go.”

I climbed into the thing reluctantly, buckled the seatbelt, and gripped the handle on the door.

“Off we go.”

James hit the gas and started flying down the long driveway, and the wind rushed around us, causing my light sundress to fly up, exposing my pink panties. I saw his head whip toward me then away just as quickly as I tucked the hem beneath my thighs.

Within a few minutes we were in an unimpressive part of Model City. I craned my neck as we passed row after row of strip malls, looking for an unexpected five-star restaurant among the chains. James finally pulled into the parking lot of an abandoned Kmart.

“Umm...” I said, glancing around.

“Over there.”

He pointed to the back corner of the lot where a makeshift fiesta had sprung up with half a dozen food trucks, picnic tables, and lights strung between them.

“*This* is your favorite spot?” I asked, not even bothering to hide my shock.

He laughed at me as he pulled into a parking spot. “Abuela’s Tacos. None better. Trust me, I’ve traveled the world and I keep coming back to these.”

I was charmed that he didn’t turn up his nose at such a humble spot. The place had a pulse, with salsa music pumping from

the speakers and people eating and laughing. It was exactly where I wanted to be.

After we ordered, he pointed to a picnic table where people were cleaning up to leave.

“Go grab that one and I’ll bring the food over when it’s ready.”

Once settled, I watched him interact with the people who were also waiting. An older woman started chatting with him and he engaged with her easily, like he was just an ordinary guy out for the evening. Little did she know that he was one of Miami’s major power players, and he could’ve flown us to Mexico for tacos if he so desired. I hadn’t realized exactly how wealthy he was—not when we’d first met and I’d slept with him and not even once I’d started working for him. I intentionally didn’t research him because I hadn’t wanted my opinion to cloud my decisions when it came to working with Harper. It was only once my sister pointed it out that I’d looked him up online. Most of the gossip was just that and it didn’t match the person I was watching now. James didn’t look down on this place—and he didn’t look down on the people patronizing it, either, chatting with them as comfortably and naturally as if they were old friends.

I liked that about him. His ability to fit in no matter where he was. He seemed...real. Although if you looked closely at him, you’d notice that his oversized watch probably cost as much as a car, and his jeans and dress shirt were cut to fit him by his private tailor. But on the surface, he was just a guy enjoying dinner in a parking lot.

I averted my eyes as he headed for me, loaded down with food and beer. I didn’t want to be caught staring, which was exactly what I’d been doing.

Because he was *so* freaking hot, and it killed me that I had to pretend like he wasn’t.

“You’re in for a treat,” he said, placing the various bags on the table and sliding in across from me.

He was right. In fact, once we started eating, all conversation stopped as we stuffed ourselves. Half an hour later we were

full and happy.

“Oh my God,” I moaned, clutching my stomach. “That was amazing. I’m stuffed!”

“Same,” he laughed. “But it was worth it. Want to head down to the beach and walk it off? It’s a quick drive.”

“Love to,” I said, standing up slowly and trying not to think about the fact that this felt exactly like a date.

It was golden hour on the beach, and the sun threw a perfect pinkish light on James. The man didn’t have a bad angle.

“Beautiful night,” he said.

“It is. Thanks again for dinner.”

“Happy to introduce you to Abuela’s. From now on you’ll compare every taco to the ones you ate tonight.”

I laughed and we fell silent again. If this really had been a date, I’d be trying to make conversation—working hard to sound charming and fun. But I didn’t need those pretenses with James. I felt relaxed and at ease, despite being very aware of close he was standing. The two beers I’d had over dinner plus the romantic setting were starting to get to me. And it didn’t help that I could feel James sneaking glances at me, too.

“I told you the dress would be perfect,” he said.

“You were right, as always,” I joked. “I know that’s important to you.”

“Am I *that* bad?” He glanced at me in chagrin.

I shrugged. “A little. Sometimes. But that’s who you are. You’re James Morris, businessman extraordinaire.”

“Well, for now it’s nice being James Morris, taco enthusiast.” He paused and glanced at me. “This is fun.”

“Yeah, I’m having a good time.” My heart sped up.

The distance between us closed a little as we walked, partly because of me and partly because of him. Anyone watching us would assume we were on a date. As the sun went down, I had to fight the urge to reach for his hand.

“Shit,” James growled. “They found us.”

I stopped and looked around. “What? Who found us?”

“Keep walking, please,” he said through gritted teeth. “It’s the paparazzi, just behind the dune. Must’ve been my car. I thought I’d parked far enough back.”

I sneaked a glance and saw two men with incredibly long lenses stealing shots of us.

“Does this happen a lot?” I asked.

He frowned. “More often than I’d like, that’s for sure.”

It was like all of the good vibes we’d been building drained away in an instant.

“What should we do?”

I glanced over at him and noticed that he’d put more distance between us. I understood, but it made me a little sad. For him, that he had to live parts of his life under such scrutiny, and for us, that we couldn’t explore what was happening.

I wanted to smack myself. No. *Nothing* was happening between us. We were an employee and her boss going for dinner after a long day. I couldn’t allow anything else to simmer, despite the way he made me feel every time he looked at me.

James sighed. “We should head back home, I guess. They won’t stop, trust me.”

“We’re going to pass right by them on the way to the car. What should I do?” I crossed my arms self-consciously at the thought of them capturing my every move.

“Do you have sunglasses with you?”

I glanced over at the setting sun, imagining how ridiculous I’d look in sunglasses. But after a lifetime of dealing with the paparazzi, James obviously knew what he was doing.

“I do.” I dug them out of my bag and slipped them on.

“Just don’t look at them as we get closer, keep your head down,” he barked.

His relaxed tone was gone and he was back to the guarded, closed-off voice he'd used on me earlier in the day.

We walked back to his car in silence, me a few steps behind him like the employee I was.

But deep down, as much as I fought against it, I *knew* something had shifted between us tonight. I just wasn't sure what—or whether it was a good thing or not.

KAITLYN

I heard the voice before I could see who it belonged to.

It was Saturday and I was officially off the clock, but I was insanely curious about who was making Harper laugh loud enough for me to hear it up on my balcony. I peeked over the edge, taking care not to be seen, and saw a chic gray-haired woman in a flowy turquoise Asian-print robe and wide white pants striding out to the seating area by the pool. Harper danced behind like she was the Pied Piper, followed by a smiling James.

“Where’s Kaitlyn?” Harper asked, turning in a circle.

Seeing that as my cue, I stepped out from behind my potted plant hiding spot. “Hi there, I’m up here.”

The three of them turned to look up at me, and the gray-haired woman swept both of her arms through the air dramatically. “Kaitlyn Thorn, *hello!* I’ve heard all about you from my granddaughter. Come down here immediately and join us, please!”

“Sorry,” James looked up and grinned at me. “Usually, I’d say you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to on your day off, but that’s a direct order from my mom, and it never ends well if you ignore those.”

We hadn’t talked much since taco night, but surely this would be safe. We would have a buffer, and a larger than life one at that. Plus, I was eager to learn more about his family. Every insight about them was potentially something I could use as I

worked with Harper. Especially since it was clear Harper and *this* grandmother had a great relationship.

Luckily I looked decent, clean from my post-run shower and wearing a cute white romper.

When I walked outside, Harper ran over and circled my legs in a hug.

“Hi you,” I said, stroking her hair.

“That’s my Grandy,” Harper said, disentangling herself and pointing at the woman.

She laughed as she walked over to me to shake my hand. “I refused to be called ‘Granny.’ I’m Petra. I’m just back from Barcelona and catching up with these two.”

Petra pronounced the city’s name with the cultured “th.”

“And she has presents for us!” Harper said, skipping around us. “Presents, presents, presents!”

“I hope you didn’t bring me anything,” James said from his spot on the lounge chair.

“Never. I couldn’t hope to pick anything that’s up to your discerning tastes,” Petra laughed. “But I *did* bring something back for these two ladies.” I glanced around to see who else Petra could be talking about, and she touched my arm gently. “It’s just something small, dear, to thank you for everything you’re doing. Please come sit with us.”

I still wasn’t convinced that I was hearing her correctly. A gift for *me*?

Harper hopped up on one chair and Petra took the other, leaving me to join James on the lounge. He shifted to the corner of it as I sat down.

Petra waited until she had our attention and then reached into her oversized, undoubtedly expensive bag and pulled out a pretty wrapped gift. She handed it to Harper. “This is for my tiny dancer.”

Harper tore into it and pulled out a bright red dress, edged in black lace. When she held it up I realized that it was a child’s

sized flamenco dress, but not a costume-y version. I could tell even at a distance that it was an elaborate and authentic piece of craftsmanship.

“Grandy, it’s a princess dress!” Harper breathed, her eyes wide in awe.

“In a way,” Petra agreed. “Later I’ll show you videos of how they dance in those types of dresses.”

Harper twirled away, singing to herself and holding the dress against her.

“Now for you,” Petra said, digging into her purse again. “Just a little something to help you beat the heat around here.”

“Oh...you didn’t have to...”

“It’s nothing, really. Just a little thank you for helping our girl.” She handed me a slim package while I tried to figure out how much she knew about me. I wasn’t surprised that James had told her he’d brought me on board, but had he given her enough detail about my time here to make her think I was worthy of a *gift*? I resolutely stopped myself from thinking of how long it had been since I’d gotten a gift from my own mother. Those thoughts wouldn’t lead anywhere useful or pleasant.

I opened the box to find an intricately carved fan, pale blue and covered in delicate flowers, with a bit of lace along the edge.

“It’s stunning,” I breathed as I flapped it a few times. “Thank you so much!”

“Vintage,” she said with a satisfied nod. “The man I bought it from said it belongs in a museum, but my perspective is why keep beautiful things under glass? Use them, enjoy them!”

“I... I will.”

I was speechless that this stranger had thought to bring me something so beautiful and valuable. I glanced over at James, and he tipped his head as if to say, *That’s just the way she is.*

It wasn’t just her generosity that caught me off guard, it was the way the three of them seemed so connected. The easy way

James laughed as Petra regaled us with stories of haggling with street vendors, and how she had to fight off the advances of men half her age. How she chatted while casually braiding Harper's hair. They were a family in the truest sense of the word, and it was nothing that I was familiar with. Sure, Cassie and I were tight, but I'd never just *hung out* with my mom the way James did. I felt like an anthropologist watching an unknown species.

"Can Bernardo whip something up for dinner for all of us?" Petra asked James. "And let's invite your sister over as well. I've been gone for too long, and I want all of my favorite people together!"

What I wouldn't have given to hear my own mom say something like that.

"Bernardo can create a seven-course meal out of potatoes, onions, and water so yes, he can most certainly make dinner for all of us," James answered. "I'll ask him to grill to make it a little easier. It's a gorgeous night; we can stay out here." He swung his eyes to me. "Kaitlyn, would you like to join us?"

"Yes!" Harper yelled before I had a chance to answer, hopping over to where I was sitting. "Stay!"

Her excitement made me laugh. "I'd love to, thank you for the invitation."

Jess joined us an hour and a half later, and we were all seated at the long, teak table enjoying grilled jerk salmon, scallops, and corn with a side of mango salsa. I could feel James watching me as the evening progressed, and I couldn't imagine what might be going through his mind. I worried that he was upset I was crashing his family dinner until I finally glanced his way. He looked like he was *studying* me. Trying to figure me out.

"Jess, darling, you've been quiet since you arrived," Petra said, gesturing toward her daughter with an overfull glass of white wine. "What's going on in your life?"

Jess's eyes flew to James before she answered, and his jaw clenched.

“I was working on something that was really exciting, but I might have to drop it since I’m not getting the support I need.” She fired another look at him that revealed her anger and frustration.

“Why not? Tell me about it,” Petra said.

“It’s a fashion house that my friend from school wants to set up in Raleigh—”

“Is it Henri?” Petra asked. “I *adore* him, I still have a silk scarf he designed for me all those years ago. He’s got such an eye.”

“Right?” Jess exploded. “That’s exactly what *I* said, but—”

“It’s not worth your time investing in something like that, Jess,” James interrupted. His voice had an edge that didn’t make sense given the conversation. “Or the money. I don’t care if it’s Coco Chanel herself, fashion is always a bad investment.”

“Oh, I don’t agree with that at all,” Petra said. She glanced between her children. “Is Lucas somehow involved with this operation? Is that why you two are squabbling?”

“Mom, no,” Jess replied, practically vibrating with anger. “Why would someone I dated a million years ago be a part of a new business venture? Of course I wouldn’t go near anything he was involved in—and not just because it would send James through the roof.”

I was insanely curious about what had gone down between Jess and this Lucas person to make everyone so prickly about him, but I didn’t dare insert myself into the family drama. The table went silent except for the sounds of clinking utensils on fine China until Harper finished gulping her drink, stood up on her chair, and slammed the empty cup on the table.

“Done!” she shouted loudly enough that the people in the next villa probably heard her.

“*Harper,*” we all scolded her in unison.

She looked delighted that she had everyone’s attention. “Now let’s watch a movie!”

“Harper Rose Morris, you’ll sit down and wait until everyone at the table is finished,” James said in his no-nonsense voice. She bowed her head and sank back onto her chair. “And once we’ve cleared away the plates, *then* we can watch a movie.”

She raised her head, and the victorious smile was back.



James

After fighting our way through clearing the table and bickering with my daughter about what we were going to have for dessert, the five of us finally settled in my theater room. Harper had suggested we hold movie night in my room the way we usually did when it was just the two of us, but I finally managed to convince her that we’d be more comfortable in the larger room.

Besides, I didn’t want Kaitlyn in my bedroom. I’d *never* get those intrusive and inappropriate thoughts about her out of my head if I had the mental pictures to spur my imagination along.

We’d settled on *The Wizard of Oz*, which just happened to be Jess’s favorite growing up. She’d been quiet since the conversation about the fashion ridiculousness over dinner, and I wanted to make a small peace offering. Bernardo had quickly cooked up a batch of kettle corn and served glasses of port for the grown-ups, and we all settled in to enjoy the movie.

As Kaitlyn took in the room, I realized that there were still parts of the house she rarely visited. She was so focused on Harper’s rehabilitation that she probably forgot everything the place had to offer. I’d have to find a way to remind her she was free to explore. She deserved to be able to kick back after a long day. Enjoy the sauna, perhaps.

I cleared my throat as an image of a sweaty, half-naked Kaitlyn flashed through my mind. *No. Focus on the flying monkeys, idiot.*

I realized a little too late that some of the scarier parts of the movie might be *too* scary for my daughter at this age. Harper

started off sitting next to my mother, then found her way to Jess before she jumped off the couch to dance her way down the yellow brick road.

The unexpected reappearance of the Wicked Witch sent her flying to Kaitlyn, who welcomed her onto her lap and shielded her eyes while the witch was on screen. She bent her head to whisper into Harper's ear until the action on the screen changed.

It was too sweet. I knew Kaitlyn was going to be perfect for Harper the second I hired her, but I never expected it would evolve into *this*. There was so much she did that was above and beyond her job description, beyond the classroom and into the core of our lives.

I glanced around the room and my mom caught my eye. She tipped her head toward the pair and I nodded. The simple gesture spoke volumes about what she was seeing happen. And I saw it, too. Harper was slowly becoming the happy child we'd all known before the incident, and we had Kaitlyn to thank for that.

I downed the last of my port and wished I had something stronger. I could see Kaitlyn's long, shapely legs stretched out in front of her. I remembered how it felt to have them wrapped around me.

Damnit, *stop*.

But I couldn't resist taking her in. Barefoot, her toenails sparkled with some sort of glittery pink polish that suited her personality. Her skin glowed with a healthy looking tan. Probably from her runs around the neighborhood. I'd seen her out the window, returning home looking sweaty but somehow still perfect. She'd occasionally be smiling to herself, and I had to wonder why.

Kaitlyn adjusted herself and I quickly averted my gaze. When I looked back I realized Harper had fallen asleep in her arms with her head nestled on Kaitlyn's shoulder. It was precious. Perfect. Peaceful.

Kaitlyn glanced at me over Harper's head and smiled.

Shit.

I was *so* screwed.

KAITLYN

I stretched my hands over my head and tried to recapture whatever had me in such a good mood before I'd even gotten out of bed. It was the morning after movie night with the Morris crew, which probably had something to do with it. Being surrounded by a loving family was a novelty, but a very pleasant one.

Then the details of the dream came flooding back. Nope, it wasn't just the family stuff that had me waking up feeling great, it was a way-too-realistic reenactment of what had happened between James and me that night at Bloom. His hands tracing the contours of my breasts, pausing to run his thumb along each nipple. Dropping his mouth to one, then the other, dragging his tongue over the peaks then slowly sucking until I was squirming with pleasure. Last night I'd woken up right as his fingertips were walking their way down my stomach, and I'd practically cried out from the agony of wanting him to keep going. I bit my lip when I remembered taking matters into my own hands, literally, then drifting back into a semi-satisfied sleep. My dreams had picked up along the same thread, with much more *fulfilling* conclusions the second time around, hence the pleasure practically buzzing through me as I woke up.

James had been showing up in my dreams on the regular, ever since the night we'd walked along the beach together. I wouldn't allow myself to think about what might've happened if the paparazzi hadn't shown up, which was probably why my damn subconscious mind kept filling in the details.

I needed to get moving. And more importantly, I needed to stop dreaming about my boss fucking me.

Jess had stayed over and was hanging with Harper for the day, so I was free to do whatever I wanted. Cassie and I had talked about meeting for lunch to go over some wedding planning details, so I reached for my phone on the nightstand to text her. Right as I picked it up, a text buzzed through, and I laughed at the way my sister and I were always on the same wavelength. I might not have a strong family unit, but at least I had Cassie.

I squinted at the message and was surprised to realize it was from a number I didn't recognize. Reading it, my heart dropped when I realized who it was from.

Hi, it's Mom. Please call me.

It's a sucker punch to the gut. Out of *nowhere*, here she was, trying to get in touch. In a way it felt like all of my warm feelings from the night before had somehow found their way to her, prompting her to reach out. But no, my mother wasn't like that. If I'd been back in my apartment, going through my regular day-to-day, there was no way I would've even considered it. But being here, surrounded by the kind of family I'd always wished I had...well, I guess it was doing something to me.

And maybe something was wrong? Mom had at least been conscientious enough not to call me out of the blue without warning. The text, the request to call at my convenience, gave me time to collect myself. To make the decision as to whether I should do it. That was a start. It showed a little growth.

I tapped the "dial" button before I could talk myself out of it, and she picked up almost immediately.

"Oh, honey, I'm so happy you called me." Her voice went shaky, and she sniffled a few times.

Was she actually *crying*?

I could picture her as she'd been the last time I'd seen her, years ago, with her shoulders hunched up close to her ears and a cigarette clutched in the same hand that was holding the phone. She always liked to tell us what a beauty she'd been

when she was young, how model scouts used to chase her down at the mall. Cass and I always found it hard to believe, because to us she looked hard, and she *never* smiled. Neither one of us looked like her, and the fact that we took after our father was probably yet another strike against us.

“Are you okay?” I asked tentatively.

The fact that she was crying was unusual, but I didn’t want to jump to conclusions about what it might mean. I’d been on the receiving end of too many mood flips over the years.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong?” As much as I hated to admit it, I was starting to get worried.

“I *miss* you,” she sobbed. “Just hearing your voice is getting to me. I have so much to tell you, honey.”

“Okay... I’m listening,” I said, still not letting my defenses down.

She finally composed herself. “Do you know what it means to make amends?”

I let out a long sigh. “You went to rehab.”

“Yes! And I learned so much. About what happened to me, and how it impacted you...but the most important part of going through it was learning that I need to make up for my mistakes. To make things right with you and your sister.” She paused to sniffle again. “You’re my girls.”

The desperation in her voice was surprising—as were the words themselves. She’d never even come close to admitting she was in any way responsible for the screwed-up dynamics in our family. This felt like a major step. It could be the beginning of healing.

And just in time for Cassie’s wedding.

But I knew to be cautious. One apology didn’t erase our painful history. The controlling behavior, the constant criticisms, the way she’d always blamed us for our dad walking out. The way she’d kicked us out when we’d failed to fall in line. But I’d learned about gaslighting, and toxic

parents, and I knew that the crap she'd thrown our way had nothing to do with us and everything to do with her own issues. It didn't take away all of the hurt, but it made it a little easier to bear.

"Hon? What do you think?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. I wasn't quite ready for a reconciliation just yet, especially since the words *I'm sorry* still hadn't come out of her mouth. "I appreciate that you reached out."

"Maybe we can get together some time?"

"Things are pretty busy these days between..." I broke off. I didn't want her to start asking questions about my job, and I wasn't sure if she knew about Cassie's engagement. "Between all of my commitments. But I think just talking like this every now and then is a decent start."

"Oh, okay," she said softly. "I was hoping that maybe we could start making up for lost time."

I thought about the way Petra had hugged James as she was leaving, and my heart ached a little. It had been a real hug, and when they'd pulled away they'd both been smiling. I'd wanted that type of relationship so badly when I was young, but I'd figured out that it just wasn't possible for me. My relationship with my mom had never been strong. On good days, we got along decently well—without ever actually being close or affectionate. On bad days, I had to deal with constant accusations of being ungrateful. Selfish. Choosing my sister over her.

"I hadn't expected to ever hear from you again. I need some time," I said. "But I'm glad you went to rehab and appreciate that you reached out. And I look forward to talking again."

"Me too."

"I need to run, take care, okay?"

"Okay. Hey...I, uh," she paused. "I love you."

I hadn't heard those three words in years, and damn it if I didn't get choked up. I cleared my throat. "Thanks. I hope we

talk soon.”

After we hung up I was frozen in bed. *What* had just happened?

When I was finally able to get up, I realized I still needed to figure out my schedule with Cassie. I debated telling her about the call but opted to skip it. Cassie’s relationship with Mom had been even more screwed up than mine, and I wasn’t in the mood to hear my sister shrieking about how evil our mother was.

Once we finally nailed down our time and location, I sped through a shower and did my hair and makeup. Cassie always looked perfect, and I wanted to show her that her MOH was putting in the effort to look good too.

Even though we were headed to brunch, I needed to take the edge off my hunger, so I headed for the kitchen to grab a quick snack. The breakfast shift was over, so Bernardo was probably out shopping to restock the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator, curious what he’d served for breakfast and hopeful that there were leftovers. All of my consistent running had me starving every day. I smiled when Lou’s face popped into mind. I’d seen my mysterious running buddy a few more times, and our conversations had been friendly and fun. Hanging out with him had turned into a nice way to clear my head and unwind.

The sound of running water startled me, and when I turned, a very sweaty James bent over the sink and drinking directly from the faucet.

“Hey.”

His eyes went wide when he looked up at me. “I thought you were Bernardo! I saw the fridge door open and I assumed...” James wiped his mouth then ran his hand through his sweaty hair, making it stand up a little.

Yum.

It was the first thing I thought when I got a good look at the rest of him. He was wearing a white tank top and shorts that showed off a lot of leg. He had that muscular cut in the center of each thigh, the line that made it clear that my boss never

skipped leg day. When I glanced up at his arms, I had a flash of how it felt to have them wrapped around me, and I swear I almost shuddered right then and there.

“I’m sorry you have to see me like this,” he said. “Very unprofessional.”

“Well, we’re standing in *your* kitchen on a Sunday morning—I would hope you don’t feel the need to be professional here,” I shot back with a smile.

He leaned against the counter and grinned at me. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. What are you up to today?”

A flash of concern passed behind his eyes as they flicked down my body. I’d put on my white jeans and a sleeveless black top that dipped a little low in front, so I looked dressy enough for Cassie’s approval. “Brunch with my sister. Wedding stuff.”

“Ah, got it.”

I could’ve sworn I saw relief pass over his face. Then it hit me. He thought I was going on a date!

“What are *you* up to?” I lobbed back at him. “It’s still the weekend, so I hope you’re not planning on working.”

He shook his head and leaned forward on the counter. I tried not to stare at the strong muscles that roped along his forearms. “I’m supposed to meet Jess and Harper at the pool. Shame you’re not going to be around, we would’ve loved to have you join us.”

James in a swimsuit? Speedo or trunks? I swallowed hard. What a terrible idea.

“Maybe next time,” I said as casually as I could, knowing it was a lie.

Because there was no way in hell I was ever going to get within fifty feet of a wet, half-naked James Morris. It was hard enough being around him when he was fully clothed.

JAMES

I had to admit I was more than a little jealous.

I'd scheduled the cruise on my boat as a belated birthday gift for Scott, letting him know from the start that the whole trip would be on me—but that I wouldn't be able to join them. Not when I had so many commitments keeping me at home. But now that everyone was showing up to board, I found myself wishing I could be a part of the fun. I watched the group gather on the dock at the far end of my property, laughing and chatting. There were seven of them total, and I strained to spot Kaitlyn among them from my position on my office balcony.

They were headed to Key West as honored guests at my brand new investment, Club Obsidian. It was a two-birds-with-one-stone situation. The night would be comped and they'd get to have a fabulous time, while I would get reports back to me about every detail of their experience so I could make sure it was perfect before we held the press and VIP launch in a few weeks. I'd been there myself, of course, but everyone was always on their best behavior when the boss was around. Scott and his friends would be able to give me a better idea of the average guest's experience.

I finally spotted Kaitlyn throwing her head back and laughing at something a too-handsome guy was saying and decided I needed to walk down to see them off. It was the least I could do *and* polite.

I passed my mom and Harper in the shade of the patio making a mess, or as Harper said, “Doing art.”

“Our girl has quite a gift,” Mom said. “Little Junior Picasso over here. I might have some of these framed.”

Harper beamed and held up a painting that was a mass of colors. “Kaitlyn showed me how to make a rainbow!”

“Wow, sweetheart, that *is* good!”

I jogged over to plant a quick kiss on her head and mouthed my thanks to my mom.

It was funny to me that Kaitlyn was always top of mind for Harper, even when they weren’t together. The bond between them had grown quickly, to my great relief. Sometimes it felt like Kaitlyn was destined to wind up in our home.

Everyone applauded and cheered when I finally reached the dock.

“Look who decided to see us off, the man who’s too busy keeping his nose to the grindstone to sneak away for twenty-four hours!” Scott said, grabbing my shoulder.

Kaitlyn smirked at his comment.

“Hey, hey, it’s not just work. I want to keep close to Harper,” I protested. “She’s still dealing with some stuff.”

But the truth was my mom was staying for the weekend, and Jess was due to arrive any minute. I *could* sneak away for the night, but I was waiting for confirmation about a property I wanted to buy in Miami. It was an absolute gem of a spot, in an up-and-coming area that no one else seemed to recognize as such. Well, no one but the person selling the spot. I was still about to pay a pretty penny for it. Once the deal went through, there’d be paperwork to attend to, and I never liked to wait once things go through. I glanced at my phone to see if word had come yet.

Scott grabbed Cassie’s hand and pulled her over to us. “I heard you treated Cassie and her friends to quite a night at Bloom, and now this. We can’t thank you enough.”

Just mentioning that night was enough to set me on edge. It would forever be linked to Kaitlyn. I glanced to where she was standing, and she was still talking to the guy, who kept edging closer to her.

“Yes, thank you so much for this incredible gift,” Cassie said, smiling broadly as she leaned in to kiss my cheek. “I hope you stocked up on champagne because I might drink your boat dry, right, ladies? *Woooo*, champagne!”

The sound set off a chain reaction of “wooo”s from the other two women, while Kaitlyn just smiled at them like she was a bemused babysitter. I glanced between the sisters and could see the similarities between them. Same eye color, same wide smiles, but there was something about Kaitlyn that no one could touch. She was incandescent.

And standing *way* too close to that ridiculously good-looking guy.

“I recognize your friends from the bachelorette party, but who are the guys going with you?” I gestured toward the rest of the group.

Cassie glanced where I was pointing. “The dude who looks like he just played eighteen holes is Scott’s friend from work, Matt,” she gestured to a guy wearing a golf shirt and visor. “And the guy talking to my sister is Matt’s boyfriend, Malcolm. He does some modeling. He had a billboard up on I-75 for a while you might’ve seen.”

I relaxed. *He’s gay*. Okay, good.

Not that I had any claim to who Kaitlyn talked to, but still. I had to look out for my employee. At least, that was what I kept telling myself as I mentally stomped down my jealousy.

My phone rang. “Excuse me, I have to take this.”

My pulse kicked up a notch as I stepped away to take the call from my business manager. Nothing like the thrill of the kill. I’d make the call quick, send off the booze cruise, then get to work on next steps for the property.

“James, I’ve got news,” Walter’s voice was strained in a way that didn’t sound like good news, and I felt my pulse trip into

double time.

“Don’t tell me—”

“We lost it.”

“*Fuck*,” I growled.

“To Lucas. Again.”

I was so angry that I started pacing in circles on the lawn a few feet away from the end of the dock. “How the hell did he find out we were considering it?”

“No idea. He must be paying off contractors and surveyors. I’m sorry.”

“Did you try topping his offer? Or calling his people to see if they’d be open to letting it go?”

“Yes, but they said Lucas was dead set on it.”

“*Damn* it.”

I hung up and stared at the ground. That fucker kept grabbing everything that mattered to me.

“Hey.”

I turned to find Kaitlyn looking at me with concern.

“Oh, hi,” I said, shoving my phone in my pocket and trying not to look as pissed as I felt. “You guys all set to go?”

“Yeah, shortly.” She gestured to where I’d just shoved my phone. “What just happened? Are you okay?”

For a second, I worried that I’d been too loud and everyone had heard me raging, but it seemed Kaitlyn was the only one to pick up on my distress.

I sighed. The way she was looking at me made me feel like confessing could do me good. There was a calmness about her, a willingness to listen which was probably the reason my daughter opened up to her so quickly.

“It’s just business. Someone swiped a property out from under me. A professional rival, you could say.” I wasn’t about to go into Lucas and Jess’s history.

“Oh, I’m sorry, James. You must be disappointed.”

I forced out a laugh. “More like pissed.”

Kaitlyn moved a few steps closer to me. “Why don’t you come with us and get your mind off it for a night? Might do you good to blow off some steam.”

I started to answer that getting away would be impossible, but she was the one person who’d be able to see through my lie. She knew Harper was in great hands with her grandmother. With Kaitlyn standing just a foot away from me, looking up at me wearing a worried expression, it was impossible to say no.

“Okay. Yeah, maybe I will.” I paused for a moment. “Fine, I’ll go with you.”

“Fantastic! Jess is supposed to come over for the weekend, right? Would she want to come too? I think everyone would love her.” The smile she beamed at me lifted some of the weight from my shoulders.

I glanced at the women singing and dancing together on the docks without a drink in them yet, and yes, my sister would fit right in.

“Okay, give us thirty minutes and we’ll meet you on the boat.”



Why didn’t I do this more often?

I tipped my head back and let the sun warm my face. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d taken the boat out. It was a goddamn delight, and when I glanced around it was clear that I wasn’t the only one enjoying it.

Everyone was either in or around the hot tub where Jess was holding court. My sister was good at many things, but nothing topped her ability to keep people’s focus. It was one of the traits I envied about her, that easy way she commanded the spotlight. I could hold my own, of course, but it took more of a conscious effort. She did it naturally.

“You good, bro?” Scott asked. “You’re mighty quiet.”

“Other than losing out on a deal I’d been counting on, I’m fine. Better than fine. This is great.”

We’d been catching up, smoking cigars and really talking for the first time in ages. It felt good and reminded me that I needed to connect with people other than my business contacts more often.

A text from my mom buzzed in, a photo of her and Harper playing Go Fish. I smiled. Things were good. *Really* good. I glanced at Kaitlyn and watched her watching everyone else, still wearing a diaphanous white cover-up. It was short—when she turned around I could see the lower curve of her ass in her blue bikini bottom, but it obscured everything else.

“She’s an amazing woman,” Scott said, clinking the edge of his beer bottle to mine to try to pull my attention away from my staring.

“What? Who?”

He laughed. “Dude, you’ve never been subtle. You’ve been staring at Kaitlyn the whole time.”

“I’m looking at...everyone,” I said, gesturing to the group, knowing he didn’t believe me.

“Yeah, uh-huh.” Scott drained his beer. “There’s no one more loyal than a Thorn girl, let me tell you. And you never have to wonder where you stand with them. Oh, trust me, you’ll know. When they love you, they *love* you. Fierce love. And if you piss one of ‘em off, hoo boy. That’s fierce too.”

I considered what it would be like to be loved by Kaitlyn. Loyal, I could definitely see that. Fierce...wasn’t the first word that came to mind, but I remembered our night at Bloom, how passionate she could be. Yeah, I’d seen her fierceness too. I swallowed the rest of my beer. I didn’t drink much these days, but I felt like a freshman again, needing a few beers to take the edge off my nerves.

“Their mom really screwed them up, though. Took forever for Cassie to actually trust me.”

“What happened with their mom?”

“Their dad walked out and she blamed Cassie and Kaitlyn for it. Then, when Cassie was in high school, she kicked her out for failing a bunch of classes. Kaitlyn stood up for her, and their mom turned on both of them. It’s a whole thing, they all haven’t talked in years. Needless to say, Momma Thorn ain’t invited to our wedding.”

I realized I knew nothing about Kaitlyn’s family. Not that it was integral for her position with me, but still. She’d never even mentioned her family in passing.

“I know Kaitlyn has the same big heart as Cassie. She’s going to make someone very happy someday.”

I narrowed my eyes at Scott. “Why are you telling me this? Kaitlyn is my employee.”

“Mm-hmm,” he replied, nodding and pursing his lips. “Right. And that’s *all* she is?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

I avoided looking at Scott because I knew he’d see right through me. Instead, I peered across the boat at the group of laughing, dancing people and let my eyes trail further, to the woman sitting off to the side, watching the action and wearing a little smile.

Kaitlyn. Loyal, fierce Kaitlyn, the woman who was bringing my daughter back to life. Yes, she was my employee. A damn good one.

And it was going to take everything in my power not to ask for anything more.

JAMES

“C ould you repeat that?”

I leaned closer to Cassie to hear what she was trying to tell me over the pounding baseline in Club Obsidian. Our group was spread throughout the place, with a few of us holding down the VIP table and the rest scattered on the dancefloor. So far everything was going perfectly, except for one glaring issue. And it seemed Cassie had picked up on it as well.

“I said it’s weird that Katie is dancing with that guy. She never dances.” Cassie nodded toward the dancefloor where a guy with slicked-back black hair had his hands on Kaitlyn’s hips, guiding her through some moves.

“Oh? Why do you think she’s out there then?” I asked as I involuntarily curled my free hand into a fist.

Cassie shrugged. “Sometimes she’s too nice to say no thanks. Maybe it’s a pity dance.” She paused. “Although the guy is pretty hot, so maybe not.”

I felt Cassie’s eyes rest on me for a beat, but I didn’t stop watching Kaitlyn. As if I could. Jess had hooked her up with a dress that looked like it had been made for her, a short, yellow feat of construction that clung to her curves and twisted into a knot at her hip, leaving a sliver of her waist exposed. The dress, combined with her hair in a wild tumble over her shoulders and makeup that set her eyes smoldering, made it impossible for me to look at anything but her. I was supposed

to be doing recon on the club, but all I wanted to do was watch Kaitlyn.

I tried to convince myself that it was for her safety, because men had been buzzing around her all night. But Kaitlyn could hold her own. I'd watched her walk away from one guy who got a little too friendly during a slow song. I mentally applauded her as she stormed away.

I wished she'd come back and sit at the table, but for whatever reason, it seemed like she wanted nothing to do with me. In fact, she'd been keeping her distance all night.

Jess plopped down beside me on the leather banquette.

"You outdid yourself with this place, big brother. It's fabulous."

"Thanks, I think it's a nice complement to the rest of my properties. This one is a little more..."

"Raw?" Jess finished for me.

I nodded. "Exactly. I think we all need this type of vibe now and then. It's the kind of place where anything can happen."

"Agreed." She pointed to the dancefloor. "Speaking of anything happening, what do you think of Kaitlyn's dress?"

Why the hell did everyone keep circling back to her? Was it *that* obvious I was looking out for my employee?

"It's nice. There's some engineering to it." I gestured to my midsection, unsure how to explain the mechanics of the fabric and exposed skin.

Jess laughed at me. "*Nice?* A sundress is 'nice.' That right there is a work of art thanks to a certain Parisian designer. But you don't want to hear about him so never mind."

She leaned forward to pour herself a glass of champagne and held the bottle toward me.

"No thanks, water for me tonight," I replied, holding my tumbler up.

"Suit yourself. But I think at this point you can clock out and enjoy yourself. The club looks great, the staff is incredible, the

DJ is killing it. Loosen up and have some fun.”

“I *am* having fun,” I lied. “What should I be doing?”

“How about breaking *that* up?” She pointed to the dancefloor where Kaitlyn had her hands over her head and was shimmying in front of a guy.

Damnit why was she dancing like that with him? Something curdled inside me as I watched her laughing and moving in sync with him.

It wasn't a protective instinct. What I was feeling was pure jealousy.

The song changed and the energy on the dancefloor immediately downshifted to match the slower tempo.

“Maybe I should go see how she's doing?” I mused.

Jess smirked at me. “Yeah, maybe you should.”

I stood up slowly and stalked toward Kaitlyn as the man pulled her back to press against his body. I wanted to run across the room and rip the man's hands off her. As I got closer I noticed her looking around, like she was trying to find the right moment to escape. When she spotted me relief flooded her face.

“Excuse me,” I said, hoping the growl in my chest wasn't too obvious. As the host of the club, I couldn't be an asshole to my patrons, but fuck if I didn't want to drop this guy with a single punch to the jaw. Instead, I moved in and grabbed Kaitlyn's hand, pulling her toward me smoothly, like it was a dance move. She ended up pressed against my chest.

“Hey...” the guy said, taking a step closer to me.

“Sorry, I need to cut in,” I said with a shrug. The guy looked at Kaitlyn as if he expected her to argue, but she just nodded and snuggled into my arms. With a huff, he stormed away.

The tension dissolved from Kaitlyn's frame. “Thank you. He was getting to be too much.”

I tried to focus on what she was saying and not the way her body felt pressed against me. I'd taken off my blazer, and it

was as if I could feel every contour of her body through my thin dress shirt. I'd thought about it far too often since our night at Bloom, but now here we were, chest to chest. Hopefully, Kaitlyn couldn't feel my heart pounding.

"I could tell you weren't enjoying yourself."

"Oh, really? Were you *watching* me?" She cocked her head and gave me a mischievous smile.

"I watch everything that goes on in my club."

Her smile faded. "Oh."

Her body shifted ever so slightly away from me, and I knew I couldn't let this moment of connection slip away.

"But yes. I was watching you. In fact, I can't keep my eyes off of you." I stared at Kaitlyn, waiting to see how she'd respond. I wanted this—but if there was any hint she wasn't on board then I would back off. I couldn't risk doing anything that might make her quit. As badly as I wanted her, Harper mattered more.

"I thought so."

I tightened my grip around her waist.

"I've been waiting for you to come dance with me all night," she said softly.

The naked desire on her face was all the invitation I needed. I threaded my hand through her soft hair to cup the back of her head and stared into her eyes for a beat, allowing her the opportunity to move away from me. But she didn't. Kaitlyn stared up at me with an expression that looked like pleading.

I didn't care that we'd agreed to keep it professional. If she was on board, then I wasn't about to deny either one of us any longer. In that moment I'd never desired anything more than the sensation of Kaitlyn's lips pressed against mine. So I leaned down and did exactly what I'd been dying to do since the minute she walked into my home.

I dropped my mouth to her and kissed Kaitlyn like I wasn't about to stop.



Kaitlyn

I couldn't stop thinking about the way James had kissed me last night.

After dreaming about it for weeks, I could barely believe it had happened, and right there in the middle of the dancefloor, in front of everyone. Normally, something like that would make me shy and self-conscious, but in the moment, I'd wanted it so badly I hadn't cared, and based on the bulge in his pants it was obvious he hadn't cared, either.

"Earth to Katie. Pass the salt please."

I didn't realize that I'd been zoning out until Cassie called me on it. We were at brunch along with Jess—everyone else having begged off, preferring to sleep in—and it seemed I was the only one without a hangover. They were deep in hair-of-the-dog mimosas and greasy eggs while I munched on a strip of bacon.

"Yup, here," I said, handing the shaker across the table.

"So are we going to talk about it?" Cassie asked as she covered her eggs in salt.

"Talk about what?"

"Talk about the show you and my brother put on for everyone last night," Jess snorted.

My cheeks heated fast in response. Did she have a problem with the fact that James and I had kissed? Was she the protective type?

Trying to play it cool, I shrugged. "There's not much more to it. I mean, there's an attraction between us. There's heat, sure. But I work for him so nothing can happen. That's what we agreed to. He'd probably had a few too many last night."

"Uh uh," Jess said, shaking her head. "He was stone sober. He never drinks in his own clubs—I know that for a fact."

I filed the detail away, secretly happy to hear it.

“He couldn’t stop watching you all night. He looked like he was going to jump out of his skin when you were dancing with other guys.”

“Oh, stop...” I said, even though I wanted to hear every detail about what they’d noticed and what they thought it meant.

Jess drained her mimosa. “I know my brother. He’s into you.”

“Agreed,” Cassie said. “I think the dress helped. You looked amazing in it.”

“Right?” Jess said, her eyes wide. “I *know* Henri’s designs will take off. I just wish James would invest and not be such a jerk about it.”

“Why is that?” The dynamics of their family confused me. On the one hand, they all seemed so close, and it was clear they loved each other. But when it came to Jess, there was this weird undercurrent I couldn’t quite understand, as if they weren’t quite sure they could trust her. As if she wasn’t quite sure she could trust herself, too.

“He thinks fashion is too risky. Which—yes, fine, it *is* risky, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be done right. I *know* I can make a go of it, but it’s not going to be easy without backing. And it’s frustrating because I *have* the money—there’s enough in my trust fund to cover the investment Henri needs ten times over—but James won’t let me touch it. All I get is my monthly allowance, which is plenty to live on but not enough to invest.”

“What about property?” Cassie asked.

Jess just blinked, confused. “You mean...like, a place for Henri to set up shop? He’s not at that stage yet, but—”

“No, I mean, does your inheritance include any property or is it just money in the bank? Because if you’ve got something to use as collateral, you could try to get a loan.”

“I... I could?”

“Absolutely,” Cassie said. “I work for a bank, but it’s not one of those little regional outfits. We do quite a bit of business

investing, with some pretty major players. I could set up an interest call with you and our corporate loan officer.”

“Really?” Jess asked. “I hadn’t even thought about getting a traditional loan. But anyway, yes, I would love to do an exploratory call. Let me talk to Henri first and see what he thinks.” She pulled her phone out of her purse and jumped up.

“Now?” I laughed.

“I told you I’m serious about it!” She looked back over her shoulder. “Don’t say anything to James, okay?”

Cassie and I agreed as we watched Jess thread through the tables on the patio.

“Hey, I need to tell you something,” I said, feeling unsettled about the conversation we were going to have. “Just hear me out before you say anything.”

“Oh shit,” Cassie said warily. “Did you decide that pineapple upside-down cake is better?”

“No,” I laughed, trying to keep her mood light. “I heard from Mom the other day. She texted, and then we talked on the phone.”

Cassie froze with her fork in midair. She lowered it to her plate slowly. “What did she want?”

“To make amends. Cassie, she went through rehab. She sounded different. I mean, she actually acknowledged that she made mistakes.”

Cassie let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. She’s hoping we can get together to talk.”

Cassie’s face went hard. “You didn’t tell her I’m getting married, did you?”

I shook my head. “No. That’s your news, I’d never do that. I think she wants to try, Cassie, and I think we owe it to her.”

“*Fuck that.*” Cassie said, enunciating the words. “No way. I’ve made my peace with the fact that our mom is messed up—that it’s not our fault, and that it’s okay to let that family tie go. I’m

not about to lose the progress I've made by connecting with her. Especially right before my wedding. Nope, not a chance."

"So you won't even—"

Cassie held her hand up in front of my face. "No. Conversation over."

I pushed the sippy pancakes around my plate. I'd expected resistance from my sister but not a "do not pass go" reaction.

Seeing the way James and Jess got along with Petra made me feel the fracture in my own family that much more acutely. I'd hoped that phone call was the start of a new beginning, a new page in our family history, but Cassie had just made it abundantly clear she wasn't going to be a part of the new story.

JAMES

“Daddy, what’s wrong?”

Harper looked up from her bowl of cereal with worried eyes.

I placed my phone down on the table, perplexed at how my daughter could’ve pick up my displeasure even when I hadn’t said a word. I was pretending to eat breakfast while Harper and Kaitlyn did it for real. My focus was on the avalanche of bad news on my phone.

“What makes you think something is wrong, sweetheart?”

“You keep making that mad noise.” She furrowed her brow and made a few grunting sounds, pretending to look at an invisible phone in her hand. Kaitlyn giggled into her coffee cup next to Harper.

“Do I really do that?” I asked in a teasing voice. “You think Daddy sounds like a grumbly bear?”

She nodded and scooped the last bite of cereal into her mouth, leaving a dribble of milk on her chin.

“Like...*this*?” I leaned toward her and let out a Disney-monster growl right in her ear, causing Harper to shriek and jump.

“Daddy!”

Once the laughter died down I realized that Harper needed an explanation. Ever since her kidnapping, I tried to be honest

with her, shielding her from harsh truths but sharing the types of ups and downs I knew she could handle.

“I’m not mad, sweetheart, I’m just a little unhappy because I saw some photos of me that I didn’t like.”

“Pictures of what?”

There was no way I was going to let on the paparazzi had been at it again. “Just pictures of me being silly. I like to be silly in private with you. But no one else needs to see that, right?”

“I like it when you’re silly, Daddy.”

“You’re my favorite person to be silly with,” I promised. “But I’m still not very happy with these pictures someone took.”

“Daddy, can I make you a nice picture that will make you happy? So you can forget about the bad silly pictures on your phone?”

“I would love that, sweetheart.”

Harper jumped off her chair and started running toward the makeshift classroom in the library.

“Excuse me, young lady,” I called to her. “Your bowl to the sink, please.”

Kaitlyn gave me a nod as Harper trudged back and grabbed her bowl.

“Thank you,” Kaitlyn and I said in unison.

Once she was out of the room, I picked up my phone again. It had been forty-eight hours since I’d impulsively kissed Kaitlyn, and we still hadn’t talked about it. Without Harper as a buffer between us the air felt thick. I wasn’t sure we’d ever talk about it, to be honest. I had thought we were moving forward after the kiss...but when the song changed to a pulsing EDM tune, everyone had run back to the dancefloor, and Kaitlyn had stepped away. I was determined to respect her decision, to not do anything that might make her feel uncomfortable or pressured—but damn, I couldn’t stop myself from wishing she’d change her mind.

So we were stuck in an uncomfortable limbo, pretending that it didn't happen.

It didn't help that Kaitlyn looked absolutely gorgeous in the morning light. Her hair was in a loose braid that trailed over her bare shoulder. Her fair skin had the slightest golden cast, like she'd forgotten to wear her sunscreen a few times on her daily runs. She was sitting with her leg kicked up on the chair and her arm draped over it, a casual pose that telegraphed how at home she felt here.

"May I ask what the photos were of?" Kaitlyn said, startling me out of my examination of her.

I grumbled for real this time. "Just the usual tabloid bullshit about how I'm 'out of control' and partying too much. Someone was taking photos of me at Club Obsidian, and they look pretty incriminating."

"Can I look?" She held out her hand and I scrolled to the picture and handed my phone to her.

I watched her face cycle through surprise and displeasure as she flicked her finger along the screen. "I'm in a bunch of them too."

It was true. Kaitlyn was seated next to me in a few photos from the end of the night, and the angle made it look like she was practically in my lap. Nearly every posted photo showed me throwing back a clear liquid in a tumbler with ice. The implication was that I was downing vodka by the gallon. I guess the truth—that I'd been drinking water—was less likely to get clicks.

"The party doesn't stop when you're at the top?" Kaitlyn read the headline. "Ugh, that's awful."

"Look at the last series of photos."

"They got us leaving Club Obsidian too? Oh my God, Hope looks *wasted*."

"Did you see the shot of me with my head back and my eyes closed? I was literally *blinking* but it makes me look like I'm about to pass out."

Her face was grim when she handed my phone back. “I’m sorry.”

“Let’s talk about something positive. How is Harper’s progress coming along? Anything new to report in the past day or so?”

Kaitlyn glanced toward where Harper had disappeared. “Actually, yes.” She sat up a little straighter. “Harper and I walked all the way down to the storage shed! We’ve been working on breathing techniques, and I paired the exercise with walking, so before she knew it we were there. I got a little nervous once she realized how far we were from the house, but luckily we spotted a bird’s nest so I was able to get her to focus on that instead. Then we started the breathing again and walked back to the house.”

I couldn’t believe it. The storage shed was halfway down the driveway, farther than any of us had gotten her to go. “That’s incredible.”

“What’s ‘credible?’” Harper asked, zipping back into the dining room clutching markers and a sheet of paper.

“You are,” I replied. “Now let’s get you moving on that picture, because I need to start my day.”

Harper was already back in her chair with her tongue jutting out of the corner of her mouth as she concentrated all her attention on drawing.

I took the opportunity to check my messages and was hit with yet another bombshell. A text from my PA Ella telling me that the woman I was relocating to Raleigh to manage my new club was opting out due to a better offer from that asshole Lucas. She was still in the building, and Ella was begging me to come in to work my magic.

“There’s that noise again, Daddy,” Harper said, her eyes flicking between her drawing and my face.

“Whoops, sorry. Your Daddy just has a lot going on.” I shot a look at Kaitlyn and frowned. “I need to head out.”

She nodded. “Okay, take care. We’ll see you when we see you.”

I pushed the chair back and started to stand.

“Daddy, no! Look at what I made for you,” Harper said, thrusting the drawing toward me.

I walked over to her and studied it. “Tell me what I’m seeing.”

She beamed at me. “It’s a family picture. That’s me,” she pointed to a little blob in the middle of the page. “And that’s you holding my hand. And that’s Kaitlyn holding my other hand.”

I hid my shock that my daughter had included Kaitlyn in a family image. But it made sense. She was a big part of my daughter’s life, and she was becoming a very important part of mine, too.

One that I couldn’t stop thinking about.

I glanced over at Kaitlyn, and when our eyes met her face was unreadable.

“It’s a wonderful drawing, thank you Harp,” I said, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. “I love it.”

I turned to leave.

“Daddy! Take it with you!”

I paused then turned back to my daughter. “Of course I will. I’ll keep it in my briefcase, okay?”

“Okay! And look at it when you feel sad. Because whenever we’re all together you act happy!”

My daughter was too damn perceptive.

“You’re right.”

I didn’t dare look at Kaitlyn again. The implication of what Harper had picked up on wasn’t lost on me, just as I’m sure Kaitlyn noticed it too. The fact that the three of us had an easy, warm connection. That we liked being together. And that everything felt better when we were.



I tossed my keys to Devon our valet and sped through the lobby, my mind spinning. I knew that Catherine was our top choice to relocate. I didn't want to lose her because of what she could bring to the table but, more importantly, because there was no way I was going to let Lucas win *again*. He made her an offer she couldn't refuse? Mr. Rushing was about to find out how easily I could top him.

Ella was waiting for me clutching her tablet, looking green.

"Hi James, thank you for getting here so quickly. She's in your office."

"Did she give you a number? How much is he offering her?" I didn't even bother with pleasantries, but Ella was used to it.

She shook her head. "She wanted to wait to talk to you."

"How receptive does she seem to negotiating?"

Ella squinted. "Hard to say? You know how Lucas is...he's good at making promises."

"And shitty at keeping them. Okay, let's go."

"One more thing..." Ella's pretty face was frozen in a frown. She swallowed hard. "Someone is waiting to talk to you. He won't give me his name."

She pointed to a dark corner in the lobby where a man was hovering in the shadows. He strode over to me, reaching into the breast pocket of his blazer, which made me instinctively brace myself for whatever he was about to do. I quickly scanned him to assess the threat level. His suit was two sizes too big, and his shoes were the wrong color. The man clearly didn't fit in. What could he possibly be doing here?

"James Morris?"

I gave him a curt nod, and he handed me an envelope. "You've been served," he said, then turned and headed for the elevator.

My stomach seized. I tore it open, dread spreading through me as I skimmed through the document.

Mitch and Maureen Dresher were suing me for custody of Harper, claiming that I was an unfit parent. The frequent CPS

visits made sense now; they were building a case against me. The frequency of them looked bad even though they never turned up a damn thing.

I crumpled the paper in my fist while trying to remain calm in front of Ella.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” I lied.

There was nothing I could do about the lawsuit at the moment. I’d have to do what I always did in times of crisis, which was focus on the immediate. Right now I had to convince someone that Morris Enterprises had her best interests at heart, and that we valued our employees. I couldn’t even hint at the rage that was swirling inside of me.

I exhaled slowly, letting some of the tension drain from my face. My personal life remained private, despite what the tabloids seemed to think. I couldn’t let on about the turmoil I was feeling.

“Let’s go.”

Ella finally allowed a smile, knowing that I could make everything right.

Despite what the Dreshers seemed to think.

JAMES

“So we have a deal?”

Catherine and I were in my office overlooking the Miami skyline, and it was finally decision time. After teasing out exactly what Lucas had offered her, I was able to make a counteroffer that *should* have swept all hesitation away.

Catherine looked down at her hands, but I could see the smile playing at the corners of her mouth. When she looked up at me the full smile bloomed. “We have a deal. Thank you, Mr. M-... uh, James.”

“How long have you worked with us? Two years? And you still have a hard time calling me James?”

She laughed. “We all do. It’s... I don’t know, it’s a sign of respect, I guess.”

I stopped myself from saying that she hadn’t respected me enough to ignore Lucas Rushing’s offer. It was now in the past, and I could relish the fact that I’d scored one victory against him.

“Ella is redrafting your paperwork so we can go ahead and finalize that today, but is there anything else you need from me?”

Her smile vanished, replaced by a look of concern. “No, everything is great. But... I want to say I’m sorry. For even considering going to work for Rushing Events. He came on really strong. It almost felt like he was *wooing* me, you know? Like a dating scenario. He sort of swept me off my feet. But I

shouldn't have listened to him. You deserved more loyalty from me than that, and I'm sorry."

I nodded. That was his technique, and it was hard to resist his "love bombing." Lucas was getting bolder, trying to snatch longstanding, valued members of my team. It was time to step up my game.

"No need to apologize. Not everyone plays by the rules," I said.

"But you do."

Ella came into my office clutching a stack of papers. "Catherine, why don't you come out to my desk and we'll get everything signed?"

She gathered her things and paused at the door. "Thank you, again, for this, Mr., *uh*, James."

I exhaled once I was alone in my office. Now I could put my energy toward the summons.

I read through it again, and my anger reached a boiling point. How *dare* they? My daughter was everything to me and they knew it. There was no way the courts would side with the Dreshers; the whole thing was a massive waste of time and resources. But then the paparazzi images flitted through my mind, reminders that to the outside world I looked like someone who cared more about a good time than the health and safety of my daughter. Would that be enough to sway a judge?

I slammed my fist down on my desk then picked up my phone to call my lawyer.

"James, how are you?" Malcolm Washington asked as a way of greeting me.

"Pissed off," I growled in response. "I just got served by Mitch and Maureen Dresher."

He let out a low whistle. "You've got to be kidding me. That's ridiculous."

"Exactly. But all the CPS bullshit is enough suspicion to make me look bad. And those recent pap photos will probably get

thrown around as well.”

“Listen, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Yes, this is an inconvenience, and yes, you’ll be putting my retainer to good use for a few weeks, but in the end, everything will be fine.”

I tried to be comforted by what he was telling me but still felt unsettled. I hated that Harper was being put in the middle of something so ugly. After what she’d been through, my daughter deserved peace, not a custody battle.

“James? You there?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. I’ll fax over the summons, let me know if you see anything that’s dicey.”

“Based on what you’ve told me about the Dreshers, I’m sure everything is letter perfect, but I’ll take a look, just in case.”

We hung up, and despite Malcolm’s easy dismissal of the case, I didn’t feel reassured.

Ella peeked her head in my office and studied me before speaking. “Hey, do you have a sec?”

“Of course.” I’d wanted a few minutes to sit in silence, but work never stopped.

“Ted reached out and said they’ve been having major issues with the POS system at Bloom for days now. He’s been in touch with the support team at the manufacturer and they’ve done all the patches and updates they could, but it’s still acting wonky.”

“Like how, exactly?”

“Like, leaving charges off bills. Last night the servers had to go over every bill line by line to make sure that everything was accounted for. People got frustrated with the wait.”

“Shit.”

She frowned. “Exactly. He said he thinks we need a full upgrade, with a different vendor. And he suggested that you consider including Club Obsidian in the upgrade as well, to prevent issues down the road.”

“We literally *just* installed –”

“I know, I know,” she interrupted with a grimace. “But Ted is convinced that the legacy system is failing because the whole thing is outdated.”

“Do you understand what that means, aside from the cost of an upgrade? It means sales pitches and demos and trial runs, then staff training, which leads to everyone bitching about the new system, and glitches and delays and... God *damn*it.”

She looked shocked, and I winced when I realized I’d raised my voice, something I tried to *never* do around anyone who worked for me. They needed me to be strong, in control—and to *not* throw a temper tantrum when things didn’t go my way. I hated that I’d let my frustration get the best of me in front of her.

Ella stared at me. “You don’t need this right now, do you?”

“I absolutely do not,” I admitted.

“Okay, I’ll take the lead and do some more research then circle back.”

That was one of the things I appreciated about Ella. Her ability to read the room and take initiative. She was capable enough to allow me to get the hell out of my office and go exactly where I needed to be.

Home. With my girl.

Girls. Yes, I wanted nothing more than to be with Harper *and* Kaitlyn.

“I’m going to head out for the day. Text me if you need anything.”

“Of course. And don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.”

I finally allowed a smile. “I appreciate you. Thanks for all of your hard work.”

Half an hour later I had three bags filled with nachos, tacos, and churros from Abuela’s and was speeding toward home. I’d texted Bernardo and he let me know that Harper had eaten dinner and was already in bed, but Kaitlyn was out for a run and hadn’t requested dinner yet. I let him know that I’d taken

care of the meal for Kaitlyn and me, so Bernardo could head home for the night.

After getting caught in a frustrating traffic tie-up, I finally waved at Miguel and headed up the driveway. All I wanted was to sit down and hear about what Kaitlyn and Harper had gotten up to all day. The daily updates always filled me with hope, and right now I needed a hit of that feeling. I found Kaitlyn sitting outside by the pool, so absorbed in the book she was reading that she didn't even hear me walk up. I studied her as I got closer. She had one leg hitched up on the lounge making her calf muscle pop and her terrycloth shorts rise high enough that I could see the curve of her ass. All the running she was doing was clearly having an impact. Her hair was still damp, twisted up in a clip with a few tendrils curling around her face.

"Hey there, hungry?" I held up the bags so she could see the Abuela's logo.

She smiled, but her expression shifted when she saw my face. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Kaitlyn stood and walked closer to me, staring into my eyes. "You look, I don't know...shell-shocked. Did something happen today?"

There it was again. That perception that allowed her to see through the façade I usually relied on. I debated mentioning only the challenges with Catherine and the POS system, to avoid thinking about the summons, but in that moment I just felt the need to unburden myself and tell her everything.

Her expression went equal parts grim and angry as I told her about it. Instead of brushing it off with platitudes as if it wasn't a big deal, she placed her hand on my arm and stepped closer.

"I am *so* sorry, James. That's the last thing you need. I'll do whatever I can to support you and Harper during the trial."

Maybe it was my exhaustion, or the fact that a freshly scrubbed, wet-haired, barefoot Kaitlyn was irresistible to me,

but before I could think about it I wrapped my hand around her wrist and pulled her closer. She stumbled, bumping up against my chest, and her eyes went wide.

For a moment we stared at one another in silence. Everything around us seemed to go still, and the air became heavy with the promise of what might come. Her lips were slightly parted, like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the right words.

But she didn't move away. Not even when I leaned closer, testing the waters.

She just closed her eyes, fully receptive. It was all the invitation I needed, so I bent my head to place my lips on hers. She melted into me as we kissed, and it felt like we were both experiencing the same relief that *yes*, this was exactly what we wanted. What we *needed*. Her arms circled behind my neck, and I felt the familiar pulsing between my legs as she pushed her body against mine.

My kisses became more urgent, like I had to take as much of her as I could while I had the chance. I could still taste the toothpaste on her tongue, smell the sweetness of her damp hair, and all I wanted to do was throw her over my shoulder and steal away to my bedroom to breathe in the rest of her. Because I knew exactly what she meant when she threaded her fingers through my hair and ground her hips against me.

The realization that I was about to make a mistake came out of nowhere. The timing was wrong, and so were the reasons. She deserved more than to be someone just to make me feel good when I was having a lousy day. When we ended up back in bed together—because I was becoming increasingly certain it was a *when*, not an *if*—I wanted the moment to be about nothing but us. And that meant that here, now...I had to stop. I tightened my grip for a moment then pushed her away.

Her confused expression was an arrow through my heart.

“Kaitlyn...not like this.”

I could've sworn I saw her pout, but she didn't say a word to me.

“Let’s try something different,” I continued, trying not to focus on the throbbing between my legs. “Can we go on a date? A real date, not just take-out tacos?”

Her expression immediately lifted, the jutting bottom lip disappearing into a wide smile. “Are you serious?”

I nodded.

“When? Where?” she asked excitedly.

“Well, I wouldn’t want these fine tacos to go to waste, so we can enjoy these tonight and then plan for an evening out tomorrow night. Does that work for you? Be ready at five-ish...”

“But what about Harp?”

I loved that Kaitlyn had picked up on the nickname I used for her. “Her Grandy has been pestering me for another sleepover, so we’ve got that covered.”

Kaitlyn clasped her hands under her chin like a real-life Disney princess, her eyes wide with excitement. “Yes. I’d love that.”

I didn’t tell her that I was probably more excited than she was.

KAITLYN

I glanced down at my short floral skirt and t-shirt then back at James.

“Um, you didn’t tell me we were taking your private plane. I’m dressed for margaritas on a patio.”

He placed his hand on my lower back and gave me a gentle push toward the staircase up to the door. “Well, consider this the first of many surprises tonight. And don’t worry about your outfit, that’ll be taken care of too.”

I remained frozen until he slid his hand down my arm and took my hand in his.

“Let’s go.”

It was like he’d ripped a page from the *Pretty Woman* playbook, driving us to the airfield in yet another sportscar I’d never seen before and parking it in the shadow of the most elegant little airplane I’d ever seen. I mean, the truth was that it was the first private airplane I’d ever encountered in real life, but still. It gleamed in the hot sun, and the attendant waiting at the top of the steps looked like he’d stepped off a billboard.

James finally managed to unstick me from the tarmac with a gentle tug, and we boarded the plane. It was unbelievably sumptuous and had the same vibes as his home, with clean lines and calming creams and grays everywhere.

“*Couches?* You have couches in your plane?” I asked, pointing to them.

“And captain chairs as well,” he nodded toward the front of the aircraft. “Where would you feel more comfortable?”

I shrugged, gobsmacked by the idea that this was his everyday life. It didn’t make sense to me, stepping from the car directly to the plane, not having to pass through security or jostle my way through crowded aisles. The way he lived didn’t feel real.

He was still staring at me, so I pointed to the high-backed chairs and we settled in.

“Where are we headed?”

“Just a quick trip to Chicago. I’ve got front row tickets to *Hamilton*, then we’re going to have dinner at Maple & Ash.”

I was too stunned to speak.

“Have you already seen *Hamilton*? Because we can see something else if you want.” James was already pulling out his phone before I could even answer.

“No, no, I’ve been dying to see it. Front row? James!”

He relaxed into a smile. “Good. I haven’t seen it yet either, so I’m glad we’ll get to share the experience. But first? A little shopping.”

There it was again. The fairy tale vibe. Of course I liked it—who wouldn’t? But a tiny, nagging voice in my head kept reminding me that this was *his* reality, not mine. I didn’t actually belong in this world, and it was hard to believe I’d really be allowed to stay.

He worked the entire flight, and by the time we landed I was feeling even more anxious about everything. Not that I let on to him. His private car whisked us off to Oak Street, where I couldn’t even pronounce half of the names of the shops.

“How do you feel about Armani?” James asked as the store’s doorman stood to the side to let us pass inside.

“Um...good, I think?” As if I had a clue.

“Great, I had Jess call ahead and give them an idea of what you might like.”

A beautiful, dark-haired woman welcomed James with kisses on both cheeks then did the same to me. “I’m Marina, welcome to Armani, Kaitlyn.”

She led us to a private fitting room where an array of dresses lined the walls.

“I’ve prepared some looks for you for tonight, but if there’s something specific you’re hoping to try on please let me know. Are you familiar with our spring and summer lines?”

I shook my head as I ran my fingers along the sumptuous fabrics.

“That’s no problem,” she smiled kindly. “I’m sure we’ll find something just perfect for you. May I bring you a glass of champagne to enjoy while you try?”

I nodded again, dumbfounded by the way rich people shopped. There was no picking through crowded racks and loading my arms down with options. Everything was pre-selected, in both the colors I preferred *and* my exact size.

“I’ll be waiting out here.” James pointed to a black velvet couch outside the private dressing room. “I only have one rule: you have to let me see every option, even if you don’t love it.”

I pulled my phone out of my purse. “It’s getting late, will we still have time for dinner?”

“We will. Chef Andre is preparing a special tasting menu for us at the restaurant’s private kitchen table. All I have to do is let the maître d’ know when we’re fifteen minutes out, and the first course will be waiting for us.”

“Um, *wow*.”

I walked into a dressing room the size of half my apartment and leaned against the wall to steady myself. I was used to living amid the Morris luxury but not being a direct beneficiary of it to such an extent. I could enjoy the lavish food and the sumptuous gym and sauna, but none of it was *for* me. Not like this. It felt...weird.

But I sort of liked it.

I sped through the dresses, switching from a thin white slip dress to a fitted short, silver skater-style dress to a pale pink skintight knee-length that made my ass look like a work of art. James hadn't said a word when I came out wearing it, instead shaking his head like the thing had rendered him speechless.

I was convinced that was the dress until I tried on the final option, a simple black sheath with a few pleats across the chest and at the waist, and a cut-out at the shoulder that left a dagger of skin exposed. It was unlike anything I'd worn. Sexy, yes, beyond sexy, but more importantly it was *elegant*. Regal. It made me want to stand tall and walk slowly.

"That's it," Marina said when I walked out of the dressing room. "No question, that's the one. Do you agree, Kaitlyn?"

I beamed at them and noticed that James's mouth was hanging open. "It's perfect."

"Now all we need are shoes and some earrings. Size seven, right?" Marina asked before she rushed out of the room.

Once we were alone James stood up, shaking his head. "Stunning. I didn't think the pink one could be topped but... wow."

"This is all going to be too much," I said, checking the sleeves and neckline for a price tag. "The dress *and* shoes *and* jewelry?"

"Don't bother looking for a tag; Marina took them all off. And please, I want to do this for you. You've been such a miracle worker for Harper."

I felt myself deflate. Oh. So this was all a thank you for my work. The kiss we'd shared had convinced me otherwise, but I wasn't about to push it and make things awkward between us.

Marina bustled back into the room before I could say anything and dropped to her knees in front of me with the shoe box.

"Oh, no, I can do it," I said, backing away. My feet were in desperate need of a pedi, and I was embarrassed to let her see them.

I leaned down and opened the box to find the most exquisite black pumps on the earth, sky high with a dainty strap across the ankle. I stepped into them expecting them to pinch, but the leather was butter soft.

“The finishing touch,” Marina said, handing me a jewelry box.

Inside were black diamond studs, large enough to draw the eye but not big enough to deflect attention from the dress.

“There’s one other thing,” Marina said, beckoning me to follow her into the dressing room. She closed the door behind us. “James buys all of his suits with me, and he’s been a fantastic client, so as a thank you I wanted to give you the right underpinnings for the dress.”

She opened a drawer in the mirrored end table and pulled out a black gossamer lace bra and panties set. “These are for you.”

I was speechless. Now I wouldn’t have to wear my panties from Target under the fabulous dress. Between the two of them, they’d thought of everything.

“You need to get moving,” Marina laughed as I struggled to thank her.

“I... I can’t thank you enough. You’re a genius.”

“Tell him you think so,” she said with a nod toward James as she pulled the door shut behind her and winked.



When James had mentioned a private chef’s table in the kitchen of the restaurant, I’d pictured a stainless steel affair with hard stools, but instead, we were tucked away in a leather booth behind a glass wall in the busy space. We had front row seats to the madness in the room, but we were cocooned away from the noise and bustle of it.

I’d never eaten anything like the meal we were served, and as our delightful private waiter, Darren, cleared away the last of our plates, I let out a contented sigh.

“Happy? Full? Satisfied?” James asked me as I settled back.

“Happy? Yes, incredibly. Full? Beyond, but I left room for dessert.”

“Of course you did,” James laughed. He paused. “What about my last question?”

I’d purposely left it unanswered. Was I satisfied?

No, I absolutely wasn’t, because all I could do was think about the way James looked tonight. He’d changed before we left Armani, from his day suit into a sleek, all-black affair. Black blazer, black shirt, and black slacks that left little to the imagination. When we’d walked into the restaurant, more than a few men turned to look me up and down, but just as many women had swiveled to admire James.

I wasn’t at all satisfied because it was taking everything in my power to keep from jumping on top of him. The few glasses of champagne I’d had weren’t helping me keep myself under control. Everything we said and did was in that lowered-inhibition, sexy, soft focus. When James talked, I found myself staring at his mouth, and when I talked I kept finding excuses to touch him. I wasn’t sure if he hadn’t noticed or if he was just trying to keep things clean while we were in a space that could be observed from 360 degrees.

Darren walked back in just as I contemplated climbing onto James’s lap and saving me from a potentially embarrassing moment.

“Your final course, a kiss of chocolate,” he said, placing the small plates in front of us.

“Could we get spoons?” James asked.

Darren smiled. “That’s the fun of this dish. No utensils, Chef insists that you use your hands to eat it.”

I glanced down at the plate to find that the perfectly round ball of dark chocolate was sitting on a swirl of melted white chocolate. “Fun.”

“You first,” James said, bracing his head on his fist.

I studied the delicacy. There was no way to pick it up without getting the melted white chocolate on my fingers, which was

probably deliberate. I used my thumb and pointer finger to grasp it and let my fingertips drag through the white chocolate, then held it to my mouth and slid my tongue across the mess.

James's breath hitched.

Delicious, both the way he reacted and the way the chocolate tasted. I circled my lips around the ball and bit down, then slowly licked my fingers again. It was the champagne at work, turning me into a confident siren.

"Amazing," I moaned as I popped the remainder in my mouth.

James didn't say anything, but the way he shifted uncomfortably spoke volumes.

"Do you need help with yours?" I asked innocently.

He nodded, still watching my lips.

I reached over to his plate and pulled the chocolate through the melted goo slowly, tracing an s-shape across the plate, then held it in front of his mouth.

He parted his lips, and I touched the chocolate to his plush lower lip for an instant before pushing it into his mouth. I started to withdraw but James caught my fingertip in his mouth and gave it a long suck, curling his tongue around the length of it.

My stomach fluttered at the heat. I knew exactly what his tongue could do. Our eyes met.

"Didn't want to waste any of that chocolate," he said in a low voice, sending a shiver through me.

How were we going to make it through the show?

JAMES

Thank God for Alexander Hamilton.

After wanting to devour Kaitlyn for our entire meal, I welcomed the chance to cool down as we learned about the ten-dollar founding father. When the show ended, we went for a stroll along Navy Pier at a respectable distance from one another. It was after ten and the tourist area was officially closed, but I had a knack for making things swing my way. The lights from the various attractions cast a beautiful glow on Kaitlyn as we strolled.

“I’m so inspired by the show,” Kaitlyn breathed, her eyes shining. “I’m a little like him, you know? Without the support of a family, just trying to make it. Young, scrappy, and hungry.”

I was instantly intrigued when I realized she’d opened the door to talk about her background. I wouldn’t push if she wanted to keep it to herself, but I couldn’t deny that I wanted to learn everything I could about her.

“Tell me more,” I said gently.

Kaitlyn shook her head and hugged herself. “It’s not a happy story, that’s for sure. Obviously Cassie and I are tight, but my mom?” She frowned. “Our father walked out and she always blamed us for it. We were kids. And then Cassie got into a rough spell in high school and decided she didn’t want to go to college. I was already working on my degree, so I was out of the house, but Cassie told me it got really bad. Our mom was drinking a lot. She tossed Cassie out, so she came to stay with

me. When I went to my mom to try to play peacemaker, she told me that if I was going to take Cassie's side...I should leave and not come back. Since then it's been us against the world, basically." She paused. "Except..."

"Except what?"

"Recently, my mom has started trying to make amends with us. She went through rehab, and she reached out to me. We talked for the first time in ages. It's...odd, you know? I'm glad she's taking those steps, but I'm not sure how I'm supposed to react. Does she think we can wipe away the past and just start over? It's not that easy."

"But it's something, right? It proves that she's making an effort."

"It does," Kaitlyn agreed. "And you know what? I hope we're able to work through our past. Because I want what you have. You and your family. It's perfect."

"Oh, hold on there," I laughed at the thought. "We've had our fair share of bumpy patches."

Kaitlyn was staring at me, and I could tell she wanted me to keep talking.

My laughter faded as I debated how much I was comfortable saying. But Kaitlyn had been so honest, so open about the pain of her past. I couldn't offer her anything less. "I, uh, I lost my father when I was in college. Heart attack. I was away with a girlfriend, a rare spur-of-the-moment getaway. I had no cell reception, so I didn't get the call when he died. My mom... well, she had a hard time with the fact that I wasn't there. We got into some pretty nasty fights right after that."

"I'm so sorry, that's awful," she whispered.

I didn't like thinking about that part of our history. "She went to therapy and we got past it, obviously. We're good now."

"You and Jess are tight, right? You seem super close."

I laughed at the way she could peel back my layers. "You're hitting all of my hot buttons tonight. Yeah, we're good-ish. We

still have our disagreements. Jess made some mistakes that are going to follow her for a long time.”

“Like what?”

“Well, she started dating this guy, Lucas Rushing, who was a lot older than her,” I explained. “He swept her off her feet and basically took over her life. They started partying a lot, really hitting the night scene. She’d only just turned twenty-one, and she’d always been a little sheltered. She was in over her head, but she didn’t want to admit it. I tried to talk to her, tell her that he was bad news, but she didn’t want to listen—she said they were in love. It all came to a head when she got busted for drunk driving. Some paps had been following her and they got a ton of photos of her falling out of his Ferrari. She was wearing a short skirt so they were, uh, *indiscreet* photos. The pictures were everywhere after it happened—she even got made into a meme—so I had to tighten the reins a little.”

“Hmm,” Kaitlyn said.

I glanced over at her and she seemed deep in thought.

“After that, she finally realized that being with Lucas wasn’t good for her, so she ended the relationship.” *Pissing Lucas off and wounding his pride to the point where he seemed to make it his personal mission to undercut my business any way he could.* There was no need to get into the whole mess I was dealing with thanks to that nuisance of a man. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that family can be complicated. Sometimes, you have to get through the bad stuff and learn from it before you can get to the good. As for your mom, I think you should hope for the best, but prepare yourself for the worst. Know what I mean?”

Kaitlyn took a deep breath. “Yeah. That’s a wish and a warning.”

“Exactly.”

Kaitlyn wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“You’re cold, take my jacket.” I slipped it off and turned to her, sliding it around her shoulders.

“Thank you.” She smiled at me shyly, looking up through her lashes. “So what’s next tonight?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m getting tired. I have two rooms reserved at the Waldorf Astoria, and then we’ll get an early start home tomorrow.”

Kaitlyn stepped backward, her face falling. “Oh, okay. That’s fine.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Do you want to leave tonight? Because I can call Dave and he can have the jet ready—”

“No.” She shook her head slowly. “No, it’s just that I...I...”

I closed the distance between us, desperately wishing I could take her hands, but they were hidden beneath my jacket. “What? You can tell me.”

“I was assuming we would...share a room.”

It came out in a whisper, and for a moment I wasn’t sure I’d heard her correctly.

“Really? Kaitlyn, you really want that?”

Her face turned stricken. “No, never mind, forget I said that.”

She turned quickly and started walking away, but I grasped her by the shoulder and turned her back to face me. “Wait. It’s what *I* want. Desperately. But I have to be honest with you... this date...it’s not who I usually am. I don’t go on dates. Or have real relationships. And I’m not sure what all of this means, to us. I want more, but I’m not sure how much I can give you.”

Her head was bowed as if she was ashamed for being so forward. “I understand. Why don’t we just go back to our separate rooms and figure things out? Reconsider where we are.”

What the hell was I doing? Slamming the brakes on what’s been an amazing ride so far? I wanted Kaitlyn more than I’d ever wanted anyone, and there was no way I was going to miss out on the opportunity to prove it to her.

What scared me was that I didn't just *want* Kaitlyn. I *needed* her. And I wasn't sure what to do with the emotion.

The way she was looking at me, all big eyes and pouty mouth, was more than I could take. I stepped closer and pulled her into my arms, bending her into a sweeping kiss without any warning. I felt her startle against my mouth, and for an instant I worried she'd push me away.

But no, my delicious Kaitlyn circled her arms around my neck, letting my jacket fall to the ground as she clung to me for warmth instead.

All I ever wanted to do was kiss the damn girl, and now I was finally getting the chance to do it. She was mine for the night, and I was going to love every second of being wrapped up in the beautiful mystery that was Kaitlyn Thorn.



The first time we had sex it had been frantic, sweaty, and hot as hell, but this time was going to be different. I wanted to worship every inch of the woman, all night long.

We strolled through the hotel lobby looking like any other couple coming in from an evening on the town, but the second the elevator doors closed, I pinned Kaitlyn against the wall to kiss her again.

Fuck, she tasted incredible. She bit my bottom lip then giggled against my mouth, which made me want to pull her dress over her hips and take her right there. I started inching it up her legs, slipping my hand along her silky thighs.

“Damn, your legs are strong,” I marveled.

“All of that running,” she murmured, tracing kisses along my jawline.

The ride to the penthouse was taking longer than expected, so I dropped to my knees in front of her.

“James!” Kaitlyn exclaimed, backing farther into the corner. “There are cameras in here!”

“Then let’s make the people monitoring them jealous,” I growled, grabbing her ass and pulling her toward me. She made a noise that sounded like a cross between a shriek and a whimper as the dress crested the tops of her thighs, exposing the most exquisite lacy black panties I’d ever seen.

I pressed my lips against the thin fabric and her knees buckled.

“James,” she panted. “You can’t…”

I slid my thumb along the fabric and let it slip beneath to the dampness between her legs. “You want me to stop? Because I will.”

As much as I wanted to tease my finger back and forth along her soft folds, I let it rest there. I was close enough to plant a kiss on her mons, and I’m sure she could feel my hot breath. But I wasn’t about to make another move until she said yes. I didn’t mind nudging her boundaries, but I wasn’t going to push her into anything she truly didn’t want.

I glanced up at her and she was supporting herself on the handrails, eyes half closed.

“Don’t…don’t stop,” she breathed.

I immediately wrenched the fabric to the side and placed my mouth against her slick skin, sliding a finger inside her at the same time. The noise she made drove me insane.

I was so caught up in tasting her that the ding of the elevator barely registered. She let out a cry of anguish and pulled her dress down, panting.

“There’s no one else on this floor,” I reassured her as I stood up. “I could continue having you right here if I wanted without worrying about anyone walking in on us, but I’d prefer to take you on the bed.”

Kaitlyn nodded and looked so discombobulated that she could’ve been drunk.

“You okay?” I asked as she stumbled out of the elevator.

“I don’t trust my legs,” she said, looking at me with hungry eyes.

“Fine, let me help you then.”

I swept her into my arms and strode down the hallway kissing her until we got to the door. I pulled the key card from my back pocket and opened the door without even pausing.

For a moment I hated the sweeping penthouse with the bedroom at the far end. I hated anything that stood in the way of our bodies finally connecting.

When we finally got to the bedroom, I placed her feet on the floor with one last kiss then turned her around.

“I’ve been waiting all night to do this,” I said as I unzipped the dress, kissing down her back as I went. The dress dropped to the ground, and she stepped out of it then turned to face me in her bra, panties, and pumps. “Keep the shoes on, please.”

“And you take yours off, please,” she retorted with a cheeky smile. “Because now it’s my turn.”

Kaitlyn dropped to her knees then unzipped my pants, pulling them off without ever taking her hungry eyes off the bulge straining against my boxer briefs. I slipped them off quickly, and she took my cock into her beautiful mouth. Within seconds I felt like my legs were about to give out.

Her tongue slid along my shaft, taking me in deep then pulling me out slowly, her tongue teasing every inch. What her mouth could do! It wasn’t long before I was going to lose it. I pulled away quickly.

“You’re killing me, Kaitlyn. Have mercy, please. I want to last,” I managed in a strained voice.

She looked up at me with a mischievous smile then licked her lips. “We’ve got all night. And the morning too.”

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” I growled, picking her up off the floor in a fluid motion and walking her to the bed.

“Maybe a little,” she murmured as she kissed my neck. “And if you touch me again you’ll know exactly what you do to me.”

She was still in her bra and panties, so I placed her in the middle of the bed and made short work of the bra. I pushed her back against the bed, more roughly than I meant to.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Take Charge,” she laughed.

I pulled at the panties, nearly ripping the delicate fabric because I was so desperate to get to her sweetness again. Once they were off, I dove between her legs, pushing them wider apart with my shoulders so I could taste every inch of her.

“You’re soaked,” I murmured.

I slid a finger inside her as my tongue explored her, focusing on her quivering nub. Within seconds I could feel the tension increasing in her legs, then she let out a moan that nearly made me come, too. She bucked, but I never stopped licking her, tasting her, until she pushed me away.

“Your fingers aren’t enough! I need more,” she cried out.

It was the only thing I wanted to hear. I rolled off the bed to my discarded pants and fished a condom from the pocket.

“Hurry!”

I slid back onto the bed.

“C’mere,” I said, drawing Kaitlyn to me. “I want to see your beautiful face.”

I knelt on the bed and pulled her onto my lap so she was straddling my thighs and facing me.

“I don’t think we’ve tried this position yet,” she said with a saucy smile.

Kaitlyn linked her legs behind my back and started moving on top of me, undulating against my hardness at her own pace. She crashed her mouth against mine, her nipples gliding along my chest. I let her take the lead and ride me until I thought I was going to explode, until I couldn’t control myself any longer. In a single, swift movement, I flipped her onto her back and ground into her. I slid my hand down to caress her as I got closer to the edge. I wanted her to come once more, but I was so out of my mind that I could barely focus. I buried

myself deep inside of her, trying to take it slowly. But I couldn't hold myself back, she just felt too good.

And then she moaned the one word that almost drove me over the edge.

“Harder.”

I abandoned any pretense of chivalry and fucked her as hard as I could. I was glad there was no one else on our floor because she wasn't quiet as I pounded into her. Right when I was about to lose it, Kaitlyn let out that shuddering sigh that signaled she'd come, and it kicked me right over the edge.

When the tremors subsided, I lowered myself on top of her and wrapped her in my arms.

Damn it. I'd never been happier.

KAITLYN

Early morning run completed, shower done, and now it was time to get ready for the main event with Harper. I was so wrapped up thinking about what we had planned for the day I didn't even notice the massive flower arrangement that had magically appeared on the nightstand in my bedroom until I was right in front of it.

James.

We'd only been able to steal kisses in the three days since we got back from Chicago, but he was making his feelings known in other ways. The lingering glances, the private jokes...we couldn't act on the passion we had for each other, but we still managed to connect in other ways. As much as we wanted to spend the night together there was always the risk that Harper would revert back to her old ways and climb into her father's bed in the middle of the night. I'd successfully reintroduced her to her own bed, but on days when I pushed her, she seemed to wind up with him.

I grinned at the bouquet. There was no card, but I didn't need one. Like everything James touched, the arrangement was gorgeous and extravagant, with fat pink roses surrounded by greenery and loopy fronds from a plant I'd never seen before. I stopped counting roses after I got to twenty.

I braided my hair, breathed in the roses one last time, and headed toward the door. I was halfway out when I stopped and backtracked to the arrangement. Harper loved flowers, too, so

I plucked one out and headed downstairs to where James and Harper were having breakfast.

“Kaitlyn!” Harper crowed when she saw me. “I tried eggs Benedict, and I hated it!”

I stifled a laugh as James turned to his daughter with a sour expression. “Harper, *excuse* me? Could you try that again please?”

The little girl giggled and bowed her head. “I tried eggs Benedict, and...and...it wasn’t my favorite.”

“Better,” I said, taking my usual chair next to her. “This is for you.” I placed the rose next to her fork.

“Pretty!” She exclaimed.

James and I exchanged a knowing glance and I mouthed “thank you” to him.

“Perfect timing,” James said, standing up from the table. “I’m heading into the city for the rest of the day, and I need to leave now or I’ll be late. But I wanted to check in with you first. What’s on tap for today?”

“Morning lessons then we’re going to try something different. I’ll text you when I know more.”

We exchanged another look, this time shorthand about the fact that I was going to push Harper a little more than usual.

James leaned down and kissed the top of Harper’s head. “Love you, kid.”

His eyes flicked to me as he left the room.

Three hours and many exercises later, I was ready to broach the big adventure with Harper. We were taking a break in the skybrary, laughing at the pictures in one of her books.

“Harper, you like swinging, right?”

She nodded her head eagerly.

“Me too. I thought we could take a little walk to the park and do some swinging today. It’s very close. What do you think?”

She pursed her lips and considered it. “How close?”

“Super close. I walked there myself and it took me about four minutes.” I neglected to add that I hadn’t included the driveway into the calculation, so it was probably closer to eight minutes. But we’d been walking up and down the driveway frequently, so I didn’t think it would matter to her.

“Is it just swings?”

I loved that she wasn’t shutting me down immediately. “Nope. There’s a slide and monkey bars too. Oh, and a climbing wall.”

“What’s a climbing wall?” Her eyes went wide.

“It’s this cool structure that has little ledges and grabby things and you use them to pull yourself up the wall. It’s not easy, not everyone can do it.” I was baiting her, since she loved to consider herself the best at everything.

“I bet I could.” Harper jutted out her chin.

“Okay, let’s see then. Want to go now? Then we can come back and have lunch.”

She hesitated, looking nervous, then said, “Can Miguel come with us? Just in case?”

I’d hoped that Harper would trust me enough to make the trip with just the two of us, but I was willing to do whatever it took to help her get off the property for the first time.

“We can walk down the driveway and ask him. And when we get to the park we can Facetime your dad and show him how high you can swing!”

“No!” Harper shot back, and my stomach dropped. “I want to show him how I can climb the wall thing.”

I beamed at her. “Deal, young lady. Let’s go!”

I shot a quick text to James to let him know what we were attempting. I wasn’t sure if we’d make it all the way there, but I wanted him to be available for a celebratory call if we did.

The driveway was no longer a big deal for Harper, but I watched her carefully as we walked down it. The addition of something new tacked onto a behavior she was just becoming

comfortable with was a push, but the clock was ticking. School was on the horizon, and I wanted to make sure I did as much as I could to get her ready.

We reached the end of the driveway without incident to find Miguel waving at us from the guard booth. I'd filled him in on how important it was to recognize Harper's progress. After the initial wariness he'd shown on my arrival, I'd been happy to discover that Miguel was a big softie at heart, especially when it came to Harper.

"Hola, *muchachita!*" he called to her. "Are you on an adventure?"

She nodded proudly. "*Hola* Miguel! I'm going to the climbing place. Do you want to come too?"

He shot me a questioning look.

"Harper and I are going to the playground, and she thought you might like to tag along." I tipped my head at him to imply the subtext of her request.

"Ah, okay," he nodded agreeably. "Let me get Frank up here to the booth and I'll step away with you."

"Will you climb too?" Harper asked him excitedly.

"No, Miguel is too *gordo* for that!" He laughed as he patted his stomach. "But I'll watch."

We set off with Miguel a few paces behind us, so I could concentrate on helping Harper stay focused. We worked through her breathing exercises as we crossed the end of the driveway out to the street, and I was thrilled to see that she didn't really even need them.

We chatted about the various flowers we saw and stopped to pet a small white dog walked by a woman in a broad pink hat. There were tons of distractions along the way that prevented Harper from thinking too much about how the safety net of home was fading in the distance behind her.

She reached out to hold my hand, and I gave hers an encouraging squeeze. "Almost there. Can you see it?"

She craned her neck. "Yes! I see it!"

I felt her start to pull away, and even though I was thrilled about her excitement, we still had to be safe. “Harp, hold on, we need to cross the street together.”

Once we got to the park, Miguel moved slightly away from us and took up a sentry stance. I realized that the climbing wall was meant for slightly older children, making me start to second-guess whether Harper would want to try it. But the moment she figured out what it was, she ran to it.

“Can I?”

“I want *you* to tell *me* if you can,” I said, glancing between her and the wall. “It’s your decision.”

Harper studied it. She reached out to touch a few of the brightly colored grab handles then squinted up at me. “Yeah, I can.”

I had to fight back tears at how far the little girl had come. The Harper from weeks ago was fading into the past while the *true* Harper was making herself known again. A brave, creative, funny, and confident little warrior.

“Do you want me to call your dad first?” I asked.

She shook her head, her blonde ponytail swinging. “Not yet. Do it when I’m at the top so he can see how strong I am.”

“You got it. Whenever you’re ready.”

Miguel moved a little closer as Harper placed her fingertips on the handles. As much as I wanted to coach her, I let her puzzle out the best route on her own. Sure enough, she was more than up to the challenge. Within seconds, she was skittering up the wall like a spider.

“Are you okay?” I asked as she hit the midpoint.

“Yup!” she answered as she plotted her next move.

I moved closer to the wall just in case she lost her grip, and Miguel took up a similar position. The ground beneath it was cushy, but I would rather catch her in my arms than let her drop to the ground. I pulled out my phone as she got closer to the top.

“I’m calling your dad now, okay?”

“Okay! He’s gonna be so proud!”

He wasn’t the only one.

“Everything okay?” James picked up on the first ring. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Your daughter is doing something incredible I want you to see.” I flipped the camera around right as Harper reached the top and swung her leg over to the platform on the back side of the wall.

“Harper! You did that all by yourself?” James asked.

Harper leaned over the edge of the wall and gave a sassy wave. “Look at me, so high up,” she sang.

“I can’t believe it, sweetheart!” James said. “You’re amazing!”

I could hear the awe in his voice.

“We’re having a great time. She wanted to try the wall first, and next, we’re probably going to swing for a bit.”

“That sounds great, I wish I could be with you.”

I turned the camera around so he could see my face. “We do too.”

James moved closer to his phone. “Wow,” he whispered.

“Yup. I’m in awe of that little girl.”

“Kaitlyn, look at me!” Harper’s voice called out.

I looked up from the phone just in time to see her grab onto a pole and slide down it.

“Wow, you’re trying everything! That’s great!”

“Swing now,” she said, running toward us.

“Please,” I corrected.

“Please,” she yelled over her shoulder.

I followed behind her as James chuckled. “She’s something.”

“Yes, she is. I’ll keep you posted if anything comes up on our way home, but we have Miguel with us, and I think we should

be fine.”

“Okay, sounds good.” James paused. “Hey, Kaitlyn?”

I gave him my full attention while Harper tried to decide which swing she wanted. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. For this. For *everything*.”

Our eyes met, and we both knew exactly what he meant in those three simple sentences.

“Kaitlyn, please push me,” Harper shouted from the swing, kicking her little legs to no avail.

“Sounds like you’ve got to run,” he laughed.

“Duty calls, I’ll text you later.”

After a shockingly long time swinging, Harper and I agreed that we needed to head back when we spotted Miguel covering one too many yawns. She reached out to hold my hand and looked up at me with her eyes shining.

“I had the best time! Can we do this again?”

“I had fun too!” I agreed. “We can do this every single day if you want. And maybe some other time, we could try going to the beach.” I saw a hint of cloudiness in her expression, so I pressed on. “But only if you want.”

Harper considered it. “Maybe, if Daddy can come too.”

She sang to herself as we made our way back home, and my heart filled with love for the special little girl. She was conquering her demons one by one, and it was a joy watching her learn to be a happy child without a care in the world once again. When we got back to the house, we waved goodbye to Miguel, and she jumped up the front steps one by one before turning to me with her arms outstretched.

“Hug me!” she demanded, and it was one order I obeyed without requiring a “please.”

As we embraced, I realized that I loved her. I tried not to think about the end of my tenure with the Morris family, instead choosing to focus on the amazing here and now.

“Why don’t we go out on the patio and have sneaky popsicles before dinner. Sound good?”

She nodded, then stuck her tongue out and panted like a puppy and ran toward the kitchen. I pulled out my phone as I followed, still buzzy from our success. I couldn’t have been prouder of Harper if I’d been her own mother. And that thought made me think of my *own* mom. Had she ever felt this way about Cassie and me, back when we were small? Maybe there had been a time when things were good, before Dad left. I couldn’t remember, but maybe *she* did. I found myself wanting to ask. If this reconciliation could work, if we could find our way back to being a family, maybe we’d be able to talk about those memories someday. Just the thought made me feel warm.

I shut out Cassie’s angry voice in my head as I texted my mom. She’d *have* to forgive me once she started feeling the happy family vibes. I was convinced it was possible for us.

Hi Mom, I wrote. So you know that Cassie’s wedding is coming up?

As I’d promised Cassie, I hadn’t mentioned it to our mom, but *she* had actually brought it up to *me*, telling me that she’d seen the announcement in the paper.

The response came seconds later. *Yes! So exciting!*

I forced myself to keep going even though I had a feeling Cassie wasn’t going to be pleased with me. At least not at first.

I wanted to ask you a question. Will you be my date to the wedding?

Sweetheart, YES! Of course, I’d love to! Send me all the details.

I dashed off a text with the date and location and tried to ignore the nagging feelings of worry in the back of my mind.

KAITLYN

“**T** here you are! Where’ve you been lately?”

Lou jogged up behind me and fell in step next to me wearing a huge smile despite the fact that he was red-faced and looked like he’d been running for a while.

“Hey Lou, been a while,” I huffed as we jogged side-by-side but not close. “I’ve changed my running schedule lately, so I guess that’s why we haven’t seen each other. How are you?” I slowed my pace so we could chat a bit. The new schedule worked better for Harper, but I had missed running with a buddy. Having a partner made it easier to keep my pace, and Lou was fun to talk to—funny and engaging, making the run go faster as he dished all sorts of entertaining dirt on the other residents in the neighborhood.

“All good, except for missing your smiling face. What’s new?”

“Not much,” I lied. No sense telling him that I was sleeping with my boss. He got a little too into gossip sometimes, and I wasn’t entirely sure I could trust him to keep something that juicy to himself. “Just really busy.”

He watched me for a few beats. “You seem...different. What’s going on?”

His tone was pushy, like I owed him an explanation.

“Oh yeah?” I glanced over at him and felt a little put off by the intensity of his stare. “How so?”

“Happier. More, I don’t know, comfortable here. Settled.”

I laughed, relaxing a little. “Happy, sure, but I wouldn’t say *settled*.”

“So you’re ready to move on, then? A new adventure?” He was smiling, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

God, I hope not. I wanted to stay here in paradise with James and Harper for as long as possible, but James had told me straight out that he didn’t know how much he could promise me. And I’d told him I was fine with things being undefined. But as much as I was enjoying my time with James, I couldn’t quite outrun the feeling that I could be tossed out on my ass at any moment. I didn’t want to hold the past against him, and I understood why he’d wanted to rush home to Harper that first night we spent together...but that didn’t actually erase the sting of being kicked out. Discarded. Just like my mom discarded me years ago.

“No, not quite,” I answer vaguely. “I mean, my assignment isn’t over yet, so there’s that.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re still here. Honestly, I was getting a little worried you’d left without saying goodbye to me. I wondered if that boss of yours had run you off. Not many people can deal with him, from what I’ve heard. Have you got any good stories about him? I bet he’s a tyrant.”

I stifled a laugh. Typical Lou—always mining for gossip.

“He’s been a really great boss. No problems to report,” I said simply, and I swear Lou slumped in disappointment.

We ran in silence for a bit until we reached our usual separation point.

“Hey Kaitlyn, before you go...” Lou said, moving so that he was standing in front of me, blocking my path.

There was something in his expression that set me on edge. Going with my instincts, I pulled my phone out of my armband and looked at the time. “Shit, I’m *really* late. Gotta run, we can talk next time!”

I turned and sprinted away, leaving Lou in the dust with a confused expression on his face. He called my name, but I

pretended like I didn't hear him. I made it back to the house in record time.

Vida had offered to eat breakfast with Harper that morning, saying that she missed hanging out with the little girl, so I knew I had an extra thirty minutes before I had to clock in for the day. I peeked outside and noticed it was just the two of them eating and laughing in the shade of the umbrella, which meant James was probably still getting ready for the day.

I headed for his room, hoping to steal a few minutes alone with him. While I'd expected to find him dressed and nearly ready, what I found instead was a dozing James still sacked out in bed. I giggled at the sight of him with his arm slung over his face, fast asleep like he didn't have a care in the world.

It had been weeks since Harper had slept in his room, which meant James was getting the rest he needed instead of worrying about his daughter. Based on how deeply he was sleeping, he clearly needed it.

I stopped to admire him, still a little confused how a workaholic could have a body like *that*. Lightly tanned skin... how? Muscles that looked rock hard even at rest...how? The way he managed to work long hours, make time for his daughter and me, and tend to himself was yet another example of why he was so successful. The man was driven in every possible way.

I bent over him and kissed him softly on the mouth, eliciting a groan from him.

"Are you awake?" I whispered into his ear, giving his lobe a gentle tug with my teeth.

He made a little growly noise. "Not sure yet, maybe you should kiss me again."

I placed my lips on his and before I realized what he was doing, he grabbed my wrist and flipped me on the bed like I weighed nothing.

"James! I'm all sweaty from my run!"

“Oh yeah? Let me check.” He rolled on top of me, dropped his nose to the side of my neck, and inhaled. “Mmmm. You *are* sweaty, but I like it!”

He bit my neck, making me grumble in protest. “James, *gross!*”

“I disagree,” he said as I wriggled beneath him. I could feel his hard-on pushing against me. “I like the way you taste no matter what. In fact...”

James gave me a wicked look and started tugging at my running shorts.

“No, you can’t!” I laughed and tried to move away. “Please, I’m disgusting.”

He paused. “Again, I think you’re wrong, but if you insist on getting clean before you let me fool around, will you allow me to help you in the shower? I can get all of those hard-to-reach spots.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“I don’t know...” I hedged. “I need to get ready for the day, and I’m sure you do too, Mr. Businessman.”

He ground against me, shifting my legs apart and igniting a flame inside of me.

“You know I usually like to take my time...” He rolled his hips so his hard-on pressed against me. “But since we’re both on a tight”—he bucked against me—“schedule, if I can get you in the shower, I guarantee I’ll make you come in under five minutes.”

I giggled at how serious he looked. “Is that a fact?”

“Try me,” he whispered huskily into my ear as he bucked against me again. I pushed against his hardness and a shiver rolled through me.

“Okay,” I managed.

James hopped out of bed and pulled me into his arms in a single motion. The next thing I knew, he’d peeled off my clothes and we were in his gigantic walk-in shower, letting warm water from five different shower heads hit us.

I started to drop to my knees in front of him, my eyes on his cock, but he slid his hands beneath my arms and pulled me back up. “Nope, no time.”

I pouted as he grabbed a bar of soap and gently lathered me up from shoulders to toes, turning what I thought was going to be a sexy escapade into an actual clean-up. He washed my hair and massaged my scalp so gently I practically melted, but it wasn't enough for me.

I wanted *him*.

“The clock is ticking,” I whispered into his ear as I slid my wet body up and down his. “You said you'd get me off in five minutes.”

“Oh, don't you worry,” he replied.

James dragged his mouth over mine and traced his hand down my body. His fingers gentled their way between my legs and started massaging my aching nub. I pushed against his hand, moaning against his mouth. James played me expertly, dipping inside of me then coming back to give my aching clit more attention. I could feel the waves starting to build.

He moved his hand away and I wanted to cry out in frustration, until a jolt of warm water caressed me. James went back to teasing me with one hand while the other worked the hand-held nozzle, dousing me with a high-powered stream that stimulated me so perfectly it made it hard for me to remain upright. Between the sensation of the water hitting me and his expert fingertips, I could feel a screaming orgasm rising within me.

“James...” I whimpered in his ear when he backed off again.

It was torture. He knew exactly how to play me, bringing me close to the edge with his fingers, then switching to the warm stream of water, which brought me even closer, then pausing to rest his palm against me.

“*Please.*” My voice was shaking. My entire body was shaking.

He claimed my mouth again and put me out of my misery, making the little circles that drove me insane while the hot water pulsed against me.

I couldn't control the noise that came out of my mouth as the orgasm hit me. Part moan, part scream, it was like I was possessed. I managed to muffle myself with a hand over my mouth as the waves continued to roll through my body, starting in my low stomach and undulating throughout my body.

Of course I'd had orgasms before, but what James did to me was unlike anything I'd experienced.

"That was..." I couldn't form words as I hung off of him, weak and satisfied.

"Great start to the day," he said, smoothing my wet hair back to kiss my neck. "And now we both need to run."

I pulled away, taking his still hard dick into my hand. "But I want to take care of you, too."

I stroked him a few times and his eyes closed. "I might... I might have a few more minutes."

James leaned back against the wall in between the shower jets as I slid along his hard length with one hand and cradled his balls with the other.

"I'm not going to last," he said in a low voice. "Getting you off drives me wild."

"Shh," I scolded, leaning in to trace kisses along his neck as I gripped him.

Within a few seconds, James found his own shuddering release, and we ended our shower fun with kisses and a promise to reconnect once the sun went down.

JAMES

The monthly calls from my financial advisor were a necessary evil. I usually tuned out for most of them to focus on more pressing issues, but this time Chris said something that stopped me cold.

“What do you mean, you’re happy that I took a chance on Jess’s business?” I asked slowly, hoping I’d misheard him. “What business?”

The door to the balcony was open, and I could hear the happy chatter of Harper, Kaitlyn, and my sister on the patio.

“Uh...wait, did you not know?” Chris stammered. “I assumed you knew.”

I could hear the confusion in his voice and the rapid shuffling of paperwork.

“Knew *what*?” I demanded, struggling to keep my voice calm. “What’s going on, Chris?”

I drummed my fingers on my desk impatiently as I waited for him to answer me.

“Um... I got a notification from a bank that your sister had... well...had taken out a loan. I thought you must have helped her with it, talked her through it.”

“My sister has a trust fund worth tens of millions of dollars,” I reminded him. “Why the hell would she need to take out a loan? Did that really not raise any red flags for you?”

“Not really?” Chris admitted. “I thought maybe it was for optics. To show other potential investors that the idea was strong enough to get a bank to endorse it, so it wouldn’t seem like her investment was just a rich girl whim, you know?”

But it *was* just a rich girl whim. That was all it had ever been. Only instead of admitting that and moving on to something new, she’d decided to go behind my back and put herself in debt. Debt that she’d never be able to pay off without breaking into her trust fund after all. What a goddamn mess.

After I wrapped up the call with Chris, I stalked out to the patio and saw Jess, Kaitlyn, and Harper playing poolside. I strode out to them feeling my anger growing with each step closer.

“Daddy!” Harper stood up on her chair and cheered when she saw me. “We’re making floaty mermaid toys. Want to make one too?”

“Harp, please sit down.” I managed a strained smile for my daughter as she plopped into her chair and glanced at the mess of fabric and glitter on the table beneath the umbrella. “I wish I could, but Daddy is busy.” I turned my attention to Kaitlyn. “Can you take her inside? I need to speak to my sister alone.”

Jess sat up straighter as her smile disappeared. “No, I think I know what you’re here to discuss, and I want Kaitlyn to stay.”

I gritted my teeth and ignored my sister. “Kaitlyn, take Harper inside. Now, please.”

A shadow passed over Kaitlyn’s face as she nodded and took Harper’s hand. My daughter threw a concerned glance my way as they walked up the path, and I heard her say, “Why is Daddy so mad?” They were out of earshot before I could hear Kaitlyn’s reply.

I took a few beats to collect myself because all I wanted to do was yell at Jess for yet another bad decision. But yelling wasn’t my style.

“I just spoke to Chris, and he mentioned you’d taken out a loan with a bank for ‘your business,’” I began in a measured tone. “Would you mind explaining to me what he means?”

Because I'm confused since the last business we discussed was tabled."

Jess pounced on me before I'd even finished speaking.

"Yeah, you made your decision before I even started my presentation because you think I'm an idiot. You didn't even give me a *chance*," she shot back, already defensive. "And I worked hard on my presentation for you."

"I don't think you're an idiot, don't say that," I sighed. "But putting together a presentation and actually running a business are two very different things. I said no because you didn't put enough thought into what you want to do, Jess. You get ideas in your head and assume that everything is just going to magically work out." I felt myself getting angrier the more I thought about it. "You don't know business."

"I know *this* business," she countered. "And you always conveniently forget about my degree."

"A degree in fashion means you know how to play *dress up*, Jess! If you *really* knew the fashion business, you'd know how often private labels like this one fail. Even the *best* business managers struggle to keep fashion labels going long enough for them to catch on with the public. Do you really think *you* could succeed where so many others fail? It's not just about knowing clothes. How would you pay your bills? Hire staff? Promote it? You don't know the first thing about launching a company. That's why I said no."

"Stop yelling," she shouted back at me, glancing up toward the house. I knew the acoustics of the place meant that everyone inside might be privy to our conversation as well.

"I'm not yelling," I responded, even though I was. "I'm trying to talk some sense into you—but you're refusing to listen."

Jess snorted, shook her head, and glared at me. "You're so dismissive, as usual. But there are plenty of people who believe in me! Even the loan officer at the bank, a complete stranger, showed more trust in me than I get from my own family. Don't you see how messed up that is? I could get a

stranger to hear me out about the potential of this project when my own brother would barely give me the time of day.”

I let out a long sigh and rubbed my temples. “Of course the bank was cooperative. If the business succeeds, they get to take credit. And if it fails, they get to collect your collateral. What *is* your collateral? How were you able to get the loan in the first place? What did you put at risk?”

“The house in Raleigh.”

I took a few seconds to compute exactly what that meant and how it was even possible. It was one of our family properties, a gem in the south that we all loved but rarely had the time to visit.

“We both own it,” she said as if she’d read my thoughts, her chin jutting out in defiance. “I had every right to use my share of it.”

I took a few deep breaths before saying anything else, because I was angry enough to burn bridges with my impetuous sister.

“Does Mom know?”

Jess shook her head. “Not yet. But I’m going to tell her. She’ll be fine with it, I’m sure, since *she* believes in me.”

I paced along the patio, trying to vent the anger roiling inside of me.

“I know you’re upset but I promise you this is going to work,” she said in a soft voice, like she thought she’d actually be able to sweet talk me into this.

“You just don’t learn, do you?” I finally exploded. “I thought for sure after what happened with Lucas you’d be more responsible. I bailed you out of that mess, but I’m not sure I’ll have the patience to do it again once this venture fails.”

I hated myself for bringing Lucas up, but he still cast a long shadow on our family.

“This has *nothing* to do with him,” Jess shouted, her voice cracking. “Why does everything always go back to Lucas? And how much longer will I have to pay for my mistakes?”

I finally turned to look at my sister and saw the raw emotion on her face. For a moment I felt bad about blowing up at her, but then I remembered all of her many missteps throughout the years, and felt my anger rising again. She'd tried to launch a high-end vodka while she was still in college, then signed on to rep a skincare brand that had traces of lead in it, and even considered launching a singing career until someone finally had the integrity to tell her she couldn't carry a tune. I didn't have the time to babysit my sister as she tried to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. She was a representative of the Morris family, and we were supposed to be past this dynamic.

"You heard my perspective on the viability of this fashion business, and you went behind my back and did it anyway," I said once I centered myself enough to speak calmly. "I never signed off on what you're doing, and I still don't. I want you to know that when things go south, I won't be there to pick up the pieces, do you understand me?"

Jess didn't answer. When I looked over at her she was sitting with her legs drawn up on the chair and her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked tiny, vulnerable. But I knew firsthand that she was anything but. My sister was formidable when she set her mind to something. It didn't mean I thought her ridiculous business was going to succeed, but I knew that she'd throw every ounce of her energy into it—along with throwing in piles of good money after bad—until it ultimately went up in flames. I just hoped the rest of the family wouldn't end up burned again as well.

"Did you hear what I said?" I asked her.

She nodded, still refusing to look at me, which made me even angrier. Here she was, acting like the wounded party when I was the one with so much to lose. If anything happened to our Raleigh house because of what she did, there would be hell to pay. Not to mention the hit to our family's reputation if it became known that we lost a fortune due to foolish investments.

I spun on my heel and headed back to the house, fuming. I was so caught up in what had just happened that I almost ran into

Kaitlyn coming out of the classroom in the library.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she asked, her eyes searching my face.

I looked in the room to make sure Harper was occupied and out of earshot. “I don’t want to get into the details, but let’s just say my sister has poor decision-making abilities. Sometimes it impacts the rest of the family, and I’m left cleaning her mess. I’m tired of it. It comes down to the fact that I just can’t trust her, and that’s a dealbreaker for me. I’m done.”

I knew that Jess and Kaitlyn had been hanging out quite a bit, and I wondered how much my sister had confided in her.

“But maybe she’s changed?” Kaitlyn asked haltingly. “I mean, you said the DUI happened a while back. It seems like she’s on a new path. I think it’s important to let people grow out of the mistakes of their past.”

“Not if it’s at the expense of everyone else,” I snapped at her. “You don’t understand how long this sort of behavior has been going on. I can’t tolerate people going behind my back, especially people that I care about.”

Kaitlyn took a step away from me and I instantly regretted my tone. “You’re not even giving her a chance. And it’s not like she’s just goofing off, James. She’s trying to start a business. You should be proud of her.”

The way she was sticking up for Jess made it clear that they’d been talking, and for some reason that made me even angrier. It was like they were conspiring against me. “Trust me, she’s used up all of her chances. End of story.”

Kaitlyn’s mouth dropped open and she took a step away from me. She looked at me like I was a stranger.

“Sorry to involve you in our family drama,” I said, hoping my tone made it clear that she needed to stop meddling. “There’s no need for you to concern yourself with it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go, I have a meeting soon.”

I headed for my office, my footsteps echoing off the marble floor and making it clear to anyone within earshot that the man

of the house had had enough.

KAITLYN

I tried to focus on the steady rhythm of my feet hitting the ground. It was late afternoon and hot as hell despite the shaded path, but I needed to get away from the house.

Away from *James*.

The blow-up at his sister revealed a side of him I'd never seen, and I didn't like it one bit. The James I knew stayed calm and collected no matter how upset he felt. The James I'd just witnessed was angry, and he showed it. Sure, Jess had made mistakes in the past, and James was right that he needed to watch out for the family reputation, but I knew she was serious about launching her business. And since I'd worn one of Henri's dresses in Key West, I knew firsthand that he created magic. The fabric was sumptuous, and the dress fit me like it had been made for me even though it was Jess's and we were different sizes. The whole thing was a feat of engineering masquerading as high fashion. I believed in what she was doing.

I could feel the furrow between my brows etching in as I thought about what had gone down back at the house. I tried to concentrate on my workout, but my focus was shot. At least I didn't have to think about my route. I couldn't deny it, I felt at home in the neighborhood, as if I actually belonged here despite the way James was acting at the moment. I sped up at the thought of it but immediately tried to pace myself. It was too hot for sprinting.

My phone buzzed, and I welcomed the forced break. It was Cassie, probably calling me with the latest wedding gossip.

“Hey,” I said brightly, trying not to pant.

“Two things real quick. First, I’m about to send you a picture of the final table arrangement, and I want you to tell me that it’s perfect no matter what you really think, and second, we have your last fitting coming up, and I want to confirm it’s on your calendar.”

“Cass,” I laughed as I slowed down even more. “You’ve texted it to me twice and it’s on our shared Google calendar. How could I forget?”

“Okay, okay, just making sure! It’s getting close, and I’m starting to freak out a little, you know?”

“I get it,” I said in a comforting voice.

“Okay, enough about me. How are things with you and Daddy Warbucks?”

“Stop,” I groaned. I contemplated telling her the weirdness that had just happened, but I wasn’t about to add any stress to her life. “Everything is fine, and Harper is making incredible progress.”

“Of course she is, she’s got you leading the way,” Cassie replied.

“Oh, go on,” I joked.

“I’m serious! They don’t know how lucky they are to have you.”

I thought about how grumbly James could get and hoped he actually did realize it. To be sure, he was always quick to praise all the progress Harper and I had made, showing full support for every plan I had put into place. But when the dark side came out, like the way he yelled at his sister? It was like he turned into a different person. I wasn’t sure I could trust that person. Sure, he was happy with Harper’s progress now. But what if she had a setback? Would he turn on me like he’d turned on Jess?

“Are you in a good place, wedding-wise?” I asked, eager to change the subject.

“Other than stressing out about every single thing, yeah, I’m great. We’re still arguing about the cake flavor, Hope’s dress went missing, I can’t think of anything grandparent-appropriate to say in my vows, and the tablecloths are the wrong shade of cream. Good times.”

“Yikes, that is stressful. Anything I can do to help?” I was walking now, happy to have an excuse to stop pushing myself.

“Can you hire a private investigator to find Hope’s dress? And then write something that’ll make everyone cry when I say my vows?”

The thought of crafting an ode to love sent a shiver through me. What did I know about real relationships?

“Sorry, can’t help with either of those, but I can definitely be the tie-breaker on your cake. Let me at that snooty planner, and I’ll tell her where she can put that pineapple upside-down cake!”

Cassie giggled. “Ooh, I’d pay to see that go down. Seriously, though, I’m feeling pretty overwhelmed. It’s just a lot right now, you know? I’m excited to marry Scott, but all of the surrounding BS is getting to be too much. I’m bickering with his mom about the seating plan and she won’t back down. I mean, I love her, she’s amazing, but the woman has *opinions*.”

“To be fair, so do you,” I pointed out. “Maybe you should count yourself lucky that Scott was raised by a strong woman—otherwise, he’d be totally baffled by you, don’t you think?”

Cassie laughed. “Okay, fair point. Maybe I should thank my future mother-in-law. But really, I shouldn’t complain about her at all. She’s a handful, but I’d take her over our mom any day of the week, that’s for sure.”

I’d been trying to find the right time to bring up the fact that I’d invited our mom to be my plus-one at her wedding, and this clearly wasn’t the moment. But I was excited for Cassie to get to know our new and improved mom.

“Hey, everything is going to be fine,” I said in my most reassuring voice, half for her and half for me to try to convince myself that I hadn’t made the wrong decision. God, I hoped Cassie would understand what I was trying to do. It was going to be bumpy at first, but I was convinced she’d eventually be won over.

“If you say so,” she muttered.

I turned when I sensed someone coming up the deserted path and was surprised and not at all surprised to see Lou jogging my way. My running schedule had been erratic, but somehow he always managed to bump into me. I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. He smiled and waved when he saw me.

“Hey, Cassie, I need to go,” I said, waving back at him. “We’ll catch up soon. Good luck with everything, it’s going to work out.”

“Okay, love you!”

She hung up before I could say it back.

“There she is!” Lou said, slowing to a walk beside me. “Looks like you’re cooling down, mind if I join you?”

I shrugged as he fell in step beside me. “Sure.”

“You okay?” he asked, studying me. “You seem upset.”

“I’m fine,” I lied, then checked myself on it. The truth was I *wanted* to talk about what was going on with James, and it wasn’t like my sister had the bandwidth to hear about it. Lou had been a great ear so far, so maybe I could find a way to discuss it without implicating James? I obviously couldn’t get into specifics with Lou, but I could dance around the topic without betraying any confidences. “Actually, I have a... philosophical question for you.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Do you think there’s a difference between keeping a confidence and lying?”

“Yeah, I think there’s a huge difference,” he said, staring off into the distance. “Keeping a confidence is something you do for a friend, like let’s say a buddy is having an affair. I’m

aware of it, but it's none of my business, you know? I'm not going to run out and tell his wife. But if his wife asks me about it point blank and I deny it? Well, that's lying. See the difference?"

He was so caught up in his imaginary cheating friend's double life that he didn't notice my glaring side-eye. I had a feeling the scenario he described was something he'd dealt with in real life, maybe more than once.

"Yeah, I see the difference," I said. "Do you think both are okay?"

"Well, I certainly don't see anything wrong with keeping a confidence. Especially if everyone else is happier not knowing. As for lying... I guess it depends on the circumstances. Some lies are harmless enough, don't you think?"

I didn't agree at all, but I nodded just to be polite as I thought about the Jess loan situation and my part in what had gone down between her and James. I was a facilitator for sure, the bridge between the loan and her dream. Should I have said something to James about it? Had I let him down by keeping it to myself?

"What's going on for real?" Lou asked, his handsome brow furrowed with concern. "Are you in trouble? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

It was kind of him to offer, and based on his worried expression, he was genuinely interested in supporting me.

"No, not at all, I'm fine," I replied, shaking my head. "I've just been thinking of...hypothetical scenarios, you know?"

"Uh-huh," he replied, clearly skeptical. "You know I'm here if you ever want to talk. I'm a great listener. And trust me, I know your boss can be a handful, so you probably need to vent about sins of omission, lies, *and* keeping confidences." He gave me a knowing look that left me feeling more confused than anything. Why did he assume James was the one who had lied?

"I'll keep that in mind."

As much as I enjoyed talking to Lou, there was no way I felt okay saying anything about James, Harper, or even Jess. In fact, I felt strange even alluding to what was going on in the Morris household, no matter how badly I wanted an unbiased listening ear to help me work through my thoughts.

We came to the split in the trail where Lou always turned off, and he stopped so he was blocking my path. It was his power move. “Hey, remember that sometimes people aren’t ready to have the truth thrust upon them. Sometimes it has to be more subtle, and if that means having to tell a white lie or not saying something, then so be it.”

I nodded. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

Lou laughed. “You’ll soon learn that I’m *always* right.”

I managed a smile even though I didn’t find it funny. “How lucky I am to have a friend with all the answers. But hey, where were you when I was buying a lottery ticket?”

He smiled widely. “Is that your way of saying you want to spend more time with me? Because that could definitely be arranged.” He crossed his arms and raked his eyes down my body.

I froze, taken aback. Cassie always joked that I wouldn’t know a come-on if it walked up to me and introduced itself, but this was too blatant for even me to ignore. I had thought that Lou and I were both good with just being friends, but this was definitely sounding like he was interested in something more.

The thought...didn’t appeal. Yeah, Lou was good looking and charming, but I just didn’t think of him that way. And I didn’t particularly want to try.

“Oh, um...” I said awkwardly, “I’m sure you’ve got plenty on your plate already. And so do I, for that matter.” *Such as a particular blue-eyed billionaire who can make me come harder than I ever have in my life in five minutes or less.*

Despite the new tension in our relationship, I couldn’t really imagine wanting to be with anyone but James.

His face fell almost imperceptibly, and a look of irritation replaced his usual smile for a moment. But then he rearranged

his features back to the affable guy I'd been running with. "Fine, I can take a hint. But let me know if you change your mind."

"Yeah, will do," I said, trying not to wince at how strained and stilted I sounded. "But hey, speaking of stuff on my plate, I really need to go. I'll see you later."

I gave him a little wave then jogged off to the point where he could no longer see me then slowed down again. Why was I feeling so strange about Lou acting like he was on the verge of asking me out? It wasn't like James and I had anything real happening between us. When we'd first met, I'd agreed to a no-strings arrangement, and we've never discussed taking it further. Then there was the blow-up with his sister, which certainly showed me another side of him.

Despite all of that, there was something about James Morris that had me hooked, and nobody else could compare.

KAITLYN

Why did everything feel so weird?

I was deep into lesson plans with Harper, and I kept beating myself up because I was having trouble focusing on the task at hand, which was helping her make drawings of things she enjoyed doing. It was a simple exercise to help illuminate her strengths and focus on the positives instead of fixating on the things we still needed to tackle. She was immersed in it, making elaborate drawings of swimming and riding her bike, which gave me the bandwidth to think about the strange distance that seemed to have grown between me and James in the few days since the argument.

I tried to catalog what had gone wrong, but it felt silly to dissect every interaction. I knew I wasn't imagining the fact that we'd barely touched in the past two days. Sure, he'd been busier than usual and had been called away one of the nights, but he was also just less...there. No texts other than to check in on Harper, and *definitely* no invitations to sneak off for a quickie. Again, not unheard of since he was so busy, but still. It felt off.

He was home today, but he'd skipped breakfast. He'd never even hung up from his phone call when he came out to the patio to give Harper a good morning kiss on the top of her head. He was speaking in code around Harper, but I could tell the call was about Jess, which made me feel prickly all over again.

“Done!” Harper said triumphantly, holding up a drawing of her on the climbing wall.

“Perfect, I love it,” I exclaimed, relieved to have something to focus on other than James. I looked through the drawings she’d made. “So many fun things, Harp! Now we’re going to move onto something different. I call it ‘favorite places.’”

“Ooh, what’s that?” She clambered up onto her knees on her chair.

“We’re going to talk about all of the places you love visiting, and if you’d like to visit them again.”

She shrank in her seat. “Do I have to go to them?”

“No, of course not!” I reassured her. “But I thought it might be fun to talk about what you like about each spot. Then we can discuss if each place is a green light, which means you’re ready to go there, a yellow light, which means you maybe want to go, and a red light which means you’re not ready yet.”

“Like a traffic light!”

“Exactly, you’ve got it,” I said. “So let’s think of a favorite place. How about Disney World? Is that one?”

Harper’s eyes went wide, and she nodded rapidly.

“Okay, great. I’m going to put that on the list. What color is it?”

“Um...when Daddy and I went we had to go on the plane.” Her face registered hesitation and a hint of anxiety.

It was only a couple of hours to drive—but whatever, of course James would take a plane. “So, red? You’re not ready yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Okay, so what’s next?”

We worked through a list of spots and ended up naming six that Harper felt okay to visit. One of them shocked me: the house in Key West. I knew that James and Harper usually took the boat to get there and it wasn’t a quick trip, which meant Harper also felt okay being out on the open water. After

staying in the Key West house the night we went to Club Obsidian, I could understand why Harper felt good being there. It had a low-key, relax-and-hang-out vibe that made life feel lazy and happy. Plus the swimming was amazing.

We were wrapping up and getting ready for snacks when James came barreling into the room, catching both of us off guard.

“I need to talk to you.”

It was the no-nonsense, all-business James I’d come to know over the past few days—and I didn’t like it one bit. Harper looked between us with wide eyes, so I opted to play it off even though James looked furious.

“Okay, I have a few minutes, and Harper can eat her snack while she watches a video.” I didn’t move from my chair, a tiny power play to see if he’d shift into a more polite tone of voice.

It seemed to work.

James cleared his throat. “Can you come outside?” A pause. “Please?”

I nodded. “Harper, I’m going to step away to talk to your dad, okay?”

She was already digging into her fruit cup and navigating to the video she wanted to watch on her tablet as I walked out of the room.

I met James in the hallway and was taken aback by how upset he looked.

“Outside, please.” He pointed to the open patio doors across the dining room.

I followed along in silence as my mind spun to try to figure out what could have him behaving this way. Unless there’d been new developments with the Jess argument, I couldn’t imagine what might have set him off.

I expected him to turn and start raging the second we were outside, but he kept walking until he was beneath the shade of a giant palm tree near the pool.

“What’s going on?” I finally asked.

“The CPS visits got out. Someone leaked it,” he managed in a tight voice. “It’s a huge story all over the internet. It’s making me look like an unfit father.”

“Oh no!” I fought the urge to reach for him. “How did they find out?”

“We’ve been keeping the visits incredibly quiet, so I’m guessing that someone planted a bug in the house—which is why I brought you out here to talk about it.” His shoulders sagged, and it made me realize how much he was dealing with.

“James, I’m so sorry.”

He waved my sympathy away. “The point is, we need to get out of this house for at least a day so my security team can do a full sweep. I don’t feel safe here with Harper. But I’m not sure where we can go. She used to be okay to go to Jess’s house, but obviously Jess and I—”

“I have an idea,” I interrupted, chewing on my lip. “We literally just made a list of Harper’s favorite spots, and the Key West house was on it. Could we go there?”

“Of course we could, but is she ready for that kind of trip? I mean, she hasn’t been since...”

“Honestly, it’s a bit of a risk,” I replied, staring into space and weighing the pros and cons of attempting it. “She said it’s a favorite place, and when I asked her if she felt okay to go there she gave it a ‘yellow light,’ meaning ‘maybe.’”

James paced and ran his hand through his hair. “Any other options? Maybe a few nights at the Ritz in Miami since it’s closer?”

I shook my head. “Nope, I would definitely avoid hotels, even ones that are nothing like the motel where she was kept. If she goes out of her comfort zone, it should be to a place she’s been before, where she’s already comfortable.”

James looked at me. “And that’s Key West.”

“Exactly.”

“What about the boat?”

“Also on the list—and she said it was a ‘green light’ since we’ve been able to board it a few times without going anywhere.”

He pursed his lips, the tension evident on his face. “Okay, can you be ready in an hour? Bags packed for two days?”

“It might take me a little longer to get Harper ready too—”

He waved me off again. “Focus on yourself. I’ll have Vida pack my things and I’ll take care of Harper’s. We need to move quickly; I don’t want to spend another minute here if we’re being surveilled.”

“Okay, I’ll get to it.”

“We won’t be doing much in Key West, so it doesn’t matter what you bring. And if you forget anything I can have it brought in.” He paused. “Seriously, maybe that’s what I should do for everything? We can just leave as soon as Captain Tim is ready rather than wasting time packing, and I’ll have my house manager order everything we need?”

The idea of buying everything from toiletries to clothing to shoes just to save time felt way too decadent. “No, I can be quick, trust me.”

Fifty minutes later, James and Harper met me on the dock where the sleek white and navy blue yacht awaited us. I studied the little girl as she skipped toward me. She looked excited to be going on an adventure, without any sign of stress on her features.

“Can we play on the boat?” Harper asked when she reached me, grabbing for my hand.

I smiled at her. “Of course we can! I packed the Go Fish cards and some coloring books.”

Harper squinted up at her father. “You too, Daddy?”

He glanced away from his phone. “Of course. I just have to finish one more thing, then I promise the three of us can play all the way to Key West.”

We boarded and kicked off our shoes as Harper took off for the table on the back deck.

“She seems good,” James mused to me, watching his daughter.

“Yeah, we’re off to a great start. No obvious fear, excitement for the journey ahead, focus on activities...all positive signs.”

We were alone on the narrow walkway but somehow maintaining a polite distance. As much as I wanted to hold James and tell him that everything was going to be okay, I didn’t dare. It felt like we’d switched back to an employee and employer relationship, and I wasn’t about to do anything to put myself in an awkward situation.

It didn’t matter how much I wanted James. If he wanted *me*, he’d have to take the lead.

Harper peeked around the corner at the other end of the boat and beckoned us to come.

“I guess we’re on,” he laughed.

“Guess so. Let’s go keep that little girl busy.”

The three hours to Key West flew, but it helped that James and I both had a great time making Harper laugh during the trip. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought she made the journey all the time given how relaxed she seemed. I’m guessing it helped to have both me and James beside her, giving her plenty of attention. It didn’t happen often enough.

Being out on the water seemed to give us all a vacation vibe even though the truth was we were running away from a stressful scenario. The trip was a brief respite from real life, and the way we leaned into it made it clear we all needed a break. James opted to sit close to me as we played with Harper, and we wound up resting thigh to thigh. It felt good to connect with him again, even if it was only a small taste of what I actually wanted from him.

We docked and I watched Harper closely. A shadow of fear passed over her face, and I grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

“I forgot we have to walk down that long dock,” she said, staring at it mournfully.

“Yes, but once we get off the dock it’s the *beach!*”

“Yeah Harp,” James added, kneeling down in front of her. “You love the beach.”

She nodded, her eyes still worried.

“I have an idea,” James continued. “Why don’t we go for a swim right away? How does that sound?”

“Really?” Harper breathed. “Right now?”

“Yes, now,” James teased.

“And I can watch you from the shore,” I added.

“No, Kaitlyn, swim with us!” Harper cried. “You *have* to!”

“I didn’t pack a bathing suit, I’m so sorry.” I’d been in such a hurry that I’d managed to forget that the Key West house had the most beautiful private beach right outside the patio doors.

“I can have a selection delivered to the house in twenty minutes,” James said. “Just give me your color choices. I already know your size.”

Somehow I still managed to forget that James could snap his fingers and get what he wanted.

“You don’t have to do that,” I protested. “I don’t mind sitting this one out.”

“No! Swim!”

Harper issued the command with a stomp, and James and I turned to her with our mouths hanging open.

“*Excuse* me, young lady,” James said. “That was rude.”

Harper’s shoulders drew up to her ears and she looked down at her feet. “Sorry. Please swim, Kaitlyn?”

It was impossible to refuse her. And given the way James was staring at me, it seemed he was just as eager to get me into a bathing suit.

“Okay, okay,” I finally acquiesced. “Harper, what color bathing suit should I wear?”

“Rainbow!” she cheered.

“Rainbow it is,” I laughed.

She reached for my hand, then grabbed her father’s, and the three of us got ready for our next adventure.

JAMES

“She’s exhausted,” I whispered to Kaitlyn as I pulled the sheet over Harper.

“Big day in a lot of ways. Major strides,” she whispered back, beaming at me.

Harper had asked for the two of us to tuck her in, and the process had felt surprisingly natural even though it had never happened before. I read the first book snuggled on one side of my daughter, Kaitlyn read the second nestled on the other side, then we talked about the highlights of the day together. Harper had struggled to keep her eyes open the whole time, until she finally drifted off to sleep.

We tiptoed out of the bedroom and paused outside the door. I couldn’t tell if Kaitlyn wanted to spend more time with me or go our separate ways for the night, but after the past few prickly days, I wasn’t ready to let the good vibes that were reemerging end.

“Do you want to grab a glass of wine?” I asked. “It’s a beautiful night, we could sit outside.”

Kaitlyn nodded shyly. “Yeah, I’d really like that.”

It felt like she’d just agreed to a date, but I punched down my hopes. We still needed to sort through the distance that had grown between us and find our way back to where we’d been.

I met her outside carrying a pair of glasses along with a bottle of red as well as a white.

“Looks like you’re ready to party hard,” Kaitlyn laughed as I placed the bottles on the table.

She had her feet tucked beneath her on a lounge that was backed up to the palm fronds, with a prime view of the ocean. As much as I loved my Miami house, there was something about my Key West place that made me feel like I was miles away from civilization. It felt easier to breathe when I was here.

“I wasn’t sure which you liked better,” I said, settling in a chair next to her instead of beside her on the lounge.

“I’m easy to please, I like both. Gentleman’s choice.”

“Key West calls for white, I think,” I said as I uncorked the bottle.

We drank in silence for a few minutes, letting the peace of the location wash over us. I tried not to stare at Kaitlyn as she sipped her wine, but it wasn’t easy. She’d let her hair dry in the sun after spending the day swimming, and it was a gorgeous wild mass around her shoulders. She’d changed out of the bikini I’d had sent over and into a short, loose-fitting white dress that kept slipping down in front, giving me glances of the pale pink bra beneath it. Her skin had turned a golden brown despite the sunscreen she kept applying. I glanced down at my own legs and noticed I was darker than normal as well. We’d both be going home with what looked like a post-vacation glow.

“Things have been more stressful than usual for you lately, huh?” Kaitlyn asked as she took another sip of wine.

“Why do you think that?” She was right, but I wanted to know what had led her to that conclusion. I’d thought I’d done a pretty good job of projecting nothing-to-see-here calm, the way I always tried to do.

“The Jess stuff.”

I felt my mouth move into a frown and took a gulp of wine.

“Yes, she’s never been easy to deal with.”

“You came down on her pretty hard,” Kaitlyn said tentatively.

I fought back against the reflexive anger I felt any time I thought about Jess's situation. "You have to understand that this has been a pattern with my sister. Making irresponsible decisions then leaving me to clean up the fallout. And the last time she went rogue? I'm still feeling the ramifications of her actions."

"May I ask what happened?"

It was time to tell her the whole story, so Kaitlyn would finally understand why Jess and I had such a hard time finding common ground.

"Remember that guy I told you about? The one Jess was dating? Well, I had a history with him. We'd already been business rivals for a while before he and Jess started dating. Adding my sister into the equation took the rivalry to another level. And after they broke up...let's just say the rivalry got more intense. He's very, very focused on undercutting my business any way he can."

"Sounds like he took the breakup pretty hard," Kaitlyn said. "Do you think he really loved her?"

"No," I replied flatly. "I don't. If he loved her, he'd have poured all his efforts into *her*: convincing her to give him another chance, helping her deal with the media backlash, working with her to get her life back on track. Instead, all he did was throw a tantrum and lash out at *me*. What I get from that is that it was never about her. It was always about winning. His ego was wounded when she called things off, and he responded by trying to find a way to come out on top. That's what he's *still* doing, years later. Jess was just a pawn in his game."

We both went quiet.

"I can't trust Jess to make good decisions," I continued. "Her heart is in the right place, but she doesn't think things through. She leads with her heart, not her head. That's why she's only allowed an allowance from her trust fund rather than having access to the whole thing. I'm trying to protect her—and her response to that was to go behind my back. I thought we were

past secrets and lies, and then this fashion thing blew up in my face.”

“It’s not just a ‘thing,’” Kaitlyn said gently. “She’s serious about it. And the designer is good. *Really* good.”

I sighed. The last thing I wanted to do was bicker with Kaitlyn about my sister. “Can we talk about something else? Anything, really.”

“Okay. I’ve actually been wondering something…” Kaitlyn trailed off.

“What? Tell me.”

“Are you and I…okay? Things have felt weird lately.”

Relief washed over me when I realized Kaitlyn was just as unnerved by the distance between us as I was.

“I don’t understand what happened, to be honest,” I admitted. “But I know I’ve missed being close to you.”

We locked eyes, and Kaitlyn moved over on the lounge then patted the space beside her. “Would you like to sit next to me, so we can discuss it further?”

The devilish look in her eye sent heat rushing through me. “I would *love* to.”

I moved to the lounge and settled so our thighs were touching once again, but this time without a little chaperone’s prying eyes.

“The trip has been a success so far, don’t you think?” Kaitlyn asked, setting her wine glass down on the table in front of her.

“Agreed. And it’s looking even better now.” I leaned closer and planted a kiss on her bare shoulder, getting a soft giggle out of Kaitlyn. I loved her clean soapy smell, tinged with something sweeter I couldn’t quite place.

“I’ve missed you,” she murmured. She placed a gentle hand on my cheek and leaned in to press her lips on mine, a sweet kiss with devious intent. It sent flames right through me.

“Kaitlyn,” I whispered. “I’ve missed you too.”

I pulled her gently until she was on my lap and facing me. I didn't even bother to hide the fact that I was already hard. She fell against me, her chest on mine, and kissed me deeply. I let out a groan when she ground her hips down.

When she finally pulled away her cheeks were flushed, and I knew the sun wasn't to blame.

"You have no idea what you do to me," I managed.

"Oh, I think I know exactly what I do to you," she laughed and rocked against me again.

It was too much. I put my hands on her ass then stood up with her clutched to my chest, getting a squeal out of her. She tightened her arms behind my neck as I pivoted then dropped her down to the lounge, covering her with my body. I pushed between her legs and hitched her dress up, letting my hand graze along her heat.

"Ooh," she purred. "Are you feeling like an exhibitionist tonight?"

I captured her beautiful face in my palms. "I want you anywhere and everywhere, so the answer is yes."

Kaitlyn reached between our bodies and slid her hand down the front of my shorts, rubbing along the hard ridge there.

I squeezed my eyes shut and thrust against her hand. "I feel like we're in high school."

"Then take your pants off and have me already," she panted in my ear.

I stood up and started unbuckling my belt then froze. The unexplained privacy breach that had sent us to Key West in the first place nagged at me, and the thought that someone could be on a boat in the harbor watching us through a telephoto lens was something I couldn't get past. I wanted her desperately, but I couldn't afford to lose my head.

"What's wrong?" Kaitlyn asked.

I reached for her hand and pulled her off the lounge.

“Let’s go inside. I want to do ridiculously dirty things to your body where we have complete privacy.”

Her expression shifted back to a naughty grin. “Ooh, I like the way you think!”

I smacked her on the ass hard enough to make the hem of her dress flip up.

“*Hey!*”

Kaitlyn rubbed her rear with a shocked look on her face.

“Did you like that?” I asked, arching a brow.

“I...I sort of did,” she replied, looking a little surprised at her reaction.

“Well, there’s more where that came from.”

Kaitlyn grabbed my hand then took off running for the house.



It was hard to keep from staring at Kaitlyn over breakfast, but Harper’s stream of happy chatter kept me focused.

“Daddy, what are we going to do today? Swim? Kaitlyn, will you go in the waves with me again?”

My phone started pinging, and I stifled a groan of frustration. I wasn’t ready for the fantasy of normalcy to end yet.

“Let Daddy see what’s going on in the world before we plan our day, okay?”

Harper turned her attention to Kaitlyn as I reached for my phone. I knew texts and emails had, almost certainly, piled up since the night before. I was usually more on top of my communication, even when I was technically on vacation, but for once I wanted to relax into the moment with Kaitlyn. Our lovemaking was unlike anything I’d experienced. The hunger of keeping our distance and then her willingness to try new things made for an erotic adventure that I knew I’d be replaying all day. I glanced at her, feeling satisfied on a purely instinctual level when she shivered under the weight of my

gaze. She glanced at me then rubbed her fingertips along the back of her wrist, a reminder of how I'd used one of my silk ties to tie her hands together then made love to her with my tongue.

I could feel myself growing hard just thinking about it, so I took a giant gulp of hot coffee and focused on my phone. The first urgent email was from my security team reporting that they'd found nothing during the sweep of the house. As happy as I was that my home hadn't been breached, I was still angry we couldn't identify the source of the leak. I wasn't about to let it rest, and I fired off a quick response to pursue every possible avenue to try to identify what was going on.

I glanced at the endless stream of texts and realized that as much as I wanted to work remotely and enjoy more time here, I needed to head back to HQ.

"Ladies, I'm afraid we have to go home today."

"No!" Harper wailed. "I'm having fun!"

"I am too, sweetheart, but work needs me. I promise we'll come back again soon, okay?"

She nodded and propped her chin on her hand, looking so dejected that I wanted to call my team and tell them to clear my schedule.

"Harp, why don't you and I go to the beach when we get back home since we had so much fun on the beach here? I know it wasn't on your list, but maybe it's a green light spot now?"

I held my breath waiting for my daughter to answer. She hadn't been to our beach since before the kidnapping because it was a spot she and Emily used to visit all the time. She tipped her head and a slow smile spread across her face.

"Okay! Maybe we can bring the floaty unicorn?"

Kaitlyn glanced at me. "Do we have a floaty unicorn?"

"We used to, but I'm not sure where it is." I didn't want to tell her that we'd tossed those toys out when she stopped wanting to go to the beach. "You know what, Harp? I'm going to send

for a whole zoo of floaty animals that you can choose from. How does that sound?”

“A flamingo too?” She asked with her little hands clasped beneath her chin.

“A flamingo, a zebra, a peacock, a giraffe, a turtle...you can take your pick.”

“Yay! Okay, let’s go!” She hopped off her chair and ran toward her bedroom.

“That was easy,” I mused.

“And we’ll get to check off *another* major milestone,” Kaitlyn laughed. “Fantastic!”

I reached across the table for her hand, and she threaded her fingers into mine. “It’s all because of you. You do know that, right?”

Kaitlyn blushed, and for a few minutes absolutely everything in my life felt perfect.

KAITLYN

Cassie opened her door and gave me an exaggerated frown.
“Oh, how I’ve missed your face.”

She held out her arms and I stepped into the hug, happy to see my sister in person for the first time in way too long.

“I’ve missed you too. I brought celebratory donuts.” When we finally let go, I held up the bakery box.

“Katie, no!” She looked like I was offering her sugar-dusted poison. “I have a stupid-tight white dress I need to fit into soon. Why are you trying to sabotage me?”

I laughed. “Please. With the amount you’re working out, you could probably eat all six of them without gaining an ounce. You look amazing.” I reached out and rubbed her toned arm, but I didn’t say anything about the hollows under her eyes. Wedding planning was definitely taking a toll on my sister.

“Thanks,” she replied looking glum. “Yeah, fine—gimme one of those please.”

We walked to the table near the sliding glass door. Cassandra’s apartment had an incredible view of the ocean, but in a few weeks, she’d be giving it up to move in with Scott. I thought it was adorable that they hadn’t moved in together right away once they got engaged, but she’d told me she wanted the act of joining their lives post-vows to feel momentous.

“So what’s going on? What are you stressing about today?”

“The frickin’ seating chart,” she wailed, pointing to a whiteboard propped up on an easel. “It’s like I’m setting up

UN negotiations! I can't put Scott's Aunt Mary anywhere near his cousin Janet because there was an incident with Thanksgiving leftovers a million years ago they still fight about. And his Uncle Roger flirts with everyone, so I can't put him near the bridesmaids or his wife will freak out. Add in a few raging alcoholics who need to be seated far away from the open bar, and half a dozen divorced folks who want to murder each other. At this point, I just want to draw names and put everyone wherever."

I walked to the seating chart and studied it, realizing it was time to come clean about my surprise plus-one.

"Where is the bridal party's table?"

Cassie walked over munching on a strawberry donut and jabbed a finger at a table. "Here. I'm letting everyone sit with their dates so it's not awkward for the plus-ones who don't know anyone. But then again, your plus-one is a way-back friend of Scott's, so I could put him with the other frat brothers and he'd be fine. Although I have a feeling that he'll try to James-ify the table no matter where I put him. Know what I mean? I can just picture him ordering special bottles of wine that aren't on the menu and telling the waiter he served from the wrong side."

She wasn't wrong. I could totally see James trying to take over even when it wasn't his event. But I needed to tell my sister James wasn't my plus-one. I settled for a redirect as I worked up my nerve to spill the big news about my date. "True, but I think it's hard for him to turn that part of his brain off. He knows how to show people a good time, and it's not easy for him to be 'just' a guest."

"Exactly. Control freak," Cassie agreed, licking her fingers. "Has he made up with Jess yet?"

I shook my head. "Not that I can tell. He refuses to believe she's capable of running a business."

"Oh please," Cassie scoffed. "She hooked me up with one of Henri's designs for my 'leaving the wedding' dress and wait until you see it. Pale pink with a little sparkle, strapless—it's jaw-dropping. Her business is going to do just fine." She

stared at me for a beat. “Eat a damn donut already! I’m getting ready for number two.”

I laughed and grabbed a jelly donut.

“How’s everything between you and James these days?” Cassie asked, eating nearly half of her blueberry cruller in a single bite.

“Good. Really good.” I couldn’t control my smile. “Key West was exactly what we needed. And Harper too. It was a big breakthrough for all of us.”

“Sounds like a cozy little family thing,” Cassie mused.

The mention of family made me realize I couldn’t put off my big confession any longer.

“Um, speaking of family...”

Cassie munched the donut and studied my face. “What? What’s wrong?”

I cleared my throat and shifted in my chair. “Nothing’s wrong. Everything is actually really great. But before I tell you what’s going on, I need you to promise you’ll let me talk without interrupting, okay?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Okay.” Cassie drew the word out, suspicion thick in her voice.

“My plus-one isn’t James—it’s Mom. I invited her.”

She froze as her face cycled through half a dozen expressions, none of them positive.

I rushed to keep talking. “She’s different now. I can hear it in her voice, and the things she says. She’s been working on herself—she’s really changed! And it feels amazing connecting with her. I actually look forward to talking to her, how weird is that?” I forced out a laugh to try to lighten the mood, but it seemed to have no impact on Cassie, who was staring at me with her mouth hanging open. “She’s really excited to rebuild her relationships with *both* of us. And it feels like a wedding celebration is a great place to start the process. She doesn’t want to miss your special day, Cass.”

She finally snapped her mouth shut. “*My special day,*” she repeated.

“Yes, and I think it’s wonderful she’s going to be there!” I watched my sister closely as she tried to formulate a sentence. “She told me she’s so excited to see you and give you a hug.”

“You invited Mom...to *my* special day.”

I nodded wordlessly, now fully aware how the conversation was going to go. I could feel beads of perspiration forming along my hairline.

“How *dare* you?” Cassie whispered. The fury in her tone was unmistakable. “How *dare* you invite that woman?”

“That woman is our mother,” I shot back.

Cassie pounced on me before the words were out of my mouth. “Only by blood. Because there’s nothing maternal about a person who throws a child out the door to fend for herself! I was still in high school when she kicked me out, Katie! Do you have any idea how much that hurt?”

Cassie knew I did, because I was there to pick up the pieces with her. I was the one who stepped up to take care of my sister when our own mother refused to.

She was up and pacing now. “Why didn’t you ask me first?”

“Because I knew you’d respond like this! You completely shut down when it comes to Mom. You’re not even open to a conversation with her.”

“Why should I be?” she shouted back. “She reached out to you, but I haven’t heard a peep from her. She doesn’t give a shit about me! Never did.”

“I’m the oldest, and she asked me to talk to you,” I said gently. “I’m the peacemaker, she knows that.”

Cassie barked out a laugh. “Oh, you’re the peacemaker? So what does that make me?”

“Hurt,” I said simply, and Cassie’s face shifted from anger to sadness for a moment. “As you should be. But now things are

going to change. We can turn everything around and be a family again, Cassie.”

She paced around the room like she was looking for an escape. “So you invite her to the biggest, most important, most stressful day of my life so far. And you expected me to smile and make nice to that woman when I haven’t even laid eyes on her in years? Like all is forgiven?”

“No, not at all. I was thinking we could all meet for a coffee date in the next week or so. That way you’d see how different she is. Then, we can all be together at the wedding without any awkwardness. I promise you, this is a really positive step for our family.”

She came to a stop and stared out toward the water. I crossed my fingers so tightly that I cut off my circulation.

Cassie turned back to me slowly. “No.”

“No what? No coffee? Because we could meet for dinner and really hash things out—”

“No to all of it. No to coffee, no to dinner, and no to Mom coming to my wedding.”

“But Cassie,” I protested. “I already invited her.”

She held my gaze for a beat. “And no to *you*,” she hissed.

We both went silent as I tried to figure out what she meant.

Cassie crossed her arms and started talking. “You pulling a stunt like that means I can’t trust you. Hell, at this point I feel like I don’t even *know* you. And I no longer feel comfortable having you at my wedding.”

Panic rose inside of me. “Hold on, wait. Are you saying you’re *disinviting* me?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” She sniffled but I didn’t see any sign of tears. The only thing in her eyes was fury.

“You can’t be serious. All because of Mom?” Heavy dread spread through me as I realized she meant it.

“No, because of *you*. Because you went behind my back and invited her. It’s not just her, it’s that you didn’t consider my

feelings about it. How could you do that to me? Like I need more stress in my life right now.”

“Cassie, I swear, it’s for the best! We can be a family, a real family—”

She threw back her head and let out a joyless laugh. “Not a chance in hell. She’s bamboozling you and I don’t know why you can’t see it. What’s gotten into you?”

There was no way I was going to admit to her that the Morris family was a big part of the reason why I was willing to try again. I shrugged helplessly. “I’m thinking about the future. Don’t you want your children to know their grandmother?”

“That’s my decision,” she smacked her chest for emphasis. “Not yours.”

We went silent again, and I fought back tears. “So you don’t want me to be your maid of honor?”

She shook her head.

“You’re serious?”

“How many times do I have to say that I don’t trust you, Kaitlyn?” Her words reverberated around the room. “I’ll pay you back for your expenses so far. You can ship the dress to me.”

I couldn’t hold the tears back any longer. “I was just trying to help. To set things right between us. Why are you punishing me?”

“Because I can’t believe you’d choose her over me. It was supposed to be us against the world.” The tears had come at last. They were rolling down her cheeks, and all I wanted to do was run over and hug her—but I knew better than to try.

“Cassie…”

“I think you should leave now.” She walked to the window and refused to look at me.

I left quickly and waited until I was in my car to allow the floodgates to open. I let out all of the pain and confusion I was feeling until I was ready to reach out to the only person who

would understand my anguish. I picked up my phone and dialed.

“Mom? I need to talk to you.”

JAMES

Kaitlyn and I had made plans to spend Sunday relaxing by the pool then screening a new James Bond movie in my home theater. Harper was having a sleepover with Jess, and Vida and Bernardo were off for the rest of the day, so all I could think about was getting naked with Kaitlyn in every square inch of my house. I felt myself growing hard at the thought of it.

I was rushing to plow through my few remaining weekend emails in the kitchen so I could focus on our time together when I heard the front door slam.

“Hey, you, I’m making mimosas, come to the kitchen,” I called out, smiling. “And take your clothes off now, please.”

I paused, waiting to hear her laughter echoing down the hallway.

“Kaitlyn?”

Silence.

I headed to the foyer expecting to find her peeling off her shorts and t-shirt, only to discover her sitting on the bottom step of the staircase with her head in her lap. My heart jumped into my throat when I realized she was crying.

“Hey, hey, what’s wrong? What’s going on?”

I rushed to her side, collapsing next to her and pulling her close to me.

“Kaitlyn, talk to me. Are you okay? What happened?”

She finally pulled her head away from my chest and looked at me with swollen eyes. “Cassie...” she hiccupped. “Cassie disinvited me from her wedding! She fired me as her maid of honor!”

“What?”

It made absolutely no sense. Kaitlyn and her sister were as tight as twins. Before she could answer me, she dissolved into tears again. All I could do was hold her close as she cried.

“Come on,” I said, helping her to her feet. “Let’s go sit somewhere comfortable and figure this out.”

I led her back to the kitchen, to the window seat nook I knew was a favorite spot for both her and Harper. I’d grown to love the cozy place as well. Kaitlyn immediately curled up on the cushions and let out a shuddering sigh.

“Tea?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “No thank you. Can you come sit with me?”

Kaitlyn sounded like a scared little girl, something I was all too familiar with. I slid in next to her and wrapped my arms around her. She snuggled against me and sniffled.

“Okay, now please explain what happened,” I said gently as her breathing evened out.

Kaitlyn haltingly told me the story of reconnecting with her mother and inviting her to Cassandra’s wedding. The high hopes she’d had for a happy reunion—a way forward after their rocky past. I watched her as she spoke and could see the hope and pain mingling on her face as she explained everything to me.

“Am I a terrible person for doing that, James? For inviting my mother without asking Cassie first?”

I could see the tears pooling in her eyes and her bottom lip trembling as she waited for me to answer, so I gentled her head back onto my shoulder and stroked her back.

“Of course not. Your heart was in the right place, Cassie will understand that soon enough. She just needs time to work

through her emotions about everything.”

“I...I just wanted what you have. It’s *perfect*.”

Her voice was a whisper, and it took me a moment to understand what she meant.

“You mean my relationship with my family?”

She nodded.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I kissed the top of her head. “If you only knew what it took for us to get to this point. And you’ve seen firsthand that things are still tough with Jess. No family is perfect, no matter how good it looks from the outside.”

She pulled back to look up at my face. “But the way you all get along! You enjoy being together. We’ve *never* had that. And I want it. I want it so badly.”

She slumped against me, defeated by the ghosts of her past.

“Hey, hey, families go through tough times. That’s part of life. You guys will get through this.”

“She disinvited me from her wedding. She wants me to send my maid of honor dress back. That feels pretty final to me.”

“Stop,” I chided gently. “You want to talk about final? Try having your mom blame you for your father’s death. And we worked our way back from *that*, so...”

“Wait.” Kaitlyn sat up. “What?”

I nodded. “Remember how I told you my mom had a hard time when my father died and that we’d fought? Well, there was more to it. It’s not easy for me to talk about, but I think you should know just how bad it got for us.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She grasped my arm and gave it a squeeze.

I took a deep breath. “Grief does strange things to people. I told you I was away and without cell reception when my dad had a heart attack. My mom actually told me that if I’d been able to be there at his bedside after it happened, he might have survived. She said it was *my* fault that he died.”

Kaitlyn’s eyes went wide with shock. “How awful.”

I managed a tight smile as the old memories and emotions flooded through me. “Yup. It sucked.”

Kaitlyn wrapped her arms around me, her problems seemingly forgotten so she could comfort me. “How long was she upset with you?”

“Oh, months. And she wasn’t just upset. She was *angry*. Downright mean. So I was dealing with the pain of losing my father, the guilt of not being there for him, *plus* the hurt of my mother’s tirades. I knew on a rational level my being there wouldn’t have changed a thing. The doctors told me as much, that there was nothing anyone could have done to save him. And I knew that eventually, she’d see the truth as well. But in that moment, my mom needed an outlet for her anger and grief, and it was me.”

We both fell silent as we tallied our pain. I stroked Kaitlyn’s back, hoping my story put some perspective on what she was facing with her own family.

“Have you spoken to your mother since you told Cassandra?” I was eager to move on from my past and focus on her again.

Kaitlyn nodded. “I called her on the way home.”

My heart leapt at her using the word “home” to describe my place.

“She was so understanding,” Kaitlyn continued. “It felt like she was a different person. The mom I used to know would’ve thrown Cassie under the bus. But this time she said all the right things. She talked about patience and understanding. Forgiveness and time. I’m sure it was all twelve-step stuff, but it did feel like we were moving in the right direction. She said the two of us should meet for a mother-daughter spa day on Cassie’s wedding day, so we can focus on what we’re building instead of what we’re missing.”

I stroked her back. “That’s promising. See? Your mom is willing to wait for Cassie to be ready. That’s a great start.”

She nodded and pushed against me, hitching her leg over mine and causing the embers to stir inside of me despite the heavy topics we were discussing. I took a deep breath and tried to

ignore my arousal. It wasn't the time for that. I leaned slightly away.

"Tea?" I offered again. It was one of my mom's rituals from when we were little, and one that I used with Harper during her darkest days. She used to feel grown up drinking the watered-down brown liquid that was more milk and sugar than actual tea.

Kaitlyn gave me a little smile. "Yes, that would be great. Thank you."

I wasn't handy in the kitchen, but there were a few things I was quite good at, and fixing tea was one of them. I moved away from her warmth, grateful to have something to focus on other than the way she felt nestled against me. I was proud that I knew exactly where Bernardo kept the kettle and stash of imported teas.

"What type?" I asked, holding the tray filled with colorful packets so she could see it. "We have everything."

"You pick," she yawned and curled into a tighter ball.

I settled on an English Breakfast. The champagne was still sweating on the counter, so I grabbed it along with the orange juice and put the bottles back into the refrigerator. There would be other days for mimosas.

Tea prepped, I placed the cup on the table beside where Kaitlyn was curled up and then slid next to her on the window seat. She nestled against me with a sigh as I drew her closer.

I wanted to keep talking, to try to figure out how to make things better for her, but after few minutes of silent contemplation I heard the most adorable sound.

A tiny snore.

Kaitlyn was emotionally exhausted, and it seemed a nap was exactly what she needed. I wrapped my arms around her and moved her gently so she could spread out on the cushion. The snores never stopped.

Why did it feel so good? To be wrapped up together, our legs entwined and her head on my chest? Sure, she was going

through some tough times, but it was amazing being by her side to try to help her. And I felt like I'd actually managed to lighten her burden with the stories of my family. I was willing to spend the rest of the day in this quiet paradise with her. She could sleep against me until all my limbs went numb, as long as she was comfortable. If she felt content and happy, I was too. I closed my eyes and kissed the top of her head again, breathing in her delicious scent.

Paradise. *This* was paradise. I'd seen the sunset from the Eiffel Tower and the sunrise in Provence, but I'd never seen anything more beautiful than the woman in my arms. I loved that I could make her feel safe. I loved the way we seemed to fit together like puzzle pieces. I even loved her ridiculous little snores.

Then it hit me. I loved...*her*.

The realization flooded through me, causing my heart to gallop. I was in love with Kaitlyn Thorn. Deeply, head-over-heels, irrevocably, stupid in love with her.

I waited for panic to set in, because love wasn't something I understood, and it definitely wasn't something I trusted. I loved my daughter and family, of course, but love like this? Never. My heart was non-negotiable, yet here I was, ready to hand it over to the woman nestled next to me.

Could I do it?

I glanced down at her face. How could I not? Kaitlyn had come into my life and changed everything for the better. My daughter was transforming back into the wonderful, joy-filled child she'd been before her troubles. And I was happier than I'd ever been. I hadn't stopped to take stock of my own emotions, it wasn't something that I did, but reflecting on it now made it clear I'd never felt lighter.

How could I *not* love her?

I expected love like this to be scary, a beast to be tamed and eventually put down. I didn't "do" love. But instead of feeling overwhelmed, all I felt was...peace. Because loving Kaitlyn

was exactly what I was supposed to do. I ran my thumb down her soft cheek.

Yes, I loved this woman.

And I couldn't wait to tell her.

KAITLYN

I woke up with a start when something hit my leg.

Where was I? I looked around the room in a panic. It slowly dawned on me that I was in bed with James, and we'd just been joined by a sleepy four year old. Harper wordlessly deposited herself in between us and pulled the sheet up with a little huff.

I remained frozen, watching as she drifted back to sleep immediately. Either Harper was sleepwalking and didn't realize I was also in her daddy's bed, or she didn't care. Her little hand reaching out to touch my shoulder clued me in that it was option two.

My eyes still felt puffy from all the crying the day before. The stone in my chest remained, but it was slightly lighter thanks to James. He was a great listener, and hearing him talk about his own family struggles helped put mine into perspective. I was feeling more confident that my mom, sister, and I could come back from this mess, somehow.

I was starting to drift off when a little foot hit against my leg, hard. How could someone so small have such a strong kick? I moved away to give her room but somehow Harper still managed to reach me with another roundhouse kick. I sighed.

It was going to be a long night.

Even though James had blackout shades on the massive windows, the morning sun managed to seep in through the cracks. That, plus the fact that I hadn't been able to fall into a deep sleep thanks to our little visitor meant I was wide awake

at the literal crack of dawn. I glanced over at Harper, and it was as if the weight of my gaze was enough to rouse her. Her eyelids fluttered open.

She made a little grouchy noise when she saw me watching her.

“What?” I whispered.

“I’m *hungry*,” she pouted.

“Well, good morning to you too,” I laughed softly.

“I want to get up,” she said in a too-loud voice.

“Shh, okay, okay, let’s go.”

Harper stood up and padded to the end of the bed then dropped to the ground with a thump. I glanced back at James and saw that he hadn’t moved. When he slept, he *slept*. I tried not to be jealous.

I took Harper’s hand and headed downstairs with her.

“You know Bernardo isn’t here yet, so I’ll have to fix something for you,” I cautioned.

Her bottom lip thrust out. “No.”

Someone had clearly gotten up on the wrong side of the bed.

“Why not? I can make you delicious scrambled eggs!”

“I hate eggs.”

“Harper, that’s not a nice thing to say. You can say you don’t prefer eggs, or you’d like something else, but don’t say ‘hate,’ okay? And I know for a fact that you *do* like eggs because I’ve seen you eat omelets.”

“Omelets aren’t eggs,” she said in a haughty voice, and I tried not to laugh.

“Oh really? So what are they?”

I pushed the swinging service door entrance into the kitchen.

“Omelets are omelets,” she said, dragging her feet.

I opted not to try to win a debate with the grumpy four-year-old.

“Well, I don’t know how to make an egg-free omelet, so let’s figure something else out. How about cereal?”

Harper shrugged and climbed on the little stepstool next to the marble counter that was her designated kitchen spot.

“Yes, I think cereal sounds perfect,” I answered myself. “But now I have to find it!”

I started opening and closing cupboards hoping Harper would pipe up and tell me where to look, but she was zoned out, sitting on the counter. I wasn’t worried about it. We’d had a great run of even moods lately, so we were bound to have a grumpy start at some point. It was typical behavior, all part of the growing process.

“Is the cereal in *here*?” I asked dramatically, wrenching the giant refrigerator open.

“Nooo,” Harper said disdainfully. “Not in there.”

I peered inside and saw a tray of unbaked sticky buns Bernardo must have left for today’s breakfast.

“I think I found something even better than cereal,” I said as I pulled out the tray to show her.

“Yum!” She brightened. “Can you cook them?”

“You bet I can.”

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through a few sticky bun recipes to find average temperature and bake times and turned the oven on.

“Now for coffee. Harp, how many cups will you have this morning? Two? Three?”

I expected her to laugh at my silliness, but she frowned. “No, I don’t drink coffee! *Juice!*”

I stopped in my tracks. “Hey, hey, I understand you aren’t feeling like yourself this morning, but that’s no excuse for being rude. Please try again.”

Harper heaved a sigh like a teenager in training. “May I have juice *please*?”

“Better, and yes you may. Would you like to sit at the table and color while the rolls are baking?”

She nodded.

“Okay, run to the classroom and grab the ones you want while I make coffee for everyone but you.”

I checked the time on my phone as Harper stomped out of the kitchen and down the hall. Bernardo wasn't due to show up for another hour, and Vida was probably already bustling around the laundry room. I was happy James had been able to sleep through the restless night. He needed it.

It took me a few minutes to figure out the complicated coffee machine since it looked like it needed to be run by a trained barista. Or possibly a neurosurgeon. Harper settled at the table with her coloring books and crayons while I pushed various buttons on the thing until the rumbling of brewing started.

It was going to be a long day.

“Something smells amazing,” James said, strolling into the kitchen wearing pajama bottoms and a half-opened robe that showed off his torso. I had to glance away to keep from staring at it.

“Cinnamon rolls are in the oven,” I said, widening my eyes and nodding toward where Harper was coloring.

He glanced at his daughter and seemed to notice she hadn't even raised her head up to greet him. “Um, hello over there? Good morning?”

She paused. “Hi Daddy. I'm working right now.”

“Ah, okay,” he said sagely. “I understand. Important coloring deadline on the horizon?”

“Yes, I have to finish this unicorn before the cinnamon rolls are done.”

James strolled over to look at the page she was working on. “Huh, you're cutting it close, kid. Better get going on that tail.”

“*Daddy*,” Harper whined. “Don’t. Stop looking.” She covered the page with her hands. “Go away.”

James grimaced and pretended to run away from her. He walked over to where I was putting sugar in my coffee and kissed my cheek. I peeked at Harper, but she was too engrossed in coloring to notice.

“Yikes,” he whispered.

“Yup. Tread lightly today.”

The mood in the room lightened once the warm rolls hit the table. Harper finally managed to engage with us more normally, though she still seemed a little irritable. I watched her carefully as we ate, trying to determine what had set her off. Usually, I could tell what triggered Harper, but as far as I could tell, this morning’s bad attitude was a case of what I called unexplained grumbles.

James had left his phone on the counter behind us to keep from looking at it...but then his “red-alert” security ringtone sounded. We exchanged nervous glances.

“Excuse me ladies,” he said, pushing away from the table, clearly trying to keep his expression neutral. He answered. “Miguel, what’s up? Mm-hmm. No, I have no record of that.” Pause. “I absolutely didn’t okay it. We’re eating breakfast right now.” Another pause. “Please handle it for me and let them know I’ll be in touch to schedule something at a more reasonable hour.”

He glanced at me after he hung up, his face stormy.

“What’s up?” I asked, pretending to keep it light.

“Miguel wanted me to know that the D-R-E-S-H-E-R-S are at the gate and are R-E-F-U-S-I-N-G to go unless they get an audience.” He tilted his head toward Harper.

“Seriously? This early?” I couldn’t believe their presumption, grandparents or not. “And without a scheduled appointment? Oh no, that’s not going to fly.”

“Miguel will handle it. He’s excellent at de-escalation.” James reached for the tray of cinnamon rolls. “Okay, who wants

seconds?”

Harper shook her head and kept coloring.

“More for me, I guess,” James said, stuffing one into his mouth.

We chatted about nothing, but I could tell the fact that Mitch and Maureen had shown up unannounced was still bothering him. The second red-alert ring happened a few minutes later, making us both jump.

“Hey Miguel,” James barked, frowning. “You’re kidding me. Okay, okay, give me fifteen minutes and I’ll get back to you.”

“The issue remains,” James said after he’d hung up, rubbing his forehead. “And I can’t afford to have them causing a scene. What do you think is best in this scenario? Can we make it happen quickly and be done with it? What’s your professional opinion?”

He was talking around the subject so as not to upset Harper. I glanced at her and noticed she was holding a red crayon in her fist, making a jagged scribble around the unicorn.

“It’s not ideal, especially given the ‘temperature’ this morning. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I feel like I have no choice. Especially with the hearing coming up.” I could hear barely hidden fury in his voice. “Would it cause backsliding if we made it happen? Quickly, in and out?”

I sighed. “If you and I can stay close for the duration we could probably get through it. I have some behavioral redirects that can help, too.”

He nodded, his mouth in a tight line. “Okay then. Can I tell...” he gestured to Harper.

“Gently, yes. Make it no big deal. W-A-I-T a bit before introducing the concept though, okay? So there’s no connection between discussions.”

James nodded again and then started talking about the unicorn Harper was coloring. A few minutes later, he steered the conversation in a new direction.

“You know who might like to see that picture?” he asked gently. “Your grandpa and grandma. I bet they’d even like to color with you!”

James glanced at me and I nodded, urging him on. Harper shrugged and kept coloring.

“You know what? They stopped by for a visit this morning. They want to see you! I’m going to go get changed and then I’ll bring them in to sit with us for a little bit. How does that sound?”

Harper paused then and started scribbling harder. I decided to step in.

“Harp, your dad and I will be right there with you. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, okay? I promise you’ll be okay.”

She nodded, still looking down at the page.

“Why don’t you and I change out of our pajamas, then we can go outside on the patio and wait for them,” I said.

Harper slid off her chair and walked to the back stairs without a word.

“Shit,” James exclaimed the second the door swung closed behind her. “I’m *livid* about this! How dare they?”

“I know, I know,” I said, trying to calm him. “They’re trying to catch you off guard. We’ll be fine. Give them a clear time limit, say we had plans which is why they need to *schedule* visits, and then we’ll be done. Thirty minutes max.”

James shook his head angrily. “It’s going to be very hard to be civil to them.”

“You have to...for her sake.” I reached out and gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “I’m going to help Harp dress, and we’ll meet you outside. It’s going to be okay, I’ll be your buffer.”

He finally looked up at me and his expression softened. “I’m going to need it.”

“Thirty minutes and we’re done.” I leaned down and kissed him. “Now go put some clothes on before we make them wait

even longer.”

JAMES

How I hated their fake smiles.

These people were *suing* me and here they were, in *my* house, trying to pretend like everything was fine. Thank God for Kaitlyn, who ran interference for me while trying to keep Harper on steady ground.

Not that it was helping.

My daughter could barely look at Mitch and Maureen let alone give them the hugs they were all but demanding from her. She was curled up on a patio chair a few feet away from where the rest of us had gathered, staring at the hem of her dress. I hated seeing her like this. It brought me back to the initial days after her kidnapping, when she was shut down and withdrawn from the world. Had she had a nightmare about it? Was that what was behind her mood this morning? I wanted to ask—but like hell was I going to get into it in front of the Dreshers.

“Harper honey, would you like me to buy you a present?” Maureen asked in a saccharine voice. “Maybe we can stop at a toy store? Do you like dolls, honey?” She looked like she was headed for a three-mimosa brunch. She’d clearly spent time getting ready, in a flowy cheetah print dress with her yellow-blond hair in a poofy ponytail.

“Harper, don’t you want to come over here and give your Grandpa Mitch a big hug?” he asked, spreading his arms wide. He was a giant of a man, not as tall as me but definitely wider, in a straw Panama hat and orange golf shirt. “It would make me really happy to get a hug from you.”

“Please don’t hinge your emotional state on touch that forces her out of her comfort zone,” Kaitlyn scolded in a low voice, leaning closer to that asshole so only he could hear. “That leads to guilt. Physical contact is her decision.”

I wanted to laugh when I saw Mitch’s shocked expression. Score one for Kaitlyn.

Maureen sniffed. “When we were little, we knew to respect our elders. I guess things are different now.”

“And when you were little, you probably weren’t told that you were allowed to say ‘no’ to things that made you uncomfortable, like hugs from adults you barely knew, which I’m guessing led to some boundaries being crossed,” Kaitlyn responded quietly.

Maureen shifted uncomfortably as a look of sadness flitted across her face. Kaitlyn had clearly hit a nerve.

“Hey Harper, how about some ice cream?” Mitch boomed in an overly friendly voice. “It’s never too early for ice cream, right?”

We all turned to watch Harper give an almost imperceptible head shake. I could read her like a book, and I could already tell that the visit wasn’t going to get any better.

“I know what we can do,” Maureen said. “Let’s go for a walk on the beach. We can look for shells!”

Another head shake.

I glanced at Kaitlyn and could tell she was as displeased as I was at how pushy Maureen was being, but she was in professional mode, trying to navigate the choppy waters of the unscheduled visit.

“Harper,” Kaitlyn said in a soothing voice. For the first time since the Dreshers arrived, my daughter actually looked at the person addressing her. “We were having a nice time coloring this morning. Would you like to color now?”

“No thank you.”

It was a tiny voice, the scared tremor of the old Harper. A regression that sent my stress levels skyrocketing. Things were

going worse than I'd imagined, especially considering all of the progress Harper had been making up to this point.

That was it, I'd had enough. "I think that's enough visiting. We let you see her and she's clearly uninterested in anything beyond that, so I think it's time for you to go. We'll give it some time and maybe try to schedule something in the future, but we're done for today."

Maureen turned to me with her mouth hanging open. "*Excuse me? You're throwing us out? We're her grandparents!*"

Mitch joined the charge, focusing on my daughter. "Harper, look at me! Stop pouting over there and tell us what you want to do. We've given you a bunch of options, so pick something already!"

She crumpled even further into the corner of the chair, pulling a pillow onto her lap and hiding behind it.

Kaitlyn said, "Excuse me, that's an unacceptable—"

"Absolutely not!" I shouted over her, rising to my feet. "You will not speak to my daughter like that!"

Mitch jumped up. "And you're not going to stop us from seeing our granddaughter!"

"Guys, guys, *enough*," Kaitlyn said, moving in between us with her hands out to put distance between us. "This is completely inappropriate and not at all helpful."

"You're right," I fumed. "Mitch, Maureen, please come to my office."

"No, sir. Absolutely not," Maureen spat back at me, shooting me a superior look. "We came here to see Harper, not the man keeping her from us!"

"If you'd open your eyes, you'd see that she doesn't want to be with you," I shouted, losing my cool completely. "Look at her, she's petrified of you!"

We all turned to look at the chair and discovered that my daughter had disappeared.

"Harper?" Kaitlyn called out. "Where are you?"

The air went still as we all turned in circles, trying to see where she'd run off to.

"Harper, it's okay honey," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "You don't have to go anywhere. You can stay with us, they're leaving now."

Mitch made an exasperated noise as he strode around the patio looking behind the lounge chairs.

"Harper! Don't play games like this," Maureen chastised, looking more angry than concerned about my daughter's whereabouts. "It's not nice. We don't like it when you act like this, young lady!"

"Knock it off," I growled at her. "You're going to scare her even more."

"Hey, Harper, let's go up to your room and play for a little while," Kaitlyn said in a soothing voice. "Just you and me. No one else."

I knew of all of the options that had been given, that was most likely to be the one my daughter truly wanted. She needed to decompress after this mess of a morning. I was furious at myself for letting them in despite knowing Harper wasn't in the right headspace, and even angrier at them for demanding we give in to them.

"I'm going to look down by the dock," Kaitlyn said, her expression pinched. I could tell she was struggling to maintain a calm demeanor, which stressed me out even more. Kaitlyn was always even-keeled, and the fact that she was nervous meant Harper's behavior was worthy of concern.

"Harper!" Mitch roared, his face red. "Get back here *now*! This isn't funny."

The tone of his voice broke me, and it took everything in my power not to haul back and punch him in the jaw. I stormed over and stopped inches from his face, close enough to see the fear in his eyes.

"Out," I growled, pointing toward the door. "Get the fuck out of my house. *Now*."

Mitch stumbled backward. “I...I...”

“You too,” I rasped at Maureen. “Leave.”

“But we’re helping,” she finally managed, gesturing around herself. “We need to find our granddaughter.”

“The only thing you need to do is leave—and I’m not asking again.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Miguel. He answered in one ring. “The Dreshers need to be escorted off the premises. Get Frank and make it happen.”

Mitch and Maureen were stumbling around the patio in shock as I headed inside the house. I was confident that thanks to my team they’d be gone within minutes. I had no intention of sticking around to watch it happen. My sole focus was finding Harper.

It wasn’t the first time she’d disappeared during a time of stress. It was her go-to strategy when she was scared or upset in the weeks after her return. She hadn’t done it in ages, since before Kaitlyn arrived. My heart pounded as I realized Harper was still in a precarious place despite the progress she’d been making. I hated that the Dreshers contributed to her regression. There was no way I was ever letting them near her again.

“Harp, where are you?” My voice echoed into the silence of the foyer.

Vida came rushing from the kitchen wearing a frown. “Is everything okay? I heard yelling outside.”

“The Dreshers were here and they upset Harper, so now she’s hiding,” I explained. Vida and I had joined forces to find my daughter many times.

She gave me a nod. “Okay. I’ll look too. Don’t worry, we’ll find her. We always do.”

Harper had a few go-to spots, so I started with them. First, the theater room. The resourceful little girl had figured out how to turn on the projector, something I could barely figure out, and a few times I’d found her watching cartoons in the dark. I peeked my head in, but the cavernous room was silent.

“Harp, you in here?”

Nothing.

She also liked to hide in the storage room where we kept the holiday decorations. Something about being surrounded by smiling pumpkins and Christmas elves seemed to bring her comfort. It was in a far-off wing, one we rarely visited, but I had to check it, just to be sure. I cracked the door and looked in, but I could tell by the stillness she wasn't in there either.

I continued my hunt feeling more and more nervous as time ticked on. Where was she hiding? And was she safe? The fact that Kaitlyn had opted to look down by the water first sent a chill through me. Could Harper have slipped in? I picked up my pace.

Then it hit me. *Kaitlyn*. She was the one new variable since Harper's last episode. And she was a source of comfort for my daughter. Of course! I ran up the stairs to her room.

I ignored the fact that I was basically trespassing into Kaitlyn's private space and barged in.

"Harper? Honey are you in here?"

I noticed the closet door was open, and something rustling inside.

"Daddy?"

I rushed to the closet and wrenched it open as relief spread through my body. Harper was curled up on the floor with one of Kaitlyn's sweatshirts wrapped around her shoulders. She looked up at me, her eyes haunted.

"I don't want to see them anymore," she whispered. "Please don't make me."

I dropped to my knees and pulled her to me. "Sweetheart, no, you don't have to. I'm so sorry you were scared."

I rocked her back and forth as she clung to me, her breathing shallow.

"It won't happen again, you're safe," I cooed, kissing her soft hair.

It was at that moment when I realized just how far I'd have to go to make sure that was true.

KAITLYN

I woke up feeling like I hadn't slept at all.

It was after nine. I'd gone to bed early—we all had, exhausted from trudging through the day after Harper's bad morning—and given how long I'd slept I should've been ready to conquer the day, but all I wanted to do was roll over and close my eyes again. It was my day off, so staying in bed was a possibility.

Everything I'd been facing was taking a toll. The fight with Cassie. The drama with Mitch and Maureen. Trying to keep Harper in a positive headspace despite the recent backsliding. The hearing on the horizon.

And then there was the James situation. We were in a good place but still...fall was speeding toward us, which meant the end of my tenure. What then?

A soft knock on my door startled me out of my thoughts.

"Come in?"

"Are you decent? I hope not."

James stepped in carrying a tray loaded down with covered plates.

"What is this?" I asked, laughing as he struggled to keep the thing level.

"Breakfast in bed."

"Are you kidding? Seriously?" I scooted over and patted the empty space next to me. "Get over here!"

James deposited the tray in front of me, and I was even more impressed that he managed to deliver the coffee and mimosa without spilling them. He looked like the world's most overqualified waiter, already dressed and gorgeous in a slim pink button-down and black pants. I raked my eyes down his body, suddenly hungry for something other than breakfast.

He sat on the edge of the bed, seemingly unaware of what he was doing to me.

“Why, though? What’s the occasion?” I asked as I surveyed the tray.

He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Because you deserve a little pampering. You’ve had a rough go lately, and I wanted to help you relax.”

“Where’s Harp?” Even though it was my day off, she was always top of mind for me.

“Grandy day,” he explained. “They’ll be down by the pool till sundown.”

“And what do we have here?” I asked, pointing to the tray.

“Crème brûlée French toast,” James said, pulling off a cover with a flourish. “Fresh fruit, juice, coffee, and mimosas. I made it all myself.”

“You did not,” I laughed.

“Caught me,” he said with a wink. “But I did ask Bernardo for this specific menu, so that counts, right?”

“Absolutely. Excellent planning.”

James stood up. “It’s your day off, so I’m going to leave you to it...”

I frowned at him. “There’s enough food here for five people, there’s no way you’re leaving. Get in this bed!”

“Yes ma’am!” He laughed and saluted then lowered himself next to me.

The sensation of his leg pressed against mine sent a zing through me. Suddenly, all the stress of the past few days evaporated, and the only thing I could focus on was how much

I wanted him. Making love to James would allow me to forget everything else, at least for a little while. I glanced at him through my lashes, hoping my come-hither expression was obvious.

“I know that look and I’m not falling for it,” he chuckled. “Eat. Maybe we can work it off afterward.” James picked up a fork and cut into the French toast, then held it in front of me. “Open up.”

“You’re going to *feed* me too?”

“I am. Now be a good girl and open that pretty mouth for me.”

The double entendre wasn’t lost on me. I gave into the decadence of the billionaire feeding me breakfast, trying to tempt him by wrapping my lips around the fork and then licking the syrup from it, never breaking off eye contact.

“Mmm,” I moaned lasciviously. “It tastes *so* good.”

“Oh yeah?” James shifted a little. “How good?”

“I want to lick up every last drop.” I grabbed his hand and brought the fork back to my mouth then dragged my tongue up the tines. I was almost embarrassed at how blatant I was being. But not enough to stop.

“Maybe...maybe I should try some?” he asked in a strained voice.

I glanced down at his lap and saw the telltale bulge.

“Oh, definitely. Let me give you a taste.”

I reached over and dipped my fingertip in the syrup and cream pooled on the plate then brought it up to his lips. I’d intended to tease him with it, but James grabbed my hand then took my finger into his mouth, curling his tongue around and slowly dragging it out.

“You’re right,” he said in a low voice. “I think I need more of that.” He moved the tray to a nearby dresser then climbed back on the bed and lowered himself on top of me.

I reached down between his legs, but he grabbed my wrist.

“I said *I* need more.”

He dropped his mouth to mine and gave me a kiss that left me breathless, then pulled back.

“Just a little taste of sweetness,” he said, planting a kiss on my neck, then my collarbone, between my breasts, and after pushing up my tank top, on my belly. He tugged at my panties and kept kissing lower, until nothing else mattered but what he was doing to me with his tongue.



The high of our lovemaking lasted for a little while after James left for work...but it ended up fading, and I found myself back in the blue mood I'd been in when I woke up. I decided the only option was to run through it, literally. I changed into a t-shirt and shorts, shoved my hair in a haphazard ponytail, laced up my sneakers, and got ready for an epic sweat session.

I wasn't planning on checking Instagram because I usually got stuck scrolling for way too long, but my music wasn't loading properly so I took a quick detour to the app and then promptly regretted it. The first photo in my feed was of a group of smiling women with their arms draped around Cassie titled, “impromptu bridal party brunch.” I was supposed to be there, right by her side. I studied my sister's face for any trace of sadness, any hint that she missed me, but she was glowing, as if she couldn't care less that I wasn't by her side.

God, how it hurt.

The only saving grace, aside from James and Harper, was the fact that my mom and I had been talking more. I was still in shock at what a good listener she'd become, and how she tried to offer me advice, about Cassie as well as my relationship with James. Not that she was necessarily a good role model in that department, but still. She seemed to love hearing about our time in Key West, and the magical night out in Chicago. She went as far as to remind me that we shared the same shoe size and laughed about wanting to borrow the Armani pumps James had bought for me. I'd promised they were hers to use if she ever had an Armani-worthy occasion.

My mood flipped from melancholy to angry when my music app kept malfunctioning. I couldn't run without it, so I opted to speedwalk on the trail as I tried to figure it out. I finally came to a stop under the shade of a tree and let out a frustrated yell, ready to throw my phone on the ground.

"Sounds like someone needs to run off a bad mood."

Lou. The last person I wanted to see. It was insane how we always managed to run into one another no matter when I started my workout. I'd enjoyed his company when I arrived, but now it felt intrusive to keep seeing him. I was in no mood to chit-chat, and for the first time, I didn't feel like playing nice.

"Hey Lou, I've only got time for a quick run, and I really need to focus," I lied, not even bothering to give him an apologetic smile. "I'm just trying to get my music working, then I have to get moving."

I took a few steps away from him to drive home the point that I didn't have time to talk.

"Hey, no problem. Understood. But you should know I'm sort of a tech genius. I bet I can fix it." He held his hand out.

I hesitated. I'd never felt comfortable surrendering my phone to anyone given how much confidential information was on it, but I *needed* to run, and the only way that could happen was if I could zone out to dance music.

"Okay, thanks," I said as I placed it in his palm. "But don't bother if fixing it is going to take a long time. Like I said, I need to get going."

"Don't you worry. Two minutes or less."

I felt a little bad as he got to work on it. Lou was a genuinely nice guy who'd been nothing but kind to me. It wasn't his fault I was in a crappy mood.

"Whoops, I'm almost up to three minutes; I think I'm losing my touch," James laughed as he tapped at my phone. "But I'm getting there."

"Hey, if you can't make it work, no prob—"

“Aaaand, finished! Your Beyoncé, madam,” Lou said, bowing as he handed my phone back.

I pushed “play,” and the sweet sounds of “Single Ladies” filled the air.

“No way! Lou, thank you so much. You saved the day.”

“It’s sort of what I do,” he said, winking at me. “So can we finally discuss the terms of payback?”

My stomach dropped. He probably felt like I owed him after fixing my phone. Maybe it wasn’t fair of me to be suspicious, but I didn’t like the look in his eyes.

“Next time,” I said, giving him a giant, fake smile and jogging backward a few steps. “Gotta run!”

“Don’t worry, it won’t take long,” he said, his demeanor changing from smiling guy to laser focused on me. “Let me take you to dinner. I’ve been dying to ask you since the first time we met.”

Damn, I thought we’d settled this before—that he’d understood I wasn’t interested in anything more than being friends. It looked like I was going to have to be clearer. I walked back to him.

“Lou, it’s been great getting to know you. You’ve been a good friend. But I have to be honest, that’s all I feel for you. I’m sorry, I hope you understand.”

His face fell then shifted to something that looked like anger. “Well, let me prove that we can be more than friends. One date and you’ll see.”

I felt myself getting annoyed that he wasn’t taking no for an answer. “Lou, I’m...I’m seeing someone. And I’m happy.”

“Really?” He made a disgusted noise. “Wish you’d told me that. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have wasted so much time with you.”

His reaction was like a slap. It took me a few seconds to compose myself enough to respond.

“Is that the way you think? Wasted time? Wow, and here I thought you were a good guy.”

“I *am* a good guy,” Lou sneered at me. “But I guess you’ll never know. Later, kid.”

He turned abruptly and jogged off, leaving me to question how much worse my day was going to get.

JAMES

Typical Monday bullshit.

Weekends at my clubs always brought an avalanche of new problems for me to address, which made my Mondays a chore. Sure, I had tons of people working for me ready to step up and deal with the challenges, but there was a reason my clubs were successful, and that reason was me. Micromanager? Bosshole? Didn't matter what they called me—I wasn't about to change the way I did things.

I was going over the invoicing my accountant had sent me when my phone pinged with the Google news alert I'd set up for my name. As much as I hated monitoring what the world said about me, I had no choice. Damage control was a necessary evil in my life.

I grabbed my phone expecting to see something about a fight at one of my clubs. I nearly dropped it when I saw the headline.

Billionaire's Daughter Mental Health Diagnosis: See the Reason She Stays Inside!

I banged my desk with a fist and let out an unchecked roar. Nausea rolled through me and I clenched my gut, taking slow, deep breaths. This wasn't happening. Not now.

Harper had been the subject of a bunch of articles post-kidnapping, which was to be expected, but thankfully the news cycle had pivoted back to me after a few weeks. If I had to be the sacrificial lamb to preserve my daughter's privacy, then so

be it. They could write bullshit stories about me all they wanted, just leave the child out of it.

I clicked through the list of news pieces that mentioned Harper. The outlet that had broken the story used the sensationalistic headline, but the story was being picked up all over, even by reputable sources, who took the angle of “thoughtful” pieces about childhood agoraphobia. I was so angry I could barely read through the original piece.

But then I saw the line that sent my fury to another level.

The article called the quote “a source close to the Morris family,” but I could tell right away it was part of a text message Kaitlyn had sent me during her first weeks working with Harper. It said, “Harper shows almost no interest in leaving the property. She seems frightened all the time.”

I remembered it word-for-word because the grief I’d felt after receiving that text was a knife in my heart. It was acknowledgment my daughter was suffering, and I’d been unable to help her.

The pieces snapped together as I realized everything could be traced back to Kaitlyn. She was the anonymous source that had leaked Harper’s story—and everything else—to the press!

I pounded my desk again. How? How could someone I trusted, hell, someone I *loved*, not to mention someone who was bound by confidentiality laws, have turned on me in this way? How much money did it take to get her to hand over the details of my private life? To sell out my daughter, for fuck’s sake?

I refused to admit I was brokenhearted. No, I was betrayed, but *not* hurt and I planned to fix that right now.

Kaitlyn Thorn needed to pay for what she’d done to my family.

I stormed down to the library, struggling to hide my anger behind my usual ice-cold mask before I got there so Harper wouldn’t pick up on it. My daughter’s excited voice carried down the hallway forcing me to pause before I walked in. I squeezed my eyes shut. What the hell was going on? How did any of this make sense? Harper was finally blossoming again,

and the person who was helping her grow was the same one who'd betrayed her? I was furious about what Kaitlyn had done to me but devastated about what she was about to do to Harper.

The laughter. The two of them giggling so hard that part of me wished I could be in on the joke. How long would it be before I heard that unfettered joy from my daughter again? I'd seen the other applicants for Kaitlyn's position, and no one came close to her qualifications. Until *this*, I had been convinced there was no one better for the position. It had almost made me believe in fate, because Kaitlyn seemed like she'd been made for us.

Money. She'd blown it all to hell over *money*. I couldn't understand it. I was paying her an incredible wage, and unlike Emily, I knew she didn't have a gambling addiction—the background check had been *much* more thorough this time around. So what could she have needed the money for? What would be so important it would be worth betraying our trust? It was impossible for me to make sense of it.

“Hey!” Kaitlyn said brightly when I walked into the room. The sun was shining on the two of them, making their smiles look that much bigger. “Guess who just added three new locations to her ‘want to go’ list?”

Harper wiggled in her chair and giggled behind her hand.

“Is that a fact?” I asked in an even voice, managing to smile back at my daughter. “That's great Harp!” I refocused on Kaitlyn and felt my smile disappear. “I need to speak to you in my office. Now.”

It wasn't the first time I'd made the order, so Kaitlyn's little nod didn't betray any sort of concern.

“Okay, let me set Harper up with her next workbook exercise, and I'll meet you there.”

I couldn't stop my hands from curling into fists as I stormed back to wait for her. Five minutes later, she knocked on the door and pushed it open at the same time.

“Hey, everything okay? You seem upset. Are Mitch and Maureen at it again?”

I handed her my phone. “Read it.”

Kaitlyn gave me a questioning look as she took it from me then started scanning the article.

“Wait...how did they...” she said as she read through it. “Who...”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I snarled at her. “I know it was you.”

Her eyes went wide with shock, and she inhaled sharply. “What are you saying? Do you actually think I’m responsible for this leak?”

“They quoted your text messages—word-for-word. How else would they get access?” I watched her expression and had to admit she was a great actress. She managed to look convincingly shocked and devastated. “Was it worth it? Huh? Selling me out? Selling *us* out? How much did they pay you?”

Kaitlyn’s eyes filled with tears. “You’re serious,” she whispered. “You really think I did this.”

“Either you contacted the press directly or you’re supplying information to someone else. That’s why we didn’t find anything when security swept the house. Because it was coming from *you*.”

I wasn’t moved by the crocodile tears rolling down her cheeks. I wanted to kick myself for letting her get close to me, for believing I loved her. I’d broken my rules, and look what I’d gotten in return.

Scandal. Treachery. And worst of all, betrayal of the one person who meant more to me than anything else in life.

My daughter.

A flash of pain hit me at the thought of having to tell Harper that Kaitlyn was gone. She wouldn’t understand no matter what I said. We’d been priming her for the end of Kaitlyn’s stay with us by showing her the calendar and marking off days, but even with all that prep work, Harper seemed in

denial, constantly referring to things we'd all do together for Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, as if she fully expected Kaitlyn to be around for it all. The idea that Kaitlyn might leave *early* was something she'd be totally unprepared for. She adored Kaitlyn, and just a few minutes ago, I'd truly believed Kaitlyn loved her back.

I'd been foolish enough to think that maybe she'd fallen in love with me too.

"Get out."

My voice was flat. It was one of my gifts, my ability to bury my emotion when necessary.

Kaitlyn choked out an anguished cry, tossing my phone onto my desk like it was scalding her and walking toward me. "James...*no!* You have to believe that I'd never do anything to hurt you or Harper!"

I held up my hand to keep her from getting any closer. "There's no other explanation. The information in the article makes it clear that there's an internal leak, and you're the only one it could be."

"But I'm not your only staff!" she managed through her tears.

"Are you suggesting that it could be Vida? Or Bernardo? Miguel?" I barked out a laugh. "They've been with our family since before Harper was born. Try again."

Kaitlyn collapsed onto the chair by my desk and buried her head in her hands. I wasn't moved by the anguished sounds she made.

"You need to leave the premises by four o'clock today, which gives you exactly five hours," I said in a flat voice. I knew the contract inside out and backward. "If you're unable to pack all of your things by then, you can leave them and we'll have them sent to you. You are to have no further contact with Harper before exiting the premises. Miguel will shadow you as you prepare to go. Your wages for your work up to today will be paid in accordance to the contract you signed, but no severance will be given due to the nature of your termination."

Any legal action on your part will invoke clause two-point-seven, which means—”

“James!” she sobbed. “I have to talk to her, to tell her I’m leaving. You have no idea how damaging it would be for me to disappear without saying goodbye!”

“Damaging? You want to talk about damaging?” I hissed and pointed to my phone. “*That* is damaging. And worse, it’s a betrayal. I haven’t even begun to process the legal ramifications of what you did to us, Kaitlyn. I guess you forgot the confidentiality agreement you signed on your first day here.”

She rubbed her hand on her tear-stained face. “I didn’t even bother to read it because I knew it wouldn’t apply to me.”

“Well then, let me refresh your memory. Clause four states that an initial breach of confidentiality will result in a \$500,000 fine, and every subsequent violation will accrue at \$250,000 per. Based on what I saw in that hit piece, you’re going to owe the Morris family over a million dollars.”

“I don’t care about the money,” she jumped out of the chair and yelled at me. “I care about Harper. And *you!*”

The anguish on her face looked so real that for a moment I questioned if I could be wrong. But there was no one else that made sense. No one would have access to that text message thread except for Kaitlyn and me, and *I* certainly wasn’t the leak. It was Kaitlyn, there was no way for her to deny it.

I didn’t respond and wordlessly walked over to my phone, punching in the number I knew too well. “Miguel, Miss Thorn needs to be escorted from the premises. You’ll have to stay with her as she gathers her things.”

The pause before Miguel responded spoke volumes. “*Jefe...* are you serious?”

I glanced at Kaitlyn as she paced in circles near the open glass door.

The very spot she’d stood on the first day she arrived, when I’d put the pieces together about who she really was. And now it was happening for the second time.

“Incredibly. Make sure she doesn’t have any contact with Harper.”

This got another anguished cry from Kaitlyn.

“Yes sir.” His voice was quiet. He knew better than to question me.

“That’s all,” I said to Kaitlyn. “You should start packing.”

My even tone didn’t betray a hint of what I was feeling. Kaitlyn likely had no idea the turmoil rolling through me as I severed the tie between us for good.

“James, please...are you *sure* I can’t just give her one last hug?” Kaitlyn was begging through her tears. “I won’t say anything about leaving. Just let me tell her how special she is and that I believe in her?”

“Absolutely not. You won’t be getting anywhere near my daughter.”

Another wave of sobs, but no matter how convincing she sounded, there was no way I was going to change my mind.

It was over.

KAITLYN

I thought I'd run out of tears, but the sun was setting, and I kept finding new reasons to cry.

I was still in shock about what had happened. The way things ended. Miguel had been an angel as I quickly packed my things and left the Morris property. Of course his loyalties were with James, but the hug he gave me before I got into my car spoke volumes.

After I left, I'd driven off the island and then pulled over into the first parking lot I found so I could take a minute to just... *process* what had happened. And cry some more. Because I couldn't figure out why James would believe I'd betray him. The evidence definitely made me look bad because yes, the quote in the article was directly from my text, but I would never let anyone see our personal communications. It was a breach of ethics, trust, and everything I stood for.

But he clearly didn't believe me.

I couldn't go home to my apartment. Adam would probably agree to break our sub-lease agreement if I explained, but I just didn't have the energy for it, so instead, I'd finally found a motel, the crappy kind with a tiny pool by the parking lot. It was a depressing adjustment from what I'd just left—but that was fine. “Depressing” fit my mood to a tee. I had to take some time to figure out my next move, and being trapped in a hellhole of a motel seemed to be appropriate.

I needed to talk to someone. My go-to was always Cassie, but that option was out. Then it hit me: I could call my mom, like

any other normal person in need of advice and comfort. The post-rehab version of her was finally equipped to say all the right things, to give the comfort I'd craved from my mom all my life. We'd already Facetimed a few times, so I dialed her before I could think twice about it.

As my camera turned on, I saw how awful I looked. Puffy eyes, blotchy cheeks. I was a mess.

"Hey sweetheart," my mom sang as the call connected. Her camera flicked on, and she went from smiling broadly to frowning with concern. "Oh no, what's wrong? You look like you've been crying!"

I sniffled, trying to hold it together. "James... James fired me. He threw me out."

Just saying the words made me dissolve into tears again.

"Oh, oh, sweetheart," my mom cooed. "Don't cry! I wish I could be there to hug you."

I managed to pull myself together. "Thanks."

"Now tell me exactly what happened, and we'll figure out how to fix it, okay?"

"I wish it were that easy." I rubbed my hands on my face and swiped the tears away. "I don't think fixing it is possible."

"Explain what you did," Mom said in a gentle voice, which took some of the sting from her words. "Tell me everything."

"That's just it. I didn't do anything."

I launched into the painful story, trying not to break down each time I thought about how angry James looked and how I'd been unable to say goodbye to Harper.

"And you didn't sell the information?" my mom asked, looking shockingly dubious.

"No! I would never!"

"Okay, good, good. So what if you track down the person who wrote the article and find out who the source actually was? Then you can tell James, and everything will go back to how it was before."

“It’s not that easy, Mom. And I’m sure the writer won’t reveal their source.”

“Well, you have to do *something*, Kaitlyn,” she said in an accusing voice. “You need to figure out a way to get through to James.”

“He won’t listen. And you know what? That in itself shows things weren’t as great between us as I’d thought. I mean, when you’re in a relationship you need to hear each other, and work through rough patches. He barely even let me talk after he accused me. And the fact that he doesn’t believe me hurts, you know? It’s like he didn’t know me at all.”

“Well, who’s fault is that?”

“Wait...hold on...are you siding with *James*?” I asked, bewildered, certain I’d misunderstood.

“I can see his perspective is all I’m saying. He’s protecting his lifestyle. His investments. If he thinks he can’t trust you, then I have to think you might be to blame for that. Which is why you need to work hard to prove to him it wasn’t you. You need to win him back, Kaitlyn.”

I tried to spin what she was saying, but there was no way I could make it make sense. “Mom, first of all, he was protecting his *daughter*, not his investments, and second... there is no winning him back. We’re done.”

My mom went silent, and the kindly expression slipped from her face, replaced by the hard, narrowed eyes and downturned mouth that looked disturbingly familiar. *This* was my mother as I remembered her. Not the new, improved version but the original edition. “Well, you fucked up, girlie. Big time.”

“*What?*”

“You just threw out a lifetime of security,” she sneered at me through the screen. “Now who’s going to protect us?”

“Did you just say ‘us’?” I asked. I was still confused about what was happening...but I could feel my stomach sink as the pieces started to come together.

“Of course I did. Who the hell is going to want a washed-up barfly like me? *You* were our ticket to first class. And you were so close! I could almost taste the champagne. But you had to go and ruin everything.”

The more she said, the more I felt like I had to throw up.

“I’ve got bills, Kaitlyn!” she went on. “And there are things I want to do, like go to Vegas. How am I supposed to make that happen when—”

I pushed the “end call” button, feeling numb.

How could I have been so stupid? So blind? I’d wanted so badly to believe that my mom could change and that we could find our way to a real relationship, but I’d ignored the warning signs. Why *had* she only reached out to me and not to Cassie? Why did she always want to talk about James and the money he spent on me? The more I thought about it, the more I recognized dozens of red flags that I should have noticed all along. I waited for the wave of pain to pull me under but instead, I only felt...angry. And determined.

Determined to connect with the only person I could truly trust to have my back no matter what.



It was a risky move, but my life was currently a dumpster fire, so how much worse could it get?

I arranged the bouquet of sunflowers and pink box of cupcakes in my arms before knocking on Cassie’s door. This had the potential to go horribly wrong, but I wasn’t going to leave without begging my sister for forgiveness.

I heard her shuffle to the door and pause to look out the peephole. It seemed like an eternity passed before she finally opened the door.

“Well, this is a surprise,” she said in a flat voice, looking me up and down. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and she was wearing a blue striped apron. I knew what that meant. My sister was stress baking.

“Hi, Cassie. These are for you.” I handed over the flowers and box in quick succession, and she sputtered trying to hold it all. “Can I come in for a sec? There are a few things I have to tell you.”

She sighed. “Fine. Come in.”

I followed behind her, past the wrapped gifts that had multiplied since the last time I’d been over. It was another reminder of how close we were to the wedding day.

“I was just making stress brownies. Not like I need them now.” She held up the box of cupcakes.

“Can I help you make them?” I crossed my fingers.

“No.” She waited a beat. “But you can sit at the counter and watch me.”

Progress!

Cassie walked back into her tiny kitchen and went to the bowl on her counter next to cracked eggshells. “Care for some salmonella?” She grabbed a spoon from a drawer, dipped it in the brownie mixture, and handed it across the counter to me as I settled on a stool. “Come to think of it, you sort of deserve it.”

Despite the snide comments, I could tell she was softening toward me. If Cassie was still as angry as she’d been before, she wouldn’t have let me in the door.

“Thanks.” I licked the spoon clean. “Before I say anything else, I want you to know how sorry I am for inviting mom to the wedding. That was wrong. I should’ve talked to you first.”

She gave me a terse nod as she stirred the bowl but didn’t look up at me.

“And you were right about everything.”

Cassie finally met my eyes. “What did she do to you?” It came out in a hiss.

“I found out that the only reason she reached out...” I felt uncomfortable admitting it out loud. I cleared my throat. “She was after James’s money.”

Cassie's eyes narrowed and for a second she looked too much like our mother. "No."

I nodded. "She came right out and admitted it. It was disgusting."

"I hate to say I told you so..." Cassie shook her head.

"I know, I know. But I was hoping she really was different. I just had this vision of us being a real family. A normal family, you know? I hoped we could celebrate your big day together. I can't believe she had me convinced she'd changed."

"The woman knows how to run a con," Cassie said, frowning. "Even on her own daughters. Well, one of them at least." She shot me a look. "I hope you let James know he needs to watch out for her. Because I could see her getting desperate and showing up at his front gate, claiming you invited her."

And now it was time for the other difficult part of my visit. I'd managed to bottle up my sadness about James to focus on Cassie, but now I had to tell her.

"We broke up. Or, he broke up with me. Kicked me out, actually."

Her mouth fell open.

"Someone leaked insider information about Harper, and because some of it came from our text thread, he assumed it was me." My bottom lip trembled.

"Oh, Katie!" Her face fell. "I'm so sorry. Tell me what happened."

It took a few minutes before I could compose myself to talk, and when I finally managed to tell her everything, she seemed dumbfounded.

"So I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought I did," I finished with a shrug and teary smile.

"I mean...he really believes you would do that? Does he not know you at all?"

"I guess not. We never agreed to anything serious, so maybe I never moved out of fuck-buddy status in his mind."

Cassie squinted at me. “Is that what you really think?”

I shook my head. “No.”

And it was true. Despite how things had ended, when we were together it had felt so real. So meaningful. And I know he felt it too. So why did he throw everything away?

My sister was studying me, coming to conclusions without me even needing to open my mouth. “You loved him, didn’t you?”

It was jarring to hear it put so plainly. I’d never admitted it to myself, but I’d felt it. In my heart, in my bones. Yes, I loved James Morris. But when it came to saying it out loud, well, all I could manage was to nod.

“He’d have to be an idiot not to feel it.”

“Cassie,” I sighed. “It’s over. He’s not the kind of man to come crawling back, trust me.” I pointed to the box. “I need a cupcake while the brownies are baking, please.”

“You got it.” She slid it toward me then went to her cupboard. “Red wine goes with cupcakes, right?”

“Sounds perfect,” I mumbled with my mouth full of red velvet.

She turned around clutching the bottle to her chest. “I’ve missed you so damn much. You know that? None of this wedding bullshit has been fun without you. The girls are great, but they’re not *you*.”

“Cassie, don’t make me cry again,” I said, my voice cracking. “My eyes are so swollen already.”

She put the bottle down and strode across the room toward me with her arms outstretched. I walked to her, and we connected like two magnets coming together. After feeling so alone since James tossed me out, it was incredible getting a real, full-body hug again.

Cassie sniffled against my shoulder. “Sorry, I think I just got snot on you.”

“It’s okay,” I laughed through my tears. “I love everything about you, even your snot.”

When we finally pulled apart, Cassie grabbed my face in her hand and fixed her eyes on mine. “Will you be my MOH, please? I’m begging you.”

“Of course,” I laughed as relief flowed through me. “I’ve been waiting for you to ask!”

We hugged again. “No one gets me like you.”

“I’m your big sister, it’s sort of my job.”

Cassie finally pushed away from me. “No, your job is convincing our wedding planner that vanilla is the new pineapple upside-down cake.”

We laughed, and for a little while, I forgot about the fact that the rest of my life was still a shambles.

JAMES

“**Y**ou don’t do it like Kaitlyn,” Harper said in a glum voice. She crossed her arms on the table then plopped her head down on top of them.

I hated to admit my daughter was right. I couldn’t measure up to Kaitlyn’s skill and competence—but it wasn’t for lack of trying. I had taken some time off after Kaitlyn left to try to keep life stable and work with Harper while my team went back to the drawing board to find a replacement for her. My mom and I were tag-teaming efforts, and even though I never saw my sister, I know that my mom had Jess helping out as well.

Kaitlyn had compiled a thorough transition document, along with daily plans and milestones to hit, but I wasn’t able to capture the joy of learning she shared with my daughter. It didn’t help that Harper and I were both mourning the loss of Kaitlyn in our own ways.

There was a void in the house. A bleakness that we all refused to talk about. And it killed me that no matter how twisted up I felt about Kaitlyn’s betrayal, poor Harper was dealing with sadness and confusion about her sudden departure.

“Are you sure she can’t come back, Daddy?” Harper asked.

I sighed. “I’m sure. She had other work she needed to do.” I’d explained Kaitlyn’s absence by making vague references to “work,” something that Harper knew firsthand could easily ruin plans.

“Can I see her to say goodbye? I want to hug her one last time.”

Damn, it hurt to see my daughter in pain.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart. Now let’s get back to your workbook, okay?”

She pouted at me. “Can we please be done, Daddy? I’m tired.”

It was obvious just by looking at her. Harper hadn’t been sleeping well and had migrated back to my bed a few nights a week.

“Sure. Let’s clean up.”

“Can we watch *The Wizard of Oz*?”

I chuckled. “Oz. Of course we can.”

We’d been watching the movie basically on repeat since Kaitlyn left. I assumed it was a way for Harper to feel close to her. Once we’d packed up for the day, Harper and I headed for the theater room. My phone pinging with an alert from Miguel stopped me.

“Hey, Harp,” I said, scanning it quickly, “Grandy is here. Maybe we should wait for her to watch the movie too?”

“Grandy!” She raced back to the front door.

The more distractions we had, the better we both felt. I still hadn’t worked through whatever I was feeling about what Kaitlyn had done to us. The ache in my heart was at odds with the anger I felt. There were moments when I doubted that she was capable of the betrayal, but I was hard pressed to come up with another explanation for it.

My fury was fading to sadness, and it was a headspace I didn’t like. So I kept busy.

“James!” My mom’s voice echoed through the house.

I walked into the foyer and stopped when I saw Jess in tow.

“Yes, I’m forcing the issue,” she said, pointing at my sister as she explained. “I forced her to come, just like I’m going to

force the two of you to sit down and talk through this ridiculousness.”

Jessica was hovering near the door like she was about to make a run for it, though it wouldn't be easy for her given she was dressed in a tailored navy business suit and heels.

Harper grabbed my mom's hand and started pulling her. “*Wizard of Oz!* C'mon, let's go, Grandy!”

“Is that approved by your daddy, or is there a lesson you need to finish first?” Mom glanced at me.

“It's fine. We've been taking it easy lately.”

“Well then, off we go,” she said, shooting a look between me and Jess. “Now, you two figure this out then come join us, but not a moment before!”

Once their chatter faded down the hall, it was just the two of us facing off in silence.

“I didn't want to come,” Jess crossed her arms and raised her chin defiantly.

I let out a long sigh. Damn, I was so tired of strife in my life. “Well, I'm glad you did. It's probably time for us to talk. Harper was starting to ask questions about why you weren't visiting, and it's tough enough dealing with...other issues.”

“Yeah, we should probably talk about that too,” she said in a softer voice. “Anyway, I brought my latest projections if you're interested. I now have proof that my idea is solid.”

God, not this again. But I knew I needed to at least hear her out. Otherwise, we'd never be able to get past this. “All right, let's head down to my office.”

I wanted to make it feel official for her, to show my sister that I was going to try to listen to her. Then maybe we could put this idea to bed once and for all.

We settled in the two chairs in front of my desk, so it wouldn't be quite so intimidating for Jess, even though I saw no traces of the nerves she'd had the last time she pitched me. But then again, she didn't really need me at this point. She'd gone out and done it on her own, which was ballsy as hell.

As upset as I was with her, I was a little impressed by her gumption.

“I’d like to lead with my Q1 projections,” she said, opening her tablet and scrolling to a spreadsheet. “I know this is your favorite part of any business transaction, and I’m confident you’re going to like what you see.”

I sat back and let Jess walk me through her presentation while trying to keep my face expressionless. To my surprise, everything from her market analysis to her executive team, to the resort wear launch they’d planned to lead with, was top notch. If she’d been a stranger pitching me, signing on would’ve been a no-brainer, despite my distaste for investing in haute couture.

This was what I could get behind. Hard numbers. Facts. Proof that what she’d put together was more than just another flight of fancy. It wasn’t just viable, it was going to soar. My sister had done the work and then some, and I was proud of her.

As I listened to her effortlessly discuss her business, it dawned on me that I’d been an absolute jerk to my sister. I’d been letting her history dictate her future. And that wasn’t fair.

“Any questions for me?” Jess asked.

I shook my head and I saw her face fall. “But I do have a few comments. I want to apologize for doubting you. I need to let go of the past and start appreciating who you’ve become. Because it’s damn impressive. *You’re* impressive.”

Her frown transformed into a wide smile. “Really?”

“Hell yes. You’re not the same party girl I bailed out a million years ago.”

She frowned at the reminder. “James... I think you forget it was just a moment in time. That’s not the sum total of me, as a person. And I would *never* go for a man like Lucas now that I’ve figured out who I am.”

I couldn’t help the growly sound I made at the mention of his name. “You know he was behind the leak, right?”

It had taken an entire cybersecurity team to pick up the trail that led directly to Lucas. They'd wanted to be sure there was no way he could talk his way out of the accusation, so they had combed through every file until they had irrefutable evidence against him.

She nodded. "Mom told me."

"My team can't figure out how he got in touch with Kaitlyn, but we know they were working together."

"You *know* it, or you're assuming it?" Jess was locked onto me now, studying me in that unnerving way of hers.

"Listen, I don't want to discuss it with you, okay?" I grabbed the tablet and started scrolling to try to redirect the conversation back to a topic I could handle.

"Nope, sorry, that was the other thing I wanted to talk about with you, and you're not getting out of it."

"What's left to say? Kaitlyn betrayed me, plain and simple. She's not who I thought she was."

Her face went hard. "James, come *on*. You had her vetted like she was applying for the CIA, do you really think you could've missed a character defect *that* glaring? Didn't you make her take, like, psych tests or something?"

"It was a personality profile," I scoffed. "And no vetting process is perfect."

"Okay, then let's talk about your gut. You never would've let her get so close to you if you sensed something was off about her."

I shrugged, not wanting to admit she was right.

"Have you ever considered that someone realized she could be a way in and hacked her? You did a security sweep, but did anyone check her phone to see if it had been compromised?"

The question hit me with a wallop. "Well, no."

"Exactly," she replied, warming to the topic. "And if the quote in the article came from your messages to each other, it's

completely possible that she was the victim of a hack. It happens to people all the time.”

I considered it and felt queasy. I'd been so angry with Kaitlyn, I'd been blind to reason. How could I have not considered that someone could've gotten to her phone? I'd seen her leave it unattended on the table a few times that night we were at Club Obsidian. Perhaps it had happened there?

“I need to connect with my people, to discuss the plausibility of this angle,” I said gruffly, fighting off the hurt, questioning feelings bubbling up inside of me. “Anyway, we're here to talk about you. Congrats on an excellent proposal. You're going to do amazing. And if it takes longer to get to profitability than you expected, just let me know and we can transfer some money from your trust fund to stay on top of your loan.”

I expected her to break into a smile again, but she still looked troubled. “James, you need to figure this stuff out, okay? I've never seen you and Harper happier than when Kaitlyn was here. The woman I knew wasn't capable of what you accused her of. And I know you know it too, deep down.”

I ignored the comment and stood up. “Let's go find Mom and Harper and tell her we're back to normal. Mom will be pleased her pushing worked.”

Jess huffed but didn't say anything else. I followed her out of my office, only to be stopped in my tracks by an emergency security text.

“They're in the theater room, you go ahead,” I said to Jess. “I have to deal with whatever this is.”

The text from Miguel was vague, only asking that I come down to the security outpost ASAP. As I walked down to the building, I imagined what, or who, I was about to face. The Dreshers again? A rogue alligator captured from the bay?

“*Jefe*,” Miguel met me outside the booth, the stress evident on his face. “We have a problem. It's Frank.”

I barely knew the new hire the security team had brought on. He'd been shadowing Miguel for a few months, learning the ropes so he could be a part of the security booth rotation in

addition to ground patrol. The man was surprisingly slight for someone who was supposed to be certified in personal defense, but then again, I knew judo masters who looked frail until you met them on the mat.

“What happened?”

“He’s behind the leak, I’m sure of it,” Miguel said in a quiet voice, looking around him. “He left his phone unlocked, and I happened to see a text come in from someone named Lucas, so of course alarm bells went off. I read it, and he was saying something about a payout, so I scrolled back and saw dozens of messages talking about the whereabouts of everyone in the house. He told Lucas when you and the others left town for Scott’s birthday party and a bunch of other times when you were going somewhere out of the ordinary. He definitely told Lucas about the CPS visits and when the Dreshers came. Most of the text, though, were about ‘K’ leaving the property, like ‘K heading out on north trail,’ and ‘K skipping morning run.’”

“Hold on, hold on... Frank was telling Lucas when Kaitlyn was running? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. So Kaitlyn *knew* Lucas and she didn’t say anything to me about meeting him? I mean, she knew I had a major problem with him...”

I clenched my fists, angry all over again at the thought of Kaitlyn spending time with him.

“*Jefe*, think about it... I doubt he would’ve used his real name, he’s too smart for that. She doesn’t seem like the type to read tabloids, so she would have had no reason to know what he looked like.”

I tried to make sense of what Miguel was telling me, getting angrier by the second as everything snapped into focus.

“Where is Frank now?”

“I sent him out on a bullshit errand so I could talk to you. He’ll probably be back in fifteen minutes. How do you want to handle this?”

“Police, obviously,” I answered, pacing. “But I want to talk to him first. Do you think he’s a flight risk if I confront him?”

Miguel shook his head and jangled a keychain. “Not without these. I sent him out in the golf cart, and you and I could outrun that thing if we had to.”

I nodded. Despite the fury coursing through me, for the first time, I also felt something else. Something I hadn’t been lucky enough to feel since the day Kaitlyn walked out the door.

Hope.

KAITLYN

“Do you swear it’s not too much?” Cassie asked me, smoothing the back of her hair as she looked in the mirror in her bridal suite.

“You look *perfect*,” I assured her, tucking one of the sparkly combs deeper into her updo. “The most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

She exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment. “Why am I so nervous? I mean, I’ve wanted to marry Scott since the day I met him. What’s with these stupid butterflies in here?” She tapped her hands against her stomach.

“Well, you’ve got a room full of people getting ready to stare at you and take pictures of you for the next three hours, a wedding planner who’s acting like an air traffic controller, and you haven’t eaten anything but toast today. Butterflies make sense.”

Cassie pushed back from the mirror and faced me. “Last time I’m asking. Good, right?” She gestured down the front of her body.

Even though she looked like a dream, I humored her and pretended to consider the question, slowly trailing my eyes down the dress. It was a simple, slim ivory gown without any embellishments except for the wide straps, which were made of illusion netting covered with delicate pearls and crystals that shimmered when she moved. Her hair was twisted in a chignon, set with a small, sparkly comb on either side of it that would anchor her simple veil.

“Absolutely amazing.”

I swooped her into a hug, trying to hold back tears. To think I almost missed this!

“Stop, stop, you’re going to make me cry,” Cassie fussed, sniffing as she pushed me away. “Besides, you don’t want to wrinkle your gorgeous gown.”

I did feel pretty, for the first time in a while. My maid of honor dress was the palest pink, just a few shades darker than Cassie’s dress in a break from the tradition dictating that only the bride could wear a light color. It was a floaty, cross-body confection that felt elegant *and* comfortable. Which was great, because I planned to sit in the corner all night nursing drinks and eating too much vanilla wedding cake.

“Cassandra?” The photographer poked her head in our room. “Are you ready for the first look photos?”

Cassie and Scott had agreed to do the new tradition of seeing one another before the walk down the aisle, so she’d have time to touch up her makeup due to the guaranteed tears.

“I am.” She turned back to me. “The girls are down the hall in the holding room if you want to join them for some champagne. I should be back in twenty minutes or so.”

“Okay, yeah, I will in a few minutes.” I grasped her hands. “You look gorgeous. Now go show your man how lucky he is!”

She grinned, her eyes shining.

Once I was alone, I settled on the settee to scroll through my phone. I wasn’t ready to surrender to the noise and energy of three tipsy bridesmaids. When I saw James was trending on Twitter my heart lurched, but I clicked through before I could stop myself. It was torture seeing his photo splashed all over my feed, but I needed to know if something had happened with Harper.

The headline read, *Billionaire Boss Battle: Lucas Rushing arrested for corporate espionage and hacking of longtime rival James Morris*. I breathed a sigh of relief that it was work-related and was about to move onto the next Tweet when

something in the accompanying photos stopped me. The guy being arrested had his head down in the photo, but I was shocked to realize that his blurry profile looked familiar to me. I kept scrolling until I found a better photo of him and felt sick to my stomach when I realized what had happened.

Lucas Rushing was *Lou*!

Every conversation came flooding back as I put the puzzle pieces together. No wonder he'd always been so eager for any gossip about my job! Reading through the article, I learned one of the security guards had been bribed to share info with Lucas about the comings and goings from the house—and it occurred to me that this explained how he had managed to be around every time I went running, even when it was at random times. I reconsidered every conversation I had with him now that I knew who he was. Had I said anything incriminating about James or Harper? I'd probably complained about my uptight boss once or twice in the beginning, but I was always true to client and patient confidentiality. I felt a little sick that I'd been manipulated and that I'd once considered him a friend. How had my instincts been so wrong?

A realization struck me setting off a wave of nausea. My phone! The last time I'd seen him, when my music app wasn't working, I'd actually handed my phone over to him. He'd had *complete* access to it, meaning he could've planted a surveillance app on it—or even gone in and taken screenshots of my text messages to send to himself. I cringed that he'd likely also seen some of the romantic texts James and I had sent each other.

James. So was it clear to him now that I hadn't betrayed him? I knew what we'd once shared was too far gone to recover, but I felt a profound sense of relief at the thought that at least he'd understand I didn't betray his trust. He was supposed to be at the wedding, which meant there was a chance we'd cross paths at some point during the evening. I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

I have no idea how long I sat staring out the window lost in thought, but the next thing I knew the perfectly put together blonde wedding planner was peeking her head in the room and

hissing at me that it was time to line up. I followed behind her and joined up with Maddy, Nia, and Hope, who were already smiley and peppy thanks to their pre-ceremony party.

The venue was gorgeous, a tropical botanic garden transformed into a fairytale of lush flowers and pastel drapery. The four of us waited at the end of a long, grass aisle, hidden behind a wall of roses as the music cued up.

“Where’s the bride?” Maddy asked, looking around. “We can’t start this gig without her.”

Cassie finally strolled up to where we were gathered, a curious expression on her face.

“You okay?” Nia asked, frowning. “You look weird.”

Cassie nodded. “Yeah, but I need to talk to my sister for a sec.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me a few steps away from the group.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered, searching her face for hints of what was going on.

“Absolutely nothing,” she sighed, her eyes shining. “This is already the best day of my life. But I know how it could be even better. Katie, would *you* walk me down the aisle?”

She’d planned to make the walk alone, a solo journey to her husband-to-be to show she didn’t need anyone to bless their new union. Cassie hated the idea of being “given away,” especially since there was no one in our family qualified to perform the honor. I didn’t know quite how to respond.

“It’s always been just us,” she continued, holding both of my hands in hers. “You and me. And even though this new chapter of my life is beginning, no one can replace you. I want the world to know that *our* love came first.”

“Cassie...” tears rushed to my eyes as she squeezed my hands. “Yes, of course I will!”

We fell into each other’s arms and tried to keep from dissolving into full-on sobbing.

“Ladies,” the planner said in an impatient voice. “We’re ready. We need to keep this on time, okay?”

We both shot daggers at her as we fell in line behind the rest of the girls. When I was finally able to compose myself enough to focus, I looked down the aisle to where Scott and his groomsmen had gathered. I giggled at how shell-shocked he looked.

“Ready?” Cassie asked me.

“You know it,” I beamed at her.

We started down the aisle. I tried not to scan the crowd, but it was as if my eyes were magnetized to lock onto him. James was the first person I saw, but I barely let my gaze rest on him.

Today wasn't about whatever had happened between us. Right now, my sole focus was my sister's happiness.



The sound of people clinking their glasses filled the tent, and Scott paused on the dancefloor to lean in to kiss Cassie for what felt like the millionth time. He fist-pumped afterward and everyone laughed.

Nia ran over to where I was sitting, out of breath and a little sweaty. “Why aren't you out there?” she asked, pointing to the crowd moving along to vintage Jackson Five. She grabbed a glass of water and downed it.

“I'm having fun watching everyone,” I replied then held my phone up. “I'm the unofficial photographer for the night, taking all the incriminating pictures. I've got some amazing shots of you twerking.”

Her eyes went wide. “No!”

I laughed and shrugged. “You'll just have to wait and see. But don't let me stop you from the Electric Slide. Get back out there, everyone is waiting for you.”

She grabbed a flute and took a gulp of champagne, winked at me, then ran back out to the rest of the group.

Truth was, I wasn't in the mood for dancing.

After the ceremony, I'd clung to the hope that James would seek me out to talk about everything. I imagined us finding a dark corner of the tent where we could hash out what had happened between us, and how everything had changed once he learned of Lucas's deception. I'd even concocted a fantasy that he'd apologize for doubting me, though I knew James wasn't one for saying sorry.

I tried not to be obvious that I was tracking his whereabouts as the guests filed out of their seats following the ceremony and headed toward the nearby reception tent. There were photos to take with the bridal party, in a thousand different combinations and poses. It felt like we weren't dismissed for hours, so by the time I made my way to the tent to casually-but-not-at-all-casually look for James, there was no sign of him. I continued to scan the area for him, thinking maybe he'd slipped away for a phone call, or was in a long line for drinks, but he didn't appear even as the first course was being served.

He'd left without saying a word to me.

I wanted to wallow in my sadness, to let the tears flow about everything I'd lost. But then I looked at my beaming sister and her new husband and was reminded that the day wasn't about me. I'd have *plenty* of time to rehash the fact that James had walked out of an opportunity to connect with me. That he had no desire to try to make things right between us.

As I looked around the room filled with happy guests, it became all the more obvious I'd probably wind up consumed by the thoughts of what I'd lost. I barely knew anyone—the majority of the guests were Scott's people. And now they were Cassie's people, too. She'd married into a happy, healthy, robust family who acted like she was already one of them. The doting aunties kept clucking around her all night, forcing her to eat. The grandparents kept looking at her with warm smiles during Scott and Cassie's first waltz. And then there was the insane choreographed dance Scott and his brothers and male cousins had done for Cassie, bowing before her at the end like she was their queen. She was one of them.

And I was alone.

The stark realization nearly took my breath away. Of course, I'd *always* have Cassie, but now she had a network of family who could support her, too. Maybe it would be more convenient for her to reach out to her new sister-in-law instead of me, since they both knew the ins and outs of the family? I'd been so wrapped up in developing my career and being my absolute best that I'd neglected to grow my own support network. Sure, Nia, Hope, and Maddy would be there for me if I needed them, but they were Cassie's friends first.

I fiddled with the hem of my gown, trying not to cry. I'd lost so much.

"Hey, seat warmer," Cassie yelled at me, dragging a sweaty Scott with her to the edge of the dancefloor. "They're about to play 'I Gotta Feeling.' Get out here!"

"Ugh," I rolled my eyes. "Next song, promise."

She held out her other hand to me. "Nope, sorry. Bride's orders, let's go!"

Scott pretended to hook me with a fishing pole and reel me in. "Dance, dance, dance!" he chanted.

The rest of the bridesmaids joined the chant, clapping along until I stood up, causing the group to break out in cheers.

Nia ran over to me and bumped her shoulder against mine. "See that hot guy in the blue tie?" I looked to where she was pointing and saw an undeniably attractive dark-haired man jumping up and down with the rest of the groomsmen. "He thinks you're incredible. He wants to meet you."

I laughed and didn't answer her.

Because as much as I tried to convince myself otherwise, the only man I wanted was James.

JAMES

I thought I could quickly adjust to being in the same room as Kaitlyn after not being close to her for so long, but after an hour, I realized it was all but impossible. Yes, my focus was on the court case at hand to determine Harper's custody, but I couldn't help glancing toward where Kaitlyn was seated, waiting for her turn to testify. So much rested on her professional opinion.

But that wasn't the only reason why I couldn't stop staring at her.

Malcolm had successfully argued against every point the Dreshers' legal team had tried to make. That my wealth and notoriety put Harper at risk, that my security protocols had been proven ineffective by the hacking incident, that Harper wasn't developing normally since she wanted nothing to do with her grandparents. Now was the time for Kaitlyn to take the stand and help me prove that not only was I the only person qualified to care for my daughter, but that she'd been flourishing lately.

Kaitlyn took to the stand without even glancing at me, which gave me an opportunity to study her. She was dressed conservatively, in a pale yellow blouse and black skirt. As always, she looked breathtaking. But her expression...the sparkle, the *joy*, that always lit up her face was gone.

"Ready, Miss Thorn?" the opposing counsel asked.

She nodded.

“You were employed in the Morris household and worked directly with Harper Morris. Can you describe some of the work you did together?”

Kaitlyn cleared her throat. “Yes. My work with Harper centered on helping her feel more confident in a variety of settings in and around her home, along with teaching her coping skills for potentially stressful times, particularly when it came to leaving the house. In addition to the behavioral modification exercises we did each day, I also helped to get her caught up and ready academically to begin kindergarten in the fall. She missed some developmental milestones due to the kidnapping, so my goal was to backfill those missing pieces.”

“Were you successful?”

“Yes. I was very impressed with her progress.”

“And how did you measure said progress?”

“I use developmental screening tools that include language and communication abilities, a physical abilities checklist, cognitive milestones, and most importantly in Harper’s scenario, social and emotional milestones.”

The lawyer scrawled something on the pad in front of him, and I saw Maureen whisper to Mitch.

“Can you give us an example of a physical ability test?” the lawyer asked.

Kaitlyn smiled for a moment then regained her stoic face. “In Harper’s circumstance, it was not so much a formal test as a willingness to attempt something new. The most impressive example is the time she left the property, which she hadn’t been able to do prior to our work together, and scaled a climbing wall designed for children older than her. The determination with which she tackled the challenge, and the tangible sense of pride she felt in her accomplishment represented enormous strides from the timid girl I met on my first day.”

I looked around the room. No one else seemed all that impressed, but it was a special and important memory that Kaitlyn and I shared.

“That’s fine,” the lawyer said in a flat tone. “Now I’d like to move on to your employer, Mr. James Morris.”

Kaitlyn sat up straighter, and I hoped that she’d glance my way, but she kept her eyes fixed on the lawyer.

“How would you describe the interactions between Mr. Morris and his daughter?”

“Loving. Attentive. Intuitive. During my tenure, Mr. Morris was an involved and caring parent. He set appropriate boundaries, encouraged Harper to be respectful to those around her, and supported her growth in a manner that was comfortable for her.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“Yes.” Kaitlyn took a deep breath. “I’ve worked with many families, and I’ve never seen a tighter bond between parent and child. It was...it was beautiful to watch the two of them together. It’s clear that Harper and Mr. Morris adore one another, and it’s my professional opinion that any attempts to move Harper to a different household would have an incredibly negative impact on her development.”

I beat back the emotions that welled up inside me as Kaitlyn spoke.

“So you’re saying that moving Harper into the care of Mitch and Maureen Dresher, her grandparents, would be detrimental?”

She nodded. “Based on what I saw the morning they stopped by—unannounced, I might add—I don’t think that rehoming Harper with them is a safe option. They disrespected Harper’s boundaries and attempted to use guilt and coercion to get physical affection from her. Harper reacted negatively, and instead of trying to work with her, they doubled down on the pressure until she wound up hiding from them. I haven’t seen anything to demonstrate that the Dreshers are equipped to give Harper what she needs in order to continue hitting her developmental milestones. And not only that, the impact of being separated from her father could cause major behavioral regressions.”

The judge looked over at Malcolm. “Do you have any questions for Miss Thorn, Mr. Washington?”

“No, your honor.”

Malcolm and I had agreed that there was no need to request anything more of Kaitlyn. Her initial testimony had been perfect.

The judge turned to face Kaitlyn. “Thank you, Miss Thorn, you’re free to go.”

She gave him a little nod then grabbed her purse and left the courtroom without a backward glance at me.

I wanted to tear out of the room after her, to get her to look at me, so I could thank her for everything she’d said, not to mention all she had done for Harper. And for me. I had so much I wanted to say to her, but the more I thought about it the more inappropriate it felt to try to get it all out in the halls of a courthouse.

The judge glanced around the room. “While there are no real winners when families are at war with one another, the evidence has made my decision clear. Mr. Morris, you will retain full custody and parental rights of your daughter, Harper Morris.

Mr. and Mrs. Dresher, any further CPS investigations brought by you will be investigated for fraud—and trust me, that’s not a position you want to be in. All future visitation is at the discretion of Mr. Morris.”

I glanced over as Mitch dropped his head. Maureen looked like she was holding back tears.

“Thank you, court adjourned.”

Malcolm turned to me and raised his hand to give me a high five, but I shook my head at him. “Not now,” I said in a quiet voice.

I should’ve felt celebratory, but it was a hollow victory. Kaitlyn was still gone, and the Dreshers had effectively cut themselves out of their granddaughter’s life. Yes, they were troubled people, but I knew firsthand that desperation drove

people to do crazy things. There was no denying it, every stupid thing they did stemmed from their love for their granddaughter. Given the way their daughter had signed away her parental rights without a second thought, it was actually pretty impressive that the Dreshers were so committed to having a relationship with Harper. I knew they truly did love her, even if they didn't pick the best ways to show it.

"So, celebratory lunch?" Malcom asked me.

"Wish I could," I replied. "Got a few things I need to take care of, then it's back to the office. Thanks for everything you did today."

"Hey, don't thank me. Kaitlyn was the one who sealed the deal."

I stupidly turned around to scan the room again at the mention of her name even though I knew she'd left.

Malcom and I walked out into the midday heat then said our goodbyes. I spotted Mitch and Maureen getting into their black Cadillac a few rows away and headed for them before they could take off.

"Coming to gloat, are you?" Mitch asked in a harsh voice when he spotted me.

"I don't want to talk to you," Maureen managed through tears as she fiddled with the door handle.

"Listen, there are a few things we need to discuss," I said, glancing between them.

"What's left to say?" Mitch spat out. "We're cut off from our only grandchild now thanks to you."

"And that's exactly what we need to talk about," I said with far more patience than he deserved.

Neither one responded so I pressed on.

"The judge said visitation is up to me, and I've been giving it a lot of thought since the last time you saw Harper."

Mitch's jaw went tight, probably remembering how it felt to be thrown off my property by security. "And?" he asked angrily.

“Did you come over here to make sure we know we won’t be seeing her again until she’s eighteen?”

“Not at all,” I said in a calm voice. “I actually *don’t* want you to be cut off from her. I want her to have good relationships with all her grandparents. The more supportive people Harper has in her life, the better off she’ll be.”

“James...” Maureen dabbed her eyes with a wadded-up tissue as she stared at me. “R-really?”

“Of course. It won’t be a smooth process, and you’ll have to follow protocols until she’s comfortable with you again, but I’m convinced that you can build a bridge with her—and I’ll do what I can to help that happen.”

Mitch had his arms crossed tightly across his chest and was staring at the ground. “Why?”

“I told you. Because I think it’s in Harper’s best interests.”

I studied the man, and it became clear that he was fighting back tears as well.

“Look, I know we haven’t had a good relationship,” I said, filling the awkward silence. “It’s been rocky as hell, to be honest. But I think we all agree we want what’s best for Harper, and that includes working it out between us. I’m willing to try.”

Mitch finally met my eyes. “I didn’t like you, do you know that? For the longest time I thought you were just a pompous, rich asshole who used my daughter. But as much as it pains me to admit it, I can tell you’re a decent father. And the fact that you’re willing to let bygones be bygones with us says a lot. I appreciate your offer.”

He held out his hand, and I grasped it and gave it a firm shake.

Maureen let out a little sob. “Thank you.”

None of us were willing to hug it out. The feelings were still too raw, and there was much to sort through. But it was a start.

As I walked away, I realized I felt lighter. And I couldn’t help wondering if Kaitlyn would be proud of me.

KAITLYN

“Can you please turn the TV off?” I asked Cassie, pointing to the giant set on the wall across from where we were sitting. “It’s distracting.”

We were curled up on the giant khaki sectional in Cassie and Scott’s new place, catching up on her honeymoon to Fiji and every other life detail that popped into our heads. It had been too long since we’d had a chance to hang out, and I was loving it even though my heart was still heavy. I tried to focus on the fact that my sister’s life was currently perfect. She was my inspiration, my hope that maybe everything could work out for me too, someday.

Cassie shook her head. “Nope. We need to watch the next show.”

“Cassie, I’m not in the mood for housewives, or chefs, or horny singles on an island.”

“I promise you that it’s none of the above. Trust me.”

I tried to imagine what could have her prioritizing TV over talking to each other. Based on her expression, it had to be something worthwhile.

“Our photographer said the pictures will be ready next week. I’m so excited!” Cassie clapped her hands.

“I guarantee mine are better,” I said, shooting her a sideways glance. “I mean, how can you top a shot of Nia in the middle of the dancefloor in a split downing champagne straight from the bottle?”

Cassie laughed. “We got wild, didn’t we?”

“Or the one of Scott giving you a lap dance?”

She hid her face behind her hands. “Please don’t remind me.” I chuckled along with her, then frowned when she asked me, “So, have you spoken with James while I was gone?”

“Uh. No.” That was a rapid shift in conversation. I looked at my sister who was chewing her lip. “Why?”

“He hasn’t tried to get in contact with you? To apologize? Nothing?”

Wincing, I smoothed out the fabric of my shirt. I guess we’re talking about this. “He’s called but I set his number on do not disturb.”

“Oh my God, Katie! Why? Maybe he was calling to grovel an apology?”

Shaking my head, I laughed, knowing it sounded more like a sob. “After the way he treated me, I’m not interested. It’s too little, too late.”

My sister turned to give me her full attention. “Okay, I get why you’re upset, I do. But once everything was out in the open, don’t you think you should have heard him out?”

Wrapping my arms around my torso, I hugged my body. “I have thought about it, but I couldn’t do it. He really hurt me and I’m going to need time.”

“But you *do* plan to talk to him?” Sighing, I knew I should talk to him. For nothing else, then to get some closure.

The theme song for a popular interview program came on and Cassie dove for the remote. “It’s on, here it is!” She increased the volume until sound filled the room. “Watch!” She karate-chopped me in the arm.

“Ouch!” I was about to punch her back when I heard the voice.

His voice. James was actually sitting for an interview. Something he never did.

I couldn’t make out the words at first, but the deep timbre was unmistakable. It shook me to my core seeing his gorgeous face

splashed across the screen. I remembered every centimeter of it, which was exactly why I'd been avoiding him. The teaser for the show ended, and it went to a commercial.

"You knew about this?" I gasped to Cassie.

She nodded. "Yup. And I had a feeling you'd boycott it if I told you in advance."

"Cassie, no!" I moaned. "Why are you making me watch this? To torture me?"

"You're the one avoiding him. There's unfinished business between you two, and maybe this interview will help you sort it out. At the very least, maybe you'll be more open to talking to him. Can't hurt."

My sister clearly had no idea that seeing him made me feel like I was being ripped in two. I remembered the sweetness of what we'd shared and the ugliness of the way everything ended. It was the reason why I couldn't bear to look at James during the custody hearing. It *did* hurt me, physically. I clutched my chest.

"I don't know if I can watch," I whispered.

"Just a few minutes," Cassie said as the program came back on. She reached for my hand.

It opened with a voiceover and a shot of James and the interviewer walking on one of the paths on the grounds of James's house. It cut to a close-up shot of James sitting outside near the pool, and I caught my breath at his expression. He looked...tired. Serious.

Sad.

"You're a very private man, James. Thank you for agreeing to chat with me," the interviewer, a flawless woman named Mariana, said. "We have lots of ground to cover, I think."

"Yeah, I've had an eventful year," James mustered up a weary smile as he glanced down.

The camera cut back to Mariana. "Quite a few challenges I'm sure," she agreed. "The latest was a custody battle with your daughter's maternal grandparents, yes?"

James nodded but didn't say anything. He wasn't going to be an easy interview subject.

"Can you tell us a little about that?" she probed in a gentle voice.

"Look, I recognize my family matters have been getting quite a bit of public attention lately. For a long time, actually. But it's important to me to keep my daughter's life out of the press. She's a child. She has no say in the way her life is being portrayed, so it's up to me to safeguard her privacy. I don't feel comfortable discussing the details of the hearing, or of other... *events*...in her past. But there is one topic relating to her I'm willing to speak about at length, and it's childhood mental health."

Mariana's eyebrows shot up. "Okay, I wasn't expecting that. Please go on."

I leaned forward to better take in what James was about to say.

"After going through...everything...my daughter needed help. I had a wonderful support network in my family and trusted staff, but we couldn't get her past her demons by ourselves. That was why I found someone who was equipped to help her work through her challenges. And that's the point I'm trying to make here; we need to be advocates for our kids in every way possible. We need to speak up for them when they can't. And we need to recognize when it's time to seek outside help."

Cassie glanced at me and squeezed my hand. "That was nice of him to say."

I nodded. "Yes, destigmatizing mental health care for children is important. I'm glad he's being so open about it."

Mariana pressed on. "Sounds like you had a positive experience."

"The *best*," James said, his voice suddenly enthusiastic. "All of my daughter's progress is because of one woman. She's a miracle worker."

"Attaboy! Tell 'em James!" Cassie jumped up and down in her seat and cheered. "Now we're talking."

I was dumbfounded. James had singled me out for praise. I knew he'd appreciated my work, but I never imagined he'd tell the world.

"What sorts of things did she do with Harper?"

James finally smiled. "She was by-the-book when it came to Harper's treatment, but she was also open to doing things in an imaginative way. The woman is *so* damn creative! And fun, too. She made even the most mundane daily exercises a treat for Harper. She knew when to push and when to tap the brakes. She's just an incredible, amazing woman."

I could feel my jaw falling open. What was going on?

"Wow, that's high praise," Mariana laughed.

"She deserves it," James shot back. "Kaitlyn Thorn is unlike anyone I've ever known. She started off as a wonderful resource in my daughter's life, but she became so much more. To both of us."

"Ooh, sounds like we might have an exclusive here, please go on," Mariana said.

James grimaced slightly, and I knew he must be uncomfortable with sharing so much, so openly for the world to see. But then the set of his jaw came back, as if he was determined to push through. "You're right, I'm about to admit something I haven't said out loud before. I feel like I have to say it, but I worry it might be too late." He paused and I leaned closer to the TV, still in awe about what was unfolding on the screen. "In our time together, I fell in love with Kaitlyn. I fought the feelings for too long, but I'm through lying to myself."

I made a wounded noise at his raw admission, and Cassie shrieked.

The camera had pulled in so James was speaking directly into it, but it felt like he was talking to *me*. Like it was just the two of us, having the conversation we should've had before that awful day he threw me out.

"The problem is," James continued, "I was careless with my love. I didn't tell her how I was feeling. And I... I made some mistakes. Big ones. Which is why I'm apologizing for them,

right here and now—on the record, with the world watching.” He paused. “Kaitlyn, I’m sorry for everything I did to hurt you.”

The room started spinning.

“You heard it here first,” Mariana was saying, breaking the spell. “Ladies, bachelor for life James Morris might be officially off the market. Thank you for being with us, James. Up next, we’re chatting with home cleaning expert Candace Connors about her favorite back-to-school organizational tips. Stay with us.”

Cassie turned the TV off and stared at me, giving me time to process everything that had just happened.

“You okay?” she asked tentatively.

“I... I don’t know.”

“Katie, he said all the right things. He apologized. He said he *loves* you!”

I sniffled away the tickle in my nose and nodded.

It didn’t make sense. James had looked like he despised me when he threw me out for the second time. And though it had definitely felt like he loved me at moments during our time together, could I be in a relationship with someone who was capable of tossing me aside without a chance to explain myself? He’d said he could never love someone he didn’t trust, but he never gave me the opportunity to prove I was trustworthy.

“I don’t understand what’s going on with you,” Cassie said. “Why do you look upset?”

“Cass, I know it seems like everything is all better and the slate is wiped clean because of what he said, but James hurt me. *Really* hurt me, which was why I was avoiding him. And yes, it’s wonderful that he apologized, but... I don’t know. I’m feeling very mixed up right now.” I pulled my legs up onto the couch and hugged them to my chest.

We fell silent.

“You still love him.”

I felt my entire body go buzzy at the way Cassie said it. It wasn't a question. She was asserting, in the way only a sister can, that she knew my feelings better than I did.

"I know you're still upset and confused," Cassie continued. "I get it. But what James just did in that interview...was major. You know how private he is. To lay it all out like that, so publicly...that was him making the biggest splash he could in order to get your attention and prove what you mean to him. And now the whole world knows your name, and that the great James Morris is in love with you." She held up her phone. "I guarantee you're trending on Twitter right now."

"But I don't need that," I protested. "I don't care about being famous any more than I care about the 'great' James Morris. I saw a totally different side of him when I lived there. His kindness, his sense of humor, the way he adored Harper. *That's* what I fe—" I stopped abruptly.

"What you *what?*" Cassie asked. "Go on."

I felt my eyes welling. "That's what I fell in love with," I whispered.

Cassie lurched toward me and pulled me into a hug. "Yes, exactly! You love him, Katie. You just admitted it. Now go do something about it."

I rested my head on her shoulder as silent tears fell on my cheeks. I couldn't make sense of the way I was feeling. Yes, I was still hurt and angry about the way he'd treated me, but more than that was the realization that it didn't change my love for him. People make mistakes. Sometimes love hurts.

And in the end, all that matters is whether or not both hearts are willing to try again.

KAITLYN

The elevator ride up to Bloom felt different this time.

After a little more prodding from Cassie, I realized there was no better time than now to connect with James—which meant I had to track him down at work. Even though he had a few offices in the city, I knew Bloom was his favorite location. He loved the view, the one we'd shared the night we met. I bit back a smile at the memory.

I wasn't sure how things would go, though. We still had plenty of stuff to work through, hurts we still needed to address. I could be walking out of here holding the hand of the man I loved or walking out alone and feeling as dejected as I'd felt at the end of that first night.

But I had to try.

The minute the elevator doors opened, I realized my first mistake—my outfit. I hadn't even bothered to change, so I was wearing a breezy skirt and tank top with my hair in a high ponytail. The same beautiful blonde that had been here the first time I came was standing guard at the host stand, looking devastating in a metallic black dress. She gave me a cool, disdainful look.

“Are you Uber for someone?” she asked me over the music.

I shook my head and leaned closer to her. “No, I'm actually here to see James.”

She gave me a blank look, and I realized she couldn't compute that I meant her boss. I knew I could bypass her completely

and just text him, but I wanted the element of surprise.

“James Morris,” I said.

The corners of her mouth tightened. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Morris isn’t here tonight.”

Did she mean that, or was she running interference to keep away unwanted admirers? Either way, I had a feeling I wasn’t going to get past her, so I switched strategies.

“You know what? I’ll sit at the side bar for a bit if that’s okay.”

She frowned but nodded.

The small bar was an overflow area before the velvet rope of the main part of the club, a spot where I knew I could hang out even though I didn’t meet the dress code. I needed to figure out a way to get to James. The thumping baseline made concentration almost impossible, but I was on a mission.

I hugged the wall as I made my way through the crowd, and I was just about to snag an open seat at the end of the bar by the serving station when I felt a hand on my arm.

“Kaitlyn!” I turned and saw James’s assistant, Ella, grinning at me. We’d met a few times when she’d come by the house. I liked her—she was hardworking and efficient but also genuinely warm, and really sweet toward Harper, who idolized her. “You’re here!”

“Hi, Ella, yes! I was hoping to connect with James, is he around?”

“He is, and let me tell you, we are *so* happy you’re here.”

I frowned. “We who?”

Ella gestured around the room. “The staff. All of us. He’s been miserable, and it’s not fun.” She leaned closer. “I know it’s not my place to say anything, but I can tell he misses you like crazy. Come on.”

I followed Ella through the crowd to a door that was camouflaged by a wall of plants, where she placed her badge on a pad and the door slid open. We stopped at a door down

the hall. The noise from the club was just a faint throb in the distance.

“Good luck,” Ella whispered then winked at me and walked away.

I took a deep breath before I raised my fist to pound on the door.

“I said *no* interruptions!” I heard James call out.

Frowning, I hovered my hand in front of it for a few seconds before knocking again.

“Are you kidding me?” He exclaimed, his heavy footfalls following.

The door opened with a *woosh* and then there was James, brow furrowed, mouth twisted in a scowl until it dropped open in shock at the sight of me. It seemed to take him a second to process what was going on.

“It’s you,” he said in a soft, disbelieving voice.

“Hi.” I gave him a little wave. “It’s me.”

He was the James I remembered, but his face bore the traces of sleepless nights, with dark hollows under his eyes.

“Kaitlyn,” he stepped back. “Please, come in.”

He sounded formal, like he wasn’t sure how to handle me. I walked past him and had to force myself to keep from jumping into his arms. There was no denying I was magnetically drawn to him, but we had so much to work through before I could let myself touch him.

Because I knew exactly what would happen if we connected physically.

The view was just as gorgeous in his workspace as in his penthouse, and I could see why he opted to spend so much of his time here. I scanned the twinkling lights out on the horizon and was brought back to our first night together. Confusion and hurt twisted inside of me when I was reminded of the way he’d thrown me out not once but *twice*.

James was staring at me, waiting for me to say something.

“You’ve been calling me.”

“I have.”

“I’ve been ignoring you.”

“I know.”

“I saw the interview. That was huge.”

He exhaled in a heavy sigh, but he didn’t respond.

“I know it wasn’t easy for you to be so open about your personal life like that, and it meant a lot to me.”

The furrow returned. “Okay. But did you—?”

“There’s some stuff I want to say to you, stuff I *need* to say, but before I get to that I want you to know you really hurt me, James, more than you realize. A few times.”

“Kaitlyn, I—”

I held up my hand to stop him. “Please, just hear me out.” I took a deep breath. “You already know I’ve got some baggage from my family, but what you might not understand is that you poured salt into those old wounds when you threw me out. You did it *twice*.”

He frowned.

“Our first night together. Remember? When Harper had an episode. I mean, I get it now, but the way you turned so cold in an instant was shocking. And then you did it again, when you thought I’d betrayed you.”

“Kaitlyn, I’m so sorry,” he said in an agonized voice.

“I believe you, and I appreciate the apology,” I said, steeling myself to continue. “But here’s what I can’t stop thinking about: you wouldn’t hear me out. You didn’t give me a chance to try to figure out what happened. You made a decision and that was that. I was out on my ass.”

Pain flashed across his face at the memory, and a tiny part of me was happy for it.

“My mom threw me out. She treated me the exact same way, and I will always bear those scars. There’s no way I can give

my heart to someone who would do that to me again.” My voice trembled a little.

“Kaitlyn,” James came toward me, but stopped short of actually touching me.

“The problem is,” I began, fighting back a sob. “The problem is I fell in love with you. And now I’m a mess because I want to be with you more than anything in the world, but there’s a part of me that worries you’ll hurt me like that again and that will destroy me.”

I couldn’t hold back any longer, so I bowed my head and surrendered to the tears.

The next thing I knew his strong arms were circling around me, drawing me close to his chest.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured, kissing the top of my head. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I *hate* that I hurt you.”

He let me cry until the tears stopped then led me to a couch in front of the windows. When we sat down, he took both of my hands in his.

“I’m not good at this,” James began haltingly. “Relationships. I’m not trying to make excuses for my behavior, I just want you to know why I am the way I am. I have a hard time letting people get close to me, and when I feel like someone is breaching that wall I keep up, I get defensive. The way I treated you was inexcusable, and I am heartbroken that I hurt you.”

I sniffed and he used his thumb to gently wipe away a stray tear.

“But I need you to know that I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you. I want you to feel safe. I want you to trust me. To understand that I hear you.” He took a deep breath. “And most importantly, I want you to know that I will *always* love you.”

There was hope in his voice. He drew back to study my face.

I took a deep breath. “James... I love you too.”

The tears came again, and this time I could see them sparkling in his eyes as well. We'd been working toward this moment for too long, but now here we were, scared, joyful, and ready to admit just how much we meant to one another.

Our lips came together in a rush in the messiest, most beautiful kiss of my life. I'd been so caught up in my emotions I'd forgotten how badly I missed his touch. When we finally pulled away, we both laughed at our tangle of emotions.

"I've been dying for this," James whispered, smoothing his palm along my cheek.

"It would've happened sooner if you hadn't run away after the wedding," I scolded.

"I didn't want to ruin Scott and Cassandra's big day. I wasn't sure how you'd react to me, and I had visions of flying glassware."

"Please," I shoved him lightly. "You know me better than that."

We kissed again, this time with more intention. James slid me a little closer. My body was already screaming for him, but I reminded myself that he was at work.

His phone went off and we jumped apart.

"Duty calls?" I asked.

James shook his head. "Nothing is more important than this." He stared at me. "I'm still in shock. You're really here. This is happening."

"This is *definitely* happening," I smiled back at him.

He dropped his head back onto the couch. "Harper is going to lose it! Wait till she finds out you're coming back." He picked his head up quickly and stared at me. "Wait...you *are* coming back, right?"

I had to laugh. "Yes! Of course I am!"

He let out a long exhale. "I'm still in shock."

"Believe it, Mr. Morris. You're stuck with me." I threw my legs over his and he reached out to grab them.

“I’ve missed these,” he said, stroking my calf gently.

“Is that a fact?” I arched an eyebrow at him. “What else have you missed?”

“This perfect knee.” He leaned down to kiss it, and I was shocked that the chaste move set off a naughty tingle inside of me.

“Oh really? Did you miss anything else?” I asked in a whisper that sounded like pleading.

He nodded. “Definitely. So many things.” He stroked the inside of my thigh just under the hem of my skirt. I shifted closer to him, hoping his hand would push higher.

I started to relax back against the couch as he gently massaged the soft skin of my inner thighs. “You better stop now,” I breathed.

“Why would I ever do that?” James asked as he finally let his fingertip climb all the way up my leg to graze along the edge of my panties.

“You’re at work,” I said in a strangled voice as he cupped me gently.

“I’m the boss,” he murmured. “I do what I want.”

“And what do you want?” My breath hitched.

“This.”

James flipped up my skirt and dove between my legs.

JAMES

I wanted to live between Kaitlyn's thighs. How I'd missed her...her sweet, beautiful body. I licked her soft folds and sucked her tender nub until she was writhing on the couch, begging me not to stop. When she finally came, I was glad for the soundproofing in my office because she screamed like a banshee.

Once she'd caught her breath, I collected her wrists and pinned them above her head with one hand while I tugged at the top button on my pants. "Are you ready for me?"

She shook her head and frowned.

"What's wrong?" I let go of her and she sat up. "Are you okay?"

A wicked smile replaced the frown as she quickly hopped onto my lap and straddled me. "Gotcha. You're mine now." She reached down to tug on my zipper. "Get these off. Hurry."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Someone's feeling bossy, huh?"

"Off," she said sternly.

"Yes ma'am," I said, easing her off of me and standing up. The second my shoes were off and my pants were on the ground, she dropped to her knees in front of me. "Kaitlyn, no... I'm about to burst as it is."

She ignored me, eyes on my cock. "You *sure* you don't want me to?" Kaitlyn leaned over and dragged her tongue across the length of it. "Because I can stop any time." She looked up at me with big, innocent eyes then encircled her mouth on my

head, dragging her lips off me slowly in the world's most agonizing kiss.

A groan escaped me. "Kaitlyn..."

"I'll stop any time you like." She grasped the base of my shaft then took me a little farther into her mouth, dragging her tongue along the ridges as she drew me out slowly. "Just say the word."

When I didn't respond, she took my full length into her mouth, and my knees almost buckled. She let her tongue do incredible, magical things along my shaft as she drew me in and out a little faster this time.

"Shall I continue?" She looked up at me wearing a devilish grin.

"Please..." I managed, and Kaitlyn had me back in her mouth before I'd finished saying the word, easing me in and out of her mouth in a delicious rhythm. I felt the waves building inside me, but I needed to stop her. I pulled her ponytail gently and she looked up at me with a shocked expression.

"I want to make you come again," I said as I reached down to help her stand.

"I like the sound of that," she murmured, drawing her thumb along her glistening lips.

She was still dressed, so I made short work of her tank top and skirt, pulling them off so quickly I swear I heard something rip. I just needed to get to her body, the body I'd been missing so much. I took a step back to admire her perfect breasts, the gentle swell of her hips, and her strong legs.

I bent down to take her nipple in my mouth, and she arched against me, dragging her nails down my back. I trailed my hand down her flat stomach to the dampness between her legs, letting my finger slide inside of her.

"Stop teasing me," she whispered in my ear. "I want you. All of you."

It was all I needed to hear. I picked her up and placed her on the couch then stalked to my discarded pants to find the

condom in my wallet. Once I was ready, I settled myself between her legs, my cock poised and ready.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve missed this?” I asked, dipping my hips so the tip of my cock teased her.

Kaitlyn laughed. “Yeah, I think I have a clue. Now stop making me wait and make love to me.”

“Your wish is my command.” With that, I plunged inside of her eliciting a squeal that about did me in. I slid in and out of her in a steady rhythm, then reached down to caress her swollen bud.

“Don’t stop,” she sighed, pushing her hips against me.

I teased her with my hands and my cock, bringing her closer with each stroke. I could feel the tension building inside of her. The way her eyes squeezed shut and she bit her lip, I could swear she was purposely holding off.

“Come for me,” I leaned down and murmured with my lips pressed against her ear.

It was almost like I’d given her permission to let go. Kaitlyn shuddered and I felt the tremors start as that gorgeous, satisfied noise filled the room.

I slowed my rhythm and watched her drift back to earth.

“More,” she murmured. “I’ll never be finished with you.”

I leaned down to kiss her as I picked her up off the couch. I walked her to the end of it, still kissing, then broke away to gently lean her over the arm of the couch. She looked back over her shoulder at me as I situated myself behind her.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me?” she laughed. “I’m perfect.”

I took advantage of the pert posterior right in front of me and gave her a slap on the ass, getting a shocked yelp out of her.

“This again?” she giggled.

“No,” I growled. “*This.*”

I plunged myself inside of her again causing her to moan and arch back against me. I pumped against her, grasping her hips, then leaned forward to take hold of her ponytail.

“Do you feel good?” I asked, wrapping her hair around my hand. “Do you like this?”

“Yes,” she sighed, and the sound of her voice made me push against her a little harder. I reached down to find her heat yet again, confident I could get her off one last time, but then everything hit me all at once. The way she felt, how perfectly we fit together, the fact that I’d almost lost everything... I let go and surrendered to the waves building inside of me.

When I was finished, I collapsed against Kaitlyn’s back, panting. We were both a little sweaty and very satisfied. I slid out of her, and she immediately turned around to wrap her arms around me.

“I love you, James Morris,” she whispered with her cheek pressed against my chest.

“I love you more,” I said, then planted a kiss on the top of her head.

JAMES

One Year Later

“To the team,” I said, holding my champagne glass up and nodding at Jess and Henri.

“To the team,” the rest of our group echoed, then clinked glasses.

It was the final toast of many that evening, at the end of a lavish meal celebrating the official launch of Henri Fournier Designs. Back at the beginning, I never would have imagined Jess’s crazy idea to launch a fashion line with her friend would result in our entire family and many of their friends gathered in a rooftop lounge in Paris, raising a glass to their success. Kaitlyn tapped her flute against mine then snuggled up against me. Harper was on the far side of the table holding court next to my mom, crashing her sturdy Shirley Temple glass into everyone’s delicate champagne flutes.

Henri’s runway show had been the showstopper of Paris fashion week, a dark horse debut line that caught the haute couture establishment off guard. Henri and Jess had managed to snag the hottest models to walk for him, and the models’ celebrity plus the creativity of his designs left everybody chattering about the rockstar upstart. The early success of the line meant Jess had already made her investment back times three. I was surprised, but at the same time I wasn’t. My sister had stepped up and proven herself. I couldn’t be prouder of the woman she’d become, now that we’d *both* decided to leave the past in the past.

“Daddy, toast me,” Harper appeared at my elbow, holding up her glass of mostly ice.

“Of course,” I replied, leaning over to tap my flute against hers. “Cheers, my dear.”

“When are we going?” she asked, glancing at Kaitlyn. “You said we’re going to look at the lights.”

Harper’s drive to go everywhere and see everything was yet another beautiful surprise I owed to the woman nestled in my arms. In the past year, Kaitlyn had managed to expand my daughter’s horizons from our little corner of Florida to the world at large. We’d checked off every place on her list and then some, including skiing in Switzerland and a real-life safari in Kenya, where she got to see giraffes and elephants in their natural habitat. So far Harper had been a tireless tourist in France, from a bike ride in Provence to exploring the beauty of Paris. The only spot we had left before we headed home was the Eiffel Tower.

“You’re not too tired?” I asked her even though I already knew the answer.

“No!” she crowed. “Kaitlyn, can we please go now?”

She drew back and looked up at me with sleepy eyes. “I’m so excited to see it but can we do it tomorrow? I’m a little tired from all the food and drinking.”

“You heard her,” I said to Harper, giving her a wink. “Tomorrow it is.”

“Nooo,” Harper howled. “Please, please, please *tonight!*” She clasped her hands in a prayer position and hopped up and down.

“Harper,” Kaitlyn laughed. “Where do you get all your energy? Aren’t you tired, too?”

“*Never* tired,” she shouted, throwing one arm in the air in a superhero pose.

I chuckled at the two of them. “Up to you,” I said, giving Kaitlyn a squeeze. I knew she couldn’t resist Harper’s

enthusiasm, and I hoped it would be enough to get her to agree to the plan.

“I guess I have no choice,” Kaitlyn said, sitting up. “But hold on...isn’t it closed now? It’s late.” She checked her phone.

“Don’t worry, I know people,” I reassured her softly.

My lifestyle still caught Kaitlyn off guard, even after a year together. She constantly forgot I could make nearly anything she wished a reality, including getting the tourist attraction to give us after-hours access for a once-in-a-lifetime view.

“Off we go, then,” Kaitlyn said, standing up and taking Harper’s hand.

I stood up to address the room. “Folks, we’re heading out, but please feel free to stay and keep enjoying this incredible celebration. Henri, Jessica, I’m so proud of the two of you.”

My sister placed both of her hands to her lips and blew me a kiss across the table with tears twinkling in her eyes.

A few minutes later, we were tucked in my Maybach cruising through the back streets of Paris. Harper’s enthusiasm had rubbed off on Kaitlyn, and the two of them chattered as we got closer to our destination.

“Whoa,” Harper said as we pulled into the parking area near the base of the monument. “Lights!”

“Lots of them,” Kaitlyn laughed. She reached for my hand. “It’s beautiful. I’m so happy we decided to come tonight.”

“This is nothing, wait until we get to the top.”

“We’re going *in* there?” Harper exclaimed.

“Yup. You won’t be scared of being up so high, will you?”

“I’m not scared of anything,” she said, her chin up in defiance.

I knew for a fact my daughter wasn’t afraid of heights thanks to her many trips to the playground climbing wall. She loved it so much that we signed her up for climbing lessons at a local gym, where she wowed the instructors with her grace and bravery. My damaged little girl had come back stronger than ever.

All thanks to Kaitlyn.

I gave her hand a squeeze as we walked to the entrance, and she went up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my cheek. I was happier than I'd ever imagined was possible.

The Tower looked like it was decked out in diamonds, shimmering in the darkness. I couldn't wait to get to the top.

"Bonjour and welcome," my contact Alphonse greeted us, holding open the glass door. "Are you ready to fall in love with Paris?"

"*Oui oui*," Kaitlyn laughed as she shook his hand. "But I already am."

Harper had stopped outside and was craning her head back. "But how do we get all the way up there?"

"Oh, don't worry, *chère*," Alphonse said. "There are only about a thousand steps to the top. You should make it up to the top by tomorrow morning."

Her face fell and she reached her arms out to me. "Carry me, Daddy?"

"He's joking with you, there's an elevator," I reassured her.

"Harper," Alphonse said as he escorted us in. "How old do you think the Tower is?"

"Ten years old?" she asked.

"You're *very* close," Alphonse said, nodding his head as he punched the elevator button. "This beautiful structure is over one hundred and thirty years old! What do you think about that?"

Alphonse continued making touristy small talk with my daughter as I tried to keep my composure. I'd been looking forward to this moment since we landed, and now that it was closer than ever, I wished I could cut directly to it.

The elevator finally pinged. "Mr. Morris, I trust you know the way?"

"Thank you, Alphonse. Appreciate your help, as always."

The three of us filed into the glass-walled elevator and started our ascent through the steel beams, bypassing the lower floors and speeding directly to the top.

“It’s beautiful,” Kaitlyn breathed as she stared out the window to the endless vista.

“You’re beautiful,” I said, pushing up against her and planting a kiss on her temple. “Thanks for coming tonight. She had her heart set on it.”

“Why, though?”

I shrugged. “I might have told her that the Eiffel Tower goes very high up, and only the bravest people go to the top.”

Kaitlyn placed her hand over her heart and glanced over to where Harper was staring outside, mesmerized by the twinkling lights. “She wants to be brave.”

“Thanks to you.”

The elevator doors opened, and we were deposited on the observatory level at the top, granting us a bird’s-eye view of the miniature city below.

“Daddy, look at all the buildings and lights,” Harper exclaimed.

“How do you feel about that?” Kaitlyn asked her, walking over to stand beside her at the wire fencing.

“I like it!”

I watched the two of them from a distance, taking in the beauty of the moment. The bond between my daughter and Kaitlyn had become so strong that sometimes Harper opted to turn to her instead of me when she needed comfort. At first it smarted a little, but I couldn’t begrudge Harper for her love of Kaitlyn. She’d come into our lives and changed so much for the better.

And now it was time for yet another change. I took a deep breath and walked over to where they were standing.

“Beautiful,” I said, leaning down to give Harper a kiss on the top of the head before I gathered Kaitlyn in my arms. “I’m so

happy we're sharing this moment."

Kaitlyn reached back to circle her arm behind my neck. "This trip has been incredible. Thank you for making it magical."

"Ah, but the magic came here with me from Florida. It's the two of you."

I never imagined I'd have trouble finding my voice when the moment came, but here I was feeling a little anxious about everything. I cleared my throat and gently turned Kaitlyn so she was facing me.

"Everything changed the moment I met you."

Kaitlyn quirked her mouth at me. "Do you mean the first time, when I was covered with mixed drinks, or the second time, when I almost walked right back out your front door?"

"Both," I laughed. "You made quite an impression on me both times, and I'm forever grateful that you were brave enough to stick around despite..."

"Everything," she offered helpfully.

"Yes, despite everything," I repeated. "We've all been through so much together, and our lives are better because you're here with us. And, well, it's my hope... I mean it's *our* hope," I glanced down at Harper who was watching us with wide, excited eyes, having been prepped on what was coming, "that you'll consider spending the rest of your days with us."

Kaitlyn was frozen as I kneeled in front of her.

"You can grab it now, Harp," I whispered to my daughter. She reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a small navy box, popped it open then handed it to me.

"Kaitlyn, will you marry me?"

"Will you marry *us*?" Harper shouted as she jumped up and down and clapped gleefully.

I held the box out to her so that she could see the three-carat diamond glittering as brightly as any of the lights on the horizon. When I finally looked up at her, tears streamed down her cheeks.

It took a few seconds longer than it should've for Kaitlyn to react, and I started to get a little nervous, but then she dropped to her knees in front of me, crying and laughing.

“Yes, yes, I'll marry you! Both of you!”

She threw herself into my arms and smothered me with kisses while Harper turned in circles beside us singing a nonsensical victory song.

“Get over here, young lady,” Kaitlyn held her arms wide, and Harper crashed into us. We hugged one another tightly until I had to cough back the tears I felt welling.

When we finally pulled apart, Harper had an endless list of questions for us.

“Does getting married mean there's going to be a wedding?”

“You bet,” Kaitlyn said, smoothing Harper's hair out of her eyes. “We'll both get to wear pretty dresses.”

“And does getting married mean you're never going to leave again?”

“Yes,” Kaitlyn glanced up at me for a beat. “That's what it means to me.”

“Yay!” Harper paused to consider another question. “Does getting married mean...”

We waited for her to gather her thoughts.

“Does getting married mean I can call you Mommy?” Harper whispered the question.

Kaitlyn gasped as the tears sprang back to her eyes. “Is that what you want to do?”

Harper nodded silently.

“I want that too,” Kaitlyn tried to hide a sob as she pulled Harper to her.

It was more than I could've hoped for. My daughter was about to have the mother she'd always wanted, and I was about to marry a woman who would help me love harder and better every day. I'd always considered myself a lucky man, and I

knew that to the rest of the world it looked like I had everything.

But it took me too long to realize that without love, I had nothing.

“You two ready to go?” I asked them.

Harper and Kaitlyn nodded, and we walked to the elevator holding hands, leaving this perfect moment and getting ready for a lifetime of many more.

Together, as a family.

END OF MR. GRUMP

BILLIONAIRE BOSSHOLES BOOK ONE

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ABOUT LESLIE

Leslie North is the USA Today Bestselling pen name for a critically-acclaimed author of women's contemporary romance and fiction. The anonymity gives her the perfect opportunity to paint with her full artistic palette, especially in the romance and erotic fantasy genres.

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CEO's Pregnant Lover

BLURB

Never mix business with pleasure...

Klutzy, adorable Brianna Daughtry is nothing like the women Trent Caldwell is usually attracted to. The handsome, cold-hearted billionaire goes for bimbos and eye-candy who look good on his arm, women who won't make a fuss when things end. But Brianna, his new temporary assistant, is nothing like that at all...

She's the sort of woman who can make a man's heart beat faster. And make him wish he were a different man...a better man. The type of woman Trent usually avoids at all costs. Except, he can't. And even if he could, his heart doesn't want to...

Brianna can't believe someone like Trent could be remotely attracted to her. But she can't deny that his smoldering looks, his lingering touches, and his intoxicating kisses tell her otherwise. Yes, he's maddeningly overbearing and arrogant. But somehow, the alpha businessman has a sweet side as well.

Even with Trent's old nemesis casting a shadow over their happiness, it seems her dreams of forever may come true. Until a devastating turn of events threatens to tear everything they've built apart...

This book was previously released in 2014.

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Available April 20, 2023

(Available for pre-order now!)

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Leslie North book cover

BLURB

Grumpy Scottish billionaires don't go on holiday.

But if they did...

For most of Laila Diaz's life, nothing has gone as planned. But now, things are finally looking up. On her last day working for child services, she's scheduled to deliver an orphaned infant to his new legal guardian...grumpy Scottish billionaire Marcus Campbell.

It's immediately clear that while Marcus is capable and gorgeous, he's also in need of a nanny, especially with a family retreat on the horizon. Laila's out of a job, so he makes her an offer she can't refuse. The seductive billionaire seems almost too perfect, and his smoldering looks have her dreaming of hot kisses under the tropical sun. Too bad he's her boss...

Marcus has never met a woman as caring, sincere, and beautiful as Laila. There's something special about her...the way she looks at him, touches him, teases him. His icy front is melting. He's falling and falling hard—for both her and their new addition. Even as they enjoy paradise together, the real world still looms over the three of them, ready to burst their happy bubble.

When the holiday ends, can they can build something new, something that can last? Something more than just a fantasy...

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EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Laila checked the address once again, juggling her phone awkwardly with one hand, since the other was occupied with a baby carrier. The six-month-old baby she was delivering to his

new guardian was adorable and blessedly calm, but he was also *heavy*.

The baby squirmed in his seat. “It’s okay, sweetheart. We’re almost there,” Laila cooed. She swung him back and forth gently, even though the action made the ruts the carrier was digging into her forearm even worse.

When she was sure this was the address, she stepped up to the intercom system and pressed the buzzer for PH, preparing to go into her usual spiel to explain why she was there. To her surprise, the resident—Mr. Marc Campbell—didn’t even ask, as the building’s front door unlocked with a satisfying click.

“Well, that was easier than expected,” she addressed the baby boy, who was now smiling up at her. “It’s blessedly cool in here, too.” A blast of super-chilled air hit her in the face, and she closed her eyes gratefully. She headed to the waiting elevator—the carrier smacking her in the thigh with every step—and pressed the PH button.

The baby’s eyes widened at the upward motion of the elevators, and he kicked his feet in excitement. He was such a doll, which was why she’d volunteered to bring him to his guardian, even though she’d already cleared out her desk at child services. She sighed. She was jobless after today, but she’d be okay.

“We’ll both be fine. You’ll see,” she said to the baby and to herself.

Moments later, the elevator doors swished open into a wide marble vestibule. An enormous bank of windows afforded a view of the skyline. She paused to gasp. A stunning view like this, and all for one person?

“Canna help you?”

Laila turned and gasped again. As beautiful as the view was, it had nothing on the man in front of her. He was the kind of handsome that made her have to look away quickly to hide the flush in her cheeks. It almost hurt to look at him. “Are you Marc Campbell?”

He nodded, a small furrow springing up between the twin slashes of his brows. “When you buzzed, I assumed you were bringing up the Chinese food I had ordered.” She couldn’t place his accent. Irish? Scottish? He looked at the carrier on her arm. “Are you sure you’re in the right place?”

“Positive. This is Grayson Clark. He’s six months old.”

“Okay?” Marc gave her a blank look. “Are congratulations in order then, Miss—?”

This was always the worst part. Laila tried to soften her words with a smile, but she knew there was no way of saying this kindly. “Diaz. Laila Diaz. I work for ACS—the Association of Child Services. This child was turned over to us by his nanny today after his parents were killed in a car accident. The one with the tanker truck in Fort Lee. You might have seen it on the news?”

Marc shook his head. “I haven’t been keeping up with the local news this week. You said Clark, though, right?”

She nodded sympathetically. “Grayson’s parents were named Remy and Kendra Clark.”

Marc reached out to the wall to steady himself. “Remy,” he breathed.

“I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you this news.”

Marc blinked and then shook his head as if to clear it. “No, no. I understand. It’s just—” He pointed at the infant carrier. “They had a son?”

Laila nodded again. “And they named you as his guardian should anything happen to them. You didn’t know?”

Marc’s shoulder hit the wall, which may have been the only thing that kept him upright. His face had gone pure white, which answered her question.

“Mr. Campbell, I am sorry to be so abrupt. We’ve tried to reach out multiple times over the last few weeks but haven’t been able to get in touch with you. There really is no good way to deliver news like this.” She swallowed a little because

it was true. This was the part of the job she'd always hated the most.

Knowing she'd never have to do it again almost made getting abruptly laid off this morning a relief. Almost, but not quite.

"I thought this might come as a shock to you, so I took the liberty of bringing you some supplies to get you through the night," she told him hurriedly. She set the carrier down on the marble floor and held out the reusable bag on her arm. "A pack of diapers, enough formula for the night, a clean onesie, and some binkies. I don't know if he likes binkies or not yet."

She set the bag down next to the carrier and looked at the still-quiet child, feeling her heart lurch in sadness to admit there was not much else she could say about this child. She didn't know anything at all.

"It's my understanding that the Clarks' will is still going through probate, but they left everything to Grayson, so once the paperwork has been sorted, you'll have access to all of his assets to provide for his care. If you require the estate to forward you some funds for his expenses until then—" Not that Marc looked like he was hurting for money, living in this clearly luxurious penthouse in NoHo, but still, it was part of her job to run through the explanation. "—you can reach out to the executor of the Clark estate. I have that woman's information right here. She's a lawyer in Montclair, supposed to have a very good reputation." She reached into her purse, pulled out the crumpled Post-it note, and held it out to Marc.

He did not take it.

Laila looked up into his ashen face and immediately checked herself. In the span of two heartbeats, he had not only found out he'd been named guardian to an infant he'd never met, but also that a friend had passed away tragically. How dare she be so impatient while he processed this news?

"I am sorry for hitting you with so much at once," she said, feeling that same tight band of sadness envelop her heart that always gripped her when she confronted the sorrows of this world. Her fingers ached to touch his arm and give him a

reassuring squeeze, but she had no right to do so. She needed to stay professional.

“You’re fine,” Marc said in a gruff, tight voice. “You did nothing wrong. You’re just doing your job.”

Maybe so, but Laila was too much of a bleeding heart not to empathize with this man.

She gently set the carrier down at her feet and flexed her fingers before telling him, “I wish I could do more to help, but I’m afraid today was my last day with ACS. If you do have any follow-up questions, I’m sure the remaining staff would be happy to help you—but they might not be the fastest with a response.” Budget cutbacks meant getting rid of a number of jobs, including hers. The people who remained would be incredibly overstretched—as if they weren’t already. “Things are a bit...hectic in the office at the moment. Part of the reason I wanted to be sure to bring him over today as my last task was because I was afraid that if I didn’t get Grayson to you right now, he might slip through the cracks and end up in foster care.” She crouched down to gaze fondly at the infant, who was sleeping openmouthed, a small puddle of drool collecting in the folds by his chin. She couldn’t help smiling at him. “And we couldn’t have you getting overlooked, little man,” she finished quietly.

When she looked back up, Marc stood in front of her, one arm bent upward as he slowly rubbed the back of his neck. There was a haunted, hollow look to his expression.

Then he seemed to pull himself together right before her eyes. “Would you mind coming in?” he asked her, stepping back to allow her the first glimpse she’d gotten of the penthouse behind him. “If you could watch him for just a wee while longer so I can make some phone calls, I’d appreciate it.” Then he winced. “I’m sorry—you said this was your last task, on your last day. Do you need to be going? Am I keeping you from anything?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “I don’t mind staying with him a bit longer.” She made to lift the carrier again, but before she could

complete the motion, Marc scooped it up and beckoned for her to continue inside.

It was an oddly chivalrous gesture, and Laila found herself charmed, then a little embarrassed about getting charmed by something so basic as helpfulness.

Without the carrier, she felt strangely light as she entered his apartment. Almost dizzy even, although that might have had more to do with the stunning view in front of her than anything else.

A bank of windows so clean they looked like there was nothing between her and the sky revealed the streetscape below backed by much of the Lower Manhattan skyline. In the setting sun, a tiny wisp of cloud curled around the antenna of the far-off World Trade Center tower, its edges tinged pink like the cotton candy. Unexpectedly, it drew a long-lost memory of a trip to the Jersey shore when her foster parents had bought her a stick of wispy and completely delicious candy floss.

Laila mentally shook herself, forcibly yanking her thoughts back to the present day, and looked around her. From somewhere deep in the penthouse, Marc's voice rumbled in low, tense tones. She strained to listen for a moment. His accent had grown thicker, making it difficult for her to understand much of what he was saying. She could only determine that he must be speaking to his lawyer before Grayson stirred in his carrier, drawing her attention.

The infant scrunched his nose comically as he struggled against the straps. His chubby fist flew upward, and Laila immediately hurried over to where Marc had set the carrier down on the marble floor of the foyer. "Shhh," she hushed, touching his face. "Oh, you're all sweaty," she noted with dismay. "Let's get you out of there."

She hefted him into her arms, and he curled his whole body in to her, nuzzling at her neck a moment, before fussing a little and balling his fist to rub his eyes. Laila looked around for something to catch his attention, but everything in this apartment looked far too expensive to have a baby even

breathe near, much less play with. She was about to start singing when she felt a tug at her neck.

“You like that?” she asked him. Grayson’s eyes were so thoroughly focused they were close to crossing as he closed his greedy little fist around the simple pendant she always wore around her neck. “Don’t pull too hard, okay? Gentle,” she said, holding his hand to show him the right amount of pressure he needed to investigate the shiny object. “It doesn’t have any real meaning, I just think it looks nice, what do you think? No, not in your mouth, though—”

“Sorry for making you wait.”

Startled, Laila turned to Marc. She’d been so focused on Grayson that she must have missed him wrapping up his call. “It’s fine,” she said, shifting Grayson to her other hip so she could turn to him. “For me anyway. How about you?”

Marc let out another one of those long breaths. “This news is coming at a difficult time—” He paused and then laughed ruefully. “Although, truth be told I can’t think of when a *good* time to receive news like this would be. But I needed to double check a few things because my family and I are leaving on a six-week cruise tomorrow.”

“Six weeks,” Laila echoed. A vacation lasting six weeks. He may as well have told her he was flying to the moon. It was just as foreign a concept.

“Yes,” Marc said. “Everything’s been arranged, and it’s too late to cancel now. But now I have a bairn to mind?” he finished, his voice rising incredulously.

She had never heard an actual person say that word aloud in regular conversation, but she had watched *Outlander* devotedly, so now at least she knew that Marc was Scottish.

“It’s a lot.” She had to sympathize. She’d spent the past few weeks feeling like all her life’s plans had been thrown into chaos, too—though her circumstances had been markedly different. When she’d come to New York a year ago, to move in with the long-distance boyfriend she’d met online, everything in her life had seemed on track. She was in a good

relationship with a successful man, and she quickly found a job at ACS. When Brian proposed, it all seemed picture perfect.

Then she'd come home to find her fiancé in bed with another woman, and the relationship she'd counted on fell apart in an instant. She got to keep the apartment when he moved out, but that wasn't much of a benefit, since she couldn't afford it on her salary. The salary she wouldn't have after today, thanks to budget cuts and restructuring. She liked to believe she was capable of handling anything life threw at her, but lately life had been throwing with both hands.

She was doing her best to turn her wipeout into a controlled turn. She was looking into finding a new, more affordable place for herself, and subletting her current apartment until the lease ran out. And she had a good lead on a new job—the director position at the new community center going up in Queens. Unfortunately, they were still finalizing the building and had not yet moved to the interviewing stage, which made Laila nervous. The woman she'd spoken with had assured her that she was a shoo-in for the job. But getting hired likely wouldn't happen until two months from now. And she honestly didn't know how she'd get by until then.

She'd figure it out, though. She had to.

Marc didn't know this, of course. But he looked like he was having trouble breathing, the same way she'd felt for the past month. They had that in common. The difference was that for her, a six-week cruise sounded like heaven, and the way he'd said it made it sound like the seventh circle of hell.

“I understand that you need some time.” Laila said, disentangling Grayson's fingers from her necklace chain. “I can get Grayson set up with a foster home—”

“Absolutely not,” Marc interrupted immediately. “I'm not a complete eejit when it comes to children. I have younger cousins. I can manage.” He reached out to hold Grayson.

As swoon worthy as this display of paternal responsibility was, Laila was reluctant to let go of the baby.

Marc must have noticed this because he dropped his hands and chuckled. “Would it make you feel better if I tell you I have my parents staying here tonight and they can back me up?”

Laila smiled. “Maybe a little.”

“Then my parents are staying here. Mum and Da are out to dinner right now, enjoying their night on the town.” He paused and frowned. “This will put a bit of a damper on their evening.”

“Will your parents help you with him while on the cruise?” Laila wondered.

“They would, but that wouldn’t be fair since it’s supposed to be a holiday for them. No, I’ll need to find a nanny for the cruise. Dedicated eyes on the lad seems like a better idea than me just winging it.” A rueful smile stretched across his face. “And I have a solid eighteen hours to do that before we sail. Nothing to worry about, eh?” he finished, glancing at Laila.

Laila couldn’t help laughing along with him. “Super easy. I mean, you have someone experienced with kids who just happens to be unemployed right here in your foyer. You don’t even need the eighteen hours.”

Marc’s eyes went wide. For a few moments, Laila could only smile back at him stupidly. Why was he looking at her like that? Why wasn’t he laughing at the funny joke she’d just made—?

“You’re hired,” he blurted.

“I’m—what?” Laila stared at him, then shook her head. “No, no, I mean thank you and everything, but I was just kidding around. You don’t know me from Adam.”

“You worked for child services. I assume you’ve been checked out once or twice,” Marc said. “Were you fired for negligence?”

“Absolutely not,” Laila huffed. “I wasn’t fired at all—I was laid off due to budget cutbacks.”

“Grand. Would you submit to another background check just to be sure?”

“I—”

“And a rush drug test too, of course. I can get one within the hour.”

“Yes, but—”

“And you have a passport? Shite, I should have asked that first.”

She and Brian had planned a trip to the British Virgin Islands for their honeymoon. “Yes.” She sighed. “I have a passport.”

“Then you’re hired.”

“I—are you sure?” She still couldn’t quite believe it, but within an hour, Laila signed the contract Marc’s lawyer drew up and emailed over, stipulating that she was being hired on—for a magnificent sum—to serve as a nanny for a six-week cruise across the Atlantic. Pretty amazing for a foster kid who’d never left the Tri-State area.

“You look like you’re in shock,” Marc said kindly, once she had set her pen down. “There’s nothing to be worried about. It’ll be fun.”

Right then, Grayson let out a bloodcurdling wail, and Laila rushed to her new charge’s side, wondering what she’d gotten both of them into.

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