



SARA HINDS

Beneficial
MISFORTUNE

THE LAWSON LEGACY
BOOK ONE

BENEFICIAL MISFORTUNE

THE LAWSON LEGACY BOOK I

SARA HINDS

CONTENTS

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[1. Kat](#)

[2. Kat](#)

[3. Kat](#)

[4. Kat](#)

[5. Kat](#)

[6. Kat](#)

[7. Kat](#)

[8. Kat](#)

[9. Kat](#)

[10. Kat](#)

[11. Alex](#)

[12. Kat](#)

[13. Kat](#)

[14. Desmond](#)

[15. Kat](#)

[16. Kat](#)

[17. Oliver](#)

[18. Kat](#)

[19. Kat](#)

[20. Nathan](#)

[21. Kat](#)

[22. Kat](#)

[23. Kat](#)

[24. Desmond](#)

[25. Kat](#)

[26. Nathan](#)

[27. Alex](#)

[28. Kat](#)

[29. Kat](#)

[30. Kat](#)

[31. Vincent](#)

[32. Oliver](#)

[33. Kat](#)

[34. Nathan](#)

[35. Vincent](#)

[36. Kat](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also By Sara Hinds](#)

[About Sara Hinds](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

[Stalk Me](#)

Beneficial Misfortune

Copyright © 2024 by Sara Hinds

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Edited by Samantha Skinner

Cover design by AlphamisfitsDesign

Formatting by Vengeance City Press

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

For every girl who has ever wished she could work for a
Billionaire, silver-foxed, single father, daddy dom who would
make you the
meat in a Daddy-Son sandwich...

And for anyone who never realized that was something they
needed until just now,
You're Welcome! <3

PLAYLIST



TRIGGER WARNING

Beneficial Misfortune is a billionaire why-choose romance.
There is a holiday novella that takes place six months prior to the events in this book, and while it is not required, it will enhance the experience. It's also short and spicy!

TRIGGERS:

Mentions of Mental Health

FMC had an emotional/psychologically abusive ex - mentions of this is past tense

Sexually Explicit Scenes - all consensual

Stalkers - bad kind

Violence towards the FMC (not from MMCs)

Sexually explicit scenes

Other Mature Adult Themes

Gaslighting outside the harem

Child who feels the absence of a parent

Honorable mentions:

Breeding kink

FMC will eventually become pregnant within the series

Minor Taboo in the Lawson series:

These men love to share one woman between them. In the harem, there will be two dads who are brothers, along with their only sons who are cousins. There is no incest; these guys love to bring the most pleasure to their women.



CHAPTER I

Almost six months ago, my life was falling apart. Now, I sit on the subway, heading back to my apartment, which I can afford all on my own.

I'd thought Carter ruined my life, but I was wrong. If anything, he set me free. It's crazy to think I'd been heartbroken. Now I'm grateful, and while I still hate him, I'm not heartbroken anymore.

The thought of still being with him, running between New York and Maine just to keep our relationship going, makes my stomach roll. Looking back, I can see all the red flags I'd been blind to when I thought he loved me. I would have done anything for him; I did. I put who I was in a little box until it fit what he wanted, and in doing so, I lost not just myself but my drive.

Now, I have my dream job and provide for myself. I'm so busy I don't even have time to be lonely, but on those rare nights when I lay alone in bed, it's not him that my mind wanders to.

No, it's Alex and Desmond and the night we had when I first came to town.

I feel my cheeks heat at the memory, even though it's close to eighty degrees today. Thankfully, the air in here isn't as hot as the platforms, but I push the memory aside all the same.

The last thing I need is to work myself up and pass out from the heat, especially not in this neighborhood.

Getting off at my stop, my phone dings, letting me know I've got a new email, and I scramble to pull it from my bag. Usually, I'd wait until I got home, but I know the route by heart now, and I've been waiting for an email all week.

I applied to teach at this year's Summer on the Hill program, and they should be notifying the selected teachers this week. If I don't get picked, I'll be bummed, but I made sure to save enough to get me through with rent until the new school year starts. It'll be tight, but I can do it. Not to mention, I have nothing better to do, and I really love my class. Getting a few more weeks with them before they move on to the next grade would be amazing.

I hadn't realized how hard it would be to let my students go. Don't get me wrong—not every day is sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes, the kids are hard to handle, but I love my job. At the end of the day, they are all smart and funny, and they are only children. I can't say I loved school at that age, either.

My eyes fly over the email as I pull it up, not really absorbing much of what I'm reading until I hit the one thing I'd been praying for.

Congratulations! We're thrilled to inform you that you will be joining us for this year's 'Summer on the Hill' program.

I stop dead in the middle of the sidewalk, making the person behind me run into me. I jolt forward, almost dropping my phone as he grumbles about what a dumbass I am, but I couldn't care less. I read the message again, just to be sure I didn't imagine it.

I read it three times before it really sinks in, and I start moving again. I all but skip the rest of the way to my apartment, even though it's hot and everyone around me is crabby. I feel like I just won the lotto.

Thank god Carter was a piece of shit.



CHAPTER 2

I spend the weekend working on lesson plans for the summer program, practically vibrating with excitement.

By the time Monday morning rolls around, I've got the whole five weeks planned, and I can't wait to get to the school to get my list of students who will be participating.

"Hey, Kat!"

Trevor's voice startles me out of my thoughts as I head up the stairs, and I stumble before catching myself on the banister. I'd been so excited to get into the school I hadn't seen or heard him. I need to pay better attention, especially in a city like this.

"Hello Trevor, good morning," I say, attempting to plaster a polite smile on my face. I don't dislike Trevor, not really, but he's a bit much. It was worse when I first started working here. He took a long time to get the picture and understand I wasn't looking to date. Since then, he's chilled out a little bit, at least.

"A little birdie said you were working the summer program this year," he says with a smile.

His words take me by surprise. I didn't know anyone else who got approved, so how does he?

My confusion must be clear on my face because he chuckles, dropping his hand to my lower back and pressing me forward to get me moving again.

“Don’t look so shocked, Red. I told you most of us are in a group chat. You’re the one who didn’t want to be in it,” he whispers in my ear, his voice low with a forced huskiness that isn’t attractive in the slightest, though he seems to think it is.

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying something about that damn nickname. I’ve told him so many times I can’t stand it, but he never listens, and I’ve given up repeating myself.

“I hate group chats,” I say in response, taking a step out of his reach. I purposely walk through the second door so that he has to drop his hand from my back.

If he knows I did it on purpose, he doesn’t show it; instead, he holds his hands up in surrender with a chuckle. “I know, I know. I’m not trying to convince you. Trust me, I know you won’t join. But you can’t be shocked that we know things you don’t. You’re about the only person not in it.”

I shake my head at him as he follows me down the hall, even though his classroom is on the opposite side of the school.

The halls are deserted. Most of the faculty won’t show up for another half hour, but I like to be here early. Trevor randomly shows up early all the time now, too. Has been ever since he found out I do about two months ago. Thankfully, he’s not great with mornings, though, so it’s not every day.

Small mercies.

He follows me all the way to my classroom, letting himself in as he continues to talk about the summer program and who else will be teaching it.

I pause, letting my eyes fall closed and taking a deep breath when he tells me he will be as well. I’d known it was coming when he started the damn conversation, but I’d hoped I was wrong.

Of course, I couldn’t get that lucky.

Peeling my eyes open, I continue making my way to each window and pulling the shades back, determined not to let him ruin this for me.

He goes on and on, but I'm hardly listening. It doesn't take much—a hum or a nod—and he just keeps going, none the wiser.

It's not until about twenty minutes before the bell rings that he finally scurries off to get to his own classroom, and I sigh in relief.

I don't think he means any harm. He's just a guy with a crush and hopes to change my mind. It won't happen. I'm so far from interested, it's not even funny. But he doesn't seem to understand that. It's exhausting, but not the worst thing that could happen, so I let him go and hope that one day he'll get it.

Any damn day now.



The rest of the day passes in a blur from one activity to the next, and before I know it, the day is ending.

“Ms. Kat!”

Addison's voice rings out as the rest of the class hurries to get ready to leave, more than done with the day, but not Addy.

She's always the last one to leave. Her mother has to all but pull her from the room at the end of each day.

I know teachers aren't supposed to have favorites, the same way parents aren't, but I'll be damned if she isn't impossible to love. Her hair is light brown and long, falling in curls down her back. A splattering of freckles runs along her nose and cheeks, and she has the brightest blue eyes. Every day she begs me to let her stay with me, and of course, I can't, but I'll be damned if it's still not the hardest thing to tell her no with her big blue, puppy dog eyes.

Addy is smaller than most of the other students in my class, but what she lacks in size, she makes up for in sass and wit. I wouldn't be surprised if she skips a grade or two in the future.

“Yes, Addy?” I answer, crouching down next to her desk with a smile.

I already know what she's going to say. Every day, she asks me if she can just stay here for the day. It's adorable, but it also breaks my heart because she knows as well as I do that she can't.

"I forgot to give you this." She holds out a paper for me with a frown. "I'm sorry."

Well, that's strange.

"What's this?" I ask as I take it, flipping it open to read it.

"My brother is picking me up today," she says, the frown melting off her face at the mention of him.

"Oh, I didn't know you had an older brother."

"Yeah, he's the bestest big brother ever! He has a cool motorcycle, and he does great cannonballs in the pool!"

Her eyes light up as she talks about him, and she bounces around talking with her hands, showing how excited she is.

"He sounds like a really cool older brother," I tell her, tucking the note into my pocket and pushing to stand again. "I'll be back in a moment after all our friends have been picked up, and you can tell me all about him."

She smiles up at me and nods happily before I move back toward the other students, who are now all packed up and ready to go.

Thankfully, most of my kids' parents are really good about being on time. I know a few classes have parents who are known for being late or forgetting their children altogether. It hurts my heart to hear them cry when they fear their mom or dad isn't coming for them, and I'm grateful that I've yet to have to deal with that.

When the last of them has been picked up, I go back into the class to find Addy with her coat and backpack already on and stop short.

She never wants to leave.

She smiles at me when she spots me, and I do the same, happy to see her happy.

“My brother, Dessy, is the best!” she shouts, jumping up to pull me with her toward the door. “He bought me Ruby for my birthday two years ago, and he always brings me the best sweets when he travels! Oh, and he lets me stay up past my bedtime when Rose tries to put me to bed.”

Her face turns down in a frown at the mention of Rose. I’m unsure why she calls her that. Maybe she’s her stepmom? Whatever it is, she can’t seem to say her name without scowling.

“Oh, he sounds fantastic, Addy. I know how much you love Ruby. That was a very special birthday gift. He sounds like he loves you very much.”

I direct our conversation back to her dog, which I know she loves so much, and just like that, her smile is back.

“He does! He told me I’m his best friend in the whole world.” She throws her arms out wide and spins around, making her light brown curls whirl around, and I can’t help but smile watching her.

She’s so full of spirit; it’s no wonder she has her brother wrapped around her tiny fingers. Heck, she’s got me the same way, and she isn’t even my little sister. She’s so easy to love.

“Well, he’s one lucky guy to have a friend like you.”

Addy smiles when I boop her nose before she throws her arms around my waist, hugging me tight.

“Addison.”

A deep voice calls from down the hall, and we both turn to look toward it.

“Oli,” Addison huffs, folding her arms over her chest with a pout.

Oh no, I can see today might not be so easy to get her to leave after all.

The man approaches, and I look him over. He has sandy brown hair and hazel eyes. His hair is combed back neatly, and despite the heat, he wears a full three-piece suit. It fits him

perfectly, and I'd bet he gets them custom-fitted. You don't get that kind of fit from a department store buy.

It's not uncommon to see people in full business attire, regardless of the weather. I'd been a bit shocked the first few weeks when the weather warmed up. How can anyone wear that much material when it's hotter than Satan's balls? I'll never understand, but I know a lot of people have office jobs. They must be used to it.

His face lights up with a smile when his eyes find Addison down the hall, even though she seems less than happy to see him. He has a dimple on his left cheek that gives him an almost boyish quality that isn't common with businessmen. If anything, they seem to all have permanent sticks up their asses.

"What, no hug for Oli?" he asks with a laugh, coming to a stop in front of her. She doesn't even look at him, only pursing her lips further in a clear show of her annoyance, but it doesn't seem to affect him at all. Instead, he crouches down and holds his arms out, and all I can do is watch them. It takes a moment, but just when I'm going to intervene to try to save him, Addy gives in.

With a very sassy eye roll, she huffs before throwing herself into his arms with enough force that he sways. His arms go around her back, pulling her tight to his chest before he stands, taking her with him, and she squeaks before laughing.

If I thought his smile was cute before, it's almost devastating now.

He extends a hand to me with a polite smile, but it doesn't have the same warmth as the one he just had for Addison—not that it should; I'm a stranger, after all. Something about his eyes looks guarded, almost uncomfortable, as I reach out to shake his hand. The moment our hands drop, it's gone, and I wonder if it was even really there to begin with.

"My name is Oliver. My cousin was supposed to come get her today, but he got held up, so here I am. Sorry about the mixup," he tells me, bending back down to let Addison's feet rest on the floor again.

The second he's let her go, she turns, throwing her arms around my waist and almost knocking me over.

"No problem. If you don't mind just giving me a moment, though, I need to make sure you're on her release card." I tell him with a soft smile, hoping not to offend him, but I'd prefer to be sure she's allowed to leave with him rather than just taking his word.

His brows frown ever so slightly before he gives a stiff nod. "Yeah, of course," he tells me. "I'll just wait out here."

Addison's tiny fingers lace in mine as I turn, heading back into the classroom.

"Mr. Lawson," Trevor's voice has me stopping short just before the door and looking toward him. He's about halfway down the hall, headed our way with a huge smile on his face.

Damn it, I'd hoped to be gone before he came to find me. Usually, it takes him longer. His class, thankfully, has some of the chronically late parents.

"It's always nice to see our sponsor families," Trevor says, and I take advantage of his attention being off of me to slip away. Trevor usually makes a beeline to me, but whenever any of the 'rich' families are around, he's quick to cozy up to them.

I wasn't aware Addy's family was a sponsor, but I'm grateful for the distraction that offers; I'd had more than enough of Trevor for the day.

Making my way back to my desk, I quickly check the card to see who is approved to pick Addison up.

Rose Aston and Oliver Lawson.

Grabbing my purse, I shut off the lights, and Addison and I make our way back out into the hall where Trevor still stands talking to Oliver.

Poor guy. Though he doesn't seem as put off by Trevor, maybe minorly annoyed that he's talking his ear off. I guess he might not be so bad if he's not trying to get in your pants, must be nice.

“Excuse me,” I say, clearing my throat in an attempt to politely interrupt.

Oliver seems happy to turn his attention back to me, and, of course, Trevor has no issue with it.

“Thanks for waiting,” I say with a smile, and he nods. “You’re all set, though I know Addison and you both mentioned her brother was supposed to pick her up today. Just so you’re aware, only yourself and a Rose are listed as approved for pickups,” I tell him, hoping to save them some trouble should he try to pick her up tomorrow.

Oliver sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose and muttering something about him being a dumbass.

“Oh! You said a bad word, Oli!” Addison shouts, sounding all too happy about it, and I look down at her in question.

“Yes, yes. I’ll add my money to the ice cream jar when we get home,” he says with a laugh, and the tension from a moment ago melts away.

“Thank you, Miss...” he says, and I realize I haven’t even introduced myself.

Wow, way to make a great impression, Kat.

“Katherine, but the kids call me Kat,” I tell him, and he nods.

“I’ll let my uncle know that needs to be sorted out.”

Turning to Addison, he reaches out a hand to her, and while she seems somewhat reluctant to go, she does, nonetheless. With one more quick hug, she releases me before taking his offered hand with a smile.

She might have been hoping for her brother today, but there’s no denying she’s fond of Oliver as well, based on the smile on her face.

“Hey, Kat, I was just headed out,” Trevor says, taking a step closer to me. Without thinking, I take a step back. He, of course, doesn’t notice or doesn’t care, but Oliver does.

He'd been ready to leave a second ago, but now he stops, leaning down to whisper something in Addison's ear that has her face lighting up a second before she's running back to me.

"Ms Kat, will you walk with me!" she shouts, excitedly bouncing in place, her eyes begging me to say yes.

How can I resist, especially when my other option is Trevor?

I agree, and she squeals, grabbing my hand and all but dragging me back to Oliver with her.

"Sorry, Trevor. Next time," I call back to him as she pulls me along, not bothering to even look back at him.

I can feel his eyes follow me down the hall all the way to the end before we turn the corner, and I finally let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Thank you," I say, turning to Oliver as we walk on either side of Addison, who has one of our hands in each of her small ones.

"No problem, I could see you were uncomfortable," he says without looking my way, but that's fine. I get the feeling he's not much of a people person.

We walk in silence through the rest of the school as Addison hums some happy tune, oblivious to the fact that she was just used to rescue me.

If she wasn't my favorite before, she definitely is now.

The sun is hot, shining down at full force in the blazing heat the second we walk out the door. It's a drastic change from the almost chilly school, but I welcome it. I love the sun and the way it warms everything it touches, even if it's a little too hot sometimes. I'll take the heat over the cold any day.

"You know, if he's giving you a problem, you can always report him to the principal," Oliver says, still not looking my way, instead looking out at the afternoon traffic as if it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen.

"He's annoying, but so far, it's nothing I can't handle. I just didn't have the patience for him today, is all," I tell him, and

now he does turn to look at me.

His eyes roam my face as if searching for something. After a minute, he shakes his head and turns away, squeezing Addy's hand.

"Come on, let's get home," he says, and with one last hug, she follows her cousin into the limo that's waiting on them.

Rich people.

I wave to Addy as they drive away and quickly make my way to the subway, wanting to avoid lingering and giving Trevor another chance to corner me.



CHAPTER 3

I expect someone to call about Addison's card update today, but as the day winds to an end, I worry Oliver may have forgotten. It's not terrible if he did, but it would make more work for her brother. The office will have to call her parents and get their okay before she can be released.

Addison doesn't have a note today, but she is giddy when the time to pack up comes. It's the first time she's ever gotten ready to leave with the rest of the kids, and she's the first one in line at the door. It's a bit strange but also reinforces my idea that she doesn't get along well with her mother. The thought makes me sad for her. She's such a happy little girl.

The bell rings, and I push my worries aside as I lead the children out the door. Addison stands beside me, looking around, but must not see him yet. The students rush to their parents one by one, and before long, it's only me and Addison.

Her bottom lip pokes out a bit, and I watch as her eyes continue to scan the crowd, even as it thins.

So much for having mostly on-time pickups.

Thankfully, my skirt is long, making it easy to keep myself modest as I crouch down to Addison's height.

"Don't worry, Addy, he probably just got stuck in traffic. I'm sure he'll be here any minute."

She looks up at me, and I can see she's upset, but as she looks out around us one last time, her whole face lights up. One second, she's here, and the next, she's running full speed at a man I've never seen before.

Holy shit.

If I thought Oliver looked like the businessman type, this guy makes him look like a kid playing dress up.

He's tall and well-built, and while he's definitely older than Oliver by a few years, somehow, it only makes him look better. His three-piece black suit looks like it was painted on. The sleeves flex around his arms even as he simply walks, and it's honestly a wonder they don't rip.

His dark, almost black hair is combed back and styled to perfection, with streaks of gray running through the short sides. Most businessmen are clean-shaven, but he has a beard—like his hair—peppered with gray as if artfully done.

Gray hair isn't supposed to be that attractive. Most people try to cover it up, but goddamn, something about this man makes me think he would look good in a tutu.

Addison all but leaps into his arms, and he's ready for her, easily hoisting her up in the air as her giggles fill the hall. It's clear from the way she runs to him and his attention to her that they know and love each other, but even still, I have a job to do.

"Excuse me," I call to him and want to smack myself when my voice comes out in a broken little whisper. Thankfully, it doesn't seem like he heard me.

Get it together, Kat.

Clearing my throat, I try again and thank the stars when my voice comes out more normal this time.

He peels his eyes away from Addison, who's talking a mile a minute, to look up at me and holy shit. His eyes are gorgeous.

They're blue, but not like any blue I've seen before. They look like ice, and with the hard set of his jaw and his

appearance, they really drive home the whole fuck off vibe he has going for him.

There's no denying he's intimidating, but also yummy.

Shit, that's not appropriate.

"I just need to check her pickup card to ensure you're listed," I tell him as he walks toward me, Addison still in his arms.

His brows pinch slightly, but he nods in understanding. "Nathaniel Lawson," he says, coming to a stop a few feet from me and sweet baby Jesus, his voice.

My eyes widen at the sound as it rolls over me like a lover's caress. Unable to do anything else, I quickly nod and turn to head back into the classroom.

I really should have brought Addison with me, but in my haste to get away, I'd not thought about it. Stealing a glance back at him, I find him and Addison still just outside the door, waiting. His eyes bore into me with such intensity that I whip back around to my desk to hide the heat that's currently taking over my face.

He just has an intense personality. It doesn't mean anything.

But even as I search through the classroom release cards, I can feel his eyes on me.

It's not until I pull the card that I realize how frazzled he has me. I know what's on this card. I just looked at it yesterday.

Crap.

Bringing the card with me, I head back out into the hall where Addison is telling Nathaniel about every aspect of her day with a smile. His eyes are no longer on me, instead watching her with a smirk that changes his whole face.

I let out a sigh of relief now that I'm free of his gaze, and just like that, his eyes snap back to me.

"Um, unfortunately, you aren't listed on her card," I tell him before I lose my nerve, holding the card up for him to see.

“But we can go—” Reaching out, he snatches the card from my hand and examines it. He reads over the approved list and medical information before flipping it back to the front, and I’m about this close to snatching it back.

I don’t want to think this guy is just some creep, but the information on that card is private, and I don’t want it to fall into anyone’s hands.

Before I can decide what to do, he holds the card back out to me, and I take it with a frown.

“I’m her father,” he says, nodding down at the card.

Oh shit, no way.

I look down at the card in my hand, and right there at the top, his name sits on the line next to father’s information.

Fantastic.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize,” I tell him, feeling stupid.

I hadn’t even thought to check the parent’s side because I’d been expecting her brother.

He smiles at me, and anything else I might have been about to say is forgotten.

“It’s no problem. I’m glad to see you’re concerned about keeping Addison safe,” he says, gazing down at her with a look that tells me how important she is to him.

“I must say it is unusual for someone to be unaware of who I am, though,” he tells me, and somehow doesn’t sound like a pretentious ass about it. It’s not as if he’s gloating, just simply stating a fact, and it only makes me feel sillier.

“Sorry, I’m new to the school. I haven’t had a chance to get to know all the parents yet, and usually Rose picks her up, with the exception of Oliver yesterday.”

His smile melts away at the mention of Rose, and I regret bringing her up.

Crap, hopefully, they aren’t in the midst of a messy divorce or something. That would explain why Addison isn’t fond of

her, but I also don't want to be the reason to upset him.

"Yes, that reminds me. I need to update that card," he says, nodding to the card I still hold.

"Oh, you can do that in the main office. It's just down the hall and to your left, about three doors down on the right." I point as I talk, and he watches me as if soaking in the information.

I can't say I blame him. This school is so big it took me about a week before I stopped getting lost.

"Thank you," he says with a nod. "It was nice to meet you."

They make it about three steps before Addison wiggles out of his arms and comes flying back toward me.

I have just enough time to crouch down before she's flinging herself into my arms hard enough that I rock back, almost losing my balance.

"Have a great weekend, Addy," I tell her, soothing her hair back as she peers up at me with a smile.

"You too, Ms. Kat. I'll see you Monday!" she yells, hurrying back to her father and taking his hand to pull him down the hall.

I can't help but laugh as I watch them go, Addison's tiny self pulling him behind her as she talks a mile a minute. It's ridiculous, really, but also adorable.

I turn away, heading back into my classroom before I can get caught watching them like a creep. It's not until I go to grab my purse that I realize I still have Addison's card in my hand.

Crap, they need the card so they can update it.

Slapping my hand to my forehead, I move a little faster as I turn off the lights and lock my room. Then, I head down to the office to drop it off.

"Of course, Mr. Lawson." I hear Barbara, the school secretary, say before I even enter the office. Her voice is a few octaves higher than usual, and when I enter the office, I find

her staring up at Nathaniel with a smile that reminds me of a schoolgirl with a crush.

She doesn't even look up at me, instead happily making heart eyes at him until he clears his throat and snaps her out of it, kinda. She stands and makes her way to a cabinet behind her, quickly flipping through the folders it holds. But even busy, she can't seem to keep her eyes off him, glancing back over her shoulder every few seconds.

I take a step forward, and Addison notices me over her father's shoulder, where she once again sits in his arms. A smile pulls at her lips, forcing mine to do the same before I clear my throat to make the other two aware of my presence. I hate to interrupt, but I know they need the card.

They both turn to me, and I'm shocked to find a glare on Barbara's face when her eyes land on me.

"Yes, what can I help you with?" she snaps, her voice cold and nothing like it had been a moment ago with him.

Wow, rude.

"I just wanted to bring the card down," I say, holding it up to show her. "I'd sent Nathaniel down to update it, but realized after he left I forgot to actually give it to him."

Walking forward, I drop it on her desk. I expect some kind of understanding or maybe even a thank you. But she scoffs and waves me off.

"Mr. Lawson doesn't need it updated. We can just get him a new one," she says, putting heavy emphasis on his name as if I might not know it.

Which is ridiculous, considering his daughter shares the same last name.

More than that, her comment throws me off.

"Oh, I thought the policy was to have one per student and simply update it as needed," I say, which only makes her already annoyed face pinch into a glare.

I know for a fact that's the policy. I made sure to read it thoroughly before starting this year. This was my dream job,

and I wasn't going to mess it up over something like a policy slip.

Barbara slams the drawer closed, and I startle slightly at the sound but hold her gaze.

I've never had an issue with Barbara before, so her attitude seems a bit strange. I don't see her often, as I'm here most days before her, but on the occasional times I have, she's been nice enough.

"Yes, that is the policy," she bites out, snatching the card off the desk and ripping it up with much more force than necessary. "Which means you would have been responsible for disposing of the old one. It's not that hard to understand."

"I would have had no issues going to retrieve the old one if that's the policy, Barbara."

Both of us turn our attention to Nathaniel, and Barbara is once again as sweet as can be.

"Completely unnecessary. I know you're a busy man. Katherine is just new. You'll have to forgive her," she says, waving a hand in my direction as if shooing me away, but I don't move right away, much to her obvious annoyance.

I stand there for another moment, watching as Barbara calls him over to update the card I brought in. I watch as she gets so damn close she might as well be sniffing him before I can't take it anymore.

"Um, have a wonderful day," I say, taking a step back toward the door with a wave to Addison. I don't exactly want Barbara to have a wonderful day, but I also don't feel like telling her to pull the stick out of her ass is a good idea.

Without waiting for their responses, I turn and head out the door.



CHAPTER 4

I spend the weekend much the same way I always do: lesson planning and relaxing. I also go to the store and grab groceries for the week. Overall, it's normal, and by Monday, I've all but forgotten about Barbara's weird behavior... until I get to the school.

Trevor is nowhere in sight, and I dare think it's going to be a good day. It's not until about twenty minutes before my class starts—when I go to the teacher's lounge to make copies for the day—that I realize something strange is going on.

Barbara and a few of the teachers are getting coffee or just hanging out before the day starts. Where they normally greet me or at least smile, today, Barbara looks me up and down before her face twists up in a scowl.

It's uncomfortable, but I make my copies and head out. Nobody says a word.

It's like that all week. The only one who keeps talking to me is Trevor, but even he's around less. It's strange but not unwelcome, especially because I have no idea what happened to cause the shift.

Nathaniel's been picking Addison up every day since our first meeting. She no longer has an issue and is more than happy to see her father every day, which leads me to believe that Rose was, in fact, the issue.

He's always the last to pick up, but he explained he has to come from the office to get her and often hits traffic. It's not a big deal, and knowing that, Addison and I make the most of our time together, closing up the classroom for the day or playing games like I spy or rock, paper, scissors.

The week is smooth until Friday.

A note from the office earlier in the day let me know Nathaniel would be running late. Waiting for him was pretty normal, and he'd never sent a note before, so I assumed that meant he would be later than usual. Instead of having Addison get ready with the rest of the kids, I gave her a coloring sheet to do and explained that her daddy would be a little late. She didn't seem to mind and was more than happy to color him a picture.

I get the other kids off with their parents and head back into the room to wait with Addison, only for Trevor to come waltzing in about five minutes later.

"Hey, Red, a few of us are going out for drinks tonight. Figured I'd see if you wanted to come with us," he says loudly, without so much as giving me a moment to respond to his greeting.

I dart my eyes to Addison, but she doesn't even look up at him, and I sigh in relief.

Teachers are people, obviously, but I don't love the idea of my students hearing things like that.

"Oh, shit, sorry. Didn't realize you still had one," he says, having the decency to look sheepish, not that it matters as he swears.

"Ooooh, you said a bad word!" Addison sing-songs because, of course, she wouldn't miss that.

I glare at him, and he rubs the back of his neck, looking from her to me before muttering an apology, and she goes back to her coloring.

Trevor walks up to my desk, unable to take a hint. I abandon my lesson planning to stand, not enjoying the feeling of him looming over me.

“So what do you say?” he asks, leaning into my personal space and looking more hopeful than he has a right to.

This isn't the first time he's invited me out, and I turn him down every time. I'd hoped he would stop asking eventually, but that would seem to be too much to ask.

“Sorry, Trevor, I don't really enjoy the bar scene,” I tell him, packing up my stuff to try and appear busy. I don't know when Nathaniel will be here, and I had hoped to use this time to be productive, but it seems that's no longer an option.

“Oh, come on, Kat, you never go out with us,” he whines, and I feel my patience begin to slip. I'm not usually an angry person, but he's getting on my last nerve right now.

“I don't know why you would want me to go, anyway. It seems most of the staff doesn't even like me,” I snap, realizing too late how that sounds. Not only do I sound like a bitch, but I sound like I care what they think, when really I don't.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I try again.

“I'm going to pass. I have some things to do this weekend. Maybe next time,” I tell him, even though I know it's a damn lie.

I wouldn't go out with him if he were the last guy in New York. Something about him reminds me so much of Carter, and while it might not be fair to him, that makes him a hard no in my book.

Bracing his hands on top of my desk, he leans in even closer, and it takes everything in me not to take a step back. As uncomfortable as I might be with him this close, this is my classroom, and I won't give him that power over me.

“Don't be like that. They like you just fine. They're just jealous,” he says with a laugh, shaking his head. “Ignore them. They will see nothing happening with you and Mr. Money Bags and get over it, eventually.”

“Who?” I ask stupidly, not following what he's saying.

“Me,” a deep voice says from the doorway, and Trevor bolts upright, spinning around and coming face to face with

Nathaniel.

“Oh, um, I’m sorry, Mr. Lawson, sir. I was just trying to explain why Kat was having issues with the other staff. I didn’t mean anything by it,” he stammers, sounding shaken, and I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips.

Serves him right for being a gossip, but also, it’s nice to see him on this side of it. He so often makes me uncomfortable.

I peek around Trevor’s back to get a glimpse of Nathaniel, and I can see why Trevor’s about two seconds from shitting himself.

If I thought he looked unapproachable before, it’s worse now. His cold blue eyes narrow as he looks Trevor over like something he might peel from the bottom of his shoe.

He’s not even looking at me, and I still feel the chill.

“Daddy!” Addison’s shout pulls his gaze from Trevor, who lets out a sigh of relief, sagging against my desk.

Nathaniel takes a step into the classroom, crouching down to scoop Addison up in his arms as she runs at him full force, and he flings her up into the air. It’s the same way she greets him every day at pickup, and it’s so damn cute I could seriously melt.

Who knew I had a thing for good fathers?

Oh, nope—bad, Kat! I will not develop a crush on one of my students’ parents, especially not when I don’t know if he’s single.

At the thought, my eyes dart down to his hand, and while I don’t see a ring, that doesn’t mean anything. For all I know, he could be one of those guys who doesn’t wear it.

Besides, we’re not looking for a man, I remind myself.

“Hello, Katherine, sorry for the delay. One of my meetings ran over. It always does with that particular client,” he says, looking up at me, and I thank god he didn’t look a second sooner. He’s intimidating enough without knowing I’m damn near checking him out.

“It’s no problem,” I say, looking around to realize the one thing that had been an issue is gone.

Huh, I hadn’t even seen him go. He must have been in a hurry.

“He snuck out a moment ago. Sorry if I interrupted.” Nathaniel informs me, taking my curiosity as interest in him.

I bark a laugh before quickly covering my mouth. That was rude.

“Oh, no, not at all. Thank you actually, he’s been trying to get me to go out with him and, well, the rest of the staff. The bar isn’t really my scene, and the staff doesn’t seem so fond of me currently. Not to mention, I’d rather repaint my apartment with a child’s paintbrush and watch the paint dry than go out with him.”

I snap my mouth shut to stop my word vomit, but the damage is done. I feel the heat as it blooms on my cheeks, and embarrassment settles in with everything I just shared.

Wonderful Kat, very professional.

He stands watching me for a moment, and I can’t stop myself from fidgeting under his heavy gaze, wringing my hands together in front of me.

I expect him to be annoyed or maybe repulsed by my oversharing, but instead, a smile splits his lips. It’s not a real smile, more like a smirk, but holy hell, if I thought he was good-looking before... Now, he’s stunning.

Shit.

He chuckles, and the sound rolls over me, his deep voice making it sound like a rumble.

“Happy to be of service, then. I guess it worked out for the best. I don’t think that guy will give you much trouble anymore.”

He lets Addison down so that she can collect her things. Usually, I would go and help her, but right now, I’m stuck, standing as still as a statue, still reeling from the embarrassment that is my damn mouth.

“Unfortunately, I can’t say the staff will like you anymore. I probably owe you an apology for that,” he says, and his smile disappears, replaced by a scowl.

“Why would you need to apologize for that? It has nothing to do with you,” I tell him, because how could it?

“You know, at first, I thought you were simply being nice or pretending. When I picked Addison up and you said you needed to check her card. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had tried that.” He pauses for a moment as Addison runs over and hugs me before making her way back to him and grabbing his hand.

She’s in her own little world, humming a tune and hardly paying us any attention.

“Walk with us?” he asks, nodding to the door. I nod in response, turning back to grab my purse from my desk.

I lock up my classroom, and the second I turn around, Addison grabs my hand in one of her little ones, the other holding her father’s. She laughs and swings her feet off the ground, and I can’t help but smile as I watch her.

“Like I said, I might owe you an apology. Not only for them not liking you, but also for not believing you. It wasn’t until I saw how Barbara acted that I started to believe you. Not to mention you haven’t acted any different all week. Add that to the fact that you call me Nathaniel instead of Mr. Lawson, like everyone else. Plus, your reaction to the way Trevor all but ran from me, and I realized maybe you weren’t pretending after all.”

He says a lot, and it takes a second for me to wrap my mind around it all, but the thing that sticks out the most is the fact that he knows Trevor, and he knows him by name.

My confusion must be clear because he goes on to explain.

“I make a habit of knowing the people who will be around my daughter,” he says, and that makes sense, but this is also a huge school.

Is he telling me he knows everyone here?

“Regardless of how ridiculous the nickname might be, he’s not wrong. I have a lot of money. It’s part of owning the biggest company in New York, but with that also comes the attitude from your coworkers.”

I don’t say anything because, once again, I’m lost.

What does his financial status have to do with my coworkers and how they like me? That sounds like a crazy reason not to like someone. What, because I teach his daughter?

“What does your having money have to do with me, though?” I ask, unable to connect the dots.

We make it to the front of the school, where his limo waits. He chuckles but doesn’t answer as Addison drops our hands to run to the driver, who’s making his way around the car.

“We’re on our way to dinner. Would you like to join us?” he asks, and I’m kind of taken by surprise.

“Yes! Please, Ms Kat! It’s Oli’s birthday!” she shouts, all but jumping from the driver’s arms to run back to us.

“Oh, um. I’m sorry, I can’t tonight, honey,” I tell her, feeling guilty as hell the second the words leave my mouth and her lips pull down in a frown. It’s not that I’m opposed to dinner exactly, but I don’t really want to intrude on family time. Not to mention, I’m sure wherever they’re going, I’m severely underdressed. “Maybe next time,” I tell her, trying to make her feel better, but it does nothing, and she continues to stare up at me with her puppy dog eyes.

“Addison, don’t make her feel bad. It was very last minute, and you know what Oli says about that look.” Nathaniel scolds her halfheartedly, and a smile turns her lips.

“That my puppy eyes are a lethal weapon,” she says with a chuckle, and I laugh as well.

He’s right.

“Have a good night, Ms. Kat,” Nathaniel says as Addison hugs me. I’d never thought my name could sound sexy, but I was wrong.

“You as well. Enjoy dinner.” With a wave, I head off toward the subway station as they get into the limo and drive away.

It’s not until I’m seated on the subway that I realize he never answered my question.



CHAPTER 5

The next few weeks, things fall into a pattern as Nathaniel becomes the default parent picking up Addison.

A note comes down from the office, and I'm not surprised it's from Nathaniel. He's the only parent who ever sends a note; often when others run late, they don't know until it's too late, or they just don't bother to say anything. I get it, though, at least with him. He said he owns a huge company. I imagine he's a very busy man. The fact that he finds time to pick up Addison daily is adorable, and if that means I have to stay late with her every once in a while, I'm happy to help.

Only today's note doesn't say he's simply running late.

Today, his meeting is going to run over enough that he's asked if I would mind bringing Addison to the office.

My first instinct is to refuse. While the subways are safe enough for me, I don't know them well enough outside of my usual route to want to take Addison. Reading the rest of the note makes that a moot point, though. He's offered to send a car to pick us up.

His secretary's number is scribbled at the bottom, with instructions for me to message them and let them know if I can do that or not. I read over the note three times before I set it down on my desk, looking around my classroom as the students silently read.

I never bring out my phone with the kids in class, wanting to give them my full attention, but I guess right now wouldn't hurt. Digging it out of my purse, I type in the number and a message that confirms I can, in fact, bring her, but I hesitate to press send, my thumb hovering over the screen as nerves get the best of me.

It's silly, really. He's asking me to bring Addison to him, not out on a date. I see him almost daily at this point. So why does my stomach feel like there are millions of butterflies inside of it?

Crap.

I let my thumb fall to the screen, sending the confirmation before I can think any more about it.

It's just for Addison, a favor between friends, I tell myself, but it feels like a lie. I set my phone down on my desk and get back to what I was doing, almost jumping out of my skin when it vibrates with a response not even a minute later.

The car will be there at 3:30. Thank you.

It's a simple response, straight to the point, and not even from him, but I still feel the flush as it works its way across my cheeks.

I'm going to Nathaniel's office. Something about that feels big, even if I can't explain why.

So much for not crushing on him.



The rest of the day flies by, and before I know it, it's just Addison and me left.

"Hey, Addy, your daddy's in a meeting today and can't make it," I tell her after everyone else has gone. Her face falls a bit, but she recovers quickly.

"Is Dessy coming?" she asks with a smile, and I shake my head, feeling bad that she's stuck with me.

“No, your daddy’s sent a car, and I’m going to take you to his office to meet him,” I say, watching as her smile grows impossibly wider.

“Yay! Daddy’s office is so big, and Emily always has a sucker for me!” she cheers, bouncing around before quickly going to grab her backpack from the hook.

On the walk through the school, she tells me all about the office: how it has a fountain that she likes to throw pennies in to make a wish, how many people there are, and how many floors it has.

I can’t help but hope she’s overexaggerating. She’s only five, after all. It wouldn’t be that crazy for her to make it sound larger than life. But Nathaniel did say it was the largest business in New York, not to mention I’ve seen his suits and his limo a few times now.

Shit, what have I gotten myself into?

Speaking of his limo.

We walk out, and there it is, sitting out front in all of its black, shining glory. I’d seen them get into the car a few times at pickup, and the driver was always there, ready to open the door for them. But watching them take it and knowing I’m about to are two very different things.

Now, Addy and I are going to take it all the way across the city.

The driver is an older man who opens the door for us as we walk down the stairs. Something about him seems vaguely familiar, but I can’t figure out from where, and I don’t want to keep staring at him like a weirdo.

“Thank you,” I say as we reach the door, and Addison hugs him before climbing in, clearly used to this and him.

He nods and gives me a polite smile as I make to follow Addison, stopping short when I hear my name being called behind me.

Crap. Of course, it’s Trevor.

Ever since the day he put his foot in his mouth with Nathaniel, he's been more scarce. Not gone completely, but definitely not around so much, either popping up early in the morning or after Addison is already gone for the day.

I guess my luck had to run out eventually.

I turn to see Trevor jogging down the stairs toward me, eyeing the limo as if he'd never seen one before.

"Where are you off to?" he asks, and it seems like a reasonable question one might ask out of curiosity, but something about his tone says it's more than that.

"Um, I'm taking Addison to Nathaniel," I tell him, despite not really wanting to. But even with his off-putting tone, it's not a secret. The note came from the office, so it's not as if he couldn't find out if he really wanted to.

"Why?" He snaps, his brows pinching as he looks at the driver in disgust before turning back to me.

I know he's an ass, but so far, he's been mostly nice to me, maybe too nice, in hopes of getting me to go out with him. His tone had thrown me when it was directed at me, but seeing the way he looks at this man who's simply doing his job pisses me off.

"Excuse me, Ms, but Mr. Lawson will be waiting," the driver says before I can say anything that might be considered unprofessional to a colleague.

The smile on his face is professional—the same one he's had since he met us at the door—but something about his eyes tells me he knows what he's doing.

"Yes, you're right," I tell him before turning to get in the car without another word to Trevor.

The driver closes the door before walking back around to the front, getting in, and pulling away. I watch out the large back, dark tinted windows as Trevor stands there watching us go, unable to stop my chuckle at seeing his face turn red.

I'll probably regret it later, but I can't deny it felt good.

The glass divider that separates the driver from the back is down, and I slide down the seat toward it as Addison watches the city and people pass by.

“Thank you,” I say, keeping my voice down so as not to draw Addison’s attention.

His eyes flick to meet mine in the rearview for a moment, and he smiles. This smile is more genuine, not the same practiced professional one he had when he was holding the door.

“My pleasure, Ms.”

“Kat, please call me Kat,” I say, and he nods.

“My pleasure, Kat,” he says, and I smile back. I hate the formalities of Ms and Mr, worrying about last names and titles. It reminds me of Carter and his friends and how much all of that mattered to them. They were all about status, and I don’t want to live like that. It’s one of the reasons I let the kids call me Ms. Kat. It’s less formal.

He’s pretty big for a guy who drives people around all day. He also wears a suit, and while it’s not as showy as Nathaniel’s, it’s still probably more than one of my paychecks. His hair is shaved short, and I think I can see hints of tattoos that decorate his skin at his collar, but it’s his hands that really draw my attention.

Every finger is covered in scars. Some look older than others, but there are so many overlapping that it’s a wonder he can still properly grip the steering wheel.

What the hell does that do to someone?

“Vincent,” he says, snapping me out of my wandering thoughts, and I realize I’ve been staring rudely.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s given me his name, and I mull it over for a moment, trying to place it with his familiarity, but still come up empty.

“It’s nice to meet you, Vincent.”

With that, I quickly scoot back down the bench seat to sit beside Addison and try to fight my embarrassment. He didn’t

seem to mind my curiosity about his hands, didn't even mention it, but I still feel as if I was caught doing something wrong.

A learned behavior after years of dealing with Carter and his constant judgment. I've been trying to unlearn them, but it's taking longer than I'd hoped.



CHAPTER 6

Of course, she wasn't exaggerating.

Vincent pulls to a stop right in front of what has to be the tallest building in the whole damn city, and suddenly, I'm regretting my decision.

Shit, I should have just told him we were okay to wait at the school.

Vincent is at the door, and Addison all but flies out of it as I scramble to keep up with her. She flings her arms around him, and he bends to scoop her up.

"Thanks for the ride, Uncle Vinny!" she says, nuzzling into him.

"Anything for the little princess." I hear him say as he sets her back on the ground, while I attempt to smooth out any wrinkles in my clothes to ensure I'm presentable.

"You look lovely, Kat," he says, and I pause, unsure what to say.

I'm not used to compliments like that.

"Um, thank you. I didn't know I'd be coming here when I dressed for the day," I say, gesturing to the building in all its intimidating glory. "Or I would have worn something nicer."

Addison comes over and grabs my hand, pulling me toward the building. She's clearly unaware of my inner turmoil, and

I'm left with no choice but to follow her; after all, she knows this place far better than I do. The entire building is glass, and even from out here on the sidewalk, I can see the main floor is full of people. If she went in alone, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"I assure you, Nate will have no issues with how you look," Vincent says, swinging the door closed behind us before making his way back around the car and disappearing into the driver's seat.

It's not until Addison has dragged me through the door that I realize what he just said.

Nate.

I've never heard anyone call him that. It's always Mr. Lawson when anyone mentions him at the school. Hell, Barbara had looked at me like I was crazy when I called him Nathaniel in the office on that first day.

Oh god, Addison had called him Uncle Vin. Are they brothers?

I really hope not, or I might have just made a bigger ass of myself than I already thought I was.

"Hello, Addison, and who is this you have with you today?" The woman at the front desk asks as we stop before it.

If I had to guess, this must be the woman who gives her suckers. It would make sense, considering the way she beelines for her.

"This is Ms. Kat. She's my teacher!" Addison says with a smile that the woman returns before she turns to smile at me as well.

"Shh, don't tell, but I think she could be my new mommy too!" she says in what I think is meant to be a whisper but isn't even close, and her words catch me off guard.

From the look on the receptionist's face, I don't think she was expecting that either. I'm shocked, unsure what to say, but thankfully, she recovers faster than I do.

“How about you come pick a sucker before you go up to see your dad, honey?”

Addison drops my hand and is around the desk in a second, happily going through the small bowl of suckers to pick one.

“Emily,” the receptionist says, reaching out to me to shake my hand.

“Kat,” I say, taking her hand and trying to plaster a smile on my face, but it feels forced.

She steals another peek at Addison, who is still picking through the suckers as if this might be the most important decision she’ll ever make.

“Don’t mind her. She’s had a lot of nannies she’s not very fond of. All she wants is a mother, so I’m sure she’s just excited to have someone around she can look up to,” she tells me and actually manages to keep her voice down, unlike Addison.

I know she’s trying to make me feel better, and while it makes me less anxious, it also makes me sad.

“This one!” Addison yells, holding up her chosen sucker in the air like a trophy. She’s so happy I can’t help but smile, watching her hug Emily before she rushes back around the desk and once again takes my hand, pulling me further into the building and into the swarm of people.

“It was nice to meet you,” I shout back to Emily with a wave, and she waves back before returning to work.

My head is on a swivel as we make our way deeper and deeper into the building, and oh my god...they really have a fountain in the lobby.

Wow.

It’s kind of funny to watch grown men and women in some of the fanciest clothes I’ve ever seen quickly make room for a little girl, but they do. Some nod or say hello, and she politely responds, but she doesn’t stop until we reach a set of doors.

An elevator.

The whole wall is elevator after elevator, but this one is just a little different. Instead of having silver doors, they are black with a plaque above them that reads Lawson.

They have their own elevator. I know I shouldn't be surprised, considering it's their building and their business, but seeing the divide between what I've always thought was rich and powerful and what they have is jarring.

I scan the room while we wait, and beyond all the people and shiny surfaces, I also notice the security, though they seem to have no issue letting Addison barrel her way through. They're probably used to her.

The elevator dings, and the door barely opens all the way before Addison pulls me in, clicking the very top button labeled 'office.' Somehow, I don't think that means the average office where people work—no cubicles or little desks here.

When the elevator doors open, I'm left picking my jaw up off the ground.

Yeah, not at all cubicles and desks. Every wall is glass. The outside walls let the sun in while also giving a beautiful view of the city. The bright sun reflects off the dark floors, almost blinding me. There's a long hall that leads down the center of the floor straight across from the elevator, with what I assume are offices on either side, though I can't be sure. Unlike the glass that lines the outside of the building, the glass down the hall is frosted and dark, making it impossible to see in.

The only desk I see is the large one against the far left wall, not far from the elevator, with a beautiful blonde seated behind it.

Holy shit. Is one of the requirements for working here to look like a damn model because I haven't seen one person who isn't insanely attractive.

"Addison," the woman at the desk calls to her, but the tiny girl ignores her and pulls me forward, right past the desk and down the hall.

“Addison!” she calls again, and I hear her get up, no doubt to follow us. But Addison is on a mission, and based on the click of her heels on the floor, I don’t think she’s going to be fast enough.

I could probably stop her, but honestly, I’m not sure why she wants her to stop, and I don’t really love the tone she has when calling her name. Instead, I take in more of my surroundings. We pass two doors, one on each side of the hall and then another two a few feet later, and it would seem the one at the end of the hall is her destination.

Conference room.

“Stop, Addison. Your father is in a very important meeting and doesn’t need you disturbing it!” The woman hisses, and I hear the click of her heels get faster as she picks up her pace.

Oh no.

Her words register with me a beat too late, and before I can stop her, Addison is pushing the door open.

Nathaniel is, in fact, in the middle of a meeting. He stands at the head of the table across the room from us, the floor-to-ceiling glass window at his back. The view of the city from here is like nothing I’ve ever seen before, but I don’t really have time to appreciate it when all heads turn toward us.

I attempt to swallow the lump in my throat, but when Nathaniel looks up, and his eyes meet mine across the room, well, I might as well be choking on it.

The annoying click of heels on the floor stops right next to us, and the secretary stands at my side.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lawson, I tried to stop her,” she says with a huff, having the audacity to glare down at Addison.

Yeah, I don’t like her.

“Nonsense, Anna. My daughter is always welcome, you know this,” he says, waving her off. She opens her mouth as if to say something before snapping it closed again.

“Yes, sir,” she says, looking down at her feet, and my eyes flick to her feet as well.

Well, no wonder she couldn't catch her. Those heels are so damn high it's a wonder she could go as fast as she did.

Addison drops my hand and takes off around the table, right into her father's waiting arms.

I swear it doesn't matter how often I see them do this, it's always adorable. Or at least I think it is. Apparently, the secretary doesn't seem to agree because she huffs.

Addison is talking a mile a minute about her day, telling Nathaniel every detail before finally holding up her sucker like a trophy to show him. He shakes his head, teasing her about her love of sugar before setting her back on her feet. She quickly unwraps her treat and pops it in her mouth, clearly having only waited to eat it to show him.

He stands back at his impressive height and turns his gaze to me. His eyes aren't the only ones on me, and I fight the urge to squirm under the weight of all of them.

I want to apologize for the interruption or say something, but my body won't cooperate, so instead, I stand frozen.

"Thank you for bringing her," he says, reaching out to place his hand on her head, and his words seem to remind Addison that I'm here. She ducks out from under his hand and hurries back to me.

"Anna, please show Kat to my office," he says without looking away from me, and her head snaps up.

"Sir..." she says, but whatever else she'd planned to say is cut short when he turns his gaze to her. She doesn't say another word, but it doesn't take a genius to know she's not happy about it.

"I won't be too much longer, Kat," he says, offering me the barest hint of a smile, and damn it, it could take all night for all I care. Between the way his attention heats my blood and the unease I feel being the center of attention, I'm more than happy to get away.

"This way," Anna grumbles, turning away and heading down the hall without so much as glancing back to see if I'm following.

“Come on, Ms. Kat. We can play chess while we wait!” Addison says excitedly, and with nothing to say, I follow her.



I’m not sure how I lost to a five-year-old, but it happened.

When Addison said we could play chess, I expected one of two things: either for her to want to play with the pieces and have no idea what chess actually is or for her to know the basic rules and for us to just have fun.

That’s my fault for underestimating her.

“Want to play again?” she asks as we reset the board, but before I can decide, the door to the office swings open, and Nathaniel walks in. Just like that, chess is forgotten.

“Daddy, I won!” she shouts, hopping up and sprinting toward him.

“Don’t run with the sucker in your mouth, Addy!” I call out on instinct before realizing I’ve just corrected her behavior in front of her father.

Addison might be my student, but we’re not in school, and I’m overstepping.

Addison slows to a walk, still making her way toward him, and his brow arches slightly.

“Sorry,” I mumble to him, feeling embarrassed.

He doesn’t say anything, simply crouching down for Addison.

“I won, Daddy!” She beams up at him, seemingly unfazed by my scolding.

“That’s fantastic, princess. I guess playing against your brother really paid off,” he says with a smile that tells me how fond of both of his children he is.

Ugh, my damned ovaries; I swear they’re crying right now. I’d never really wanted kids of my own, but since leaving Carter, I’ve found that might not be true. I don’t think it was so

much not wanting kids, more so knowing he wouldn't have been the best father.

What a time to realize that.

“Did you thank Ms. Kat for hanging out with you?”

“Thank you, Ms. Kat! I had so much fun!” she says, her words slightly muffled from the sucker in her mouth.

“Any time, sweetheart,” I tell her with a smile, pushing to stand and smoothing out any wrinkles from my long skirt.

I can feel Nathaniel's eyes on me. Not for the first time, I wish I had dressed up a bit more this morning. I'm grateful he doesn't say anything about it, at least.

“Shall we?” He nods toward the door, and we head out. Addison skips with her little fingers, happily gripping her father's. Neither of them seems to notice Anna's glare as we pass right by her desk and to the elevator without so much as a word.

Shit, the elevator.

It's not tiny, but it's also not huge, and I somehow end up right in front of Nathaniel. The second the doors close, I swear he feels closer. It's crazy because I'm almost positive he hasn't moved, but it's as if I can feel his body heat seeping into me.

I stand still, unable to do much more as I fiddle nervously with my grandmother's ring on my pinky, slowly turning it. It's the only real piece of jewelry I wear at all times, and right now, it's soothing my need to turn around and look at him. But there's no proper way to do that without appearing like I'm crazy or just ogling him.

I swear the ride didn't take this long on the way up!

When the elevator finally dings, and the doors slide open, I take a breath before stepping out, not wanting it to look like I'm running away. No matter the fact that that's exactly what I'm doing.

The air in the lobby is much cooler, and it feels fantastic on my heated face.

“I’ll be leaving for the day,” Nathaniel says to one of the men standing by the wall, dressed in all black, that I assume to be security.

He doesn’t respond, and Nathaniel doesn’t wait for him to, instead making his way across the lobby.

If I thought people moved out of the way for Addison, with Nathaniel, they part like the Red Sea. They don’t just make room; they clear a whole path.

Damn.

I scurry to catch up when I realize I’ve lagged behind. The last thing I want is for the gap to close and get swallowed up in the crowd. No, thank you.

Emily calls a good day, to which Nathaniel wishes her the same, and Addison smiles and waves. We exit through the glass revolving door, and the heat is damn near suffocating even before we’re out.

I love the summer, but the humidity the last few days has been insane.

Not surprisingly, the limo is once again parked out front, with Vincent waiting at the door.

“Vince,” Nathaniel says with a nod that Vincent returns as he pulls open the door, allowing Addison to climb in.

I stop on the sidewalk and look around as they talk, not really hearing what they’re saying.

Crap, I have no idea where I am.

I may have lived in New York for almost six months now, but I have yet to really explore outside of that one night. I’d looked into the subway as far as getting to the school for work and shopping. I drove sometimes, but the traffic was terrible, and I easily got turned around. I know the subway runs just about everywhere with lots of stops, but I have no idea where one is relative to where I am.

“Excuse me,” I say, interrupting their conversation, and they both turn to look at me. “Sorry, I was just wondering if one of you could point me in the direction of the subway.”

They share a look I don't understand before turning their attention back to me.

"I'd planned to give you a ride back to the school. You don't have to take the subway," Nathaniel tells me, and while I appreciate that, it seems silly.

"Oh, there's no need. I'd just have to catch the subway over there. Here or there, it doesn't really make much difference."

His head tilts slightly to the side, and his lips pull down as he looks at me for a moment.

"Do you not own a vehicle?" he asks, and suddenly, his idea to drop me back off at the school makes more sense.

Duh, of course, I'm sure many people drive themselves to work.

"Um, I do. But I usually take the subway to and from work. The traffic is terrible, and the parking pass costs a bit, even for teachers. Not to mention, I've not had the best of luck when it comes to learning my way around. New York is a lot harder to navigate than Maine, that's for sure," I ramble, feeling the need to explain.

"You take the subway every day?" Nathaniel asks, as if needing me to confirm he's heard correctly.

I nod, unsure, because somehow he seems almost upset by that.

He schools his features before stepping back up onto the sidewalk right in front of me, forcing me to look up to continue to meet his gaze.

"Thank you for your assistance with Addison today," he says again, and his eyes are so damn pretty I'm lost in them. "I would appreciate it if you allowed me to have Vincent drive you home."

It's on the tip of my tongue to deny him. If I felt out of place and underdressed now, it would only be a hundred times worse if he saw where I live. The apartment itself isn't terrible, but the neighborhood isn't great.

If it were any other day and we were still at the school, I would decline, but seeing as I have no idea where I am and it's so humid the air is damn near suffocating, I find myself nodding before I can overthink it anymore.

He's only trying to be nice. I'm sure he's seen more than enough of the city; he has to know some places are better than others.

His lips turn up in a hint of a smile before he steps back, turning to hold his arm out for me toward the limo. The second he turns away, it's as if I'm freed from a spell. His ice-blue eyes no longer hold me captive, and I realize what I just agreed to.

Damn it, Kat.

Is that all it takes? Some nice words and pretty eyes?

Well, I guess that's not all it is. Nathaniel is much more than that, and I feel like I'd be hard-pressed to find a woman who was indifferent to the effect he has.

I move between Vincent and him to crawl into the back with Addison, who quickly throws herself into my arms when she sees me. A moment later, Nathaniel joins us on the bench seat to my right.

Vincent swings the door closed behind him, and I'm suddenly very aware of how close we are. The limo is huge, yet with Addison jumping into my arms, I hadn't had the time or space to move farther into the car. Now, with her on my lap, I can't really go anywhere.

This isn't like the elevator, where I thought he was close but wasn't sure. No, this time, I know he's close. So close that when Addison turns in her seat to lean her head against me and jolts my leg, my thigh ends up pressed against his.

My eyes are stuck on the spot where we touch as my body lights on fire. Even with my skirt and his pants between us, it's too much and yet somehow not enough.

I swallow hard, giving it a moment so as not to pull away too fast before I tuck my leg behind my other one. Hopefully,

it seems as if I'm just adjusting for comfort and modesty and not what it actually is.

Fuck, I hope not.

Vincent pulls out into traffic, calling back for my address, and I rattle it off without thinking, thankful for the distraction.

The drive feels like it takes forever, though I know it doesn't. It's only been about thirty minutes, and I'm not that far from the school. After a few minutes of driving, Addison lays her head in my lap, and I run my fingers through her long brown locks. It gives me something to do to calm my nerves, and after a few minutes, I see her eyes begin to droop.

I can't help but smile down at her. She's so full of life, happy, smart, and just amazing. I love all of my students, but she really latched onto me. I'd been nervous when I first started, having never worked at such a prestigious school before, but my class is amazing, and now I have no doubts this is what I'm meant to do.

"She's not usually so accepting of people. I'm unsure what you did, but she's truly comfortable with you."

Nathaniel's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I pause in my movements, my fingers tangled in her hair but unmoving.

I hadn't realized he'd been paying attention to us. Though I guess there isn't much else to do right now.

"Don't stop, Mommy," Addison whines, her voice hardly more than a whisper in her half-asleep state, but oh, do I hear them.

Judging by the way Nathaniel's eyes widened, I'd say he heard it as well.

Shit.

I quickly begin soothing her hair again, and she settles, her breathing turning into adorable little snores that fill the now tense silence of the limo.

"I—I um... she," I stumble over my words, trying to explain her comment but failing as my embarrassment continues to grow with every beat of silence.

“Relax, Kat,” he says with a chuckle, no doubt seeing my panic. Judging by how warm my cheeks feel, it would probably be impossible to miss.

“She’s always wanted a mother. It’s been on the top of every one of her wish lists for every holiday for as long as I can remember.” He turns to look out the window at the city as it passes, and I can see that this is a sore subject. “Unfortunately, it’s the one thing money can’t buy, or at least shouldn’t buy,” he says, shaking his head.

“I’ve given her nannies, but none of them ever stick. I’m unsure what it is, but despite dozens of them, she never really cares for them or forms any kind of relationship the way I had hoped. Dating is hard,” he pauses, glancing at me, and I sit silently, waiting to hear more about them, about him. “A lot of women want me for my money, status, or a number of other things. I don’t have much time to give between work and her, and while most say they don’t mind that in the beginning, it never fails to be an issue later.”

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and nod because I can understand that. Even with my job, squeezing dating in would be a bit of a stretch, and I’m sure I’m not nearly as busy as he is, with him running an entire company and having a young daughter.

“I’m unsure what you have done to tame my little monster, but she really likes you, which is more than most can say.”

“She told Emily she wanted me to be her mother today when I brought her into the office,” I admit with a chuckle. “I didn’t do anything. She’s smart and polite and full of life. I’m unsure how anyone could resist loving her, but I don’t think it was me who did it. She’s just impossible not to gravitate to. The way she sees the world is refreshing.”

He smirks at hearing that, and somehow, looking at it, knowing what I know now, I can see why she would say that. I was embarrassed when she said it, but now I feel honored. The idea that she would pick me to fulfill her dream is crazy, but children often don’t have filters, and that proves it.

We fall into silence once again, though this time it's comfortable.

The rest of the car ride passes quickly, and before I know it, we've arrived outside of my apartment.

Vincent unbuckles, but before he can exit the car, Nathaniel tells him to stay with Addison.

Wait what?

He's out of the car in the blink of an eye, moving much more fluidly than should be possible, considering his size. He stands just outside the door, and I realize he's probably waiting for me to get out.

That makes sense. He was blocking me in.

As carefully as I can, I move out from under Addison, soothing her hair when she stirs until she settles again.

Scooting across the seat, I make it to the door, looking out to find Nathaniel's hand outstretched to me. I know he's just being polite, but I can't help the way my body lights up when I reach up, resting my hand in his.

His fingers easily engulf my much smaller ones as I pull myself out to stand beside him.

We're so close that I can smell his cologne. I can't place the smell, but it's rich and so very fitting that I can't help but take a deep breath.

Oh my god, please tell me I did not just sniff him.

"Your cologne smells wonderful," I say, feeling the need to explain my strange behavior.

"Thank you," he says, still holding my hand up between us.

Why is my heart beating so fast?

Get a hold of yourself, Kat!

I move to pull my hand away, but he doesn't let go. Instead, his thumb rubs over my knuckles gently, and I can feel his gaze on me, but I can't make myself look up at him.

“Might I walk you to your door?” he asks, and my eyes snap up to meet his.

“That’s not necessary. You’ve done more than enough, really.”

“Please, this is nothing compared to what you do for Addison daily. It would make me feel better if I took you to the door. Humor me.”

I don’t have an argument for that, so instead, I nod despite feeling self-conscious.

“Thank you,” he says, finally dropping my hand, and I take that as my sign to move.

I hear the car door close and feel him walking behind me as I make my way toward the building.

This area is always busy, with people coming and going. Usually, I can slip right through, going mostly unnoticed, but today, it’s as if every person we pass has to stop and stare.

“I think I underestimated how well-known you are,” I say with a nervous chuckle once we enter the building and leave the wandering eyes behind.

He breathes a laugh of his own. “Yes, most people in the city know who I am, but appearance is also a big part of that. Most people know what money looks like.”

I nod because he’s right. I might not know how rich he is or that he ran a whole company when I met him, but his suit alone told me he was upper class—far higher on the totem pole than I am. And if that wasn’t enough, his daughter goes to one of the most prestigious schools, and they have a driver who takes them around in their limo...

Okay, I guess I can see why they were staring.

We make it to the end of the hall, and I wince, remembering one of the many flaws of this place.

“Um, the elevator is out,” I say, hooking my thumb over my shoulder to the door to the stairs. “So I’ll just head up. Thank you for walking me.” My words come out in a bit of a rush as

I watch his eyes flick to said elevator and the out-of-order sign that's been on it since the day I moved in.

I hoped they would fix it after a few weeks, but after six months, I gave up on that idea.

“A few stairs don't scare me, Kat,” he says, raising a brow at me, and I can't help but laugh.

“It's a little more than a few. I'm one floor from the top.”

He shrugs, still seeming unbothered, and I don't have much more to say. If he wants to climb a million stairs just to turn around and go back down, who am I to stop him?

I live on the fourteenth floor, which sounded great when I got the apartment—you know, back when I thought it had an elevator. But I guess if nothing else, it helps me get some exercise in. The first few weeks, I'd been a panting mess every time I went up, having to take breaks so I didn't die.

Now I'm able to pretty much get up without issue.

Nathaniel does better than I expected, not only keeping pace but seeming like it's nothing out of the ordinary.

“I'm unsure if you would be interested, but I wanted to make the offer nonetheless,” he says, and I slow my steps, coming to a rest on the landing.

He stops as well, staring down at me, and I want to kick myself for stopping. We're alone in the stairwell, and all my brain can think about are his eyes and the way he smells.

“Seeing how good you are with Addison, I'm now sure that no one else will ever be enough. No nanny I find will be what she needs, but you are.” If I thought his gaze was intense before, his eyes are damn near burning into me now.

“I'm sorry, what?” I ask, my mind not really able to make sense of what he's saying.

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips, as if amused by me.

“If you would be interested, I would very much like to hire you as Addison's nanny.”

His words hang in the air like a fog as my brain tries to sort through them, taking much longer than it should for them to finally sink in.

“What?!” I yell, quickly slapping a hand over my mouth as my voice echoes in the small space.

“Sorry, I’m just not sure why exactly you would want me. I mean, I have a degree in teaching, but that isn’t exactly the same thing, and you hardly know me. I’m sure there are so many people who are way more qualified than I am—”

Nathaniel reaches out, gently pressing a finger to my mouth to quiet my rambling.

“Qualifications only get you so far. It doesn’t matter what they say they have done in the past. You have a connection with Addison that, while I might not understand, I know it isn’t something she will find with just anyone.”

He drops his hand and once again begins up the stairs, leaving me no choice but to follow or be left staring after him like an idiot.

“I built a business worth millions and didn’t finish college. My brother is my partner now, and he never even finished high school. But we worked hard and learned from life. We failed a lot before something took, but it was all a risk we took, and it paid off. Life is really just weighing one risk to the next to see if we can succeed.”

We make it up the next few flights in silence as I think about what he just said. It’s true; taking this job here in New York was a risk for me. One that paid off in a huge way after finding out Carter was cheating on me. If it hadn’t been for me having my job lined up, I might have been stuck with him until I had a way out.

At first, he didn’t want me so far away, but I stuck to my choice. Eventually, he supported it enough that he even paid for my apartment for a few months until I could get a few paychecks. I’d thought he had just opened his eyes and decided to accept it as my dream and help me, but really, I

think it had more to do with his wanting to see whoever that girl was.

It shouldn't sting still, but it does. I might not want Carter or that life anymore, but cheating isn't necessary. He could have just ended things instead of making me feel as though I was the problem.

"Are you okay?" Nathaniel asks, and I snap out of it.

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"Hopefully not about my offer, because you looked disgusted," he says. I think he might be joking, but it's hard to tell.

"Oh, no. Sorry, I was thinking about how you're right about life being a risk."

He nods as if in understanding, and I'm not sure he does, but I'm not going to go into more detail. I don't want to make him think I'm a lonely girl who ran from her problems, and I definitely don't want his pity. It might not have been ideal, but I'm happier now, happier than I have been in a long time.

Finally, we reach my floor, and he falls back a step to allow me to lead the way.

"This is me," I tell him, stopping in front of my door and turning to face him, unsure of what to do. "Thank you for the ride and for walking me up."

Do I invite him in? He has Addison downstairs in the car with Vincent, and I'm sure he wants to get home after a long day at the office. Not to mention, my apartment is rather boring and plain.

"Think about my offer?" he asks, taking a step closer. I swallow hard, keeping my mouth closed as I feel the need to tell him I will just because he's looking at me like that.

But this isn't a small thing. I need to really think about it before I go agreeing just because my heart wants to pound out of my chest when he's around, and my ovaries cry seeing him with Addison.

“I’m willing to pay you double what you make at the school, and we have nanny housing you would be free to take should you be interested. The number I gave you earlier, the one you messaged about bringing Addison, is my personal number. I didn’t want it falling into the wrong hands at the school, but feel free to call or text me if you have questions or need anything at all.”

He reaches out and pushes a stray strand of hair out of my face. It must have fallen from the clip on my way up the stairs, and it takes all my willpower not to lean into his touch.

“Think about it. I look forward to hearing from you.” With one last smile, he drops his hand and walks back the way we just came. I stare after him until he disappears down the stairs, and then I stare a few minutes longer.

What the hell just happened?



CHAPTER 7

The weekend flies by, and I spend most of it in a daze.

I get it. Nathaniel's rich, but he didn't even ask how much I made before he offered to pay me double what I make now.

I think I may have grossly underestimated the difference in our lifestyles, which only makes me feel more self-conscious. I'd felt out of place at his office, but that was nothing compared to seeing him here.

Ugh, at least I didn't let him come in and saved myself from that humiliation.

By Sunday night, I crack. Unable to stop my curiosity, I Google him. It feels weird, but simply typing in his name brings up so many results that I'm kind of blown away.

Mr. Lawson was spotted today in a park with his daughter, Addison, seemingly enjoying some time outside of the office. While pictures have surfaced of his young daughter with a woman recently, sources say that she is a nanny versus the mysterious Mrs. Lawson we had all originally believed her to be.

With Addison quickly approaching her sixth birthday, the question still remains: Where is her mother? Is Mr. Lawson officially off the market, or is there more to this story?

Gross.

I click back to the search and try another article.

Nathaniel Lawson owns Lawson's, a multi-billion-dollar company that he runs alongside his brother, Alexander Lawson. The company's headquarters are in New York, NY. As of 2023, it had an estimated yearly revenue of \$1.9 billion and around 400,000 employees.

Holy shit.

I close out of Google before I fall into a rabbit hole. I guess that answers the question of how he could offer that much money.

But even still, I'm no less stuck in my decision.

Is money tight? Yes, absolutely.

Even with my apartment being one of the cheapest I could find, it's expensive. I've come to find that just about everything here is. Food, clothes, and basic everyday things all cost more than they did back in Maine. So, while I make more than I ever have, it's not as if I have money to waste. Oftentimes, my checks line up to be exactly what I need, and any savings I might have are for my off time in the summer. With the summer program, I will have less time unpaid, but it's only three days a week for five weeks. Leaving me with five weeks unpaid.

I flop down on my bed with a sigh, looking up at the ceiling as my mind races, trying to weigh out what might be the best choice.

If I took the job, I'd have a lot more room to live, and even more if I took him up on the housing offer.

He seems genuine about looking for the best nanny for Addison, and from everything I've heard from him and her, it's been a struggle so far. I can understand why he would offer, but I'm still not sure I'm nanny material. Hell, I'm not even one hundred percent sure what a nanny does.

For all we know, she could enjoy me as a teacher and hate me as a nanny.

Of course, there's also the loss of freedom. When I came to New York for a fresh start, I swore I would do it on my own. I don't ever want to be under someone's thumb the way I was with Carter ever again. Leaving him opened my eyes to how much I depended on him and how little I had of my own. He'd controlled every aspect of my life from the time we met in high school almost nine years ago.

It was his money, his house, his everything, and I hadn't ever really second-guessed it until I packed my meager possessions up to leave. It was pathetic to see my tiny car barely full after all those years together, but even worse was how long it took me to find myself again. Some days, I'm not sure I have one hundred percent yet.

Never again.

I don't think Nathaniel is like that, and it's not like we're dating. But it would be his house, and I don't think I can give up having my own space, no matter how much money it would save me.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I roll over to face the wall.

I could stay here and still take the job, get the money, and keep my freedom. It's the best of both worlds, and he seems more than okay with whatever I choose. But would he expect me to give up my job?

Ugh, thinking about all the possibilities and pros and cons is giving me a headache.

No closer to making a decision, I let my eyes fall closed and drift off to sleep.

Maybe a good night's rest will help me clear my mind and find an answer.



Sleeping isn't a magic cure, and when I wake up for work, I'm no closer to knowing what I should do than I was the night before. So, instead of dwelling on it, I push it off and go about my day because it's easier.

It's a Monday, but I've found Mondays in the summer program aren't the same as they were in the regular school year. Kids are excited to be in the program, and there are only so many spots. I have kids from a mix of grades and classes, not just my own, but it's still less than a regular-size class.

Trevor decides today is a good day to meet me out front once again. For the most part, he's been pretty scarce since his run-in with Nathaniel, but I knew that wouldn't last forever.

"Morning, Kat," he calls, popping out of the office just as I head down the hall toward my class. It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes and instead plaster on a halfway polite smile.

"Morning," I say, continuing on my way.

Please, just go to your class.

I mentally beg him, but of course, he doesn't. Instead, he picks up his pace until he catches up to me. Damn my shorter legs.

I glance his way and find him smiling as he watches me.

"So a little bird told me you have a birthday coming up."

His words catch me off guard, and I freeze.

How the hell does he know that? I didn't tell anyone.

He must see the confusion on my face, because he laughs and nods back to the office. "Barbara has a faculty calendar that has everyone's birthdays on it."

His explanation takes a bit of weight off. It makes sense, I suppose, but I still don't love that. I hadn't told anyone my birthday on purpose, and of all the people to know it, of course, it had to be Trevor.

"Oh," I mutter, unsure what to say before continuing toward my class.

"Yeah, so usually the staff goes out for drinks to celebrate. But since it's already the end of July and there aren't a lot of us teaching the summer program, plus it's the weekend, so most everyone already has plans," he says, and I can already

tell where this is going. “So, I was thinking this would be a perfect time for us to hang out.”

I go to tell him no, but he cuts me off.

“I don’t want you to miss out on something that we usually do, ya know? And besides, how often do you get out? I feel like all you do is work and take care of the Lawson girl.”

I pull a face at the way he says it, unable to help myself.

The Lawson girl... she has a name, and I know he knows it. Everybody does. Not to mention, I don’t like his tone or the way he’s trying to make this sound like it’s for me, not him, when we both know it is.

We turn the corner, and I see someone standing near my door.

“Um, maybe. I’ll have to see what I have planned for the weekend and let you know,” I tell him, even though it’s a lie. I know I don’t have any plans, and from the sound of it, he knows it, too, but I can handle him later.

“Oh, seriously?” he says, sounding a bit thrown that I’m even considering the idea. Honestly, I am, too, but right now, I just don’t have the energy to deal with him.

“Well, how about I check in with you tomorrow? Can you let me know? I can always come to pick you up for the night, so you don’t have to take the subway or pay for an Uber.” He sounds hopeful, but that’s never going to happen.

Instead of saying that, I simply tell him we’ll see, as I finally make it to my door to see who was here so early.

Oliver?

“Another Lawson?” Trevor mumbles with a huff.

“I’ll message you later, yeah?”

Without giving me a chance to respond, he turns and heads back the way he just came, and I take a moment to breathe, letting my eyes fall closed as I recenter myself.

How is a grown man harder to deal with than twenty kindergarteners?

“Long day already?”

I’d completely forgotten that Oliver was there until he speaks and startles me.

“Ms. Kat!” Addison bellows before slamming into me and making me stagger back a step, and I hear Oliver chuckle. What is it about these Lawson men and their looks? They might be striking naturally, but when they smile.

Damn, it’s hot in here.

Turning my attention away from Oliver is harder than it should be, but I manage. I pry Addison’s grip from around my waist before dropping down to wrap my arms around her. Thankfully, the dress code is a little more relaxed for the summer program, and today, I wore capris to try to beat the heat. I doubt it will help much, but it gives me more room to move around.

“Good morning, Addy. You’re here early today, aren’t you?” I ask, though the question isn’t really meant for her. I’m sure she doesn’t even realize what time it is.

Oliver is dressed down today as well, kind of. The last time I saw him, he was in a suit. Today, he’s wearing dark dress pants, a gray sweater with a button-up and a tie that peeks out at the neckline. It’s by no means casual, but it’s much less dressed up than the suit.

I look to him for an answer regarding their early arrival, and he reaches up to rub at the back of his neck, looking down at his expensive shoes.

“Sorry, that’s my fault. Nathan had to go to work early today and asked if I could drop her off. I wasn’t aware that the school program started an hour later than regular hours.”

Oh man, something about the blush and glasses gives him a boyish quality that he didn’t have the first time we met. He seemed much more serious last time.

“It’s no problem,” I tell him, releasing Addison and pushing to my feet. “She’s welcome to spend the extra hour with me.”

I feel his eyes on my back as I walk to the classroom door and unlock it. Addison barrels in, running to put her things away and work on her art project we've been doing on days she stays late. We're working on salt paintings, and much to her dismay, they needed time to dry before we could actually paint them.

"You're sure?" Oliver asks, and I hear the skepticism in his tone. I get it. I'm sure most might not want to have students when they aren't being paid for it or might need the time to get things ready for the day. But my lessons have been planned since before the program even started, and Addison is easy to handle. Even if I had work to do, she wouldn't be a hindrance.

"Yeah, as long as it's okay with Addison," I say, turning to her.

She's so focused on getting her watercolors ready she doesn't even hear me, and I shake my head and laugh before going over to get her attention.

"Hey, Addy," I wait for her to look up so I know she's listening. "Would you like to hang out with me for the extra hour and paint, or do you want to stand out in the hall with Oliver?"

She makes a face when I say his name. "Ew," she says, turning to point at Oliver, who stands just inside the door. "His name is Oli. Oliver sounds like an old cat."

A laugh bursts free before I can stop it, and I duck my head to try to hide it. I know I failed when I look up a moment later and find his eyes on me. Thankfully, he doesn't look upset—maybe just a little annoyed with her, the way siblings get.

"Yes, well, the old cat wants to know if you want to paint or hang out with me," Oliver says when she completely misses the point, and she sticks out her tongue at him.

"I want to paint!" she declares before going back to pulling out her supplies.

"I guess that answers that," I say, walking back to my desk now that I might as well be invisible to her.

"Thanks."

“No problem. She’s a good kid,” I tell him with a smile, and he nods as he watches her start her project. She’s so focused, her face scrunched up in concentration as she mixes water with the colors she wants, trying to get them perfect.

“Yeah, she is...” he says in a low voice, almost to himself, before wishing me a good day and heading out.



I managed to avoid Trevor... mostly. He’s texted me a few times now, and I let him know I still had to check the first time, but by the third time, I’ve started to ignore him. I really don’t want to do anything for my birthday, and even if I did, I don’t want to do it with him.

Ugh, damn me and my big mouth, saying I’d think about it.

The next few weeks pass in a blur, and before I know it, it’s already the last day of the summer program. If I can just get through today, I won’t have to see Trevor again until the next school year starts in a few weeks.

Of course, I can’t, though. Today is my birthday, and the second I walk through the front doors of the school, he’s there, waiting for me with flowers.

I won’t lie. It’s kind of sweet, and if he had started our meetings like this, he would probably have had more luck. But as it is, something about him leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I refuse to ignore warning signs again.

“Happy birthday, Kat,” he says, holding the bouquet out to me. I take them in a daze as I admire the beautiful colors, and he swoops in, pressing a kiss to my cheek before quickly taking a step back.

I snap my eyes toward him and have to resist the urge to wipe my face clean. Instead, I murmur a thank you before I turn and head for my class, unsure what to do.

This is what I was talking about. He can’t just be nice; he always has to push it and make me uncomfortable.

Maybe it’s me?

No, I don't think it is. I hadn't had an issue with Alex and Desmond, even if it was months and months ago.

"So I was wondering if you could figure out your plans for this weekend or not?" Trevor asks as he follows me down the hall. "I looked up Laws' schedule this weekend, and they have half-off drinks for some summer celebration."

I fumble my keys, and they drop to the floor while I stand there, unsure if I'd heard him correctly or not.

What are the odds he would mention *that* club of all places and right now?

It takes me a second, but I grab my keys off the floor and manage to get my door unlocked this time. Pushing into my room, I drop the flowers on my desk. Where they once felt sweet, they make me feel kind of gross now that he's used them to kiss me.

"Um, no. I'm still waiting for my parents to get back to me. We're talking about meeting up this weekend to celebrate. I'll probably know more tonight." The lie rolls off my tongue easier than it should. I don't like lying, but I know he won't take no for an answer.

"Oh, yeah, I understand. Just let me know, and I'll see about getting us in. Laws is pretty exclusive and kind of expensive, so the sooner I know, the better," he says, nodding as he stalks toward me instead of away like I'd hoped he would.

"Yeah, I know," I say without thinking. "I'll let you know as soon as I know for sure." I force a smile and walk behind my desk, needing the comfort of having it between us.

"You do?" he asks, cocking his head to the side and looking at me in confusion.

"Um, yes. I've been there once," I tell him, not wanting to get into the details.

He stops in his tracks, mumbling something I can't make out. For a second, his eyes are dark and full of anger, but I blink, and it's gone.

“Just shoot me a text and let me know. I’ll let you get to it. I’m sure you have a busy day planned for the kids.”

Before I can answer, he turns, and all but runs from the room.

God, he’s so strange.



CHAPTER 8

The last day is a half-day, and it flies by as the kids tell me all about their summer vacation plans. Most of them are going on extravagant vacations or camps that make my childhood sound like a bore, and I really get to see the money-class divide. This school is prestigious, and most of New York's top businessmen and women opt to have their children attend regardless of cost or travel time.

The kids are cleaning out their cubbies and packing up all of their projects and supplies to take home, and I can't help but feel sad. Come September, there will be all new faces, and while I'm excited, I know I'll miss them.

"I don't want a new teacher," Addison says with a huff, running over to throw her arms around me and squeezing me tight.

The rest of the students have been picked up, but Nathaniel texted me this morning to tell me he would be a few minutes late today.

"I know, Addy, but you're so smart, and your brain needs room to grow. You'll learn lots of new things and make new friends. And I'll still be here. You can come see me any time," I tell her, soothing her hair back and trying to offer her comfort.

We stay like that for a moment before I hear her tiny sniffles and realize she's crying.

“Oh, Addison. Hey, honey, look at me,” I tell her and wait for her to do so. It takes her a second, but finally, she does, her blue eyes swimming with tears that threaten to make me cry, too. I pull back slowly and have a seat on the ground, pulling her down onto my lap.

“I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’ll be here, and next year, if your dad’s late, you can still come down and sit with me.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her I’ll be her nanny, that even if I’m not her teacher, we’ll be together all the time outside of school. But I refuse to get her hopes up, and I want to check a few things over with Nathaniel first before I say for sure.

“You promise?” She asks, her voice small and shaky from her crying.

“I promise,” I say without hesitation before an idea comes to me. “Here, let’s make a real good promise, okay?”

She pulls back, wiping at her tears with the back of her hand as she sniffles. I hold up my hand, offering her my pinkie. She stares at it for a second before looking up at me in question.

I chuckle, realizing she must not know what I’m doing. I probably look crazy to her. “Stick out your pinkie finger.” She does it without question, and I link our pinkies together with a smile.

“I pinkie promise I’m not going anywhere,” I tell her, squeezing her pinkie with mine. “A pinkie promise is a promise you can’t break,” I explain.

Slowly, a smile pulls to her lips as my words sink in and she lets out a squeal before flinging herself at me with enough force that we fall to the ground, laughing.

“A pinkie promise, huh? That’s pretty serious.”

Nathaniel’s voice startles me, and I whip my head toward him to find him leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed, a smile on his face as he watches us.

“Daddy!” Addison scrambles to get up, tripping over her feet a few times before she makes it to him. She’s talking a mile a minute as she tells him all about our promise and how

she's going to learn new things and make new friends next year.

He smiles and nods as she continues jumping around, full of excitement. If you told me she'd been crying just minutes ago, I would think you were lying, but I saw it for myself. Nathaniel glances at me as I pull myself up off the floor, feeling silly, but his eyes are warm, and despite how silly I might feel, I don't think he's judging me.

"Did you still want to get ice cream to celebrate your last day, Princess?" Nathaniel asks her once she's finished her dramatic recap, and she squeals, finally flinging herself into his arms for a hug.

"Can we take Ms. Kat with us?" She pulls back to look up at him with big, pleading eyes. "Please, it's her birthday!" She adds before he even has a chance to answer.

"Her birthday, huh? Well, that does sound like it deserves some ice cream then. But that's up to Ms. Kat, honey, not me."

She instantly begins to wiggle, and he lets her down. Honestly, it's a wonder he doesn't drop her, but I guess he's probably used to it. The second her feet touch the ground, she runs back to me, folding her little hands and sticking out her lip in the most adorable pout.

"Will you please come out to get ice cream with us, Ms. Kat?" she pleads, and oh my, how does anyone say no to that face?

I glance up at Nathaniel for help, but he shrugs, and I know better. I've seen the way she has him wrapped around her finger. Looking back down at Addison and her wide eyes, I cave.

"Well, it is rather hot out today. Some ice cream might be just what I need."

She lets out a cry of excitement, grabbing my hand and all but dragging me to the door to join her father. With a laugh, I gently pry myself from her grip and collect my things before we head out.

Vincent nods in greeting as we walk down the stairs. “Mr. Lawson, Ms. Kat.”

I smile and follow Addison into the limo as Nathaniel stops to talk to him. It only takes a moment before he climbs in behind me, and this time, I’ve made sure to make room. Maybe too much room, judging by the way he eyes the gap between us, but doesn’t say a word.

It doesn’t matter, but the second Vincent closes the door, I feel like I might as well be on his lap. I need to get myself under control. He wants me to nanny for Addison, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to say yes, not to mention my promise to Addison. But if I’m going to be around him more often, I can’t react like this every time. Hopefully, it will get easier the more I’m around him, but as I steal a glance at him, I kind of doubt it.

“Vincent, it appears we have more to celebrate than just Addison’s last day of her summer program. It’s also Kat’s birthday today, so I’m thinking we will need to make a special trip.”

“Oh, no, that’s not—”

“Yay!” Addison cries, cutting off my protest. She scrambles around me to fall into the seat between me and Nathaniel, bouncing around excitedly. “They have the best ice cream ever, Ms. Kat. You’re going to love it!”

Well.

“It’s a little bit of a longer drive, but nothing too crazy. No worries,” Nathaniel tries to reassure me, and I chew my lip to stop myself from saying anything. I don’t think he’s going to listen anyway, and Addison is so happy.

With a sigh, I let it go and just try to enjoy it.

“Happy birthday, Kat,” Vincent says as he pulls out into traffic, and I whisper a quiet thank you.

Addison fills the silence for most of the drive. She tells me all about her favorite flavors, and I quickly learn that she just loves ice cream in general. Not that I can disagree; I love most ice cream as well.

Nathaniel is quiet, simply listening with a smile on his face as Addison waves her arms around and bounces in her seat. She tells me about her last birthday party, where they had twelve different flavors of ice cream.

The car comes to a stop, and I realize we're already here. Not surprisingly, I've never been here before, but I rarely venture around the city.

"Should I wait or drive around?" Vincent asks, and Nathaniel pauses for a moment, considering.

"Can we go to the park with our ice cream, Daddy? Please?" Addison begs him, folding her little hands together and everything. Oh my, how anyone can say no to that is a mystery to me.

Nathaniel looks up, meeting my gaze over Addison's head. "What do you say, Kat?"

"Oh, um," I stutter, caught off guard. Why the hell do I get a say in this? Addison takes my lack of reply as a chance to turn her pleading eyes to me. "The park sounds nice," I say, once again crumbling under the weight of her begging.

"Thank you!" she cries happily before throwing herself at me.

"Wait here. We'll be out in a few minutes."

Vincent nods in understanding.

Nathaniel opens the door and climbs out, and Addison quickly follows behind him, a huge smile on her face. I follow them across the sidewalk and into the shop, feeling like I don't belong, but it's too late now. I've already agreed.

The man behind the counter turns at the sound of the bell on the door, and a smile curves his lips. "Ah, Monsieur Lawson, and *la petite princesse*."

"Remy," Nathaniel greets him with a nod. Addison ignores his words, instead running to the counter, pressing her face to the glass, and admiring the ice cream with wide eyes.

"It has been a while, my friend. What are we celebrating today?" Remy asks Nathaniel as he makes his way over to

Addison.

The store isn't very busy. Only a handful of other people are here, with a young woman running the register. She looks up and sees Nathaniel before her cheeks turn pink, and she quickly looks away.

"I finished kindergarten!" Addison exclaims, jumping up and down in excitement before quickly turning back to look at me as if she'd just remembered I was here. She abandons her place at the glass to run over to me, grabbing my hand and yanking me back with her.

"And it's Ms. Kat's birthday!"

Remy looks up at me at her words, and his already large smile grows. "A birthday and a celebration. Ice cream is the perfect choice," he says with a chuckle.

Oh, wow.

From my spot in front of the ice cream freezer, I look up to find the menus hanging overhead, and suddenly, Addison's love for this place makes a lot more sense.

Not only do they have ice cream but also crepes, waffles, hot chocolate, coffee drinks, and macarons, and according to the sign, they scoop their ice cream to look like flowers!

"Judging by the look on your face, I'm going to assume you've never been here," Nathaniel says, stepping closer to us.

"No."

"How long have you been in New York, exactly?" he asks, and I laugh. I guess it's a fair question, considering I didn't know him or anything else, it would seem.

"Um," I say, quickly counting back in my mind. "Seven months, almost eight now, but I don't get out much."

He nods, turning back to look at the menu, and I do the same.

There are so many choices, and everything sounds so good. How am I supposed to decide?

“So what can I get you?” Remy asks, and like me, Addison stands staring at the selection as if making a choice is impossible.

“What do you recommend?” I ask Nathaniel. Clearly, he’s been here before, so he’s sure to have a good recommendation.

“What flavors sound best to you?” He answers my question with one of his own, nodding to the flavor board above us.

“All of them,” I say with a chuckle, because that’s the problem.

He chuckles as well, but my indecisiveness doesn’t seem to phase him.

“Let me have a classic signature cone with caramel, L’inimitabile, and vanilla with the salted butter caramel macaron,” he says to Remy, and damn, that does sound good, even if I’m not sure what it all is.

“Oh, I want that too, Daddy!” Addison says, turning to look up at him with big, wide eyes.

“Of course, Princess,” he tells her, bending down to scoop her up into his arms. “Make that two, Remy.”

“You got it,” Remy says, already moving to start assembling our cones. “And your Americano as usual?” he calls back as he finishes the first cone, turning to present it to Addison.

Holy shit! That has got to be the prettiest ice cream cone I’ve ever seen. Each flavor is sculpted to look like the petals of a flower, with the flavor changing as it moves in toward the center, and in the middle sits a macaron. The smile on Addison’s face lets me know she also loves it, and she wastes no time taking a large bite of the macaron the second the cone is in her hand.

“Mmm, it’s so yummy. Thank you!”

Remy smiles at her before turning away to start mine, and I’m not sure I’ve ever been more excited about getting ice cream in my life.

“No, I’ll have a mint chocolate chip today, please,” Nathaniel says, earning a questioning glance from Remy. He

doesn't say anything aloud, instead continuing to scoop ice cream for my cone.

My ice cream is ready next, and somehow, it tastes even better than it looks, which I didn't think was possible.

Nathaniel sets Addison down so that he can grab his own cone, and we follow him to the register to pay. I watch him as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet, not even realizing I'm staring until my jaw almost hits the floor as he hands the young girl a black card. I've never seen a black card except in movies. Even Carter hadn't been able to get one, and I'd thought he was rich.

I knew Nathaniel had a lot of money; not only had he told me as much, but my Google search confirmed it. However, knowing it and seeing it are very different things.

Addison stands with me as he pays, and Remy prepares a cup that he hands Nathaniel before we head out with a quick goodbye. Addison might be enjoying her ice cream, but I think it's safe to say she's excited about the park.

She skips beside me, out the door, and back to the limo that's still waiting.

Nathaniel is a few steps behind us, having been finishing up at the counter when we headed for the door. I reach out to open the door for Addison, but before I can, he's there.

He steps around me, his ice cream in one hand and the cup pressed between his arm and his chest. He reaches out to grab the handle and opens the door before I can.

I stand, somewhat shocked. I know he'd been behind me, so why rush to get the door, especially when his hands are full?

Addison doesn't seem to notice as she crawls in with her ice cream, but I hesitate a moment. It's not until Nathaniel holds his arm out in a gesture for me to go next that I finally move, not wanting to hold us up. Nathaniel slides in behind me without a word, pulling the door closed before moving along the bench seat to the dividing window and offering the cup to Vincent.

“Thanks, boss,” he says with a laugh that makes Nathaniel huff. I’m not sure what it is, but I feel as though I’m missing something.

Vincent takes a sip, humming his approval as he pulls away from the curb. We ride in silence, everyone quiet as we enjoy our treats. Not even five minutes later, we stop again, and I see the playground. Addison is moving the second the car stops. Flinging the door open with a squeal, she takes off without looking back.

I follow her out, fighting the urge to run after her, but Nathaniel doesn’t seem concerned that she’s gone, so I try not to be either.

We walk in silence through the park after her, but it’s not uncomfortable. Kids laugh and run around. The park isn’t huge, so it’s easy to spot Addison as she climbs up the playground with other kids, her ice cream still clutched tight in one hand.

Nathaniel walks to a bench, and I take the seat beside him. Finally, I pull off my macaron as I reach the center. The flavor explodes in my mouth, and I can’t stop the hum of appreciation that leaves my lips.

“That’s the best macaron the shop has,” Nathaniel says to me, his eyes still on Addison. I feel my cheeks heat, realizing he heard me.

“It’s delicious.” I make myself respond.

“Have you thought any more about my offer?”

“Oh, um,” I mumble, having just shoved the rest of the macaron in my mouth. Chewing, I take a moment to think about my answer.

I have thought about it, a lot actually.

Before I can answer, he continues. “After school, Vincent would pick you both up and take you to the house until either me or my brother are home. My son and nephew might also be able to relieve you occasionally, though not always. Or, as I offered before, you could save money on housing and be her live-in nanny. We have housing for many of our staff, the

groundsmen, the chef, and security to keep those we need close by. Besides, the cost of living in New York is nothing to sneeze at.”

I almost choke on the damn cookie. Covering my mouth, I cough and save myself, but just barely.

A smile pulls the corner of his lips up as he turns to me with a brow raised.

“Just because I have money doesn’t mean I don’t understand the value of a dollar. The school pays well enough, but the cost of living is always on the rise, and I don’t expect it will go down anytime soon. Especially not here.”

I remain quiet, mostly because I’m pretty sure if I open my mouth right now, nothing will come out anyway. Or at least nothing that will be considered intelligent conversation.

He just offered me a place to live, again... I mean, as a nanny for his daughter, but still. He’s not wrong, though. The cost of my apartment is outrageous, even though I’m making more than I’ve ever made before. I struggle and have to save for the summer to ensure I won’t end up homeless. It’s part of the reason I signed up for the summer program to begin with. But if I took the nanny position, I could easily cover it.

“I have more than enough space. You would have your own room and bathroom, and that would save you time. When you’re off, your time would be your own. You wouldn’t have to waste it traveling, and everything we have would be accessible to you at all times. The pool, library, and meals would be included.”

“Stop.” It comes out more forcefully than I intended, and I wince at hearing how harsh it sounded.

“Sorry,” I say, feeling like an asshole when his lips turn down in a frown. “It’s just a lot, and I’m feeling a little overwhelmed.”

He nods, and I take that as him accepting my apology and continue.

“I’m flattered, really, but I’m also confused. Why do all this? You didn’t need to offer so much. I love Addison, and I

really don't need all the extras. I've been thinking about it and was already pretty sure I was going to accept."

"Daddy!" Addison's voice carries across the playground to us, pulling our attention to where she sits on a swing. "Push me?" she yells out.

Shaking his head, he stands to walk over to her, and I follow.

Addison's laughter and cries to go higher ring through the park, and I can't help but smile as I watch them.

"That right there is why," Nathaniel says, nodding toward me.

What?

"You asked why I was doing all this, why offer so much for you to nanny, and that's why."

"What's why?" I ask, still confused.

"Addison's had a lot of nannies over the years, but they're always missing something. No matter what I did, paid, or the lengths I went through to vet them, it never seemed to make a difference. They didn't care, but you do."

He doesn't say anything else, and after pushing Addison for a few minutes longer, we leave. My mind wanders, going over everything as we head toward my apartment, but I know what my answer will be even before we get there because he's right—I do care.

Vincent pulls up, and Nathaniel opens the door, stepping out. I hesitate for a moment before following him, gathering my courage.

Why does this feel like such a big deal? Yes, I'm taking on a second job, but it's not as if it's difficult, and the pay and other accommodations are kind of mind-blowing.

Stepping out of the car, I come face-to-face with Nathaniel, and I'm reminded exactly why it's hard. I'm going to work for him and live in his house, essentially helping him raise his daughter.

Fuck me, maybe this is a bad idea. I'm almost positive it's not a good idea to accept a job if I'm already crushing on my new soon-to-be boss.

"I'll take it," I say in a rush before I can overthink it and talk myself out of it... again.

I open my mouth to explain when I realize I haven't said what, but before I can, his lips turn up in an actual smile, not the smirks and half smiles I'm used to, and suddenly, I've forgotten what I was going to say.

Yup, this is a terrible idea, but it's too late now.



CHAPTER 9

I walk up the endless flights of stairs in a daze.

I just did that. I took a second job where I'm going to live with a man I've apparently developed a crush on over the last few weeks.

So much for never being at the mercy of another man...

But that's not exactly true. I'm not at his mercy the way I was with Carter. I'm his employee, not his property. Honestly, I can't imagine Nathaniel would ever be anything like Carter; he just doesn't seem the type. But I guess you can never really be sure of that kind of thing. I never would have thought Carter could.

We'd dated all throughout high school and into college, and I'd missed every red flag until one of them decided to smack me right in the face.

So maybe I'm not the best judge of character.

Regardless, I have a new job that I start tomorrow.

Nathaniel had told me to call him in the morning, and we would work out the details of my move if that's what I chose to do. I'd said I'd take the job but hadn't been one hundred percent sure about moving, though I'm leaning toward it.

I'll sleep on it.

I fish my keys from my bag and check the time on my phone.

How the heck is it only two in the afternoon? It definitely feels like it should be later.

When I finally reach my floor, I'm damn near dead on my feet, ready to sit and do nothing for a while. Maybe I'll take a nap. I have a little while before dinner still, and lord knows I could use it.

Stopping dead in the middle of the hallway, my eyes go to my door only to find it's not there.

What the hell?

I rush forward, stopping in the doorway to find my door is, in fact, there, but not the way it should be.

It hangs off the hinges, the wood of the doorframe busted up and littering the floor.

Unable to stop myself, I step over it, making my way inside despite the urge to turn back around. My eyes dart around my apartment, desperate to understand. Everything's a mess, and as I make my way deeper inside, it's as if my brain can't make sense of what I'm seeing.

What happened here?

The cushions of my couch lie littered on the floor. Every cabinet in the kitchen is open, the contents littered on the counters and floor, and both my fridge and freezer doors hang open.

I stop as the sound of cracking glass under my feet echoes around the eerily silent kitchen.

Turning in place, I survey the room, and it finally clicks.

Someone broke in.

Someone was in my flat...

Maybe they still are.

Without hesitation, I turn back, running from my apartment as my heart lodges in my throat, threatening to choke me.

Why would someone do this?

Back in the hall, I look at the other units around me, curious if I was the only one broken into, but find the rest of them seem to be untouched.

Who would do something like this, and why to me? It's not as if I have anything worth taking, and I don't talk to anyone. Nobody but Nathaniel knows where I live.

I'd like to say it's random, a chance break-in that I happen to be the victim of, but I'm fourteen floors up. What are the odds someone would decide to climb all of those stairs just to break into my flat?

My hands shake as I dig into my purse, searching for my phone. I back up until I hit the wall opposite my door. I should leave, go back downstairs, and call...

Nobody.

I have nobody to call.

With my back against the wall, I slide down it until I'm seated on the floor staring at what's left of my front door, and I feel the first tear roll down my cheek. Another follows, and I make no move to wipe them away.

I don't have friends or family in the city. Hell, even in the state. I know I need to call the police and report this, but I can't. For the first time since coming here, I feel well and truly alone. Before, it had felt freeing, but now...

With trembling fingers, I pull up the contact of the one person I think might care and press the call button.

"Hello," his voice carries through the phone, and something about it is calming, even if he's not here. "Kat?"

A choked sob works its way out of my mouth, but no words come out.

"Kat, what's wrong?" he demands, and I can hear the sharp edge in his tone. It should piss me off. Who is he to demand anything from me? But it doesn't; instead, it gives me enough push to speak.

“I’m sorry,” I cry, gasping for air with each word. “I need help, and I didn’t know who else to call.”



I’m not sure how long it took Nathaniel to get to me, but it felt like I hung up, and he was there. One second, I was staring at my broken door, and the next, he was there, crouched down on the floor in front of me, blocking it from my view.

I don’t remember calling the police—hell, I don’t know if he did it or I did—but they arrived not long after. Nathaniel tucked me into his side as they asked me questions, but I didn’t have anything useful to offer them.

I have no idea who would do this, if anything was missing, or when it could have happened since I’d been gone since the early morning.

Nathaniel gave them his card so they could call should they need anything else before he ushered me down the stairs and back into the car. Only it’s not the same limo that Vincent usually shuttles them around in.

He walks me to the passenger side, opens the door for me and waits for me to climb in before closing it and moving around to the driver’s side.

It’s not until he pulls away from the curb that I realize I’d just been so close to him. I’d been too dazed before, but it was probably for the best.

“Where’s Addison?” My voice is quiet, hardly more than a whisper, and I hate that this has shaken me so much.

“At the house with Vince. We’d just arrived when you called, and I wasn’t sure what I was going to find when I got here. I thought it best to leave her there.”

I nod because that makes sense. It’s not like I gave him much information. Bringing her could have put her in danger, and she didn’t need to see me like this. She’s only five. She doesn’t need to know what a dark place the world can be; she deserves all the happiness.

“I’ll have movers come tomorrow and bring your things back to the house.”

“What? No, that’s not necessary. Really, you’ve done enough already,” I rush to say, but he’s shaking his head even before I’ve finished.

“Nonsense, you’re not coming back here alone.” He cuts his gaze to me, and I see that he won’t take no for an answer. Not that I can argue now. I hadn’t even thought about that, but now that I have...

I don’t want to ever go back there, let alone by myself.

“None of my stuff is packed.”

“They can take care of it.”

Well, I guess that settles it then. I’d been unsure if moving in was my best bet, but now I’m happy for the option. Unsure what else to say, I remain quiet as he drives us back to his house, where I’ll now live and work.

What a day.

The silence isn’t uncomfortable. Actually, it’s quite the opposite. Despite all that’s happened, I find comfort in Nathaniel’s presence. He’s been nothing but kind to me since I met him, and when I had nobody, he didn’t hesitate to come to my rescue.

Crap.

As if I didn’t have a big enough crush on him already.



Holy shit.

When Nathaniel said he would provide me with a room, I imagined his house was big. It had to be to offer someone a whole room, right? I mean, I’d seen his suits, his limo, his driver, and, oh my god, his office.

Let’s not forget the fact that he’s paying me double what I make at my dream job, where I’m making more money than I

ever dreamed of, and just to take care of Addison for a few hours a night until he's home.

It all sounded too good to be true, which is one of the reasons I was hesitant to accept. I mean, what if I ended up dead or locked in his fucking basement for the next twenty years?

Alright, maybe I've been watching too many unsolved mystery shows.

Still, you can never be too careful, and with my past, I don't really trust my judgment with men. First with Carter, and then there was that one night...

Nope. Don't go there. I didn't know, but they did. That's on them, not me.

In the end, it was Addison that swayed me—you know, before someone broke in.

Nathaniel said he was struggling to find a nanny who was a good fit for her. Over these last few weeks at the summer program, Addison has told me all about the nannies she's had and the ones she's seen her daddy interview.

She didn't like any of them.

It broke my heart to hear how many nannies she's had, how much she disliked them, and how much she just wished she had a mom like other kids her age.

I can't give her a mother, despite what she might wish, but I could give her a nanny who cared.

Pulling up to Nathaniel's house really let's me know how much I underestimated his wealth. It's not a house; it's a fucking mansion. Complete with one of those huge iron gates, they, of course, have a giant L worked into the metal, and they open automatically as the car approaches.

I've seen the gates a lot in the past. Carter had those around his house, and so did...

Nope stop that I need to stop going back there.

What have I gotten myself into?

Nathaniel pulls around the circle drive to the front door, and I can't even bring myself to care what I must look like with my face damn near pressed to the glass as I try to comprehend what I'm seeing.

This house is bigger than the building I lived in; hell, it might be bigger than the school.

The driveway circles around the front, where two large French glass doors stand, as what I can only assume is the front door. Large pillars are on each side, and above it is another level that has the same set of doors, only slightly smaller. Every window is lit, and my god, there are a lot of windows. I don't even want to think about what their electric bill might be, especially with the lights outside.

The house appears as if it's made of bricks, but instead of the usual red color I'm used to, these are a light brown, almost sandy. The roof is dark, just like the driveway, and it makes the house almost look like it's glowing. If I had to guess based on the windows, it has to have at least three stories, maybe even more in some areas.

What kind of house has this many stories? It's like their own apartment complex, but way nicer.

Mansions in Maine are clearly not the same as New York mansions...

A secondary building is connected to the main one, but I can't tell if it's just an extension or maybe a garage. I've never seen a garage that looked this nice, though, so maybe not.

I haven't even seen the inside, and already, this house is telling me I'm way out of my league.

Honestly, if it weren't for me having nowhere else to go right now, I'd probably tell Nathaniel I've made a mistake...or that he has. There's no way he wants me here.

I look over at him with wide eyes and find him smiling at me a moment before he exits the car, leaving me alone.

I guess I should probably follow him. Either that or I can just stay here in the car.

Even the car's too expensive for you.

I shake my head with a laugh at the thought, but it's true.

I've hardly gotten out of the car before a tiny wrecking ball slams into me. I clutch the door frame to stay upright and smile down at Addison, whose face is buried in my stomach as she holds onto me for dear life.

"Hey, sweetheart," I say with a chuckle, unable to hide my amusement. With the way she's reacting, you'd think she hadn't just seen me an hour or two ago.

Pulling back, she looks up at me with a huge smile before she drops her arms from around my waist, practically vibrating in place.

"Come on, Ms. Kat, I want to show you my room!"

For someone so small, she has one hell of a grip, her tiny hand grasping mine as she drags me behind her toward the door.

"Oh! And you can finally meet Ruby and my brother, Dessy!" She shrieks and pulls harder, making me laugh as I quickly make my way after her.

Note to self: No heels with her.

At this rate, I'm going to fall and break my neck.

We make it to the front door at the same time Nathaniel reaches it.

"Addison, Princess, don't pull her arm off," he says, shaking his head, earning a glare from her as we pass, and I can't help but chuckle. Nathaniel Lawson might be a man of money and business, but he's so very clearly wrapped around his daughter's finger that it's hard not to find it utterly adorable.

Addison doesn't let up as we make it through the foyer and up the stairs. I don't have a lot of time to look around, but what I do see is surprisingly normal. I'd half expected everything to be marble and, I don't know, gold or something else ridiculous. Instead, I find the floors are dark wood, and the walls are painted white and gray. There's art on the walls, plants here and there, along with other decorations. While it's

still very clear they have money, it has a homey feeling I hadn't expected.

We make it up a set of stairs and down a long hallway with a few doors on each side before we come to a stop outside of one of them. Addison drops my hand long enough to open the door before yanking me inside with her.

Holy shit.

I've heard Nathaniel call Addison princess a few times now, and while it's an adorable little nickname, I see where it comes from now.

The room is pink, everything from her bed to the walls and carpet, with gemstones that make everything look like it's glittering when she flips the light on. Her bed is huge, way bigger than any five-year-old would ever need, and covered in fluffy blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals. It sits against the far wall in the middle of the room, with a large canopy built above it. The canopy is the same oval shape as the bed and has curtains that hang down to the edges, with little fairy lights shining inside of them.

I take in the room as Addison finally releases me with a squeal of joy. She barrels into her room and drops to the floor to wrap her arms around one of the biggest and meanest-looking dogs I've ever seen in my life.

"Ruby! Meet Ms. Kat!"

That's Ruby?!

Of all the dogs I could have pictured, never in my life would I have pictured this one. In my mind, Ruby was a small dog, maybe a Pomeranian or even a golden retriever puppy.

In no world would I have imagined a Doberman!

"Ruby, sit," Nathaniel's voice calls from behind me, startling me. I whip around to find him standing in the doorway. I hadn't even realized he'd followed us up here.

"He's a bit protective. I wanted to make sure he was on his best behavior," Nathaniel tells me, clearly seeing the question in my eyes.

Hearing that makes me uneasy about having my back to him. Turning back around, I find Ruby watching me, and while I've never had a dog of my own or even been around very many; I don't feel like it wants to eat me.

Is that a thing? Do dogs let you know when they are about to chew on you like a new bone?

It's not until I bump into something that I realize I'd been moving back away from the dog and out of the room. A hand comes up to rest on my arm, and I quickly realize I didn't back into something but someone.

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry, Nathaniel," I rush to say, moving away from him.

"It's fine, Kat, really. I know Ruby is intimidating. He's not at all what most assume a five-year-old girl will call a pretty puppy, but he doesn't seem to mind you." He looks down at me almost as if in question, but if there's a reason Ruby might like me, his guess is as good as mine. Shaking his head after a moment, he looks back to Ruby and Addison, who are still sitting on the floor. Addison is giving him belly rubs, and it's hard to find him as scary with his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his little tail wagging hard enough that it sounds like a drum on the carpet.

"And please, call me Nathan."

I'm not sure what the sound that leaves my mouth is—half squeak, half some kind of acknowledgment, one hundred percent embarrassment.

His lips turn up even more, and...why am I sweating? How does this man have such an effect on me?

"Your room is just down the hall, first door you passed on your right." With that, he turns and leaves, and I'm left watching him as he goes, my cheeks burning up like I'm an elementary girl with her first crush.

Only I'm not. I'm a grown-ass woman, and he's my boss...



CHAPTER IO

I arrived at the house early in the afternoon, but by the time Addison was finished showing me everything, including my new room that's almost the size of my whole apartment, it's about dinner time.

My stomach grumbles just as Nathaniel... Nathan calls for us to come downstairs.

"Oh, it's dinnertime! Uncle and Des will be home soon!" Addison says, rushing out the bedroom door without a glance back.

"Well, Ruby, that's my cue, I guess," I tell the dog, offering him one more ear scratch and heading out, only for him to decide to come with me.

I won't lie. When Addison had first told me about Ruby, I hadn't pictured this huge dog. Nathaniel had seemed a bit worried when Addison first insisted I meet him, but after hovering for a few, he left, which I took as a good sign.

I've never had a dog before, or any other animal really, so I wasn't sure what to expect. He's definitely intimidating, but I think he might like me.

Maybe?

As if to answer my question, he nudges my hand as I make it to the bottom of the stairs. Something about such a large dog

asking for my attention melts my heart, and I stop for a moment to give him a few pets again. Spoiled pup.

I follow the sound of Addison's excited chatter and Ruby, who knows the way better than I do. This place is huge. It's going to take some getting used to.

It's not until I turn the corner into the dining room that I realize Addison's voice isn't the only one I'd heard. I come face to face with two familiar men I never thought I'd see again.

Nathan and Addison sit at the table, but they aren't alone. Nathan had mentioned that his brother and son, as well as his nephew, lived at the house. I'd met Oliver, and he seemed nice enough, if not a little standoffish, but I hadn't asked much about the other two. Addison had spoken highly of them, and I knew Nathan's brother was also his partner at their company thanks to my Google search, but I'd never asked for their names or more information.

My big brother, Des...

Addison's words echo through my head, and I could smack myself. I'd thought it was a nickname, not a shortened form of his name.

Alex and Desmond sit at the table, staring at me much the same way I stand staring at them, in pure disbelief.

"Ms. Kat, Ms. Kat!" Addison shouts, running over to grab my hand and pull me toward the table when I make no move to go to it myself. "This is my brother, Des, and my Uncle Alex!"

She's so excited that she doesn't seem the least bit put off that I'm not really present. Instead, my mind is racing, going over everything that's happened in the last few weeks, as I wonder how the hell I missed this.

How had I never asked their names? Nathan had talked about them a little bit. Had I just missed it? No, there's no way... Right?

Shit. Shit. Shit.

This can't be happening.

I'd just agreed to nanny for Nathan. Now I have to find a way to tell my new boss I have to quit. There's no way I can stay here knowing what I've done. And shockingly enough, sleeping with his son and brother isn't even the worst of it. I'd slept with a man who had a child and possibly a wife, or at the very least, someone who would call him dear.

Again, shit.

"Uncle Alex, this is Ms. Kat. She's my new nanny!"

"Katherine," my name rolls off his lips in a deep, husky whisper, as if he's testing the way it will feel to say it again. He reaches out for Addison, and she happily climbs up on his lap with a grin, seemingly unaware of the way her uncle is devouring me with his eyes.

I look from him to Desmond and back to Addison, and something doesn't add up...

Oh my god.

No way!

Was I wrong?

Was this whole thing one big misunderstanding?

I look from Addison to Alex, and the more I look, the more I think I might have.

That little girl I saw all those months ago was Addison. Seeing them now, I'm almost certain of it. Her hair is lighter, but she has the same blue eyes as Nathan. I'd only assumed when I heard her calling for her dad she was talking to him, but had she actually?

Shit.

"Katherine," Desmond says, pushing to stand before his eyes flick down to Ruby, who stands beside me. I hadn't even realized I'd been petting him in my shock, almost as if taking comfort in his presence, and I snatch my hand away.

"Well, it would seem introductions aren't required." I snap my gaze to Nathan's, hearing the amusement in his tone. I'd

been careful not to look at him, worried about what I might find, but he doesn't seem upset at all. Honestly, why would he be? I highly doubt he thinks I slept with both of them during a one-night stand that still plagues my dreams.

No, he probably assumes we've met somewhere before. And my god, he has no idea.

If my cheeks get any more red, they might just catch fire.

"Come on, Kat, come sit with me!" Addison says, still oblivious to the tension and my situation. Which is a good thing. The last thing I want is for her to start asking questions.

Jumping down from Alex's lap, she runs back over to me, grabbing my hand and towing me with her to the large table.

Right next to Desmond.

Of course, because why wouldn't it be?

I keep my gaze focused on the table, unsure where to look or what to do. I can feel eyes on me, but I'm not sure who's, and I don't dare look.

Addison happily fills the silence, telling Desmond and Alex all about her last day, our pinky promise, our trip to get ice cream, and how I'm going to be her new nanny. She's so happy, and they listen, chiming in here and there, sounding genuinely invested in what she's telling them.

Slowly, my heart rate starts to return to normal, and I take a deep breath.

"Pasta?" Desmond's deep voice makes me gasp at how close it is, and I look up to find him leaning into my space, his eyes sparkling with something I can't put my finger on.

"Um... Ugh, yes, thank you," I manage to stammer out.

If I thought he was close before, he gets impossibly closer when he leans over to drop a helping of said pasta onto my plate without taking his eyes off of me.

And just like that, my heart is beating like a damn drum again.

He moves away again, and to anyone else, it would look like he was simply being nice, getting me food. But something about the smirk on his face tells me he knew exactly the effect he was having on me.

The rest of dinner is mostly uneventful. They all talk, Nathan and Alex, about the trip he just took and some light business stuff that I don't pay much mind to. Desmond and Addison catch up, and I learn that he's been gone a little over a week for business as well. It's clear Addison missed them, and honestly, it's adorable. They make plans to have a day with her to make up for their absence.

The food is delicious, even if I only manage to eat a small portion. My stomach is so tied in knots right now that I'm amazed I manage what I do.

"Do you not like it?" Alex asks as I swirl my fork in my noodles absent-mindedly.

"Oh, no. It's great. I'm just tired," I say lamely, setting my fork down to stop my fidgeting, attempting to force a smile.

He smiles back, and jeez, what is with the Lawson genetics? How are they all so ridiculously handsome?

"Yes, Kat has had a long day. The movers will be here bright and early tomorrow to drop off your things, and I've had a few basic things delivered to your room for the night as well." Nathan asks, and I nod, not trusting my voice.

"Unfortunately, Alex and I are required at a meeting tomorrow as he's just returned, or we would be here to help."

Again, I nod, because, I mean, what am I going to say to that? When we talked about me taking over as Addison's nanny, he told me he has a pretty busy schedule, hence the need for a nanny. When you run your own business, you don't really get days off the same way the rest of the world does.

"Desmond will be home, though, so should you need anything, please let him know." With that, he stands from the table, coming over to collect a very sleepy-looking Addison. I take that as my sign that I'm excused, whispering a rushed

good night before I make my way back up to my new room as quickly as I dare without running.

I appreciate his offer of Desmond's assistance, but I can almost guarantee I won't be taking it. I know I can't avoid them forever, especially not with us all living in the same house, but I don't have any intention of seeking him out.

It's not until I'm in my room with the door shut firmly behind me that I feel my panic begin to lessen. How did this happen? What are the odds that of all the students in my class, Addison would be tied to them and that I would accept a nanny position that lands me in their path again?

I let my head fall back against the door with a groan at my luck, or maybe it was a lack of luck. Hell, I don't know what it is, but it's ridiculous.

The house is quiet, and despite the crazy that just happened, my room is nice. I want to take some time to look around without Addison running around trying to show me everything. She was so excited earlier I hardly had a moment to really look for myself.

Like the rest of the house, my room is massive, way more room than I'll ever need. The bed is so big I bet it could easily fit at least four grown people, and I don't even need to touch it to know the second I lay down, it's going to be the best sleep I've ever gotten; I can tell just by how soft the blanket is. The tufted headboard is black with gold details, the same as most of the other furniture, from the matching nightstands on either side of the bed to the tall dresser near the bathroom door and even the vanity.

Most of the furniture I've seen is darker, but the accents always give it enough of a pop that, with the lights on, it doesn't feel stuffy or small—not that I think that's even possible.

My room is so big that a chandelier hangs above my bed, and I'm honestly not sure how I feel about that.

I've seen *Final Destination*. But somehow, if I were to die in this house, I get the feeling it would be from something like

falling down the million stairs and not something like the chandelier falling. I'm sure this place was built to last.

Holy shit.

My bathroom is amazing! There's no tub, but the shower is huge, taking up the whole back half of the room. There are no doors and no glass, but as I look closer, I notice the drain at the end of the tile that makes up the bottom of the shower area. I've never used a shower like this before, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little afraid of making a whole mess, but I'm also excited to try it. Walking further into the bathroom, more lights flick on, and with them, the room warms.

It's cozy, almost a bit much being fully clothed, but I bet it would be nice fresh out of the shower.

Shit, they really did think of everything.

Walking out of the bathroom, I walk right over to my bed and drop face down onto the super soft blanket with an oomph.

This isn't ideal, but even with them here, I don't feel like I made the wrong choice. Maybe they forgot exactly what happened that night?

Judging by the way they looked at me and the way Desmond was leaning toward me at dinner, I highly doubt it.

There's not much I can do about it now, though. I already agreed to nanny Addison, and I won't back out on her, no matter how awkward this might be. Not to mention, I don't really have anywhere else to go. I could go back to my flat. I'd filed a police report, but it doesn't feel safe or like home the way it had, even when I left this morning. Not to mention, I don't even have a door to close.

I wander over to the window and look out at the massive backyard. The pool is huge, and there's a giant play structure that looks like it belongs in a park rather than in someone's backyard. My eyes fall to the pool house, and memories of that night with them rush back, heating my blood and making my heart race for a completely different reason.

From up here on the second floor, it looks like it might be a normal place, but I know better. I know what happens in those walls, and I highly doubt I'm the only one. They might have tried to leave me a way to contact them, but I know they weren't looking for anything serious, just like I wasn't.

No, it happened. There's no denying that, but I don't need to let it make things weird. They've probably been with dozens of women since then and will continue to do so, and they should. I'm not here to stop them. I'm only here for Addison because it's my job, and she deserves someone who cares. I need to get over myself and them, if I'm being honest.

No, I need to make this work, and I will.

Just because I've thought of them more than I care to admit, since that night doesn't mean they have. They were probably just shocked to see me again.

Determined to let it go and move on, I check the drawers and find some basic clothing items, just as Nathan said. They're nothing special, just flannel pajamas, some plain shirts, and shorts, but enough to get through until my clothes arrive tomorrow. More than I'd hoped for, I'd been ready to sleep in my underwear and wear the same thing tomorrow if needed, though I'm thankful I don't have to.

I crawl into bed, and oh my god, if it's not the most comfortable bed I've ever laid in. The comforter is thick but not so heavy that I'll sweat to death, and there's a smaller blanket on top that has to be the softest thing I've ever felt.

Whoever says money can't buy happiness must not have a bed like this because I might have to argue they're wrong right now.

Despite being so comfortable I don't want to move, sleep evades me. My mind won't stop as I go over the details of the day, from ice cream to accepting the job, finding my apartment in shambles, and coming here to find Alex and Desmond. Over and over, I replay it, trying to think about anything I missed—signs that Alex and Desmond were Lawson's—but I come up blank. The only thing I can think of was the Google search I did that named his brother Alexander, but that's a

rather common name, and I didn't think anything of it at the time.

Stupid.

Rolling on my side, I look at the clock on the nightstand and let out a groan. I've been laying here for over an hour and still feel no closer to sleep than I did when I first laid down.

It's going to be a long night.



CHAPTER II

Of all the people to walk into the kitchen as Addison's new nanny, *she* was not who I expected.

Why would I? I'd tried to track her down and had no luck. It was as if she'd vanished into thin air after that night. We kept track at the club, but she never went back, and despite owning the place and having access to everything, we had nothing. She hadn't bought one drink that night. From the second she sat down at the bar, people were sending them to her, and while I can understand why, it was still frustrating. Not only because we couldn't track her, but because the thought of her dealing with so many drunken fools like the one we chased away makes my blood boil.

I wasn't the only one upset about it, either.

Des might not admit it, but he was hooked from the second he saw her at the bar. He doesn't do relationships, not after the last one, but he would have for her. I could see it in the way he gravitated toward her, the gentle way he fucked her, and the smile that was damn near plastered on his face all night.

We took a hit a while back. It was the whole reason we used the pool house for our fun and kept everything simple and clean. But the very thing we used as a way to protect us proved to be our downfall when she was able to slip right through our fingers. We hadn't wanted anything serious, so

we'd made it easy to keep our pleasure separate from our daily lives. Maybe we'd done a little bit too good of a job.

Not this time, though.

I'm not sure how she ended up here, and I don't believe in destiny or higher powers, but I'll be damned if I don't take this opportunity and treat it like the gift it is. I don't even need to ask Des if he's interested. I saw the way he looked at her at dinner tonight. That boy's just as gone as he was that night, and it's like a weight dropped off of him.

He'd been a bit distant for a while, spending more time out on his bike than at the office, and I knew it was annoying Nate. He was acting like a little lost puppy about a girl he spent one night with. It didn't make sense to the others because they hadn't been there, and no amount of us telling them about her would make him see.

We'd left her that morning to make breakfast with Addison. It was a tradition we had, making pancakes together on holidays. One we hadn't missed once since Addison was born. While she ate, we filled Nate and Oliver in on our night. We might share, but we don't usually sleep and tell. Oliver caught on right away, and while he didn't seem happy about the idea of trying again, he remained quiet. Nate seemed minorly intrigued, if not a bit skeptical, but agreed to meet her and see for himself.

Which, of course, never fucking happened.

Until, apparently, it did. Somehow, she had met him all on her own, and she'd clearly made an impression, considering she was living in the house as Addison's new nanny.

Rapping my knuckles on his office door, I push it open without giving him a chance to respond.

"Took you longer than I thought it would," he says without looking up from his computer screen, and I huff a laugh before falling into the chair in front of him. He already has a glass of whiskey sitting on the edge of his desk for me, and I snatch it, knocking it back in one gulp.

Fuck, I needed that.

“Yes, well, my niece needed extra bedtime stories to make up for my absence,” I tell him, rolling my eyes, and he chuckles.

“Yes, god forbid she miss your ass.”

“Hey, my ass is very lovable!” I say in outrage that he ignores. I can talk a good game, but I’m just as wrapped around Addison’s finger as he is. I might not be her father, but she’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a daughter, and I love her like my own.

We all do.

“Speaking of asses,” I say, leaning back in my chair and getting comfortable.

That gets his attention. His fingers that had just been flying along the keys without missing a beat freeze before he drags his eyes from the screen to me, meeting my gaze with a raised brow.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks, but he’s not fooling me. Nate might seem like an unfeeling prick with a stick shoved up his ass, but I know him better than that.

There are a million things I could say and quite a few questions I want answered, but all of that can wait. I want to watch him squirm.

“Since when does the help live with us?”

Instead of answering, he rolls his eyes and turns back to the computer screen. But that’s as good as an admission in my book. My brother isn’t one to let things bother him unless it’s for good reason, and he’s more than used to me.

“She was out with us for ice cream. I’d offered her the position of nanny last week, but she had yet to accept it. We made an agreement while out, and then we dropped her off at her apartment.”

The disgust in his tone is clear, but I don’t understand why. We might be loaded now, but we didn’t grow up much better off than the average family. We weren’t poor exactly, but we

also weren't rolling in it. Sometimes, bills were tight, but our parents always made it work.

Clearly, I'm missing something.

"We'd only just made it back to the house when she called me..." he pauses, pushing back from his desk and completely disregarding his work.

Strange. My brother is nothing if not a workaholic.

"She was freaking out. It took me a second to understand, but I left Vince with Addison and went back. I wasn't sure what was wrong. All she managed to tell me on the phone was that she needed help and didn't have anyone else to call. I found her crying in the hallway."

"What the fuck?" I shout, bolting upright from my chair.

Of all the things I expected him to say, this hadn't been it. I thought maybe she'd caught his attention the way she had ours, and maybe she still had, but fuck me if this doesn't make me see red.

"Someone had broken into her apartment, busted the door down, and ransacked the place. I couldn't just leave her there."

I'm mad, damn near seeing red. But also grateful that he didn't leave her and happy she called him.

Slumping back in the chair, I let myself seethe for a second before I let it go, for now.

"Did she file a police report?" I ask, and he nods.

Shit, well, we can still work with that.

"We'll come back to that later, all of us. But that still doesn't really answer my question. We own six houses on this street just for staff. So pray tell, brother, why she's in our house instead of the one intended for the nanny."

His jaw ticks, but he knows as well as I do that I've got him. Nate bringing her in isn't strange. As I said, we have housing for that. But we made a deal after Natasha. We don't bring women into the house. It's the whole reason we have the pool house.

A smile pulls at my lips as I watch him struggle to find an answer to appease me, and he comes up blank.

“So tell me, dear brother, how did you two meet?”

And he does.

Apparently, they met a few months ago, and just like Des and myself, he was taken by her beauty at first, which was only made sweeter by the fact that she had no idea who we were. Seeing Katherine with Addison is what sold him, though. I can see it in his eyes when he talks about seeing them together.

Finding a nanny for Addison has been a fucking challenge. She’s got a lot of energy, she’s smart, and stubborn, but more than anything, most of the ones we hire seem to only be doing it to try to get into our good graces for one reason or another. Some think they can be the one to tie us down, while others have sold our personal information to tabloids and other bullshit places.

It’s not fair to Addison, but there’s nothing we can really do about it.

“I told you, you’d like her,” I say, unable to help myself once he’s finally done catching me up.

“Yes, well, that’s not what I think we need to be discussing right now,” he says, not even bothering to try and deny it.

Good, because we both know it would be a lie.

“No, you’re right, it’s not. Though it’s still true.”

He waves me off, but before we can continue our conversation, the door flies open and Des strolls in with a smile on his face and a pep in his step.

Yeah, we have a lot to talk about because there’s no way I’m letting her get away again.



CHAPTER 12

I wake up in the morning tangled in my blankets and sweating. It has nothing to do with the actual temperature of the room and everything to do with the dreams of three sexy men and the things they could do to my body. It started like my dreams of them usually do, reliving our night of fun in the pool house, but somewhere along the way Nathan joined in, and if I thought it was hot with the two of them...

Fuck, three of them were otherworldly.

At least they were in my dreams, though I can't imagine it would be anything less.

Looking at my phone, I find it's only five. With the summer program ending yesterday, I have no reason to be up right now. The movers won't be here until around ten, but there's no way I'm going to be able to go back to sleep now.

The house is quiet as I make my way down the hall, and I walk slowly, taking in the dark wood of the walls and the carpet beneath my feet. The sun is just starting to rise, pouring through the window behind me, but even still, the hall is full of shadows, making it almost creepy to be alone. The sound of my footsteps might be muted by the soft carpet, but not one hundred percent, and with the high ceilings, the sound bounces around until I'm suddenly walking a lot faster.

Making it to the stairs, I slow down so as not to fall down the stairs in my haste, but I make sure not to look behind me

until I've made it to the kitchen. This house is going to take some time to get used to.

Ruby is lying in the kitchen when I enter, and he pops up, nearly giving me a heart attack. He growls at first, but it quickly dies when he realizes who I am, and he lays back down.

I'm glad he seems to like me because I'd thought he was scary just from the size of him, but when he's in protection mode, he goes from scary to the thing of nightmares.

"There has to be coffee in here somewhere," I mumble, looking around.

It takes me entirely too long to figure out which high-tech gadget is the coffee machine, and even when I do, I have no idea how to use it. It's got knobs and buttons and a whole touch screen.

Ugh, why is this so complicated? Who wants to do all of this for a cup of coffee?

Twenty minutes later, I'm still no closer to figuring it out than I was when I started, and I let out a groan of frustration, letting my head hit the machine with a thump.

A chuckle behind me makes me whip around to find Alex standing in the doorway that leads to the dining room. He's leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed and a smile on his face as he watches me.

Crap! How long has he been standing there?

My cheeks heat at the idea of him watching me struggle like an idiot.

"Don't stop on my account, Red."

The nickname he gave me all those nights ago rolls off his tongue and caresses my body, but as much as I might like it and the way it sounds coming from him, Trevor tainted it. Now, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and I can't help but cringe when I hear it.

"Oh, not a fan of that nickname anymore, huh? Don't worry, I can find a new one," he says, and the idea shouldn't excite

me, but it does.

People don't nickname nannies, right?

Crap, they might. I have no idea.

I stand there for a moment, lost in thought, before I realize I'm staring and quickly whip back around to the coffeepot. As annoying as it might be, it's definitely the safer and easier option right now.

Mindlessly, I push a few buttons, trying to get it to do literally anything, and for a moment, I convince myself he's not there, that he's left.

Of course, I'm wrong.

I feel him before I see him, the heat of his body behind me a moment before his hands come down on the counter on either side of me, trapping me.

With a squeak, I spin around and come face to face with him. He's leaning forward so that we're almost nose to nose, and his sudden proximity has me backing up into the counter's edge.

Crap.

"That color on your cheeks is beautiful," he says, slowly reaching up to brush the back of his hand over my heated skin. I remain as still as a statue, unsure if I should run or if I want to lean into him. He pulls back before I can decide, and I'm left gaping at him as I try to get my brain to function with him so close.

"I don't remember you being this shy the last time I was this close. No, last time you were a real firecracker."

His mention of our night together opens the floodgates in my mind. The memories mix with my dreams from last night, and just like that, I can no longer meet his eyes.

He chuckles; the sound is low and sexy, and I get the feeling he knows exactly where my mind just went.

Careful as not to touch him, I turn back around, letting him stand at my back and hoping maybe he'll just leave me be. It's

too early for this; I haven't even had coffee yet, and with my dreams last night, I'm so on edge that one wrong move might have me jumping his bones.

Nope, bad idea, Kat.

You work for his brother, and you already fucked him and Des once.

Shit, I fucked his brother *and* his son. There's no way he's going to keep me as his nanny when he finds out, and I can't keep it from him. Not only is that wrong, but from the way Alex is acting right now, I know it will be impossible.

I just need to find a way to tell him.

Ugh, I don't think they make a card for this kind of situation.

'Sorry I fucked your family, but that was before you hired me.'

Maybe I should submit that to Hallmark; it's a missed opportunity, honestly.

I bite my lip, holding in my laughter at the stupid thought, before shaking it away. I'll deal with that later. Right now, I need caffeine.

"I'll make you a deal. How about I make us some coffee, and we can sit down and talk about why you never called?" His warm breath rolls over my skin, and I can't fight the shiver as it works its way down my spine.

His lips ghost over the sensitive skin of the back of my neck, and I let my eyes fall closed.

Fuck.

It would be so easy to explain it was all a misunderstanding. As silly as it might sound to him, it's the truth.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but so are some other ones that are less than ideal.

Like the urge to beg him to touch me. Having him this close after so long is almost intoxicating. It's as if I'm right back in that night again. I remember the way he and Des made me

feel, the tender way they held me and the protection they offered me from the creep at the bar.

That night was exactly what I needed—a way to make a fresh start and leave the memory of Carter and everything else behind—and they had delivered.

It wasn't until I saw Addison that I realized why it worked so well, though. They were exactly what I was looking for because they were the exact opposite of what I was used to. It had been almost like a bucket of ice water was poured over my head when I thought he had a wife and child, but it was a good thing.

If not, I have no doubt I would have fallen for him, for both of them, and that wasn't what they were looking for. I hadn't been either, but the signs were all there looking back at it now.

No, it might have been a misunderstanding, but I'm grateful for it now. It saved me from making a fool of myself, at least at that moment.

There doesn't seem to be anything that's going to save me this time, though.

“Alex, don't tease her before coffee.”

My body stiffens at the sound of his voice, and I stop breathing.

Alex huffs, but I feel him move away. “I was only asking a question,” he says, turning to lean against the counter to my left, his arms crossed and a smirk on his lips.

I'm so fired.

“Yes, well, your questions tend to be annoying, so let her get some caffeine in her system first. I don't need you chasing her off on her first day,” Nathan says from behind me, slowly getting closer.

Wait, what?

He's not going to fire me even though he just found his brother all but pressed against me in the kitchen?

A warm hand rests against the small of my back, pulling me from my thoughts, and I turn to find Nathan standing behind me this time. A small smile turns his lips up, and just like that, I'm lost in the blue of his eyes.

"The coffee machine takes a little getting used to. Why don't you have a seat, and I'll make us some," he offers, his voice much gentler than it was with Alex, and I worry I might melt into a puddle at his feet.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out, leaving me gaping like a fish before I snap it closed again and nod. Hyperaware of the fact that he's still touching me, I turn and make my way to the island counter that's lined with stools and take a seat, keeping my eyes fixed on the countertop.

I'd thought it was bad when I had a crush on my now boss, but this...this is so much worse.

I'm so screwed.

Nathan makes us all coffee, and I don't even realize that I should have paid attention to how he did it until after.

Damn it. I'll have to find a video online later to show me because I'm not asking right now, not when I can feel their eyes on me as we sit here.

They talk, but I can't really focus on what they say as I try to understand what's going on.

Alex's behavior makes sense, at least. We have history, and I guess in his mind, I ghosted him. But Nathan's easy way of accepting it really throws me off. Shouldn't he be upset?

I'm no closer to understanding when I hear them getting up.

"We'll be back later tonight, probably around dinner," Nathan says, placing his cup in the sink and heading out, once again leaving Alex and me alone.

"Have fun today, Kitten," he all but purrs before following Nathan.

I let my head drop to the counter with a sigh, only to pull back and rub at the spot. Damn, that hurt more than I thought it would. Hopefully, it doesn't leave a mark. The last thing I

need is to have a bump that looks like a horn in the middle of my head.

“Kat!” Addison’s voice rings from down the hall, and Ruby quickly gets up and wanders off in her direction. I’m standing at the sink, rinsing the cups I just washed, when she comes in with a smile, rubbing sleepies from her eyes.

“Good morning, Addison,” I say, reaching for the towel to wipe my hands, but she has other plans, and I have a split second to decide between catching her or risking her taking us both to the ground.

I scoop her up, pulling her close as she buries her head in my shoulder, squeezing me tight with her arms and legs.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I ask, rubbing circles on her back as she clings to me.

“I thought you left,” she whispers, her breath hitching, sounding like she’s on the verge of crying.

“Oh, honey, no.” I hug her back and rock her a bit to try to comfort her. “We made a promise, remember, and I take my promises very seriously.”

I feel her nod, but she doesn’t let up. She is still holding tight to me, but that’s okay. I don’t mind a good hug. Before long, she’ll be used to me being here, but until then, I can comfort her. She’s probably used to nannies leaving, so I can’t blame her.

“What do you say we eat some breakfast and go play? You can show me all of your favorite toys or the jungle gym you have outside. That looks like a lot of fun,” I tell her, trying to get her mind on something else.

She pulls back, peeking up at me before she gives a tiny nod. I smile before finding us something simple to eat with her still in my arms.

Addison perks up a bit after some cinnamon sugar toast. It was a treat my mom used to give me when I was a kid, and it always made me happy, so I’m glad it worked for her as well.

The movers arrive while she's eating, and all they seem to need to know is what I want to put in the room and what can go into storage. Everything is packed neatly in boxes that are labeled, and honestly, the whole thing is way more efficient than when I moved my own stuff. In all, the whole thing takes maybe fifteen minutes before they don't need me; it's kind of crazy.

By the time we head outside to play in the backyard, you would never know she'd woken up so sad. We climb, swing, play hide and seek, and by the time lunch rolls around, I'm sweating my butt off and starving.

"Alright, I think it's time we go make something to eat," I tell her with a laugh when her stomach grumbles. A smile lights her face, and she quickly slides down the slide to join me on the grass.

"We're going to make something?" she asks with a smile, but her question confuses me.

"Of course we are. How else would we have something to eat?" I ask, taking her hand and leading her back into the house through the large sliding glass door.

"Usually, Dale makes all the food," she says with a pout, and now it's my turn to be confused. "He's our chef."

Oh, well, I guess that makes sense. Nathan did mention there was other help, though I have yet to see them.

"Well, your dad didn't say anything to me about a chef, so I think for today, we'll make something for ourselves and see how you like it."

As we enter the house, she jumps up and down, looking around at the kitchen with wonder, much like she did at the playground earlier.

"So, what do you think we should make?" I ask, realizing I don't know much about her preferred foods or if she has any allergies. Figuring out what she likes should be easy enough just with time and talking to her, but I don't want to mess with unknown allergies.

Fishing my phone from my pocket, I debate texting Nathan. I know he said they had a meeting, but he also told me to text or call him should I need anything. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I decide to just go for it. Worst case, he's in a meeting and can't get back to me right away. We can always stick to things I've seen her eat at school for today.

Sorry to bug you, but I just wanted to check in and see if Addison has any allergies to foods or in general before we made lunch.

Typing out the message, I quickly hit send before I can think too much about it and talk myself out of it.

Addison is looking through the cabinets for something she might want, humming a happy little tune as she goes, and I stand watching while I wait for a response.

It doesn't take long before the three little dots pop up on my screen saying he's typing, and with them, my anxiety spikes.

Don't apologize, I told you to message me if you need anything. This is new and going to take some time to get used to, but no, she doesn't have any known allergies.

My anxiety melts away as I read the words, but before I can tuck my phone into my pocket, the dots pop up again.

Dale usually does all the cooking. Should I inform him he won't be needed today?

Yes, please. Addison and I have it covered.

Sounds good. I'll let him know.

Thank you. Hope your meeting goes well.

The second I hit send, I regret it. Why did I say that? That was in no way necessary or strictly professional.

“Mac and cheese!” Addison proclaims, finally deciding and saving me from my spiral.

I drop my phone on the counter face down, and we begin the hunt for ingredients.

The fact that they have a chef is apparent the more I look around. There are so many fresh ingredients and everything we need, from cheese to noodles and every cooking tool imaginable.

This kitchen is a dream.

The prep work takes a while with Addison helping, but she’s smiling the whole time, so I don’t mind. By the time we popped it into the oven to cook, I had another idea, and the fact that they had not one but two ovens only solidified my decision. We’d pulled out some of the fresh fruit from the fridge to snack on while we cooked, and Addison took a break to grab some while I did a quick cleanup and pulled out peanut butter, sugar, and some eggs.

Setting them down on the freshly cleared island counter seems to get her attention.

“What’s that for?” she asks, hopping down from her stool to come stand with me. I kick her step stool over so that she can climb up next to me and see what we’re doing on the counter.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I could use something sweet,” I tell her, chuckling when her eyes widen. Addison, like most kids and myself, loves sweets. “How do peanut butter cookies sound?”

Judging by her squeal, I’m going to say she likes the idea.

We make two dozen cookies and get them all loaded up onto a tray, ready to go in, just as the timer for the mac and cheese goes off.

Addison washes up while I get the cookies in the oven and plate us some food.

“This is the best mac and cheese ever, Ms. Kat!” Addison proclaims after her first bite before quickly shoveling another spoonful into her mouth.

“Slow down. It’s not going anywhere,” I tell her, worried she’s going to choke with how fast she’s trying to eat it. “I’m glad you like it, but we have plenty, and we can make it again.”

She slows down, if only minorly, but it’s enough for her to chew, so I’ll take it. I eat from my own plate as I continue to clean up and rotate the cookies out and onto a cooling rack as they finish. After the first batch cools, I put two on a paper towel and drop them next to Addison’s bowl, which she promptly abandons to try the cookie.

I let her. Not only is she on her second bowl of mac and cheese, but I can’t really blame her; I did the same.

Who can resist a freshly baked cookie?

Nobody, apparently, because just as I fill the last sheet from the oven, I hear Ruby as he wanders in. He’d been outside with us while we played, but disappeared when we came back inside. I’d thought he was going for a nap after playing, but now I see that wasn’t the case.

Desmond walks in a moment later, his hair sticking up in every direction, telling me he probably just woke up. He steps into the kitchen and stops, throwing his arms up to stretch and fuck me. He has no right looking so good without even trying.

His chest is bare, and I can’t look away from the tattoos that litter his torso and arms going up so far as his neck. They move and ripple as his muscles bunch and stretch, and I have to resist the urge to move toward him and trace the delicate lines and colors with my fingers or maybe even my tongue.

His shorts are loose and sit low on his hips, showing off the tops of his boxers that also sit low, but not as low. My eyes trace the muscles of his stomach, moving down lower to the V between his hips and the dark hairs that run down the center

and into his shorts. I know exactly what that trail leads to, but I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't love to see it again.

He slowly peels open his eyes, his gaze meeting mine. A smirk curls his lips up, making him look impossibly hotter. I quickly avert my eyes, looking back at the cookies.

"Morning," he says, his voice still hoarse with sleep.

"Afternoon," I say, trying to sound indifferent, knowing I fail when he chuckles.

As if getting caught staring at him wasn't bad enough.

I need to get my libido under control before I go through all my clean underwear on the first day here.

I hear him walk across the kitchen, but I refuse to turn around, carefully focusing on moving the cookies with much more concentration than necessary.

Which is why I almost jump out of my damn skin when he reaches around me to snag a cookie off the tray. His very bare chest presses against my back, and I suck in a breath, damn near choking on it.

He stays right against my back as he brings the cookie up to his mouth to take a bite, and I feel the rumble in his chest as he lets out a groan.

"Um, this might be the best cookie I've ever had," he says before turning his head to press his lips close to my ear. "Second best-tasting thing in the room," he breathes low enough that Addison won't hear him, but loud enough that there's no way for me to miss it.

"We made them!" Addison announces proudly. Her mouth full of her own cookie that slightly muffles her words.

Desmond lingers for a moment longer before moving away, but not before I feel him reach down to adjust.

Don't think about his dick, Kat!

Nope, too late.

He moves away, and I turn, watching him move to the counter opposite of Addison, and now I'm looking at his ass.

Fantastic.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the counter so that they are eye to eye. “You made these?” he asks, sounding shocked, and she eats it up.

“Yes! Me and Ms. Kat played outside and then made mac and cheese and cookies, and they are so good, and she’s the best nanny EVER!”

“Well, she sure sounds fantastic, and these cookies are great, but I think you’re forgetting about one important question.” Judging by the look on Addison’s face, I’d say she’s just as confused as I am.

“What?” she asks, leaning closer to him, her little face very serious, and I’ll be damned if they aren’t adorable. I know from the way she talked about him at school that she adores him, but there’s no denying he feels the same.

Desmond glances back at me over his shoulder and catches me once again checking him out.

Fuck it, I can look but not touch. I can’t spend every moment trying to avoid looking at them. It’s just not possible.

Turning back to Addison, he leans closer, waving her toward him. She scrambles to reach him, giving him her ear so he can whisper his secret.

“Can she swim?” he asks much louder than a whisper, and I snort.

Desmond pulls back, turning to face me, and I can see the mischief in his eyes.

What is he up to?

“So you can swim?” he asks, crossing his arms.

“Of course I can...” I say in confusion, not sure what he’s up to but knowing it’s something.

A smile turns his lips, and he claps his hands together. The sound rings out around the room, minorly startling me as Addison hops off her stool and runs around the counter, bouncing on her toes with excitement.

“We can swim?” She asks, looking from Desmond to me and back again, looking like she might combust if we don’t answer her.

“I don’t know, Kitten, what do you say? Can we swim?” Desmond asks, cocking a brow at me, almost as if in challenge.

“Um, I don’t see why not,” I tell them, not sure what the big deal is.

Addison throws her arms around my waist with a happy little squeal even before I’ve finished talking, and I look down at her with a smile, shaking my head, still confused.

“I don’t understand what the big deal is. You guys have a pool,” I say, looking to Desmond for answers.

“Her last nanny didn’t know how to swim, so she only got to swim when one of us was here to swim with her or watch her,” he says with a shrug. While that explains her excitement, it still doesn’t make sense.

“Okay, but you’re here, so even if I couldn’t, she could still swim...” I trail off, trying to make it make sense in my mind.

“Yeah, but everything’s more fun with more people to play, isn’t it?” Something about his tone and the way his eyes narrow tells me he isn’t talking about swimming anymore.

He turns away, walking back through the doorway he’d just come through a few minutes ago, and I’m struck silent by his comment still. Just before he leaves, he stops, catching my gaze over his shoulder.

“Why don’t you guys go get changed? I’ll grab my trunks and meet you in there.”

With that, he disappears, and the realization that I’m going to have to be in my swimsuit in front of him smacks me in the face.

Shit.



CHAPTER 13

I didn't have a bunch of stuff prior to moving in, and even less after so much was destroyed. Honestly, it was hardly worth having movers, especially with a room that was already fully furnished with stuff way better than what I had. But Nathan had insisted he would pay for it so I could be with Addison instead of wasting my time moving my things. Not to mention, he didn't seem keen on the idea of me going back there alone, not that I was either.

It sounded great at the time, but that also meant I went from living alone to a live-in nanny. Nowhere in that time did I think about the fact that I would have to swim. Addison had been so excited that she took off to get changed, and I was left standing in my room, staring down at my bikini.

It's not as if it's a string bikini; no, it's more than appropriate for a backyard swim. Even with a little girl present, everything important will be covered. But knowing Desmond will be in the pool with us has me longing for a one-piece or, hell, maybe even a wetsuit.

Just his presence in the kitchen rocked me to my core. How the hell am I meant to swim with him with both of us half-naked?

I look down at my suit that lies out on the bed as if the red fabric has somehow personally offended me before I snatch it

up and go into the bathroom to change. It's not as if I have another choice, and delaying isn't going to change anything.

Slipping into it, I do a turn in front of the mirror. I'd bought it online when I got my first check and never even tried it on. It had still been kind of chilly then, but it was on my list of things I didn't take when I left and seemed easy enough to get. Thankfully, it fits, but I also seemed to have gained a bit more ass since then. Well, I'd gained a little everywhere, and while most of my clothes fit better for it, I'm not sure this is one of them. The bottoms come up to my belly button; I remember the ad saying they were slimming, but fuck me, could they have given me a bit more fabric on my actual ass? As it is, the fabric only covers a little more than half of my cheek, and while they make my ass look good, that's not at all what I want. I'm trying to keep my ass away from these guys, not put it on display.

The top is better, at least. The girls are snug, and while I have cleavage, it's not enough that I'm worried they will spill out if I move around too much. Overall, it's fine, and I'm probably overthinking it, but I still quickly jump online in search of a one-piece for the future.

A knock sounds at my door, startling me. "Are you ready, Ms. Kat?" Addison's voice filters through the door, and I can hear her excitement. I can almost picture her bouncing in place, waiting on me.

"Coming," I yell back, looking myself over one last time before I go to my closet and grab a pair of flip-flops, another purchase I'd yet to use. At least I had the foresight to buy them when I did.

Slipping them on, I pause for a second. I don't want to leave her waiting long, but...

Before I can second guess it, I reach out, snagging one of my thin summer dresses and throwing it on over my suit. I'd bought them because they are simple and thin. Perfect to beat the heat but still acceptable at the school, and right now, this gray one will make the perfect cover.

Addison beams up at me when I pull the door open. Her suit is also a two-piece, but it's much more age-appropriate. The top is a lot like a sports bra, coming down to just above her belly button with thick straps, and the bottoms are shorts with a little skirt built into them. The whole thing is black with rainbow butterflies outlined all over it, and her little black flip-flops also have large butterflies that sit on her toes.

"That's not a swimsuit," she says, her face scrunching up in confusion as she takes in my dress.

"No, it's not," I tell her with a laugh as we head down the hall back toward the kitchen to go outside. "It's a little cold in here, so I put it on to keep warm until we're ready to swim," I explain. It's not exactly a lie; the house is kept at a lower temperature to combat the heat outside. It's enough that I have goosebumps even with the dress covering me, but also, I'm not trying to explain to a five-year-old that I'm hiding from her brother.

She seems to accept my answer and happily hums as we make our way through the rest of the house. With every step, my heart beats harder in my chest until I have to force myself to take a deep breath to try to calm it.

We're just swimming. I tell myself over and over until we reach the screen door. Earlier, when we went out, we did so at the other end of the house near the playset. I'd seen the pool. It's impossible to miss how big it is, but standing here in front of it is kind of crazy and once again reminds me that we live in very different worlds, or we did.

When I think of a pool, I picture a large rectangle with one side deeper than the other, maybe even a slide or diving board with sun chairs around it.

This is nothing like that.

A deck with a grill, chairs, and a few tables sit right outside the door under an awning that I'm pretty sure is actually another deck for the second floor, though I can't say for sure as I haven't been up there to see. Off the deck, you can take the walk bridge to the center of the pool area, which is all dark stone. From there, you can get into the lazy river that circles

the whole thing, or you can get into the main pool, hot tub, or the slide that's built into the rocks that make a waterfall into the main pool...

Not feeling swimming and just want some sun? You can do that too because there are recliners on the stone divide between the pools, along with tables and a towel rack.

"Come on!" Addison whines, pulling at my arm, and I realize I've been standing here staring for a while now.

"Sorry, dear," I tell her, letting her pull me across the deck and little bridge. She doesn't waste a second before running to a rock and pulling it open.

What...

It takes me a second to understand what I'm seeing, but when she pulls out a pair of goggles, I realize it's a deck box disguised as a large rock to blend in.

Wow!

While she pulls them in place, I take a second to look around for Desmond. I hadn't seen him since we came out and can only assume he's still inside. With shaking fingers, I pull off my dress and drop it onto one of the sun chairs just as Addison comes toward me, ready to go.

I shouldn't be nervous. Desmond and Alex both saw me naked. Hell, they did a lot more than see me, but I can't help it.

"Ready?" I ask her as I head toward the pool, and she gives me a nod.

The water is cool with the heat of the day, but I push myself down the stairs without care, trying to get into the water before...

"What's the rush, Kitten?"

Desmond's voice calls, and I almost scream. Whipping my head up, I look out into the pool to find Desmond already in the water. He swims out from behind the waterfall, and my jaw almost hits the ground.

“Des!” Addison yells happily, jumping in the water to swim to him.

I can't peel my eyes away from Desmond as the water rolls down his face and chest, and the smile on his face tells me he knows exactly what he's doing. Reaching up, he pushes his hair back from his face as he continues toward us. Every step leaves more of him exposed as the water gets shallower. By the time he reaches Addison, the water sits just under his swim trunks, swim trunks that sit very, very low.

Crap.

“Hey, Princess,” he says to Addison, reaching out to grab her and pull her further in with him. She laughs and splashes before calling for me to join them, and I realize I'm still standing on the stairs.

So much for getting in the water, so he didn't see me.

“Yeah, come play with us, Kitten,” Desmond purrs, and suddenly, the water doesn't feel as refreshing as it had a moment ago.

“Kitten?” Addison asks, looking at her brother in confusion. “Her name is Kat, silly, not kitten.”

Desmond barks a laugh as he falls back into the water, still pulling her along. The sound washes over me, raising goosebumps on my skin.

“I know that, but I think she's adorable, like a kitten. The same way I think you're a princess,” he says, reaching out to boop her nose.

“Desmond,” I hiss his name, trying to get him to stop, but he only laughs harder.

“You should call him Des!” Addison proclaims, turning around to look back at me, where I'm still a few paces behind them. “That way, you both have nicknames.”

She seems so proud of the idea, but there's no way I'll be calling him that. It's bad enough he has a silly nickname for me. I don't want to play into this game.

“Awe, thank you, Addy, but that’s your nickname for him. I don’t want to take it,” I tell her, trying to spare her feelings.

For a second, I think it’s going to work—that is until Desmond has something to say about it.

“Don’t be silly. Addison is great at sharing, aren’t you, Princess?” he asks, and she’s quick to nod her agreement.

Before I can come up with another excuse, Desmond dips below the water. I’d thought he was just being funny, going underwater so that I couldn’t say anything. It’s not until I feel something on my leg that I realize that wasn’t it at all.

The water here comes up just under my breasts, and I jump slightly when the splash of him popping up behind me sprays my upper back with tiny, freezing cold droplets, stealing the air from my lungs.

“See, Kitten, Addy doesn’t mind sharing. Besides, what’s a nickname among friends?” He asks, swimming behind me, his hand ghosting over my arm and his leg brushing mine.

Friends? I’m not sure what kind of friends he’s used to, but I don’t sleep with my friends, and I certainly don’t rub up on them like he is now.

“Can we play?” Addison asks, cutting off my line of thought and pulling Desmond’s attention back to her.

“Of course. What else would we do in the pool on such a perfect day?” Desmond asks, but even as he says it, he remains where he is. “How about Marco Polo?”

Addison squeals in excitement, and I’m going to assume she’s happy with that. Without another word, she closes her eyes and plugs her nose before dropping under the water. A second later, her hand pops back up as she begins lifting her fingers and counting.

“Come on, don’t tell me you’ve never played before,” Desmond says with a chuckle, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me into him as he swims back away from her. “You’re supposed to hide, Kitten.”

“I know how to play,” I say as I let myself drop below the water, out of his arms and swim away. I come back up on the other side of the pool, treading water in the deeper end where my feet no longer touch the ground, and find him watching me with a smile on his face.

“Marco!” Addison yells the moment her head pops back up, and Desmond has to swallow whatever he might have been about to say or risk giving his position away.

“Polo!” we both call out in response, making Addison chuckle.

We could easily avoid her forever; while she might swim well, she’s still only five. Of course, we don’t, though. What would be the fun of that? No, we make her work for it, but we let her get us, and Desmond takes full advantage of her eyes being closed.

Honestly, before long, it feels more like a game for him. It doesn’t matter who’s it; Desmond finds a way to be right there as often as he can while still not drawing Addison’s attention. I’d never admit it out loud, but it’s impressive, if not completely embarrassing. Every time he touches me, my body heats as I remember our night together.

He knows exactly what he’s doing, too. Every time our eyes meet, I can see the lust and the mischief that swims in them.

Fuck, how does he make something like simply playing in the pool into something so much more?

Even with Desmond’s sly touches, or maybe because of them, time flies, and before I know it, my stomach is rumbling.

“I think it’s about time we get out, Addy.” The second the words leave my lips, she’s pouting, but I know just how to handle that.

“Or you and Desmond can keep swimming while I start dinner.” She scrunches up her face at my use of his full name, but lets it go when she realizes what I said.

“No!” she shouts, shaking her head as she makes her way toward the stairs to get out. “I want to help cook.”

“Damn, you’re good,” Desmond says from behind me. His breath rolls over my neck as he chuckles, and I have to bite my lip to stop from shivering under his touch as he traces a finger up my spine with a featherlight touch.

“Kids are easy. You just need to know what makes them tick,” I tell him with a shrug and almost pat myself on the back when my voice comes out even.

“And what about you? What makes you tick, Kitten?” he purrs, and this time it’s impossible not to shiver.

I don’t even need to open my mouth to know there’s no way my voice would be even this time. I can feel the lump in my throat, and as he swims closer, I notice a very obvious bulge in his swim trunks.

I don’t move away, and he takes the opportunity to press closer.

It would be so easy to push against him, to reach back and feel him. Swim trunks are thin material, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t dying to feel the cold steel of the bars that line his cock again.

“Come on, Kat! We have to make dinner before Daddy comes home!”

Addison’s voice pulls me from my daydream, snapping me back to the present, where I find her standing outside of the pool, waiting.

Definitely not the best time to lose myself in him. No, there probably isn’t a good time to do that period.

“Coming.” This time my voice isn’t so steady, but I don’t let myself dwell on it. Instead, swimming toward the stairs, leaving Desmond behind.

I met Addison over at the recliner, where I left my dress and towel off. Desmond doesn’t get out right away, and I feel his eyes on me with every move I make. It’s not until Addison runs toward the back door that I hear the water move.

Unlike us, he didn’t use the steps. Instead, he pulls himself up on the side and hops out as if it’s the easiest thing in the

world. I try and fail to keep my eyes from his arms and the way his muscles flex and move while water drips down them.

Hot damn.

The water was cool and refreshing, a welcome break from the hot sun, but it's almost as if it never happened as he stalks toward me.

"I'll let Dale know he can have the night off." His voice is low and husky in a way that makes no sense for what he's talking about but still has me clenching my thighs all the same. "I can't wait to taste you. I mean, your cooking."

He walks away before I can reply. Not that I had anything to say. He leaves me to watch him with my mouth hanging open as my eyes trace over the muscles that line his back.

I'm so screwed.



CHAPTER 14

Having Kat here is both a dream come true and the sweetest kind of torture. I couldn't believe my eyes when she came down for dinner last night. Father had told me he hired a new nanny, but I hadn't been paying attention. I never really cared for Addison's nannies. They were usually either trying to get to one of us or had a stick so far up their ass I couldn't stand being around them. Like Rose, she was a real piece of work. It's no wonder Addy hated her so much.

I'd looked for Katherine after our night together, but it was as if she vanished. She never came back to the club, and it's not like I had her last name to track her down. And if she took my number, she sure as hell never used it.

It didn't make sense, considering the night we had. I'd thought it was amazing, and Alex agreed. To the point that we even brought her up to Oliver and my father. They had agreed to meet her, and we could go from there, but even before we had a chance, it was gone.

Just like her.

I'm not too proud to admit she'd been on my mind since then. I'd gone over the night hundreds of times, be it to please myself or try to figure out where the hell it all went wrong. But despite having a wonderful memory to jerk off to, I couldn't get past her. I'd never been so stuck on someone so fast, and I'd damn sure never chased anyone.

There was something about her I couldn't forget, though. I'd tried to find someone else, but nobody held my attention. They were all so... fake.

Regardless of why she left, she's here now, and we're in agreement that she won't be getting away again.

Well, most of us are. Oliver isn't due home until tomorrow, but I'm sure she'll win him over, too. I can't imagine anyone could turn her down.

I make my way down to my room as the girls head up to change before they start dinner. Addison had been so excited to cook something for Alex and Father. It's fucking amazing to see her like that with anyone that wasn't us.

Not only was she amazing in bed, but she's also fantastic with Addison. It's no wonder Father hired her without hesitation. Over the years, we've probably hired a few dozen nannies, and none of them lasted more than a couple of months. But if I get my way, Kat will be the last nanny Addison ever has.

Maybe even more than a nanny.

I'd left my phone in my room when I went down to swim. I'd been in a bit of a rush to get down there before them, and I'm glad I did. Getting the chance to watch Kat without her knowing I was there was, ugh. Fuck, I've been hard since the second I saw her in that damn bikini.

Snatching my phone off my dresser, I pull up our family group chat to rub it in a bit; not that Oliver will care, but Alex and my father will. I bet they've never been more ready to call off a meeting than they were this morning. If it hadn't been necessary, I bet they would have, but I can't say I'm upset about having some time alone with her.

Fuck... Kitten in a bikini is enough to make me pray for ninety-degree days ALL summer long.

I hit send and set my phone down to strip out of my wet bathing suit while I wait for their reply.

Faster than I'm used to with them, my phone vibrates, and I shake my head, smiling as I grab it. It seems even a big meeting can't keep them entertained right now.

Pictures or it didn't happen.

Alex writes back, and I curse aloud.

Why hadn't I thought to snag a picture!?

Whatever, it's not like I wouldn't have more chances. Besides, I wouldn't share it with him, anyway.

Green isn't a good color on you, old man.

I look good in everything. Though probably not as good as she did in that damn pool... No worries, though. I'll just have to get her into the hot tub with me. I bet she'd look fantastic with her bikini on the ground, skin flush from the water as I fuck her.

Damn it.

As if my dick wasn't already hard enough, motherfucker knew exactly what he was doing.

Nobody is fucking her until we know if that's what she wants. For now, she is Addison's nanny, nothing more.

Father's message comes through, and I roll my eyes. He can act like that's all he wants, but I know better. I saw the look in his eyes last night when we discussed keeping her around. I don't know what she did or how she did it, but somehow, she'd won him over without sleeping with him and without any kind of push from us.

Though that bikini would look much better on the ground.

I read his message twice, but I still don't understand what he's saying.

How the hell could he know what her bikini looked like?

My phone vibrates again, and a picture loads in. It's the backyard, the pool area specifically. Kat stands near the sun loungers with her little dress lying on one. I'd seen her come out in it, but she'd been out of view when she took it off...

The fucking cameras!

Fuck... no wonder you called for lunch early. Are you sure we need this partner? Can we reschedule for another day?

Lunch early, huh? What happened to just Addison's nanny?

I can't help but ask. My Father is a borderline workaholic. The only thing he takes time off for is family, and even that is planned. He and Alex built this damn company from the ground up, and it's damn close to being like another child to him. For him to call lunch early just to look at Kat in a swimsuit. Well, he might have it worse than I thought.

Good.

I said nobody was fucking her. Doesn't mean I can't appreciate a beautiful woman.

He doesn't need to elaborate for me to know what he means. Not everyone understands our dynamic, but it works for us. Sharing a woman takes jealousy and other issues we've dealt with over the years out of the equation. Maybe it should be weird, but it's not; it's almost exhilarating sharing her. Fuck,

sharing Kat with Alex was one of the hottest nights I'd ever had, and it was pretty tame overall.

The way she responded was beautiful, and watching her reaction to his praise... I can only imagine how she will handle my father.

We need to have this conversation sooner rather than later if you want me to be a functioning part of this company, because right now only one of my heads is getting proper blood flow and somehow I don't think you want me to engage in meetings with that one.

And the cameras are cheating.

He's not wrong, though; I'd be lying if I said I hadn't pictured peeling that bikini off of her and having my way with her in the pool, on the recliners, in the kitchen, and just about every other surface all the way back up here.

Would she respond the same way if it were only me and her?

I've never been so desperate to find out while also knowing I can't. She's momentarily off limits, and while I have a feeling that won't last long, she's also currently watching my little sister. That's her job, and she's fantastic at it, even from the little I've seen. I understand why Dad wanted her, and thank my lucky stars, this shit worked out like this.

For now, I need to keep myself in line, which means I need to get out of these wet shorts and handle myself before I go down for dinner with not just her but the rest of my family.

Tossing my phone on my bed, I make my way to my bathroom, letting my swim shorts fall to the ground with a wet slap before kicking them aside to handle later.

I've been painfully hard since the second I watched my kitten strip off that little dress she tried to use to cover herself up. Hell, who am I kidding? I've been hard since I saw her again. My memory of her hadn't done her justice. She's

fucking stunning, and like an addict, I can't wait for my next taste.

My bathroom is soundproof, something I'd required when my father bought the house.

What can I say? I enjoy sex in the shower. Something about being wet and covered in bubbles adds even more fun to it.

I'll be alone in here, for now, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy all the features alone. I flip the water on, letting it settle on the perfect temperature as I make my way to the speaker system and click on my favorite playlist.

Stepping into the warm water, I let my mind go back to that night with her. The way her fingers felt as she explored the piercings in the underside of my cock as I graze my own hand down them. It's not the same. No, her fingers were softer, her touch more erotic, but it will do for now. Fuck, I'd already been living off a memory of her, sure I'd never get the chance to be with her again.

Wrapping my hand around my cock, I begin pumping into my fist with vigor as I imagine the way she would have reacted if it had just been us in the pool. Her pale skin as the sun hit it, the water beading off her breasts, begging me to lick them. I'd love to bend her over the edge or take her under the waterfall, watching the water run down every inch of her as I make her scream for me.

My balls tighten as I picture it so clearly I'd swear it's a memory, but I know it's not, at least not yet. One day it will be.

One day, there won't be a place in this whole damn house where I haven't fucked her, and then we'll find new places in the cars and vacation homes. Fuck, if we run out, I'll just have to buy more houses and cars.

I wonder how long it will take before Dad fucks a baby into her.

With a groan, I come hard before letting my back lean against the wall of the shower. It's cold, but right now, it's a

refreshing change; the water almost overheating me in the wake of my orgasm.

I'd never really shared dad's thing for pregnant women or wanting to fuck a baby into someone. It's something he loves to say and threaten, but I've never actually known him to fuck a woman not on birth control, which I can totally get behind because I'm the same way, except I don't want kids...

Or I thought I didn't. Maybe I need to look into that again now with Kitten in the picture.

Though I'm sure that's something I can think about after I've finished showering. No use standing around with my dick out now. The faster I finish up, the faster I get to go downstairs and make her blush that beautiful color I love so much.



CHAPTER 15

Addison had been adamant that we make dinner tonight after seeing how much Desmond liked the cookies. She was so excited to show everyone her cooking skills, and I enjoy cooking, so it seemed like an easy request. Desmond disappeared after our swim, and after a while without him popping up, I stopped looking over my shoulder every few minutes.

At Addison's request, we ended up with a chicken dish: chicken cordon bleu with parmesan pasta and homemade garlic mashed potatoes. Addison helped me with every step, and together, we cooked, sang, and made a mess of the entire kitchen. The smile on her face, when we set the table, made it all worth it, even if it took twice as long going at a five-year-old's pace.

I sent her upstairs to change while I cleaned up the bulk of the mess. She'd had a run-in with the breadcrumb and egg mixture we used to coat the chicken and ended up wearing a lot of our first batch.

"Damn, something smells great!" Alex's voice rings out in the dining room, and I almost drop the glass mixing bowl I'd been cleaning.

I hadn't heard the door, either because the house is so damn big or because I'd been too focused on what I was doing. I

glare down at Ruby, who lies on the ground not far from my feet.

“Some guard you are,” I hiss, and his ears perk up before he looks up at me. “Next time, let me know,” I whisper, gesturing toward the dining room as if he might understand me.

Great, I’m talking to the dog. Ruby whines as if he’s taken offense to what I said, and I roll my eyes.

With a sigh, I finish rinsing the bowl and lay it out to dry before quickly wiping my hands on a towel and trying to ready myself to face them, only to turn around and come face to face with Nathan.

I choke on a scream as my heart jumps into my throat, and I stumble back a step.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Nathan says, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I was simply coming to see what the two of you were up to, seeing as the food is on the table, yet neither of you is there.”

It takes me a second to get my breathing under control enough to answer him.

“Addison had to go change. She ended up wearing quite a bit of the ingredients...” I trail off, realizing I probably should do the same. One glance down proves that correct, as I see the mess, which is my clothes.

“Uncle Alex!” Addison’s voice carries to us from the dining room, and I hear her little feet running across the marble floor, no doubt into Alex’s arms.

“Hey, little Princess! Did you have fun with Kat today?” Alex asks, and she excitedly starts to fill him in on everything he missed.

“I’m going to go change,” I say, moving toward the hall that leads to the stairs.

“Of course, take your time.”

I have to work hard to keep a regular pace. Something about being alone with him is so much harder than it should be. It’s

as if I'm fighting the pull of a magnet, and my only way to avoid collision is to escape quickly.

Once I'm in my room, I wash up and change. Giving myself a pep talk that doesn't feel like it does a damn thing. For a moment, I contemplate skipping dinner completely and just hiding away, but I'd already been seen, and if I don't come back, it would be obvious I'm hiding... which I would be, but I don't want them to know that.

Splashing some water on my face, I pull on my metaphorical big girl pants and make my way back downstairs.

I follow the sound of their voices to the dining room. There, I find them all sitting at the table: Desmond and Addison, filling Alex, Oliver, and Nathan in on the fun we had in the pool today. The second Addison sees me, her smile grows even wider.

“And we made dinner!”

Nathan, Alex, and Desmond turn to look at me as I stand in the doorway, unsure where to sit. Two seats are open on the side of the table we set. One is to the right of Nathan, who sits at the head of the table, and the other is next to Alex on the other side.

Nobody says anything, waiting to see what I choose. In the end, I decide to sit next to Nathan, which also puts me next to Addison. It seems like a logical choice, given the fact that I'm her nanny, the smart choice.

“So you two made all of this?” Alex asks as I take my seat. He sounds a bit surprised, and when I look at him, I find him admiring the spread of food we set out.

“Yes! It was so much fun!” Addison says, saving me from answering, but I nod regardless.

“You know we have people we pay to do that, right? Are you trying to put them out of work?” Desmond asks with a chuckle, and I feel his eyes on me overtop Addison's head. I don't even have to look to know he has that sexy smirk on his face. I can hear it in his words.

“I do, but cooking is a valuable skill, one that everyone should have, and Addison enjoyed it.”

“You’re right. Everyone should know how to cook. Maybe Desmond could stick around one of these times and learn a thing or two.”

Alex barks a laugh at Nathan’s obvious dig, and I can’t fight the smile that tugs at my lips.

“Sure, I wouldn’t be opposed to a little one-on-one tutoring.”

Crap, how did he make that into something dirty? Is it like a special skill he has?

“Well, I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m starving, and this smells delicious.”

With that, Alex serves himself, and the others follow suit. I help Addison, allowing her to do what she can on her own before offering her assistance. After I’ve finished cutting up her chicken, I turn back to my own plate, only to find it full of food.

I feel my cheeks heat, but I try to ignore it as I turn to face Nathan, who’s the only one close enough to have done it.

“Thank you.”

He doesn’t say anything, simply giving me a nod, but something about his eyes is different. Nathan has a bit of a cold edge, something I’m pretty sure he developed over the years being in the spotlight. Depending on the person he’s interacting with, his coldness can vary, except for the few people at this table.

Addison, Alex, and Desmond seem to be the exception. And while he’s not overly cold with me, he’s usually still guarded.

Seeing him like this takes me by surprise, and I have to avert my gaze to stop myself from falling into the beautiful depth of his ice-blue eyes.

We all eat, and for the most part, everyone’s quiet. Addison talks a bit about how we made it and the mess she made. I

can't help but smile as she recalls it all. Somehow, everything seems so much more exciting when kids tell you about it.

Desmond drops his fork onto the table and slumps back into his chair with a sigh. "Damn, if you're going to cook like this, we might have to pay you more."

Alex agrees with a laugh, and I feel my cheeks heat, but it's not until Nathan agrees that I almost choke on my food.

"Anytime you want to cook, just let me know, and I'll let Dale know he can have the night off. That was fantastic, Kat."

My head snaps up to meet his eyes, and I instantly regret it. I'd thought maybe he was joking, but his face is serious as he holds my gaze, almost as if challenging me to look away.

"If you think her food is good..." Alex lets his words trail off, and I whip my head to look at him, my eyes wide.

He did not just say that...

Right?

Please tell me I imagined it, because there's no way Nathan would have missed what he was clearly implying.

A smirk turns his lips as he raises a brow at me, looking so cocky I'm half tempted to throw my fork at him.

I wouldn't hit him, of course, but damn him.

"What?" Addison asks in confusion, clearly not understanding what he said.

Thank god.

"What, Uncle Alex?" She pushes for an answer when nobody answers her, and as much as I'd love to explain, I don't know what to say.

"Kat?" I can feel her eyes on me.

I pull my eyes from Alex, but not before narrowing them to let him know what I think of his comment. He doesn't seem to care, though, instead chuckling as I roll my eyes.

"Um, he was talking about..." I trail off, grasping for something to say and coming up empty.

“Uncle Alex was talking about her baking,” Desmond says, finally taking pity on me, and I feel myself breathe a little easier. “Her cookies are delicious, aren’t they, Princess?”

Addison’s lips turn up into a smile as she nods in agreement. “Yes! They were so good! She let me have three!” She holds up three little fingers in excitement.

“Three cookies?” Alex asks, pulling her attention to him, and she once again nods. “Well, that’s not fair. I didn’t get three.” He meets my gaze over her head, that same smirk on his lips, and I already know whatever he’s going to say isn’t going to be good.

“I’ll just have to make sure I get some more later.”

How in the hell did he manage to take something like baked goods and make them sound dirty?

That shouldn’t be possible, yet here we sit, together at the dinner table, and my brain goes right back to that night I spent with him and Desmond.

Dinner feels like it takes forever, and I spend more time than I’m proud of staring down at my plate, too embarrassed to look anywhere else. Nathan scoops Addison up from her chair, where she’s already half asleep, and is ready to take her to bed when she suddenly wakes up enough to ask me to tuck her in.

Of course, I couldn’t say no to that. Not only was it adorable, but it also gave me the perfect getaway from Desmond and Alex. Right now, I cannot handle more of them, at least not without risking spontaneous combustion.

Thankfully, Addy is so tired that she doesn’t request a story, though Nathan said she usually does, which is fine. I have no problem reading to her; it’s the idea of being stuck reading to her with Alex or Desmond that scares me. However, if I really stop to think about it, being stuck with Nathan isn’t much better. It’s not as if he’s less sexy. He’s just not openly flirting with me and saying dirty things in front of everyone.

Despite all of it, I can’t get them off my mind. I know when I close my eyes tonight, they will be there the same way they have been since our night together, and Nathan has been for

the last few weeks now. It's all very confusing and exhausting.

Why couldn't Desmond or Alex have picked Addison up from the school when I was still just her teacher? This whole situation could have been avoided, and while it wouldn't have helped me with Nathan because that probably would have ended any kind of flitting thing we had going on, or I thought we had going on, at least I would have understood what was happening.

Now I work for him. I am a Lawson employee who dreams of fucking not one but three of the Lawson men, and while I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels like this, it feels wrong.

I'm just going to need to buy some better toys and hope to god I can keep my hands to myself, despite it being one of the last things I want to do.



CHAPTER 16

What's that saying, three days is a habit?

God, I hope not. If that's the case, I'm one night's sleep away from inappropriate sex dreams becoming my normal, and I'm not sure I can handle that.

Just like I can't seem to handle this damn coffeepot regardless of the few YouTube videos I'd pulled up in hopes of them explaining it.

Groaning in frustration, I exit the video and put the cup back in the cabinet, giving up on it for now. Maybe one of the guys can help me when they wake up. As of now, I haven't seen anyone else yet, minus Ruby, of course, who sleeps a few feet away. The second I left my room this morning, he seemed to appear out of nowhere and hasn't left my side since. Nathaniel had been a bit worried at first, but he seems to like me. I've never had a dog before, so it's kind of nice.

"You're not supposed to be in the house." A voice says from behind me, and I let out a shriek and just about jump out of my skin.

Turning around, I find Oliver standing in the doorway. What is with these guys and that doorway?

"So which one of them did you sleep with?" he asks, his voice harsh and nothing like it had been when I last spoke to him when he dropped off Addison at school.

“I’m sorry, what?” His question catches me off guard. I mean, I slept with his father and his cousin, but there’s no way he could know that, right? Despite being almost positive, he doesn’t know that I feel my cheeks heat.

Damn my fair skin.

“Funny, I thought you were different. You really had me going there for a second, acting like you care about Addison. I should have known better.” Shaking his head, he pushes off the wall and walks into the kitchen, stepping around me to go to the coffeepot I’d just abandoned. “You’re not supposed to be in the house,” he says again as he passes me, his lips pulled down in a frown.

Unfortunately for him, I didn’t get enough sleep last night to deal with his attitude without having coffee first.

“Actually, I am supposed to be here.” He stops turning to look at me with a raised brow, and I get the feeling he has more to say.

Too bad.

“For your information, I live here. As of yesterday, I started as Addison’s live-in nanny,” I tell him and get the satisfaction of watching his eyes go wide.

Serves him right.

“Shit.” He pushes a hand through his hair, messing up the perfectly combed look he had despite the early hours. Something tells me Oliver is a lot like Nathan, though, and that the time of day doesn’t matter when it comes to his appearance.

“I’m sorry, I thought...” he trails off, but he doesn’t need to finish. I know damn well what he meant. He made it abundantly clear.

His ears turn red, and despite being annoyed with what he said and the way he handled it, I can’t help thinking about how adorable he looks like this.

Damn my brain, I’m going to blame my dreams.

I decide to take pity on him, waving him off. “How about you help me make some coffee, and we call it even, because I’m about eighty percent sure that thing is made to confuse people.”

Oliver’s eyes narrow for a moment, turning to look at the coffeepot before turning back to me.

“Yeah, I can do that.” He sounds almost unsure, but I don’t question why. Right now, I *really* need caffeine.

I turn back to the cabinet and retrieve the coffee mug I’d just put away not two minutes ago. Despite the way he’d come in here, I’m actually happy he did. Maybe I can watch him and learn how to use the damn thing.

Walking toward him, I set my mug on the counter to his left and take a step back, determined to watch his every move and hopefully avoid these awkward mornings. I’m two for two on these as well, and I’m not sure how many more habits I can afford to pick up, especially not habits like these.

Oliver places his own mug under the dispenser but doesn’t move beyond that, and for a moment, I worry he doesn’t know how to use it either. That can’t be right, though. Not only does he live here, he’d also been going for coffee before running into me.

He turns his head, peeking at me over his shoulder, and I meet his gaze.

“Um, do you want me to show you how to use it?” he asks, sounding uncertain.

A smile pulls at my lips, and I quickly walk up beside him so that we’re standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the coffeepot from hell.

“Yes, please!”

He chuckles, but it sounds shaky, and when I look over at him, he won’t meet my eyes.

It’s strange, considering he’d just been so outspoken, but before I can question him about it, he takes a step to his right, creating a small gap between us.

“Okay, just let me know if something doesn’t make sense. It’s annoying, but once you understand, it’s not too bad.”



Oliver was right. The coffeepot is actually pretty straightforward once you get past all the knobs and unnecessary shit on it. I mean, I guess they aren’t unnecessary, exactly. Everything has a purpose, but I don’t need to know anything other than how to brew a basic cup of coffee, nothing so fancy.

We sit together in silence at the island, both sipping our coffee, and while it’s a bit strained, it’s not unbearable, probably thanks to the caffeine.

“Ah, Oliver, I expected you back tonight.” Nathan’s voice pulls me from the nothing I was staring into, and I turn to find him standing at the coffeepot.

Wow, I must be out of it if I missed him walking by. Clearly, today is going to be a two-cup kind of day.

Standing, I make my way toward him and the coffee, a little nervous to try the machine with an audience, but at least if I mess it up, they will hopefully take pity on me.

I don’t get a chance to try, though. Nathan turns, looking down at me before snatching my cup from my hand.

“Another cup?” he asks, and I stand frozen for a second before I nod, despite the fact that he’s no longer looking in my direction. He makes quick work of preparing another cup for me, making the machine look easy to use despite the fact that I know it isn’t.

“You get used to it,” he says with a smirk, pressing my now full cup back into my hand before he starts on his own.

Crap, he didn’t even make himself coffee, and he got mine.

“Thank you, but I could have done it. Oliver showed me how it works.” I try to sound confident in my ability, but I’m not sure if it works or not.

“Good, I’m glad you two had the chance to meet already,” he says, ignoring my bit about the coffee and turning to face Oliver as his own cup brews.

I might not know Nathan very well yet, but I know him enough that I can tell I’m being dismissed. Taking my coffee and my complaints, I return to my chair. Nathan stares across the room at Oliver, and he squirms under his gaze. Not that I blame him. Nathan is intense.

They seem to be having some kind of silent conversation that I have no hope of understanding. I look between them for a moment before Nathan finally turns back to grab his coffee and comes to join us at the counter.

Oliver’s eyes remain on his cup this time as if it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen.

“So, Kat, do you have any plans this weekend?” Nathan asks, turning his attention to me, and suddenly, I have to fight the urge to squirm.

I’d much prefer he keep his attention on Oliver.

“Um, no.” I never have plans, but I don’t say as much. No reason to make myself sound pathetic.

He nods, taking a sip of his coffee as if in thought before he continues.

“Well, while you’re not required to be with Addison this weekend as I’m not working, if you would like to join us, we plan to take her to the zoo today. She’s been asking since the weather has been nice, but this is the first weekend we’ve all been home.”

“Oh, no. I don’t want to intrude on your family time. I’m more than okay with staying here. I can read or…”

“Nonsense,” he says, cutting me off as he pushes to stand and head to the sink. “Addison would love it if you came along. I wouldn’t invite you if I didn’t want you to be there.”

I snap my mouth shut, unsure of what to say. On the one hand, I’m sure he’s right. Addison would enjoy me being there, and I can’t imagine he would ask me if he wasn’t okay

with it. He doesn't seem the type to mince words or give mixed signals.

But on the other hand, can I handle being with all of them all day long? Yesterday was hard enough, and it was only Desmond. What if he acts like that in front of Nathan? Not to mention, I have no idea how Alex will act, and I still haven't told Nathan about what happened between the three of us.

Just the thought makes my mouth dry. I'm still not sure how to bring that up to him.

Nathan turns to look at me, and I realize he's waiting for me to answer.

"Sure, the zoo sounds nice." The second the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could take them back.

A smile turns his lips up, and fuck me. I could melt into a puddle right here.

"Fantastic," he pulls his sleeve up and glances at his watch. "We'll probably leave in about two hours. It's going to be around ninety degrees today, so make sure you dress accordingly."

He turns to Oliver once again, all business. "Meet me in my office when you're done. I need to talk to you," he tells him before striding out of the kitchen without another word.

I sit staring after him for a moment until I hear Oliver push the stool back. Without looking at me, he moves to the sink and deposits his coffee cup before disappearing after Nathan.

Not for the first time, I find myself wondering how I ended up here and if I just made a mistake.

With nothing else to do, I also drop my cup in the sink and head up to my room to get ready. Beats staring off into space like a weirdo and tempting fate. The last thing I need is for Alex or Desmond to wander in. I'm not sure I could handle either of them right now, let alone both of them.

In my room, I go through my clothes, trying to decide what to wear. Nathan's warning about how hot it will be echoes in

my mind, and I decide a dress will probably be best as most of my pants are thick dress pants, and my shorts are sleepwear.

I really need to expand my wardrobe.

It takes longer than it should, but in the end, I decide on a dusty pink sundress. I ordered it last month but have never worn it. The neckline is a little low, and it was just a bit shorter than I thought appropriate for teaching. I'd meant to send it back but never got around to it, but for daily life, it was probably the most suitable thing I had for the heat. It's loose and flows around my thighs at varied lengths, but the waist is fitted with cute, puffy, short sleeves, and when I put it on, I can't help but do a little twirl.

It's definitely not appropriate for school, but it fits great and makes me feel pretty.

Before I can second-guess it, I slip on sandals, opting for a pair with ankle straps to ensure I won't be walking out of them all day. Then I head out to check on Addison. I might not be required to work, but I don't mind helping her get ready. It gives me something to do and makes me feel useful.

It also keeps my mind from wandering back to the men in this house. I do that enough while I sleep, and I highly doubt a day at the zoo watching them with Addison is going to make that better.



CHAPTER 17

I knew what Nate wanted to discuss even before I met him in his office. It had nothing to do with the three days I had just spent away on business—not that I expected it to. He trusted me to handle our tech department for the most part. After all, it had been my idea to expand to include it.

I knew it had to do with Kat just by the way he looked at her, though she seemed to be oblivious. Not that I could blame her. Understanding Nate is a skill I've had years to hone, and even I get it wrong sometimes.

What I didn't expect was for Kat, Addison's new nanny, to be the same girl who gave Alex and Des the slip last December. I'd meant what I said in the kitchen. I thought she was different. The way she is with Addison isn't like someone who was just trying to get close to her to get close to us. She seems as though she genuinely cares for her. Something Nate must have seen as well, considering he offered her the position of Addison's nanny.

Apparently, all three of them were on the same page, which is a first in a long time. For the last few years, the most they have been able to agree on is a woman to share for a night or two, but nobody they wanted more from.

Who was I to say otherwise? I don't dislike Kat based on what I know about her. She's good with Addison, beautiful and forgiving, if our time in the kitchen is anything to go by.

She also doesn't seem to have an issue with standing up for herself. Which is also good, considering she's living in the house. She'll need her wits about her.

No, I haven't had any problems with her so far, but I also don't want her like they do. I don't want anyone, not after last time. I'd rather focus on the company and spend time with my family, but I won't deny them the chance.

With my agreement, Nate and I head out to get ready for our trip to the zoo.

I have a feeling things are about to get a lot more interesting around here, and the zoo is going to be a great test.

I wonder if Kat has any idea what she just signed up for.



If Addison hadn't been so adamant about going to the zoo for the last few weeks, I would probably have asked if we could postpone it.

Today is the hottest day so far this year, and spending it outside, surrounded by animals, is not the first thing on my list of things to do for a good time. Unfortunately for me, one of the top things on that list is seeing Addison happy. So, although I'm dreading the heat, I get ready and meet the others outside with a smile when she flings herself at me.

Okay, maybe the heat isn't so bad.

I'm dressed in dark blue shorts, a white T-shirt, and a short-sleeved button-up over it. I've left it unbuttoned, though, so I don't die. However, I've never really been comfortable leaving the house in just a t-shirt the way Desmond and my father are. I'd like to say I'm a nice mix of my father and Nate when it comes to how I dress. I can be relaxed but still appropriate to be seen.

Desmond is wearing what looks like gray sweatpants that were cut just above the knee, an olive green T-shirt, a backward baseball cap on his head, and sunglasses.

My father wears shorts and a t-shirt as well, but his are, of course, both black because he doesn't give a shit if it's one hundred degrees, that's his favorite color.

Whereas Nate is also wearing a black shirt, his is a long-sleeved button-up. He's pushed the sleeves up to his elbows, but it's still tucked into his dark gray dress pants, and instead of opting for tennis shoes like the rest of us, he's also still wearing dress shoes. It's the most dressed down he ever gets outside of the house, and even then, it's a rare occurrence.

Vince stands near the back of the limo talking to my father, and I know without asking he will be escorting us today based on his black t-shirt and cargo pants. The guy's so ripped that his sleeves look like they're about to shred themselves. Of course, to everyone else, he's our driver, but he's much more than that. Nate has known Vince since they were teenagers, and by default, my father knows him as well. I'd say they were best friends, but somehow, that doesn't seem right. No, they're more like brothers, and, of course, Nate gave him a job—well, more than one, I guess.

I try to keep my eyes off her. I spotted her the moment I walked out; how could I miss her? But the last thing I need after putting my foot in my mouth this morning is to be caught gawking the way Des and my father seem to have no problem openly doing.

I try and fail.

Des says something, pulling her attention to him, and I take a moment to look at her without worry.

She really is stunning.

Her long red waves are pulled up off her shoulders and secured with a clip, probably to keep them from sticking to her skin in this heat. I find my eyes roaming down her creamy white neck, unable to stop myself. Like most redheads, she has naturally lighter skin, but while she's paler than we are, she's not the palest person I've ever seen.

She's also dressed for the heat, with a pink sundress that fits her so damn well it should be a crime. It's tight around her

waist and flows down to mid-thigh, showing off her legs. I have to forcefully pull my gaze away from them. Not that roaming up is much better. The neckline of her dress dips down; not the lowest I've ever seen a neckline go by a long shot, but it's enough to show off some cleavage.

Yup, I was probably safer looking at her legs because her breasts are full and the same creamy white as the rest of her.

Damn it, I might not want her the way they do, but I can't deny seeing her appeal.

It takes more effort than it should for me to make myself turn away and look back toward Vince and Nate, but I manage. Too bad I also catch my father's eye in the process. The smirk on his face lets me know he saw me checking her out, and I resist the urge to flip him off.

Fuck, I'm going to hear about that later.

We load up into the limo and head out. Des, of course, sits next to Kat, and Addison sits on her other side, talking a mile a minute about everything she wants to do and see.

When we get to the zoo, Vince parks instead of dropping us off like he usually does. Thankfully, our membership includes closer parking for members, so we don't have to park so far away. Even with that, I'm sweating by the time we reach the gate.

You'd think the heat would deter people, but that doesn't seem to be the case. It's still pretty packed. Kat keeps hold of Addison as we make our way through the gates, seeming undeterred by the heat as well.

The smile on Kat's face is real and happy, and if Addison's happiness isn't contagious, hers is. Every single one of us wears a smile as we watch them look over the map, Addison pointing out her favorite animals as they decide where we should go first.

People around us stop and stare, some openly gawking and snapping pictures, while others go so far as to try to approach us. It's nothing new, but it's exhausting, nonetheless. I know we have money, and people know our faces. It's hard not to

here in the city where we work and live, but when it interrupts our time doing normal everyday things, it gets annoying.

For the most part, Vince is able to keep them away, but stopping them from snapping pictures is almost impossible. On instinct, we walk around Addison, protecting her from the people and the pictures as best we can without drawing attention to them. She's young enough that she never really notices, and with her blissfully unaware, it seems that Kat stays unaware as well. Addison pulls her from one enclosure to the next, her smile so wide as she shows her everything, and Kat seems fully invested.

"Has she never been here?" I ask Nate as we trail after them.

"Not that I'm aware of. She's been in the city less than a year and doesn't seem as though she goes out much," he tells me without taking his eyes off her.

We continue on like that, making our way to the center of the zoo where they have concessions and Addison's favorite part, the sea lion pool.

The sea lions do performances every few hours, and ever since the first time we came here years ago, it's been her favorite part. It's a bit of a tradition now. We come, look around, get ice cream, and watch the sea lions perform before we see the rest of the animals.

The line at the concession stands is long today, probably due to the heat. Everyone needs a cool drink or ice cream to help them fight it off. Could we walk up to the counter and bypass it, possibly, but none of us tries. Instead, we move into line and stand with everyone else. There's no real rush, considering we have about thirty minutes before the next show. Vince stands in front with Des and my father on either side of the girls, with Nate and I behind them. If Kat's noticed the way we close rank, she hasn't said anything.

Addison, as adorable and smart as she might be, is still only a child and, after a few minutes of waiting, begins to become impatient. Before she gets the chance to whine or complain too

much, Kat pulls her aside, dropping down to her knees and distracting her.

I can't help the shock that fills me, seeing her disregard her appearance and probably comfort in favor of Addison. We've had many nannies, and while they were good at taking care of her, they were never as involved as she is.

Kat and Addison play rock, paper, scissors, and Addison's annoyance is forgotten as Kat makes a big deal of her winning or does silly things when she wins. Without even realizing it, Kat has our attention and the attention of people around us. After a few minutes, Des sits down next to them and joins their game. Their laughter ringing out around the area.

They play on, and Vince moves with the line, keeping our place without us all having to move. He calls out to us once he finally reaches the front.

Kat and Addison's heads snap up at his call, so lost in their game that they didn't even realize the line had moved. Addison lets out a squeal of delight before taking off toward Vince, who scoops her up so that she can look at the menu.

I have to fight the urge to go to Kat and offer to help her up. Thankfully, my father is there the next second to do it, because I'm not sure I would have been able to stop myself had someone else not done it.

The others move to the window, but I stay back. I don't love sweets the way they do, and I need a moment to collect myself. Something about Kat is harder to resist than it should be. It's not as if she's flaunting anything. Hell, some of the women Alex and Des had brought around years ago had all but pushed themselves onto my lap and caused less of a reaction.

So why is she different?

I'm lost in thought, looking off toward the sea lion pool, mindlessly watching them prep for the show as I try to puzzle it out. For the most part, nobody ever bothers me because I'm not them. I'll get looks here and there, but nobody ever throws themselves at me, asking if they can have my babies the way they do my Father, Des, and Nate.

I don't expect today to be any different. Don't expect anyone to approach me, which is why when a soft hand rests on my arm, I'm taken by surprise.

I half expect to find someone who wants to ask me about the others. It happens from time to time. Women approach me and ask if I can help them get a picture with them, give them their number, or even introduce them. Obviously, I never do, but that doesn't stop them from trying.

Instead, I find Kat. Her hair is a bit frizzy from the heat, and her cheeks are slightly red. I find myself wondering if she's burnt or just flushed. Had she applied sunscreen today? With her fair skin, I have no doubt she would burn up in the sun.

Shaking the thought from my head, I tell myself that's not my concern and try to focus on what she's saying. Her lips move. But now that I'm focused on them, that's all I can think about.

Shit, bad idea. It's bad enough she's so close as it is. I don't catch a word of what she said, and when her lips press closed once again, they curve up into a hint of a smile, and she cocks her head to the side.

I take a step back, physically removing myself from her grip, and blink hard against the image my mind just conjured of my lips pressed to hers.

"I'm sorry, what?"

She doesn't follow me; instead, she lets her hand drop, but the smile remains on her face. Strange. Most of the time, people don't know the meaning of personal space, and more than once, I've been crowded or gotten rude looks for keeping my distance. Kat doesn't seem at all affected by it, though.

"I said, this is for you," she tells me, holding her hand out and offering me a bottle of water.

I should take it. It's boiling hot out, and I should stay hydrated, but even knowing that I don't.

"I didn't ask for anything," I tell her, cutting my gaze back to the others who sit at a table with Addison as she happily eats her ice cream. I half expect to find my father or Des with

a shit-eating grin, them having sent her over here to me. Instead, I find them watching her with questioning looks, and it's enough to tell me they had nothing to do with this.

“I know, but it's too hot out here not to at least have some water.” Turning my attention back to her, I find her smiling up at me, the water still held out in offering. “Addison tried to convince Nathan you needed ice cream like the rest of us, but I was able to convince her you would like water better. Alex said you don't much care for sweets.”

He's right, of course, but I'm almost unsure what's more impressive, the fact that she convinced Addison I would like water more or the fact that she cared enough to even try. Usually, I just take the ice cream to make her happy. I eat a little bit and toss it when she's not paying attention. It's not that I don't like sweets; I just don't crave them the same way she does, but being only five, she doesn't seem to understand how anyone could not want ice cream all the time.

“Thank you.” I make myself say, reaching out to take the offered bottle from her.

“Kitten, your ice cream is melting!” Des calls, and I watch as his words roll over her. Her eyes go wide before she quickly ducks her head, but it's not fast enough to hide the deep shade of red her face has turned.

I look up, finding his gaze, and give him an unamused look, but he isn't phased. He throws his head back and laughs.

With a deep breath, she turns around and heads back to them. I watch her go, unable to look away.

I don't want to want her. I don't want to want anyone, but as I watch her sit beside Des with a deep blush on her cheeks and take the ice cream from his hands before promptly turning away to give him her back, I get the feeling she's going to be hard to resist.

It's not like I want to be alone. I don't think anyone really does, but it's easier this way.

I'm not like them. I'm not covered in tattoos, ripped, or a silver fox. I don't drive a motorcycle, I'm not smooth, and I

don't enjoy fucking just for the sake of it. No, I like numbers and order; I wear glasses and like to read. I'm under no delusion that I'm any girl's fantasy.

Once, I thought I could be desired, but it was a lie, one that almost tore our family apart. Des was mad at me for a long time after Nate kicked her out, but he'd believed me, eventually.

I don't want to think Kat's like that, like her, but I'd been blindsided before, and I wouldn't go through that again. I couldn't. It's easier just to stay away.

Cracking the water bottle open, I make my way to the table everyone sits at, but I keep to myself, lost in thoughts of the past.

“Oliver.”

The sound of my name pulls me back to the present, and I could kick myself when I realize I'd zoned out again. Even more so when I find myself once again looking into her beautiful green eyes.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to yell,” she says with a chuckle that seems forced. “You just weren't answering, and I didn't want to touch you again.”

I raise a brow, unsure what she means by that.

“You didn't seem to like when I touched you earlier...” she trails off, looking down at her hands that she's nervously wringing in front of her.

“Oh, no. I—” I try to explain, but I don't really know what to say.

“It's okay. You don't have to explain,” she says in a rush, holding her hands up to stop me. “I just didn't want you to get left behind, is all.”

She glances back over her shoulder, and I follow her gaze to the others who stand a few feet away.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks... We should,” I nod toward the others, and she nods in reply.

“Yeah!”

Without another word, she turns and heads back to them.

Fuck, why am I like this?



CHAPTER 18

The zoo was pretty great despite the heat and the fact that I struggled to keep myself from drooling most of the time. I'm not sure what it is or when it even became a thing, but watching the way they care for Addison somehow makes them hotter. It shouldn't be possible, not with the way they look already, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't imagined climbing them like trees on a few different occasions now. I know I need to get myself under control. I'm technically their employee, but they aren't exactly helping.

No, if anything, they seem as though they like watching me squirm, and despite my best efforts, I am, in fact, squirming. Even if it's only when I'm alone in my bed every night.

After the zoo, Addison requested that we all go swimming. It makes sense with how hot it is. I'm sure the pool would feel amazing, but I was tempted to decline. Technically, I'm not working today, and everyone else has agreed to go. I could easily slip up to my room, shower, and... what, hide away?

Shit, that sounds pathetic.

So, instead, I make my way to my room and slowly change, once again opting to throw on a thin dress as a cover and cursing myself for not having ordered the one piece yet.

I stand in my room, changed and ready, but unable to make myself move. I just need a few minutes to breathe before I go back downstairs. I scroll through some bathing suit options

and place an order before I forget again. It won't be here for two days, but better late than never, right?

With nothing else to do, I pace my room until movement out my window catches my attention.

Oh. My. God.

Nope, there is no way I can go down there!

I'd had a hard time keeping my eyes to myself when they were fully clothed today, and now...

Well, now they have a lot more skin on display.

I watch from the window like a creep, unable to pull myself away as they walk around the pool in nothing but swim trunks.

My memory didn't do Alex justice the same way it hadn't Desmond. Months after our one night together, the image of them I remember was more like a watered-down version.

Tattoos cover their tanned, muscular chests and arms. Desmond even has them down his legs. I'd seen him in the pool the other day, but I hadn't really had much opportunity to look, not without him noticing. Now, from the safety of my room, I eat him up.

Desmond and Alex get in the pool with Addison, and I hear her laughter as they swim around her, splashing and playing. Oliver comes out next, and while he isn't covered in tattoos and his muscles aren't as defined, it's not as if he's lacking. He's definitely more lean muscle, like a swimmer or a runner, but fuck me, something about seeing him so dressed down is almost erotic.

I stand gawking at them in the window far longer than I should, and in the end, I guess I'm not as sneaky as I hoped. Desmond hops out of the pool, talking to someone I can't see, but I assume it's Nate or maybe even Vincent. Grabbing a towel, he hastily dries himself before tossing it on one of the recliners as he makes his way toward the house. He stops just short of the awning that will hide him from my line of sight and turns so that his gaze meets mine. I panic, frozen like a

deer in headlights, knowing I should move but unable to as a smirk curves his lips before he continues on.

There's not a doubt in my mind he saw me, though. As he disappears from sight, I finally take hold of my body and force myself to take a step back, away from the window.

Shit.

I make my way through the house slowly, but it doesn't take long before I can hear them. The sound of Addison's laughter rings out, and I can hear Nathan and Vincent's deep voices rumble, and though I can't make out what they're saying, I know it's them.

I might not have been able to see them through my window, but as I make it to the sliding glass door, I can't miss them. They both stand near the biggest grill I've ever seen. It's made with stones instead of just the typical metal and has counters, drawers, and knobs galore. Much like the coffeepot they have, it seems they only use the best of the best.

Nathan smiles at something Vincent says as he grabs a spatula and gets to work tending to the hamburgers on the grill. Damn it, why is it so hot when a man cooks? Vincent's back is to me, but he's shirtless, and I take a moment to look him over before I reach the door and draw their attention.

He's covered in tattoos, much like Desmond is, but something about this is very different. They don't feel the same. Whereas Desmond's are colorful or nice black-and-white pieces with clean lines, Vincent's seem harder. Some of them look as if he's had them all his life, and some look like they might be from a gang or something.

I can't really put my finger on it, but they just aren't the same, though both are sexy as hell.

Wait, are those scars?

No! Bad Kat! I do not need another man to add to my dreams.

Shaking myself, I take a deep breath and slowly let it out while making myself take the last few steps to the door and pull it open before I can change my mind.

The second the glass door is open, I'm hit with the smell of ribs, burgers, and other things I can't put my finger on. It all smells heavenly, and my stomach rumbles, thinking about how great it's going to taste. I'm not sure if it's the door opening or my stomach that gets their attention, but either way, they turn to me, and I pause for a moment under their gaze.

Vincent and Nathan are both intimidating men, from their good looks to their build and even just the way they hold themselves. Everything about them is delicious and enough to make me squirm, but I'd be lying if I said I don't wish I'd just come out the other door, on the opposite side of the pool from them.

"I was starting to think you fell asleep up there." Nathan chuckles, still manning the grill.

"It was tempting," I mumble, kicking myself for not just staying up there.

"Well, food will be done soon, and I know a certain little princess who will be happy to see you," Vincent says with a nod toward the pool where Desmond is once again in the pool, and he and Alex are playing with Addison. Looking around a bit, I also spot Oliver reclined in one of the sun chairs near the hot tub, a book in hand. Sunglasses hide his eyes, but I swear I can feel his gaze on me. Or maybe I'm just feeling everyone else's.

I take the way out he offered me, and head toward the pool, but I can feel their eyes on me even as I cross the little bridge.

How am I going to take this damn dress off with them looking at me like that? I know, I won't.

Addison is focused on whatever it is she, Desmond, and Alex are doing and doesn't seem to notice me. The same can't be said for the two of them, though. Their heads snap to me the moment I'm in sight, and even from across the sitting area, I can see the heat in their eyes.

Thankfully, they don't draw attention to me, and I drop down in one of the reclining sun chairs. It takes a minute, but eventually, I feel their gazes fall away as Vincent and Nathan

return to their conversation as they grill while Alex and Desmond continue to play with Addison.

Sitting in the sun, it only takes a few minutes before I'm sweating again. There's not a cloud in the sky, and even with only my thin dress over my suit, it's hot.

Leaning forward, I gather my dress and pull it over my head, trying not to draw attention to myself as I do it. Dropping my dress on the stone floor next to the chair, I lay back, letting my eyes fall closed. I'd thankfully applied another layer of sunscreen before I came out, or I'd be burning up, but as it is, I can afford to lay here and relax for a moment.

“Kat!”

Addison's cry pulls me from unconsciousness, and I realize, at some point, I must have dozed off. Peeling my eyes open, I find her at the edge of the pool, her tiny hands gripping the stone as she peers over it to look at me.

“Will you swim with us?” she asks with a smile. How the hell can I say no to that face?

“Of course,” I tell her as I push to stand, stretching after my little cat nap. “Going for a swim sounds pretty good right now. It's hot out here.”

She lets out a squeal of excitement before quickly swimming back toward Alex, who's only a few feet behind her, his eyes glued to me. Instead of shrinking in on myself the way I usually would, I push forward, raising my chin as I walk around the stone sitting area to the pool's stairs.

We swim for a while, splashing and just enjoying the refreshing water before Nathan calls us out to eat. Addison grumbles a bit, but he promises her we can all swim after, and that's all it takes for her to be all smiles again.

The food is delicious, like finger-licking good. The ribs are so tender they fall off the bone, and the cod is the best I've ever had. I can't help but take a second helping, even though I'm already so full. It's just too good not to.

That's how I end up almost choking to death on fish, of all things.

Everyone's finished eating. Addison only ate what was required before declaring she was full and ready to go back into the pool. The guys ate a lot, like probably double what I did, but they also ate much faster than me. I hadn't thought anything about it when Nathan got up, but the second his shirt is off just so happens to be the same moment I shove my last bite in my mouth.

I'm not sure what I expected. He'd told Addison we would all swim after we ate, but for some reason, it had escaped me that it would require him to be shirtless. I'd dreamed of Nathan naked more than once now, but my imagination had failed me. If I thought he was good-looking in my dreams, it's nothing compared to the real deal.

His chest has defined muscles, which I could have guessed from the way his clothes hug him. What I wouldn't have guessed is that he would also be covered in tattoos.

I'd seen the ones on his forearms this morning when he wore his sleeves rolled up. But those were smaller, and, for some reason, I'd imagined them to be his only ones.

Wrong again.

The tattoos that cover his chest and back are anything but small. In fact, I'm pretty sure he has more ink than skin showing.

I manage to clear my throat, but not without drawing attention to myself. Attention that I desperately do not want right now, but even despite that, I can't seem to pull my eyes away. I move up his chest until our eyes meet, his lips turn up in a smirk, and I get the feeling he knows exactly how fucking hot he is.

The others all follow suit, and thankfully, I have no more food to choke on because, despite the fact that I've seen Alex and Desmond naked, I'm still left speechless. Add in Oliver and Vincent, and I'm damn near drooling.

"Come on, Kat!" Addison yells as she races toward me with a bright smile on her face. "It's family swim time!" Her words warm my heart, and she doesn't even seem to realize it.

She tugs on my hand, and I push to stand, quickly pulling off my dress as I go. I get the feeling she's not going to pause to let me get it off, and I'd rather not be weighed down by it.

Addison is in such a hurry that I don't get a moment to let the embarrassment sink in, despite the fact that I can feel their eyes on me. I've been a blushing mess since I walked out here, and with all of them shirtless, I'm not sure I could get much more red, so at least that's something.



It's still a little early, but today has been a long day, and I'm exhausted. After a shower, I pull on some sleep shorts and a tank top and climb up into bed, grabbing my book off the nightstand. I haven't had a lot of time to read lately, and I doubt I'll get far tonight with the way my eyelids feel, but reading always relaxes me.

My eyes have just started drooping when a knock at the door echoes through the room, making me jump and drop my book.

Damn it, I have no idea what page I was on.

The knock sounds again, and I drop it on the table to worry about later before moving from the bed to the door.

It's not until I've pulled it open and heat flares in Alex's eyes as he looks me up and down that I remember I'm in very little clothes right now. He doesn't say anything, watching me as I take a step back and to the side to hide behind the door as I feel my face heat.

"Um... What can I do for you?" I ask, unable to stand the stretch of silence.

Alex leans in, bracing his forearm against the door frame, looking completely at ease despite my lack of clothing, or maybe because of it, and damn him and his ability to make everything look good.

"Nate wanted to see you in his office if you had a moment," he says with a smile as he continues to shamelessly look me

up and down, making me feel more exposed than I am.

“Oh,” I say stupidly as worry turns my stomach.

Have I done something wrong?

“Ok, just let me change.” I hook my thumb over my shoulder as if he doesn’t know I’d change in my room and almost groan with how dumb that probably sounded.

Instead of putting my foot farther in my mouth, I simply move to close the door and change, only for it to stop abruptly.

Alex leans in closer, and I realize he’s stopped it with his foot.

“It’s nothing formal, no need to change.” His voice is deeper now than it was a moment ago. It rolls over me, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from shivering as I clench my thighs together.

I’m not wearing any real underwear. Technically, the shorts I have on are underwear, but I sleep in them because they are comfortable. But they are in no way something I should walk around in outside of my room and definitely not something I should, under any circumstances, go and see my boss in.

Before I can say as much, he reaches out, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him down the hall. I stutter out weak protests, but if he hears me, he doesn’t acknowledge me, and before I know it, we’re standing in front of another door at the end of the hall.

Alex raps his knuckles on the door, pushing it open a second later without giving enough time for a response.

Not five minutes ago, I’d been cuddled up in my bed with a book on the verge of sleep, and now I stand in Nathan’s office, severely underdressed, with Nathan’s eyes burning into me from his spot behind his desk and Alex’s grip lighting me up from the inside out.

Fuck.



CHAPTER 19

He's going to fire me.

Even if he wasn't going to before, he probably will now. His eyes roam over me, starting at my face before slowly working their way down to my bare feet and back up again. Unlike with Alex, Nathan's face is blank; there's no hint of what he's feeling or thinking. It should be a good thing. At least he doesn't look disgusted with me, but in our short few weeks of getting to know each other, he'd seemed more open with me. Whereas he gave people like Trevor and Barbara nothing, I was used to hints of his emotions.

Being on this side of him is terrifying, and for the first time, I think I understand why Trevor tucked tail and ran that day in my classroom.

Hell, I want to tuck tail and run, but I know that's not really an option. If he's going to fire me, I'll have to leave. Hiding out in the room that was mine for a few short days won't save me from that. This is his house, after all.

My body sags as I realize I'm once again right back where I started... under the power of a man.

"Don't look so grim, Cherry," Alex says, leading me further into the office to the two chairs that sit opposite Nathan.

He releases me, dropping into one and motioning for me to take the other.

Might as well get this over with, I guess.

Sitting in the chair beside him, I take a deep breath before letting it out slowly, hoping to chase away some of my nerves before I force myself to look up and meet Nathan's eyes.

My deep breath was useless. The moment our eyes meet, I feel my palms begin to sweat, and I fight the urge to fidget.

"Kat," Nathan says, greeting me with a nod. "I apologize for pulling you from your room so late, but I wanted to have a word with you in a more private setting." He cuts his gaze to Alex, who smiles back at him, and I get the feeling I'm missing something, but I don't dare ask. Even if he wasn't about to fire me, it's none of my business.

"I'm not sorry. Do you see her?" Alex asks, gesturing toward me, and I duck my head as my cheeks once again betray me.

This is so not the time, Alex. I mentally scold him but remain quiet.

Nathan shakes his head at his brother before returning his attention to me.

"It's been brought to my attention that prior to you taking this position, you had met my brother and my son."

His words hit me like a punch to the chest, knocking the air from my lungs. Of all the things he could have said, that's not what I'd been expecting. It's not a question, not really. I can hear the surety in his tone, though he seems to be waiting for some kind of reply, regardless.

There's no point in lying; I'd planned to tell him. I just wasn't sure how.

I guess I don't need to worry about that part now, though.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. If I open my mouth right now, there's no way I won't beg him to let me keep my job. I love Addison, and I'd promised to be around for her. The thought of breaking that promise makes my chest feel heavy. But he's her father, and he has to do what he thinks is best. If

he thinks that means letting me go, then the least I can do is try to keep my dignity intact. If I have any left, that is.

“I see,” he says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the desk in front of him and steeping his fingers. “This seems almost too convenient to be, yet I know for a fact you didn’t know who I was when we met. And despite my son and brother’s best efforts, they were unable to find you after that night.” He looks over at Alex, and I can’t help but look as well.

They looked for me?

“And believe me, they tried.”

Alex doesn’t look at me, but he doesn’t need to. From our brief encounters, I’ve learned he has no problem speaking his mind. If what Nathan said wasn’t true, he would have said something.

I’d spent months remembering that night, alone on the subway, at night alone in my bed. And as crazy as it sounds, it wasn’t just the amazing sex, though I did think about that too. That night with them was fun and exactly what I needed to help me start fresh. They helped me remember myself after so long being lost to being whatever Carter wanted.

“So, now the question is what we will do moving forward?”

Nathan’s voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I turn back to look at him, knowing this is it.

“I understand,” I say, biting my lip when my voice shakes. I have to look away, unable to meet his eyes as he fires me.

Alex barks a laugh, and I snap my head to look at him, unsure what can be funny about this.

My confusion must show on my face because he quickly explains. “Sorry, Cherry, but I really don’t think you do. And if you do, and that’s your reaction, I clearly need to refresh your memory.” He wiggles his brows at me suggestively, and now I’m even more confused.

“What?”

“What is it you think is happening here, Kat?” Nathan asks.

My brain short circuits, and I don't know how to answer that. I wasn't aware there was another option, but clearly there is.

"Um, I thought..." I trail off, turning from Nathan to Alex, looking for some kind of hint as to what I'm missing, but come up empty. "Aren't you going to fire me?"

Alex pops out of his chair and slaps his hands on Nathan's desk hard enough that the sound rings out and startles me.

"I fucking told you!" he shouts with a laugh.

A hint of a smile pulls at Nathan's lips as he reclines back into his chair. I swear he's like a different person. *This* is the Nathan I've become used to over the last few weeks.

"I never said you were wrong," Nathan shoots back, arching a brow at his brother in challenge.

Their sibling banter is kind of fucking adorable, but it's not at all helpful.

"I'm confused..." I say, and both of them turn back to me as if remembering I'm there. "Am I not being fired?"

"Not even close, Cherry."

"Okay... Well then, what's going on?"

Neither of them answers; instead, they share a look, and Nathan gives the slightest nod. Whatever silent conversation they just had leaves Alex smiling from ear to ear as he turns to face me before stalking toward me.

"Do you remember our night together, Cherry?" he asks, and I don't even have to answer; I know my face gives me away.

He stops in front of me, dropping to his knees and letting his hands rest on my knees, my very bare knees. His touch makes my skin tingle, and I'm not sure what to do. I want to lean into it, soak up his touch, but I know I shouldn't. Somehow, I'm not being fired, but that could always change.

"Do you remember how Desmond and I shared you?"

How could I forget?

But the better question is, why the hell is he asking me this now, in front of his brother, who happens to be my boss?

“Kat?”

My head snaps up at the sound of my name, and I find Nathan watching me, his gaze intense and not in his usual cold way. No, right now, he’s looking at me a lot like Alex had when he saw what I was wearing earlier, and it’s not just me he’s watching, but Alex and me.

“I remember,” I say, forcing the words out despite feeling like I shouldn’t say them.

“What if I told you it isn’t just Desmond and I who share?”

I’m going to get whiplash at this rate.

Alex is still in front of me on his knees, but I swear he’s closer, and there’s no denying the fact that his hands are slowly creeping up my thighs.

Goosebumps break out over my skin, and I press my thighs together in an attempt to try and hide my arousal from him. Of course, he notices, his eyes flicking down to my lap before darting back up to me with a knowing look.

Fuck, I should have just pretended I was asleep and not answered the door.

“Wh—what does that mean?” I ask, my breath catching as he continues to trail his hands higher.

“What if I told you we all share?” Alex asks, leaning even closer now. His fingers are dangerously close to the edge of my booty shorts turned sleepwear, and I swear my heart is trying to beat its way out of my chest.

“I don’t understand...” Shaking my head, I try to clear it so I can focus, but with his hands on me, it’s damn near impossible.

“What part don’t you understand?” Nathan asks, and I chew on my lip as I try and fail to think of how to word it.

“Kat.” His voice has just the slightest hint of demand, and I find myself wanting to answer him despite the fact that I might

sound crazy.

“I don’t understand why you’re not firing me or why you’re telling me this. Do you need me to stay hidden when you bring someone to the pool house? I only work here. It’s none of my business what you choose to do with your personal lives. And why did you look for me?” The last bit is for Alex, and I feel his fingers tighten around my legs as I turn my attention back to him.

“Why the hell wouldn’t we look for you, Cherry? Des said he left you his number, but you never called. Do you know how strange that is for us? Usually, we refrain from giving out our information because people abuse it, but you were different. He wanted you to call, but instead, you disappeared.”

His lips pull down in a slight frown as he looks at me, and I don’t like it. Alex and Desmond are a lot to handle, especially working here, but even with the teasing and embarrassment, I don’t want them to be unhappy, especially not because of something I did.

“His number was smudged. The condensation on the glass made it impossible to read.” I tell him, and while that’s true, it’s not the whole reason. I could have easily gone to them in the yard and gotten it, but what I’d seen made me panic.

“Kat.”

Again, Nathan’s voice hits me with that cold demand, and I know he’s not buying it.

How the hell does he know? Am I that easy to read?

I hesitate a moment, unsure how to explain, and both of them remain quiet.

Fuck it.

“I saw you with Addison, and I...” I pause, licking my lips as my mouth goes dry. I know it was a misunderstanding now, but I’d felt so bad that night. Thinking I’d been the other woman, no matter how amazing our time had been, all I could picture was me being the reason a happy family was ripped apart.

It's stupid. I didn't know. They hadn't told me, and it wasn't my fault. Had it been true, that would have been on him, not me, but the guilt was unavoidable, especially when I'd just dealt with that myself with Carter.

The thought of him leaves a sour taste in my mouth, but I refuse to let him have a hold on me. He made his choice, and they aren't him, despite what I thought.

Looking at Alex, I swallow my pride and admit my mistake. "I heard someone call to you."

It takes him a moment before he seems to understand what I'm implying.

"Rose."

It's not a question, but I nod all the same.

"You thought Addison was mine, and she was calling to me?" His eyes light up with understanding, and he nods. "I can see how you would think that."

"I...I'm sorry. I know it's terrible, but I heard her call, and then I saw her with you, and Rose called to her, but I thought she was calling to you..." My words come out in a rush, and I look down at my hands in my lap, unable to hold his gaze.

"Hey," His finger hooks under my chin, forcing my eyes back to his, and I find nothing but understanding in his gaze. No judgment or anger. "I get it, Cherry. Actually, it makes a lot more sense why you flew out of here like your ass was on fire."

He offers me a reassuring smile, and while I can't return it, I'm grateful.

"You didn't know us, and I can imagine we probably came off like the assholes who would do that kind of thing, but I assure you that's not who we are. If Rose had been my wife, I never would have been out with Desmond like that. I'm not the cheating type, and I'd never make anyone the other woman."

His words loosen something in my chest, and some of the tension I'd been carrying seeps away.

I'd been so afraid to tell them, to tell Nathan I'd been with them, that they would be just like Carter, but I was wrong about all of it... I was wrong about them.

"I think there might be more to this, but that's a conversation for another time." I turn back to Nathan, and I swear it's like he can see right through me, making me feel bare in a way that has nothing to do with my clothes.

"The reason I called you here is to see if you would be interested in being more than a nanny to Addison." His gaze burns into mine with so much intensity I want to look away, but I can't.

"I don't understand. Like a chef?" I say, recalling what they had said the other night when I cooked dinner.

"We share, Cherry. Usually, it's only the occasional hook-up in the pool house, but ever since you..." Alex groans, cutting himself off, and his hands finally hit the bottom of my very short shorts. My breath catches as he flexes his fingers on the sensitive skin at the top of my thigh that's just short of being inappropriate.

I pull my gaze from Nathan to look at his hands, licking my lips at the memory of what it felt like to have his hands on me like this. It had been one night, but it plays on repeat in my dreams, and being here like this with him has my stomach in knots and my shorts soaked.

With his grip on my thighs, he gently guides my legs open. I tense, trying to stop him for a moment, not wanting him to see the evidence of how much I want him. He pauses for a moment, flicking his gaze up to meet mine with a smile, and his pupils are blown wide as he looks at me, just like he did that night.

My resistance crumbles, and I stop fighting him as he once again moves to guide my legs open.

"I knew you were different the moment I laid eyes on you in our club. You had us captivated, and you didn't even have to do anything." His voice is husky, and I swear the air is thicker.

Every breath is a struggle as I try to keep myself from panting.

“Do you know why I decided to call you Cherry?” he asks, leaning between my spread legs. The feel of him so close scrambles my brain, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s asking me a question.

“Be—because they’re red?” I guess, unsure. Trevor had made that nickname feel dirty, and while I enjoyed it that night, I didn’t like it the same anymore, something he quickly picked up on.

He chuckles, low and deep, and I feel the vibrations from his chest where it rests on my knee. I bite into my lip to stop from squirming as I feel them all the way up into my aching core.

“No, though I guess they are,” he says as his thumb rubs along the hem of my shorts, almost absently. “It’s because you had me from the moment I saw you in our club, sucking on that damn cherry from your drink.”

What?

They’d come up to me after that guy had been a little too pushy, right? I’d had a few drinks that night, so some of it was less than clear, but I’m almost positive they weren’t around for that.

“You sat all alone, looking like a fucking goddess, and you had no idea the pull you had on just about everyone. Fuck, I could have watched you eat those damn cherries all night.” He groans at the memory of it. His nails bite into my thigh, and I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

“It took every ounce of Desmond’s control not to chase down that douche-bag and lay him out,” he chuckles and shakes his head. “He banned him from the club, you know?”

My eyes go wide at the thought. I knew they had power and money, but to ban someone from somewhere feels like a lot, especially for me.

“Wh—why?” I stutter.

“Because we don’t condone that kind of behavior,” Nathan says, and I whip my head toward him. I’d been so focused on Alex that he startled me.

Being alone with them is already dangerous, but having Alex on his knees between my legs is scrambling my brain even more than usual.

Shaking my head, I let his words really sink in.

Holy shit!

When Alex said ‘our’ club earlier, I thought he was talking about a club they frequented.

Not that they owned the club!

“So what do you say, Cherry?” Alex asks, but I’m still reeling from discovering it’s their club.

“You can say no, and nothing will change. This isn’t a requirement.” Nathan reassures me, and I believe him. He doesn’t seem like the type to force something on someone if they don’t want it.

But are they seriously offering me what I think they are?

They want to share me...What does that even mean? Like right now?

My cheeks heat, and I dig my nails into the soft cushion of the chair at the thought.

I don’t know if I could pretend that it wasn’t appealing to me if someone held a gun to my head and told me that was the only way I could live. My body would give me away, even if I found a way to force the lie out of my mouth.

Alex’s eyes rake over me, and I know he sees my excitement at the thought, even if I can’t make myself say the words.

A smile pulls at his lips as he dips his head, his eyes never leaving mine as he presses his lips to the bare skin of my inner thigh just above my knee. It’s nothing more than a feather-light brush of his lips, but I feel it like a shock to my system. A

shiver runs down my spine as his warm breath ghosts across my leg, and I can't look away.

"Tell me to stop, Kat. All you have to do is say the word," Alex breathes before dropping his lips to my skin again, just an inch higher.

"I'll never forget the way you responded that night." Another kiss. "You were so ready to please us." Kiss. "So tell me, do you want to please us, Kat?"

His lips hover just shy of my shorts when he pulls back, and I can't stop the whine that rips from my throat with him having been so close to where I want him. If my face wasn't already on fire, it would be now, but I almost don't care.

I do want that, and while I have about a million questions about all of this, they don't feel as pressing right now knowing I could have him.

Have them.

"Yes." My voice is hardly more than a breathy whisper, but I know he heard it. His smile grows big enough that I'm worried he's going to hurt his cheeks, but he doesn't seem to give a shit.

I squeak in surprise when he surges forward and presses his lips to mine before I melt into him.

I should stop him, push him off, and leave. This is not happening, and it's not okay. Nathan is my boss, and Alex is his brother; this is Nathan's office, for crying out loud.

But despite that, I can't make myself stop kissing him, can't possibly push him away, and I can't stop the wetness that's damn near soaking my shorts knowing I have Alex kissing me while I still feel Nathan's eyes on me.

Alex's hands move up my legs, over my waist, up to my breasts, and my breath catches, feeling him touching me even with the thin layer of fabric still between us. I haven't been with anyone since him and Desmond all those months ago, and my hands never feel this good.

“So fucking eager,” Alex says with his lips still pressed to mine, and I can feel his smile.

He pulls back, and I fight to peel my eyes open to find him looking over his shoulder at Nathan, who is looking very intensely at us.

“Didn’t I tell you she was so receptive?” he doesn’t wait for an answer, instead turning back to me with that shit-eating grin still in place.

“Such a good girl for us.”

Fuck, that shouldn’t be so hot, but between his smirk and his words, I feel like I could melt into a puddle right here and now.

“Isn’t she such a good girl, brother?” Alex’s question has my eyes darting back to Nathan over his shoulder, wanting to know what he thinks. Before this, I would have told you I didn’t give a shit if a grown man thought I was a good girl or not.

Now, I think that might be a lie.

Nathan doesn’t respond, and I have to fight back the urge to pout over his lack of reassurance.

“Awe, don’t worry, Cherry, it’s not you, it’s him,” Alex assures me as his fingers find their way under my shirt before he pushes it up, exposing the fact that I’m not wearing anything underneath. My face heats being on display for both of them like this, so raw and open, but I fight the urge to cover myself, instead watching Nathan as his eyes move over my chest with a heat in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“Yes, see, he wants you. How could anyone resist you? You’re just so fucking delicious.” He leans in, quickly sucking one of my nipples into his mouth before he lets it drop just as quickly. I let out a high-pitched moan that’s half from shock and half from the intense pleasure.

“What do you say we give him a little show, Cherry? I think he could use a good show, he works so much after all. There’s no way he’s had any good quality time with a woman in a while.”

Nathan's eyes narrow at the back of Alex's head, but he doesn't correct him or say anything against his suggestion.

Wrapping his arm around my waist, Alex easily pulls me up to stand so that we're chest to chest. His finger hooks under my chin, forcing my head back so that my eyes meet his.

"I'm going to fuck you, and he's going to watch, Cherry. Do you understand?" My eyes go wide at his words, and he chuckles, no doubt seeing my reaction as he stares down at me, but I can't help it.

He didn't just say that, did he? No, I had to have heard him wrong.

Before I can overthink it anymore, Alex's hand tangles in the hair at the base of my neck. Holding me still, he steps to the side, leaving me on full display for Nathan, who still sits at his desk. I'm shirtless and so damn wet that I'm almost positive he can see the evidence of it on my shorts.

"Ah, ah, ah. We aren't going to do that." Alex swats my hands away as I attempt to cover myself, and I'd love to give him the stink eye, but his hold on my hair keeps my gaze firmly on Nathan. "Don't deny him the chance to see you, Cherry. That kind of torture would be cruel when he's so clearly begging for it."

Alex walks me forward toward Nathan's desk until my thighs brush the edge of the wood, and I suck in a sharp breath as Nathan leans forward in his chair. Until now, I hadn't been sure he was into this the way Alex said he was. Hell, I'm still not totally sold; maybe what I'd thought was lust burning in his eyes is something else entirely, and I'm only seeing what I want to see?

Alex releases my hair, but I don't move. I mean, I might be a bit uncomfortable under Nathan's gaze, but it's also exhilarating knowing I have his attention solely to myself. A man as powerful and attractive as him, well, that could give a girl an ego, that's for sure. Not to mention, Alex stands close enough behind me that I wouldn't make it far, and as I hear the rustle of his clothes behind me, well, suddenly, I'm not sure I'd want to make it anywhere.

No, my embarrassment can take a back seat right now because I know what it's like to be with Alex. I know exactly what I've been missing, and I'm not prepared to give that up. I already did once, and I was wrong. I might very well combust if I tried to leave right now.

I hear the sound of what I can only assume is Alex's pants hitting the floor behind me, and I want to turn around so badly. I'm not sure when I became this needy, but it's almost as if I'm no longer thinking with my brain. If it wasn't for Nathan's icy blue eyes holding me in place, I might already be on my knees for Alex.

Alex moves up behind me, and I shiver at the feeling of his cock as it presses into my lower back, the warmth of his skin on mine. Fuck, I need him to fuck me like right now before I resort to begging.

He's taller than me; they all are, and that might just make this angle a little harder for him, but I know he'll figure it out. He and Desmond had no issues lifting me every which way they wanted me that one night.

"You see, brother, this is why I always tell you that you have too much stuff on your desk. You never know when you could benefit from having more room." No sooner are the words out of his mouth than Nathan clears it.

In one swift movement, he sweeps his arm across the desk, knocking everything from papers and pens to his whole PC to the ground with a bang that makes me flinch but doesn't seem to phase either of them.

"See, he's dying to see you." His words roll over my neck before he presses a kiss to the sensitive skin right behind my ear. "I bet he can't wait to taste you, Cherry." His tongue moves along the sensitive skin, and my eyes fall closed, my head falling back against his chest in bliss.

His hand moves down my stomach, sliding past my waistband, down between my legs, where he trails a finger through the wetness that's gathered there, and I hear the deep grumble in his chest as much as I feel it.

“So fucking wet, Cherry. Is this for me? For us?”

The only answer that leaves my lips is a moan that isn't a word at all, but he seems to know what I'm trying to say.

He pulls his hand from my shorts, holding it out in front of him like some kind of trophy that he's showing off to Nathan, and finally, it's too much.

“Eyes on me.”

I jerk my head back up to find Nathan's eyes still on me, his jaw set as he peers at me with so much intensity that I almost fuck up and look away again but stop myself at the last second.

Alex's hand presses to my back, just between my shoulder blades, and I don't fight him, instead allowing him to push my chest to the desk, my hands braced on either side of me. Once I'm damn near parallel with the desk, Alex moves his hand, only to reach around and grab my wrists. With my wrists in his hand, he moves our hands up to the far edge of the desk nearest Nathan before he closes his hands around mine so that I'm left gripping the edge.

“Hold on nice and tight for me.”

I do as I'm told, even as I feel him pull away, one of his hands moving to grip my left thigh.

“Bend that knee for me, Cherry,” he tells me as he lifts my leg to rest on the desk, making it so that I have to stand on my tiptoes. I have to fight the urge to tell him this is a bad idea, but the feeling of his cock between my legs keeps me quiet.

Or it keeps me mostly quiet.

With my leg up on the desk, Alex makes quick work of moving my shorts to the side and pressing into me in one swift motion. The sound that leaves me is half needy moan and half satisfaction at the feeling of being filled after so long.

He pulls back, and I realize I'd forgotten just how large he is. Pulling back until he's just barely inside of me, he groans as if it pains him to do it before he quickly slams back in, and this time he's all the way in, the slap of his nuts off my ass,

assuring that. We both moan at the feeling, my back arching from the intensity of it, my head falling to Alex's shoulder as he stays buried deep inside of me, unmoving.

“I'm going to fuck you now, Cherry, and you're going to keep your eyes on my brother while my cock is deep inside of you, making you come.” His words excite me, and my heart pounds in my chest, both with nerves and anticipation. With his one hand on my side holding me up, his other comes up to cup my chin, ensuring there's nowhere for me to look that isn't Nathan's blue eyes.



NATHANIEL

CHAPTER 20

Alex is enjoying himself as he flaunts Kat in front of me, but despite the fact that I want to punch him for it, I can't bring myself to complain. Not when she looks so fucking perfect bent over my desk. Not with the way her eyes damn near roll into the back of her head. The only way it might be better is if she was bent over from this side and I was the one fucking her, or maybe if her lips were wrapped around my cock while Alex fucked her.

With every thrust, her breasts sway, and the air leaves her lungs in a whoosh that has me desperate to reach out and touch her.

I don't, though.

Not yet. Not until I talk to her about this.

She might have agreed to be ours, and she might be okay with Alex fucking her, but I want so much more and until I know if she wants that too, I won't be touching her.

No matter how torturous it might be.

I've been hard since she walked in. How could I not be with the way she came dressed? I'll have to thank Alex for that later. I know if she had a choice, she would have changed. I can't see her being okay with walking around in her sleep clothes, but fuck, I would love to see her like this every day.

I'd take her in nothing at all; hopefully, soon, that will be a very real possibility.

She's been a walking temptation for weeks, but right now, with the sounds that she's making as Alex brings her closer to climax... It's only by sheer determination that I've not snapped or come in my pants already.

Her green eyes meet mine when they're not rolled back in her head in pleasure, and her breathy whispered curses let me know just how close she is. Unable to help myself, I lean forward, folding my hands so that I can ensure I keep them to myself; I just need to be closer. Her eyes dart down to my hands, and I know what she wants; I can see it on her face, but I resist. I know that one touch would be too much. It would be my undoing.

Her eyes dart down lower, and there's no way she misses the bulge there. My pants are well-fitted, and with the way I'm sitting, I'm currently sporting the closest thing to a tent as they would allow.

Alex leans forward over her, whispering something in her ear as he palms her breast. His hand that's been holding her chin slips down her throat, and I'm not sure if it's that or what he said that has her eyes falling closed, but it doesn't matter.

What matters is what comes out of her mouth as she falls apart a moment later. Suddenly, I know exactly what Alex said to her as she moans my name loud enough that I'm sure anyone on this floor would have heard her if the room wasn't soundproof, that is.

Alex releases her throat, and she collapses forward on the desk as she pants through the waves of pleasure, but of course, he doesn't stop.

"Fuck, Alex!" she whimpers as he slams into her hard enough to move the desk closer to me. The smell of her cherry shampoo mixes with the smell of sex, and it's the most intoxicating thing I've ever smelled in my life.

Alex slams into her one last time before he follows her over the edge. Falling forward, he braces himself on either side of

her so as not to crush her. The smile on his face lets me know how satisfied he is and also tells me he's far from done with her.

He quickly steps away, and I don't need to look to hear what he's doing. A second later, he's back with his button-up off and his boxers on. Draping the button-up over Kat, he quickly scoops her up into his arms, and she hardly even seems to register it, still blissed out from being fucked.

It's a beautiful sight, one I don't want to end, but I know I have things to do, and I only have so much willpower.

Their leaving is for the best, for now.

If I get my way soon, she won't be leaving my bed.



I like to think I'm a man who has pretty good control and discipline. Years of dealing with assholes in meetings and women who only want my money have made me rough around the edges. With that, a certain kind of restraint comes into play. It makes my life easier and makes business run more smoothly.

Yet seeing Kat laid out on my desk as my brother fucked her had me ready to snap. Hell, I'd been ready to snap the second he pulled her into my office in those tight little shorts and tank top.

Kat had been invading my mind since the first time I met her, and with every meeting since, it only got worse. I really did want her to be Addison's nanny. She's great with her, but that wasn't all I wanted.

Alex was right. We owned several houses that our staff lived in, including the nanny. It gave us privacy. If we brought someone back to the house with us, we used the pool house for the same reason. I could have told them I offered her a room because her apartment was broken into, and they probably would have bought it, but I'd offered even before that.

No, I wanted her and as luck would have it, so did Alex and Desmond. Oliver was still adamant he didn't want anyone, but I'd seen the way he looked at her at the zoo. He could pretend and fight it, but I didn't think that would last long. She wasn't going to hurt him or the rest of us; I was sure of it. Something about Kat was different, and I had no desire to let her slip through our fingers.

She'd already given Desmond and Alex the slip once.

Alex had carried Kat from my office about an hour ago. He no doubt took her back to her room to enjoy another round, or however many he could get, before she was exhausted and fell asleep. Come tomorrow, Desmond will know she agreed, and he'll be forced to share. I can't say I blame him. I'm looking forward to my own time with her, but for now, that will have to wait.

I'd agreed to do this with Alex tonight because he made it clear he couldn't wait another day, and I believed him. Unfortunately for me, I still have things to get done. All of which I now have to do while painfully hard with the memory of the look on her face as she fell apart and the sinful sounds she makes.

Fuck.

My phone rings, saving me from myself as I debate putting everything on hold to go to her. It's for the best. I need time to see how she will react to the others...the way she will react to me, and what I want to do to her.

With a groan, I accept the call and put it on speaker before tossing it on my desk.

"Rough night, boss?" Vince's voice does a wonderful job of pulling me from my musing and back to the task at hand. A man of many talents indeed. Maybe I should tell him he can add Boner Killer to his long resume.

"You don't even know," I tell him, running a hand down my face.

"The little beauty giving you a rough time?" He chuckles, his voice dripping with sarcasm. And if he were here, I'd hit

him. We've been friends for so long it's impossible for me to hide anything from him, and him from me. It's why I hired him in the first place. I trust him, but in times like these, it can be a hassle. I already have one obnoxious brother. I don't need to hear it from him as well.

Ignoring him, I move our conversation back to the reason I'm still sitting in this damn office when I could be doing much better things.

"Did you find anything?"

Vincent huffs into the phone, and I already know what he's going to say.

"Not really. Whoever broke in didn't really do much except break shit and, according to the police report she filed, nothing was missing." It's not a question, but I know he's looking for me to confirm.

"She hasn't said anything about missing things, but I can ask her tomorrow."

"With everything broken, I would say it was probably someone with a grudge. Does she have any enemies?"

I was afraid he would ask that.

"I'm not sure about enemies, but it's not as if it's a secret I've been talking to her." I don't need to explain any more than that. Vincent is well aware of the type of people we deal with. That's part of his job, after all.

"You think someone was jealous enough to do this?"

I think about it for a second. I want to say no; honestly, this shouldn't even have to be a discussion. But I know better, people do crazy things when they think it will better them. I'd seen the way Barbara looked at Kat that day in the office. The way Trevor followed her around like a puppy, and those were just the two I saw. That school was full of people, many of whom have tried to get closer to us over the last year, ever since we enrolled Addison and took up endorsing the school. Some took the hint, but not everyone.

"It's entirely possible."

“Alright, well, I’ll start investigating the school and teachers, and I’ll let you know if I find anything. And don’t forget to ask the little beauty if anything was missing,” he says, and I can already hear him typing away on his keyboard.

“Is there something else we need to talk about?” I ask, unable to stop myself. This is the second time he’s referred to her as that just while on the phone. I’ve never heard him actually call her anything but her name prior, and Vince isn’t one for nicknames. Unless, of course, you counted his insistent need to refer to me as Boss, but I’m pretty sure he only does that to annoy me.

“Nah, you know I don’t do that type of shit,” he says with a laugh, and I roll my eyes.

By ‘that type of shit,’ he means dating and feelings. Vincent fucks plenty of women, but none of them ever makes it further than two times before he cuts them loose.

“I’ll keep you updated.”

The line goes dead before I can respond, and I’m left sitting at my desk wondering if he’s lying to himself or to me and how I would feel about either.

For now, I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt and move on to my next task. Figuring out more about Kat and how we’ll keep her. She might have fallen into our laps unexpectedly, but now that she’s here, I plan to make her mine.

Permanently.



CHAPTER 21

Alex is insatiable.

Last night, I'd been sure I was going to get fired, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Instead of firing me, they had offered me the chance to be theirs...

I'm not sure what it was—live-in employee with benefits?

No, that sounds awful.

I'm not sure what the name for what I am is, but I know Alex had fucked me on Nathan's desk...while Nathan watched. Then he brought me back to my room and fucked me again until my legs were shaking, and I was so tired I passed out before he even pulled out of me.

Shit, that wasn't another dream, right?

I blink my eyes open slowly, but it's not necessary. Even before I can see, I can feel the warm body pressed against my back. Strong arms wrap around me, holding me tight to a very bare chest, and I can't miss the erection pressed firmly against my ass.

"Good morning, Cherry." Alex's voice is husky with sleep. Jesus, how does he sound even sexier?

"Good morning," I manage to say through my daze. I'd almost half convinced myself this was all a dream, but nope, we're both here, in my bed...naked.

It's too much. My mind replays last night, the meeting in Nathan's office, the way Alex fucked me on his desk, how Nathan watched, and their offer. I feel myself getting flustered at the memory. There's still so much I don't understand. Like why they would want me, what *this* even is, and the one question that's really bugging me.

If they all share, why hadn't Nathan joined us last night instead of just watching?

I don't have any answers, and honestly, I don't want to ask Alex and risk sounding like an idiot.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I mumble, trying to untangle myself from his hold to slip away. For a second, he doesn't move, and I wonder if he's fallen asleep again, but when I move away from him, he pulls me back against his chest, nuzzling into my neck with a sigh.

"Do you have to?" he asks with a chuckle, and I can't help but chuckle as well. "Fine." He relents when I pull away again, and I quickly climb from the bed, worried I'll lose my nerve. Walking toward my bathroom, I glance back at him. He's lying on his back with an arm slung over his eyes and an adorable little pout on his lips.

Shaking my head at his antics, I go into the bathroom, closing the door behind me with a sigh. I'd thought some distance might help clear my mind, but even after I go to the bathroom and splash some cold water on my face, all I can think about is last night.

Crap.

I doubt a shower will help, but it can't hurt. Honestly, I could use some freshening up. Not to mention, I'm not sure I can face Alex right now. What do I do when I walk back out there? Do I get back in bed or go down for coffee? Shit, I didn't grab clothes either.

How will I face Nathan or Desmond after last night?

Fuck, how did this get so complicated?

Actually, that's one question I do have the answer to. Everything got complicated when I started letting my need to

get fucked outweigh my brain. Damn these men and the magnetic pull they seem to have on me.

I never stood a chance.

I turn on the shower without letting it warm up before I hop in. The cold water shocks my system. For a few glorious moments, my brain is blissfully silent—that is, until strong arms once again band around my waist.

I'm not proud of the sound that leaves my mouth, but to be fair, he scared the shit out of me. He's not sorry about it either, based on his chuckle.

“In your own little world in here, huh?” I feel his warm breath on my neck as he presses soft kisses down it, working his way to my shoulders. “What are you thinking about, Cherry?”

My brain already isn't working properly this morning with everything going on. Add that to the feel of his lips on my skin as the water runs over both of us and the hard press of his cock to my lower back, and I might as well be mute for all the words I can make leave my mouth.

“Use your words,” he coaxes, his lips never leaving my skin, and I groan in both pleasure and frustration.

Damn him. He knows exactly what he's doing to me, and he's loving it.

“I...”

I what?

Taking a moment, I gather my thoughts the best I can and try again.

“I—I was just...cleaning up.” I stutter and stumble my way through the sentence, but I get there.

“Oh, good idea.” His arms that had been wrapped around me slowly pull back until his hands rest flat against my stomach, slowly moving up toward my breasts. “Get clean, so I can get you dirty again,” he groans in my ear, and I clench my thighs as the sound goes right to my aching core.

I'm sore from last night, tender after the way he fucked me not once, but twice. I haven't had sex since I was with him and Desmond all those months ago. Not only had I not had time, I wasn't really interested, but I can't say that anymore. Even sore, I'm so interested you'd think I was still in a dry spell.

I'd told myself I wasn't interested in anyone because they'd burned me, making me the other woman. The only way to avoid that kind of thing was to simply avoid men, and it wasn't hard to do, considering my track record seemed to be shit between them and Carter.

But maybe, just maybe, now I can admit I was lying to myself.

Not about Carter.

No, he can go straight to hell for all I care. But Desmond and Alex...

They'd left a mark, and it had a lot less to do with the bad than the good. They had been invading my dreams. I'd spent many nights reliving our time together with various toys I'd bought to keep me occupied.

Too bad none of them were anywhere near the real thing.

"You're thinking too hard again," Alex says with a tsk as his hands cup my breasts and begin kneading them.

He tweaks my nipples, and just like that, I'm not thinking at all as a soft moan leaves my lips.

"That's better," he praises, and I swear I could melt into a puddle at his words. "Now tell me what's going on inside the beautiful head." I open my mouth to deny his words, but he pinches my nipples harder, and the words die as I let out a hiss. "No lying, Cherry," he says, tsking me again, and I let out a huff of annoyance.

He doesn't even know what I was going to say.

Alex's hands move up my shoulders before trailing them down my arms, and I hum at the feeling of his hands on me even like this. We're naked and in the shower, but even if we weren't, something about his hands just feels good, feels right.

He links his fingers with mine before moving my hands up to rest on the wall in front of me before he releases me, and somehow, without him even telling me, I know he wants me to stay where he's placed me.

I could move. The idea of him punishing me for it is almost enough to make me, but I love it when he praises me for how well I listen.

It's such a strange feeling knowing I crave being yelled at and praised, as if I'm a child craving attention.

Alex grabs my body wash from the built-in shelf and flips it open, taking a deep breath of the cherry scent.

"Can you think of a more perfect scent for you?" Alex asks with a smirk as he pours some of the soap on my loofah and lathers it up until big bubbles form.

I'd not bought any of my soaps or other necessities. The day after I started here, they showed up, and I assumed Nathan had someone handle them. My own had come with the movers, but it was very clear that the quality of the products that were supplied for me were much better. Clearly, it had been Alex who handled supplying them. I should have known, given his nickname for me.

Not that it mattered; I would happily use them. My hair hasn't ever been this soft.

Alex moves the loofah over my skin, scrubbing me clean, and I can't help but feel silly.

"I can do that, Alex." I turn to take the loofah and do just that, but Alex has other plans. His hand comes down on my ass, not super hard, but enough to jolt me, and I yelp in shock.

"Hands on the wall." I turn back to face the wall and do as he says. The second my hands are back on the wall, he goes back to washing me, and while it makes me minorly uncomfortable to be doted on like this, I'd rather not have him redden my ass, at least for now.

"You need to learn to let us take care of you," Alex says as he reaches around me, ensuring he's cleaning everywhere before he lets the loofah fall and reaches for my shampoo. "I

know it makes you uncomfortable, but we enjoy it, Cherry. We want to take care of you, remember that. Someday, you'll get used to it."

I bite back the urge to argue. He's right, after all. It makes me uncomfortable, but I highly doubt I'll ever get used to it.

Using one of the two shower heads, he rinses the soap from my body before moving onto my hair. His fingers begin to massage the shampoo into my scalp, and the breathy moan that leaves my mouth sounds sexual, even to me. But I can't help it, and if we weren't in the shower, I could totally fall asleep to the feel of his hands on me.

Hell, depending on how this massage keeps up, I might be able to do a lot more than sleep.

Clearly, he has the same idea because he steps into me, and I can feel just how hard he is against my lower back. I bite my lip to keep from moving my hands and earning another spanking, but damn if I don't want to touch him. Instead, I do the next best thing and press up on my tiptoes to wiggle my ass back into him.

He lets out a low groan, and his hands abandon my hair, dropping to my hips, stopping my movement. I can't help the smile that curves my lips at getting a reaction from him.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" he asks, pressing an open mouth kiss to my shoulder that gives me goosebumps. "Well, joke's on you, love, because there will be none of this," he presses his hard length into my asscheek in lieu of an explanation. "Until you tell me what's bothering you."

He moves back, and I miss the warmth of his body even as he once again rinses me with the warm water, washing away the shampoo. He takes more time with the conditioner before his hands move to my shoulders, and he firmly kneads the muscles that I hadn't realized were sore before now.

"Nothing's *wrong*," I say, and my words come out breathy and deep as he continues to rub me down. It's like he can feel that I have more to say, or maybe he's just waiting, hoping I say more. Either way, I do.

“I’m just a little confused, and I don’t know overwhelmed, I guess.” The words tumble out before I can really think about them, and I let my head fall forward with a groan. “You cheated.”

The sound of his laughter bounces around the stone walls, and I get the feeling he knows exactly what he did.

“What’s confusing?” he asks, ignoring my comment, his hands moving down my back and continuing his massage. Other than the fact that we’re naked in the shower together, it’s pretty standard as far as a massage goes, nothing sexual, but fuck if I don’t want it to be.

With that, I decide to give him the information he wants and put myself out of my misery. I have a feeling he isn’t going to let this go either way. These Lawson men seem to be stubborn to a fault.

“Why me? Of all the women out there, I can’t imagine what would make you want me.”

His hands freeze before his arms wrap around my stomach, and he pulls me back into his chest, leaning his chin on my shoulder.

“There’s nothing not to want, Katherine. You had me and Des captivated from the moment we saw you at the bar. It might have taken Nathan a few more months to meet you, but he was taken just as quickly. Hell, even Oliver is interested, no matter what he might say. You’ll see, just give him a chance to figure it out. I’m not sure how else to make you understand it, but give us some time. I promise you’ll see that we only want you.”

His words leave me breathless, and when I try to say something in response, nothing comes out, and I end up simply closing my mouth before folding my arms over his in a kind of backward hug.

I want to believe everything he said, that I’m just so amazing they can’t resist me, but honestly, the idea is almost laughable to me. What I can do though is give him the chance he asked for, I’m not going anywhere. I made a promise to

Addison, and it might very well break my heart eventually, but I don't want to leave them.

Spinning me around in his arms, he walks us back underneath one of the showerheads until we're both getting soaked in the rain-like downfall.

"Alex!" I yell with a laugh as I try and fail to wiggle free from his arms, but he only holds me tighter.

"What? Don't act like you weren't already wet," he says with a chuckle. Leaning in, he presses his lips to mine, and just like that, the water is forgotten. I melt into him as his hands roam over my body, pulling sounds from me that would be embarrassing if I gave a shit, but right now, the only thing that matters is that he keeps touching me.

His hands move to my thighs, and he wraps his fingers around them before hoisting me up into his arms. I'm not super heavy, but I'm not really thin enough that I'd picture myself being tossed around. Yet, somehow, he makes it look easy.

Stepping back out of the direct spray of the water, Alex moves to the stone bench opposite the shower head before sinking down onto it with me still in his arms. His stiff cock rests between my asscheeks, and this time when I wiggle, it leaves us both groaning. With expert movements, he lifts me just enough to maneuver us so that he's lined up with my entrance and easily slips in.

The stretch stings a bit after last night, but he gives me a minute to adjust, and that's all I need to get over it, craving the release I know he's going to give me.

"What else is bothering you, Cherry?" Alex's voice is huskier than it was a minute ago, and I can't say I blame him, considering he's balls deep inside of me right now.

With the chance to adjust, the stretch is no longer an issue, and I decide to take matters into my own hands. I've never loved being on top. I don't know many girls who do, but if it means sex instead of these questions, I'm down to try it.

All I really need to do is distract him enough. How hard could that be?

Turns out it's harder than I would have thought. Being on top is a totally different feeling but also a lot of fucking work, and without me answering his question, Alex isn't stopping me, but he also isn't helping.

With a huff, I sink down further on his lap and blow out a puff of air in annoyance.

Like I said, stubborn Lawson men.

"Don't stop on my account, Cherry. You were doing a great job." The smile on his face tells me he's teasing me, but the heat in his eyes says he really didn't want me to stop.

With a sigh, I finally give in.

"How does sharing work?" I ask before I realize that's not exactly what I should have asked. I get how it works; I remember how well Desmond and Alex were able to share me, like a well-oiled machine that was made to suck all the pleasure from me.

"Is there a time schedule? Am I with you sometimes and Desmond others? What about Addison? What would she think if she saw Desmond kiss me and then her father? And speaking of Nathan, if everyone shares, why did he only watch last night?"

Alex smiles, and it's not just his usual shit-eating, sexy smirk; no, this is a full-blown smile that makes a dimple appear on his left cheek that I didn't even realize he had.

He's so fucking adorable.

"You really are overthinking this whole thing, Kat. I promise it's not that serious." His hands grip my hips as he talks. Lifting me just enough that it forces a sudden cry from my lips when he shoves me back down on his cock to punctuate his last word. "Sharing works however it works out. If I want to fuck you and Desmond wants to join, he can. If you decide you want it to be just you and Desmond or you and me, you tell one of us to get lost." He continues to bounce me up and down on his lap as he explains, and I have to really

focus to comprehend what he's saying while he continues to fuck me.

"If you want to make a schedule, you can try that, but I doubt it will work. Des is going to lose his fucking mind when he learns you agreed to this. Boy's been going out of his mind trying to keep his hands to himself the last few days, not that I can blame him." He grunts as I begin to match his rhythm, letting his head fall back, but he doesn't stop his movement, and it gives me the courage to keep doing it.

The idea of a schedule sounds a little silly when he says it out loud, and I decide that won't be something I ever suggest again.

"There won't be any jealousy?" I ask, my words choppy and voice rough as he continues to fuck into me, each thrust a little harder than the one before.

One of his hands slides up my back, the other still firmly holding my hip. He twists my long, wet hair around his hand and gently pulls my head back.

"If we have any problems with jealousy, that's on us to deal with Cherry. We're grown men. You just need to worry about your happiness and make sure you let us know if anything changes or if we have any problems. It's new to all of us, and it's going to take some time to get used to it, but I know we can," he groans, leaning in and nibbling at my neck. I dig my nails into his shoulders as the slight pain from the tug of my hair mixes with the light nip of his teeth and the pleasure of his cock slamming into me.

It's all too much, and I can't stop my orgasm from slamming through me or the sudden cry that's ripped from me. Alex grunts, sucking hard on the sensitive skin of my neck, and I know it's going to leave a mark, but I can't bring myself to stop him as it only intensifies the pleasure.

Both of our breathing is labored, and when he finally releases the skin of my neck, I know he's left a mark just by the way his lips twitch.

Asshole.

“You were made for us, Cherry.” He gently kisses the spot he just marked before moving to my lips. Despite him just fucking me and the wonderful orgasm he gave me, I can’t help but get lost in him, in the feel of his lips and our tongues as they tangle together.

Slowly, we untangle ourselves from each other, and I stand on wobbly legs for a moment before Alex has me sit on the bench and again washes me. I feel bad letting him, but I also don’t have enough energy to stop him right now.

“And what about Nathan?” I ask as we get out of the shower, and he towels me off with the plushest towels I’ve ever felt in my life.

Alex shrugs before pulling a towel around himself.

“My brother has always had a strange way of doing things. If you want to know something, I’m afraid you’re going to have to ask him about it, love.”

He quickly presses a kiss to my cheek, telling me he’ll meet me downstairs before strolling out of my room with nothing but that towel slung low on his waist, water still dripping from his hair. Clearly, he has no issues with anyone knowing what we might have been doing. Not that I’d thought he would after last night, but still, I find myself feeling embarrassed at the idea of someone seeing him. It’s not as if I regret what we did. No, it was amazing...all three times, but despite the agreement, I worry I might make someone upset.

The memory of how Oliver accused me of sleeping with them plays in my mind. He’d been mostly wrong before, but I can’t help but remember how upset he’d seemed.

Ugh!

Pushing the memory aside, I get dressed, opting for shorts and a tank top. Today isn’t supposed to be as hot as yesterday, but it’s still hot, and I promised Addy we could play in her jungle gym, something I don’t think I should do in a dress.

I half expect to run into someone in the kitchen, but not only is the kitchen empty, but the sink is as well, which tells me we’re not the only ones who slept in. Not that I’m surprised.

The sun has a tendency to drain you, and we spent a lot of time outside yesterday.

Taking advantage of the fact that I'm alone, I once again try my hand at the very excessive coffee machine and, after a few failed attempts, manage to brew my own cup.

I'd been so sure that I would never get the hang of it that I can't help the little jump of joy as I watch the coffee drip into my cup, not noticing the eyes on me. A chuckle from behind me has me whirling around so fast that I almost lose my balance. It's just a stroke of luck that I grab the counter to steady myself before I end up face-down on the floor.

Desmond stands in the doorway watching me, and I roll my eyes because, of course, he does. I need to learn to pay better attention to them so they can stop sneaking up on me like this.

Before either of us has a chance to say anything, Alex strolls into the kitchen, completely ignoring Desmond. He moves around me, swapping out my cup with his own and setting it to brew much easier than I did, earning a glare.

Show off.

Once his coffee starts brewing, he turns to face me with a smile that screams trouble. He reaches out, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me into his chest before pressing his lips to mine.

I freeze for a moment, very aware of the fact that Desmond is still standing a few feet away watching us. But even with my embarrassment, I can't stop myself from melting into him with the feel of his lips on mine.

He kisses me like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted, as if he needs me to survive, and I'll be damned if I don't kiss him the same way. By the time he pulls away, my lips feel puffy, and my breathing is ragged. When I finally peel my eyes open, he has a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

It's well deserved, but I reach out and smack his chest all the same. He deserves that too, for doing that in front of Desmond.

I have a feeling he did it mostly because he was there.

“What the fuck!?” Desmond says from behind me, much closer than he was a moment ago. A second later, his hand drops onto my hip and pulls me back into his chest, and I feel his hard length pressed against my lower back.

“Kitten,” he growls, grasping my chin in his other hand and tilting my head back so that I’m looking up at him through my lashes. His eyes roam across my face, from my eyes that are no doubt blown wide with lust, to my swollen lips. It’s impossible for me to miss the hunger that shines down at me.

“We had a meeting last night.” Alex’s words seem to be exactly what Desmond wanted to hear. A smile curves his lips a moment before he presses them to mine in a strange upside-down kiss that shouldn’t be as hot as it is, but pulls a soft moan from my lips all the same.

“Kat!” Addison’s tiny shout has me pulling away as I stumble forward in an attempt to put space between me and Desmond. Unfortunately for me, I end up running right into Alex, and I feel his chest rumble.

Despite his amusement, he steadies me before turning back to his coffee, and by the time Addison comes barreling into the kitchen, I’m an acceptable distance from both of them. If she were older, I have no doubt she would pick up on the tension and other cues, but I thank my lucky stars she’s not.

She’s still in her pajamas, her long hair in the braid I put it in before bed last night, though nowhere near as neat. Since I’d moved in, she has a tendency to run to me in the mornings, and while I love it, I don’t think that’s what this is about today.

Instead of her usual smile, her lower lip is puffed out in a pout, and her eyebrows are pulled together as she stops in the same doorway Desmond had just been in moments ago.

“What’s wrong, Addy?” I ask, moving toward her on instinct before dropping down on the floor to scoop her into my arms.

“Marie said you can’t be my mommy!” she wails, burying her face into my shoulder, and I can feel her warm tears as they begin to soak through my shirt.

To say her words catch me off guard would be an understatement. Who's Marie, and why is she talking to her about me being her mom? But I know she doesn't really understand. So I do the only thing I can and try to soothe her, gently rubbing a hand up and down her back as I assure her I'm not going anywhere.

It doesn't seem to do anything as she continues to cry, even as she hugs me back.

Unsure of what else to do, I turn to look at Desmond and Alex in hopes they can help. Both stand where I left them, watching us but unmoving.

A little help.

I mouth the words to them so Addison doesn't hear me, and that seems to be all they need to get moving.

Thank god.

"Addison, Princess," Alex moves toward us, dropping to his knees beside me and laying a hand on the back of her head. "Don't cry. Kat's here with you every day. She plays with you and swims with you. She loves you very much, and that's all you really need."

His voice is calm and soothing, but still, it doesn't seem to help. If anything, I think she might be crying harder now.

"But I want a mommy! Everyone else ha-has a mommy, and Kat is the most perfect mommy ev-ever!" Her words are choppy as she fights to breathe through her crying, and I feel my own eyes well up with tears.

"Addison."

Nathan's voice has my head snapping up as I find him walking toward us from the dining room. While the rest of us slept in, he appears as if he's been up for hours, already dressed and perfectly put together. Even though he's not in his suit, he somehow finds a way to make his simple button-up and khaki shorts look as though they're meant for a runway versus a Sunday morning coffee.

“Da-daddy!” she hiccups as she wiggles her way out of my arms before running full speed into her father’s waiting arms.

“Princess, we’ve been over this. You don’t have to have a mommy. I know it feels like everyone else does, but you know that’s not true.” His words are gentle but firm, offering her no way to deny them.

“But I want one, Daddy. I want Kat to be my mommy.” Her words are hardly more than a muffled whisper, but they’re impossible for me to miss.

“You don’t need Kat to be your mommy,” Desmond says, and for a moment, Addison doesn’t respond, simply continuing her crying. But it’s clear he’s gotten her attention, and when he doesn’t say more, she can’t seem to help but look up at him in confusion.

He offers her a small smile before going over to take her from Nathan. “What do mommies do?” he asks her, walking into the dining room, and the rest of us follow. The food smells great, but I don’t feel as hungry as I should after my time with Alex.

Desmond is able to soothe her, and we eat. All the while, Addison lists things a mother would do. It’s not until we’ve finished eating that Desmond’s question seems to have an actual purpose, though.

“And are any of those things not done?”

His question seems to catch her off guard, and it takes her a second to think about it.

She’d named pretty basic things like playing with her, brushing her hair, reading her stories, shopping. I don’t need her answer to know it. These guys would never let her go without.

“No,” she finally says, shaking her head.

“See, so mommy or no mommy, you’re good, Princess.” Desmond smiles at her, and I can tell he’s proud of himself. Honestly, it’s not a bad point and probably the only way to appease a five-year-old who wants one of the few things they can’t give her.

“So even if Kat isn’t my mommy for real, she’s still my mommy because she does all the things a mommy does!”

The problem with good points is that oftentimes, kids miss them.

“Can I call you Mommy?” Addison asks, turning to me with the biggest puppy dog eyes I’ve ever seen.

Oh shit.

“I—I, um...” I look at Nathan, unsure what to say. On the one hand, it doesn’t bother me any, but also, I’m not her mother, and I’m not trying to step on any toes.

“Being a mom is a lot of work, Princess. Not everyone wants to be a mom, and while Kat does all those things for you, that doesn’t make her your mother.” Nathan tells her with a stern look that has her hanging her head.

I think it’s the first time I’ve seen anyone hold out against her pouting, but I’m grateful all the same. I catch his eye and hope he sees it, but the second our eyes meet, I see something shine in his eyes.

“That being said, it’s Kat’s choice whether she would like to be called that or not, and you need to respect that.”

What. The. Fuck!

He did not just say that... right?

There’s no way he just threw me to the tiny puppy dog-eyed wolf. But as I hold his gaze, unable to look away, I see the truth. He hadn’t intended to save me from the start.

“Why don’t we give her some time to think about it?” Alex stands and scoops Addison up into his arms with a smile. “Let’s head outside and enjoy the sun.”

Without another word, he leaves, taking her with him, and I’m left to sit there in a daze, trying to figure out what just happened.



The rest of the day is spent outside. We play with Addison, blowing bubbles, pushing her on the swing, and building castles in the sandbox.

Oliver and Desmond disappear and eventually come back out with sandwiches, fruits, drinks, and some chips. We enjoy it on the deck in the shade, and conversation is easy. Nobody brings up this morning, but I know they're thinking about it. I'm not sure how to explain it, but I can see it in their eyes when they look at me.

I have no idea what to say about it, but I swear it almost seems like Nathan wants her to call me Mom...

But that's crazy, right?

After lunch, I head up to my room. Technically, I'm off today, and right now, I just need a little bit of time to try to clear my head.

The house is quiet. Even Ruby is still outside, happily chasing the ball with Addison.

"Shit!"

I damn near jump out of my skin when I walk into my room and find Desmond sitting on the edge of my bed.

A smile curves his lips as he stands up and stalks toward me.

"Didn't mean to frighten you, Kitten, but I've been dying to get you alone since I kissed you this morning."

He's hardly finished speaking before he's wrapping me up in his arms, pulling me against him, and pressing his lips to mine. Despite my initial fright at finding him here, I can't help but melt into him. Just like with Alex last night, I'd missed him. It sounds crazy even to me. We'd only spent one night together months ago, but it had been a wonderful night.

This kiss is nothing like the one we shared earlier in the kitchen. Whereas that kiss was sweet and testing, this one is hungry and almost demanding, and I have no intention of stopping him.

With a groan, he pulls away but doesn't let me go, instead resting his head against mine.

"Why didn't you call?" His voice is low, and his words sound almost pained.

I'd been in a sense of bliss from his kiss, but it quickly melts away as I peel open my eyes and see the pain in his as he looks down at me.

I reach up, cupping his cheek, and he leans into my touch. Last night, when Alex asked me the same question, I was afraid to answer. I'd felt silly, stupid even, and worried about what he might say. I knew I was wrong after I saw them here the first night, but I'd convinced myself to let them go, thinking what we did was wrong.

Just like Alex had, he listens, and I don't see any judgment.

"God, I could beat his ass," he says with a chuckle, shaking his head.

I open my mouth to tell him it was my fault and to leave Alex alone, but before I can get a word out, his lips are once again on mine. He takes full advantage of my open mouth, pressing his tongue into mine as his hand moves down from my waist to grip my ass.

"Whose ass are you going to beat, boy? Because only one seems important right now."

A low growl sounds in Desmond's throat, vibrating my lips.

"Yours, old man. You had your turn with her earlier. Now it's mine. Get lost."

Alex laughs. There's no real bite in Desmond's words, but it catches me off guard all the same.

"If you wanted alone time, you should have closed the door."

I hear the door click and realize that in my shock at finding him, I hadn't shut it. Anyone could have walked by and seen us, and clearly, Alex did.

Shit, what if Addison had seen us? How would we explain this to her?

“Stop thinking so much, Cherry,” Alex whispers, his lips grazing the shell of my ear, and I shiver.

When had he gotten so close?

Desmond has yet to let me go, but I’m not sure I could face Alex right now. Just standing between them like this has me on edge. All I can think about is how amazing it was to be between them the last time. His hand is still firmly gripping my ass when Alex bends down to rest his chin on my shoulder, and his hands drop to my hips.

“The most beautiful color,” Alex all but purrs, and I can feel his eyes on me, no doubt seeing my flaming face, though I don’t meet his gaze.

“There’s no way you guys had a meeting, and you didn’t have her all night. Share.” Desmond says, trying to pull me closer against him. It’s not possible though; we’re already only separated by the clothes between us.

“I have no problem sharing,” Alex teases, making Desmond groan in annoyance. “You should be thanking me. I’m the one who made your father call the meeting last night, and I think I was very persuasive.” Alex drops light, open-mouth kisses up my neck as he talks, and I can’t stop the shiver that racks through my body.

Desmond is quiet, and for a moment, I worry this will be the first glimpse of jealousy between them before he huffs, and I know he’s going to cave even before he says anything.

“Fine, but on one condition.” I can’t help but look up at him now, hearing the humor in his words. The second our eyes meet, I regret it. There’s so much heat there, so much hunger.

I’m already so turned on that I feel like I could explode, and we’re all fully clothed. I clench my thighs together, trying to fight against the intense need to be filled and feel his fingers as they dig even further into my skin.

“You have to tell me all about your meeting last night.”

My breath hitches at his words, as I vividly remember what happened. The way Alex fucked me on the desk and Nathan–Desmond’s father!–watched us.

Alex presses up against my ass, and it’s impossible to miss the feeling of his hard cock, even through our clothes.

“Deal.”



CHAPTER 22

“Last night, your old man agreed to let me bring her down to the office to talk about the possibility of sharing her.”

“Which she clearly agreed to,” Desmond says, his voice full of sarcasm, and I imagine he’s rolled his eyes too. It’d be funny if I weren’t so outside of my comfort zone with them right now.

Yes, a few months ago, I was in the middle of a wonderful sandwich with the two of them, but I was heartbroken and a little tipsy. Not to mention, I didn’t live in their house or work for them.

A lot has changed in the last few months. I squirm between them, hearing Alex recount the way he fucked me on Nathan’s desk as he watched and again in my room last night before fucking me in the shower this morning. I can’t bring myself to regret a single thing, and I don’t think I’m going to regret this either. How could I when I’ve been dreaming of them like this?

The truth is, it was great being with Alex again, but I’d missed Desmond too, and knowing I’d been wrong about what I saw that night, well, it left me with a lot of regret.

What could have happened if I hadn’t run away the way I did?

Would we have gotten to this same outcome? Probably not.

Honestly, I can't imagine a world where I would still be Addison's nanny. Hell, she might not even like me if I'd come in as one of their girlfriends instead of her teacher. We'd built our friendship while she was my student, and she learned to trust and turn to me.

No, everything happened a little crazy, but I can't say I'm not happy with where we are now.

Desmond's fingers dig into my hips, and he drops his head forward until his forehead rests on the top of my head, and he groans as if he's in pain.

"Don't be such a baby," Alex says with a chuckle as he presses his lips to my neck. Desmond's head snaps up so fast that it's a wonder he didn't hurt himself.

"Don't be a dick. You know I love shower sex," he snaps, and I feel my brows climb my forehead in disbelief as my eyes open impossibly wide.

"Don't worry, Kitten. My bathroom's soundproof," he tells me, sounding very proud. While I can't say I've ever heard of someone soundproofing a bathroom, I can't say it sounds like a bad idea—especially not after Alex had me shouting and moaning this morning.

Alex's hand snakes around my waist to the front of my pants, where he makes quick work of my button and zipper. It's impressive, honestly, but I quickly grab his hand before we can get any further, and he instantly stops.

"What about Addison?" I ask because not only is it my job as her nanny, but I'd be lying if I said I still wasn't worried about how she will handle me with any of them. The last thing I need is for her to come looking for us.

"Nathan is getting her into bed. He knew what would happen when Desmond found out you agreed." His words take the edge off, but I can't help feeling just a little bit bummed to know he once again didn't care to be a part of the sharing.

Not that he shouldn't prioritize his daughter; of course, he should. But it still feels as though he doesn't want me, despite

him saying he did and looking like he did in his office yesterday.

My shirt is pulled up and over my head without warning, leaving me standing in only my bra and pants. However, before I can register what's happening, my shorts are also being pushed down.

"She has a nasty habit of overthinking, it would seem," Alex says as I look down to find him at my feet. Having been the one who just took my pants, he taps one ankle and then the other to have me step out of them.

"Damn Kitten." My head snaps up to look at Desmond, who stands in front of me, his teeth sunk into his bottom lip as his eyes trace up and down my body. Without thought, I cross my arms over myself in an attempt to hide, but that seems to have been the wrong choice.

Desmond's brows pinch together, and he takes a step toward me. Instead of looking up to meet his gaze, I turn my head down to the ground.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he asks, and this time it's my turn to bite my lip, unsure how to answer him.

A sharp sting on my thigh makes me squeak in surprise as I jump away, looking down to find Alex still on his knees.

"Did you just pinch me?"

"Actually, I bit you, but same thing." With a shrug, he pushes to stand, snagging one of my arms and yanking me into his chest. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling my head back until our eyes meet, and his eyes are hard and not at all playful the way they usually are.

"If you don't want to do this, all you have to do is say so," he pauses for a moment as if waiting for me to respond, but I don't because that's not what this is. "But what you're not going to do is hide from us and pretend like you're not beautiful. Do you understand?"

Again, I can't bring myself to respond, so instead, I nod and hope he will accept that.

Desmond moves up behind me, his arms wrapping around me, his fingers closing around my wrists so that he can gently pry my arms open. I don't fight him. I don't want to hide from them; they make me feel better about myself than anyone ever has, but it's a habit.

He drops my arms at my sides before his fingers slowly begin to trail back up my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake. My fingers twitch, and I fight the urge to cover myself, feeling Alex's eyes on me. His gaze is intense as he watches Desmond's hands until they disappear to my back, and a second later, my bra falls.

Clearly, these men are experienced in ways I wasn't ready for because they make bra clasps and pants buttons seem so easy. I've had days I struggle with my own bra, damn it.

Desmond steps forward, and I feel his bare chest press against my back as he pushes the bra off my arms until it drops to the ground.

Alex moves in a blur of motion, quickly scooping me up before he moves toward my bed and tosses me onto it. I bounce more than I would have thought possible and can't stop the giggle that works its way past my lips. It's silly and not at all a sexy thing to do in the moment, but it was unexpectedly fun.

Desmond is on the bed with me a second later, a smile on his lips as he looks down at me. Before I can say or do anything, I'm being pulled back down the bed by my ankle. Alex's grip is firm but not enough to hurt, and when my ass hits the end of the bed, he wraps my leg around his waist, and I quickly do the same with my other leg. It's not until he moves forward that I feel the heat of his lower body pressed against my almost naked lower half and realize at some point he'd lost his own pants.

When had that happened?

"Have you ever been fucked in the ass, Cherry?" Alex asks, his hands moving around my waist to grip my ass as he talks about it.

“Ugh... I—” My mind blanks as I attempt to answer him, leaving me gaping at him like a fish out of water.

“I’m going to take that as a no,” Desmond says with a chuckle, and I snap my mouth shut.

“That’s okay. We can work up to that,” Alex says in what I’m sure is supposed to be a reassuring tone, but somehow, it’s not.

His eyes dart up to meet Desmond’s gaze over my head, and a smirk curves the edge of his lip up. “Too bad you’ll just have to deal with her mouth until then,” he teases, and Desmond barks a laugh as he moves closer to me, only for me to realize he’s also missing pants.

My eyes drop to the steel bars that line the underside of his cock, and I swear my mouth waters. Desmond is the only pierced dick I’ve ever seen. Honestly, before him, I hadn’t even put much thought into the idea of it. I’d read about it in a book or two over the years, but it always seemed exotic, like something very few people had. So either that was wrong, or I’d somehow just gotten extremely lucky.

“I think we’ll live,” Desmond says, and I quickly look up to find him looking down at me. No doubt he saw the way I was just looking at his cock, if his comment is anything to go off of.

“What do you say, Kitten? Can I choke you with my cock while Alex fucks that perfect pussy?” His question catches me off guard, and it’s not just because of the question itself but because it’s hot as fuck despite it having no reason to be.

Dirty talk was never something I got into. In the past, it always felt forced, but not with Alex and Desmond. No, with them, it’s hot, and for the first time in my life, I think I might just understand why women go crazy for it.

It takes me a second to realize he’s waiting for me to answer him.

“Um, yeah...” I say, and honestly, it’s probably the least convincing thing I’ve ever said in my life, but I’m kind of distracted.

Alex and Desmond apparently hear the lack of conviction in my voice as well.

“Come on, Kitten, I think you can do better than that,” Desmond says, reaching down to grip his dick before slowly pumping his hand down the hard length, over each bar, until they disappear under his hand.

Alex’s hands start at my knees before slowly working their way up to the edge of my panties, where he teases me instead of continuing where I want him most.

“Yes!” I hadn’t meant to say it so loud, but their teasing seems to be getting the best of me right now.

“Yes, what, Kat?” Alex presses, his fingers still teasing the edge of my panties.

I groan in frustration from their teasing, but also the fact that he’s going to apparently make me spell this out for him.

Asshole, he’s enjoying this way too much.

“Yes, Desmond can choke me with his cock while you fuck me.” I refuse to call my pussy perfect, but apparently, I’ve said enough. One second, I’m on my back, damn near ready to beg them to touch me, and the next, I’m on my being flipped on my stomach.

“Up on your knees,” Alex says, slapping a hand to my ass and spurring me into action.

The bed dips behind me, and I feel Alex, though I don’t look back at him. Instead, I keep my eyes on Desmond, who is on his knees in front of me, his cock hard and dripping.

Without a thought, I lean forward, darting my tongue out to lick at the bead of pre-come that’s collected at the tip of his cock while he’s waited for me. It’s not the best-tasting thing, and the texture is strange, but the hiss followed by his mumbled curses make it worth it.

Alex pulls my underwear to the side, not even bothering to pull them off, before he runs two fingers over my soaking wet pussy and gives a husky groan of his own.

“So fucking wet for us.”

Desmond growls at his words before pulling his gaze from me to look toward Alex, and I follow his gaze curiously to find Alex holding up his fingers to show Desmond the evidence of my arousal.

“Fuck, I missed you too, Kitten,” Desmond says, no doubt seeing the red that tints my cheeks.

Alex presses the head of his cock to my opening but doesn't fuck me the way I want him to, the way I need him to right now.

“Fuck me, Cherry. Choke yourself on his cock and take what you need from me. Let's show Desmond how much you missed him and all that metal in his cock.”

It sounds like he's teasing, making fun of Desmond's piercings, but I honestly don't think he is. If anything, I think he somehow understands how much I enjoy his piercings, which is crazy because I hadn't said anything about it to him.

Whether he knows or just guessed, I don't need to be told twice. Alex and I have had more than enough sex in the last twenty-four hours, but I feel as though I've been being teased for days.

I want both of them.

Before I can let myself overthink it or second guess, I sink back onto Alex's waiting cock in one swift press of my hips that has him bottoming out. This angle lets him get even deeper, and I gasp at the feeling of him so deep inside me. Desmond takes the opportunity with my mouth open to move forward, letting his head rest on my bottom lip. I quickly dart my tongue out to swirl around his head before swallowing him down as far as I can.

His hand grips my hair as he presses in further, and I swallow down the urge to gag, instead rocking back to once again impale myself on Alex's cock.

Me being in control is great, but it only lasts about three minutes before the guys take over, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't prefer it.

They work together just as well as I remember, and without even needing to communicate, they fuck me hard and fast, and before I know it, Desmond is coming down my throat.

“Fuck, I missed you, Kat. There won’t be any escaping a second time,” he tells me, holding my chin as I look up at him through my lashes as Alex continues to fuck me, pushing me closer and closer to release.

“No, this time you’re ours,” Alex says in agreement, wrapping a hand around my waist where his fingers skillfully find my clit and begin to rub slow circles. With each circle, he picks up the pace of his fingers and his thrusts to match.

I come with a shout as my orgasm is ripped from me, and my arms and legs give out, leaving me a pile of boneless mush on the bed.

“I think she likes being ours,” Desmond says, his voice breathy, still not quite back to normal, and I can’t help but chuckle.

My eyes are drooping as my orgasm subsides, and I swear I could sleep right here like this, damn near naked and dripping come.

Instead, strong arms scoop me up and carry me to the bathroom before gently cleaning me up with a warm, wet towel.

“Just a few more minutes, and we can go to sleep.”

He’s so damn gentle as he cleans me—not something I think people would expect from either of them based on their appearances, but I love it.

Desmond finishes up before once again picking me up and bringing me back to the bed, and I’m happy to find Alex there. I’m not sure why, but the idea of him being gone when we came back made me sad. Don’t get me wrong, I want Desmond here, but I prefer both of them, especially after we just all had time together like that.

I’m a cuddle after sex kind of girl, sue me.

“Sweet dreams, Kitten.”



I know they're both gone when I wake. I have a distant memory of them kissing me and telling me they were going into the office for the day. It's strange how quickly I'd become used to them being in my bed. Just one night with Alex and last night with them both, and now my bed almost feels too big without them.

It's still a bit early. Addison will probably sleep for another hour or two, and while I'm tired, I can't bring myself to go back to sleep. With a groan, I push myself up and out of the bed and make my way into the bathroom to shower, hoping that will wake me up a bit more.

By the time I'm done, I feel alive enough to start my day. I decide against putting my hair up, letting it hang loose to air dry, and risk it frizzing in the heat. My hair is long and thick, so putting it up while it's wet is almost certain to give me a headache, and I just don't have the energy to blow dry it right now. Not to mention, if we swim again, it's all for nothing.

I finish up my morning routine, brushing my teeth and putting on some lotion before I grab my daily birth control pill from the medicine cabinet. I'm not fantastic at remembering these things and I make a mental note to get into the doctor for something different soon. For the last few months, it hasn't been a big deal, as I wasn't having sex. But missing a pill or two now...well, it matters.

The guys hadn't said anything about it or even seemed concerned about if I was on anything, and it's not as if we've been using protection.

Shit, that wasn't very smart on my part, but it's a bit late to worry about that now. I'll just have to talk to them about it later.

Ruby's waiting outside of my door when I leave my room. His ears perk up, and his tail starts wagging the second he sees me and I can't resist stopping to give him some scratches.

He follows me down to the kitchen, where I make my own cup of coffee. I sip it while wandering around the kitchen, looking at the ingredients available. There's a bit of everything, and eventually, I settle on pancakes before shooting off a text to Nathan to let him know Dale won't be needed this morning.

By the time Ruby pops up again, I have everything prepped, and a moment later, Addison comes running into the kitchen right into my arms.

"Good morning, Princess," I tell her, hugging her close as she nuzzles into me.

"Morning," she mumbles with a yawn.

I hold her until she begins to squirm, clearly having enough hugs for now. When I set her back down, her eyes go right to the little station I've made for us to cook at on the counter.

"What are we making?" Her eyes light up as she turns to me, waiting on my answer, and she's just so stinking cute!

"Pancakes."

She lets out a squeal of excitement before rushing to the stool I have set up so she can get a better look.

"With chocolate chips?" She's all but vibrating on the stool now, and I move forward to make sure she doesn't fall, but I can't help but smile down at her. For a little girl who has literally everything she could ever want, she's so excited about the little things like this, and it warms my heart.

"Of course," I tell her seriously, reaching out to boop her nose and making her laugh. "What kind of pancakes don't have chocolate chips?"

With only the two of us, we don't need to make a lot, and it doesn't take long before we have a nice stack of steaming chocolate chip pancakes ready to go. Addison eats them so fast I have to tell her to slow down, worried she might choke. After we've finished, I send her upstairs to get dressed and work on cleaning up the mess we made in the kitchen before going to get dressed myself.

My hair is dry now, so after I change, I braid it so it stays out of the way. Unfortunately, I still haven't been shopping, and most of my clothes are still work attire. So, I ended up picking a dress because shorts are limited.

The thought gives me an idea, and I leave my room to go find Addison. I'd half expected her to come find me already, but sometimes she stays in her room to play, and that's where I find her. She doesn't look up as I approach, and I stop in the doorway to watch her with a smile.

"Mommy, Mommy, I love you so much. You're the best mommy ever," she says, holding a little doll in one hand and another full-size one in the other. I love you too, Princess," she says to the other one and makes them hug.

It's adorable and so innocent, but it also pulls at my heartstrings.

I'd thought about the conversation about her calling me Mom, and while I haven't said anything or had a chance to talk to Nathan, I know if she ever called me Mom, I wouldn't stop her.

"Addison, honey."

She turns at the sound of my voice, dropping her dolls before coming to grab my hand and pull me back to her dollhouse.

"Here! You can play the mommy!" she says, shoving the mother doll in my hand with a smile.

I sit and play with her, the dolls swim and cook, and every time she calls 'mommy,' she looks at me with the biggest eyes, and just like that, I'm putty.

When she seems to have become bored with the dolls after a while, I ask, "Addison, I was wondering if you wanted to go to the mall with me today. "

The second the question is out of my mouth, the dolls are all but forgotten as she lunges into my arms.

"Yes!" she shouts happily before releasing me and running out the door. With a chuckle, I quickly follow her, hearing her

talk to Ruby as she goes, seemingly unaware of me behind her.

“She’s the best mommy ever, Ruby!”

Nathan had given me Vincent’s number and told me to text him should we need or want to go anywhere, so I do just that. He texts back even before I can put my phone away, saying he will be here in less than five minutes.

Addison makes a beeline right to the door, throwing her shoes on in record time and going out to wait on the porch. A fence blocks off the whole property and sits back a ways from the road, but I can’t help rushing to put my own shoes on, not liking her outside alone. Ruby sits on the porch with us, and we give him all the belly rubs until Vincent pulls up. Then, he takes himself to the door to be let in.

He’s the best-trained dog I’ve ever seen, and honestly, it kind of makes me sad I’d never had one growing up.

“Uncle Vinny!” Addison flies down the stairs and right into his arms, and he smiles as he grabs her.

“Hey Princess, where are we off to today?” Vincent asks her, but his eyes meet mine over her head.

“Mommy’s taking me to the mall!” she shouts, and I watch as his eyes go wide. I’m almost positive mine are the same right now, but neither of us corrects her, and she doesn’t even seem to realize what she did.

Vincent recovers before I do. “That sounds like a great time.” He moves back to the car, which for once isn’t the typical limo I’m used to him chauffeuring the Lawson’s around in. He opens the back door before letting her down, and she quickly scrambles inside, clearly used to this car as well. I, on the other hand, pause. I’d thought the limo was expensive, but even before I get in, I know this is more.

The seats have footrests that look like they recline!?! And the back doors open from the opposite side of a normal door.

I didn’t even know cars could have this many features.

“Kat,” he says to me with a nod as I meet him at the door to get in, and I’m not sure why, but I can feel my cheeks heat

under his gaze.

Fuck, who am I kidding? I know exactly why. He's a very handsome man, and being the center of his attention like this is almost intimidating.

I nod in return, murmuring a soft hello as I climb into the car. I hope he thinks my reaction is from Addy calling me Mom, and not him. I have more than enough crazy shit going on right now and more than enough men...I need to get it together.

"Did you have a specific mall in mind?" he asks as he slips back into the driver's seat and pulls away from the house.

Crap. It's a good question. I guess I really hadn't thought about that. In Maine, we only had one mall close enough to go to.

"Um, no. I've never been to any of them, so whatever one you think would be best would be great." Vincent nods, and I let out a small sigh of relief that he seems to know where to go.

Addison talks to Vincent and me about everything and nothing the whole way there, making it less awkward, and the drive seems over in no time.

"Call me if you need anything. I'll be out here when you're done." He holds the door open as we get out. Addison's jumping around, but I keep a good grip on her hand as I stop, not wanting her to slip away.

"That's not necessary. I have no idea how long it's going to take. I can just text you when we're done," I insist, feeling bad about the idea of him just sitting out here doing nothing for God knows how long.

He pushes the door closed before turning to face me with a smirk that somehow makes him look even better than he usually does.

What is with these men and their smiles?

"It's actually my job, so it's not a big deal. Oh, that reminds me." he reaches into his pocket and pulls something out,

holding it out and offering it to me.

I don't reach out to take it, unsure what it is.

"The boss said to give you this."

He opens his hand, and in his palm lays a credit card, but not just any credit card...it's a black card.

Instead of taking it, I take a step back, shaking my head. "Absolutely not."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Yeah, I told him you would probably say that, but he insisted."

His words catch me off guard, and for a moment, all I can do is look at him.

What does he mean he told him I would say that? How would he know?

"I don't care if he insists. I'm not taking that."

Without another word, I turn and head into the mall with Addison happily skipping beside me. Nathan already pays me more than enough. I don't need more of his money. Especially not when he's already paid me for my first three months to ensure I had everything I needed when I moved in.

We ended up spending a few hours at the mall. I get clothes that are less school teacher and more suitable for anywhere. Addison gets a few things, too, and we even get a pair of matching sundresses. We stop in a kids' play area for a few, and I let her burn off some of her energy before we grab a snack from the food court and head out.

Just like he said he'd be, Vincent is there waiting. He quickly exits the car before coming around to take the bags from me. I scowl at him, but if he notices, he ignores me, making his way to the trunk and dropping them in. Taking advantage of him being occupied, I move to the door and open it for Addison before I climb in and close it behind me.

When he slides in the driver's seat, he catches my eye in the rearview mirror and cocks a brow but doesn't say anything. I can't stop the smile that pulls at my lips, knowing I won this round.

We get back to the house, and Vincent, seemingly learning, lets us out first, ushering us toward the house, not letting me get near the trunk. Addison runs right to Ruby and starts telling him about her fun day with Mommy, and this time, it only makes me pause a moment.

“Hey, Cherry.” Alex’s arms come around my waist as he pulls me into his chest and drops his lips to my cheek, making me jump. I hadn’t realized he was home yet. “Just what I needed after a long day at the office,” he breathes the words against my neck, and I shiver.

“Uncle Alex!” I jump at the sound of Addison’s voice and try to move away, but Alex doesn’t let me go, instead pulling me closer.

I glare at him, but he seems unfazed as he simply moves me over a step and pulls her up into his arms. Addison launches into a step-by-step playback of our day at the mall and everything we did. And while Alex only has his arm around my waist, it still feels very intimate, especially with Addison in his arms.

I’m not sure if she doesn’t notice because she’s so immersed in her own story or if it just doesn’t phase her, but she doesn’t seem to care. I wish I could say the same; instead, I can feel how warm my cheeks are.

“Oh, matching dresses?” Alex asks, raising a brow before turning to me, and I roll my eyes. Of all the things she said, that’s, of course, the one thing he focused on.

“Yes! Do you want to see?” Addison exclaims, all but jumping out of his arms and running over to the bags to rummage through them before he can answer.

“I want to know what else you got,” Alex whispers in my ear, and my eyes widen, knowing exactly what he means.

“Alex,” I hiss, smacking his chest and darting my eyes back to Addison, who is thankfully still blissfully unaware.

“Trust me, she won’t hear a word I’m saying right now. Someone gave her an amazing day out, and it will be all she talks about all night,” he says with a laugh, dropping a kiss on

my head. It's such a sweet gesture, it's almost worse than when he's being overly touchy.

These men will be the death of me.

"All I did was take her to the mall," I tell him with a huff. He's acting as if I did something amazing.

"It was more than that to her."

Before I can say anything, my phone rings, pulling my attention from him.

Nobody ever really calls me. I don't give my number to many people, and most of the people who do have it live here and usually text.

Fishing my phone from my pocket, I see the school's number on the screen. Strange, I still have a few weeks of vacation before teachers have to report back, so what could they need?

I guess there's only one way to find out.

"Hello."

"Hello, Katherine, this is Barbara." Funny enough, I've never spoken to Barbara on the phone before, but I somehow recognize her voice just fine. Maybe it's the snotty, stuck-up tone, or maybe just the way she spit my name. "The headmaster wanted me to call and inform you that a few rooms had to be changed over the summer, one of which is yours."

She sounds bored, as if she'd rather be doing anything but calling me, and I can't say I don't feel the same. Of all the people in the building, she had to be the one to call me. Most people have been standoffish with me since I'd been talking to Nathan, but I'm pretty sure she actually hates me.

"We're going to need you to come in tomorrow and get everything sorted."

I stand almost in shock, unsure of what to say to that.

Tomorrow? Really? They couldn't give me more time than that?

“Um, I’ll have to see if I can...” I turn to look at Alex, unsure who I need to ask or what I should do. It’s my job to watch her. I could probably bring her with me.

“Well, if you can’t be here tomorrow, I can have the janitor handle it. This should be a priority over simple summer plans, Katherine.”

Bitch.

“I—I didn’t say it wasn’t a priority, but I have another job, and next day is very short notice,” I explain, trying very hard to keep my annoyance out of my voice despite her attitude.

She laughs, and it rings out loud enough that I have to pull the phone away from my ear with how loud it is.

“You’ll be there,” Alex growls, and I can’t help but smirk when Barbara all but chokes on her laugh.

“Yes,” she clears her throat, no longer sounding so amused. “Very good. Have a wonderful night.”

The line goes dead, and as much as I enjoyed hearing her get put in her place, I can’t help but worry about tomorrow.

“Alex...” I trail off, but I don’t need to explain. Apparently, he’s a mind reader now.

“I don’t need to go in for a whole day tomorrow,” he says with a shrug. “I’d hoped to steal you away for a little while, but I’m okay with waiting until bedtime, if it means shutting that bitch up.”

He looks like he wants to say more, his brows pinched in a way I’m not used to seeing. For the most part, he seems pretty laid back, ready to go with the flow, but not right now. The only other time I can remember him looking like this was the first night I met him when he and Desmond handled the asshole at the bar.

I hate to admit it, but damn, is it attractive. I have to bite my tongue against asking what else he thinks about her.

“Oh, you like that, huh?” he asks, dropping a kiss to my cheek and chuckling.

“What? No!” I say, a bit too loudly, making him laugh harder.

“Mommy!” Addison exclaims, and I turn to find her with our matching dresses clutched in her little fist and a huge grin on her face.

I’d never thought that a bit of fabric would make her so happy, but I can’t help but smile back.

“Mommy, huh,” he growls, pulling my back to his chest, and it’s impossible for me to miss the feel of him pressed against my back. “I quite like the sound of that.”

Oh, shit.

That shouldn’t be so hot, but at this rate, I’m going to have to do more than change my clothes when I put that dress on.

“Well, what are you girls standing around for? I’m waiting for my fashion show.”

Addison lets out a squeal of excitement before she runs to me, grabbing my hand to pull me behind her and up the stairs. Our laughter bounces off the walls as we rush up the stairs, and I feel Alex’s eyes on me the whole way.

I can’t remember the last time something so simple made me feel like this or when I was this happy, ever.



CHAPTER 23

By the time we changed and headed back downstairs, Alex wasn't the only one waiting for us. Addison had me braid her hair so that we matched in as many ways as we could. I didn't think it was possible, but I think she stole my heart even more.

Addison holds my hand as we walk down the stairs, a huge smile on her face. I hear voices, but the second we round the corner into the living room, everyone is quiet, and I almost stumble over my feet when five sets of eyes turn toward us.

Shit.

Oliver clears his throat, and it seems to do the trick.

"Daddy!!" Addison drops my hand before taking off toward Nathan, and Alex quickly takes that as a sign to fill her spot.

Addison does a twirl, showing him her dress as she tells him all about our day as his eyes continue to bore into me as if he could undress me if he just stares hard enough.

"Mommy and me have matching dresses and hair," she proclaims loudly, and I watch Nathan's face carefully as that word leaves her mouth.

I half expect him to be upset despite what he said the other day. I wouldn't blame him; honestly, we might have an agreement for sex, but I'm her nanny, and he doesn't really know me.

His eyes narrow, and I bite down on my lip, unsure what to do or say as I fight against the urge to look away.

“A Princess and a Queen.” Nathan’s voice is deep and husky, and while it could have been taken as a joke, his eyes tell me it’s anything but. “You both look beautiful, honey,” he says, bending down to scoop her up, as his eyes roam over me.

“We had the best day!”

“Next time, I’ll have to go with you two and make sure we get some more stuff. You guys only have like five bags,” Desmond says, raising a brow at my bags that still sit where I left them. I’d honestly forgotten about them when Addison pulled me upstairs.

Vincent barks a laugh, pulling their attention to him. I scrunch up my face, knowing what’s coming even before he says it.

“Good luck with that. She refused Nate’s card today. I doubt she’s going to let you buy her anything, either.”

Nathan’s jaw ticks at the news, and I give Vincent the stink eye, knowing I’m going to hear about that later.

Asshole couldn’t just keep that to himself.

“That’s...different,” Oliver says, almost more to himself than to us, but I hear him nonetheless. I’m not sure it was meant to be taken as a compliment, but considering I know the type of people who usually try to get close to them, I’m going to take it as one.

“We’ll see about that,” Desmond growls with a smile, and I get the feeling he’s going to take this as a personal challenge.

Crap.

Since we were gone, Dale had cooked dinner, and from Desmond’s reaction, I’m going to assume it’s one of his favorites. Just one bite is all it takes for me to see why.

“Oh, wow!” I hadn’t asked what it was because it looked and smelled delicious, so I really didn’t care. I’m not picky. The flavor is out of this world. The cheese, the BBQ chicken

and the crunch of the bread all go together so well that I'm sad I've never tried it before.

"So good, right?" Desmond says, winking at me before he takes another bite and fucking groans. He's eating, but my god, if I didn't know better, I'd have said he was fucking. It's the same damn noise he makes when he comes.

Dinner is mostly quiet, with everyone focused on eating rather than talking. While I might enjoy cooking, I can see how having a chef can be nice, too. It's a great way to try new things and a nice thing to have in your back pocket should the day get away from you like it did for me today.

After dinner, I excuse myself, grabbing my bags from the foyer and taking them upstairs to put away before showering. I'd made sure to pick up a few pairs of pajama pants as well, in case I ever needed to leave my room at night. They are baggy and super soft, making them perfect to slip over my boy shorts.

My phone vibrates on my bedside table, and I scoop it up to check it before I crawl into bed.

Could I see you for a moment in my office?

Dread washes over me as I once again worry he's going to fire me.

Stop it.

Could he fire me? Yes, of course. But honestly, if he didn't fire me for sleeping with his brother and son, I can't imagine he would have much of another reason, too.

Of course. I'll be right there.

Taking a deep breath, I pull on my pajama pants and thank the heavens I bought them before heading to his office. Even knowing he probably won't be firing me, I can't help but feel anxious, both because this feels formal and because of the last time I was here...which was the opposite of formal.

After a moment's hesitation, I knock, waiting for him to call out for me before I enter. Just like last time, he sits behind his desk, looking every bit the billionaire businessman he is, though this time, Alex is nowhere in sight.

Nobody is.

It's just me and him, and I'm not sure if that's better or worse.

With slow steps, I make my way to his desk. Unsure if I should sit or not, I decide to remain standing. He tracks my movement from the moment I open the door, and by the time I reach his desk, I'm fidgeting with no hope of stopping. I'm not used to being the center of attention. Hell, for a long time, I could hardly hold my own fiancé's attention. I'd always thought myself mundane and boring, nothing special or eye-catching.

But now...

Now I have not one but three men who look at me like I'm not only worth seeing, but like I'm the best damn thing they've ever seen. They could have their choice of women, yet somehow, they picked me. I'm not sure if it's because I'm here and available or not, but I'm not going to look too closely at it right now.

"Hello, my Queen," he purrs as a smirk curves his lips.

Oh, no. There is no way he can call me that, joke or not. His presence is enough to have me hot and bothered, but if he keeps calling me that, I'm going to walk around permanently wet.

"I wanted to talk to you about today at the mall," he says, suddenly serious again.

Damn it, Vincent.

"It's come to my attention that while we have talked about how we share and you have agreed to that, you seem to be unaware of what comes with this agreement."

He looks at me as if waiting for me to disagree, but I can't because I honestly have no idea.

“We’ll start with this.” He tosses something onto the desk that slides across, almost falling off before it stops right in front of me. “This is yours. It’s to be used when you take Addison out, when you’re hungry, when you buy clothes, or anything else you might need. Think of it as a business card.”

For all of two seconds, I’m ready to agree.

“Wait, my clothes aren’t a business expense.”

A smile curves his lips as he pushes up from his chair and makes his way around his desk to stand in front of me.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong.” He hooks his finger under my chin, craning my head up so that our eyes meet. “You agreed to let us share you, and that means you are ours, to spoil, to protect, to fuck...” he trails off, his eyes burning into mine as if waiting for me to disagree.

I want to. Fuck, I want to so badly, but I can’t bring myself to do it with him looking at me like that.

“You’re now my queen, and I have every intention of treating you as such. Addison will learn by example exactly how she should be treated.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat that feels as if it’s choking me as the need to argue with him presses me hard.

After a moment, he nods, seemingly happy with my silence. He lets my chin drop before scooping the card up from the desk to hold out for me to see.

It’s a black card, the same as the one Vincent offered me at the mall today, but with one major difference. It has my name on it.

“I assume you know what this is.”

I chuckle, shaking my head at his question. I might live under a rock, but who doesn’t know what a black card is? Everyone in movies has them, but from what I know, they’re a lot harder to get than the movies make it seem. Carter came from a wealthy family and was still denied one, much to his annoyance.

“Good, then I trust you understand the limit does not exist. If you want it, it’s yours.”

He tucks the card into my pajama pants pocket before reaching into his own to pull something else out.

“No!” I cringe as my voice comes out harsher than I’d intended. “No, thank you.” I try again, holding up my hands to stop him from giving me whatever that is as I take a step back.

His eyes narrow as he watches me, but he doesn’t let me get far before he reaches out, pulling me back to him.

He doesn’t say a word, and I don’t either, unsure what to say. I know he’s not Carter, even just our brief time together has shown me that. But for some reason, I can’t get past this feeling, this fear of being owned.

“Why?” he asks, his words impassive and his face unreadable, but I swear I see the hint of a spark in his eyes as he assesses me.

Licking my lips, I stand tall. He might be my boss, but that’s it. He doesn’t own me. He arches a brow at me, but I don’t have an answer, at least not a good one.

Instead, I drop my gaze to my feet.

“Katherine...”

I know what he wants, yet I can’t seem to do it. Shame turns my stomach, knowing he doesn’t deserve this. That he deserves better than me.

Once again, he lifts my chin, and the barest hint of a smile curves his lips.

He leans down until we’re only a breath away. I hardly dare to breathe as my heart beats at triple its usual speed.

“I’m not sure who he is or what he did to you, but I assure you when I give you something, it’s yours,” he says, his voice low but harsh, and I know he means it.

He isn’t Carter; I know that, but accepting things is a slippery slope.

I open my mouth, ready to insist, but he cocks a brow, and I swallow it down.

“A real man doesn’t need to own his woman with possessions and buy her affection. A real man owns his woman by being what they need, their support and love, even when things aren’t pretty.”

Nathan holds out the box, and I glance down at it, seeing the words *Tiffany & Co.* stamped across the top.

“I buy what I want, for who I want, because I want to. I suggest you get used to it.”

His fingers curl around my chin, tilting my head farther back as he leans impossibly closer. I worry I might pass out as all the oxygen rushes from my lungs. He’s so close, closer than I’ve ever been to him before. Nathaniel is harder to read than Alex and Desmond. He likes his privacy and seems more reserved, but right now, it’s as if he can’t get close enough.

“When I own you, there will be no question of if you want it or not. You will be mine, and I will be yours because real men know a woman’s pleasure makes our own sweeter.” His eyes search mine for a moment, and all I can do is look up at him like a deer in headlights. I’m trapped here, but I’m almost positive I don’t want to leave. It takes me a moment to process what he’s just said; my mind is a tangled mess from how this conversation just went from zero to one hundred so quickly.

I can’t keep the shock off my face as his words finally sink in, and I watch as his lips turn up in one of his rare smiles and know he was waiting for me to understand.

Did he just imply that we’re a thing, like a couple? No, there’s no way he meant it like that... But then again, what else could he have meant?

Well, honestly, there’s probably about one hundred other things he could have meant, but I don’t get to overthink it for long.

“That will be all. Have a good night, Katherine,” he says, dropping his hold on me and pulling himself up to his full height, brushing non-existent wrinkles from his suit jacket.

“I—I” I try to say something, but it’s as if he stole my ability to function properly when he trapped me in those icy eyes. Snapping my mouth closed, I drop my eyes to the floor as I feel my face heat with embarrassment.

“Take the necklace,” he says, holding the box to me.

With a shaky hand, I reach out, my fingers closing around the box as I take it before quickly turning to leave.

I’ve embarrassed myself enough for one night. I need to get out of here before I do something stupid like open my mouth and demand he tell me if that’s what he meant or not.

That would be bad.

“I had it made just for you,” he says, as my fingers close around the doorknob, and I freeze.

This man is going to be the death of me.

I leave and hurry back to my room, not wanting to run into anyone else. I’ve had more than enough attention for the night. It’s not until I make it back into my room, the door closed and locked behind me, that I feel as though I can breathe again.

I told myself I would never be at the mercy of a man again after Carter, and while I still don’t want that, I can’t help but feel like this isn’t the same. But honestly, I’m not sure I can trust my judgment right now. Am I thinking with my brain, or is it clouded by their sexy as fuck bodies and the way they undo me?

No, that’s not fair.

I know they’re different. They’ve done nothing but prove that since I met them. Alex and Desmond were gentlemen at the club when we met, and they made sure I wanted them before we did anything. The misunderstanding the next morning was completely on me, and even that, they took in stride.

Nathan was a gentleman, too. He offered me a job and a place to stay because of my relationship with Addison, and while he didn’t have to, he came to my rescue when I had nobody else to call.

The box weighs heavily in my hand as I make my way back to my bed, and I realize I've yet to open it.

I have no idea what's inside.

It's a beautiful blue color with a white bow. With a simple tug, the ribbon comes free, and I pull the top from the bottom easily.

Oh my god...

I stand beside the bed with the box sitting on it as I stare at the piece of jewelry inside of it.

I should *not* have taken this. His comment about having it custom-made was a red flag all by itself, but somehow, I hadn't expected this. I don't know a lot about jewelry. I've had a few expensive pieces from Carter that I was supposed to wear when we went out, but I'd left all that behind. I get the feeling I could have brought it all, and it wouldn't be half the cost of this necklace because one thing I do know is Nathan doesn't do anything in halves.

This most likely means that the red gems in this necklace are rubies, and I highly doubt they're fake.

It's made of rose gold links, the rubies evenly spaced along and held in round rose gold settings.

I stare at it for way too long, debating bringing it back to him or not, but I know he won't take it. Finally, I give in and accept that I've taken it, so now it's mine, and make my way to the bathroom to admire it.

My fingers shake as I attempt to fasten the clasp, and after a few tries, I manage to get it on. The red gems catch the light beautifully. It's elegant and eye-catching and takes my breath away.

Nathan's words ring through my head as I let my fingers trail over the cool gems that rest on my throat.

'When I own you, there will be no question of if you want it or not. You will be mine.'

If only he knew how much that was already true, and not just with him.



CHAPTER 24

I've been on cloud nine for the last few days, but after last night, I feel like I'm damn near untouchable.

I'd wanted to be upset about her disappearing act, but I couldn't bring myself to be, especially not when she explained it. Hell, I couldn't even really be mad at Alex; it had just been shitty timing.

Besides, how could I be mad at him when he pushed Dad to close the deal faster than he planned? No, Alex might have been part of the mixup, but he fixed it, and now we have all the time in the world to make up for what we lost.

Last night had only been the beginning, but I need to have a conversation with good ol' Dad about it. I know he's a little more intimidating with everything, and he probably doesn't want to scare her, but Kat isn't stupid, and she's noticed his absence.

It's late, probably after midnight now. I'd made sure to wait so that I could get him alone, yet somehow when I walk into his office, he's still not alone.

I swear this man is going to work himself into an early grave...or maybe not.

Vincent sits in the chair across from him. That doesn't mean he's not talking business, but more often than not when those

two are together lately, it has something to do with a beautiful little redhead.

Neither of them so much as glances up at me, but I'm used to it, the same way they're more than used to me. I don't have anything else to do though, and what I need to talk about is on the same topic, so I drop into the chair next to Vince and wait.

"We went over it. If nothing is reported missing, it appears as if it might have just been chance," Vince says, and my father scowls. I'd heard them say Kat's name when I walked in, and I guess I assumed the conversation would be lighter. Judging by the deep frown of my father's brows, I'd been mistaken.

"We both know that's a load of shit, Vince." He doesn't yell, but he doesn't have to. Growing up, my father never yelled, but that didn't make him less scary or serious. No, sometimes I wish he would have yelled instead.

"I know that, and you know that. Nobody goes up to the fourteenth floor to trash an apartment for no reason," Vince agrees, pinching the bridge of his nose. "But unless we find something else, that's what it looks like. Whoever did this *wanted* it to look like that, and they did a damn good job."

Father presses his lips together before turning back to his computer, and I watch his eyes dart across the screen.

"She's from Maine, born and raised there, just like her parents. She attended a local high school where she dated a Carter Wilmont. The two were high school sweethearts and, from the looks of it, stayed together until college, where they got engaged."

"What?" I'm out of my chair and slamming my hands on the desk before I can even register moving.

"Sit down and listen, boy," Vince says with a swift tug on my shirt that lands my ass right back in the chair.

My father might be scary, but Vincent is like a second father to me, and he doesn't play around. He's usually pretty laid back around here, but once you know what he can do, well, let's just say I'd rather stay on his good side. I know he

wouldn't hurt me. He's my godfather and my father's oldest friend, but still, I do as he says.

"As I was saying. Kat and Carter got engaged, but there's no news of a wedding, and from what Vince was able to find, it looks like something happened. At the end of last year, all of Kat's social media accounts went quiet or were deleted, and she got a new number. Not long after, Carter started being seen with a new girl, but she didn't last long either, and by now, it's been a handful of women."

"End of last year. Christmas?" I ask as the pieces start to align in my head.

I'd wondered that night why she would be alone for the holiday. Why come out to New York alone then, of all times? Most people want to spend Christmas with their family and loved ones.

"He cheated on her..." It's not a question, not really, but I look to both of them to see their opinions, regardless.

They weren't there in the club with us that night, but suddenly everything fits. Why she was there alone, the way she was dodging guys' advances, and her hesitation on giving us any real information about her.

It also explains why she had such a strong reaction to seeing Alex with a little girl, especially when she thought her nanny might be much more than that.

"The little prick didn't deserve her anyway," Vince says as if that matters.

He's right; he didn't, but that doesn't stop the rage from filling me at the thought. Kat is amazing. Fuck, she's so damn perfect for us. How could anyone let her slip through their fingers, but even more than that, how could they hurt her?

"That fucking piece of shit. What the fuck is wrong with him?"

"Enough." My father stands up, and while he might fool the rest of the world, he isn't fooling us. No, I can see the way he's silently seething about this information. He knows as well as I do that Kat doesn't deserve that.

“His loss is our gain. One I don’t intend to waste.”

I can’t help but smile at his words because, damn right, we won’t waste it. That asshole let the best thing to ever happen to him slip away, but we know better.

“I think you and the boys need to take a trip this weekend and see what it is we’re dealing with.”

“You think her ex has something to do with this?” Vince asks, and I swear I can see the wheels turning in their heads.

“I don’t know for sure, but it doesn’t hurt to check. Besides, I can’t imagine he was happy to lose her, even if he did deserve it. They were a mess after one night with her, and obsession has a way of making people crazy.”

I don’t bother denying his words. There’s no point when it’s true. Alex and I had searched high and low for her after one fantastic night. There’s no telling what a desperate man might do when pushed.

“We can head out this weekend.” Vince stands, and my father nods, though I get the feeling he wishes it was sooner. We both know this kind of thing takes time to plan, especially with the girls here and the business.

“I’m coming with you.” Neither of them bats an eye when I invite myself, but like I said, they’re both more than used to me. Vince might be scary to anyone who knows what he’s capable of, but I didn’t get my reputation purely because of my tattoos and motorcycle.

I’m known to have a bit of a temper, and I get the feeling Carter’s face might be just what I need to get some anger out.



CHAPTER 25

Even though Alex offered to watch Addison so I could handle my classroom, I feel bad. With their company, the club, and whatever else they might do, I feel like he could probably have a more productive day if he wasn't stuck doing the job they hired me for.

That is until I walk downstairs and find Alex and Addison in an absolute mess of ingredients at the kitchen counter.

"Oh my," I can't help but laugh at the state of them. I try to cover it up with a cough, but I don't think Alex is buying it. "What happened here?"

"We're making French Toast!" Addison exclaims, bouncing around, and I swear cinnamon flies off of her like fairy dust.

"Cooking is apparently the Princess' new favorite pastime, thanks to someone." Alex raises a brow at me, and it only makes me laugh harder. "She wanted to make breakfast, and of course, I couldn't tell her no. Though it does seem a bit unfortunate that neither of us knows what we're doing."

Despite how adorable they are like this, I decide to take pity on him. Moving around the counter to better see what they have to work with, I quickly help them whip up a mixture for the bread and show them how to dip it and place it on the griddle.

“Mommy saved the day!” Addison claps in excitement as she dips the next piece of bread, and I smile down at her.

“Yes, you’ve saved my reputation. Remind me to thank you later, Cherry.” Alex’s voice is deep and husky as he pulls me back into his chest so that I can feel his hard length. I have no doubt about what he means by that.

Clearing my throat, I move out of his arms and tuck a piece of stray hair behind my ear, nervously fidgeting.

“Maybe we should spend some time in the kitchen so you can learn, too. That way, you won’t need saving.” I half expect him to laugh and wave my comment off. After all, they have a chef. What do they need to learn to cook for?

He does laugh, but he nods while he does it, catching me off guard. “You’re probably right. Besides, if we make a mess, I wouldn’t mind cleaning you up.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me suggestively, and I roll my eyes.

I swear I’ll never get used to the way he and Desmond make everything sexual.

“Ready when you are, Kat.” I almost jump out of my skin at the sound of Vincent’s voice behind me. He hadn’t been here when I came down, and with a man his size, I feel like he shouldn’t be able to sneak up on people so easily.

I blame it on Alex distracting me and quickly wash my hands before dropping a kiss to the top of Addison’s head. Alex, of course, doesn’t let me leave without also kissing him, and despite my concern with PDA in front of Addison, she doesn’t seem to notice or care.



Moving rooms sounded simple enough, but it ended up taking the better part of the day. The room I’ll be taking over used to be for a higher grade, and as such, I have a lot to move around and change so that it will fit my students. I hadn’t even realized how much stuff I had until it was time to move it all. Every wall decoration, supply, and even the desks need to be swapped out. Thankfully, the janitor is going to handle the

desks and the large carpet. He gave me a roll of painter's tape and told me to mark where I wanted everything for him to handle later this week.

The room, while bigger than my old one, isn't exactly better, but after a while I get it to a point where I'm happy with it, mostly. Anything else will be left to finish after the janitor moves everything around.

I quickly go to the bathroom and clean up. The room had been dusty and kind of gross, and I don't want to sit in the car like that, even if I still needed to shower when I got home.

Desmond is already home for the day and has been messaging me just about nonstop about anything and everything he can. From pictures of Addison and Alex on the playground to him dripping wet in the pool, with his trunks sitting super low on his hips. I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a great motivator for me to call it quits for the day.

Walking back into the room, I stop in my tracks when I come face to face with a huge bouquet that sits on my desk.

Those were not there before...there's no way I missed them.

There's nobody here. I look around to make sure, but it's not like there's anywhere to hide. Nope, it's just me. The only person I'd seen while here this whole time was the janitor, and somehow, I doubt he left them.

The flowers are a beautiful mix of lilies, roses, daisies, and a few other things I have no idea the names of, but they're no less beautiful. They're all shades of pink and light purple with white mixed in, and as I get closer, I can smell how fresh they are.

I've only received flowers a few times in my life, and they were mostly for events like graduation, never just because.

A smile tugs at my lips as I reach them, leaning in to really breathe them in. They have to be from one of the guys, maybe Alex? Or it could be Desmond. Nathan had just given me a necklace last night, so I don't think it would be him, but honestly, it could be, especially after the way he talked about spoiling me.

The edge of a note sticks out, just barely visible through the flowers. I snatch it out, excited to see who it was. I'll have to make sure I thank them properly later.

*Always on my mind,
I saw these and knew I had to get them for you.
I know we've been apart for a while,
but don't worry,
soon we'll be together again.
You were made for me.
Mine.
Until then,
xoxo*

There's no name, but I don't need one to know who sent these.

My hand trembles, and the card slips through my fingers, slowly floating down to the ground. I make no move to retrieve it. In fact, I don't move at all as panic floods my veins.

This can't be happening.

He cheated on me. I left him and that whole life behind. He's free to be with whoever he wants, so long as it's not me...so why would he be reaching out? Why wait so long?

My mind races. The possibilities are endless, but despite the reason, regardless of what it is, there's no denying this is Carter.

I leave the flowers, the sweet smell now turning my stomach. I quickly lock up my class and make my way outside. I'd originally told Vincent I'd message him when I was done, so he didn't have to sit and wait on me. But just like at the mall, he'd insisted and as I make my way outside, I find him seated in the car right where I left him, and I can't help but feel a sense of relief.

The last thing I want right now is to be alone.

I make my way down the front stairs and across the faculty lot to the limo without so much as giving Vincent a chance to

start it. I probably look a little crazy right now, but I can't bring myself to care. I just need to get away from here.

"Kat?" The question in Vincent's voice is clear, but I ignore it.

"Hey, Vincent. I'm all done for the day. We can head back now. Thanks." I say in a rush, despite trying not to draw attention to myself.

They're just flowers.

He's not here.

I tell myself over and over, and while it does make me feel a bit better, it's not a cure-all. Just because he's not here now doesn't mean he won't be.

I feel Vincent's eyes on me in the mirror. I don't want to look at him, for him to get a glimpse of the panic that's damn near eating me alive right now. But something tells me we won't be going anywhere as it is right now.

I tilt my head up until our eyes meet and force a smile to my lips. It feels fake on my face, and judging from the way his lips pull down, he thinks the same. I expect him to push, demand answers, and maybe even go back into the school.

Instead, he holds my gaze for a moment before he looks away. The car hums to life, and I can't help but let out a sigh of relief when we pull out of the lot.

Neither of us talks the whole ride back to the house. I try to use the time in silence to get a hold of myself.

By the time we pull up to the gates, I've almost convinced myself I imagined it...almost but not quite. It would be easier if the fresh scent of the flowers wasn't clinging to me like a bad smell, choking me with every breath.

I need to take a shower and get my mind on something else, anything else.

The second Vincent pulls up in front of the house, I'm out the door and up the stairs. It's not until I reach the house that I realize how rude I must seem to him right now.

Crap, Vincent doesn't deserve that.

Pausing for a moment, I find him standing outside the driver's side door, watching me. I shout back my thanks for the ride, and after a moment, he gives me a nod. It's not perfect, and I'm not sure he doesn't hate me now, but at least it's something.

The house is quiet when I enter, which is odd, considering I know Alex and Addison are here, but I don't give myself time to dwell on it. Taking advantage of it, I make my way up to my room for a shower.

I just need to get the smell to go away so I can think clearly.

Throwing the water on, I hastily pull off my clothes before stepping in. I'd been so eager to get in the shower that I hadn't adjusted the temperature correctly. The cold water hits my back, and I let out a hiss but make myself stay where I am, hoping it will help clear my mind.

It doesn't do as much as I'd hoped, but by the time I'm done, I can at least breathe easier, kind of.

I need to distract myself, and the best way I know to do that is to go find Addison. Throwing on a sundress, I make my way downstairs. This time, I can hear her voice as it bounces off the walls.

"Hey, Kitten." I'd been so lost in my thoughts that Desmond scares the shit out of me. With a squeak of surprise, I reach out to grab the banister before I can tumble down the stairs face first.

"Damn, sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Desmond says, reaching out to steady me, and I shake my head.

It's not his fault I'm so on edge right now. I'm already a jumpy person, as is, and that's without knowing someone's watching me.

"No, it's my fault I wasn't paying attention," I assure him, attempting to plaster a smile on my face and failing.

Desmond stands looking me over for a moment, and I nervously shift my weight from one foot to the other under his

gaze. Normally, having his eyes on me is exciting, but right now, it's terrifying. He, Alex, and Nathan read me so well that I can almost guarantee I won't be getting away with keeping quiet.

"Katherine, what's wrong?" My head snaps up at the sound of my full name from his lips. It'd been a while since he called me Kat, let alone Katherine. Instead, they all seem to enjoy their nicknames. Even Nathan has one now.

"Mommy!" Addison's voice rings out around the room a second before she slams into me, almost taking us both to the ground.

"Hey honey," I say, soothing her hair back when she looks up at me. "Did you have a good day with Uncle Alex?" I ask because they seemed to be enjoying themselves this morning, but it also seems like a fantastic distraction right now.

"Woah, Princess, when did you get so damn fast?" Alex asks as he jogs around the corner, huffing and puffing dramatically.

"Oh! You said a bad word!" Addison says, turning to point an accusing finger at Alex, who chuckles. I've yet to see the swear jar they have for ice cream, but I have a feeling it's got to be huge with their mouths.

Funny enough, it's even worse when she's not around. It's not as if they aren't trying, and it's adorable.

Bending down, I scoop Addison up and pull her close. She melts into my hug, and honestly, I needed this; I needed a moment to breathe.

"What do you say we give Uncle Alex a break this time?" I say, pulling back to meet her eyes. "I'm pretty sure he's just jealous you're so much faster than him now because he's so old."

Addison's eyes go wide before she breaks out into a fit of giggles, and I swear it's the most contagious thing in the whole world. I'm not sure who could possibly hear her laugh and keep a straight face.

I hear Desmond chuckle behind me, and when I meet Alex's gaze over Addison's head, I find him glaring at me, but his eyes tell me he's not really mad.

"Old, huh?" Alex asks, stalking toward us with his eyes narrowed, and Addison begins to squirm in my hold, no doubt knowing exactly what's coming.

Alex gets a few steps away before he lunges forward, and Addison's scream rings out on the high ceilings as he tickles her without mercy.

"Mommy said it!" she cries, panting and fighting for air between giggles, and Alex pauses.

"She did, didn't she?" he asks, turning his gaze to me, and I can't help but take a step back. Addison giggles before all but pushing out of my arms, and I regrettably let her down.

There goes my shield.

"Alex." I hold my hands up, trying to keep him from attacking me the way he had Addison. I don't make it far, though, before I run into a solid form behind me, and I know without looking, it's Desmond. Of course, he would help him.

"Cheater," I hiss at him over my shoulder, unwilling to look away from Alex.

"Call it what you want, Kitten. I enjoy seeing you smile. Sue me."

Addison stands to my right, a huge smile on her face as her eyes volley back and forth between me and Alex, and I know I have one of two choices.

I stand here and let Alex tickle me like I'm a child, or I run.

Can I escape him? Probably not. But it sounds better than standing here and taking it.

Without giving myself another second to think about it, I take off. For just one glorious second, I get to see the look of shock on his face before he's behind me, and I need to pay attention to where I'm going.

I run, skidding into the dining room, thankful I'd skipped socks. In socks, I have no doubt I would have flown across this floor with how polished it is. Taking a sharp left, I run through the kitchen and right to the sliding glass door that leads to the deck. It takes me longer than it should to pull the door open, and I can hear Alex's heavy steps as he closes in on me. Before I can panic too much, the door finally opens, and I burst out of it like my ass is on fire.

Or, you know, like there's a man chasing me to try to tickle me.

"You should know I enjoy a good chase, Cherry," Alex yells, and I dare glance back to find him still at the deck. He's not far behind, but it also doesn't look like he's taking this very seriously, yet. I might have said Alex was old, but I have no doubt he could catch me if he wanted to. He's in great shape, and I've seen his stamina firsthand. "But not as much as I'll enjoy catching you."

His words sound innocent enough, but I know better. With Alex and Desmond, everything has a double meaning, a dirty meaning.

Ruby barks and runs near my feet, mistaking my running for playing with her, and I almost wipe out.

"Go get Alex Ruby!" I pant, pointing him back toward Alex, making a mental note to get him a special treat when he changes direction.

"Run, Mommy!" Addison's little shout rings out around the yard, and I dart my gaze to the second sliding glass door further down the house near the play structure. Des and her stand just outside the door, watching us with smiles on their faces as Addison cheers me on, and I swear my cheeks hurt from smiling.

"Sending the dog after me was cheap, Cherry," Alex tsks, and I startle at how close his voice is.

When the hell did he get so close?

Not giving myself enough time to overthink, I turn toward Des and Addy and take full advantage of the door they left

open.

I run in so fast I almost topple over the back of the couch. I don't know every bit of the house one hundred percent yet, and while I've been in this room, I don't spend much time in here.

Tripping over myself, I manage to keep myself upright and get back out into the foyer before I dare glance back, only to watch Alex leap the couch as if it's nothing.

Fuck.

Note to self: Alex isn't old.

And I might not mind being chased, either. I realize as his eyes meet mine, and I feel my blood heat.

I know for a fact he's going to catch me, and I should probably just give up and beg for mercy. Before I can, a strong arm bands around my waist, spinning me around as my feet come off the ground, and I come face to face with Vince.

"Apologies, Kat, but I don't think you would have appreciated running into me," he says as I look up at him, and I swear I see a hint of mischief in his eyes.

He's not wrong, though. If I'd run into him, I would have been on my ass for sure. Not to mention, I might have actually hurt myself. The guy is built. I probably would have been better off hitting the wall if I'm being honest.

"Ugh, no. I, um..." I struggle to get words out, taken by surprise by his presence and by how close we are right now.

His lips ticks up in a smirk as he sets me back on the ground before taking a step back, and I furrow my brows in confusion.

I thought Vince left...

"Daddy!" Addison yells, and I turn to find Nathan a few feet away, his eyes on me and Vince until the last moment when he scoops Addison up.

"I thought you were going to be at the office late today?" Alex asks from behind me, and I turn to find him leaning

against the banister, the picture of ease. He winks at me, but other than that, you wouldn't know he just damn near chased me through the whole house.

Well, I guess the whole house is an exaggeration. There's a lot of house here, after all.

"I intended to be, but Vince said there was an issue." Nathan's words have me turning back to him in confusion.

What issue?

"Princess, why don't you go and find Oli and see what we're doing for dinner tonight?" He sets her down, and she quickly runs up the stairs in search of her cousin.

"What issue?" Alex asks, sounding as lost as I feel, and I'm grateful I'm not the only one.

I take a step back away from Vince and toward the stairs myself, feeling as if I shouldn't be here. Whatever it is they're talking about, I'm sure it's none of my business.

"Katherine."

Four sets of eyes turn toward me, and suddenly, I wish I'd left with Addison. Even Oliver's cold shoulder would be better than this because I have a very good idea of what the issue might be.

I whip back to face Vince, and despite his blank expression, I'd bet my paycheck he had more than a little something to do with this.

"I knew something was wrong earlier," Desmond says, and I look down at the floor.

He had realized, and I have no doubt Alex and Nathan would have as well, given the chance. Addison had been a wonderful distraction, but with her gone, I can feel the weight in my stomach thinking about going back to that school, back in my classroom. The idea of Carter being there when I was in the bathroom, or even someone else, of being watched.

But what are they going to do?

I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to sound pathetic. For them to know Carter cheated on me. It's stupid, but I'm almost afraid admitting it out loud will somehow clue them in that I'm not worth what they seem to think I am.

"I..." I'm not sure what to say, and I bite into my lip, trying to think and keep hold of my emotions.

It's not just about me, though. If someone is watching me, I need to tell them. They need to know I might not be the best bet for Addison. I might not be able to keep her safe.

"Someone left something in my classroom today," I mumble, wringing my hands together nervously.

"Something like what?" Nathan asks, and I can hear the hit of edge to his tone, but I can't bring myself to look up at him.

"Flowers..." Panic threatens to choke me as I remember the tiny piece of paper nestled in the flowers. How I'd thought they were beautiful before and how those tiny words had ruined them. "And a note."

My voice doesn't sound like my own. So quiet and unsure. In the last few months, I'd done a lot of growing, and my confidence, while still shaky at times, is much better than it was when I was with Carter.

So how does just the thought of him have me cowering again?

I don't realize my breathing is ragged until Desmond is in front of me, trying to calm me down.

It works, kind of.

"Breathe, Kitten, it's okay. Whatever is going on, we can figure this out. Together."

He pulls me into his chest, holding me close, and I can't stop the sob that works its way out of my mouth, knowing he means that. Or at least he thinks he does. I've never had anyone so wholly in my corner before, not even my parents, and I'd only known these men for a short time.

Let's hope he still feels that way after...

A stylized, grayscale graphic of a city skyline, featuring several prominent skyscrapers. The word "NATHANIEL" is superimposed in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the skyline. The letters have a slightly distressed or ink-like texture.

NATHANIEL

CHAPTER 26

I didn't want to be right.

Honestly, everything would have been a lot easier if this had been a random occurrence. But it didn't feel random; something about it felt off, and things just didn't add up.

Now they do.

I'd thought nothing of Vince waiting until this weekend, but that was out of the question now. No, someone was harassing Kat at her job, making her feel unsafe. And it wasn't just some nobody we could handle, but her piece of shit ex-fiancé who's supposed to be states away.

He, or someone he sent, broke into her apartment and then left flowers at her job with a note that left her shaken. We hadn't told her, but Vince went back to the school after he dropped her off. It was easy to tell something was wrong. He said she hardly said two words on the way home, so it didn't take a genius to connect the two.

At first, the flowers seemed like an average arrangement one might buy from any shop. While the words on the card were unsettling, they were nothing compared to what Vince found wrapped up inside them.

A pair of pink lacy underwear.

It was disgusting and sent Desmond into a fit of rage, and while I understood his anger, it also gave us answers.

The break-in wasn't a random occurrence; it had been planned in the same way as the flowers.

Which only meant one thing.

It was time for Carter to learn who he was dealing with. He'd had his chance with Kat, and he'd ruined it. She's ours now, and I'll have Vince put a bullet between his eyes before I let him try to change that.

After dinner, Alex and Desmond said their goodbyes with the pretense of going away for a few days for business. They had been upset when she told them about Carter earlier, but it was nothing compared to when we told them about the flowers, underwear, and the connection to the break-in at her apartment.

Alex was torn at first. He wanted to stay, but he also wanted to go meet the piece of shit for himself. In the end, he decided to go—a decision I can't say I mind. I'd already pushed everything off at the office until next week, and with them being gone, that would leave me with some one-on-one time with Kat.

Well, mostly.

Oliver would be staying behind as well, but despite the fact that he clearly enjoys her company, I have no doubt he will spend most of his time hiding away. It's only a matter of time before he comes around, I'm sure, but I don't want to leave Kat after everything that she's been through recently. It's all too clear she's shaken by it, even if she's trying to hide it.

This might be the perfect time to see how she does and how she handles what I want from her. Alex and Desmond have both made it clear that my distance from her is confusing her, and I don't want that. I'd hoped to stay away and give her time to adjust, but it seems that had been the wrong choice.

Time with her will give me the opportunity to correct my mistake because that's the only option now.

There's no going back.



CHAPTER 27

The club isn't bad. Honestly, if we had happened across it while on a business trip, I'd probably be pleasantly surprised by it. Unfortunately, that's not why we're here. No, we're here to deal with a problem, one that has everything leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

We've been all over the place on business, different states and even different countries, and while I've been to Maine a few times, I've never been here. A few months ago, I would have been thrilled to scope this place out. They have a wide variety of things to do, from golf to tennis, and while that might not be my thing, the drinks are strong, and there are pretty ladies everywhere.

Too bad none of them are my Cherry.

I drain the rest of my drink, slamming my cup down on the table in annoyance.

"You know you didn't have to come," Vince says with a chuckle. I glare at him, but it only makes him laugh harder.

Asshole.

He's lucky he's Nate's oldest friend and damn near like a brother to me, or he would have lost his job a long time ago.

As it is, he's right. I didn't have to come, and I almost didn't. I could have easily stayed behind and let Desmond and

him look into Kat's asshole ex. Hell, I almost had, but in the end, I'd needed to see this guy.

I'm not sure if I want to hit him for hurting her or thank him for it. If he'd never broken her heart, she wouldn't have ended up in New York or at our club that night. This agreement with Kat might be new, but I can assure you it's going to last. I'll make sure of it. I've never felt this way with anyone else, and it's not just me.

Fuck, even Oliver is taken by her, and he's never really cared to participate in sharing, especially not after what happened with Natasha.

Alright, so I'll thank him and beat his ass. Both seem appropriate for the situation.

Although, based on the death grip Desmond has on his glass, I might not get the chance to do either before he gets to him.

I open my mouth to ask Vince if he's sure we're in the right place for the third time, but before I can, some loud asshole cuts me off.

"Hey, beautiful, how about another round?"

I don't even need to look to know this guy's a prick, but I do anyway. All three of us turn, and I shit you not, this guy looks like a Ken doll. Not a hair out of place, his skin even looks like plastic.

What the hell did Cherry see in this guy?

"Of course, Mr. Wilmont." The girl says, ducking her head and quickly walking to the bar. In no time at all, she returns, passing around beers to not just him but his five friends as well.

"Gross," Desmond says, pulling a face as Carter very openly runs the back of his hand up the server's leg.

I agree it's gross and not at all acceptable. Judging by the way the girl goes stiff, I'd go as far as to say it isn't welcomed, either.

“Here we go.” I can hear the smile on Vince’s lips, and a second later, the scrape of Desmond’s chair legs against the stone ground lets me know just how right he is.

“Hey!”

All six of the guys turn our way as Desmond makes his way around our table toward them. They look him up and down, some with disgust and others with confusion, but not a single one of them appears to recognize him.

Fantastic.

“How about we keep our hands to ourselves?” Des raises a brow, nodding down to where Carter’s fingers still rest on the server’s thigh.

One of the guys at the table laughs before pushing to stand. He’s got a few inches on Desmond, and it looks like he might be one of those assholes who lives at the gym and is itching for a fight.

What does the new generation call them again?

“How about you mind your own damn business?” he spits, his lips curling in disgust.

Oh, right. A gym bro, yeah, that’s definitely what this guy is.

“I like to make things my business when assholes take advantage of people. Especially people who can’t defend themselves.” Desmond keeps his voice even, but I can see the tic in his jaw. I know how bad he’s itching for a fight, and funny enough, it’s not with the asshole he’s talking to. Though I’m sure he wouldn’t mind knocking him around a bit, too.

“Fellas,” Carter stands, lifting his hands to try and pacify the two currently staring daggers at one another. All he actually succeeds in doing is giving the poor girl a chance to slip away and turning Desmond’s hate-filled eyes to him. “I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot here.”

Carter takes a moment to look each of us over, and I see the recognition in his eyes.

Smart.

“What do you say? Come, pull up a chair and let me buy you a round, and we can all get better acquainted,” he offers with a smile that I’m sure usually has people eating out of the palm of his hand.

Too bad for him, I helped raise Desmond and now Addison, and he doesn’t have shit on either of them.

Before Desmond can tell him to shove his invitation up his ass, like I know he wants to, I decide to step in. Not that this isn’t fun and all, but I’ve seen enough of Carter’s face already.

Besides, the faster we handle business here, the faster we get to go home back to Kat, and that’s really why we’re here. To give Kat peace of mind and ensure this kind of thing doesn’t happen ever again.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time for that, as we do have business to attend to.” Desmond turns his glare to me, but I ignore him. I know the only thing that’s going to help his attitude right now, and while I can’t give him that, I can give him the next best thing.

“A shame, well next time—”

“There won’t be a next time.”

“Excuse me?” Carter’s eyes narrow, and the easy smile he’s held in place this whole time finally slips.

Yes, I know assholes like him. I’ve been around them for years now, the type of man who measures his success based on how far his reach is. He seems nice enough, so long as you can further his success or agenda.

“Yes, I know how rude of me for not explaining.” Pushing up from the table, I make my way to stand next to Desmond, who, thankfully, has managed to hold back so far.

“You see, your behavior with the staff is unacceptable, and as such, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Nobody says a word, but I see his eyes narrow, and I know I’m close to seeing the real Carter.

“Do you know who I am?” He asks, and his friendly tone from only a moment ago is gone.

I'd pretend I'm shocked, but not as shocked as he's about to be.

Walking around the table, I slowly approach him from his left while Vince moves around the table to the right, and Desmond stays where he is at the head of it.

“Actually, I do.”

One of his friends stands, looking at me as if I'd somehow offended him. Before he can get further, Carter waves him off, and once again, I get a glimpse of who he really is.

I'd bet these men aren't so much his friends and, more likely, his muscle, probably hired. But that's okay, I came prepared.

“You're Carter Wilmont, twenty-seven years old. You went to Deering High School and graduated from Bowdoin College. You're the only child of Marge and Robert, and you have a small penis.”

His face goes red at my last comment, and he balls his hands into fists, no doubt wanting to hit me, but his buddy to his right cracks a smile, and I take that as a win. I don't actually know if it's true. It's not as if I asked Kat, nor do I really care, but with guys like him, his pride is the best place to hit him, and that certainly seems to have done the trick.

“Whoopie shit, you can use Google. Every stalker can do that,” Carter snaps, trying to make light of what I said. He's right; most of that probably could be found in a basic search, but I can tell it's shaken him. “So why don't you take your stalker ass and get lost before I call the police?”

“Oh, that won't be necessary. Vincent here would be happy to escort you out.” I gesture to Vince, who still stands opposite me, and Carter follows my movement, looking him up and down. He can act as hard as he wants, but I know the kind of picture Vince paints, and it's not a nice happy one, at least not for him it won't be.

“I'm not the one who needs to leave,” Carter seethes, moving away from the table and stomping toward me.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. We don’t tolerate your kind of behavior here. Our staff has the right to feel safe while working, and it’s our job to ensure scum like you don’t push yourself on them despite the status you seem to believe you have.”

That’s the final straw.

Carter lunges for me, his hand closing around my collar as he pulls me close to him in an attempt to intimidate me, but all I can do is smile.

“Listen here. I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but you can’t just come in here with your expensive suits and tattoos and expect me to listen to you. This city is fine just the way it is, and we don’t need the likes of you trying to stick your nose in shit you don’t know the first thing about. My parents donate a lot to this club, and I’d hate to have to call the owner to have you thrown out, but I will if I have to.”

Reaching down, I carefully unwrap his fingers from around my shirt but remain where I am.

“My apologies. How rude of me. My name is Alex Lawson, and this is my nephew Desmond.”

“Oh, shit...” one of his buddies murmurs, but I don’t look up to see which, ensuring Carter has my full attention.

“As of two hours ago, this country club is now under new ownership.”

Vince is ready the second I turn to him, more than happy to take care of this pompous asshole. He’s always been our muscle, but something feels different this time. Is he so eager to help because he knows what Kat means to us, or just because of Kat herself?

I don’t have the time to dwell on the thought right now, and frankly, I’m not sure I want to.

“Vincent is going to show you and your friends out, and from this moment on, none of you are welcome back.” Vince moves toward the table, and despite how big and tough Carter’s friends try to appear, they’re quick to fall in line.

Carter does not.

Vincent reaches out to provide Carter with some motivation, and he stupidly pushes back as if he could overpower him.

“It’s time to go, Carter. Before you give Mommy and Daddy a bad name.” The sarcasm that drips from Vince’s words has me biting the inside of my lip to stop from smiling.

Carter stands for a moment, his face becoming more red by the second before he takes a deep breath and shakes his arm free from Vince’s hold.

“This isn’t the last you’ll be hearing from me,” he hisses, leaning closer so that we’re damn near nose to nose.

“For your sake, I hope you’re wrong. This was a warning. Next time, we won’t be so nice,” Desmond says, and with that, Vince grabs him and drags him toward the door, cutting off whatever else he might feel the need to say.

Which reminds me.

“And stay the fuck away from Kat. She’s ours now.”

Carter stills, causing him to trip over his own feet when Vince urges him forward, and I hear Desmond chuckle beside me.

“I want him to leave her alone, but I also want to beat his fucking face in,” Desmond whispers to me as we watch them go.

“I’m shocked you didn’t hit him this time, if I’m being honest.” He shrugs as if it’s not a big deal, but we both know it is. I’d had Vince on standby should Desmond need taming while dealing with these assholes, but it hadn’t been necessary.

“Next time, he won’t get so lucky,” Desmond says, and a smile turns his lips as if the idea excites him.

“No, he won’t,” Vince says as he makes his way back to us from the door now that Carter is gone.

Damn it. As much as I might enjoy Vince being on our side and our muscles, I can’t get past the feeling that this time it’s

more than him just doing his job.

I'll have to talk to Nate when we get back home.



CHAPTER 28

The house is quiet with Addison in the bath and most everyone else gone. Alex, Desmond, and Vince had some kind of meeting they flew out to earlier today in a bit of a rush, leaving Oliver, Nathan, Addison, and me for dinner. It was strange. Most of the meal was quiet, minus Addison's chatter about her day. Even after just a short time, I'd grown used to Alex and Desmond being here and their constant teasing, along with the feeling of their eyes on me.

Addison needed a bath, which Nathan moved to handle before I could, but she made sure to let me know she wanted me to read her bedtime story with him tonight. It had become somewhat of a routine. No matter who else read to her, she almost always wanted me there. It was sweet, and damn it if it didn't make them more appealing watching them all dote over her.

While Nathan handled her bath, I cleaned up the table and the food from our meal. No matter how much they told me not to worry about it, I just couldn't help myself. Besides, what else did I really have to do? Read another book that would only fuel my very inappropriate dreams...

No, that's probably a bad idea. I should honestly pick up a Bible or something at this point.

Tonight, Addison was asleep not even five minutes into the story, and I couldn't help but chuckle. She was always so sure

she would be able to make it to the end that she would pick two books. So far, she has yet to make it halfway through one.

“Kat.”

I’ve only made it a few steps down the hall toward my room when Nathan’s voice stops me in my tracks. Turning back around, I find him standing just outside of Addison’s door that’s now closed behind him.

“If you could pack an overnight bag and meet me down by the front door, I’d like to take you somewhere for the night.”

It’s not exactly a request, but there’s still enough wiggle room in his words that I feel I could decline should I want to. Not that I do, but it’s nice to know it’s an option.

“What about Addison?” I ask instead of the hundreds of other questions swirling in my mind. Of all of them, that seems the most important, considering my job is as her nanny, and he’s her father.

“Oliver’s here and happy to spend the time with her.” His answer makes sense. I can’t imagine any of them would ever mind having her around, not with the way she has them wrapped around her finger.

Yet I still can’t help but feel bad.

He hired me to look after her. Not to mention, how will she feel when she wakes up and I’m not here? Will she think I abandoned her?

“It’s only for the night,” Nathan says as if he can read my mind, and I nod, biting my lip when I look up and see the way his eyes all but bore into me. How is it that he’s down the hall, but it feels like he’s right here? “Addison is more than used to us having to leave. She’ll be fine. Oliver will ensure she hardly has time to miss us.”

I bite back the urge to assure him that’s not my issue because it feels kind of silly to remind him of what he hired me for.

“Thirty minutes,” he tells me when I remain quiet. His voice is deep, almost that same authoritative tone I’ve heard him use

with Addison, yet somehow sexier.

With that, he turns and makes his way down the hall opposite of me, toward his study, and I'm left staring after him, trying to convince myself to turn around and go to my room like I'd been before.

The faster we get ready, the faster we get to see him again and apparently spend the night with him somewhere that's not here.

Shit, I probably should have asked him where we were going...

Shaking myself from my little trance, I quickly turn around and head toward my room instead of standing around wasting more time.

It takes me longer than it should to pack for a single night. Mostly because I have no idea what I should be packing. My brain goes through about a million different scenarios before I finally get frustrated with myself and just settle on a pair of pajama pants and a tank top, as well as a nicer bra and panties. I might have also changed out the set I'm wearing now for a nicer set because a girl can dream, damn it.

So far, Nathan hasn't really touched me like that, at least not while I'm awake, but something in his eyes tells me he wants to, and damn it if I don't want him to as well.

Only problem is the man makes me weak. I'm like a girl with her first crush around him, unable to do anything but drool and babble and hope for the best.

You'd think I'd be able to tell him what I want and how I feel after he watched Alex fuck me over his desk. I saw the way he watched us together and felt his eyes as they lingered over every inch of my skin.

He wants me the same way I want him; I know it.

I just don't know what's holding him back.

I grab a few basic necessities from the bathroom and shove them in my bag before heading out. That took me way longer than it should have, but thankfully, not the whole thirty

minutes. I'm not sure why, but I get the feeling Nathan wouldn't appreciate me being late. The thought almost has me turning around as I come to a stop on the steps, debating what to do.

I might not mind him coming up to my room after me...

No!

What the hell, Kat? Get it together.

I make it the rest of the way down the stairs just as Nathan enters the foyer as well. Unlike me, he has no bag and, as always, has yet to dress down. I swear it's like he sleeps in a suit; only on rare occasions do I see him in anything else, but even that is still somewhat formal.

With the exception of his bathing suit.

No, that's not formal; if anything, it's dangerous. Boss, father, important billionaire businessman, I don't really care what label you pick. He's still in shape, that's for sure.

Oliver walks in behind him as I reach the foot of the stairs, and his presence shakes me from my less-than-savory thoughts.

"We'll be just down the road."

Oliver nods, waving Nathan off toward the door. "I've got it, just like always."

I look between them, unwilling to interpret and glimpse one of Nathan's rare smirks before he turns to me.

I'm not sure what he's looking for—maybe my bag or maybe something else—but he must find it as he quickly turns to the door, pulling it open and holding out his arm to me.

"Ladies first," he offers, every bit the gentleman.

As if his good looks aren't enough to make me weak.

In order to make it to the door, I have to pass Oliver. Usually, that wouldn't be a big deal, but right now, I can feel his gaze on me, his eyes damn near boring into me as if he intends to look through me.

I'm not sure why, but I want to run. I know Oliver doesn't seem to care much for me, though he doesn't seem to dislike me exactly, either. I tend to try to stay out of his way, but lately, that seems as if it's becoming harder to do, and I'm not sure if that's on me or him.

Before I can think too much about it, I stop walking and turn to face him. Even with his glasses, his green eyes are so intense that I damn near lose my nerve. Instead, I force a smile to my lips and stand up straighter.

"Thank you for watching Addison for the night. Please let her know I'll be back soon and not to worry. I don't want her to think I left her." I say in a rush before I can chicken out.

Oliver's brows pull together slightly, but he nods, and I let out a sigh of relief. I hadn't even realized how worried I was about her being upset, but knowing Oliver is with her makes me feel much better.

With the weight off my shoulders, I turn and head out the front door and down the stairs to the car that waits in the driveway.

It's not the same car that Vince usually drives when we're not in the limo, but I'd bet it's just as expensive; it has the same kind of style. It's a style I've never seen before, but that's not crazy; I don't know much about cars, and I never really cared to. Carter had a Lamborghini he loved more than himself; it was like his baby, but these cars look nothing like that. This one's a deep purple color that I'd mistake for black in the darkness, if not for the lights that illuminate the driveway and front of the house.

"Don't you dare."

I snatch my hand back a moment before I grab the door handle, whipping around to watch Nathan as he descends the stairs toward me, his brow raised and his jaw tight.

Clearly, this is another situation like Carter, and this is his baby.

Nathan moves past me to pull the door open before gesturing for me to get in, and I almost laugh. This isn't like

Carter at all; if anything, it's more like Vince, only this is far from Nathan's job.

Shaking my head, I climb in, and he closes the door behind me before making his way around to the driver's side. He'd caught me off guard this time, but now I know better. Just like with Vince, I won't be allowing this.

The drive doesn't take more than five minutes. After leaving, we head down the road and turn left before turning onto the street that I imagine sits right behind the mansion. The houses are still big—huge, really—but not quite the same as the Lawson mansion. Big enough that I'm sure they're owned by some very important people nonetheless.

“We own every house on this street. We had them built for staff a few years back. It used to be a part of the original property that the house sits on, but it was easy enough to do without it.” Nathan says, breaking the silence for the first time since we got in the car, and I'm glad I'm looking out the window and not at him because I'm sure my eyes are cartoonishly big right now.

When he originally mentioned me working as Addison's nanny, he said they had housing for the chef, groundskeepers, and other staff. However, this...

This isn't at all what I expected. No, I pictured a house a lot like the one I grew up in—enough space to live, with necessities and maybe some fun extras like a pool or something. But this feels like overkill. Each house could easily fit ten or more people, and while I guess these people could have families, I find it hard to believe they can afford these houses, even knowing how well Nathan pays.

We pass five houses before pulling into the driveway of the sixth. It's not the last house on the street. I can see at least two more past it, but they're all dark. I assume the first few are occupied, and these ones aren't.

Holy shit.

It's beautiful, not that I should be surprised given everything else the Lawson's own. I mean, hell, *they're* beautiful.

The door opens, and I'm confused for a moment until I see Nathan's no longer in the car. He'd clearly taken advantage of the fact that I was distracted.

Pursing my lips, I huff in annoyance that he got to open my door again, but I quickly swallow it down and grab my bag before climbing out. I'll just need to do better, it seems.

I follow Nathan to the front door and can't help but hear the sound of shock that leaves my lips when he simply turns the handle and opens the door.

No way they don't lock the door!

We're totally going to be murdered in this house tonight.

I watch Nathan walk in, flipping on lights as he goes, and I can't take my eyes off him, watching, waiting. It takes him a minute, but eventually, he seems to notice I've yet to follow.

"I called ahead and had the house prepared for us," he says, as if that means something to me. Maybe it should, but honestly, all I can think about is all the places a crazed murderer could be hiding.

Apparently, my face gives my fear away because he's back in front of me in just a few strides of his long legs. His fingers grip my chin, forcing my head up so that our eyes meet.

"I had them leave the door unlocked because they messaged me to say they were finished right before we left. I also have cameras on the grounds and up and down the street, not only here but by the house, so you can breathe easily. Nobody is going to hurt you here."

"O-okay," I manage to stutter out with a nod that doesn't feel convincing, but he seems to accept it. I expect him to release me and us to move into the house; instead, his fingers remain where they are as his eyes continue to bore into mine, and I'm trapped, completely and utterly at his mercy.

I damn near go cross-eyed as he slowly moves forward, leaning in until his lips press against my own, and I swear to god my knees almost give out. It's not long, just enough to totally and completely erase every thought from my head.

“In the house, Kat,” he says, his lips moving against my own before he pulls away, and this time, I don’t hesitate to follow him, pushing the door closed behind me.

My fear is quickly replaced by wonder as I look around the house, admiring the high vaulted ceilings and dark wood that appears to run throughout.

“I designed these homes around our groundsman’s property. His was the first home we built, and he had the full ability to customize it. It ended up having a nice homey feeling, so we just kept up the same style for the rest with minor changes here and there,” he explains as he continues through the house. And while it’s cool to know, I don’t really understand why he’s telling me or why we’re even here.

The whole house is pretty open; there are no walls separating the rooms like they do at the mansion, and because of that, each step seems to echo back to us. Nathan stops near the back wall, near a fireplace that I’m shocked to find already has a beautiful glowing fire.

It shouldn’t surprise me. Honestly, nothing with him should anymore, but somehow, it keeps happening. I guess this was part of the ‘getting the house ready’ that he was talking about earlier.

The whole wall around the fireplace is glass, from the floor to the ceiling, though it’s hard to see much because of the darkness outside.

A place like this would be amazing in the woods, somewhere with less light pollution, where you could really see the stars.

“Yes, New York is good for a great many things. Seeing the stars isn’t one of them.”

Nathan steps up beside me, looking out the window at the few stars that are visible, and I realize I must have said that out loud.

At least it wasn’t something worse, I suppose.

We stand in silence, looking out the window, and as beautiful as this place is, and how much I don’t mind being

with him, I still don't understand why we're here.

“So...” I start to say before trailing off. Crap, I should have figured out what I was going to say before I opened my mouth.

Nathan turns away from the window to look at me, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip under his gaze.

Me and my big mouth.

“So, I thought you might like to see the house that is usually reserved for Addison's nanny.”

I'm not sure if he just happened to decide to tell me that or if he somehow knew what I was trying to ask, but either way, it doesn't matter. He answered my question whether he knew that was it or not, and now I'm left with about fifty more...

“I'm sorry, what?” I say because I'm not sure I heard him correctly. If this is where the nanny usually lives, why am I staying in his house?

Maybe my being there was temporary? I did move in pretty quickly because of the break-in at my apartment. Maybe something here wasn't ready? Does he want me to move here now?

Why does the thought make me sad?

It's silly. I'd be only a few minutes away, but for some reason, the thought of waking up without Addison tugs at my heartstrings. Not to mention, the idea of them not being here somehow makes the whole house feel less like a home despite how cozy it might have seemed only moments ago. And it's not just Desmond and Alex but Nathan and even Oliver. I've grown used to having all of them around; to have a whole house to myself sounds lonely.

“I thought it would be a nice place to get a little bit of time alone to discuss everything. A lot has changed in the last few weeks, and I wanted to ensure we're on the same page.” He turns away from the window toward one of the two couches that sit in the middle of this back room and beckons me toward it.

I move away from the window, dropping down onto the surprisingly plush couch, and he follows me. I watch him as he unbuttons his suit jacket and slips it off, gently laying it over the arm of the couch before he sits beside me. Instead of his usual stiff posture, he sinks into the couch, his arm thrown over the back of the couch behind me.

“I can get my stuff out pretty quickly. I don’t have a lot,” I say in a rush before I quickly press my lips together, unsure why I said anything.

He doesn’t say anything, instead looking at me with a slight tilt to his head as if he’s unsure how to respond.

Apparently, I’ve said the wrong thing, though, because, after a second, he shakes his head, his lip quirking up a bit.

“Do you want to move out?”

“No!” I shout in a rush to try to assure him, only to cringe when the sound of my voice bounces off the high ceilings around us and echoes back.

“This is why I thought this would be a good idea.”

Yeah, he might be right about that. I’m clearly lost as far as just about everything goes.

“First, I think you should quit your job at the school.” I’m not sure what I expected, but it sure as hell wasn’t that.

“I can’t quit my job!” I say in shocked disbelief. “It’s been my dream to be a teacher since I was a little girl, and this has been my dream school to teach at for years.” I try and fail to keep my voice level, but I can hear the almost harsh jump in pitch.

Apparently, he hears it, too, because he chuckles, and I kind of want to smack him. How can he be laughing right now? This is serious.

I’m serious!

“Dreams are wonderful, and I’m happy you got to work there, but it’s not like you won’t still be teaching. Hell, I’ll let you homeschool Addison if you really want, but it seems as though you might have a stalker, and that school clearly isn’t

secure the way I thought it was.” His tone drops, making his already deep voice sound almost dangerous, and if this wasn’t such a serious conversation, I’d be seriously turned on by it.

Okay, I’m still turned on by it, but I’m going to ignore that for now.

I open my mouth to argue my point, but he cuts me off.

“When Alex asked you if you were interested in being more than just Addison’s nanny, you said yes, correct?” His gaze burns into mine, daring me to say he’s wrong, but I can’t.

I had agreed to that, and it’s still what I want. I nod, and he nods back; he knew as well as I did what I agreed to, maybe even more so since I was still in the dark on so much.

Nathan sits forward, invading my space, once again towering over me so that I have to crane my neck back to continue to meet his gaze.

“That makes you ours, Katherine. You might not understand this yet, but after tonight, you will.” He leans in closer so that I can feel the warmth of his body so close to my own, and I fight back a shiver at how nice it feels to have him this close. “You are *ours*. Ours to protect, ours to spoil, ours to fuck, and I’ll be damned if I keep letting you go back to that fucking school where someone might be putting your safety at risk,” he growls, and between the sound of that and what he just said, I’m pretty sure I’m dreaming.

Men don’t do this kind of thing. Possessive men are a red flag, but this isn’t what I think of when I think of possessive men. No, the toxic possessive is like Carter, where he used to make me change because he didn’t like how much skin I was showing in damn near modest clothes. Somehow, I can’t see Nathan or any of the rest of them being like that.

No, if anything, they would handle any man who might look too long. Much the same way Desmond and Alex handled the asshole at the bar the night we met.

Why does that make me feel warm and fuzzy? I shouldn’t be excited by the thought of violence, but here I am excited by not only that but by him being concerned as a whole.

When was the last time someone was worried about me, really?

I can't remember.

"But why?" The question is out of my mouth before I can really think about it, but Nathan doesn't seem put off by it; if anything, he looks like he might have been expecting that question.

"This is where part two comes in. I was taken with you from the moment I saw you. You're beautiful, and despite my disbelief at the beginning, you didn't treat my daughter in any special way because of her last name or how it might help you get closer to me."

It's my turn to growl. The thought of women trying to use Addison to get close to Nathan really pisses me off.

Nathan chuckles, and the sound catches me off guard. It's not as if I've never heard it; Addison often has the guys smiling and laughing, but Nathan is usually a bit more reserved.

"That right there, you're not like other women, Kat, and something about you draws me in. I tried to keep it professional with you. You were Addison's teacher, and it only took me a time or two to see you with her to know I wanted you to be her nanny, which would make you an employee. Everyone knows you don't have those kinds of relationships at work. It's bad for business and often ends poorly." He can say that again. There are whole sayings about not mixing business and pleasure because it is so well known. It's something I was afraid of in the beginning with my crush on him and why I thought for sure he would fire me when he found out about me sleeping with Alex and Desmond.

"You weren't supposed to be in the house. I'd offered you housing the right way, despite how much I hadn't wanted to. But then your apartment was broken into, and suddenly, no matter how safe I knew you would be here, I couldn't bring myself to have you stay here. Not when the other option was with me."

My mind is going about a million miles an hour, but somehow, I can't seem to make anything come out of my mouth.

“Then I found out you're Alex and Desmond's lost fling. They were so torn up about you disappearing. At first, I thought it was because you got away and gave them the slip instead of vice versa. But even months later, they were still caught up on you, and I knew you had to be something special. My son and brother aren't known to settle. They're a little more loose, a little more okay with drowning their sorrows under someone else.”

I'd thought the same thing since I left them. I was sure I was just a distant memory to them. I would have been shocked if they had remembered my name. I might not have known who they were exactly, but I have eyes, and it's not as if I was able to forget my night with them. No, I was sure women were lining up to be with them; I'd never for a moment let myself believe that I'd made an impression, not even in my wildest dreams.

Nathan stands, once again making his way back to the fireplace, his eyes fixed on the darkened windows.

“Alex and I built the Lawson name from nothing. Desmond was the product of a one-night stand many years ago. His mother didn't want a baby. It didn't fit her lifestyle. So she brought him to my doorstep and left him, and I've never seen her again. And Oliver's mother died in a car crash when he was young.”

I gasp aloud, before quickly pressing a hand to my mouth, but I know he heard me. Turning away from the window, his eyes meet mine as I watch him, unable to look away. I don't know much about these Lawson men, but I want to, and I'll gladly eat up every crumb he gives me.

He nods me toward the window, inviting me to come and stand with him, and I'm up and off the couch the next second, unable and unwilling to ignore the chance to be closer to him.

I stop just short of being right next to him, trying to give him some space to breathe while he talks, but apparently,

that's not what he has in mind.

Reaching out, he grabs my hand, interlocking our fingers before he pulls me into his side. We stand like that for a moment, his thumb stroking against my knuckles as I relax against him, enjoying the warmth his body offers before he continues.

“Alex and Riley weren't in love. Hell, they spent most of their time at each other's throats, but she was a good mother, and before she passed, they'd split time between the two of them. Of course, after she passed, Alex took Oliver full time, and as such, Oliver and Desmond grew up much closer than most cousins. At this point they really are more like brothers, even Addison is more like a little sister to Oliver.”

Nathan's not looking at me, but I nod, knowing he will feel it. I've seen firsthand how close they all are; if I wasn't told they were cousins in the beginning, I would have believed they were siblings.

“With Oliver and Desmond, we split time working and raising them. The company grew overnight, and before long, they were old enough to start taking an interest in it. Alex never really wanted more kids. He said Des and Oli were enough, but I knew I did. I'd always wanted a large family, and in the last few years, I've found there's no time like the present. Business is booming, but I'm not getting any younger.” He chuckles, and I shake my head at his joke. I know he's older; Trevor had said he was old enough to be my father, and I'm pretty sure he's right, but honestly, aside from the streaks of gray in his hair, it's not really super easy to tell that.

Is it obvious he's older? Yes, of course. I'm pretty sure Desmond and Oliver are right around my age, but I think it would be harder to guess Nathan and Alex's. They don't exactly fit into the usual categories for men their age.

“I had Addison through a surrogate. Originally, I'd planned to adopt, but surrogacy seemed like a nice choice as well, that way she still got to have the Lawson bloodline.”

It sounds fine, logical even, but at the same time a little too much like a business transaction.

“You never had a woman you wanted to marry and have children with instead?” I ask before I realize how intrusive that question is. “Shit, sorry, I wasn’t trying to pry.” I pull back to look up at him. Nathan’s a much more reserved person than most. I can’t imagine he wants to talk about that kind of thing with me, and if he did, it’s something he can decide on, not something for me to bring up.

“Stop doing that,” he says with a chuckle, easily pulling me back into his side and wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “I want you to ask questions, Kat. I want you to understand, that’s the whole point of this little trip.” I can’t see his face, but I can hear the smile on his lips, and it makes me smile as well. “Or most of it, at least,” he says almost more to himself, and I can’t help but giggle at how dirty it sounded.

“To answer your question, no, there was never a woman I wanted to marry and have children with. Alex and I had worked hard to make our business what it is today, and one of our bigger concerns was splitting it as it passed through the years. We couldn’t stop Oliver and Desmond from marrying, and we didn’t want to, but we both knew it wasn’t for us. Instead, we enjoyed women like fine wine but kept no strings, and somewhere along the way, I think Desmond picked up the same habit. Oliver very rarely even took interest in women, and when he did, it tended to be with Desmond. It was something we weren’t really aware we were doing until later, sharing women. It was fun, and it made things much easier, to the point that we discussed the possibility of sharing a woman long term.”

His voice loses all hint of his earlier humor, and I get the feeling whatever he’s about to share is serious. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him he doesn’t have to share with me, but he said he wanted to, so instead, I press my lips together and wrap my arms around him, nuzzling into his chest.

Nathan doesn’t strike me as the type to need reassurance or affection, but it’s nice to have regardless, I’m sure.

His fingers run through my hair from the back of my head down my back, and I sink even further into him.

Fuck, that feels good.

“One woman seemed to fit everything we wanted and needed in a woman. Natasha was young and beautiful, and Desmond brought her home from the club a few times before she seemed to realize how our dynamic worked. She, like most women, didn’t have a problem with it, and before long, she was always around for one of us. Addison was young then, only a year or so old, and she was great with her, or she pretended to be. It wasn’t until she realized Oliver was a part of our shared lifestyle that we saw the issues with her. She never liked Oliver, but he didn’t say a word until one night, Desmond brought up the idea of us making her a Lawson, having one of us marry her and make her ours forever. Thankfully, Oliver couldn’t keep quiet anymore and brought his issues to me. I didn’t want to believe it. I’d grown fond of her and the idea of having a woman not only for myself but for Addison, but I always knew this was why Alex and I hadn’t looked for women.”

He continues to stroke his hand down my back as if the action is comforting him, and I hope it does because I really don’t know what to say about this. I’m sorry they went through that and that she turned out not to be the one for them, but I’m also kind of grateful.

Which I’m aware sounds horrible and is the reason I’ve kept my mouth shut so far.

“We’d almost made a terrible mistake tying ourselves to her. Desmond was upset about it for a long time. He loved her, and he thought she loved him too, but even if she did, it wasn’t the right way, not the way we wanted. She didn’t like Oliver, and she only pretended to enjoy time with Addison because she knew it made us happy. Like so many before her, she was using us. She was just much better at hiding it.”

“I’m so sorry.” I finally say, unable to keep quiet anymore. Grateful for the chance to be here or not, I can’t make myself enjoy their pain. Nobody should feel unwanted the way Oliver

did, no child should be used for someone else's gain, and the pain of a broken heart isn't something I'd wish on my worst enemy.

"Don't be sorry. Natasha is the one who ruined that. And because of her, I was sure our bid to share a woman would never be more than just the occasional fling. Addison didn't *need* a mother, no matter how much she might want one, and I could adopt or get another surrogate..." his hand pauses as his words trail off, and I chance a peek up at him through my lashes to find him looking down at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"And then you came along and changed everything I thought I knew and made me want something I never dared to dream was a possibility."

"What is it you want?" I ask, my voice hardly more than a whisper, afraid to hear his answer but almost just as desperate for it.

"You, Katherine." His words crash over me, and I'm struck silent, sure I've heard him wrong or I've imagined this. There's no way of all the women he could have, that any of them could have, that he, *they*, would want me... Right?

"I want you in every way I can have you. Be it only as Addison's nanny or with benefits if that's all you want, but know it will never be enough. I've never felt for anyone the way I do for you, and it's not just me."

I open my mouth to tell him he's wrong, to argue that Oliver hates me, but he cuts me off before I can.

"If I get my way, I won't need a surrogate. I won't need to adopt, because one day I'll have a beautiful wife who will carry my children and theirs as well."



CHAPTER 29

Have you ever had something happen that makes you question everything you've ever known in life?

That's what's happening right now because I'm pretty sure this conversation started with Nathan explaining that he doesn't want a wife and that they had agreed to share to ensure there would be no split in the company should one of them marry.

So how the hell had we gotten to the point where he's telling me he wants a wife...

And not just any wife, but possibly me, if I'm understanding him correctly.

"Kat."

Nathan's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I blink hard, shaking my head when I realize I'd been staring off into the nothing outside the dark window.

"I'm sorry... What?"

I step back out of his arms as I attempt to make sense of what was just discussed, but I can't. He lets me move away, but I can feel his eyes on me, and when I look up at him, I find him watching me. Nothing about his face says he just dropped a bomb on me, but I assure you, it felt like one to me.

How is he so calm about this?

“What part didn’t you understand?” he asks as if I simply didn’t understand a word he said and needed it explained.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the part where you didn’t want a wife, and now you do?” My voice is a few octaves too high, bordering on almost a shrill, panicked tone, but I can’t bring myself to care right now.

“Is that all?” he asks, still as calm as can be, and I swear I want to reach out and smack him. I probably would if I thought it would do a damn thing, but knowing my luck, I’d only hurt my hand. I’ve seen him without a shirt, I know how well built he is.

Regardless of how easy his question may be, I take a moment to think before I answer.

Is that all?

‘If I get my way, I won’t need a surrogate. I won’t need to adopt, because one day I’ll have a beautiful wife who will carry my children and theirs as well.’

Nope, that’s not it at all, but I’m not sure I can voice the rest right now.

“I don’t want to quit my job.” I settle on a safer topic instead of whatever else this conversation might be headed toward.

His eyes harden, and I see his jaw tick. I get the feeling he isn’t used to having anyone oppose him who isn’t his five-year-old daughter, but I don’t want to fall back into the arms of a man who I rely on for everything. I’ve worked hard for my freedom and independence.

He takes a step toward me, and I stand my ground, despite feeling like I should step back away from him. He towers over me, but I stay put, keeping my eyes locked on his as he reaches up and gently brushes a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

“Why?” His voice is gentle despite my attitude, and it makes me deflate.

Nathan isn’t Carter.

With a deep breath, I purse my lips and decide now is probably the best time to tell him. “I don’t want to belong to someone, to be under someone’s thumb and stuck.” I look down at my feet, unable to hold his gaze.

I *know* they aren’t the same. Nathan and the rest of the guys have shown me that on so many occasions, yet I still can’t help but be concerned. Afraid I’ll fall back into the same trap and be stuck again.

His fingers are gentle as he presses my head up until our eyes meet, and I once again quickly look away. He doesn’t say a word; instead, he simply waits for me to be ready to meet his gaze.

Ultimately, he wins, and I relent, looking up to meet his eyes.

“Do you remember what I called you the day you and Addison went to the mall?” His question seems strange and out of place given our line of conversation, but still, I rack my brain trying to recall.

“No,” I say after a minute when nothing comes to mind. Usually, Alex calls me Cherry, and Desmond calls me Kitten, but Nathan calls me Kat or Katherine. I never really thought he was one for nicknames.

“Queen.” He says it as if it should mean something to me, but it doesn’t. Thankfully, he seems to see that and explains further. “With this arrangement, you’re not just the nanny, Kat. You’re ours, yes, but not as an object. You are ours, as in our equal, our woman, our friend, our queen. Should you decide you want a new car, you have a card, you buy one. You don’t need permission. If you think we should go on a vacation and have some family time together? Let me know, I’ll clear the week and get the jet ready.”

He takes another step toward me, letting his hand move from my chin around to the back of my neck, his fingers brushing over the fine hairs at the nape of my neck.

“Queen’s aren’t owned. They don’t belong to anyone, and they’re under nobody’s command. My queen is meant to rule

the kingdom with me, and together, we will continue to build our empire, be that the company, Addison, or any other children we might have in the future.”

Every word out of his mouth sounds too good to be true. How someone as rich and powerful as him seems to understand so well what a relationship is supposed to be when Carter couldn't, kind of blows my mind. I'd thought maybe the problem was that Carter was rich and was used to getting what he wanted and being treated like a king, but that obviously wasn't it at all. The money Nathan and the rest of the Lawson's have is probably enough to make Carter cry, if the black card is anything to go by.

Hell, Nathan has enough money to get me a black card, and my income is way less than Carter's. That's not even counting what he already had in his bank account from Mommy and Daddy that he never let me see.

Somehow, the part that seemed to have gotten my attention most was the very last bit about children we might have in the future, and it wasn't only my brain that took notice.

“You quitting your job is not meant to put you under our thumb or take your independence. My only concern is your safety. While I could handle Trevor, get him fired, and ensure he's not allowed back, that doesn't change the fact that the school let someone like him be employed there, to begin with. Not to mention Barbara and the other staff who were nasty to you simply because I took an interest in you. No, that's not the kind of place I want my Queen or my princess spending their time or the type of people I want them surrounded by.”

Without being upset, it's much harder to see the problem with what he's saying. No, it makes sense, and I even agree with him about taking Addison out to find a better school. So why is it so hard for me to let go and agree to quit?

“Okay.”

I force the word out before I can change my mind because I know this has nothing to do with them and everything to do with my fears from my history with Carter. I refuse to let him keep hold of me. He didn't want me. He chose someone else,

and I need to do the same while remembering this might be the very best thing to ever happen to me.

The second the word leaves my lips, I feel lighter. I hadn't realized how much this was all weighing on me. The idea of seeing Trevor again, of needing to have a job to be able to support myself, of being helpless again.

Now, I just need Nathan to explain why he doesn't touch me if he views me as his queen. It seems his actions and words aren't exactly matching up.

That is until he leans down and captures my lips with his. And just like that, nothing makes sense again.

His fingers dig into the back of my neck, pulling me tight to his chest as he tries to consume me. I've kissed a decent amount of people in my life, not a crazy amount, but enough to know this feels different.

This is the kind of kiss I could get lost in; that's life-changing and all-consuming. The kind I didn't think was real. In one swift motion, he easily lifts me into his arms. I barely manage to wrap my legs around him before he's headed toward the stairs.

How he can continue to kiss me and still make it up the stairs is beyond me, but he manages without missing a beat, and the next thing I know, we're in a bedroom.

He leaves the door open, and I guess it doesn't matter; we're the only ones here, but it still feels like we're being risky, doing something we shouldn't.

Pulling back slowly, he sets me gently on the bed before taking a step back. I bite my lip, watching him, trying to keep my ass on the bed instead of running back to him. His eyes stay fixed on mine despite the distance he put between us, and I swear I see the same need I feel in his eyes.

"There are some things we need to talk about if you're going to be mine, Kat." He begins to undo the buttons on his shirt. He'd abandoned his suit jacket downstairs, but he's still dressed to kill.

It's on the tip of my tongue to agree with whatever it is, even before he can voice it, but something stops me. He seemed to be enjoying our kiss as well, so if he stopped us and created some distance, I get the feeling it might be important. I can always jump back into his arms the second he's done.

Besides, I rather enjoy watching him undress. I swear I never really had a type before, but Nathan might change my mind. A well-dressed man with some grays...

I look up from his hands to his face and get the feeling I missed something.

Shit, what did he say?

"I'm sorry, what?" I say, fidgeting with the comforter below me under his intense gaze. I wasn't trying to tune him out. "You're distracting," I say in my defense. He simply looks down as he undoes the last button on his shirt before slowly peeling it off. I'm pretty sure he's doing it on purpose now.

"I need you to listen to me, Kat. Can you do that? I'm pretty sure Alex mentioned that you're very eager to please." His words work like a charm, and suddenly, I'm more than ready to watch and listen.

"I'm sure you've noticed by now that despite my clear attraction to you and the fact that I was with Alex the night you agreed to our arrangement, I have yet to really do much." He moves to the dresser and drapes his shirt over it because, of course, he wouldn't throw it on the floor before he moves to unbuckle his belt. I swear to god my heart jumps into my throat at the anticipation of it all.

He looks at me, and I nod because I did notice that. I very much so noticed that.

"Staying away from you has been..." he pauses as if in thought before pulling his belt from his pants in one swift motion that leaves me wide-eyed. "Difficult to say the least. Watching my brother fuck you on my desk was the sweetest kind of torture. But I needed to ensure you were really aware of what you were agreeing to with me before I took things any further."

His belt joins his button-up on top of the dresser, and he begins to pull his undershirt from his pants, where it was tucked in, and I catch a glimpse of his toned skin underneath.

Fuck me.

I'm honestly not sure how old Nathan is, but I know there's no way he should look like *that*. Hell, most men my own age don't even look like that.

He walks toward me, stopping right in front of me. I'm not sure what he wants, so I remain where I am, hoping for some kind of direction should he want me to do something. Instead of saying anything, he drops to the ground on his knees in front of me and reaches for my leg, pulling my foot into his hand before pulling off one shoe and then the other.

"I need you to understand that I want you to be more than just Addison's nanny. I want you to be her mother, and I want to make you a mother." He slowly pulls off my socks before standing and pushing my sweater down my arms until it pools on the bed around me.

"I enjoy control. When we're in the bedroom, you will refer to me as sir."

"Yes, sir," I say in response, earning a smile that has my toes curling.

Sir indeed.

"I also need you to understand that I want to see your stomach round with a child. That I want to fuck a baby into you or have one of the others do it. And that one day I'll fuck you on my desk the same way Alex did, because not joining him has haunted me every day since then."

His words wash over me, and it takes me a second to really grasp them.

It sounds like he's excited by the idea of getting me pregnant. I'd never heard of that before; actually, in the past, I'd been worried if I had gotten pregnant that Carter would no longer be attracted to me.

"How do you feel about a large family, Kat?"

“A big family sounds wonderful,” I say before I can really think about it, but it’s not a lie. I can picture little Nathan’s, Desmond’s, and Alex’s running around; hell, even a little Oliver... It’s easy, if I’m being honest, and while that should probably scare me for how new all of this is, it doesn’t. If anything, it only excites me more.

He pulls me to my feet, and we stand so close that I’m simply staring at his chest and the way his undershirt is pulled taut everywhere. With my eyes on him, he takes advantage of my distracted state, pulling my shirt up and over my head and leaving me in my bra. The instinct to cover myself is there, but so is the memory of the way Alex reacted when I did, and I instead let my arms drop to my sides.

“Communication is key, Kat. If you don’t like something we do, you need to tell us. If you don’t want something, you need to tell us. I’m no longer your employer but your future husband.”

His words hit me hard, and I feel my mouth fall open in shock, but I can’t do anything about it. For whatever reason, hearing him say he wants a wife and more children didn’t really feel the same as him saying he will be my husband.

And if he’ll be my husband, what will the others be?

He presses a finger under my chin, popping my mouth closed and pushing my head up so that our eyes meet.

“Don’t confuse this for being my proposal. That will come later and be much grander, but do know that you’re ours now, Kat. There’s no going back after tonight.”

His blue eyes bore into mine, and I see so many emotions in his eyes. When I’d first met him, I’d thought his eyes were icy and closed off, but not anymore. No, now, when I look into his eyes, I see affection, desire, respect, and longing...but most importantly, I see a future.

“I understand, sir.” My voice is strong and sure despite my emotions, which feel like they could choke me at any second.

I know I’ve said the right thing the moment the words leave my lips. Nathan’s eyes shine, and a smile pulls at his lips, but

it's not like any I've ever seen on his lips before—it's predatory and seductive.

It's a damn good thing he sticks to his usual icy looks in public because he already has enough women after him. I can't imagine how they would react if they saw him like I am right now. No, Nathan is any woman's wet dream already; trust me, I should know, but Nathan in the bedroom...Nathan as sir.

Fuck me.

“For tonight, let's see how well you can listen,” he says, taking a step back before he nods toward the bed behind me. “Up on the bed.”

I can't move fast enough and damn near trip over my feet as I scramble to get on the bed, not only wanting to please him but desperate to make my dream of being fucked by him a reality.

Unsure how he wants me on the bed, I make it about halfway up the mattress before I stop and turn around, waiting for more instructions. His gaze is unwavering as he looks me over from head to toe. Moving forward, he reaches out, grabbing my ankle and pulling me toward him enough that he can easily pull my pants off, leaving me in nothing but my bra and underwear.

Thank God I'd changed them before we came. Not that there was anything wrong with the other set, but they were bland, basic black. This set is one I bought just a few days ago with the guys in mind. It's a bralette and panty set that's all lace in a deep jade green color that I've been told goes great with my hair. The set is a little more than I'm used to wearing, a little flashy and sexual, but that had kind of been the point. Judging by the way his eyes sweep over me, I'm going to assume he likes them.

I watch as he moves his hands to his pants, undoing them without taking his eyes off of me. Everything he does is sexy as fuck, and I'm dying for him to touch me but also terrified I'll explode the moment he does with the way he's building this up. Neither of us is even naked yet.

His pants fall to the ground around his ankles, but he disregards them, instead reaching over his head to pull his undershirt off in that sexy, over-the-head, one-armed way guys do. If I tried that, I'd get stuck, but Nathan makes it look effortless.

I soak up every inch I can see once again, taking in all of his many tattoos that you would never guess were there when he was in his suit. It takes me a moment to realize we're both damn near naked and for some reason, my nerves decide this is a great time to make an appearance.

“Eyes on me, Kat.”

My eyes snap back to him of their own accord, and I see the approval that shines in them.

“Lie back and get comfortable, my Queen. We'll be in this bed for the rest of the weekend.”

Weekend? I thought we were only going to be gone for the night.

I move up the bed to lie back on the pillows with every intention of asking him about it, but before I can, he's moving across the room, toward a chair in the far corner. He easily hoists it up into his arms before walking back to the end of the bed, where he places it down. He drops back into it, somehow still finding a way to look every bit the billionaire businessman despite his lack of clothes. His eyes quickly find mine across the bed, and the weight of his gaze alone is enough to leave me squirming. Biting my lower lip, I press my thighs together in what I hope is a subtle enough way that he doesn't notice.

Of course he does, though. It's as if I'd shouted it from the rooftops. His eyes dart down to my thighs. His pupils blow wide as he sits back, rubbing his hand over the very clear erection that's straining to be free from his boxers.

Whatever I'd been about to say is long forgotten now.

“Take off your underwear for me, my Queen,” his voice is low and husky and goes right to my vagina as if a string attaches them. It would be pathetic if I could bring myself to

care, but unsurprisingly, the only thing that seems to matter to me right now is the sexy as fuck man in the chair sitting across from me.

I move to do as he said, not only eager to please but worried I'll lose my nerve if I hesitate. I've never done this kind of thing before. The most engaging sex I've ever had was with Alex and Desmond; other than that, it was just taking our clothes off and having sex. No buildup like this or intense foreplay. Not that I don't enjoy it, but it's going to take some time to get used to.

“Slower.”

I pause with my thumbs hooked in the waistband before trying again, this time paying attention to how I move. With my thumbs still hooked around the lacy material, I gently and slowly begin pushing them down, lifting my ass off the bed enough to free them. Usually, I would just kick them off now, but knowing he's looking for a show, I slowly lift my knees, pushing them up to the top and letting gravity take them down to my ankles, leaving my pussy on full display. Something he doesn't miss. His eyes are laser-focusing, and I see the way his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard.

“Now, your bra,” he says, and I watch as his hand moves down to grip his cock through the fabric of his boxers. My embarrassment at being on display is suddenly forgotten as I wish he was bare as well.

“Kat.” His voice reminds me he gave me an order, and I quickly reach behind my back to undo my bra as my cheeks damn near catch fire. I struggle for a moment before I get it and almost groan in annoyance. I've worn a bra for so long you'd think I'd be better at this.

Remembering his request for me to go slower with my panties, I do the same with my bra, slowly pulling it down my arms before I let it drop onto the bed beside me. I'm completely bare on the bed now. I can feel his eyes on me, but I can't bring myself to look up, that is, until I hear movement at the foot of the bed.

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I glance up to find him standing at the foot of the bed. His eyes find mine the second I look up, and he holds my gaze, as if daring me to look away.

Of course, I don't. I don't think I could if I wanted to; I'm lost in his gaze, so lost that it takes him bending damn near in half before I realize what he's doing.

“Stay.”

I freeze. I didn't even realize I was moving until he said something. I fall back onto my butt in the center of the bed and wait impatiently for his next directions while also trying not to seem too eager to see him naked.

I'm pretty sure I do a terrible job, though, because he looks all too pleased with himself as he slowly stands back up, taking his precious time to reveal himself to me.

I gasp out loud, quickly slapping a hand over my mouth when he's finally standing, and I see him in all of his glory.

No fucking way.

“You didn't think I'd let Desmond have all the fun, did you? After all, where do you think he gets that wild streak from?” Most parents would say that kind of thing about getting a cool color streak in their hair or one of those little matching tattoos with their kids.

Not matching dick piercings!

I watch as he reaches down to grip his cock at the base, pumping it slowly so that I get to see the underside completely.

I guess they don't match exactly. Whereas Desmond has multiple barbells up the underside of his cock, Nathan only appears to have the one right below the tip. I can't bring myself to care, though, because while piercings might be new territory for me, I can promise they are most welcome. I'm not picky about the style or placement.

My gaze is glued to his cock. It's thick and long and might just be the biggest I've ever seen. It's hard to know for sure

when he's so far away and the other two aren't here, but I'm pretty sure.

Maybe one of these days, I can get them to let me measure them all, just for the sake of knowing. Though that might be a bad idea, I don't want to make it a competition, and I can totally see Desmond making it just that.

Nathan climbs up onto the bed on his knees, and it takes everything in me to stay where I am. He's released his cock, but that doesn't really matter. He's so damn hard it stands damn near straight up, letting me see the barbell and the drip of precome that beads from his slit down the underside of his head toward it.

He reaches down, swiping the drop away with his thumb before beckoning me toward him with a simple curl of his finger.

I should be embarrassed by how quickly I move, but I can't bring myself to care right now. I'm so on edge I might explode if he doesn't touch me soon, and honestly, even when he does, I still might.

Raising to my knees, I match his stance, though there's still a bit of distance between us. Nathan doesn't seem to mind, though. Looking down at me, he doesn't hesitate to reach out and press his thumb into my mouth. It takes me a second to catch on, but when I do, I quickly swirl my tongue around his thumb, enjoying his salty taste.

His fingers curl around my chin, holding my head still as he moves further up the bed until his cock bobs against my lower stomach. "I've dreamt of the way your lips would feel wrapped around my cock." I whimper at his words as I imagine the same thing.

I can't lie. If someone like Carter had said that to me, I probably would have just rolled my eyes because that's always what he wanted. It felt like a chore, like something he required me to do, and he never reciprocated. Hell, he didn't even care if I finished when we had sex; so long as he did, that was all that mattered.

But with these men, I find I not only don't mind it, I enjoy it. Which is why his next words are kind of a disappointment.

"But that will have to be something for later." He holds my gaze the same way he holds my head, and I don't even know his other hand is moving until his fingers dip into the wetness of my pussy. "First, I need to feel the way your pussy is going to hug my cock as I pump you full of my come."

His touch damn near makes my knees buckle, but I manage to stay upright, mostly because of his hold on me.

"God, you're so fucking wet."

He's not wrong. I'm not sure I've ever been so turned on and teased as I am right now. Wetness drips down my legs as he continues to work his fingers back and forth from my clit, all the way to my opening.

"Is this all for me, my Queen?" He removes his thumb from my mouth, gently brushing it over my cheekbone, and I take that as a signal to answer him with words.

"Yes, sir." The words come out strained and breathy, but they come out nonetheless, which is more than I thought possible right now.

He drags his fingers up to my clit, applying just the slightest bit of pressure before he pulls his fingers away, and I can't help whimpering at the loss. A whimper escapes that I almost choke on when he pushes his fingers into his mouth. His eyes fall closed as he makes a sound a lot like a growl deep in his chest, making my pussy clench around nothing.

One second, we're on our knees; the next, I'm on my back, with one of my legs over his shoulder as he stares down at me. The head of his cock is pressed to my opening, but not inside of me the way I desperately need him to be. I move, pressing my hips up off the bed, unable to help myself, craving the feeling of him, needing to know how it will feel to have him buried deep inside of me.

One of his hands grips my waist, holding me down and stopping my movement, his other coming up to my throat. His

thumb caresses my jaw tenderly, and despite his strong hold, he doesn't restrict my ability to breathe.

"I'm going to fuck a child into you, my Queen. It might not be tonight, but it will happen. Until then, we can practice."

Eventually, I'm going to have to tell him I'm on birth control, but not right now. Right now, the only thing that matters is the delicious stretch of his cock as he thrusts inside of me for the first time, and my eyes roll back into my head as I almost come from this alone.

Nathan doesn't pause. There's no time to adjust or get ahold of myself as he fills me completely before pulling back out and slamming into me again. It's enough to steal the air from my lungs, and I reach out, gripping his arm hard, my fingernails digging into his skin, but that only seems to spur him on.

My toes curl, and I bite down on my lip to try and keep myself quiet as my orgasm builds in my stomach, ready to crash over me at any moment.

Nathan has other plans, though.

"You don't come until I say you can."

A choked sob is the only noise I can make in response as he continues to slam into me, and I know for sure now that he's, at the very least, thicker than either Alex or Desmond. That damn piercing is hitting the most amazing spot inside of me, and I know what he said, but I'm honestly not sure I can hold off if he keeps this up.

"S—sir, pl—please," I beg, but he doesn't respond. Peeling my eyes open, I find him watching me with a sparkle in his eyes that looks almost mischievous. He releases my hip, and for a moment, I think he might take pity on me...

I'm very, very wrong.

Instead of letting up or letting me come, he instead moves his thumb to my clit, where he slowly begins to circle it with just enough pressure to drive me insane. My back arches as a desperate, filthy moan is pulled from somewhere so deep inside of me. I've never heard it before, and I'm not sure I

could ever make it again, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm about to come whether he gives me permission or not.

It's right there, ready to crash over me, when all of a sudden, everything stops as he pulls out of me, his thumb disappearing from my clit. His fingers around my throat tighten enough to make it harder to breathe, but not impossible.

"Be a good girl and beg me to let you come, for me to fill you with my come."

"Please." The word is out of my mouth even before he's finished his sentence. I don't care what he said. I'd be willing to do it so long as he lets me come, so long as he fills me once again.

"Please fill me with your come, sir. Please fuck a baby into me."

It isn't what he asked for, but it seems to do the job. His hips snap forward, and I cry out at the harsh way our hips slap together, pushing me further up the bed with a groan of his own.

"Come with me, take every last drop of my come like a good fucking girl."

His thumb once again moves back to my clit as his hips take on an almost frantic rhythm, but this time he applies more pressure, moving fast enough that my orgasm builds back up in record time, crashing through me hard enough that it steals my vision and leaves me shaking.

Nathan releases my throat, dropping his forearm to the bed beside my head. He falls forward onto it, his head dropping to rest against my own as we both gasp for air.

His cock throbs, still hard inside me, and I feel his come as it leaks from inside me, making a mess of the both of us, but I can't bring myself to care.

He gets himself under control a lot faster than I do, and I'm not sure if that's because he's in better shape or what, but I feel like I could sleep for a few days at this point. I didn't even really do much but undress and lay here. Pressing up, he looks

down at me, and his eyes are so full of affection that emotion clogs my throat.

Nobody's ever looked at me the way he is right now, and I'm not sure how to feel about it.

Pressing his lips to my forehead, he sits back on his knees. He pulls my leg from his shoulder, pressing a few light kisses to my ankle before gently placing it on the bed beside him. Despite the fact that I know he just came, he's still mostly hard, but he pulls out, and I feel more of his warm come leak out of me. With two fingers, he collects most of the leaking come before sliding them back inside of me, making me hiss at the feeling while I'm still overly sensitive.

My pussy clenches around his fingers of its own accord as he pulls them out, and I watch his eyes darken with lust as he watches me.

"Let's get cleaned up and get you some water. I'm far from done with you for the night." His words have goosebumps breaking out over my skin. When he climbs off the bed, I see he's once again hard, and suddenly, I understand why we're staying more than just one night.

It seems it's going to take longer than that to satisfy him. I just hope I'm up for the task.



CHAPTER 30

Even after our weekend together, I still don't feel like Nathan had enough. If not for Addison and the fact that Monday meant work for him and the guys being back from their trip, I think he would still have me hidden away in that house with him.

Not that I'm complaining. I'm pretty sure I've never been more sore, but I also don't think I've ever had so many orgasms back to back.

It's strange to think that had almost been *my* house.

So many things happened and lined up perfectly for us to get where we are right now, and despite all the crazy, I can't help but be thankful for it all.

I know Nathan's right about my job, which is why Vince is currently driving me to collect my things instead of being back at the house with Desmond and Addison, much to Desmond's dismay.

As much as I love my job, it's not like I'll be giving up teaching, not really. I'll still have Addison, and he even offered to let me homeschool her if it made me feel better. As of right now, I don't think that will be necessary, but it was nice of him to offer. Not to mention, I could always look for another job at a different school or maybe as a tutor or an assistant.

It's not as if Nathan is simply trying to monopolize my time. He had no issue with me working before it became a possible safety risk.

He's not Carter. I remind myself once again because, despite the panic I feel doing this, I know Nathan, Desmond, and Alex only have my best interest at heart.

The drive to the school makes me nervous despite my belief that it's the right decision.

"You alright back there?" Vince calls back to me, and I realize I'd spent most of the drive staring out the window in a daze, fiddling with my necklace.

Nathan insisted I wear it despite my feeling it's too fancy for daily wear. I lost that argument, but he did promise me to try to tone it down in the future.

That didn't make me feel better as I didn't want him buying more for me, but at this point, I'm almost positive it's impossible to stop him.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Sorry, I'm just a bit nervous," I tell him truthfully.

"Nah, there's nothing to be nervous about. If they give you a hard time about it, let me know, and I'll come in and handle them for you." He winks at me in the rearview mirror, and I can't help but laugh, picturing it.

I know he's joking, but Vince is an intimidating guy. The thought of him putting Barbara in her place was exactly what I needed to loosen up a bit.

"Ah, that's better," he says, turning into the school's drive and pulling up in front of the door. "But seriously, any issues, just let me know."

"Thank you," I say quickly as I watch him move to exit the car. Before he can make it out, I quickly open my own door and climb out.

"Kat." I can hear his growl of annoyance, but when I exit the car and turn to face him, I see his smile.

“I’ll be back in a few,” I tell him with a wave before making my way up the stairs and into the building before he can yell at me.

I’m not sure when it happened, but I can’t deny I love messing with Vince. Something about him seems as though he should be the most serious person ever, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

Unfortunately, my playful mood doesn’t last as I make my way into the main office and find Barbara sitting at her desk, scrolling on her phone.

Is there nobody else in this whole building who can ever man the office? How is it that no matter the day, school year, or summer, it’s always her? Does the universe just hate me that much, or does she really just have the best attendance record mixed with zero social life?

I clear my throat as I walk toward her desk, and her head snaps up, a smile in place before it’s quickly replaced with a frown as she recognizes me.

“Back so soon? I thought you had another job you needed to be at?” she smacks her lips together as she chomps on her gum, and it takes everything in me to stop myself from rolling my eyes at her.

Honestly, I’m about to quit, so if there was ever a time, I could stop pretending it would be now. But I don’t really want to stoop to her level, not to mention, I don’t feel like she deserves an explanation.

“Actually, that’s what I was here about. I’m going to have to resign,” I tell her, plastering a fake smile on my face even as she turns her attention back to her phone without so much as batting an eye at what I just said.

“Okay, well, I’m just going to collect my things from my room now,” I say, hooking my thumb over my shoulder toward the door.

“Have fun with that, but just know that once I tell the headmaster, you’ll have to go through the whole hiring process again should you change your mind.” She blows a bubble with

her gum, still not looking up, and for a second, I dare say she almost seems to be giving me good advice.

“Or when they change their minds.” And there’s the Barbara I’m used to.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say instead of the other, not-so-nice things that come to mind as I quickly leave and head down toward my class for the last time.

It took me a few minutes to work up the nerve to even enter the room.

I’d half expected to find the flowers still on my desk where I abandoned them, but they’re gone, and while I’m happy not to have to look at them, that’s almost even creepier.

Nobody’s here. Vince is outside, and this is the last time I’ll be here.

I tell myself before taking a deep breath and unlocking the door to get this over with.



“Hey, Red, didn’t expect to see you here today.”

I whirl around at the sound of Trevor’s voice, smacking my hand to my chest. I’d been so focused on packing that I hadn’t heard him approach. Not to mention, I didn’t expect anyone else to be here.

“Shit, sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you,” he says, rubbing at the back of his neck, but I wave him off. It’s not his fault I’m so damn jumpy. I always have been, but right now, in this room, it’s worse. “No, you’re fine. I just wasn’t paying attention.”

I turn back to my desk, pulling out the last of my lesson plans and journals for the year from the drawer. My talk with Barbara already took longer than I wanted it to, and I feel bad making Vincent wait, despite how often he might tell me he’s fine doing it.

“So I heard you got moved, put in a bigger room this year, huh? That’s actually why I stopped in, since you’re right next

door to me now.” His words make me pause, but I brush them off and keep packing up my things. “I didn’t expect you to be here. Most people are enjoying their summer vacation until the last minute.”

“Oh, um,” I grab the last of the papers and push the drawer closed, standing up to really look at him for the first time. I hadn’t realized he’d moved further into the room, but he’s still near the door, which is good because we need to leave. “I actually just put in my resignation. I won’t be here next year. I was just getting my things.”

Moving around my desk, I set the papers in one of the last open boxes before looking around for my purse, only to realize I’d left it in the car.

Well, at least it’s one less thing to carry out.

“What?” Trevor’s tone is sharp, and I quickly look up at him. His brows are drawn down in confusion, and I can see why it might be a shock. I’ve only been here one year, and it’s not like this is a bad job; no, most people who teach here do so for the rest of their lives.

“Yeah, I had another offer.”

It’s not actually a lie, though judging by the way his eyes narrow, I get the feeling he isn’t buying it.

Crap.

With three large strides, he’s in my face, backing me up against the desk that my box rests atop of.

“This is because of them, isn’t it?” he hisses, all traces of friendly conversation from a moment ago gone.

“What? Who?” I stammer, unsure of what he’s talking about.

Trevor has always been a bit much, but right now, he’s bordering on crazed. His eyes dart around my face before looking down the length of my body in a way that puts me on edge.

He doesn’t respond, and I’m not sure if he’s ignoring me or just didn’t hear me.

“Trevor?” My voice comes out in a pathetic little whisper, and I cringe at how fucking weak I sound.

In a flash, he reaches out, his larger hand gripping my biceps as he pulls me toward him until we’re chest to chest.

“They’re making you leave, aren’t they?” His hand tightens around my arm, making me wince, but I bite back against making a sound.

“Who?” I ask again, although, at this point, I’m pretty sure I know. I feel like I need to keep him talking, though, so I can find a way to get out of this.

If there’s a way out of this.

“Don’t play stupid with me!” he shouts, shaking me, and this time, I can’t bite back the whimper of surprise that leaves my lips. “Those fucking assholes think they can come in here and buy you!?”

If I’d had any doubt about who he was talking about before, it’s gone now.

“N-no. It’s not like that,” I tell him, hoping I can reason with him. His grip tightens, and I know I’ve said the wrong thing. The same way, I know I’ll have a bruise in the shape of his hand on my arm later.

“Trevor, you’re hurting me,” I whisper, hoping I can maybe appeal to his sense of humanity, but instead of loosening his grip, he throws his head back and laughs.

“*I’m* hurting you!?” he barks, shaking me and making my hip slam into the desk. “What do you think those assholes are going to do to you, Kat? Do you think they are going to love you?”

His face twists up as if it’s the craziest thing he’s ever heard in his life, and I wish it didn’t hurt, but it does. I know he’s not in his right mind; that’s very clear, but damn if he didn’t hit the nail on the head.

“You think you’re so special that they’re just going to throw away their playboy ways and settle down with you when they could have anyone they want? When they can afford the best

and the brightest. They're only pretending to care because you serve a purpose to them right now."

"It's not like that, Trevor, I'm only taking care of Add—"

"Liar!" he screams in my face so loud I flinch away from him. Not that it does a damn thing, considering I'm trapped between him and the desk. "I've never seen so many of them around. Usually, they stick to themselves, but ever since they met you, they've been circling this place like hawks, waiting to get to you!"

I can feel his spit as it hits my cheek, and my ears ring. If this was a normal day, I have no doubt someone would come running to see what all the commotion was about, but it's not. It's the middle of summer, and as far as I know, the only other person here today is Barbara, and somehow, I doubt she would ever come running to help me.

"He's old enough to be your father, Katherine! He's a sick, perverted old man who uses his money to attract beautiful young women like you so he can use you until he's had his fill and then throw you away for the next one."

"You're wrong," I yell, despite knowing it's in my best interest to keep quiet. I just can't seem to keep my mouth shut.

Hearing him talk about Nathan like that pisses me off. He might be older, but everything else Trevor said is bullshit. He doesn't know the first thing about Nathan or the rest of them.

If he did, he'd know he'd never be half the man Nathan is.

"What did you say?"

My eyes fly open, and I come eye to eye with Trevor, who's only a breath away from my face, so close I can see the anger as it flares in his eyes.

Oh fuck, I just said that out loud...

How the hell am I going to get out of this now?



CHAPTER 31

I don't know how Nate convinced Kat to leave her job at the school, but I can't say I disagree with his way of thinking. Carter might have seemed like he got the message when we went to visit him, but guys like him never really do. I've dealt with enough assholes to know his type, and I'd bet my left nut we haven't seen the last of him.

Which I don't do lightly. I happen to enjoy having both my nuts, thank you.

I watch the clock on the dash as the minutes tick by and try not to worry, despite the fact that it's my job.

Well, kind of.

If you look at my paystubs, I'm the Lawson's chauffeur. But I'm really more of a jack of all trades. I might drive them around, but I'm also a bit of a bodyguard and who they call when they need things handled.

A lot of my job is spent sitting around, either gathering information or waiting on them. I should be used to it, but for whatever reason, waiting for Kat to come out of the school today feels as though it's taking forever.

It's strange having a woman around again, but Kat's good for not only Addison but the guys as well. After what happened the last time, I wasn't sure their sharing thing could actually work. I understood the idea, and while it sounded like

a good way to keep them together, it also sounded highly unlikely to work out.

In fact, I'd seen just how it could fail.

But something's different this time. Kat's different, not at all like Natasha. Despite my job and how often I was stuck taking her places, I never liked her, but Nate always chalked it up to jealousy. For some reason, the old asshole still thought I'd settle down someday. Hell, he probably still does.

It's laughable.

Twenty minutes hadn't seemed too damn long, but now, as thirty turns to forty, something begins to feel off. How long can it take to tell someone you're quitting and grab your things?

Maybe she could use some help packing things up? She's so stubborn, I doubt she would ever ask me.

Unable to shake the feeling, I shut the car off and head into the building. I've picked Addison up from here dozens of times, but I've never been inside. Thankfully, it's summer and deserted, so I don't have to worry about dodging a bunch of people.

However, that also means I can't ask anyone around me for directions.

Why the hell is this school so damn big?

I walk around for a few minutes, taking a few wrong turns before I hear something.

A loud voice rings down the hall, and while I can't make out what was said, I know it's a male voice, and I can hear the sharp tone.

That's all I need, though, because I know Kat's here somewhere, and suddenly, that bad feeling I had earlier makes a lot more sense.

I should have insisted I came in with her after the damn flowers. I knew it was possible our message to Carter would be ignored, but honestly, I didn't think he would act so soon.

“He’s old enough to be your father, Katherine! He’s a sick, perverted old man who uses his money to attract beautiful young women like you so he can use you until he’s had his fill and then throw you away for the next one.”

The voice is clear this time, and I just make out what he’s saying past the pounding of blood in my ears. We’d only dealt with Carter one time, but that doesn’t sound like him.

“You’re wrong!” Kat shouts as I round the corner down yet another empty hall. Unlike the rest of the building, one of these rooms has a light on, and it spills out into the hallway like a beacon, calling for me.

I’m fast, well-trained, and in shape, but even with that, somehow, it feels as if it takes forever for me to make it to the door. Like one of those old movies where the hallway gets longer, regardless of how hard the main character tries to make it to the other end.

Thankfully, that’s not actually the case, and I make it to the door, my hand already resting on my gun.

I look in, finding Kat in the room with a man I’ve seen a few times around the school before. I can’t recall his name, but it doesn’t matter much. I know he’s given her issues in the past, and it’s clear he needs to be taught a lesson.

He’s got her trapped, a desk at her back, and him pressed against the front of her, his hands gripping her arms as if to keep her there.

“...never be half the man Nathan is.” Kat’s words are hardly more than a whisper, but it’s impossible to miss the venom in them. It’s adorable, and something I can agree with, but also not her best move considering the fact that she has no idea I’m here, and this guy has already proved he’s a few screws short of a whole working brain.

“What did you say?”

Kat’s eyes fly open, wide, and afraid, and I get the feeling she didn’t realize she said that out loud.

Damn, this girl is going to put these boys in an early grave. I can already see it.

“I think the better question is, what did you say?” I ask, my voice low and husky as I fight with the anger that threatens to leave me beating him bloody without asking questions. It’s a nasty habit I picked up when I was younger. They tried to teach me better ways to handle myself in the military. But all they did was give me more ways to be lethal, which I’ll forever be grateful for.

Kat’s eyes flick up to meet mine over the asshole’s head, and the sheer relief that shines back at me is staggering. Nobody ever wants to see me except the guys and the little princess. To anyone without the Lawson last name, I’m their worst nightmare, even if they don’t know it right away.

The piece of shit in front of me seems to be one of the ones who doesn’t get it, judging by the fact that he still holds Kat’s arms as if he has any right to touch her or even look at her.

Pity, but I have no problem educating him.

“What did you say? I didn’t quite hear you before.” I press the barrel of my gun to the back of his head and get the great joy of watching him stiffen.

Good, maybe he’s starting to get it.

Not enough, though.

“No? Nothing to say now? Funny, I swear you were real loud a few minutes ago. Not so brave anymore?” Leaning in closer so that we’re damn near cheek to cheek, and I can see the sweat as it beads down his head. “I suggest you take your hands off her before you regret it.”

He hesitates a moment before slowly prying his fingers from her skin, and I can’t help but press the barrel in just a bit harder, seeing the red outline of his fingers and the deep indent from his nails left behind on her skin.

Don’t kill him right here.

He removes his hands but makes no move to back away from her, and I’m guessing that might be due to the gun. Against my better judgment, I let it fall to my side but don’t put it away. I’m still not sold on the fact that I won’t have to shoot this motherfucker right here.

“Are you okay, Kat?” I ask her without taking my eyes off the scum that still stands too close to her for my liking. Something I can see she’s well aware of as her own eyes dart between me and him before finally resting on him.

I see her nod from the corner of my eye, but that somehow doesn’t feel like enough. I can’t blame her for being scared with him here. She doesn’t know me, doesn’t know what I’m capable of, and part of me hopes she never really will, but I need to know she’s okay before I wrap this up and get her the fuck out of here.

“Kat.” I try to keep my tone lighter, knowing she’s probably shaken, but it still comes out huskier than usual, making her startle as her eyes fly back to me. “Are you okay?” I ask again, but seeing the fresh panic in her eyes answer’s my question before she can open her mouth.

“Yes,” she mumbles, nodding, and while she doesn’t sound sure, she doesn’t look away.

She’s strong, she’ll be okay.

With a nod of my own, I reach out, grabbing the little pussy by his collar and hauling him back away from her hard enough that he stumbles over his feet and almost falls. With him on the other side of the room, I step in front of Kat, blocking her view of him and his of her.

Staggering on his feet, the asshole chuckles, shaking his head and looking up at me with a confidence that wasn’t there, not two minutes ago.

Or maybe it’s stupidity?

“Real tough, hiding behind a gun.” The venom he had earlier is gone, and I can hear the slight shake in his words, but he sure tried.

They always do, though, don’t they? Everyone wants to believe they’ll be tough in the face of danger, but I’ve found most would much rather run away scared. Something I’d be happy to let him do had he been a regular asshole and not the type that puts his hands on women. My best friend’s woman at that.

“Oh, I assure you, I’m not hiding. I could beat your ass without it just fine.” I shrug because it’s simply a fact, nothing special, but I see the disbelief in his eyes. He wants to call me out on that, but he also doesn’t want to be wrong.

I give him a second, almost hoping he does challenge me, but to my regret, he doesn’t.

That’s fine. I owe him a lesson either way. This one will just be a little less fun for me.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to turn around and walk out that door.” I use my gun to point at the door, even though I’m sure he knows where it is. He got in here, after all. “And you’re never going to talk to Kat again, ever, in any way. If you see her in public, you don’t know her, no calling her, texting, emailing, nothing.”

It’s more than he deserves—damn near a second chance—but we’re in the middle of a school, and I don’t want to scare Kat any more than she already is.

We can always get better acquainted later, and believe me, I intend to.

“And if I don’t? What are you going to do, shoot me in the middle of a school?”

Or we could get better acquainted now.

Lifting my gun, I once again point it in his direction. The click of the safety rings out around the room louder than should be possible.

His eyes narrow at me before darting past me, no doubt looking for Kat.

The very idea of him looking at her pisses me off enough that I’m moving before I can think better of it. It’s not until I’m in front of him, the barrel of my gun pressed up into the underside of his chin hard enough to snap his mouth shut, that I even realize I’ve moved.

“Keep looking at her and find out. I wouldn’t care if we were in the middle of a church.” I lean in closer and hold his gaze, letting him see how serious I am. “I will put a bullet in

your brain if it means keeping her safe, and I won't even lose a moment of sleep over it."

His eyes dart from me down toward the gun and back up, and this time, I see the crack, the hint of his fear leaking in.

Good.

Most people can sense danger, can look into my eyes, and realize I'm not joking when I threaten bodily harm. Nate always said it was my crazy leaking through, but I don't really know what it is. It doesn't matter beyond the fact that it works.

He takes a step back, and I let him, keeping my gun and eyes trained on him as he moves away slowly toward the door. All the while reminding myself this is what I wanted. I want him to leave. I want him as far from Kat as he can be...

But I also want to make him bleed for what he did to her.

I offered him this way out, and now that he's taking it, I can't help but feel regret.

I should just handle him now.

I've made up my mind, ready to go after him, but I only make it one step before a small pressure on my back stops me in my tracks.

The asshole slips out the door, and I hear his feet as they slap the ground, no doubt running at his full speed down the hall.

It wouldn't be fast enough if I had my way. No way the asshole could outrun me, and even if he could, there's no outrunning a bullet.

With a huff, I let it go. Turning to face the little beauty I need to focus my energy on now.

"Kat."

Her arm is still outstretched. Her hand that once rested on my back now hangs in the air between us. She doesn't look at me; instead, her head's tilted down, her eyes hidden by her

downward gaze as well. But I don't need to see her eyes to know this has shaken her.

How could it not?

"Kat," I say her name again in hopes of grabbing her attention, but still, she doesn't so much as move.

I flick the safety back on my gun before tucking it back in its holster. She didn't seem to have any issues with the gun. She hardly even seemed to register it when I came in, but the last thing I need is another thing that might trigger her.

"Hey, Kat. How about we get you out of here?" I ask her, moving forward until my chest bumps into her still outstretched hand. Something about having her hand on me like that feels oddly personal, not to mention it's in the way. Reaching up, I gently push her arm aside, and she lets it fall down at her side.

"I'll come back and get your boxes later. Or you can leave it all here. I'm sure there isn't anything here that can't be replaced, and lord knows Nate would be happy to do it."

I'd hoped to coax some of her stubborn fire from her. I remember the way she reacted when I tried to give her that Black Card. You would have thought I was trying to give her a severed finger or something terrible with the way she refused it. But even now, despite the fact that I'm sure she would hate the idea of him repurchasing her things, even if he were more than happy he would be to do it, she remains mute, her eyes still downcast.

It's frustrating because I know it's all *his* fault, but I can't help feeling guilty for not being here. If I'd come in with her or come to check on her sooner, she wouldn't have had to deal with him like that.

Reaching out, I hook my finger under her chin before gently pressing up, tilting her chin up until we're eye to eye, and what I find makes me ready to chase that fucker down and put a bullet in his skull.

Tears well in her beautiful green eyes, but she doesn't let them fall. Her eyes are wide, fear shining back at me as I look

into them, and damn if she isn't innocent.

Innocent and beautiful.

“Come on, Little Beauty, let's get you home.”

I'm not gentle; it's never been who I am. The best I can hope for is to muster up a few nice words, a hug for Addy, and some tough love for the guys, but right now, I want to be. I can tell it's what Kat needs, and I might suck at it, but I can try.

Slinging my arm around her shoulder, I pull her into my side with the intention of guiding her back out to the car. Only that doesn't happen because the second she's nestled into my side, her arms wrap around me and squeeze. For someone so small, she's got a hell of a grip. It's on the tip of my tongue to tease her about it until I feel the warmth soak through my shirt and feel her tiny body damn near convulse.

I don't say a word, unsure if I'll make the situation better or worse. Instead, I just stand there, one hand rubbing circles in her back in what I hope is a soothing way as I let her get it all out. After this, I'll take her back to the house. We'll handle this asshole, of that I have no doubt, but who says I can't comfort her while I plan murder?



CHAPTER 32

Katherine's existence in our lives isn't something I can simply ignore, no matter how often I might try to convince myself it is.

In the beginning, I told myself she was like every other nanny as far as I was concerned, and for a time, it was true. Mainly when I wasn't home or kept myself locked away in my study down in the library or in some other far reach of the house, she had not yet discovered.

But despite how much I worked, I couldn't completely avoid her. She was at dinner, oftentimes even the one who cooked the meal. She went with us on family outings or spent time with us on weekends when we did things together, be it swimming or watching a movie down in the theater. And even when she wasn't there in my face, her presence lingered.

The smell of her lingered through the house, whether it be her perfume or simply her shampoo. I'm not sure, but I swear I'd never smelled cherries as often as I do now. Laughter filled the house, and it wasn't just Addy's, though hers was often the loudest, but Katherine's as well, and sometimes even Des and my father's. Hell, I'd seen more emotions from Nate than I had in years with anyone who wasn't us four.

And that's outside of the times I shouldn't have been keen on her existence. Like last weekend, when my uncle had me keep Addison so that he could take her to one of our other

properties. I didn't need to know why, and I sure as hell didn't ask, but despite the way I told myself I didn't want her, I couldn't stop my mind from wandering back to her when I was alone.

It's not as if my father or Desmond are exactly subtle, and while it might be easier to hide from Addison, who's only five, I assure you it's not the same with other adults.

At first, I'd wanted her gone. We hadn't had a woman here since Natasha, and we'd done just fine. I know our agreement was still an option, but somehow, I never thought they would want to try that again, let alone find someone who was willing and worked for all of them.

Kat changed it all, though. She was, in fact, somehow suitable for each of them, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in her at first as well. Back when she was simply Addison's teacher, before my uncle set his sights on her, or I realized she had slept with Des and my father last year.

So why is it that when she attempted to leave after the run-in she had with Trevor at the school, I suddenly found that's not what I wanted at all?

Fuck.

After Natasha, I'd sworn that even if they found someone else, I would stay out of it. She'd come so close to ripping us apart that it wasn't worth it. No woman was. Besides, I didn't need a woman to be happy. I had my dream job, and my family was happy and healthy.

I was set... or I thought I was.

Something about Kat calls to you, though. She's easy to be around, thoughtful, and caring. And as much as I hate to keep comparing them, Natasha was never any of those things, especially not to me.

No, she tolerated me, and that's the nicest way to phrase it.

Natasha wanted my cousin from the start. She'd been just like every other one of his fangirls, chasing after him with hearts in her eyes. She got herself a job down at the club in hopes of running into them and getting a shot with him, and

she'd done it. Not that it's hard. Before Kat, Desmond was a bit of a whore. He's always loved the attention he gets at the club, which is why he often spends more time there than the rest of us.

All it took was once, and she was hooked.

Before Natasha, the pool house was just that, a pool house. It wasn't a place for them to take their sexual adventures, which means there were many days of waking with random women here in all kinds of states of undress.

Thankfully, Addison was still very young, just under a year old. Looking back now, the pool house really was a wonderful idea, one we should have used earlier.

Natasha took full advantage of having free rein of the house, though, and quickly set her sights on more than just Des. When she thought she might be able to get farther, she went from heart eyes to dollar signs, and before long, she had all three of them convinced she could be not only the perfect wife to them all but also a perfect mother to Addison.

She could have won an award for the acting, I swear.

If any of them were around, she was perfect. She changed diapers, played with toys, and handled tantrums with grace while being completely put together. Natasha was like Barbie, never a hair out of place.

But it was a lie. The second she was alone with Addison, she would quickly hand her off to her nanny. If Addison continued to cry or needed attention, Natasha would quickly make her way to the farthest corner of the house to escape her.

It was annoying, but they were happy, and Addison had a nanny to take care of her, so I kept my mouth shut. I'd never taken an interest in her, and she'd never even attempted to talk to me. Hell, I'm not even sure she realized I was a Lawson until after almost a year of her dating them. And it was only because she brought up the question of marriage that she ever really cared to take notice.

I'm not sure if it was the first time she brought it up, but one night at dinner, she decided to push it far past what my uncle

seemed to want. She ended up hurting her own feelings because Nathan Lawson never had any plans to marry.

It's one of the reasons why Addison was born from a surrogate. Desmond's mom was a woman he had a short relationship with, but that was back when he first started his business, and there was a lot of red tape around his birth that ensured she stayed away. I'm not sure if it was true or something he just told us, but growing up, we were always told she was a drug addict. A one-night stand gone wrong, and nine months later, there was a baby with a note on Uncle Nate's doorstep. As far as I know, Desmond's mom never came back, and if she did, I never heard about it.

Desmond was the one with the bright idea for her to be with all of us, and then maybe one day we could see about marriage. Then she would be *our* woman, the only Lawson woman.

It was something both Nathan and my father often worried about. Someday, splitting the company for Desmond and I. Desmond claimed that was the perfect solution, and I'm sure it sounded like it. The only problem is that Natasha didn't want me, and if I'm being honest, I didn't want her. I'd seen the type of person she was. She'd made no attempt to hide it from me, because why would she?

It worked for about a month. When the guys were around, Natasha was all over me the same way she was with them. She would choose me some days over them, coming to sit with me when we watched a movie or spending the night in my room. What they didn't see is that she didn't want to touch me, to the point that she had me sleep on the ground when she stayed in my room and took the bed.

I'm not sure why I let her get away with it for so long. Maybe I'd hoped one day she would warm up to me and we could have what she did with the others. Or maybe I just didn't want to disappoint them and destroy what they had, but after a few months, I couldn't take it anymore. I heard Nathan talking to Vince about considering marrying her, and I had to tell him about how terrible she was. Vince being there was helpful. I

know he hated her. They never ever got along, and he often accused her of being a money-chasing whore.

Something I agreed with, and they do as well now.

Desmond hadn't talked to me for a long time after Nathan exposed everything I said and kicked Natasha out with a stack of paperwork from our lawyers.

I'm almost positive Kat isn't like Natasha, and I'd bet money this won't have the same outcome, but I'd always thought, even before Natasha, I was fine alone. For a while with her, I'd thought I wanted more, but I realized I was wrong. I didn't need her, and I don't need Kat...

But maybe, just maybe, I want her, and she might want me too?

Is that such a crazy thought?

With Natasha and any other woman who tried to pursue the 'Lawson men,' I'd been an afterthought or nothing at all. But Kat sees me, even when I don't want her to.

I'm not sure I'm ready to do anything about it or even admit it out loud, but for the first time since the agreement was made, I can close my eyes and see Kat in our lives for the foreseeable future. But even more than that, I can see myself with her, us all together with kids and happy, and I'm not sure if it's more exciting or terrifying.

One thing I do know for sure, though, is that she seems to have a few less-than-desirable people from her past who are threatening to make her run, and I can't let that happen. I know Vince is going to protect her. That's not only his job, but I get the feeling he likes her much more than he ever did Natasha. But some things are easier to discover when people leave a trail, and nothing on the internet is ever really gone. Thankfully, tech is what I'm good at.



It takes a little while, about a week. Carter tried really hard to cover his tracks, and I hit more than a few roadblocks, but

there's always a way around them. I'd had to reach out to one of Vince's guys for help to get into some databases that were a little more well-protected than someone's private PC, but they were happy to help.

Like legitimately excited.

In the end, it's Trevor who gives everything away. His call log comes back a bit concerning, and I don't need to be a genius to know my uncle, and Vince will want to know about this.



CHAPTER 33

After everything that happened with my apartment and then Trevor, the guys had been around a lot...

Like almost every day they were here, and even if one of them had to slip away to go to the office, they would be back as soon as possible. Oliver seemed to be the only exception, and even then, I saw him a lot more often than I had before, even if only in passing.

I love it, don't get me wrong, but after a while, it went from sweet to almost suffocating. They weren't just here because they wanted to be around me, though I hoped it was that, too. No, they were here so much because they were afraid to leave me alone. At first, I could see why they might think it necessary. I'd wanted to leave. I still kind of did when I thought about all the issues I was bringing with me and all the stress I was causing them. But they insisted it was something we could handle and that they would ensure it wasn't a problem. I want to believe them, but them being here, out of the office every day because they were worried I would finally break or run, it wasn't helping.

That didn't say we could work through it together. So I made them go back.

Nathan had the balls to try to act surprised when I told him he couldn't watch me every day. Too bad I wasn't buying it. I'm not one of his little fangirls. He can't just give me that

dark, sexy look and expect me to eat out of the palm of his hands... At least not all the time.

Last night, there had been a lot of going back and forth about what he could and couldn't do. The main one was him not skipping out on work because of me, which he was adamant he could do because it's his company. The asshole is so full of himself without even trying to be arrogant; it's exhausting.

But so was the sex after he agreed to go back to the office, back to what our normal was before Trevor. I didn't want him to have any kind of sway in my life and how we lived. Of course, even after agreeing, Nathan had damn near demanded that Vince be around when they're out.

Before, I would have been confused. Of course, he went with us. He's the driver. How would we get anywhere without him? But after seeing how he handled Trevor, I get the feeling he's not just their driver. I hadn't asked, unsure how to approach the topic and also unsure if I really needed to know.

Vince, being there, might very well have saved my life or, at the very least, saved me from some more bruises. The ones on my arms have all but faded now, but I swear I can still feel them sometimes or see them when I look at myself in the mirror. But I'm not sure it would matter if they told me Vince was a trained assassin or something else crazy like that. All that matters to me is that he was there that day, that he came for me.

The same way I know he will be there for not only me, but Addison as well. I couldn't even put up a fight when Nathan said his one requirement was for us to have him around. I don't think Trevor will be an issue with me no longer at the school, especially since Nathan is pulling Addison from it. But Trevor or not, I trust Vince.

The side of the bed is cold when I roll over, but I'm not surprised. Nathan is a man of his word, and he had said he would go back to the office so long as we were in agreement about Vince, which we were.

It's strange being alone in his room, but somehow being in his room isn't. Nathan might have been a little more hesitant, but after our weekend together while the guys were gone for work a few weeks ago, I feel like something changed, almost as if it slipped into place. Now, it just feels right, and not just with him.

Desmond and Alex have found a way to slide into my bed, both together and alone, or even whisk me away to their rooms. Honestly, I can't remember the last time I was alone in my bed for the night, not that I want to be.

The house is quiet, almost too quiet, as I make my way downstairs and to the kitchen with only Ruby for company. Addison should be up soon, and for a moment, I debated waking her now just to help with the silence, but the need for caffeine wins out, and I decide against it.

It's not until I'm seated at the island with a perfect cup of coffee that I notice the note sitting in the center, and a smile tugs at my lips. I'm not sure why, but the idea of a handwritten note makes me feel giddy. As I reach out to drag it over to me, I can't stop my heart from picking up speed.

God, it's like I'm a teenage girl with her first crush or first couple crushes, I guess.

My Queen,

Unfortunately, all of us were needed for a meeting today. Oliver will probably be the first one back around lunch, but Alex, Des, and I will probably be closer to dinner.

I roll my eyes after reading just the first half.

So much for 'they don't need me in the office, I can work from home for as long as needed.' I knew he was so full of it.

Not to mention, I'd be surprised if Oliver came home early. With the way he usually avoids me, I wouldn't be shocked if he decided to stay later to wait on them, if only to make sure he didn't have to face me. I try not to let it bother me, especially since recently he's been a little less flighty around me, but it still stings. I know it shouldn't. I already have three

amazing men, but I'll be damned if Oliver doesn't still invade my dreams, and it's not just the sex ones anymore, either.

No, lately, my dreams have taken a more domestic turn. While I still have some that wake me up in need of a cold shower, the guys are often there to happily quench that need. Most of the time now, my dreams are full of laughter as we go on outings, much like the zoo, with all of us and maybe a few more.

I'd never thought of kids and a future like this before. People had often asked Carter and me when we were going to have kids, but I always had an excuse, and he never seemed to mind. Now I'm grateful for that. The last thing I would want is something that tied me forever to him. But I don't have the same fear with these men. If anything, I find my dreams filled with children's laughter and tiny feet, my belly round. While I know it won't happen any time soon, I can't help but curse Nathan for bringing it up on our weekend away.

Dale is cooking today. You and Addison enjoy a day of relaxation, and if you should feel the need to go anywhere, remember, Vince stays with you.

Xoxo, Sir

A note shouldn't be able to make me feel like this, yet despite the thought, I can't argue the fact that my face is beet red right now, and my cheeks are seconds away from a cramp with how wide I'm smiling.

Asshole just had to sign it like that, didn't he? As if him using that awful nickname wasn't bad enough.

Ruby perks up, his ear twitching before he stands up and disappears back toward the stairs, and that's all the warning I get before Addison flies into the room. Her hair is wild, falling in her face and blinding her, but she doesn't seem to even notice as she continues toward me at speeds that are kind of amazing for how little her legs are.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Her hair can't hide the smile that's plastered on her face, and I quickly lean forward to be able to scoop her up into my arms. The guys might be gone for the

day, but I'll take this. Some time with Addison is a good thing, something I've missed.

"Good morning, Addy. How did you sleep?" I ask with her pressed close to my chest, rocking her gently the way I do most mornings.

"So good! Uncle Alex told me a story, and I had the most amazing dream! I was a fairy, and I had wings! You were there, Mommy, and so was Daddy, and Des, and Alex, and Oli!" She pauses to suck in a breath, and I can't help but chuckle at her excitement. For a moment, Trevor had made me afraid and had me second-guessing the guys and whether I was worthy of their time. But he can't take this away, the way Addison looks at me with such wonder and the love I feel for her.

Nothing can change that.

As Addison continues to tell me about her dream, I take her back upstairs and to her room to help her get ready for the day. I wasn't sure when I first woke up alone if I would be capable of anything more than just hanging around the house today, but I'm pretty sure I'll be fine, and getting out of the house is probably a good idea.

I won't let Trevor force me to remain inside for fear of seeing him everywhere. That's not fair to any of them, especially Addison, who deserves the chance to be out making memories, learning, and having fun. I won't let him ruin this for her; besides, Vince will be with us, and I have complete faith in him.

"Where are we going?" Addison finally asks after she's told me every last detail of her fairy dream, and I'm working on braiding her hair. Usually she would have asked much earlier, but her dream was the only thing she could focus on, and I can understand why, what little girl doesn't want to be a fairy princess?

"I was thinking we could go eat some breakfast and go out for a little fun. What do you think? Do you want to go have some fun with me and Uncle Vince?" I skirt around, not telling

her exactly where we're going because I kind of want it to be a surprise, but also, it doesn't sound as exciting as it actually is.

"Of course!" she says, her brows scrunching up as if she's offended I even had to ask, which I guess is fair. I'm not sure I've discovered much she doesn't like, even people she doesn't like. It always seems to be for good reason, though I'm not always sure she knows that reason. She's a pretty good judge of character, honestly, much better than I am, it would seem.

"Where are we going?" Vince's voice makes me jump, and I say a silent thanks to the universe that I'd already tied off her braid so I don't have to redo it.

Turning, I find him looking at me with a smirk on his face that tells me he's aware he just scared me and isn't even a little bit sorry.

Jerk.

"Uncle Vinny!" Addison quickly hops down from her vanity chair, dodging the toys that litter her floor like a pro as she flies toward him like a heat-seeking missile.

"It's a surprise," I tell him as he tosses Addison in the air, and her giggles fill the room. Grabbing my phone off the vanity, I hold it up to him and hope he gets the hint.

"Well, in that case, I'm pretty sure we want to figure out what this surprise is as soon as we can, so why don't we go grab something for breakfast while Kat gets dressed?" Vince flips Addison over his shoulder so she's riding on him piggyback style before he takes off down the hall and, no doubt, down the stairs to the kitchen before she can respond.

I quickly text him where we're going, along with a thank you, before heading to my own room to grab a quick shower and throw on some jeans and a T-shirt. It's still on the warmer side outside, but not as bad as it was a few weeks ago. Plus, a lot of buildings have AC, and I'd rather not freeze if I can avoid it. The only thing I hate more than sweating is freezing.

I hate the cold.

It doesn't take me long, maybe twenty minutes total, but somehow, it's still long enough for me to come down and find

a mess in the kitchen.

“Oh my, what happened here?”

Vince looks up from his spot on the stool next to Addison before quickly trying and failing to hide a can of Reddi Wip.

“Uncle Vinny made me waffles!” Addison tells me, glancing at me long enough to smile and see the evidence of said Reddi Wip before she quickly turns back around to her food.

Making my way further into the kitchen, it’s no wonder why she’s so happy to eat them. There are maybe two waffles on the plate covered in syrup and a mountain of Reddi Wip. To his credit, there are also strawberries that appear to even have been cut, and Addison wastes no time dipping them in the cream before popping them in her mouth.

“Now I understand why you weren’t in charge of her more,” I tease him, and he shrugs. The smile remains on his face, and I can’t help but smile as well.

I clean up a bit and eat some of the fruit salad from the fridge, the one Vince pulled the strawberries out of, though I have no idea why he only chose them. And before long, Addison is done and ready to go after washing up a little bit.

We head out, and of course, Vince already has the car waiting, which means he gets to the door before I even have a chance. I’d like to say he’s just doing his job, but the smirk on his face says otherwise.

The ride doesn’t take long, about a half hour, and for New York, the traffic isn’t too bad. Before I know it, we’re there, and judging by Addison’s look of confusion as we enter, I think it’s safe to say she’d never been here before. I half expected Vince to park and wait for us, the way he usually does, but instead, he dropped us off at the door and told me to get the tickets, and he’d meet us inside after he parked.

I wish I could say it didn’t matter to me whether he came in or not, but that would be a lie.

Unfortunately, I think that would be true regardless of whether the whole thing with Trevor happened or not, and

honestly, I'm not sure I'm ready to look into the why behind that just yet. My life is messy enough as it is right now.

The day flies by and ends up being just what I needed. Addy's laughter warms my heart, and after a little while, I feel myself relaxing, no longer looking over my shoulder every two seconds or tensing when someone brushes against me.

Watching Vince be pulled around by Addison also helped. There's something so entertaining about watching such a large man, clearly dressed for work, down on the ground playing with a five-year-old.

It's not at all helpful for my brain, though, but I'm happy to ignore that for now.

Sadly, I can't ignore what happens when we finally make it outside to the large water play area. Truthfully, I'm not even one hundred percent sure what happened or how, but it resulted in Vince being very wet and Addison laughing so hard she ends up on the ground clutching her stomach.

"What happened?" I ask, looking between them and trying to put the pieces together but coming up blank. I'd been not two feet from them, so how did I miss whatever that was?

"Uncle Vinny made a water explosion!" I look over and find a bucket lying beneath the water dome. The water is still spraying, though clearly not as bad as when it soaked him.

"Yes, very funny, brat," Vince gripes as he undoes the buttons on his black button-up, but he doesn't really look mad. If anything, he just looks wet, and I'll be damned if that isn't a good look on him.

Though maybe not in the middle of such a public place.

As if the universe heard my thoughts and felt the need to one-up me, I watch with wide eyes as Vince pulls off his button-up and is left standing in front of me in only an undershirt.

Shit.

I'd seen him without a shirt or in an undershirt a few times around the pool or swimming, but I'd tried to keep my eyes to

myself. The last thing I needed was to be caught ogling him.

Which, of course, is exactly what happens when he looks up a few seconds later and finds my eyes still all over him.

Apparently, my brain doesn't get to be in charge when faced with a handsome man. I know I should have looked away—hell, I still know it—yet somehow, I'm stuck, unable to control myself.

“Your cheeks are looking pretty red, Kat. Are you feeling okay?” he asks, stepping up so close to me that only I can hear him.

He's right. I can feel the heat, but I can't do shit about it, and him looking at me the way he is right now isn't helping a damn thing. I'm not sure if I'm seeing what I want to or if it's real, but I swear there's a heat in his gaze that isn't usually there.

“I'm going to go try to dry off a little bit. Don't wander too far, Little Beauty.” Before I say anything or even process what he just called me, he's walking away, and I'm left standing dumbfounded.

Little Beauty?

That's not the first time he's called me that. The day he saved me from Trevor, he'd said it as well, but I'd been more worried about everything else that was going on and didn't really think it was much more than a way for him to attempt to comfort me.

There's no way I'm crushing on yet another man! Someone needs to lock me up or something because this is getting ridiculous.

Needing to get my mind off of men, specifically the soaking wet man who's probably shirtless in the bathroom, I turn my attention back to Addison, who happily plays at the waterway on the other side of the space. Thankfully, everything is closed in, so there's no worry. She can't wander off, not that I think she ever would, but kids can be unpredictable, so it's always better to be safe than sorry.

Addy's playing with a few other kids. They all laugh and run up and down the length of the waterway, playing in the pool at the bottom with the small boats and other toys provided, and I can't help but smile. She's so full of energy and so happy, making friends everywhere she goes.

With Addison happily playing and Vince gone for the moment, I move to one of the benches along the wall where a few other parents sit watching. I could use a moment to get myself together, and playing with kids her age is good for Addy.

"Imagine seeing you here," a voice to my right says and I don't need to look to know I know that voice. I hadn't been paying attention to who was around me. Kids and parents were all in a constant state of movement, so having someone sit on the bench with me wasn't that big of a deal.

My mind goes blank, and I can't take my eyes off Addison. I need to get her out of here, away from him.

I move to stand, ready to dash to Addison, get out of here or cause a scene if I have to—whatever I need to do to keep him away from her—but he has other plans.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." I freeze at his words, and while I don't want to look at him, I don't miss his hand as it raises, his finger pointing across the room to more of the benches where a man sits.

A man I recognize.

"One wrong move, and my friend is going to take that little girl you love so much, and nobody will ever find her again." His voice is quiet, as if he didn't just threaten the life of a five-year-old. To anyone around us, it might seem like we're just having a normal conversation, but on the inside, I want to scream.

Trevor sits opposite me, his arms thrown over the back of the bench, the picture of relaxation as he smiles at me, and my stomach rolls.

How the hell do Trevor and Carter know each other? What kind of fresh hell is this?

It doesn't really matter, though, if I'm being honest; I just need to get Addison and me out of here and away from them.

I can't look at Trevor without my mind going back to the classroom and the way his hands felt on my arms, the bruises he left, and the fear I felt. I turn away, letting my eyes wander back to Addison, who thankfully remains blissfully unaware of the situation I'm currently dealing with.

"I've missed you, Katie," Carter whispers, his voice low and husky in a way I used to love but now it makes me want to gag. I'd forgotten how much I hated the nickname he gave me. In high school, everyone always said it was so sweet that he called me that. They would ooh and ahh, and I somehow convinced myself I didn't hate it.

I guess that only lasted as long as our relationship, though, because I hate it again now. I'm pretty sure I hate everything about Carter, so that's not surprising.

"I waited, you know. I expected you to come back, but no, you've always been so damn stubborn. I should have known." He chuckles, and the sound gives me the fucking creeps.

How had I ever wanted a life with this man?

I bite the inside of my cheek, knowing anything that might come out of my mouth right now will only make this worse. I just need to keep him talking until Vince gets back. I just need to keep Addison safe.

"I didn't expect you to whore yourself out, though. When Trevor told me you were throwing yourself into bed with a bunch of guys, some of which were old enough to be your father, for their money, I was shocked and disgusted," he hisses in my ear. I focus on my breathing; I don't want him to know he's affecting me. "Then those assholes came to the club and wanted to act like you were theirs! As if you didn't already belong to me. As if you won't always be mine. I'd thought Trevor was wrong, that you couldn't possibly be with these men, but I also knew you needed someone to support you. Someone to try to fill the void in your life after you left me." He leans in closer, and I can't help but flinch when I feel the warmth of his finger touch my cheek, and I know he

notices. I'm the center of his attention right now; there's no way he missed it, and one glance his way lets me know I'm right if his predatory smile is anything to go by.

I have to bite back the need to remind him that I left because of him. That he was the one who cheated on me. I know it won't do any good, and I don't need to draw attention to us.

"Imagine my surprise when they show up and buy the club, Katie," he spits, his voice so full of venom it should have me shrinking away, but I can't manage it past the shock of what he just said.

They bought the club.

"Because of you and this stupid idea that they have, that you belong to them, they humiliated me. Kicking me out as if I were some nobody, a fucking peasant." He spits the word in disgust, his breathing labored. I can't stop the smile that pulls at my lips, knowing they got to him. Knowing they had to have done it for me.

None of them said a thing to me about it, and somehow, that makes it even more romantic.

His cold fingers wrap around my jaw, tugging my head to the right so that I'm forced to look at him head-on, and there's no denying the anger that burns in his gaze.

"Do you have any idea the hit my reputation already took when you left me, and now this?" He leans in, his voice getting quieter but somehow angrier. I've been on the receiving end of Carter's anger a few times, but never in a place so public, and I'm not sure I've ever seen him this angry. "It's time to come home and stop playing. You had your fun, but I won't continue to be laughed at and ridiculed because you needed to explore your hoe phase under the pretense of a better job." He frowns at me in disgust. I try to pull free of his grip, but that only makes him tighten his hold.

"So this is what's going to happen. You're going to get up and walk out of here with me. Her little bodyguard will be back soon to collect her." A whimper breaks through my lips as I try to look toward Addison, but his grip remains firm. Out

of the corner of my eye, I catch a glance of her splashing and laughing, and I know he's right.

Vince will come for her. She'll be okay.

"Or you can resist, and I'll take you by force, and Trevor will take her, and you'll never see her again." He pauses, his lips twitching in a hint of a smile, one that makes him look even more deranged. "Nobody will."

"What will it be, my dear Katie?"

I don't trust myself to speak. If I open my mouth right now, I might scream or even start crying. Instead, I nod and hope he's smart enough to figure out that I'm agreeing to go with him.

His fingers loosen from my jaw, but he doesn't release me.

"I knew you missed me. How could you not when we were simply made for each other?" Before I have a second to comprehend what he's about to do, his lips are pressed to mine in a kiss that feels more like he's trying to mark his territory, to brand me, than to show affection.

He pulls back, quickly dropping his hold from my face before turning to meet Trevor's gaze across the room. I'm not sure how they know each other, but watching them have a silent conversation lets me see just how much they do.

God, I'd been so stupid to think Trevor was just an annoyance who would eventually take the hint, but even in all his toxic behaviors, I never thought this was possible.

With Carter's attention momentarily off of me, I take a chance to look back at Addison for what might be the last time.

It feels like an eternity since I'd been sitting with Carter, but really, it couldn't have been more than five minutes. Any longer, Vince would probably be back, and this whole thing would be handled, only to be a bad memory.

Unfortunately, Carter seems to realize time is ticking as well. Reaching for my hand, he yanks me up with him, pressing to his feet before quickly pulling me toward the exit. I

stumble for a moment before I'm able to get my balance. I have to fight the urge to let myself fall and slow him down. If I put up any kind of fight, I could be putting Addison in danger, and as much as I might not want to go with Carter, I just can't bring myself to risk her.

As if he can read my mind, his fingers tighten around mine, squeezing hard enough that a grunt of pain escapes me.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I can't trust you not to do anything stupid, Katie. I trusted you to do the right thing, come back, and look at what happened. No, I won't be making that mistake again."

The front doors come into view as he pulls me down the hall behind him. I hear his words, but I can't bring myself to reply, not when I know after we make it out those doors, I'm at his mercy for real. Here, in public, he has a sort of reputation to uphold, but once we're in the car, or back in Maine...

I'm not sure what waits for me in Maine, but I know I don't want to find out. Even if he promised me the world, all the money, attention, and love, I wouldn't want it, not with him, not anymore. But something tells me that's not even close to what waits for me, especially not judging by his grip on my hand and the way he's dragging me behind him.

It's not until he pushes open the door and I feel the warm air that panic really starts to feel like it's choking me.

Is Addison okay?

Did Vince find her?

Will he think I left her by choice?

Will she?

I remember the promise I made to her that I'd be there if she needed me. Last week, she'd had us make friendship bracelets for each other, and every day since then, she had checked my wrist to make sure I still wore mine. I hadn't taken it off except to shower because it really was so cute, and she was so proud of it. Leaving her behind makes the bracelet feel as though it weighs a million pounds, and I feel a lump working

its way up my throat at the idea of her thinking I abandoned her.

The lot is packed, but somehow, I know which vehicle Carter is dragging me to, even before we get close to it. The SUV is black with dark tinted windows in the front seats and damn near black ones in the back.

If he puts me back there, nobody will see me.

Fuck, I don't want to go. To leave Addison and the guys to go back to Carter sounds like a nightmare. Honestly, leaving them at all sounds like a nightmare, regardless of who I'd be going with. I might not have known them long, and our relationship might still be new, but I'm happy. Happier than I've ever been in my whole life.

They make me happy, *all of them.*

I can't do it.

I can't go quietly.

By now, Vince should be with Addison. There's no way he would be away this long, which means she's safe. Even if not, there's no way Trevor would know I didn't go quietly at this point. No, the last he saw, I was doing exactly what Carter said.

The second I decide, I stop walking, letting my heels dig into the blacktop of the parking lot, and I thank my lucky stars I chose real shoes instead of sandals.

Unfortunately for me, Carter isn't a small man. Maybe if you want to compare him to Nathan or Vince, but next to me, well, I don't really stand a chance. Despite me digging my heels into the pavement, Carter hardly slows down, instead tugging on my arm and dragging me behind him.

"Stop it, Katherine, you're going to make a scene," he hisses, hardly glancing back at me as he continues to pull me behind him like a child throwing a tantrum.

Which is a wonderful idea.

"Let me go!" I yell as loud as I can, and that seems to get his attention.

He stops dead, whirling around to face me, his jaw ticking, and I get the feeling he wants to do a lot more than drag me behind him right now. I try to pry my fingers from his hold, but it's no use, so again, I resort to yelling, and this time, he quickly looks around before slapping a hand to my mouth when he finds we're mostly alone out here.

Crap.

He hoists me up, one arm around my waist, the other pressed to my mouth as I kick and fight, but it's no use. With nothing else to do, I do the only thing I can think of and bite down on as much of his hand as I can get in my mouth, as hard as I can.

Not only does it make him drop his hand away from my mouth, but he also drops his hold on me and damn near shoves me away from him. I can't get my feet under me fast enough, and I stumble forward onto the ground, the pavement cutting into my palms. That's fine, though; I'll take a few scrapes and bruises over being stuck with him.

Carter curses behind me, and I take my chance, hoping he's distracted enough by his hand that he won't notice me as I attempt to crawl away.

I should have known better.

His foot slams into my hip, shoving me to the side, and I fall over, off balance. I don't want to be at his mercy any more than I have to be, though, so I quickly scramble back up onto my ass, trying to crawl away from him. I don't get far as he stomps toward me, his face pinched in anger. Before I have a chance to prepare for what he's about to do, his hand connects with my cheek, hard enough to send me sprawling on the ground.

"You stupid bitch! Have you lost your mind? You belong to me!" He stabs a finger to his chest as he leans over me, but I don't look up at him as I wipe my hand across my face to see it come away bloody. "I made you everything you are! If not for me, those assholes wouldn't even want you, you ungrateful whore!!"

His hand closes around my arm, yanking me to my feet, and this time, he doesn't seem to care about making a scene as he drags me to the all-blacked-out car. Tears well in my eyes, and I can't bring myself to care when they spill down my face as I try and fail to fight him off.

Without releasing me, he pulls the door to the backseat open, and even though I'd been giving it my all before, I find a way to fight harder, knowing if he puts me in there, I'm done for.

He growls and grunts as he pries my fingers from the side of the car one by one, uncaring that I'm screaming at the top of my lungs. Not that he should give a fuck. Nobody else seems to, and that had been the whole point of me screaming to begin with.

“Nobody's going to save you, Katie. You're mine. Always have been and always will be.”

I don't want to believe him, but I can only fight him off for so long. I know that and so does he.

Maybe he's right? Maybe I should just stop fighting?

Before I can make the choice myself, the sound of a gun cocking takes the choice from me as I freeze like a deer in headlights.

A stylized, grayscale graphic of a city skyline, featuring several prominent skyscrapers. The word "NATHANIEL" is superimposed in large, bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the skyline. The letters have a slightly distressed or ink-like texture.

NATHANIEL

CHAPTER 34

I'd told Kat I could work from home for as long as I wanted, and while that wasn't strictly a lie, it wasn't exactly easy. Many clients want face-to-face meetings, which I usually prefer as well. Thankfully, most know I also have a young child and no wife, so when I moved some meetings to video conferences under the pretense that she'd been sick, nobody questioned it.

Not that I would let them. Who are they to question why I'm doing business the way I am? No, they should be happy I gave a reason to begin with.

That didn't mean our first day back wasn't slammed. From meetings, to conference calls, and everything in between, the day was packed from the second we walked in the door, and by the time lunch finally rolled around, I was ready to make a run for it.

It's strange, honestly. For years, work had been my first love, then I had children, and things changed. They were the only things that I ever put above my job, but even then, balance was often tricky. Now I find I can't wait for the day to be over, that I'm looking for a way to cut and run to be with my queen and our princess, and I know the others feel the same.

Even Oliver, though he has yet to admit it.

Unfortunately, it's not just us either, and I don't even mean Vince, though he might be an issue later. For the moment, our biggest issues are Carter and Trevor.

I should have dealt with Trevor better before, but I'd thought he was simply jealous. Most jealous men will run off with their tails between their legs, all talk and no action. Never did I think he would be a danger to Kat.

Now Vince has shown his hand, and while I'm happy he was there to keep Kat safe, for the moment, Trevor is lying low. Not that we couldn't find him if needed; no, I doubt anyone could hide from Vince for long if he put all his resources into finding them. But Trevor hadn't been our main concern the last few days.

I'd wanted us at the house to show Kat she was safe and to make sure of it, and it seems I might have done too good of a job with the way she all but demanded we go back to work and stop coddling her.

Vince is with her and Addison now, and I make a mental note to have him start looking for Trevor in his downtime when we talk next. My mind wanders to about five hundred other things I need to handle, from business to home life, yet somehow, every thought I have brings me right back to her.

I sit staring at my lunch as she consumes everything. Images of her as Alex fucked her over my desk, the way she so easily complied, her willingness to please me. I'm so hard, it hurts, but I still can't bring myself to think of anything but her. The idea of her round with a child, of children of our own running around the house with her while we work, a rock on her finger fit for the queen she is.

"Shit." I shift in my chair, trying to relieve some of the pressure in my dress pants, but it doesn't help.

The faster we finish up here, the faster I can have her in my arms, in my bed, where she belongs.

I know it's true, but still, I have to force myself to pick up my sandwich and eat. The urge to skip lunch to make the day

over faster rides me hard, but I know if I get my way, I'll need a good meal in my stomach for later.

Maybe we should schedule a vacation. I text Alex to have him get the house in Curacao cleaned up. A smile threatens to turn up my lips at the thought of her at our waterfront home on the island. Like the rest of our lives, it's a bit over the top, which I know she isn't used to, but she will be someday.

I'll make sure of it.

I finish my sandwich just as the doors to my office slam open, and I can't stop the scowl that pulls my brows down. I hate being interrupted without warning. That's why I pay a secretary, speaking of which I need to see about replacing her. I didn't like the way she handled Addison when she was here last and now this.

It's not until I get a good look at who's just barged into my office that I realize why my secretary wouldn't have called me.

It's Oliver.

Had it been Alex or Desmond, this wouldn't be strange, but I can't remember the last time Oliver came bursting into my office or anywhere for that matter.

Not only is Oliver usually all for the rules, but he's also well put together and composed, all of which seems to have gone out the window right now as he runs toward my desk, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

He reaches my desk, panting, slamming down a few papers on the edge of my desk. I push to stand, reaching across the desk and grabbing them, my eyes flying over the papers despite having no idea what I'm looking at. Whatever it is must be important to have Oliver behaving like this.

By the time I reach the bottom of the first page, I think I have a pretty good understanding of what he's trying to show me, but it seems crazy, impossible even.

Looking at him, I find him mostly composed as he straightens up, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. I want to give him another minute, but I don't have it in

me with what I believe this paper is saying, and he seems to know this because with just one look, he reaches out for the paper, and I quickly hand it back.

“Something seemed off. What are the odds that not only Carter would be after her, ransacking her apartment, but Trevor would also be after her? At the start, I thought maybe she was just highly coveted, after all she had gotten all of your guys attention so it might not have been that crazy.” He flips the paper before quickly glancing up at me, and I try to keep my temper in check. This is my nephew, after all, but I know how he gets; he loves data, the numbers, and all of that. That’s why he works in our IT department and tends to stay away from customers.

“But then the flowers showed up at the school, and somehow it connected the two that might have been seen as separate entities before. I looked into all the airlines I could access, even called one of Vince’s guys, and none of them have any record of Carter flying. Not when her apartment was broken into or when the flowers were delivered, and both of those things seemed highly personal. A lot more so than just having flowers delivered, because they had her underwear wrapped up inside of them. Underwear that tied him back to the break-in.”

Everything he says makes sense. That’s what Oliver does, after all. He makes things make sense, and this is no different, no matter how much I might not want it to be true.

Trevor and Carter are related, cousins, the same way Desmond and Oliver are, and clearly close if Trevor has been doing all of Carter’s dirty work for him.

“You said you didn’t find any record of him flying out when the apartment incident happened or the flowers...” I trail off, shuffling through the stack of papers he’d presented me with. I’d just glanced at them before when I was trying to figure out what he was showing me, and I’m almost positive I saw airline paperwork.

“No, Carter wasn’t here for either of those incidents...” Oliver looks down at my desk, seemingly no longer able to

meet my gaze.

I find the paper I'd seen and quickly read it over to find he's right.

The airline's paperwork isn't dated near either of those; instead, the date reads three days ago.

My phone is in my hand before I even make the conscious decision to reach for it. The sound of the line ringing echoes around the room as I wait for Vince to answer.

He *always* answers. It's one thing I've always been able to count on him for: no matter what, he's there. I've had his answer with a man screaming in the background, mid-torturing, so as the line continues to ring, my anxiety continues to climb until I can no longer stand still.

"Get the others!" I snap, unable to keep my voice even as I dig through my drawer, grabbing my keys and wallet. I don't look up, but I hear Oliver as he takes off toward the door as fast as he'd come flying in here, and I can't help but feel grateful for that. He might insist he doesn't have feelings for Kat, but his feelings aside, he knows we do, and that means something to him.

Vince's voicemail picks up, and I quickly end the call, swiping through my phone to call Kat. Something tells me she won't answer either, but I can't help calling anyway, hoping I'm wrong and that whatever this sinking feeling I have is unnecessary anxiety.

I hear commotion in the hall and realize that it's time to move. Alex and Desmond won't sit still and wait to hear back from Vince, and if I'm being honest, I don't really want to either. Something isn't right, and I can't seem to shake the feeling that Kat might be in very real danger. I make it all the way to the door of my office before I'm struck by an idea and quickly turn around.

"Where are you going?" Alex shouts, but I don't stop, instead running back to my PC.

I'd been hesitant to give Kat that gift, worried that if she learned what it was, I might scare her away, but now I can't

help but be grateful.

“We need to get home!” Desmond yells, storming into my room, but I don’t look up as I quickly type in the information needed to log into the software.

Desmond, in his usual impatient fashion, doesn’t wait around to see what I’m doing. That’s fine, I’d rather him leave, that will put him ahead of us and keep him busy while I do this. I can call him when I know more in a few minutes.

“Tell me you have a good reason for us to still be here, brother,” Alex says, bracing his hands on my desk and leaning over it to try and see what I’m doing.

I know the second he sees what’s on the screen when he chuckles. I glance at him and find him shaking his head, but despite that, he doesn’t seem upset, not that I would care much if he did. Oliver stands only a few steps behind his father, looking between us, clearly not understanding but either not feeling the need to ask or not caring enough.

“The children’s museum.” The second her location pops up on the map, I’m moving, not even bothering to shut it down. The program will time out eventually and log me out, and anything else on the PC is protected.

Alex and Oliver follow me out without a word as we move down the hall toward the elevator, not quite running but moving much quicker than we usually do. Anna’s head whips up at the sound of us, and I watch her scramble to put her phone away and appear busy.

Yes, I definitely need to look for a new secretary.

As we make our way down the hall toward her desk, she quickly stands, not even attempting to be subtle, as she presses up her cleavage and makes her way around her desk.

Alex had said she was a bit flirtatious a few times, but for the most part, her attempts were easy to ignore, and she did her job well enough. For whatever reason, today, it’s not so easy to ignore, though.

“Mr. Lawson, I—”

I hold my hand up to stop her talking and hear Oliver chuckle from beside me. I'd forgotten Oliver wasn't her biggest fan. Maybe I'll leave him to find her replacement.

"Push everything out for at least two days and hold all calls. Nothing should be forwarded until you hear back from me."

I expect that to be the end of it, but of course, it's not.

"But I just scheduled them for today. I can't move them. Some of these clients have been waiting for a week or longer," she says, moving to walk with us toward the elevator.

I stop, turning to face her, and I can see that she thinks she's done something, that she's more than just a person in a chair. Many employees in this building were hand picked for their position by one of us, but Anna was not. Eleanor, our old secretary, had left on maternity leave almost two years ago and, while out, decided she wanted to stay home with her baby boy instead of returning. I can't say I blame her, but as such, we had a position to fill, and Anna was exactly that—a fill-in—one of our employees' cousins who was referred by them and needed a job. We hadn't had any issues with her that warranted us looking harder, until now.

"You're right," I tell her and watch as a dazzling smile lights her face.

It's a shame her attitude is so self-centered. She does well with phones and is very pretty, but her attitude ruins both of them.

I turn to Oliver, who is near the elevator, the button already lit up, meaning he called it. At least we're not wasting any more time with this, we would be waiting anyway, so why not handle two birds with one stone.

"Can you send out an email to everyone regarding pushing meetings for the next few days on the way?" I ask, and for a moment, Oliver seems caught off guard before he nods. Of course, I knew he could. Honestly, he could probably send them in his sleep, but I was trying to make a point.

I turn back to Anna who looks between us confused. Not that I can blame her, but I'm about to clear it all up for her.

“You’re fired. Pack up your things. I’ll have security come up to escort you out.”

Her mouth falls open at the same time the elevator dings, telling me it’s arrived. She opens and closes her mouth a few times, but nothing comes out, and I don’t have time to wait around for her to gather her thoughts. In fact, I can’t think of many things that would be worth stopping for right now.

We step into the elevator, and the doors quickly close, leaving Anna behind, and I can once again focus on what’s important.

Fishing my phone from my pocket, I can’t help the frown that pulls at my brows when I see no new messages or missed calls.

What the hell is going on that Vince still hasn’t called back?

My mind races with all the possibilities, but I push them aside for now as I click on Desmond’s number to call him with an update on where we need to be headed.

Even as the elevator reaches the main floor, I know he’ll make it there much faster than us. Not only did he leave before, but that damn bike could get him there in a fraction of the time, even if he hadn’t. I might be a bit jealous of the fact, but I can’t deny I like the idea of one of us being there. Who knows what Carter is up to, especially when he has help we weren’t counting on.



CHAPTER 35

I knew something was wrong the second I walked out of the bathroom. Addison was still running around playing, but Kat was nowhere to be found. She would never leave Addison behind by choice; hell, even if she had to go to the bathroom, I know she would have waited. I've seen the way she looks at that little girl; she would never put her in danger.

Years of training are hard to ignore, and before I even need to think about it, I'm moving toward the threat in the room. He wasn't here before I'd gone to the bathroom, which means he'd more than likely been watching us, but if he's still here, where the hell is Kat?

That's what I plan to find out.

I grip his shirt, pulling him right off the bench, and his eyes go wide. He'd been so focused on Addison that he didn't even seem to notice my return.

"Where is she?" I hiss as the woman to his left clutches her non-existent pearls before collecting her child and scurrying away. Good, that's probably for the best because I'm not positive anyone will want to stick around for what I'm about to do to him if he doesn't answer me in the next few seconds.

"I, I... who?" Trevor stammers, looking around the room as if he doesn't have a clue who I'm talking about, but we both know that's a lie. I can see it in his eyes; he's hiding

something, covering for someone, and I have a creeping feeling that I know who that might be.

“Uncle Vinny, where’s Mommy?” Addison asks, pulling on my pants, and I can hear the sadness in her voice.

I tighten my grip on Trevor’s shirt to ensure he doesn’t try anything as I turn my attention down to the little girl at my side.

“I’m not sure, Princess, but how about we go find out, huh?” I ask her, trying to keep my voice even so as not to worry her. She’s used to Uncle Vince, who is funny and plays with her, but that’s not who I am right now.

No, right now, I need to be Vincent, who was expelled from four high schools before I wound up in school with Nate, who kept me in line. The same Vincent who went to the military with him and served two years before being recruited for a different kind of team, one that used my skills instead of trying to force me to calm down.

The man Nate depends on to protect the most important things in his life, his daughter and his lover.

Fuck, if Addison weren’t here, this man would be a bloody mess already.

Addison is moving before I tell her where we’re going, and I remember Kat telling her earlier that if they should get separated, she should go to the main desk and tell them. It was a good lesson, but something I felt was unnecessary, considering she had both of us.

Guess I owe her an apology.

“Keep her here.” I manage to growl out to one of the young female workers who Addison ran to when we reached the main desk. She can’t be more than sixteen, but she nods and seems to understand this is serious.

Most people know Addison if only because of her last name, which means they know the lengths we go through to keep her safe and out of the media. Which is why we hadn’t really looked at Trevor twice prior to him showing his true colors with Kat; we’d assumed he was smart enough to stay away.

We were wrong.

Dragging Trevor with me, I take him into the closest bathroom, away from Addison's gaze and the cameras. We might be able to cover our tracks, but it's always easier if we don't have to, and it means more fun.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I can't answer it—not right now. Every second counts.

The second the door closes behind me, I drop my hold on his shirt before swiftly pulling back and decking him.

Somehow, I'd thought he would put up more of a fight, but with one hit, he goes down like a sack of bricks, out cold.

I guess it's for the best; I don't have time to waste on him, not when Kat is still missing. I leave the bathroom and take a second to look around for a way to ensure the asshole stays put. I'd like to think he's going to stay out, but I don't want to risk him getting away should he come to before I can come back for him.

The bathroom has a lock, but I don't know who has the key, and I don't want to waste time looking for it. No, I have a better idea.

Not far from the restrooms is a vending machine full of drinks that should do nicely.

I move quickly, pushing it so that it stands in front of the bathroom door, acting as a barricade. With him handled, I take off toward the closest exit, which just so happens to be the front door. I'd like to assume that if Carter took her, he would use another exit, but I also don't think he's as smart as he seems to think he is, so maybe not.

The doors slide open, and I have to fight the urge to push them when it feels too slow. I know it only takes a moment, but every second is another too long when Carter could very well be taking off with Kat, and I get the feeling she didn't go so willingly.

Outside the door, I stop at the top of the steps, taking a moment to survey the lot. There are a lot of cars here and even more in the parking structure not far from here. Hell, there's

parking all over the place. As much as I might want to run around looking for her, this is a damn good vantage point.

A scream catches my attention; it's raw and full of fear, and I'm positive it's Kat. I can't see her from here, but it sounds like she might be on the side of the lot just to the left of the building, which is just out of sight.

Hopping down more of the stairs than I touch, I make it to the bottom faster than should be possible before taking off around the building while pulling my gun from the back of my pants.

Am I supposed to bring my gun to places like this? No, not really. Does that stop me? Also no. The only way I leave it behind is if the building has security that checks, and even then, some allow it based on my client.

Oftentimes, if you conduct yourself as if you're not breaking the rules, people believe that. I've had years to learn how to blend. So well that even I sometimes believe it.

The second I round the corner, I see her, along with her asshole ex, who should have left well enough alone. We warned him, tried to give him a chance to stay away, but clearly that was a mistake, one I assure you we won't be making again.

Kat's putting up a good fight, screaming and shouting as she fights against his attempts to shove her into the back of an all-black-out SUV, and I push myself harder. They're about one hundred yards away, but I know she can't keep this up forever; she's small, and I'd bet it's only by sheer stubborn will that he hasn't overpowered her already.

Just a few more seconds, Little Beauty, I'm coming!

I'd love nothing more than to tackle the motherfucker or, honestly, just put a bullet through his skull, but he's too close to her. They're damn near wrapped around each other as they struggle. Her to get away and him to put her in the car.

No, I'm here now, and that's what matters.

He'll get his later. I'll make sure of it.

Lifting my gun, I press the barrel hard against the back of his skull as I click off the safety.

I guess he has some brains because he freezes.

“Let her go, and maybe I won’t blow your brains out.” It’s a lie, though, or it kind of is. It doesn’t have to be now, and I don’t need to shoot him exactly, but he will suffer. He doesn’t need to know that, though. If he did, I doubt he would cooperate so beautifully as he is right now as he slowly lifts his hands into the air and turns around.

“There’s really no need for this. Isn’t that right, Katie?” Carter asks, and I can hear the demand in his tone. As if he really expects her to back him up after what he just put her through. With a growl, I slam my gun into his forehead and huff a laugh when he cringes away from me.

Good.

This spoiled little fuck needs to be knocked down a few pegs and given a taste of his own medicine, and I’m more than happy to give it to him.

Kat scrambles away toward the rear of the car and away from the door the second Carter releases her. I let her go, knowing she needs a moment and that me touching her or saying anything might just make her panic more. I’m not known to be comforting.

Yet when I look at her, I can see the relief that shines in her eyes, just like it had the day I got between her and Trevor. I’d never cared to be the hero, happy to do whatever my job demanded of me, but I’ll be damned if she doesn’t make me crave that look.

I take her in, checking her over to find tears tracking down her face, blood dripping from her split lip, and what looks like the beginnings of a nasty bruise forming on her right cheek.

Would it make her feel better if I shot him right here? Or would that be more traumatic for her?

My finger damn near caresses the trigger as I fight with myself on what I should do, what would be best for her.

Before I can decide, a small body slams into me, distracting me from my inner turmoil and indecisiveness, and I hesitate, unsure of what to do.

With my focus on the little beauty, the asshole takes his chance and quickly ducks out from the end of my gun before quickly jumping in the car and taking off.

I should shoot out his tires, run after him, and have Kat go back to Addison so that I can finish this now, and we can be done with it all. Yet, for whatever reason, I can't make myself do it.

We can handle him later; I won't rest until he's answered for what he's done to her, but right now, Kat needs me, and she needs me for more than just killing.

Flicking the safety back on my gun, I stash it away before wrapping her up in my arms as she continues to sob into my chest, her breathing harsh and staggered as she fights for each breath.

"It's okay, Little Beauty. I've got you. Nothing's ever going to hurt you again," I tell her, rubbing a hand through her beautiful red hair as if she's a cat. I'm not sure if I'm helping or not, but I swear her breathing seems a bit more even the longer I hold her.

My phone vibrates, and without letting go of her, I dig into my pocket for it. I'd missed the call earlier, and I can only assume it was Nate; no doubt he was probably not happy I'd missed it, but it couldn't be helped.

"They're okay. We had an incident, but Kat and Addison are safe," I tell him in lieu of greeting.

"We'll be there in about ten. Desmond will probably be there any second," Nate growls back at me, and I know he's mad; I can't blame him. I'd failed to keep Kat safe and, by extension, Addison as well. Trevor could have run off with her, and then we would have had a much different and much worse situation on our hands.

Nate hangs up without asking what happened, and I know when he gets here, he will demand every last detail, but for

now, his main concern is getting here to them.

“Oh god, where’s Addison?” Kat hiccups, pulling back to look around before looking back at me.

“I left her with one of the employees,” I assure her, but that doesn’t seem to lessen her concern.

“Trevor was here! Carter said—”

“Hey, look at me, Kat. I need you to take a breath and listen. Carter is gone, and Trevor can’t get to Addison right now, okay?” I grip her chin lightly, unsure of what might be hurting her but needing her to really hear what I’m saying. “I won’t let them get to either of you.”

Her eyes look to mine as if searching for something, and whatever it is, she must find it because, after a moment, she takes a deep breath and gives me a small nod.

She doesn’t seem very sure, but that’s fine. I’ll show her, and one day, she won’t question it anymore.

“How about we go check on the little princess? She was worried about you.”

We were worried about you.

That’s the truth, but for some reason, I can’t bring myself to say that bit out loud. It feels like so much more than just words, words that are true because I had been worried, more worried than I’d been about anything in a long time.

Kat nods before pulling back further, but she sways on her feet, and I have a feeling that the adrenaline that was fueling her fight with Carter is running out. I catch her before she can sway too much or fall, and without giving her a chance to fight me, I scoop her up into my arms bridal style and start back toward the building.

The second we make it back into the building, Addison’s voice rings out as she calls for Kat before she’s coming at us like a missile. The poor girl I’d left her with looks horrified as she chases after her, but I wave her away. She’d kept her here and safe while I went after Kat, and that was all I needed.

Trying to keep Addison away from Kat would be a damn near impossible task, especially right now.

“Mommy, are you okay?” she asks as she comes to a grinding halt in front of the bench I’m setting Kat down on. Her eyes are wide as she looks at Kat’s face, and I realize seeing her in this condition is probably confusing, especially when she was fine a few minutes ago.

“I’m fine, dear. There was a little problem, but Uncle Vinny came and saved me.”

A loud squeal outside has us all looking toward the entrance. I’m familiar with the sound, but even if I weren’t, it only takes a moment before Desmond is running up the stairs to the door, yanking his helmet off as he goes. He pauses for a moment inside the door, but only for long enough for him to spot her. The second he sees her, he’s moving again, rushing toward her. I watch the array of emotions as they play over his face. He’d come in looking worried but also ready to fuck someone up should he need to, but now seeing her, some of his worry melts away, relief taking its place before he really gets a good look at her and notices her split lip and growing bruise. His jaw ticks, and I’ve known the kid long enough to know he’s pissed, but I can’t remember the last time he swallowed it down like he is for her. No, usually Desmond is a loose cannon; the girls love it, and it’s gotten him into more than a few sticky situations over the years.

Maybe he’s finally learning a little control.

His eyes flick to meet mine for a moment, and I know that control won’t last long. But that’s okay, it doesn’t have to. I’ve got one of the assholes and don’t plan to let the other one get very far.

Kat lets out a little squeak of surprise when he reaches her, not pausing for a moment, instead quickly scooping her up into his arms to hold her close.

“Careful, she’s weak. The adrenaline’s wearing off,” I warn him, and he nods before sitting on the bench with her still on his lap. He holds her close, whispering words I can’t hear as he rubs soothing circles on her back, and I see her shoulders

shake. I can't see her face, but I'd bet she's crying again. Shock can do that to you.

Addison sits close to them on the bench, and after a minute, Kat wipes her eyes before pressing her lips to Desmond's cheek and then turning her attention to Addison. You'd never know everything she just went through as she smiles and talks to the little girl who stares up at her with so much admiration you'd think she really was her mother.

Nate, Oliver, and Alex aren't far behind Desmond, which is impressive considering he rode his bike here, but I've also seen how Nate can drive, so maybe it's not that crazy.

Nate makes it to the desk first, and I can see the questions swirling in his eyes, but he doesn't voice them aloud. There's a time and a place for that, and this isn't it.

No, right now we need to get Kat back to the house and probably looked at and get the asshole in the bathroom back to the warehouse.

"Daddy!" Addison shouts, running over to Nate with a huge smile before she launches into all the details of her day. She doesn't get far before her little mouth pulls down in a frown, and she turns in his arms to look over her shoulder at Kat, who now sits on Alex's lap, though Des is still right beside her.

"Mommy got hurt." Her voice is so soft but full of sadness that it really pulls at the heartstrings. The same ones I would have sworn I didn't have prior to the little princess.

"I know, Princess. That's why we're here. How about we head home and get her looked at? You guys had a long day. We can have Dale come make something and just relax for a little while. What do you say?"

Addison nods happily before giving him a hug. I look to Oliver, who stands just a few feet behind Nate. He's been quiet since he came in, but his face tells me he's deep in thought. He's always been smart, a real brainiac. I'm still not sure what happened. Did they rush here because I wasn't answering? And how did they know we would be here? Somehow, I bet he has something to do with at least some of those questions, but

we'll get to that. I look back at Nate to find him also watching Oliver, and I can't help but raise a brow in question at him because if I didn't know better, I'd say it almost looks like our little Oli might be envious of his cousin and father and the position they're in right now.

But that can't be right...right?

Oliver might not have ever said as much, but he's never really been one to seek out women, and he really hasn't done anything since everything went down with Natasha.

Just another thing to look into later.

Clearing my throat, I pull both their attention back to me. "I have one of the issues handled. I'll fill you in on it once we're back at the house," I say, careful to watch my words with Addison right here. Nodding toward the bathroom that's still very much blocked by the vending machine, it only takes them both a moment to catch on.

"Hey, Princess, what do you say we go tell Uncle Alex, Des, and M-Mommy it's time to go home? Daddy and Uncle Vince will meet us there." Oliver smiles at her, and honestly, I'm surprised he only stumbled over the word once. Before she can answer, they're moving towards the little group at the benches, and it only takes a moment before they all head out, leaving me and Nate to handle Trevor.

It's probably for the best; should I need some help, which I don't see happening, Nate would be my best bet. He might not use his training anymore, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have most of the same stuff I do buried in that mind.

"I know you saw the way he looked at her," I say as we make our way toward the bathroom. Nate grunts as he helps me push the vending machine aside, and I know damn well it's not because of its size. We're big guys, and businessman or not, Nate is still in shape.

"I did," he says after a second, nodding before he looks at me, and I know there's more coming. "I saw it, and you saw it, but I'm not sure he's quite ready for that conversation yet, so let's just handle this for now. It's easier."

I can't help but chuckle because he's right, but he shouldn't be.

Before I can push the door open, Nate catches my arm, and I stop to look back at him over my shoulder.

"He needs to be handled," he says, his face deadly serious as he looks me in the eyes, and I know what he's saying, even if he's not exactly saying it. Nate isn't one to use excessive force. He often will use basic scare tactics as needed or even buy people out if it's required, but he isn't one to ask me to kill people. I have done both with him asking and without, depending on the nature of the task, but it's usually a last resort that he will ask it be done.

"They both do," I say in lieu of agreement, earning a nod before he drops my arm, and we head in to grab the asshole who couldn't take a hint. Too bad for him; it took too long for him to see the whole picture, and now it's too late.

Whatever it takes to keep her safe.



CHAPTER 36

They're all worried, and I can't say I blame them. Although, I feel they should be more worried about Addison than me, but what do I know, I guess.

I'd literally just convinced Nathan that they could go back to work, only for everything to go very, very wrong.

At some point on the way home, I'd fallen asleep and ended up sleeping through the night. I wake up in Nathan's room, and although the clock says it's six in the morning, he isn't here. Instead, I find him, Desmond, Alex, Oliver, and Vince in his office.

I'd heard their voices before I knocked, but the second I knocked, the room went quiet behind the door.

"Come in," Nathan calls, and I'd been about two seconds from just walking in anyway.

Pushing open the door, all eyes turn to me, and for a moment, I contemplate turning around and walking back out.

Each of the guys sits in a high-backed chair opposite Nathan, who sits at his desk, with the exception of Vince, who is leaning against the far wall.

Nathan pushes back from his desk, his chair easily rolling back on the hardwood floor. "Come have a seat, Kat."

I stand still, unsure what he means at first; there are no open chairs. I'm going to go ahead and blame the fact that I just got up, not to mention everything that happened yesterday, for how long it takes me to make sense of what he's saying.

On his lap. He wants me to sit on his lap, in front of everyone.

It shouldn't be a big deal. Not after our conversation, and definitely not considering the fact that I've been naked or fucked by most of them. Yet somehow, this seems almost more intimate, for reasons I can't put my finger on.

Finally, I make myself move, looking down at my feet as I move across the office to drop down onto his lap. The second my ass touches his leg, his fingers close around my chin, forcing my head up so that he can press his lips to mine, oh so gently.

It's one thing when Desmond or Alex do something like this. PDA doesn't seem to be a big deal to them, but I would have taken Nathan as more reserved, especially because, for the last few weeks, he hadn't really touched me outside of our time together away or in his bedroom.

"Rub it in, old man, real mature." I chuckle against Nathan's lips, hearing the sass in Desmond's voice and his growl.

"How's Addison?" I ask once Nathan's pulled back. I'd almost gone and checked on her before I came to find them, but if she's still asleep, I didn't want to wake her.

A gentle smile turns Nathan's lips up, and he shakes his head. His hand moves from my chin up my cheek, his thumb ghosting over my cheekbone, and I can't help but flinch back.

That's fucking tender.

"How about you take a second to worry about how you are? I assure you Addison is fine, and I can only assume that is in large part thanks to you."

He sounds so sure of himself, but he's wrong, and I'm shaking my head before he's finished speaking, making his brows furrow in confusion.

“They were only there because of me. They knew Addison meant something to me and planned to use her against me. She was in danger because of me.”

The room is silent around us, and I realize too late I’d been yelling. Embarrassed, I look down, wringing my hands in my lap, but I can feel all eyes on me. I wasn’t trying to yell, but my emotions seem to have gotten the better of me, and they continue to get the better of me as tears gather in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

“Katherine.”

Nathan’s voice is stern but not unkind, but still, I kind of feel like I’d rather run than meet his gaze right now. How could he possibly want to keep me around when I’m a danger to Addison, to all of them, honestly? No, I should have left after my run-in with Trevor. They already had to pull Addison from her school with all of her friends because of me.

Slowly, I lift my head until I can look up at him through my lashes.

He raises a brow at me, and I lift my head the rest of the way, meeting his gaze.

“Carter is a sick man, one you’re in no way responsible for. His being there wasn’t something you could have known was going to happen, and when faced with him, you still chose to keep Addison safe. I know he left his marks on you. Not everyone could have made the choice to put their fear aside, even for the safety of an innocent child.”

His words hit me hard, and I lose the fight against my tears, one rolling down my cheek before it’s quickly joined by another.

“You care about Addison just as much as we do, as much as any mother would love their own child. Believe me when I tell you, there isn’t anyone I could have chosen that would have been a better nanny for her.”

The tears roll a little more freely now, and I quickly move to wipe them away, only to instantly regret it.

“Ouch!”

Fuck, that hurt. My eye throbs and Nathan quickly pulls the handkerchief from his breast pocket before gently dabbing at my eye.

“The doctor will be here soon to check you over,” he says, folding the handkerchief and dabbing at my lip. I dart my tongue out and taste the blood on it before I remember Carter backhanding me.

As if the memory unlocks something, I feel sore and tired, like I’d just gotten over being sick and done a major workout.

I also remember Carter got away.

Shit.

“What about Carter?” I ask, my voice high-pitched, my panic leaking through.

“That’s actually what we were here to discuss.” Gently, Nathan’s arm snakes around my waist before he turns me on his lap to face the others and moves his chair back in toward his desk. Feeling their eyes on me, I take a deep breath and steel myself to meet their gazes.

Desmond is to the far left, his eyes intense and almost angry, but the second our eyes meet, they soften. His eyes jump around my face, no doubt seeing the damage Carter did. His brows pull together before he huffs and looks away. I try to tell myself it’s not me, it’s him, he’s upset with Carter, but I’d be lying if I said it still didn’t sting. I’m not sure how he knows or if he can just sense my change in mood, but Nathan’s arm tightens around me for a moment in almost a backward hug. It makes me feel much better than it has any right to, but it also gives me the strength to look to Alex.

Alex’s eyes look sad as he looks me over, but I can see the anger in them too, same with Nathan and Desmond. I have a feeling that’s something they all share right now, but it’s nice to know they aren’t mad at me, at least.

“Still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he says with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, but I know he means it all the same. I chuckle, and while it pulls at my lip and hurts my eye, it feels good—a much-needed break in the tension.

Oliver sits next to his father, and I almost can't bring myself to look at him. He made it clear in the beginning he wasn't on board with all of this. Maybe me as Addison's nanny, but even that he hadn't seemed super excited about. Yes, in the last few weeks, he might have been less likely to hide away, but he never should have felt the need to hide in the first place.

No, if he's mad, I need to face it.

I let my eyes fall on him, and instead of anger, I find... I'm not even sure what emotions swim in his eyes, but they don't look unhappy.

"I'm glad you're okay, Kat." His voice is low, making him almost sound unsure, but it's more than I dared hope for. I have to remind myself of my lip so as not to smile so wide I risk splitting it again.

His cheeks tint with a slight red. I quickly avert my gaze down to my lap feeling mine do the same.

Vince is in the back of the room, which is mostly cast in shadows right now with the sundown and only the small desk light on. But even though I can't see him, I can feel his eyes on me. Something about his gaze is comforting. I'm not sure if it's because he's become something of a savior to me over the last few weeks or because he's just got that kind of energy, but I can't help but be grateful for him the same as the others.

He's the reason Carter didn't get me into the back of that car and no doubt the reason Addison was able to get away from Trevor after I was gone, too.

Trevor!

"What happened with Trevor?"

"That's the other thing we're here to discuss," Nathan says, his voice a little deeper, angrier, I assume, not that I can blame him. "Vince?"

Vince doesn't move, but all eyes turn to him. I hear him fold his arms over his chest and feel his gaze on me.

I have to fight the urge to run to him and thank him for saving me. This is a serious conversation, and I can do that

later. Not to mention, I've done enough crying for now, and I can almost guarantee that would only lead to more. Okay, maybe I should skip the hug and simply go with a good thank you.

Yeah, that's probably a safer idea given my emotions, not only about yesterday but the confusing ones I've had about him for the past week or so.

Now is definitely not the time.

"Trevor doesn't know where Carter is," Vince says, and his voice sounds gruff and angry, not at all like I'm used to. "I'd like to say he's lying, but he's held to that despite attempts at persuasion."

Attempts at persuasion... What the hell does that mean?

I don't ask, not sure I want to know, but also not wanting to interrupt.

"I'm pretty sure Carter was using Trevor as a way to get to Kat when he wasn't here, like a go-between. The problem is, in doing so, I'm pretty sure he created an obsession for Kat in Trevor. He thinks Kat should be his the same way Carter does. He views her as a piece of meat to own," he hisses, his voice full of disgust, and I can't say I disagree. Trevor's always given me the creeps, but this is a lot even for him.

"He's a danger to her, you should just fucking kill him." Desmond huffs as if it's the simplest solution and not like he just suggested Vince murder someone.

"Desmond," Vince growls, his tone warning, but I get the feeling it doesn't so much have to do with what he said versus me being here.

"What? Afraid to scare your 'Little Beauty'?" Desmond snaps, using quotations on the nickname Vince had called me yesterday.

Suddenly, I wish I'd stayed in bed because the tension in the room is enough that I feel I could cut it with a knife.

Vince pushes off the wall, his long legs carrying him across the office in just two steps as Desmond pushes out of the chair,

quickly moving around the chair to meet him chest to chest.

“Enough.”

Vince and Desmond both stop, turning to look at Nathan, and I do the same.

His jaw is set, his eyes cold the way they often seemed when I first met him, and I get the feeling he isn't playing around right now. Judging from the way Vince and Desmond step away from each other, I'd bet they see the same thing I do.

“We'll deal with Trevor, and if he has to be killed, that can be discussed later. Vince, right now, I want everyone you have looking for Carter. Kat is ours, and nobody gets away with threatening what's mine.”

AFTERWORD

How we doing??

This might have been one of my tamest endings to date, and while I'm sure you still want to see Trevor be handled and all the other yummy fun they will get up to next book; at least nobody's life is hanging in the balance... yet.

So how did we like it? Anything you just need to see happen? Do ya'll want Vince in or out? Jump over to my FB group and let me know, I love hearing from you <3

I'm off to write some new stuff, so check in often to keep up to date!

xoxo Sara

ALSO BY SARA HINDS

Vengeance City:

[Vengeance & Sin](#)

[Betrayal & Deception](#)

[Sacrifice & Redemption](#)

Lawson Legacy:

[Unexpectedly Lawson: Winter Novella](#)

[Beneficial Misfortune](#)

Beasts of Extinction:

[Shaped by Destiny.](#)

[Shaped by Discovery.](#)

[Shaped by Darkness \(Coming 2025\).](#)

Into the Woods:

[Into the Woods](#)

[\(Part of the All Hallows Eve Antho until Jan 25\).](#)

Roommates from Hell:

[Running from Nightmares](#)

ABOUT SARA HINDS

My love for reading goes back as far as I can remember. When I was growing up, my mom

used to get mad when I asked for a new book, “How do I say no to that?” she’d ask me.

Well, the answer is she didn’t. My love for reading recently developed into a need to create my

own badass females with men who make your mouth water and stories that keep you on

your toes. I live in Michigan with my husband, three boys (soon to be daughter too), and a few spoiled pets with the dream of owning a goat.

When I’m not spending time with my family, you can find me reading or writing, usually with a Red Bull in

hand. I’m known to go and go, but a good book can easily put me down until I’m done with it.

I also enjoy anime, adventure, and sleep, in no specific order, and of course, being weird with people I love <3

SPECIAL THANKS

I wouldn't be anywhere without you guys, my wonderful readers!! I cannot explain how grateful I am to have readers who enjoy the crazy ideas that take over my daily life, and I can't wait to keep bringing you more! :)

Special shout out to:

Renee (Nae), the bestest friend/PA/Alpha reader a girl could have and Lex!!!! I would be lost without you guys keeping me on track!

Shout out to Char for keeping the hype team going and being amazing!

My Viking, who supported my dream and dove into the world of smutty books with me for this journey!!

My betas!!! Char, Hope, Jennie, Jessica, Kate, Morgan, Nikki, Rose, Samantha Hickey, Sarah, Tory, Adrienne, Christina, Jennifer, Kaylynn, and Rainbow!

You guys are the bestest and lifesavers!!

And of course, my Patreon Supporters!! <3

Britney and Tiffany!! You guys rock my socks

Getting these books done is hard, but with you guys and my hype team, we get it done, and I'm so grateful for each and every one of you!! <3

STALK ME!

Stalk me, don't worry, I like it! ;)

Want the latest on all my books in this series and my
upcoming projects?

Come hang out with me on all my socials and join the
Readers Group on Facebook!

I love hearing from everyone and sharing my newest ideas
or just random thoughts with everyone!

