



# Mr. Billionaire's Second Chance

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Billionaire Preston Clarke conquered my bed and stole my heart. If only he hadn't broken it and walked into the office a year later... as my new boss.

I know, I know. It's my fault for falling for a filthy rich and obscenely handsome Manhattan type. Silly of me to think Preston had something more beneath his immaculate suit than just a chiseled body.

But what a body. I still wake up sweating from dreams about the night we shared. I thought knowing I'll never experience one again was torture enough. I was wrong.

Because working with him every single day is definitely worse. I hate that he thinks he can order me around or that he still thinks I belong to him. And I really hate that he stays late in the office when I try to bury myself in work to stop thinking about him.

Most of all though, I hate seeing glimpses of the man I once believed he was. Hints of true passion and charm beneath Mr. Billionaire's stone-cold demeanor. But it doesn't matter how many evenings we spend together in the office. There is absolutely no way I'm falling for him again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 63

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Prologue

Katherine

4 Months Ago

I ran my fingers along the seam of my satin dress as I felt the heat emanate from the grand fireplace before me. In the warm glow, I heard two glasses clink together and I turned to see him standing there with that decadent smirk on his face. The scent of his cologne wafted through the air, lulling me, and in that moment I truly believed it couldn't get any better than this.

"1996 Chateau Latour. Only the best for a woman as beautiful as you," he said. I rolled my eyes at him playfully, feeling my skin heat up as he inched closer.

"I'm sure you have a bottle ready for every woman you bring through here. Isn't that right, Preston?"

"I do, but I don't waste a bottle like this on just anyone. You're one of a kind, Katherine."

I smiled, watching as he poured us both a glass and handed one to me. My freshly painted fingernails wrapped around the stem and I sipped lightly, enjoying every bit of it.

"You surprised me, Preston Clarke. I never thought you'd be capable of holding a real conversation, much less one that has lasted this long," I teased.

“You really don’t know much about me, do you?”

“Besides what I see in the papers, not really. I know better than to think your scandalous lifestyle and the rumors about which next big business venture you’re looking into are all you have to offer. If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here. You remember that night, don’t you? The night we first met?”

“How could I forget?” he asked, with a smile.

“You did a number on that dress. I never did manage to get the stain out,” I responded, chuckling.

“If I hadn’t spilled my drink, I would’ve never gotten the chance to know you. You’re the first person that spoke to me like a human being in ages. It was refreshing.”

“Something tells me you spilled it on purpose,” I said.

“Well, you know what they say about us Clarkes. We see an opportunity and we run with it.”

“I should’ve known.”

I couldn’t hide the flush in my skin, the light buzz I felt from the wine, or how much he made me want him. There was a time I promised myself I’d never get involved with any of New York’s corporate types, because I’d heard time and time again that they were trouble. Preston Clarke was the last person I expected to run into that night at that new bar opening downtown.

It was a quaint little place, hardly the kind that had a line going right out the door. If I hadn’t let Poppy drag me out that night, I never would’ve met you. I’m still trying to

decide if she did me a favor, or if all of this luxury will still melt away and leave nothing behind. There was something about it all that felt a little too good to be true. I still wondered what a man like Preston would want with someone like me; a nobody in his eyes.

He held my gaze, not breaking it for a moment as he sipped on his wine. I watched as he ran his fingers over his stubble, and I felt it hard to catch my breath. I toyed with the small diamond pendant that sat proudly on my décolletage. He looked down on it, smiling brightly.

“You never did tell me what you were doing in Brooklyn anyway. With someone like you showing up, I would’ve expected there’d be more of a turnout than there was,” I said, as the memories of that night came flooding back.

“The bar owner is a friend of mine. We’ve known each other for years and I told him I’d show up once he actually got that place open. I offered to help him out a while back but he refused. He said he wasn’t going to be accepting any handouts. He finally did it,” said Preston.

The smile on his face was genuine and it was one of the reasons he drew me in as quickly as he did. The past few weeks of incredible nights out, seeing the city in a way I never did before, made me wonder what his life really looked like. I wanted to know the Preston that was hidden underneath that lavish suit and perfectly tousled hair. I wanted to know what kept him up at night, what his dreams were, and all that made him the man he is today.

I got a little too caught up in the whirlwind that was the life of a Clarke, but I knew there was still so much I wanted to see. I glanced down at his lips, and the tension between us grew as he lifted my chin, kissing me softly. It ignited something inside of me that I was sure hadn’t been there before. I ran my fingers through that perfect head of brunette hair as I kissed him, feeling him eventually pull away. He smiled,

getting up and smoothing out the creases in his suit pants before offering me his hand.

He led me straight to the double doors of his bedroom. My heartbeat started to quicken again knowing how incredible he felt, how the intensity between us grew every moment we were together. I wanted him. I wanted to feel every inch of him again. The softness of his lips on mine, the way his jaw tensed as he thrust deep inside of me, it left me needing more. I watched as he shut the doors behind him. He undid his belt buckle with a smile, and I took to the bed, running my fingers along his luxurious silk sheets. It was clear then that it was going to be yet another night that I absolutely wouldn't forget.

"It's time we get you home, Kat."

I didn't argue with him. Part of me wished that I could stay and let this feeling go on forever, but the other part of me knew I had to look out for myself. I knew I had to reel myself back, because if I ever did get lost in him, I wouldn't be able to find a way out. He led me down to the lobby, holding the door of his black town car open as he slid inside next to me. He drove me back to my apartment, and as I got out, he rolled the window down, smiling softly.

"Until next time."

"I'll be seeing you, Preston Clarke."

The window rolled back up and his car took off into the night. At home, I opened up my front door to hear the television on and I set my things down on the entryway table just as Poppy came rushing over to me. Her chiffon blouse was slightly undone and she pulled up her pencil skirt with her free hand, sipping on a glass of wine with the other.

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“Can I pour you one?”

“I’ve had enough wine tonight. Though, I think it’s time we cut you off. Rough day?” I asked. I got a good look at her bloodshot eyes and it told me she probably hadn’t slept in days. I made my way over to the living room couch to find a dozen case files scattered around and it seemed to me like Poppy hit a wall tonight. She only ever finishes a bottle when she can’t close a case. I thought, turning to ask her about it, but she was far more interested in the night I had.

“So, what? It’s been five dates so far. Weren’t you the one that told me to stay away from New York’s finest?”

“I guess I found someone that made me change my mind. Preston Clarke isn’t the man I thought he’d be. He’s better,” I said.

Poppy was practically bouncing off the walls as she listened to all the details of another evening spent with him. I felt my cheeks get hot again wondering when I’d see him next. He made me feel special, showering me with the kind of luxury I was sure I’d never be able to understand. What other tricks do you have up your sleeve, Preston Clarke? Surely you can’t be that perfect.

I crawled into bed that night expecting that I’d wake up to a text like I’d done for weeks before, but once the sun started pouring into my small bedroom and my eyelids fluttered open, there was nothing there. He’s probably just busy. He has a lot on his plate after all. Much like the city, a Clarke never sleeps. I thought, remembering his words as I laid in bed for a few moments, relishing in how incredible I felt. I went about my day as usual, but when I returned home that night

there hadn't been any word from Preston. I texted, called, but there was absolutely nothing.

It took a few days for it to sink in that he wasn't going to reach out again. It took a few days for me to realize that I was just another one of those girls, taking up room in his calendar until he got bored enough to move onto the next. I thought you were different, Preston. Looks to me like you're a carbon copy of every New York elite left out there. I should've known better. I should've listened to my gut. You knew all the right things to say, and now you're probably saying them to someone else.

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### Chapter One

Katherine

Today

I heard Poppy knocking on my bedroom door. I rubbed my eyes sleepily as I caught sight of the time and the dozen missed calls on my phone from work. Shit.

“Are you up? Kat, I have to leave now. You can’t be walking into work late again!”

“I’m up! I’m up,” I said, opening up my bedroom door.

“Couldn’t sleep again, huh?” she asked. I could tell that she was studying the bags under my eyes and how worn out I looked, but I had to assure her I was doing a little better.

“I slept okay. I’m just so tired. Work’s been crazy. That’s all.”

“Kat, you and I both know this has nothing to do with your job. I’m a damn lawyer but you’re somehow the one that’s always got their shit together. I can tell when something’s up. This has to do with Preston, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t know what to say. It had been four months since that night and I hadn’t heard anything from him since. Part of me had been expecting some terrible apology a few weeks later, but he never reached out. I wondered if I’d been reading too much into things when we were together, like I got swept up in the high of it all, but he was just



enjoying my company for the time being. You damn well fooled me, Preston. There's no way in hell I'm letting that happen again.

Poppy didn't wait for a response. She glanced down at her phone as it started blowing up with countless text messages.

"Listen, we'll talk about this tonight. We'll go out, get a drink. It's time you remember that there's more to New York than Preston Clarke," said Poppy.

I smiled, taking a deep breath, watching her rush right out of the front door. I ran the shower, the hot steam filling the entire bathroom and I let the water wash away yet another sleepless night. I was tired of thinking about Preston, about all of the other women he probably had lined up the minute he was finished with me. Every time I thought about it, I grew angrier. I'm done feeling this way about that asshole. It's time I get back to focusing on me, my career, and my life.

I fastened the buttons on my blouse, taking one look at my mess of brown hair in the mirror before tying it back into a low bun. I grabbed my things, making my way out the front door to hail a cab, and once I was safely in the backseat I felt like I could finally breathe again. I scrolled through my messages, feeling my heart sink into my stomach at the thought of what I was just about to walk into.

You better be here, Kat. This may just be the most important meeting of your career.  
- Jamie.

"How much longer?" I asked the cab driver, trying to hide the desperation in my voice.

"We'll be there in five."

Ten minutes later I held the door handle, ready to make a run for it the minute I saw

that familiar skyscraper appear with its perfectly embossed sign near the entrance. I almost forgot to pay the cab, shoving a few dollar bills at the driver before bolting inside. Once the elevator doors to the firm opened up, there Jamie was with his arms folded across his chest.

“You were supposed to be here ten minutes ago. In my office. Now.”

I followed Jamie in, passing the receptionist’s desk where the phone was ringing off the hook. I caught sight of a stack of files waiting to be delivered to the right office, and when I glanced down at the label, I knew we were dealing with the big sharks now. Kingsman Enterprises? I heard the name, I know they’re big, but not much more than that. My heart started thumping loudly as Jamie held the glass door open for me, and I took a seat right across from his desk.

“I’m so sorry I’m late, Jamie. What is this about?” I asked.

“Well, thankfully you don’t have to move on this until this afternoon, but that means you’re just going to have less time to prepare.”

“Prepare for what?”

“We have a new client that’s an old acquaintance of mine, and he wants a forensic audit conducted on a company he runs with his business partner. He has reason to believe that his partner has been engaging in fraudulent activity, and after hearing his story, I have to agree that there may be something there,” said Jamie.

“You want me to conduct a forensic audit?” I asked. My eyes widened at him, and I tried to hide the surprise in my voice.

“I thought you’d be a great fit to do something like this. You’re sharp, you’ve got a great track record here, and I know you’ll get the job done. Unless you think that

you're not up to it?"

"No, no. I can do this, Jamie. You can count on me," I told him.

I was so eager to get back into work that I didn't even question where this was going. From the moment I accepted the job I knew that this wasn't going to be handled traditionally. There was something strange about the way Jamie was talking about it, like he desperately needed me to find something. I took a deep breath, knowing that if I could pull this off, it would secure my place here for a very long time. It will also take my mind off of other things and I definitely need that right now.

"That's what I like to hear. Now, Kat. I need you to know that we're going to be handling this one differently. It's going to be somewhat off the books and you can't discuss anything you find with anyone other than the client and me. Is that clear?"

"Y-yes. Uh, is there anything else I should know?"

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“You won’t just be reviewing documents either. You’ll be doing more than just looking for discrepancies in their financial reports. I need you on site at their headquarters to monitor the behavior and spending habits of the client’s business partner. Do you think you can do that?”

“That’s not really the kind of thing we do here, Jamie. Shouldn’t that be left up to -”

“I told you these were special circumstances. If you don’t want to go through with it, I can find someone else who will,” he said, frustratedly rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“As I said, you can count on me. Now, which company is this for?”

“Kingsman Enterprises.”

I clutched the folder in my hand, focused on the clacking of my heels on the pavement as I arrived at the restaurant. When the doorman welcomed me, I realized it was way too far out of my budget. It’s a good thing lunch is on the firm this time. I thought, walking up to the hostess’s stand. She smiled warmly at me, and I gave her my name as I tried to hide how absolutely terrified I was.

“Right this way, Ms. Hollis.”

The clinking of wine glasses and expensive cutlery filled the room as people in freshly pressed suits enjoyed their three-course lunches. The hostess led me to a table at the very back of the restaurant, and I was quite happy about the privacy. This was the first time I ever did anything like this, and the last thing I needed was for

everyone else to see how badly I could mess things up.

You need to relax. Jamie wouldn't have asked you to do this if he didn't think you were ready. You'll be fine. This isn't exactly what you were hired to do, but it's going to help you get your foot in the door. You did say you imagined yourself taking Jamie's job one day once he moved up the ladder. I guess this is the part of the job that gets left off everyone's resumes.

I barely managed to have a sip of water before I heard someone approaching me. I turned around to see a handsome older man standing there with a gentle smile on his face. It was hard to imagine him as a big business shark, but if there was one thing I knew about New York men, it was that looks were certainly deceiving. I got up to greet him, shaking his hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Wolfe."

"Likewise, Ms. Hollis. It seems we have quite a lot to discuss. Please, let's enjoy our meal first," he said, ushering me to sit back down.

It wasn't long before our waiter brought out my Cobb salad and Mr. Wolfe's steak. I started to calm down once we finally got to talking. I listened to the way he spoke about his business partner, and it seemed to me like he was a real ass. I finished up my meal, sipping on my water, right before the question came tumbling out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"Why get into business with someone like that?" I asked. My eyes widened the minute I realized what I'd said, but it was too late. Mr. Wolfe simply laughed, and I sighed in relief.

"He's my nephew. Step-nephew, to be precise. I promised his father I'd look after him, but much like many of the other rich bachelors in this city, all he wants to do is

bleed the company dry for every damn dime he can get. I can't exactly go to the board with any of this without concrete proof, and I'm sure after he realizes you're going to be around for a while, he'll realize this isn't just an empty threat. The last thing I need is for my step-brother's company to go south because my nephew thinks he can get away with just anything."

I sympathized with him, wondering how terrible of a person his nephew really must've been to do this all while potentially ruining his own father's legacy. It felt strange to be so close to this, in a way no other forensic auditor would ever be, but I wanted to help. After hearing Mr. Wolfe's history, I couldn't wait to break it to his nephew that he was going to be investigated for fraud. Now I understand why Jamie wanted this done under wraps. Any wrong move and Mr. Wolfe's nephew might find a way to cheat the system again. There's no way that's happening on my watch. Not now, and not ever.

"I'll help in any way I can, Mr. Wolfe. I'll get you what you need to fix this," I said, reassuringly.

"Thank you, Ms. Hollis."

"Please, call me Katherine."

I arrived at Kingsman Enterprises with my head held high. I walked right up to the receptionist to show her my credentials and receive a visitor's pass.

"How long will you be needing this?" she asked, rather unbothered.

"As long as it takes. Please just make sure it works until I won't need it anymore. I'm going to need your boss to clear his schedule. Tell him Ms. Hollis is here to see him. I'm sure he's been briefed," I said.

This caught her attention because she immediately picked up the phone and dialed up to his office. She handed me a pass, and I made my way to the elevator. The entire ride up I wondered what kind of man would do such a thing to his own father's company, and then I remembered just how greedy these New York corporate types could really be. This wouldn't be the first time I dealt with one of those.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a man standing there with his creaseless button-up shirt and glasses. He appeared nervous, like he'd just received word of what was happening, and it was quite the sight to see that I wasn't the only one under an immense amount of pressure.

"Ms. Hollis, please follow me," he said.

I walked with him all the way to the grand glass-enclosed office where I was left to join the man that was having a rather heated discussion over the phone, but when he finally turned around, my heart leaped up into my throat.

You've got to be kidding me.

There he was, after all this time with his button-up shirt sleeves rolled up and that perfect chiseled jaw of his. I hated to admit that he looked just as good as I remembered, and that's when it hit me. This is the man I'm going to be investigating for fraud. Well, if he's as bad of a businessman as he is a human being, it won't be that hard to nail his ass to the wall.

I raised my eyebrow at him, taking a seat across from his desk, as he sat down in his executive office chair. I expected him to be flustered or even frustrated, but he just gave me a cold stare. I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit that it would give me an immense amount of joy to see him scrambling, but he looked confident as ever and the longer I was in his presence, the more my own confidence began to melt away.

“Katherine?”



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“Preston Clarke. What a surprise.”

“I’ll say. You’re the last person I expected to walk through those doors. When my receptionist called up telling me that someone from Eland and Ballard was here, I -”

“You what? Expected a man to stroll right in and tell you that you’re being investigated for fraud? I hate to break it to you, Preston but I’m the one that’s taking the reins now.”

“Look, Kat. I don’t want there to be any bad blood between us, especially now that you’re handling this. I don’t know who hired you to conduct this ridiculous audit, but I can assure you that I have nothing to hide,” he said.

“I can’t give up the name of my client, Preston. What I can do is to let you know that you better be telling the truth, because if I do find anything incriminating, well it won’t be very good for you.”

“Kat. I know you’re still upset about how we left things, but I -”

“Save it, Preston. It seems to me like you have much bigger things to worry about now. I hope you’ve cleared a space for me because I’m going to be hanging out here for quite a while.”

“Make yourself comfortable, Kat. You know there’s always room for you,” he said, teasingly.

I rolled my eyes at him, watching that familiar smirk return to his face. What the hell

have I gotten myself into? What's your story, Preston Clarke? This time I want the truth.

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### Chapter Two

Preston

I walked into my uncle's office to find Mr. William Wolfe typing away at his computer, sipping on his espresso like it wasn't the middle of the day. He looked up and gave me one of his charming smiles.

"You look surprisingly calm, uncle. Do you know about the meeting I just had?" I asked.

"My assistant informed me. Come on, Preston. This kind of thing always happens when a business becomes so damn prestigious people just can't handle it anymore. Welcome to the big boy's table. There's going to be a lot more problems where this came from, I can tell you that. You just need to make sure you're not losing sleep over it. Your father dealt with this kind of thing so many times in his life. You'll be fine."

"Personally, I'll be fine, sure. But do you know what's going to happen to this company if word about this gets out? This was my father's business, William. I care about this company more than the others."

"Calm down, Preston. We've been doing things by the books. We don't cut corners, and no one is stealing anything. Besides, I heard the girl they sent isn't even qualified to conduct this sort of thing. It seems to me like you really don't have anything to worry about," said William.

“Who did this? We need to find out and fast. If this investigation gets into the wrong hands, they’ll find something that wasn’t there to begin with. You know how this goes. We can be doing everything right and they can still find enough to sink us,” I responded, shaking my head.

“I’ll find out. Look, I don’t want you worrying about this. From what I heard, she seems like your type. I’m sure you can charm her, distract her long enough so she wraps this up pretty quickly.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“Why not? You can’t be losing your touch this early in the game, Preston. You’re a Clarke after all.”

“So are you, even though you prefer your mother’s name.”

“Believe it or not, she had more stature than my father ever did. Look, I don’t want to discuss family business now. Whatever happened, you know that I loved your father as a real brother. Now, tell me why exactly you can’t just wine and dine this one until she forgets all about her little job.”

“I was seeing her for some time a few months ago. Things were fun for a while, but I uh, I never called her back,” I admitted.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. You’ve been down this road many times before. Toss a few gifts her way, maybe some flowers. She’ll come crawling right back.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to work this time.”

“Well, it better work, because I heard she’s getting the corner office. If we don’t do this right, this is going to be one hell of an audit. I’ll tell you that,” said William.

I sat in the bar of my apartment building that evening with a glass of scotch in hand, trying to figure out which one of our competitors could be responsible for this. I knew I'd have to do a little digging of my own to find out exactly what they all knew because if Katherine managed to find anything before I did, I'd be fucked. I wanted to be angry, to tell her off for stepping foot into my office trying to take control, but I couldn't. She was too damn beautiful and too damn distracting for me to even get a word in edgewise.

I knew that if I ruffled her feathers a little too much she'd be more inclined than she already was to find something worth taking to her client. And her client had to be someone from the inside, a member of the board or an executive, nobody from the outside had the authority to order an audit. It dawned on me then that she knew exactly who had called this in, but getting her to give them up would be too difficult with the way things were now. Maybe William's right. Maybe I need to get close enough to her, mend the colossal bridge between us, and then she may just tell me what I need to know. I can't let this be the reason I lose my father's company.

If she found anything incriminating it wouldn't just be the loss I'd have to worry about, but I'd have jail time to deal with too. I finished the last of my scotch before ordering another, and that's when I heard a familiar voice approach from behind me.

"Preston Clarke."

"Chris? What are you doing here, man?" I asked. I was happy to see a familiar face after the day I'd had.

"I came to see you. I got into town a few hours ago. Business as usual. I heard about what's been going on down at the office," he said.

"There's no way. It's barely been a day since this shit started and people are already talking about it?"

“Sharks love to talk. Word has already reached Miami. Looks like you’re going to need to line up a few people to fire because someone’s got a damn big mouth,” said Chris.

“I’ll deal with it.”

“You’re going to need another drink. Then I’ll tell you where I heard this from.”

The waitress came around to bring us both more whiskey. It was finally starting to hit me now, and for that I was glad. I didn’t want to think about this anymore, but I needed to figure out where this leak was coming from.

“Leave the bottle,” I told the waitress. Her eyes widened at me, but she nodded, leaving with the empty tray at her side.

“You going to tell me which one of my employees I need to be worried about? I mean, it’s already too late if the word’s out,” I said, gulping down every last bit of my drink.

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“I’m pretty sure all of your employees are talking, Preston. From your mail guy to that pretty receptionist you have sitting behind the desk in your lobby. Kingsman Enterprises is under fire, but word didn’t come from them. When I was in Miami I met with one of your investors. He heard a rumor that you were getting audited but he didn’t tell me where he got that from. You better find a way to cover your ass real soon, because if the press picks this up, every day will feel like war.”

“It already fucking does. When I get my hands on the asshole that’s doing this, he won’t know what hit him. I’ve been working my ass off for the last few years and for what? So someone can feed some stupid rumor to the right people and tear my reputation apart?”

“It’s more than just a stupid rumor if they’ve hired a private firm, Preston. You sure you don’t have anything to hide?”

I shook my head at him, slamming my glass down on the table next to me. It was frustrating enough having to hear it from everyone else that I was on the edge of disaster here, but I didn’t think the people that really knew me would also be questioning my position.

“Now, why the hell would you be asking me that, Chris?”

“I’m not saying you’re a bad guy, Preston but I know how these things work. I haven’t met a businessman in this hemisphere who hasn’t padded a financial report or lied about something to get their way.”

“I’m not one of them. I thought you knew that,” I said coldly.

“Well, you’re going to have to find a way to get this auditor off your back before you become one of them. I’d hate to see this happen to you. This is the time everyone’s going to be watching your every move, waiting to buy out what’s left of your company. I wouldn’t be your friend if I didn’t tell you like it is,” said Chris.

“I’ll get her off my back.”

“You better because time’s running out, buddy. In a few days, that girl’s going to be the one deciding the fate of your damn company.”

I made my way up to the penthouse, collapsing onto the couch, as I kicked off my shoes. My head throbbed and I knew I needed some sleep if I was going to head to the office to see Katherine there tomorrow morning. I should’ve never let you go, Kat. I was getting too close to you. I was feeling things for you and I couldn’t afford to do that. It’s bad for business and it’s bad for me. Though, if things were still good I wouldn’t be in this mess. Why’d you have to be so goddamn perfect?

I remembered what it was like having her here, drinking wine until midnight, feeling every inch of her soft skin under me. All those sensations came rushing back the second I laid eyes on her again, and I knew I had to remind her just how good it was between us. I’ve got to save my father’s company somehow, Kat. I wanted to tell myself that all this was just a ploy to get her and her firm out of my hair, but I knew it was more than that. Being around her excited me because it made me feel things I’d never felt for any other woman before. I realized I was going to go crazy if I didn’t play this just right. A few games and a little teasing was all I needed to put this problem to bed once and for all. Though, this wasn’t like it had been in the past. I couldn’t just play her and walk away because I knew what kind of effect she had on me, but I had to try. The board, William, and everyone else are counting on me. I can’t let them down.

I woke to the incessant sound of my cell phone ringing, and I grabbed it off the coffee



table, answering the call groggily.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Mr. Clarke. I wanted to let you know that Ms. Hollis is here early and she’s getting settled into her temporary office. Is there anything I should do before you get in?” asked my assistant.

“Just make sure she’s real comfortable. I’ll deal with the rest when I get there,” I said.

“You got it. I’d like to remind you that you have a meeting with Riley from the Tribune. I know we scheduled this interview a few weeks ago, and a lot has changed since then. Would you like me to cancel it?”

“Claire, you and I both know we can’t do that. If I cancel the interview now it’s just going to look like I have something to hide. This is my chance to set the story straight and change the narrative. Let it go on as planned.”

“Of course, boss,” she said.

I peeled myself off of my living room couch, waltzed over to the bathroom to have a quick shower, and got into a fresh suit before I had to start this shitshow of a day. Looks like I’m going to have two women barking up my tree today. Usually I’d like that sort of thing, but something tells me one wrong move right now and they’re both going to bite me in the ass.

My black town car was waiting outside to take me to the office, and once I arrived, there were already reporters outside waiting for a comment on the leak. I sighed, as one practically jumped over the others to get a microphone in my face.

“Can I get a comment on what’s been going on at Kingsman Enterprises, Preston? It

seems you've been named in a potential fraud investigation," he said.

I did not utter a word knowing that no matter what I said, everyone was going to form their own opinions. It was bad enough that my name was out there because for such a long time I'd kept my position at the company hidden from the public eye, but now all of my dirty laundry was being aired and there just wasn't anything I could do about it. Up until now, William was the official face of the business while I managed things from the shadows to create this image of a careless playboy. Looks like now the playtime is over. Let's hope I have better luck with Riley. If I don't, I'm going to have to find someone to take care of this for me before it's too late.

I sighed, heading up in the elevator, and as the doors opened, I caught sight of Katherine standing there inquisitively. She clutched a folder to her chest, and I took in just how stunning she was. It was a nice distraction after the morning I'd had, even though she was just as much a problem as everything else I had yet to deal with.

"Good morning, Katherine."

"I wouldn't say it is. Not with the swarm of reporters in the lobby. I heard you're getting a visit from the Tribune today," she said.

"Looks like someone's been doing their homework."

"Do they know something that I don't?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

"No, but I'm sure you're having one hell of a time looking."

"That I am," she responded, rolling her eyes before taking off back to her office.

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I noticed that all eyes were on me much more than usual today, and it was hard to ignore the whispers even though they stopped every time I got close to anyone. From the time I heard that someone from Eland and Ballard was going to show up I knew there'd be trouble, but I didn't expect word to spread so quickly. If I don't tell Riley exactly what she wants to hear, I'm just going to make the morning news tomorrow, and it won't be pretty.

I opened up the door to my office to see Riley sitting there with her notepad in her lap. She smiled at me getting up to shake my hand.

"Riley, it's a pleasure. Please, make yourself at home," I said.

"When we booked this interview a few weeks ago you were looking into buying a few properties around the city and turning them into complexes. I had a list of questions regarding that prepared, but as you know there has been a lot of talk going on lately. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask about it."

"What do you know as fact?" I asked. I didn't want to be running around in circles or have Riley catch me on a lie that she could spin into tomorrow's headline. I've been at this for far too long to have a slip-up like that.

"Aren't you a smart one? Well, it's been confirmed that you are being investigated for fraudulent activity. I have multiple sources stating the fact. All I know is that a private firm is handling this, but I'm not sure which one nor who hired them to do it. Would you like to share that information?"

"Nice try, Riley. All I'm going to say on the matter is that we have nothing to hide.

They can search all they want, but they aren't going to find anything. I grew up around some of the most brilliant businessmen New York has ever seen. I wouldn't ever get myself involved in something like this because I know that the truth always does come to light eventually," I said.

This seemed to satisfy her enough because she wrote it all down before moving onto all the other topics she wanted to ask me about. I needed the world to know that I had a handle on this and that no one was going to tarnish the reputation of the company I helped build. If only you were here, Father. You'd get the chance to tell me what a shit job I was doing at handling this even though you wouldn't be doing any better yourself. You were always so damn critical.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Clarke."

"Thank you for stopping by, Riley."

I watched as my assistant led her to the elevators and when she returned, I had a job for her.

"Claire?"

"Yes, boss?"

"I need you to find who Riley's sources were. I need every name of each employee that so much as uttered a word about what's going on here. I expect a list on my desk by tomorrow morning. Do you think you can handle that?"

"Y-yes sir," she said, with a gulp.

"Good. I'll be working late so I'm going to need you to bring me dinner before you head out."

“Of course, sir. The usual?”

“Yes, and get two orders. I might be in the mood to share.”

I glanced out of my glass office to see Katherine standing there chatting with a few of my employees. No time like the present to turn on the charm.

It was getting late and everyone started clearing out for the evening, but I stayed back. I tapped my pen on my desk impatiently just as Claire came in with a bag of Thai food, setting it down on the coffee table at the other end of my office.

“Is there anything else you need, boss?”

“No, Claire. You can head home for the night. Is Katherine still in?” I asked. She nodded, raising an eyebrow at me before turning to leave.

Claire dimmed the lights on her way out, and I grabbed the takeout, heading straight to Kat’s office. I saw her sitting there with her pen between those beautiful, full lips, hard at work looking for any single discrepancy in my company’s financial reports.

“Money never sleeps, huh? You do know you can head home, right?”

“If I recall, I don’t work for you,” she responded, beaming.

“My company pays for this audit, so technically, you are.”

She rolled her eyes and before things got too heated I held up the bag of Thai food, smirking at her.

“Have you eaten?”

I watched as she studied the takeout containers for a moment as I pulled them out, and I had a feeling she was on the verge of telling me to get lost, but she didn't.

“So, Preston, do you buy all of your employees dinner or just the ones you want to do your bidding?”

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“If I recall, you don’t work for me,” I said, teasingly.

I got a little chuckle out of her this time, and she bit her lip, getting up from her seat to help me. I opened up the takeout containers, grabbing some cutlery to eat my pad Thai while I sat on her desk watching her do the same.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said.

She worked her way through her meal gratefully, and I glanced over at the paperwork she was going over when I suddenly felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. This was just as strange a situation for me as it was for her, but I knew I’d never be able to get through to her if I didn’t at least try to talk about our past.

I never should’ve ignored your calls. I never should’ve stopped reaching out. My father always told me I was weak to get involved with a woman for anything more than a few fun nights because my relationship was with my job. The job always came first. Maybe that’s where I went wrong.

“I just wanted to make sure you felt comfortable here. I know you must think I’m sucking up because you quite literally hold the fate of my company in your hands, but I have dozens of them, and Kingsman is not even the biggest one. I can imagine how you feel about what happened four months ago and I don’t want you to hold it against me,” I confessed.

This was the closest thing to an actual apology that I ever said. I could practically see her thoughts flitting around behind those hazel eyes of hers. I was expecting yet another snide remark, but I didn’t get one. Her expression softened, like she had

absorbed every word I just said, but she was fighting the way she felt. I knew it well because I was doing the very same thing. I reached over for the bag of Thai spring rolls when my hand brushed against hers, and she quickly pulled away.

“I appreciate you telling me this. Look, I really need to get going. It’s getting late,” she said.

“Of course. Have a nice night, Kat. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I watched as she quickly gathered her things and bid me goodbye before she rushed down to the elevators to leave. I sat there trying to figure out what I should do next. If I don’t get through to Katherine, I may lose the only thing my father ever gave me.

I headed home that night with a mix of emotions I just couldn’t make sense of. I got into bed, readjusting my pillow so I could get comfortable enough to sleep because I just wanted this nightmare of a day to be over. I knew how much trouble Katherine could cause me if she wanted. I had a feeling she was still harboring some anger, and I definitely wouldn’t blame her. This is what you get for being an asshole. Now, you just need to figure out who hired her whether she’s the one that tells you or not.

“What is this?” asked William, putting the newspaper down in front of me on the conference table.

I took it between my hands and read the way Riley twisted my words, realizing that even though I handled myself well in that interview, she made it seem like I had a lot to hide. She put my story alongside the Madoffs of the world saying that I could possibly be getting away with worse. It made my blood boil, because now there were far more eyes on me than there had been before.

“This is not the story I gave her. We were supposed to approve this before she even took it to print. You were supposed to be the one to give the go-ahead, or did you not



get the memo?" I asked him, sternly.

"This isn't the story I approved," said William.

Despite our little cat and mouse game, Riley was the only reporter I talked to and now she betrayed my trust. Being betrayed by a woman felt so familiar. She didn't betray my feelings as Leighton did, but it didn't matter. I wouldn't let a woman get too close to me ever again. This is why I didn't contact Kat after that night and it doesn't matter what I feel for her.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, dialing the Tribune, as I rushed right out of the conference room. I caught sight of Katherine on my way there, and she stared at me sympathetically like she was already clued into the disaster I had to deal with. I shut my office door behind me just as Riley picked up the line.

"Mr. Clarke, what can I do for you?"

"What can you do for me? You can start by telling me why the hell you printed this garbage in the first place, Riley. You had no right," I said, through my gritted teeth.

"No right to what? You see, Mr. Clarke, I know men like you very well. You know all the right things to say to cover your ass, but I'm not going to let you get away with it if you do have something to hide. See, once I found out that you were the head of Kingsman Enterprises, that little private company of yours became public, along with all of its secrets. Trust me, I'll be the first to set the record straight if I am wrong, but something tells me I won't be."

"Who have you been talking to?" I asked. My gut was telling me this story was a last-minute decision, one she ran with because she found an angle that worked. As brilliant of a journalist as she was, there was no way she'd be able to come up with that on her own. Someone's fucking with me. That's the only goddamn explanation. I

need to find out who that is and fast.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Clarke. I never kiss and tell.”

### Chapter Three

#### Katherine

I sat at the breakfast bar in my kitchen with a piping hot cup of coffee in my hand rereading the story in the Tribune. I was flustered by how quickly everything began spiraling out of control, and it made me feel like there was much more at play here than I realized. I was already pushing the limits by conducting this audit underhandedly, but now that every bit of this story was being aired to the public, I wondered how long it would take for my name to join the lineup. In a matter of days Preston's name was leaked and tarnished in the press, but I had yet to find anything truly incriminating that would make those statements even the slightest bit true.

I tried to hold onto my anger, but the more time I spent at the Kingsman Enterprises head office, and the more I saw Preston, it all began to melt away. I sighed, folding up the paper just as Poppy came rushing out to grab a bite to eat before work.

"How're things been going? There's a lot of talk going around about the investigation. Are you calling in the big guns yet?"

"This isn't happening the way it should, Poppy. Trust me, I wish I could call in an entire team to handle this, but Jamie made it clear he wanted me on this alone. Besides, the press is already ripping Preston to shreds. If I do end up finding something, then that will be well worth it, but if I don't then -"

"Then you'll finally start to see the life of a Clarke isn't all it's cracked up to be, huh?"

“He brought dinner to my office a few nights ago. He apologized for what happened, and it seemed sincere,” I said, trying not to make eye contact with her.

She slammed her coffee cup down on the table and I looked up to see her furrowing her eyebrow at me.

“You are not falling right back into his trap. There’s no way I’m letting you do that. You see what he’s doing, right? His entire world is blowing up and you’re the only one who can save it. He’s going to cozy right up to you until you forget what you went there to do in the first place. Don’t let this little act of his cloud your judgment. You’ve been down this road once before. Men like that don’t change, Kat. No matter how much we want them to,” said Poppy.

“I know, I know. You’re right. He’s playing me. I need to focus on getting the job done and getting out of there as fast as possible. I’m a one-woman show, so it’s going to take longer than I’d like it to, but I need to stay away from him. At least for right now,” I said, and Poppy nodded.

“I’m going to go get ready for work.”

I took a hot shower, stepping out and wrapping a clean towel around my body before venturing off into my closet looking for something to wear. I pulled out a fresh blouse and a pair of palazzo pants, getting dressed before I painted my lips a light wash of pink. I took one look at myself in the mirror knowing I wanted to walk into Kingsman Enterprises looking good. I wanted Preston to remember what we had together, how incredible it felt, and that I wasn’t going to let it happen again. Poppy was right. The minute I let him back in I compromise my job and my integrity. I need to keep things professional, but there’s no harm showing up there and letting him see what he missed out on.

It was the first time in a while I was getting my confidence back, and I wasn’t about

to let that go. I slipped my heels on and right before I made it out the front door I heard a text message come in.

Can we meet? - Wolfe.

The next text he sent was his location details and I decided to head there first. The entire ride over I couldn't calm myself down. A million thoughts were running through my mind, but I kept it together. Does he know about Preston and I? Does he want me off the investigation? I guess there's only one way to find out.

"Ms. Hollis, please have a seat. Would you like a coffee?" asked Mr. Wolfe.

"No, thank you. One's my limit for the day."

It felt weird to see William in the office every day and pretend that I don't know that he is the one behind the investigation. And it probably felt the same way for him when he discussed this audit with his nephew in the office and then with me behind Preston's back.

"I asked you to meet me here because as you probably know, things are starting to heat up around here. Everyone's talking about the investigation and it's making the board nervous. We're trying to figure out the best course of action, but I need to know if you've been talking to anyone about this."

"I haven't said a word. Jamie made it pretty clear that this needed to remain off the record and I've made sure to do just that," I said.

"Good, because we don't need any more bad press right about now. I have to ask, have you found anything yet?"

"Everything seems to be checking out so far but I have a lot more paperwork to get

through. I don't mean to pry, Mr. Wolfe, but are you sure that this is something Preston would be capable of doing? He has enough money as it is, and he seems rather preoccupied with other areas of his life. I just don't see him being the kind of man to resort to fraud," I said, biting my tongue right after the words left my lips.

"I had a feeling you'd say something like that. After all that man has done to you and you still think there's a possibility he could be innocent. Let's not forget how many rich, elitist assholes there are in New York playing the field and stealing from their own companies to line their pockets. A lot of them know how to charm a beautiful woman like yourself. I'd be careful if I were you, Ms. Hollis," said Mr. Wolfe.

"He told you about what happened between us?" I asked, feeling rather embarrassed.

"Yes, I'm afraid. Much like all the other women in his life all you were to him was another conquest. He's just like his father, that boy. It's a real shame."

I kept going over Mr. Wolfe's words in my head as I made my way up to the office, but every bone in my body was begging me to turn around and head home. It was like everyone else around me could see what I couldn't; a version of Preston that I still refused to accept even after what he did to me. There was something about it all that I didn't feel right, but I knew that if I didn't find the truth soon, I'd drive myself insane.

I sat down in my chair, pulling out countless reports to go over when I heard a knock on my glass door. My heartbeat quickened as I worried it was going to be Preston standing there, but it was just Claire. I waved for her to come in, and judging from the look on her face, she was begging for a distraction.

"Claire? What can I do for you?" I asked, curiously.

"Mr. Clarke just wanted me to check on you to make sure you were doing okay. Do

you need coffee, tea, water, maybe?”

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She sounded absolutely flustered and I could imagine it had something to do with all the talk that was moving around the office, the rumors that were flying, and the reporters who were practically putting up tents in the parking lot.

“Claire, are you okay?”

She nodded reluctantly, gulping, and it seemed to me like she was about to pass out. I got up out of my chair and led her right out my office door.

“How about we both get something to drink? I think we can both use it,” I said.

“T-that would be great.”

She led me down to the intimate kitchenette space which seemed to be one of many, all with the same snacks, drinks, and a few seats, but this one was empty. It was the time of the day where everyone had their morning coffee but it wasn't quite time for lunch, but I saw it as an opportunity to do a little digging. After what Mr. Wolfe had said, I needed to know what I could be in for here. I wasn't just told to look for padded financial reports. I'm supposed to be reporting any suspicious behavior I find. William, Jamie, they're all going to be expecting something. Who better to ask than the woman who spends the most time with Preston.

“What would you like?” I asked, scanning the cupboards for two mugs.

“I should be the one asking you that,” said Claire.

“It looks like you already have your hands full. I know things haven't exactly been



easy around here lately.”

“Tell me about it. Mr. Clarke has been working overtime to minimize the damage that’s been done ever since that story broke. I’m just trying to keep everything as normal as possible.”

“You’re doing a great job, Claire. Something tells me that this place wouldn’t function without you,” I said.

She smiled warmly at me, and we both drank our tea while I mustered up the courage to ask her about Preston. I wanted to know what kind of person he was when no one was watching, when the world loved him, and didn’t question his actions. I wanted to know if the man I was starting to fall for is really in there or if it was all just an act to get me to sleep with him. I wouldn’t be surprised. I’ve steered clear of men like him ever since, but something about how he’s been handling himself tells me that there may be something there after all.

“So, Claire. I have to ask, is Mr. Clarke really the asshole everyone makes him out to be?”

Her eyes widened like I’d just asked her a forbidden question and I smiled.

“I won’t tell him, I promise,” I reassured her.

“Everyone sees him as the typical womanizing New York bachelor, but he’s a hard worker, he’s dedicated his life to his business, and he’s had a really difficult time dealing with his father before he passed. If you knew his father, you’d understand why he’s so shut away from the world. And why this company is more important to him than any other from his portfolio.”

Claire reached into her pocket to pull out her cell phone, frantically rushing out as I

imagined she had far too many things to do than sit with me and chat about her boss. She said a quick goodbye, leaving me alone in that little kitchenette to gather my thoughts.

William made it clear that I have to dig a little deeper. I have to find evidence linking Preston to all of this, and that may mean I'll have to set aside my differences so I can actually talk to him again. That's one door I'd really like to leave closed, but I'm not sure I'm going to have much of a choice soon.

I finished up for the day just as one of the interns came in with an obscenely large stack of files. It was at that moment that I wished I had at least one other person from the firm helping me sort through them all. I pulled out my cell phone, dialing Jamie's number waiting as it rang.

"Kat, how are you doing? Have you found anything yet?"

"Not that great considering I have about hundreds of files to get through. I was assuming that by the time I've been here you would've sent a few other people from the firm to help. Am I really expected to go at this alone?" I asked, trying to hide the frustration in my voice.

"I did tell you these were special circumstances, Kat. I know this isn't the kind of thing we usually do, but I can't think of a better way to genuinely figure out if Mr. Clarke is involved in any fraudulent activity. Considering what his father had been rumored to get away with, we have to keep pushing until we find something that sticks," said Jamie.

"So far, everything checks out. There isn't a problem with any of the reports nor is there any indication that he's actually involved in any fraud or embezzlement here. Are you sure Mr. Wolfe didn't just make a mistake?"

“I trust him on this. How about you step outside the office for a little while, get closer to Mr. Clarke and see if you can pick up on anything strange that way?”

“That’s not -”

“We need to find something, Kat. End of discussion. Get it done or I’ll have to find someone else who will,” he said, through his teeth.

“You got it.”

I sighed, hanging up the phone. I placed my head in my hands, just about ready to pull my hair out. What the hell am I going to do? I finished up that evening, gathering my things and heading straight for the elevator. All I could think about was the tall glass of wine I would pour myself the minute I got home, but in my moment of distraction I saw a hand catch the door before it closed.

In came Preston, with a waft of that perfect cologne filling my senses, and that smirk that made my cheeks go hot. I gulped as he got close to me and the tension settled right between us. I glanced over at him, taking in his perfectly trimmed beard and fresh suit. I tried my best to ignore him, telling myself that if I could just get down to the lobby, all would be okay again. I felt his hand lightly brush against mine as we descended, and I bit my lip trying to hold it together.

“Find anything interesting today?” he asked, raising his eyebrow at me.

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“You can’t possibly be asking me that.” I chuckled, and he smiled, turning to look me directly in the eyes. I felt the close space between us grow hot, and I could’ve sworn a single bead of sweat trickled down the back of my neck because all I wanted to do in that moment was kiss him. It was like I’d forgotten everything he’d put me through, like I wasn’t there to get under his skin or investigate his company for fraud, but to feel that wild intensity again. Snap out of it. Now.

“Well this place has been a shit show lately, so I’d like to know if we’re about to go under. After that story broke, everyone’s going to be waiting on the final verdict. Everyone’s going to want to know if I’m just bleeding my own company dry,” said Preston.

“Are you?” I asked, slyly.

“You may find this hard to believe, but I’m actually not an elitist criminal.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

He chuckled, just as the elevator door opened up to the lobby. We walked out together, and I couldn’t wait to part ways because I knew that if I spent too much time around him I’d fall right back into old habits. Why is it so hard around you?

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Kat,” he said.

“Actually you won’t. I’m not coming in tomorrow. I have to run a few things over with my boss, figure out where we’re at,” I muttered. He looked at me inquisitively, and I smiled.

“You’re in the clear, Clarke. At least for now. Let’s hope you don’t have as many skeletons in your closet as you have women in your bed.”

“You’re a real piece of work, aren’t you?”

“I suppose I am. Good night, Preston.”

“Good night, Katherine.”

I got into a cab, trying to forget how good it felt to be near him, to hear my name roll right off of his tongue with ease. I felt a familiar throbbing between my legs and I tried my best to ignore it. It was getting harder every day to remind myself of the man he really was, the one that never wanted more than a one-night stand with me. I caught glimpses of the man that drew me in, the one that made me believe that I could somehow fit into this lavish world of his. I wasn’t good enough for you, was I, Preston? Is that why you ran?

The apartment was quiet that night when I returned, and right as I set my keys down in the little bowl on the entryway table, out came Poppy drying her hair with a terry cloth towel. She took one look at me, shaking her head like she could already tell I disregarded everything she said earlier.

“What did you do?”

“What? I didn’t do anything. I had a long day at work. That’s all,” I said.

“So what’s with that look on your face? I know that look. It’s trouble.”

She made her way over to the cabinet to grab two wine glasses before deciding which bottle to open next. She slid one at me, and I swished it once before taking a sip, wishing I could completely avoid the rest of this conversation.

“Talk to me.”

“This job isn’t going the way I planned. Jamie is asking a lot of me and I’m not sure what’s going to happen if I don’t succeed. The more I talk to him, the more I’m starting to feel like I won’t have a place at Eland and Ballard if I don’t find whatever my client thinks is there,” I confessed.

“Are you sure that’s all there is?” she asked.

“I guess I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around Preston being capable of this kind of thing. He just doesn’t seem like the type of guy to potentially throw away everything he’s worked so hard for.”

“Kat, you’re forgetting that much like the other rich assholes, he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Why do you think so many of them get away with things like this? If that client of yours is sure he’s involved, I have a feeling you might just find something eventually. You’re not just auditing his company - you could make or break his entire life. I say, whatever happens is what he deserves,” she said, taking a large gulp of her white wine.

“It’s not that simple. I don’t know what it is, but there’s something about all of it that doesn’t feel right. I understood when Jamie wanted to keep things discreet, but my gut is telling me I need to be careful if I do find something. I can’t shake the feeling that Preston may not be the bad guy here. I mean, how else can you explain the leak? Up until a few weeks ago I had no idea who was really running Kingsman Enterprises and I’m sure not a lot of people did either,” I said.

“It wouldn’t be New York City without a few scandals, Kat. People talk, even when they’re paid not to. The only reason you think Preston is just another innocent man is because you still have feelings for him.”

“What? No. No, I don’t. He hurt me,” I told her.

“And yet you still can’t let go of the way he made you feel.”

I sat there with my wine glass in my hand thinking about what she’d said. I didn’t want to admit that she was right, but I felt it. It didn’t take much for me to pick up on the tension between us every time we were in a room together. Now that Jamie wanted me to get closer to Preston, I realized I didn’t have much of a choice when it came to staying away from him. I’m not sure I even want to. I just don’t want to give him the opportunity to hurt me all over again. This is too much of a mess, but there’s no way out of it until I find something incriminating enough to make this all make sense. What’s going to happen if I don’t?

I ran my fingers through my brunette hair, running a mascara wand over my eyelashes before heading back to Eland and Ballard. I didn’t even want to know what Jamie was expecting from the moment I walked in, and I felt the sudden urge to lie just to get him off my back. I arrived with my to-go coffee in hand, walking straight past his office to my own to buy myself some time, but he called out to me.

“Kat, in here.”

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“Good morning, Jamie. I was just going to get settled before I came to see you. Before you even ask, no there hasn’t been an update on the investigation yet because everything I’ve looked through has been squeaky clean. I don’t want you to think that I’m not taking this seriously, but I’m really starting to believe that Mr. Wolfe has got both me and you on a wild goose chase,” I said, hearing footsteps approaching from behind me.

“What would give you that impression?”

I turned around to see Mr. Wolfe standing in the doorway, furrowing his brow at me. I looked back to see Jamie’s furious expression, but I knew I had to fix this before it got any worse.

He took the seat next to me, handing me a stack of files, and I could already tell I was going to have my work cut out for me. There was a brief attached to the first one, and I looked it over, feeling my heart sink into my stomach.

“Before you start to believe that little act Preston is pulling, I think you should look into the Laurier account. That might just change your mind,” said Mr. Wolfe.

“Of course, I’ll look into it right away.”

I grabbed the stack of files, bolting out of Jamie’s office leaving them both to chat. I reviewed the brief at least a dozen times and I wondered how Mr. Wolfe could’ve stumbled onto this information. I looked through every month’s report for this exact time period, but I somehow missed this? How is that possible? The more I read, the more questions I had. I decided to do a bit of research myself, reading articles about



the time when Preston's father passed away, and how he had managed to swoop in to save the day.

My perspective was starting to shift and everything I'd come to believe was now up in the air. I ran through every single file Mr. Wolfe handed me, realizing that for the first time there were a few discrepancies in the reports, but I couldn't exactly do anything about it until I was able to confirm that they were true. There was a little sticky note attached to the inside of the first file and I took one look at the address written on it. Is this Preston's apartment building? Is he asking me to find the remaining files in there? You've got to be kidding me.

I glanced out of my glass-walled office to see Mr. Wolfe and Jamie arguing about something. Jamie looked defeated like he had a difficult mess he had to clean up, and I could've sworn I caught him looking back at me with absolute disappointment. The breadcrumbs are there. Now, I just need to follow the trail. What are you hiding, Preston?

### Chapter Four

Preston

“I believe Ms. Hollis is closing in on something, Preston. This place has been in an uproar ever since word got out. I heard one of your interns discussing something about Katherine looking into the 2019 accounts. We have to talk about what’s going to happen if she digs up something that could ruin us,” said William.

“The year father passed. I was a mess that year, William. I didn’t look over every document and spearhead every account like I do now. Even you had your hands full. Is it possible that something could have slipped through the cracks?” I asked. I felt my heart thumping loudly in my chest, this would all go away. If only I could be so lucky.

“I can’t say for sure, Preston. We need to get ahead of Ms. Hollis’s investigation before we find ourselves being hauled out of here in handcuffs for something we may not even have had a hand in. We pulled Kingsman Enterprises out of the gutter the year your father died, and a lot of that time is a blur. I’ll see what I can find out. In the meantime, I think it’s time you keep Katherine preoccupied,” he said, and I nodded.

“I can do that.”

“Good. We have no idea what we’re walking into here, but we can keep it from getting worse if we just figure out what she may know.”

I sighed, watching William make his way out of my office, and I sat at my desk, trying to find a way out of this mess. This was exactly the kind of thing that made me want to give up running the company in the first place. I'd spent so much of my life dealing with my father calling me weak, belittling me every chance he got, and I promised myself I'd never become him. If it wasn't for William, who knows how things would turn out. He is family, he would never betray me. I know I can trust him and I need to do this for him.

I pulled out my cell phone, dialing a number I hadn't called in ages, waiting patiently as it rang.

"Hello?"

"I need to see you. Meet me outside the Astoria in an hour. We need to talk."

"I'll be there," said the voice on the other end of the line.

The overcast skies left the city feeling dark and gloomy as I took the limousine down to the Astoria, patiently waiting for Richard to show his face. I ran through a few emails on my phone, hoping that no one was going to spot me through the tinted windows because I couldn't deal with another reporter begging for a comment on the story of the century.

The door to the passenger side opened up and in slid Richard with his dirty blonde hair and overgrown beard. I could practically smell the cigarette smoke on him, as he waited attentively for his assignment.

"What do you need, Mr. Clarke?"

"I need you to keep an eye on Katherine Hollis. She's the auditor sent by Eland and Ballard. I need to figure out who her client is and what kind of vendetta they have

against me. You probably heard about all the shit that's been going down and how all my secrets are making front-page news, so I'd like you to remain discreet. Do you think you can do that?"

"Of course. Is there anything specific that I should know?"

"She's been looking into the 2019 accounts. I need to know which one and exactly what she thinks she's found. If anything else suspicious comes up, you let me know, okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Clarke. I'll contact you when I know something."

"Thank you, Richard."

I watched as he took off down the sidewalk, disappearing around the corner and I sat there in the backseat in desperate need of a pick-me-up. I pulled out my cell phone, texting Chris to meet me at the nearest bar because I was in damn need of a drink or two. Manhattan was blanketed in darkness, and there was a cool crispness to the air when I stepped out onto the sidewalk. I headed inside the quaint little place, taking one look around to see that no one recognized me. Let's hope it stays that way.

"You beat me to it," I said, spotting Chris over by the bar.

"I was around the corner checking out a new property I'm thinking about purchasing. Good to see you again, Preston. I'm surprised you even called. We didn't exactly leave things on the best note."

"You may be a pain in my ass, but I can't think of anyone better to get a drink with right about now. You're buying," I told him, and he laughed.

He ordered us two glasses of scotch, and I relished in how it felt trickling down my

throat, taking the edge off for a little while. We chatted, keeping the conversation off of the drama for the night and got back to sharing old stories like we were right back at Yale. Halfway through my second glass, I spotted a beautiful blonde woman sitting alone at the bar, and Chris nudged me.

“The hell are you waiting for? She’s eyeing you. You might as well buy the woman a drink,” he said.

I nodded, heading over to her, waving down the bartender to get her whatever she wanted. I tried to listen to her talk about what she was doing there, taking in how her beautiful legs glistened in the warm lighting, but the entire time, there was only one woman taking up space inside my mind. So much for a distraction.

“You’re one interesting man, Preston. What do you do?” she asked, and my eyes widened. It felt nice not to have to explain myself to another woman, and if it were any other time in my life I would’ve jumped on the opportunity to take her home with me, but I couldn’t shake how much I’d been thinking about Katherine. You’re going to drive me crazy, Hollis. I can’t allow that to happen.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, but I’m sure you can give me the tour. I’d love to see Manhattan through the eyes of a man like yourself,” she said. She ran her fingers along my arm, and I pulled away instantly. She furrowed her brows at me and I apologized before heading outside to get some air. What the hell is going on with me?

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I heard someone rush out behind me and I saw Chris standing there with his arms folded across his chest. From the look in his eyes alone I could tell just how much he was really judging me.

“Not your type?”

“No one is these days. Except -”

“Who?”

“You know the woman that currently holds the fate of my entire company in her hands? That would be the woman,” I said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. All right, inside. You’re buying the next round and you can tell me all about it,” he responded, patting my shoulder.

“Yeah, fine.”

I rolled out of bed the next morning far later than I expected to find that my cell phone was ringing off the hook. I realized I had at least five missed calls from William, and I groggily dialed him back, wondering what could be the problem now.

“Something wrong?”

“I don’t think you should come into the office today. This place is swarming with press, the rumors are getting worse, and everyone’s practically waiting for you to get here. I told Katherine to do the same. I called the cops, they’ll be here soon,” said

William. I could hear the pure frustration in his voice.

“Think you’ll be okay to handle this on your own today?”

“As long as you both stay far away from the office, I think I can. The public doesn’t know which firm is conducting the investigation and Katherine hasn’t been named. It’s best we keep it that way.”

“Yeah, you’re right. If you need anything, call.”

“I will.”

I hung up the phone feeling like I was going to go crazy if I just sat around here hoping that the story would die down. I took a hot shower, getting dressed in a button-up and jeans before I rummaged through my drawers for an old baseball hat. This may just be enough to keep the attention off me today. At least I hope so.

I called down for the town car to be brought around, telling my driver that he could take the rest of the day off because I was going to get behind the wheel. He seemed reluctant, trying to tell me that he didn’t mind staying, but I insisted. I was in the mood to blow off a little more steam, and after the night I had, there was only one person I wanted to do it with. I drove down to Katherine’s apartment nestled in Brooklyn, enjoying the silent drive out on the road until I pulled up right in front of her building’s door. I wondered if she was even home, because I knew she could very well be spending her day mulling over documents at Eland and Ballard, but it was worth a try.

I was just about to call her, but that’s when I saw her building door buzz open, and out she came clutching her purse, looking like she was ready to rush off.

“Hey there, stranger.”

“Do I know you -”

“You might remember me. I’m that asshole that left you hanging a few months ago and now you’re investigating my company for fraud,” I said, teasingly. I took off my baseball cap for a moment so she could get a better look and she let out that soft chuckle of hers.

“Heading somewhere? I’m sure William filled you in.”

For a moment it was like she didn’t understand what I’d said, staring at me blankly, fumbling around as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Filled me in?”

“About not heading to the office today.”

“Oh, right. Yes, he did. I was planning on spending the day there, but since the place is swarming with press, I was just going to stay in for the most part,” she said.

“But you’re heading out?”

“Just to grab a coffee.”

“How about you have brunch with me instead?” I asked, smirking at her.

“I don’t really know if that’s such a good idea, Preston. Everyone’s got their eyes on us, and if they see us together or find out what I’m even doing with you, it could open up an entirely new can of worms. You have enough to deal with as it is,” said Katherine.

“Well, luckily for you I know a place or two where no one would think to look for us.



Besides, I have a lot left to make up for, remember?”

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Her expression softened, and I could practically see her fighting the urge to turn right back around, heading inside until I left, but instead she took me up on my offer.

“Just to be clear, this doesn’t mean a thing, okay? I’m hungry, and I’ll be paying for my brunch. Got it?”

“Whatever floats your boat, Kat,” I said, chuckling as I held the passenger side door open for her.

I made my way around taking the driver’s seat when she glanced over at me, absolutely bewildered.

“Now isn’t this a sight? I didn’t even know men like you even knew how to drive.”

“Haha. Funny.”

We arrived at the rooftop brunch restaurant nestled in the heart of Brooklyn that was pretty busy for that time of the day, but I didn’t mind. I headed inside first to secure a table and make it clear that the staff’s discretion would be appreciated before the hostess led us to our table. I watched as Katherine took in the sights, much like she always had whenever we went out together, but there was something different about it this time. She wasn’t as excited or as happy to be there with me as she once was, and it wasn’t until that very moment that the guilt began to hit me. It wasn’t something that I felt very often, but I didn’t care. I found myself wanting to get close to her again, to remember what it felt like to feel her skin brush against mine. There was an intense electric current rushing through us both whenever we were together, and I gave that all away because I wanted to get back to life as usual. All work and no

play. That's what Father always expected of me, and look where I am now. I didn't dodge a bullet by leaving Katherine the moment I started to feel something for her. I walked right into the crossfire.

Her hot French toast and my omelet came out only a little while later and we ate there together, chatting like old friends for the first time in a while. It was refreshing and yet incredibly confusing because I could see it in her eyes that she was still trying to protect herself. She was purposefully being as distant as she could because she didn't want to get wrapped up in this again, and I couldn't blame her. You're not exactly making this any easier for me either, Kat. I can't seem to do anything anymore without thinking about you. You will probably betray me in the end like all the others, but...

"So, how long do you think this is going to go on for?" she asked.

"As long as it takes for you to either find something or not and for the press to catch wind of it. Until then we're going to have to lay low. William's supposedly got things under control. After today, we can at least assume that the office is going to be somewhat of a safe space again," I told her.

"Quite a difficult life being a Clarke, huh?"

"Is that sarcasm I hear?"

"I mean, it's not like you have to do much to get what you want, do you, Preston? You're flying under the radar and you can still assert your right to get a table just about anywhere, clear the sidewalks at your office, and I mean it's hard to believe that you aren't also involved in the very same things that many other businessmen like you are. You can save us both a lot of trouble if you just told me the truth," said Katherine. My eyes widened.

“You really think that I would jeopardize my own company like that? My integrity?”

“I don’t know what to think. Everywhere I turn I’m hearing something different. I just wish that for once, you’d be honest with me. You at least owe me that.”

“So, William was right. You did find something that piqued your interest, huh? Well, whatever it is, I had no part in it. I may not be the best man, Kat, but I would never do something like this. I care about my companies, the legacy that I’m building, the one that no longer belongs to my father. Out of everyone else, I wish you would just see that,” I confessed.

Later, I dropped her back to her apartment that afternoon as she thanked me for brunch.

“I had a nice time,” she said, with a warm smile.

“I did too, Kat.”

Right before I turned to head back to the car I saw someone approach from behind her. It was a tall, strawberry blonde girl practically towering over Katherine, staring at me like I just committed the worst possible crime. Katherine nudged her, trying to drag her back inside, but I decided to introduce myself. I guess there are quite a few people who aren’t my biggest fans right now, huh?

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you. I’m -”

“Preston Clarke, yes, I know. Thanks for dropping Katherine off but we better be going. See you!”

She got ready to shut the door in my face but before she got the chance I caught a glimpse of Katherine’s apologetic eyes. I smiled, feeling good that she had people

looking out for her, and it made me want to get to know her all over again. There was a sort of me that desperately wanted to learn more about her life, listen to all of the stories she didn't get to tell me because I went and screwed everything up. Maybe I'll get to make it up to her for real, or maybe once this is all over she'll go back to wanting nothing to do with me. I guess only time will tell.

I made it back to my apartment building to find Richard in the lobby waiting for me. He had that look in his eyes that told me I was about to be in for some serious news, and I invited him up to the penthouse so we could talk privately. I tossed the baseball cap over to the chaise lounge on the other side of the room, waiting for him to tell me what I had to be worried about now.

"It seems Katherine has been looking into the Laurier account," said Richard.

"That was my father's last one before he died. How the hell did she even find that? I could've sworn I had all the paperwork regarding anything my father did remove," I spat.

"She got her hands on it somehow, and judging from how much more information she's been gathering on it, she seems like she might be onto something. What would you like me to do?"

"I'm going to need you to keep an eye on her for now. If she so much as contacts her boss or that mysterious client of hers with any new information, I want to know about it. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

You couldn't just leave in peace, could you, Father? Still making my life a living hell, I see. What the fuck did you do?

### Chapter Five

#### Katherine

I mulled over the files on my coffee table, desperately searching for a connection, but I didn't have all of the pieces yet. I tucked my hair behind my ears, yawning as I reached for my second cup of coffee for the day. I took a deep breath, feeling my heartbeat quicken at the thought that I was finally onto something, but I worried about what that would mean for Preston.

Mr. Wolfe along with just about everyone else thinks that there is no question that you're hiding something. Am I wrong to give you the benefit of the doubt? I clutched my robe, glancing down at my phone screen to see I needed to be in the shower and out the door in less than a half-hour. I rushed to get ready and when I came out, Poppy was filling her to-go cup with the rest of the black coffee from the machine.

"You didn't get any sleep last night, did you?"

"I can't remember the last time I did, Pops."

"You know what you need?"

"What's that?" I asked. I fastened my earrings on, running my fingers through my light brown hair, waiting to see what Poppy could possibly come up with. If she's going to tell me I need to get laid, I'm walking right out that door. I thought, smiling.

"You need a night out on the town. Do you remember how much fun we used to have

when we didn't spend every moment of every day wrapped up in our jobs?"

"I don't know, Poppy. I mean I'm so busy with this audit, you're so busy with work, and I'm perfectly fine with winding down with a bottle of wine every so often," I said.

She folded her arms across her chest, shaking her head at me. I smiled, knowing that look real well. I saw the familiar glint in her eyes that told me she already had a plan up her sleeve.

"This audit is driving you crazy, right? My case is too. So, we're going to get all dressed up and head to the club tonight. That's how you blow off steam the right way," she said, winking at me.

"I don't know..."

"Cute. You think you have a choice in the matter. Be back home by seven so we can get ready!" she shouted, rushing out the door before I could argue. I laughed, gathering my things, heading right out too. She's right. I've been so caught up with Preston and Kingsman Enterprises, I barely have time to think. Maybe I do need this more than I thought I did.

I arrived at the hotel lobby where I was approached by a woman who had been frantically looking around, clutching a clipboard in her hand.

"Ms. Hollis?"

"Yes, that's me," I said, smiling.

"Mr. Wolfe is in the Library Bar this morning. Please follow me," she responded. It was at that moment I realized she didn't work here, but she'd replaced Mr. Wolfe's

last assistant. No wonder she seems so on edge. I thought, listening to the clacking of her heels on the marble floors as she led me straight to William's table.

"Thank you, Tiffany," he said.

"It's my pleasure, sir."

"Good morning, Mr. Wolfe," I said, taking a seat.

"It's good to see you again, Katherine. I hope that you've been managing to get through the Laurier account. I know it's quite a messy set of information, but I'm afraid that's all thanks to my brother." He ripped the top off a sugar packet, stirring the contents into his black coffee.

"There are a few things that don't seem to add up, but I'm sure I'll be able to follow the trail once I learn more about how the deal occurred. There is some questionable activity in the accounts, but maybe if I could talk to Mr. Clarke's old business manager, I'll be able to figure out what happened," I said, and his eyes widened.

"Why, yes. That's a great idea. I'm not sure why I didn't think of that before. I'll get you in touch with Pierson. You know what? I've been thinking that it's time to get this investigation moving in the right direction. You've probably been running around in circles trying to get all of the necessary information, and I think I can make that a bit easier for you."

"Oh really? How?"

"I think it's time I gave you full access to the Kingsman Enterprise documents so you don't have to go through another middle man," he said.

"Are you sure that Preston would be okay with that?" I asked, biting my lip when I



realized what I'd said.

“Well, his opinion doesn't really matter here, now does it? I'm just as much in charge of Kingsman Enterprises as he is, Katherine. I've come to like you, and I know that you're doing everything you can to complete this investigation. So, let me make it easier for you and we can all get back to our lives soon enough, huh?”

He really thinks that this is somehow all Preston's fault. Maybe it is. Preston was the closest to his father before he passed and I wouldn't be surprised if he'd been keeping some financial secrets under wraps. Though I still have a feeling something just isn't right here.

“Thank you, Mr. Wolfe.”

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I scoured my entire closet looking for the perfect dress, blowing a loose strand of hair out of my eyes, just as I got a knock on my bedroom door.

“You ready?” asked Poppy. I sighed. I couldn’t remember the last time I actually enjoyed a night out on the town. Part of me wished I could stay in, go over the documents one more time before I had to head back to Kingsman Enterprises in the morning, but I knew Poppy would never let that happen.

“I can’t find anything to wear. It’s like I don’t even own anything besides suits and blouses,” I said, upon opening up the door.

“Let me see if I can help.” Poppy pushed past me, rummaging through my closet, muttering something about the plan for tonight, but I could barely focus on anything else right now. I saw the stack of files next to my work tote sitting on the ottoman near the window, and Poppy had to have caught me looking because she was snapping her fingers at me.

“Hey, you! None of that. Look, I know you’re not too pumped about going out tonight, but I promise you that you’re going to have a great time. One, you’re with me. Two, there are going to be so many hot guys there tonight that can’t wait to dance with you. Now, I’m going to grab you something from my closet, and you will get dressed, okay?”

Poppy batted her long, mascara-coated eyelashes at me, and I rolled my eyes, smiling.

“Fine, fine. Yes. You got it.”

“Now, go pick out some shoes. I know you’ve got plenty of those.”

I pulled out a pair of black pumps, glancing up at my bedroom door to find Poppy barreling in with a short black minidress in hand. My eyes widened at her, because I knew that she’d just bought it and she didn’t even get the chance to wear it yet.

“Poppy, no. That thing costs more than everything I own combined,” I said, shaking my head.

“It’s my dress and I demand you wear it. You’re going to be turning heads tonight, Kat. You may even find someone that’s willing to get you out of it,” she teased.

“Nope. None of that. Not tonight, at least,” I responded, smiling.

She left me alone so I could get into the dress, and when I took one look at myself in the mirror, it was like I was looking at a completely different person. The fabric hugged me in all the right places and it made my breasts sit up high. I slipped on my heels, grabbed my purse, and we were out the door. Poppy and I took a cab to this new nightclub that was supposedly far too difficult to get into. I furrowed my brows as she typed away at her phone screen next to me, wondering what she was up to.

“Where is this place again?”

“Brooklyn, baby. They say it’s the new Manhattan.”

“Right. Well, I’m just glad you’re finally introducing me to some of your colleagues from the firm. It’s about time I meet the other hotshot lawyers you spend all your time with. Anything in particular I should know before we get there?” I asked.

“I may or may not be crushing on a colleague’s client. He’s going to be bringing a friend and I think he’s just your type.”

“So that’s why I’m here, huh? You need a wingwoman,” I teased.

“That I do, and you’re the best,” she replied, giggling.

I stepped out of the cab to see a long line of people eagerly waiting to get inside. Poppy quickly paid the cab driver before dragging me to the front of the line, and everyone’s eyes were on us.

“Name?”

“Poppy and Katherine. We’re with Chris Grant. He’s expecting us,” she said.

I watched as he pulled back the velvet red rope, letting us inside as the line of people angrily sighed in frustration. I followed Poppy inside, taking in the atmosphere around me. The colorful lights darted from one end of the room to the other, perfectly in sync with the music. The bass was so loud I could feel it, but I didn’t mind. I thought I would’ve been a little more opposed to being out once I got here, but I felt the sudden urge wash over me to let loose. I’m already here. I might as well.

“Let’s get drinks!” Poppy shouted over the loud music.

We made our way over to the bar and I ordered myself a Cosmopolitan, while Poppy opted for something a little stronger.

“Straight Tequila? Really?” I asked, laughing.

“I’m too nervous and a shot is exactly what I need right now,” she responded, shimmying her shoulders.

“So, who is this guy anyway? Chris?”

“He’s another Manhattan shark, and I know you said that we both need to steer clear of those, but there’s no harm in taking a little dip now and then, right?”

“I suppose,” I said, sipping on my drink.

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“I hear the guy he’s bringing is an old friend of his. Apparently they used to do this together all the time before they separated for work. Chris doesn’t even live here, and that seems like the best plan for me because if things don’t work out, I never have to see him again.”

“I see you’ve got it all figured out. So, what about this friend of his? Do you know his name?”

“No, no idea. He promised me he’d be a good time.”

Poppy and I didn’t waste any time waiting around for Chris to find us. We took to the dance floor, enjoying our time around some of the hottest men I’d seen in New York in a while. One of them got just close enough that it ignited something inside of me I hadn’t felt in a while. He pulled my hair back, exposing my ear so he could tell me something, and I smiled.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“You definitely can.”

I saw Poppy waving at me, raising her eyebrows as if she were practically telling me to go for it, and I couldn’t argue with that. I saw a well-dressed, blonde man approach from behind her, and her entire demeanor changed as she got incredibly shy almost instantly. Ah, so that’s Chris Grant. I wonder who he brought with him.

I listened to this hot stranger tell me all about what it was like moving to New York for the first time, sipping on the drink he bought me, feeling my cheeks blush. His

phone rang a few moments in and he made his way to the bathrooms for a little quiet so he could take it. I stirred my drink while I waited, glancing over my shoulder looking for Poppy just as someone came up behind me, tapping my shoulder.

“Hello, Katherine.” The soft, honeyed tone of his voice made my eyes widen and I nearly spit out my drink when I saw him standing there.

“Preston?”

“I didn’t expect to see you here tonight,” he said, with that perfect smirk.

“Trust me, I didn’t expect to see you here tonight either. I’d ask what you’re doing in Brooklyn, but this isn’t the first time I’ve run into you out here.”

“Yes, well Brooklyn is the one place I feel like I can get away for the night. It’s also where I tend to meet some of the most beautiful women,” he teased.

It was like he was a different person out here, like I could just forget how complicated things were between us. He flirted with me like nothing had changed, like we were still wrapped up in each other like we had been a few months ago. I couldn’t tell if it was the alcohol that left me buzzed or the scent of his familiar cologne filling my nostrils, but I was on a high and something told me that he began to notice.

“Can I buy you a drink, Kat?”

“Thanks, Preston, but I already have one. Besides, it’s not like you’re here to chat with me. I’m sure you can find another woman that’s willing to put up with your games,” I said, and he raised an eyebrow at me, chuckling.

“If I recall, there was a time you liked my games.”

“Well, that was before I realized just how much of an ass you could really be,” I snapped.

That wasn’t enough to wipe that beaming smile off of his face, but I wasn’t giving up. I was suddenly overcome with a mix of emotions, feeling the anger, the passion, and everything else he’d made me feel rose to the surface. It’s time you had the chance to feel what I felt, Preston. Maybe then you’ll learn not to ruin a good thing. I downed the rest of my drink just as the hot stranger came rushing back over with an apologetic smile about the call he’d been on. He outstretched his hand and I took it, glancing back at Preston as we made our way to the dance floor.

The music thumped loudly and I felt it flow through me as he got up close behind me, holding me at the waist while we danced the night away. I turned to see Preston standing there with a drink in his hand, sipping it while his jaw tensed, and it felt incredible. I saw Chris and Poppy approach him, and the look on Poppy’s face was priceless when she figured out the connection, but I put the pieces together from the time Preston showed up. One shark can’t seem to go anywhere without the other. I should’ve guessed.

The adrenaline was rushing through me as the lights dimmed, and the colorful beams darted across the room. I danced with the stranger throwing glances at Preston from time to time. He rolled up his button-up shirt, ordering another drink, but his eyes never left me. Once the song was over and my feet finally started to hurt in my ridiculously high heels, I felt a soft hand touch my shoulder. I turned around to see Poppy standing there with her eyes wide, biting her lip as she gestured over to Chris and Preston.

“I had no idea the guy Chris was bringing tonight would be Preston. I’m so sorry, Kat,” she said, and I chuckled.

“From the moment I saw him, I had a feeling, but it’s okay. Don’t let it ruin your



night. It certainly didn't ruin mine," I responded.

"I'll say. Preston can't take his eyes off of you. Maybe he's finally realizing that he let a good thing go. Though, that is not your opening to run right back into his arms, okay?"

"Nope, definitely not. I have to say, if Chris is anything like Preston, you really need to be watching your back too," I warned.

"Trust me, Kat, I'm not looking for anything serious. I'm just here to have a little fun," she replied, but I saw the look in her eyes.

I knew she was into him from the first time I saw them together. She had the same look on her face that she probably saw on mine a few months ago when I'd first started seeing Preston. I need to look out for her. I know how easy it can be to get swept away by a Manhattan shark, forgetting that they love to play games, and they always bite. Not this time. Not my best friend.

We left the club later, standing on the sidewalk while Poppy tried to hail a cab, but they all sped right past her.

"Kat?"

"Yes?" I saw Preston standing there with his slightly sweaty hair and perfect stubble. I couldn't deny how hot he looked, and how much I wished things were different so that I could feel his skin on mine again, but I wasn't going to allow myself to get involved knowing I'd get hurt. If he could do that to me once, he could definitely do it again. It's in his nature, and it's all the more reason I need to stay away from him.

"Let me give you a ride," he offered.

“No, that’s okay. Poppy and I will find a cab.”

“Come on, Kat. The chances of you finding a cab are slim at best. You may not like me very much right now, but the least I can do is make sure you both get home safe.”

“Fine. Poppy! Come on!”

She looked confused until her eyes caught sight of Preston’s limousine and we all piled in, getting comfortable while we rode back home for the night.

### Chapter Six

Preston

I thought about her tousled brunette hair and her long, glistening legs sitting in the back of my limousine on the way back to her apartment. The conversation was calm, flirtatious like it had been all those months ago, and it made me feel like kicking myself for abandoning her. I fixed my tie, sitting at the head of the conference table, ready for a meeting with the board, but all I could think about was Katherine.

She was driving me crazy, making me wait around longer than I had to just so I could catch a glimpse of her, coming into the office early just so I could run into her on the elevator ride up. It was all messing with my head, much like it was when I decided that we were getting too close too fast, and now I wasn't sure I'd ever get the chance to cozy up to her again. You just had to be an asshole. Now, she shuts you down every chance she gets.

“Good morning, Preston.”

“William, you're here early. I thought we discussed that you didn't need to sit in on this meeting,” I said.

“Well, the board thought it best that I be present for this one, just to make sure that everything is still moving smoothly. It's been a rocky last few weeks with the press, and they just want to make sure we don't lose our investors' interest.”

“You know I could've handled it. Besides, it's my job to do so. If they have a

problem with the way I'm dealing with things, they could very well just take it up with me," I said through my teeth.

"Now, now. No need to get upset, Preston. All of this will eventually blow over once your little girlfriend wraps up her forensic audit and we can get back to fixing our little image problem."

"It's going to take a lot more than some good press to fix this, William, especially if she ends up finding something in the Laurier account," I reminded him.

"Well, you're just going to have to comb through that information and make sure you remove anything incriminating first, huh? Look, I'm here to help you, Preston. I've got my hands full right now. It's time you get to digging before all of this blows up in our faces," he warned.

"I've got someone on it. Hopefully we'll know more soon. If I find anything of interest, I'll call you."

We both quieted down the moment the board members came funneling in through the conference room door. The meeting concluded an hour later and I was making my way back to my office when I heard the phone ring. I slung my suit jacket over the back of my chair, sitting down to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Clarke, Richard is here to see you. Should I send him up?"

"Yes, thank you, Claire," I responded.

I was eager to hear what kind of information Richard collected, and I wondered what I'd learn about Katherine that I didn't already know. I just wanted to make sure she

wasn't trying to fuck me over, because as much as I wanted to get close to her again, I just couldn't ignore the fact that every woman that I let too close to me ended up betraying my trust. With the way things were going, the last thing I needed was to find out she was deliberately trying to throw the investigation.

Something tells me she'd never do such a thing. She's here because she cares about her job, but I'm sure trying to mess with me doesn't hurt. I thought, as my mind still ran wild trying to figure out who her client could be. I knew that if I came right out and asked her, she'd never just tell me. She cared enough to keep things under wraps, but I hoped that I'd soon be able to unravel her for both of our sakes. I reached for the glass carafe of water on my desk, sipping it lightly right as Richard knocked on my office door.

I motioned for him to come in through the glass and I studied his nearly expressionless face closely hoping I'd be able to pick up on where this was going.

"Richard, please, have a seat. I hope that your being here means that you found something of interest."

"You had me tail Ms. Hollis for the last few weeks, and apart from her mild obsession with purchasing grocery-store wine, there isn't much else you need to worry about. She's only been talking to Kingsman Enterprises employees, her boss, and that friend of hers that she lives with. As far as I know, her life is as mundane as ever," said Richard.

I sighed. Part of me felt relieved that she wasn't openly working with one of my enemies to take me down, but that still left me wondering who was responsible for this. Someone is feeding her information, enough for her to find the Laurier account because as far as I knew, everything of my father's has been wiped from the building. I need to find out more about that case, because as far as William and my father were concerned, they considered it handled. I never so much as had to involve myself

once. Now I'm starting to think that I should have.

"Did you find out anything else about the Laurier account? How did she get that information, Richard? I'm sure none of the employees she's been talking to has told her about that. I also need to find out who her client is. I am trying on my own here, but if she's as clean as she says she is, then how is this even happening?"

I slammed my hands down on my desk loudly, staring up at Richard, hoping he had a plan in place to get me the information I needed.

"I'll keep looking, sir."

"You know every asshole out there that has been gunning for me since I first took over this place. One of them had to have paid for this investigation to take place, and I need to find out which one. Think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll call when I know more."

I feel like I'm running out of time here before Katherine pulls the rug out from under me and Kingsman Enterprises comes crashing down. I need answers, and I need them soon. For now, Kat, we need to pick up where we left off. I thought. I knew that wouldn't be hard because every time I was alone with her, it was like she drew me in. I wanted her. I wanted to feel her skin on mine, the taste of her lips, the sensation of having her near me. It's time I remind you exactly what that feels like.

The lights started to dim in the building as everyone packed their things, heading home for a lovely weekend where they didn't have to worry about the office. My life was never so simple. There was always too much to do to take real time off and there was always a problem waiting around the corner to be fixed even during the times where the rest of the world believed everything was moving smoothly.

Now, I didn't know how to fix the problem at hand because I didn't have enough answers. I didn't know how this came to be or why Katherine had to be the one to do it, but it was driving me crazy. I sifted through countless documents at the office, going through the ones in my safe in the penthouse, but not finding a single thing that could tell me how the Laurier account actually went down. It technically didn't close until I assumed my position at the head of the company, so whatever information was out there, I was ultimately responsible.

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I sat in my executive chair at the office, pouring myself a drink while I stared out over the Manhattan skyline. I glanced up to see a light turn on at the end of the hallway, reflecting in the glass. Is she still here? Maybe I'm not the only one that can use a drink tonight. I thought, grabbing another glass and the bottle before making my way to her office. We hadn't talked much since that night in the limousine, but I had been wondering how she was doing, what she must've been thinking about, and all that she was learning about my company, but none of it seemed to keep me away this time.

I wanted to grow closer, to feel everything I did those few months ago, but this time make things right. It's what she deserves. She deserves to know that she was never the problem. It was me. It's always been me. I looked into the glass door of her office to see her sitting there mulling over some files with nothing but the desk lamp on, illuminating her beautiful face. I knocked, nearly jolting her right out of her seat, and I smiled.

"Preston, what are you doing here so late? Claire said you had dinner with some of the board members scheduled," she blurted out.

"Checking up on me, are you?" I teased.

She rolled her eyes at me smiling and I placed the glasses down on the desk in front of her, while she shut her files, packing them all away for the night.

"Drink?"

"Oh, why not. I was going to head home to a bottle of wine anyway," she said.



I poured a glass of whiskey and handed it to her, watching as she swished it before taking a sip. She scrunched her nose. I chuckled, drinking the little that was left in my glass.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve done anything like this,” I said.

“Yes, it definitely has. A lot has changed since we last spent time together.”

“Of course. You’re here investigating me and my company for fraud, which would make anyone want to steer clear of you, letting you do your thing, but I can’t. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since I dropped you home from the club that night, Kat,” I confessed.

“I have to admit, I was a little surprised to see you there. Part of me thought you gave up hanging out in Brooklyn.”

Her eyes lowered to the floor and I knew that this was hard for her. I could see that she was fighting off the urge to talk about what happened, settling on downing the whiskey so she wouldn’t have to go there again.

“I never stopped. It’s always been a place I loved. There’s a lot about Manhattan that people adore, but I always find myself wanting to get away from it. I told you that the night I dropped you home and never looked back. I’m sorry I did that to you, Kat. I was a terrible guy, caught up in all this shit, genuinely believing that having something real just wasn’t meant for someone like me. The truth is, I felt that I was getting too attached to you and I threw everything we had away because of it.”

She glanced up at me, her eyes lowering to my lips, and at that moment, all I wanted to do was kiss her. I wanted to take her into my arms, feel the warmth emanating from her soft skin, and remember what it felt like to call her mine. I didn’t get the chance, as she moved away, setting the glass down on her desk before gathering her

things.

“I appreciate you being honest with me, Preston. There was a time I believed you’d never be capable of something like that. I better get going. Good night.”

“Good night, Katherine.”

I watched as she walked off down the dimly lit hallway to the elevator, grabbing the two glasses, and heading back to my office. I should’ve never let you go, Kat. That was my first mistake. The second was believing that after all this time, you’d somehow just forgive me. Maybe I’m a little in over my head here, but I’m not giving up.

I sat at the table in the quaint, practically empty restaurant for brunch, waiting for Richard to arrive. I sipped on my espresso, trying to take my mind off of Katherine, because every time I had a moment to myself, she was all I could think about. I glanced up at the door to see Richard come in, making his way to my table, and he slid into the chair across from me.

“What do you have?” I asked, unable to hide how impatient I was.

“I was keeping tabs on your lobby receptionist because she’d been talking to someone on the phone about Ms. Hollis’s interest in the Laurier account. I waited until she was done for the day to corner her, ask her a few questions, and she made it pretty clear that she didn’t have anything to say to me. Though, she let it slip that she was the one delivering files to Ms. Hollis personally, but she has no idea how she got the original one which contained sensitive information about the Laurier account.”

“Did you find out who she was talking to?” I asked. I downed the rest of my espresso in one go, trying to curb my frustration, but I should’ve known something like this would happen with how much talk that had been going around. It’s easy to recruit the

ones that can't say no to an easy payday, huh?

"No, sir. She remained rather tight-lipped about it, probably didn't want to lose out on the money she was going to be paid. I will keep digging, but whoever this guy is, he's going to a lot of trouble to make sure that his identity remains hidden. It doesn't take a genius to figure out he's the one that has to be behind the investigation. I'll get his name," said Richard, confidently.

"You better. Thank you, Richard."

I dug into my egg white omelet, enjoying the last few moments of calm before I had to head into the office. The only thing that kept me going right about now was the thought of seeing Katherine there. In the chaos of endless meetings, closings, and piles of paperwork I needed to get through, she really was my escape from it all. She has every right to be hesitant, but I'm going to show her that this time is different. This time, I know what I want. I want her.

I took the town car back to the Kingsman Enterprises office, making my way inside, noticing that my receptionist wasn't at her desk. I sighed, heading up in the elevator and I was greeted by an eager Claire, ready to read off my schedule for the day.

"Good morning, Mr. Clarke."

"Good morning, Claire. I need you to do something for me before my first meeting."

"Of course, sir. What do you need?"

"I need you to call Elle into my office. I would've done it myself, but she doesn't seem to be at her desk. Can you track her down for me? There's something we need to discuss," I said.

“Right away, sir.”

I sauntered off to my office, catching a glimpse of Kat through the glass, but I decided not to bother her this early. There will be plenty of time for that later on. I thought, getting comfortable in my office chair, firing up my computer so I could sift through a few emails in the meantime. An hour or so passed and I heard a knock on my door. I glanced up to see a worried Elle standing there with her hands folded in front of her, like a child that had just been caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Clarke?”

“Yes, I did. Have a seat, Elle.”

She nervously sat down in front of me, playing with the ring on her middle finger, unable to sit still. She could barely look me in the eye, and I hoped that meant that I’d be able to crack her. If there’s one thing I need right about now, it’s the damn truth.

“How do you like working here, Elle?” I asked.

She seemed confused by this question, furrowing her eyebrow at me like I caught her completely off guard.

“I like it a lot, sir. It’s easy work and it pays the bills. I really can’t complain,” she said.

“Is that why you’re funneling information to Ms. Hollis about an account that was closed by my father? I’m going to need to know who gave you the order to do such a

thing because as far as I'm concerned, there was no such information in the building, and there hasn't been for a very long time."

I folded my hands across my chest, watching her squirm. Her eyes darted around my office, while she probably started thinking of a way out of this mess, but I wasn't in the mood to play games where this was concerned.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Really? Well, I know for a fact that you do know what I'm talking about, Elle. I need you to be straight with me right now because if you're not, I'll have no choice but to fire you."

"Please, sir, I need this job. I-I was just delivering files given to me for Ms. Hollis. They were delivered, I -"

"Save it, Elle. I know that you were discussing the Laurier account, and you just lost your chance at saving your job. I hope whatever money you were paid to do this was enough because you won't be getting any more from me," I said.

Her eyes widened like she really didn't expect me to fire her, and she bit her lip nervously, probably realizing what she'd just done. She still didn't tell me the truth, and that made me think that she may not have been given some hush money to take care of this, but that she may have been threatened. If someone is going to all these lengths to take my company down, I wouldn't be surprised that they'd do something like that. There goes my last lead.

After Elle left, I placed my head in my hands, running my palms along my face out of pure frustration just as I got a knock on my office door, and I looked up to see William standing there. I gestured for him to come in and he was beaming. It'd been a long time since I'd seen him that excited about anything, and that's when he

slammed the paper down in front of me. I stared at the front page, noticing that there wasn't a story that had to do with me or the company, and I looked back at him wondering what this was all about.

"Am I missing something here?"

"There's nothing. There is no word about the company or about either of us. We've weathered the storm, Preston," he declared, happily.

"Now, how did you manage that?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"I may have done a little digging and found something I could use on dear ol' Riley. Seems we're not the only ones wanting our business to stay under wraps."

"Thank you, William. At least that's one less thing we need to worry about right now," I said, with a sigh. Me and William had our disagreements, but I knew I could trust him.

"What's going on?" he asked, studying my expression.

"Let's just say we're going to need a new receptionist for the lobby front desk. See if you can get that done for me. I have to go woo our forensic auditor."

I got up from my office chair, fixing my tie before patting William on the shoulder and taking off to Katherine's office. She was hard at work as usual, and I knocked, watching her wave, telling me to come inside.

"Preston."

"Kat. I just wanted to stop in to see how you were doing. I heard things have been getting real busy in here," I said.

“If that’s your way of asking if I’ve found anything condemning enough to further this investigation, the answer is no. Not yet at least,” she murmured, winking.

“Why do I get the impression that you’re just waiting for the right moment to take a hit at me?”

“Believe it or not, Preston I don’t let my personal life get in the way of my job. What I find or do not find here has nothing to do with what happened between us.”

“Well, you might find out a lot more if you just come out and ask. I know that seems unprofessional or like I’m just trying to lead you off the trail, but it isn’t. Look, I may not have always been a good guy, but I’m not out here trying to cheat people out of a few dollars,” I said.

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“Out of a few millions of dollars, maybe.”

“Oh come on, Kat. I know there are probably a thousand questions running through your mind right now that you want to ask me. So, how about we grab a cup of coffee and you ask them, huh?”

“You going to rent out the entire coffee shop?”

“No, but I’ll take you to a hole in the wall so there won’t be too many people there ready to ask questions,” I said, with a wink.

“I don’t know, Preston. I have a lot of work I need to get through, and-”

“And it’ll probably be a lot easier once you get to know the person you’re investigating. Call it unprofessional, but it’ll probably be effective,” I said, holding the door to her office open.

She sighed, grabbing her coat and her purse. I was beaming at the thought of spending more time with her, but as she passed me, she just rolled her eyes.

“This is just for research purposes only, okay? I’m here to learn more about your business, the people in it, and how much it has changed since your father was the one in charge. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, smirking.

Claire rushed to catch up to us with her iPad in her hand, going over my schedule,



looking like she was about to lose her mind.

“Sir, you have a meeting in-”

“Cancel it. I have somewhere to be,” I instructed.

“How long will you be gone? You have another one at three o’clock.”

“Don’t you just love that I keep you on your toes, Claire? I’ll be back soon,” I said, waving at her.

The elevator doors closed and Katherine turned to me, folding her arms across her chest, smiling.

“You just love to torture her, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. It’s not like she can’t handle it. She’s been my assistant for years, and she knows exactly what to do in these situations.”

“And what situation would this be exactly? Another chance for you to try to win me over so I don’t sink your company?” she snapped.

“No, see if I was trying to do that then I would’ve suggested dinner.”

“Ha. Of course you would,” she said, with a chuckle.

### Chapter Seven

#### Katherine

I folded my hands in my lap, breathing deeply as the town car pulled up in front of the small coffee shop with its beautiful bay window and charming little yellow door. Preston got out first, outstretching his hand to help me, and I took it. The mere touch of his skin on mine sent a chill down my spine that I hadn't felt in a while, and I tried my best to ignore it. I watched as he rolled up the sleeves of his button-up shirt, greeting the barista behind the coffee bar as she smiled warmly at him.

"It's nice to see you again, Preston. What will it be?"

"I'll have whatever the lady is having," he said, turning to me, smiling.

I glanced up at the menu behind her, looking at all the wonderful options, before I decided on a plain cappuccino. She went to work behind the bar while Preston led me to a table right near the window. The sun was pouring in, so much so I could practically feel it on my skin, and it was nice. I felt so calm yet so on edge all at the same time when I was around him, like I didn't know what to expect. It was hard to look him in the eye, catching yet another glimpse of that perfect, pearly white smile as he brought our drinks over.

My fingers were practically shaking as I tried to grab ahold of the ceramic cup, and I had to take a deep breath before I said anything because I was sure I'd be fumbling for the right words.

“I can’t remember the last time I was in a coffee shop in the middle of the day like this,” I said, taking in the atmosphere.

There were a few people over by the bar seating with their earphones in, typing away at their laptops, and enjoying their hot cups of coffee like there was no place else they’d rather be. It’d been ages since I’d felt like that, and now that I thought about it, it was quite strange to see Preston be so comfortable in a place like this.

“I have to ask, is this somewhere you come often? Another Brooklyn spot you just so happen to frequent?” I asked, sipping on my smooth, silky coffee.

“Another place I like to visit when I need to get away from the city. I brought you here so you can learn a bit more about me. That’s why you’re here after all, right?”

“Yes, so tell me, Preston, what makes this place so special?”

“This is where I’d come when I’d had another ridiculous fight with my father. After listening to him go on for hours about how much of a disappointment I was, I’d escape to Brooklyn. I knew he’d never make it out here unless he was visiting a property he wanted to buy. The man was a piece of work.”

“I knew your relationship was rocky, but I didn’t realize it was that bad,” I said sympathetically.

I listened to him tell me about the ups and downs he experienced ever since his father started training him to be next in line. I had my doubts about Preston from the moment we first met, thinking that he had everything handed to him, that he never had to work a day in his life, but it wasn’t that simple. He spent so many years trying to impress the one person that mattered to him, only to be shot down, time and time again. I thought about what I’d been reading about the Laurier account, the money that had shifted from one place to another, and the building that was now the

headquarters of Kingsman Enterprises. On paper, it looked like the perfect deal, but there was still money that was unaccounted for, so much that it made me worried I won't be able to find the trail. It felt like this had all fallen into my lap at the completely wrong time, and now I found myself not wanting to hurt the man that had broken my heart.

I was looking for every excuse to deny the facts, but there was a part of me that held out hope I'd find the perfect explanation for what was going on. The rest of the money had to go somewhere, Preston. Your father had to stash it someplace safe, and I just hope you had nothing to do with it.

"You've told me about your father, but what about your mother? I've heard that she's quite the popular one," I said, recalling what I'd seen while flipping through the style section.

"She keeps herself busy, and she can't seem to stop spending money ever since my father passed away. We never really had a relationship, but I never did mind. It was my father I wanted to care, to value everything that I was doing, but he never did. Now, he's potentially left me with quite a bit of trouble, now hasn't he?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. I knew what was coming, and I had been beating around the bush the entire time we were here, but I was so worried about what he was going to say.

"You're looking into the Laurier account. Edward Laurier was a friend of my father's and the one that sold him the building you've been spending a lot of time in. My father kept me completely off the deal, but from the paperwork I signed off on, everything was clean. Look, Kat. I want you to know that I'm not the kind of guy that wants to cheat my way to the top. If I was that guy, I'd be making more millions and not even bothering to show up to do the work. If there's something I need to know, you have to tell me," he begged.

I saw that genuineness in his eyes, making my heart sink into my stomach because the thought of having to break it to him that there were misplaced millions was too much to handle. I couldn't blame him, not until I got proof that money went through his hands first.

"I haven't found anything incriminating yet, Preston, but you have to know I'm not done looking. This is my job after all. Trust me, if I had a say in the matter I wouldn't be the one taking on this case, but my boss requested that I'd be the one to handle it. It would be a big step for me," I confessed.

"It would be a big step if you found something, right?"

"And yet, I'm still hoping I don't," I said, reaching across the table, placing my hand in his.

I didn't even know what I was doing until it was too late, but he brushed his fingers along my knuckles, and I allowed it to lull me before I eventually pulled away. I awkwardly tucked my hair behind my ears, clearing my throat, before finishing the rest of my cappuccino.

"We should be getting back, no? I'm sure you have an entire schedule planned, and you already missed that one meeting," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but what's missing one more? There's still more to this story that you have to know. We haven't spoken much about William, but I'm sure you two have gotten acquainted by now," he said.

My eyes widened, realizing that I had to keep quiet about Mr. William Wolfe, because the last thing I needed was to give up my client before the job was done. That would be the one thing to sink this investigation and I couldn't have that. Preston piqued my interest, and I decided to give in, because learning more about Mr. Wolfe

would definitely come in handy. I still had no idea what I was dealing with. I felt alone, trying to stay afloat in shark-infested waters.

If Preston's father is as bad as Preston says he is, then I'm sure his brother William certainly has some secrets of his own. It wouldn't hurt to find out more. Maybe then I can finally get ahead of this thing.

We pulled up outside this small art gallery that seemed to be closed, and I turned to look at him, right as he was fishing for something in his pocket. He pulled out a pair of keys, helping me out of the car and we both made our way to the front door.

“Where is this place?”

“Another little hobby of mine,” he said, opening the wrought iron doors for me.

The place was dimly lit with polished chestnut floors and some of the most beautiful art I’d ever seen. It was such a luxurious little spot that it made me feel like I’d just stepped into a European gallery, exploring some of history’s greatest pieces.

“I didn’t take you for a collector, or someone that was interested in anything other than that scandalous lifestyle of yours,” I said.

“Well, that’s why this is out here and not in the heart of the city. The gallery has been a place where I can enjoy my time and not have to worry about what everyone else seems to think of me. I bought it when my father suggested that William and I be business partners who both had rights of ownership to Kingsman Enterprises. By suggested, he meant that it had to happen and there was nothing I could do about it. William got the minority share and he wasn’t happy about it either.”

My eyes lowered to the floor and I shuffled around because I really didn’t know what to say. After all, Preston seemed to do to impress his father, it still wasn’t enough for him to man the ship on his own.

“How has that been? I’m sure it must’ve caused some tension between the two of you,” I murmured.

“You’d think so, and believe me we have our differences, but William’s really become someone I could trust. We make decisions together and ever since my father

passed, he's helped me keep Kingsman Enterprises afloat. If it wasn't for him, I don't know where I'd be right now," said Preston.

I was shocked to hear him say that, nearly fumbling over myself, but Preston held me up. He smiled, and being near him like that again sent shockwaves through my body, but I pulled away.

"Easy there."

"Sorry, I must've tripped over something," I said, glancing down at my feet to find nothing there.

"Falling for me all over again, aren't you?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes at him, but I couldn't help but blush. I felt my cheeks get hot at the thought of that because even though it was just a small joke, he was absolutely right. There were so many thoughts running through my mind that I could barely make sense of it all. Preston was the distraction I absolutely didn't need, and now that I knew how much he trusted Mr. Wolfe, I couldn't understand why this investigation was even happening.

If you two are so close, why would he call us in to investigate the company? He doesn't seem to trust you at all, Preston and now I'm starting to think that there's something going on here that isn't quite right. Maybe this has nothing to do with you or maybe you're doing all of this just to lead me astray. It wouldn't be the first time.

I was quiet the rest of the way back to the office and Preston didn't so much as ask me what was wrong. I knew I needed to stay away from him, that these little getaways weren't good for either of us. It dawned on me that if I found out that he had a hand in all of this, it would hurt me more than I wanted it to, and that was all the more reason to keep digging. There has to be something that I'm missing, but for



now, I can't forget the guy he really is. I can't forget what he put me through. Apology or not, it may not be enough to fix any of it.

I heard my cell phone vibrating loudly on my nightstand, and I answered it groggily.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, Kat," I heard his sultry voice say. I pulled the phone away from my ear as the screen illuminated, and I couldn't believe he was calling me this early.

"Preston, it's not even seven o'clock yet. Whatever you need, I'm sure it can wait until tomorrow. I have to be at my office today," I said.

"I'm calling because a few months ago, I let the one good thing in my life go. I need you to know that I won't let that happen again. I should've called that morning, Kat. I'm sorry I didn't," he murmured.

His words made my heart flutter and I could feel how hot my cheeks were as they blushed. It didn't take me long to snap out of it this time, because even so, he still did those things. I could still remember all of the mornings I woke up wondering what I did wrong, kicking myself for almost sleeping with him. It was like taking a bullet to the heart to realize how stupid I'd been, and I wasn't about to let that happen to me again. Then why do I still care so much, Preston? What is it about you that makes me still care?

"I-I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, Kat. I'll be seeing you."

"You sure will," I said, hanging up the phone.

I slammed my palm against my forehead, knowing that with every little gesture, it became harder to get over my feelings for Preston. They were still lingering around, waiting for me to either give into them or chuck them far away for good. I didn't know how to process what I was feeling, and I was afraid he'd continue saying the right thing at the right time, drawing me back in faster than I could even realize. Stick to the plan, Kat. Focus on finding the truth, because the truth could very well change every little bit of what you're feeling right now.

I tossed the covers from my legs, slipping my feet into my warm bedroom slippers before making my way to the kitchen. It was too early, but there was no way I'd be going back to sleep now. I made a pot of fresh coffee just as I heard some soft thuds coming from Poppy's room. She came out still dressed in the outfit she'd been wearing yesterday afternoon, her makeup smeared, and her hair in a disheveled bun.

"Now, what time did you get in this morning?"

"Morning? What makes you think I got in this morning?" she asked, with a yawn.

I pointed to her outfit and her eyes widened. She sighed, taking a seat at the breakfast bar and I grabbed two cups because she was definitely in need of some caffeine.

"So, I take it that drinks with Chris last night went well."

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“What can I say? He’s hot, he listens, and he doesn’t want to talk about work. What more can I ask for?”

I smiled, handing her the hot cup of coffee and she took a sip, shutting her eyes to take in how good it felt. I downed mine, telling her all about what was going on between Preston and I, which seemed to jolt her right out of her little love daze.

“I was not expecting that,” she murmured.

“Trust me, neither was I. I’m not going to let him get to me. He’s obviously doing this because he’s bored or he’s trying to keep my head out of the investigation, right?”

“Or he could genuinely be sorry.”

“What happened to steering clear of the Manhattan sharks?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

“Let’s say I’m not exactly the one that should be giving advice right now. If he’s really trying then maybe you should go for it. Who knows, things might be better than you think,” said Poppy.

“No, Pops. I can’t even think about what that would mean until I find out what’s really going on with his company. If I find out that he’s involved in fraud, I can’t exactly justify going out with him no matter how good it feels.”

“Well, if he turns out to be a criminal, you would have dodged a bullet. Though, if

this really is just a wild goose chase, then maybe it's time to test the waters again. Something tells me they're going to be real hot," she said, winking.

I laughed, heading to the bathroom to get ready for the day, and it wasn't long before I made it right out the front door. I stuffed my keys into my work tote, about to hail a cab when I saw a flower delivery sitting on the ledge near some of the other packages. I looked closely at the card, realizing it was addressed to me. From Preston. Of course. I rolled my eyes, grabbing the beautiful bouquet and walking it over to the trash can near the sidewalk.

I started walking when I heard a soft, sexy chuckle behind me. My mouth nearly fell to the floor when I realized what he'd just watched me do, and I turned around nervously, wondering how I was going to get myself out of this one.

"Preston, w-what are you doing here?"

"Apparently watching you toss a perfectly good bouquet," he teased.

"I'm sorry, I just-"

"No need to apologize, Kat. Now, what time can I pick you up for dinner?"

He had that enticing smirk on his face, the one that made my entire body melt, and he seemed so sure of himself, like there'd be no way I could say no to a meal with him. He was right.

"Dinner, huh?"

"I did say if I was trying to win you over I'd suggest dinner. I see that flowers really aren't your thing, huh?" he asked, teasingly.

“They’re definitely my thing. I’m still trying to figure out if flowers from you are my thing.”

“What do you say we decide that over dinner?”

“I say, all right. You’re on.”

I couldn’t help the flush of my cheeks, the sweat in my palms, and how fast my heart was beating whenever he was next to me. Every bone in my body was telling me to run, that I was just going to get hurt all over again, but for the first time in my life, I wanted to play with fire.

I arrived at the office with my to-go coffee cup in hand, finally having some real information to share with Jamie, and I hoped it would keep him happy for a while. I was actually looking forward to spending the day at my desk, going over what I’d found without having to worry about running into Preston, but now the thought of having dinner with him was weighing heavily on my mind. I carried my files and purse to my desk, placing them all down and taking a moment to sit before Jamie’s morning meeting would let out.

I went through a few emails, made sure my calendar was set for the day, and before I knew it I had Jamie’s assistant peering over my cubicle wall, telling me it was time to see him. I took a deep breath, following her inside, just as Jamie finished up on the phone.

“Good morning, Kat. William tells me that you’ve received some pretty interesting information that might just lead you to find your pot of gold. Have you found any proof yet that Kingsman Enterprises is involved in fraudulent activity?”

“I haven’t found my pot of gold yet, sir, but when I do you’ll be the first to know. To find a document or a trail like that, it’s going to take time, even with the team helping

me now. If there's anything to find at all," I reminded him.

"Oh, there has to be. Mr. Clarke has been involved in shady business practices from the very beginning and that's why William was brought on to help him lead in the right direction."

"That's not the story I've heard, sir. Mr. Wolfe has also been quite close with his brother leading up to his passing, and that makes me think that he could very well be responsible for this as well," I said.

The look in Jamie's eyes made me think he was about to lose his mind. I knew how much was at stake for him to close this investigation, but it seemed to me like he was no longer interested in justice.

"He's our client, Katherine. We have to honor his claims until there is evidence to prove that they are false. I was hoping you'd have something more by now. Please, don't disappoint me again."

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I left Jamie's office feeling off for the rest of the day, but I wasn't about to let it ruin the night ahead. It was the first time in a while where I didn't want to be wrapped up thinking about work, and I knew that it was time I treated myself. The thought of dropping any money on a new dress made my stomach turn a bit, but if there was ever a time to buy one, it'd be now. There was a part of me that wanted to remind Preston of the girl he'd lost, the girl he was desperately trying to win back, and I just couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he picked me up for the evening.

I walked down the busy sidewalk to a local boutique, glancing into the shop window to see the beautiful dresses that were on display. I stepped inside, hearing the sound of the little bell ring, and I instantly smelled the scent of light vanilla wafting through the air. I looked over at the small perfume counter, the racks of perfectly organized clothes, and the delicate curtains over the dressing rooms in the back. The shop assistant walked up to me with a warm smile and it dawned on me that I had no idea what I was looking for.

"Can I help you find something?" she asked.

"I actually have a date tonight. I need something fitting for a nice quiet dinner," I said.

"Let me pull a few options and start a dressing room for you. Come with me."

I followed her to the back and she left me to sit on the beige tufted couch. She moved around the store pulling all such incredible options, and I watched as each glittery, glistening piece was slung over her forearm on their hangers before she brought them over to me. She showed me each one, and I settled on a black, satiny dress that

looked like it'd be the perfect fit. I ventured off behind the curtain to try it on, and when I came out, I knew it was the one.

“That looks absolutely beautiful on you, and I’m not just saying that, trust me. You know what? Let me see if I can pull some shoes that will look amazing with that dress,” she said, and I nodded.

I looked at myself in the mirror, glancing down at the price tag and I instantly felt my heart sink into my stomach. I felt someone approach from behind me, and I looked up in the mirror to see a beautiful blonde standing there.

“Now that is one hell of a dress. I know, the price hurts, but if you’re looking to knock someone’s socks off, that’s the dress to do it in.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’m Leighton.”

“Katherine.”

We barely had a moment to introduce ourselves before the shop assistant came back with a few pairs of heels that I certainly couldn’t afford. I bought the dress, watching as she wrapped it up nicely in some tissue paper before sliding it into a bag and handing it to me. I looked around for Leighton, but it seemed as though she disappeared into one of the dressing rooms. I smiled, excited to see what the night was going to bring and I headed straight home to get ready.

Why in the world am I so excited? I asked myself, checking the time constantly to make sure I wasn’t running late. I took a hot shower, blow-dried my hair, and ran a wet mascara wand through my eyelashes. I barely had enough time to slip into my heels before I got the text message that said he was downstairs. Is this our do-over,



Preston? I hope this time, I won't get caught up in another one of your games.

### Chapter Eight

Preston

It was a cool, Manhattan evening when my limousine pulled up in front of Katherine's apartment building. I felt a strange sense of nervousness wash over me as I clutched the bouquet of red roses in my hand, stepping out and shutting the door behind me. Out she came with her brown hair slicked back behind her ears, that perfect wash of pink over her full lips, and the longest damn legs in the world. She looked over at me with a smile, glancing down at the bouquet in my hands.

"I thought that if I showed up with one in person, the chances of you tossing it would be extremely low," I teased.

"My favorite flowers are peonies, but I won't be tossing this one. I can promise you that," she responded.

Her eyes lit up underneath the streetlights, making them shine a warm amber color. Her skin glistened and that incredible scent of vanilla made me want to take her right into my arms. I kept my cool, holding the door open for her as she slid inside, and I smiled right as I joined her.

"So, are you going to tell me where we're headed for dinner tonight?" she asked.

"I won't be telling you that because it'll ruin the surprise."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be another lovely restaurant nestled somewhere in Brooklyn,

which would be a smart move on your part because the paparazzi vultures must still be looking to get the right shot for their next story,” she said.

“They may have calmed down with that for now, but one wrong move and it’ll be chaos again. Besides, I don’t need that ruining our evening together.”

She smiled at me, and I felt her fingers brush up against mine. I took her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin, and this time she didn’t pull away. It wasn’t long before we pulled up outside the art gallery, and she turned to me, looking rather confused. I led her inside, watching as she took in her surroundings. Right in the middle of the gallery was a table set for two with a white linen tablecloth and candles lit. I glanced over at the back room where the caterers were getting ready to begin service, and I knew everything was absolutely perfect.

“Can I take those?” I asked, pointing to her wrap and purse.

She handed them to me and I set them aside before we made our way to the table.

“Thank you, Preston. T-this is beautiful.”

“Only the best for you, Kat.”

The waiter came around with a bottle of 1996 Chateau Latour and from the moment she took a look at it, she blushed. The tension was high in the air and I knew that no matter how perfect the night was, she was still hesitant. I’d fucked things up so badly that she didn’t know what to think and I knew it was going to take time before she actually trusted me again.

We had our dinner, chatting for hours, and it was the first time in a while that I truly made her laugh. Once we’d finished with dessert, I led her around the gallery so she could get a better look at all the art I’d collected recently.

“These are breathtaking,” she said. Her hazel eyes darted around as she took in every last detail of the paintings before her.

“Not nearly as breathtaking as you,” I murmured.

She turned to me and I didn’t give it another thought before I lifted her chin, leaning in to kiss her. It was like a fireworks show had erupted between us, as I indulged in her soft lips, how incredible she tasted, and how much I wanted to find a quiet corner in the gallery to sleep with her.

She melted into the kiss and before I had the chance to take it any further, she pulled away. I could practically hear her panting, desperately trying to catch her breath, and that told me all I needed to know. You’ve gotten quite good at fighting our connection because you were so damn angry at me, Kat. That anger is slowly starting to melt away, isn’t it?

“I’m here to give you a second chance, Preston. That doesn’t mean I’m giving you an open invitation back into my bed,” she said.

“I never expected you to, Kat.”

The rest of the night was wonderful, so much so that when it finally came time for me to drop her back at her apartment, I didn’t want to go. I could feel the heat between us, the urge to feel every inch of her skin rushing through my body, but I didn’t want to scare her off. She still had her reservations about me, but I knew they’d dissipate with time.

“I had a lovely night tonight, Preston. I really did,” she said, with a soft smile.

“I’m glad you did, Kat. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

I turned to leave before turning back at the last second right as her key entered the front door. I pulled her into my arms, kissing her hard, as her hands caressed my cheeks. I slowly pulled away, kissing her forehead before I headed back to my limousine.

“Good night, Kat,” I said, with a smirk.

“G-good night, Preston.”

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I watched as she made her way inside and I caught a glimpse of that beautiful grin of hers through the glass right before she made her way to the elevators.

I sauntered through the lobby of my building, heading for the elevator when I heard a familiar, sultry voice behind me. There was a part of me that just wanted to keep walking because I knew that wherever that voice was, there would always be trouble. The incessant clacking of her heels got louder as she rushed around to look me right in the eyes, and she had the biggest smile on her face.

“Leighton? What the hell are you doing here?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

She tossed her blonde hair to her back, undoing her fur-lined coat ever so slightly, and I saw that diamond necklace I gave her ages ago still hanging right at her décolletage.

“I was hoping we could chat. I just got back in town and I heard about what’s been going on. What do you say we have one drink, hm?”

I glanced around at the rather full lobby to see that people were starting to whisper as they stared at me. It was almost as if they didn’t even pay any attention until they spotted Leighton, because we had quite the rocky past, and we always seemed to be the talk of the town. I told myself I’d never let any woman too close to me after you. What do you want?

I grabbed her by the arm, leading her into the elevator so we could head up to my penthouse to have a little privacy. Once we were both safely inside, I headed straight for the hard liquor, because I knew that I wasn’t going to like whatever Leighton had

to say.

“Aren’t you going to offer me one? Man, I could’ve sworn you used to be so much more of a gentleman. I guess you’ve really changed after all,” she said, playing with her necklace. She undid the buttons of her coat, wearing the same incredible dress that Katherine had worn earlier that evening. I furrowed my brow at her, wondering what kind of fucking game she was trying to play with me here. Whatever it is, I don’t want any part of it.

“Why are you back here, Leighton? Why now?”

“I booked a spread in Vogue for the Fall issue and that means I had to come back to the city for the shoot. I didn’t even know what was going on until my friends were bringing it up at dinner,” she said.

“Bringing what up exactly?”

“Well, you managed to do some damage control, I see. That reporter was going to town trying to paint you in the worst possible light, but now new information has been going around,” said Leighton, playing with her hair.

“What new information?”

“Apparently someone’s been talking about you seeing the woman that’s supposed to be investigating your company for fraud. I knew you were a player, Preston but I didn’t expect you to stoop that low. Is that what you have to do to protect Kingsman Enterprises?”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I snapped.

“Yes, I do. I spoke to Riley. I set the record straight that there’d be no way you’d be

seeing anyone else because we're getting back together. It didn't take much to convince her."

"You shouldn't have done that," I spat.

"You can thank me later, darling. I'll be sticking around for a while. I look forward to meeting that lovely little girlfriend of yours. I'm sure once she finds out how truly terrible of a boyfriend you really are, you'll be missing how easy things were with me. You and I are cut from the same cloth after all. I can't say the same about dear ol' Katherine."

"How the hell do you know her name?"

"You really have no idea how bad this is, do you? You probably thought that story was going to be the last of your little PR nightmare, but you were wrong. I did what I could to help, but knowing Riley, she'll see right through it eventually," she said.

"I think it's about time that you leave, Leighton."

"Right, well you know that I'm just a call away if you need me. I'll be here to help you, darling. Whatever you need. Ta."

She grabbed her coat, slipping it over her bare shoulders before taking off down the elevator, waving at me with a smirk before the doors closed. I pinched the bridge of my nose, wishing this entire nightmare would just disappear, but I downed the rest of my drink before I headed to bed. This is something that's just going to have to wait until tomorrow. I wonder how much time Kingsman Enterprises has before the stories start coming out. Riley's probably working overtime. I need to get ahead of this and fast.

I woke to the clamorous sound of banging coming from my front door. I groggily



sauntered over to it, looking out of the peephole to see William standing there with what appeared to be a tabloid magazine in his hand.

“Good morning, William. You know this could’ve waited until I made it to the office, right?”

“No, it couldn’t because you’re not going to the office today. You’re going to be holed up in here getting work done without so much as anyone interacting with you.”

“Watch your tone, William. What is going on?”

He handed me the magazine, and I took one look at the cover, sighing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. New information? Possible fraudulent activity? Well, this isn’t a reputable magazine so I don’t think I can even blame Riley for this one,” I murmured.

“It may not be reputable, Preston but you know the entire city is eating this shit up. What the hell happened? I thought I took care of this mess,” he responded, and I shrugged at him.

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William paced back and forth before settling into the lounge chair in my home office. We bounced ideas off of each other, hoping there'd be another quick fix to this one, but then his cell phone began to ring. My stomach turned when I saw him press his lips together angrily.

“That was one of the board members. They were probably calling with their concerns. What exactly am I supposed to tell them?” asked William.

He was usually the one with all of the answers, and for the first time in a while, I didn't know how we were going to shut this down.

“Do you think we could get in touch with this tabloid and the others? I'm sure they won't turn down a large sum to let this go,” I suggested.

“Yes, and when someone finds out what we did, we're going to be front-page news, Preston. It'll only make it look like we have something to hide when we absolutely don't. See, the more information the public gets, the easier it'll be for them to spin it before we even have a chance to stop it. If that happens, the truth won't even matter anymore,” he said.

He ran his fingers over his thick beard, adjusting the expensive tie around his neck, before grabbing his phone, typing away at his screen. I stared at him confused, waiting for him to finish, just as he got up to pat me on the shoulder.

“Clear your schedule tonight, Preston. You and I are having dinner with the board, and once that's over, at least they'll be able to see that they have nothing to worry about. It'll be in your best interest to bring a date, and your forensic auditor doesn't

count. Think you can do that?"

I shrugged, shaking my head at him, because the last thing that I wanted right about now was to take anyone else out to dinner with the board. If I had it my way I'd be jetting off somewhere with Katherine now that we were finally getting to know each other again, but I couldn't abandon the company. I couldn't abandon all of the years of hard work I put into my father's legacy.

"Who exactly should I bring then?"

"I heard Leighton was back in town. I heard from my assistant that she'd stopped by to see you yesterday. I know how you feel about her, but this time she might actually be able to help."

"No. No way. Absolutely not. That woman is a psychopath," I said through my gritted teeth.

"Well, if anyone spots you out, it would be better to be with someone they recognize than a total stranger, who would only raise more questions. Wouldn't it?"

I pressed my lips together, blinking slowly, feeling the frustration wash over me, realizing that Leighton had once again backed me into a corner.

"Fine. I'll do it. She already told some of the press that we were getting back together. I would like you to set up this dinner somewhere we won't have to run into too many people. I don't want Katherine to find out about this. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," William said, with a bright smile.

I sat at my desk, reluctantly pulling out my cell phone to dial Leighton's number. I listened to it ring, glancing out through the window of my house hoping that

Katherine wouldn't be just outside, somehow hearing the conversation. The thought of her finding out what was going on made my stomach turn, and I knew that I'd have to come up with one hell of an excuse if word ever did get out. Leighton's already feeding the press information about getting back together. It's only a matter of time before Katherine finds out. I can't let this be the reason I lose her all over again.

I took a deep breath, getting myself together, knowing that like all the other shit I had to deal with, I'd somehow find a way out of this mess.

"Hello?"

"Leighton, it's me. Preston."

"I know. I'm just surprised that you called. I didn't think I'd be hearing from you so soon. Can't stay away from me, can you?" she asked, in that sultry voice of hers.

I rolled my eyes, sighing deeply.

"I need a favor."

"Of course you do, darling. Whatever you need, I'm your girl."

I told her all about the little proposition, and I could practically feel how much she was eating all of it up. The thought of having to take her out, make it seem like we even remotely liked each other made me want to throw in the towel right then. If this dinner goes well, the board will get off my back, and I don't have to see Leighton again. The paparazzi can speculate all they want, but if there's no photographic evidence, there's not much they can do.

I went to the office later in the afternoon and was getting ready to head down to the car to go back home when I heard a knock on the door. I looked up to see Katherine

standing there with a soft smile on her face, and even though my life was practically going to shit right now, it felt good to see her. I waved for her to join me inside, taking a good look at the way her black pencil skirt hugged her hips and how her slightly unbuttoned blouse exposed a familiar diamond necklace.

It made me smile to know that she'd kept it and hadn't pawned it off somewhere. It made me feel good to know that we were finally getting back to where we left off right before I fucked everything up.

"Kat."

"I was just stopping in to see how you were doing. Everyone looks like they're walking on eggshells around you, and I just wanted to make sure you're okay," she said, and I smiled.

"I'm sure they're walking around on eggshells around you too."

She nodded. I watched as her lips parted like she wanted to tell me something, but she stopped herself. I wished I could've taken her back to my apartment so we could grab a bite to eat, open a bottle of wine, and forget this entire thing, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. I glanced down at my Rolex, realizing I had to leave now if I wanted to get home in time to freshen up before the board dinner.

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“I don’t want you to worry about everyone else, Kat. Right now, the only two people that matter are you and me,” I said.

She inched closer to me, and I caressed her cheek, kissing her softly. It was taking every ounce of my damn self-control not to lay her on my desk and fuck the life out of her.

“Do you have plans tonight?” she asked.

Her face softened and I watched the worried look she’d been earlier completely dissipate.

“I, unfortunately, have dinner with the board tonight. Though, tomorrow night I can show you another one of my hobbies if you’re up for it,” I teased.

“What could be more exciting than that fantastic art collection of yours?”

There was a glimmer in those hazel eyes of hers, and I could tell that she was finally starting to trust me again. I tried not to think about the board, Leighton, or the state of my company right now. All I wanted to do was take Katherine into my arms and remind her just how good we were together. Tomorrow. Just get through tonight and you can have her all to yourself tomorrow.

“Oh, you’d be surprised.”

“Tomorrow it is.”

She leaned in, kissing me one more time before she took off for the night. It took me a while to get out of the office, and before I knew it, William was calling me with the details for dinner.

“Is everything ready?”

“Yes, and as discreet as possible.”

“Which restaurant is it at?” I asked.

“It’s not. I decided to have a last-minute catered dinner at my home. It will give the board a chance to feel comfortable and you won’t have to worry about being seen with Leighton. That is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“You could’ve hosted it at my place, William. I have far more space, and it would’ve looked better considering they’re an inch away from wanting my head on a chopping block.”

“It’s a little too late to change things now, Preston.”

“No, it’s fine. Leighton and I will be there,” I said, giving in.

I hung up the phone, heading down to the town car that was waiting for me. I need a drink.

I took a long sip of the whiskey in my hand before I heard a knock on my front door. I grabbed my suit jacket, making my way over to answer it. I opened it up to find Leighton standing there with her hair perfectly tousled, her lips painted a shade of red, and a dress that didn’t fail to get my attention. I sighed, not looking forward to the evening at all, and she crossed her hands at her chest, pouting.

“That is no way to greet your date for the evening,” she said.

“If I had it my way, you wouldn’t be coming, Leighton. I need you to be on your best behavior tonight because if I don’t fix things with the board right now, it’s only going to make things more difficult in the future. Do you think you can do that?”

“I can, but it’s going to come at a cost to you.”

I should’ve known that she was going to hit me with some ridiculous move like this. Now it’s too late to get anyone else to take her place. Fuck.

“What do you want?” I asked through my gritted teeth.

“Oh, don’t get your panties in a bunch, Preston. All I want is for us to spend a little more time together. I’ve been back in town for a while, but you’ve been doing everything in your power to avoid me. Now, you’re going to answer my calls and take me to lunch when I ask, okay?”

I stood there, feeling the anger rush through me like a tidal wave. I glanced down at my watch to see that if we didn’t leave right away we were going to be late.

“Fine, Leighton. Let’s just go. Now!”

We rushed out the door, heading down to the lobby, and I just hoped that no one was going to spot us together. My heart was beating loudly, nearly drowning out the sound of Leighton’s incessant talking, but once we were in the car together, there was nothing I could do to escape.

I pulled out my cell phone, texting William to let him know we were on our way, and that’s when I saw a text from Katherine.



I hope you have a nice time at the board dinner tonight, Preston. Looking forward to ours soon. - Kat.

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I quickly texted her back as Leighton leaned over my shoulder, staring right into my phone screen.

“Do you mind?”

“Texting your girlfriend, I see. Does she know that you’re here with me?”

I stayed silent, watching Leighton’s eyes light up with opportunity, and I shook my head.

“You already blabbed to the press about us getting back together. Now, I need you to stay quiet. If you want me to pay attention to you, that’s what you’re going to have to do,” I spat.

“I did that so they’d have something else to talk about besides your fraud investigation, but fine. I’ll back off,” she responded, with a sly smile.

The car pulled up outside William’s grand house, and it was the first time in a while that I got a good look at it. The pillars cascaded down to the white stone steps leading up to the massive front door, the shrubbery enveloped the entire lawn, and the cobblestone path bordering the entryway only made me think of my father. Now this is why I choose to live in the city.

Leighton looped her arm through mine and we walked up the stairs, ringing the doorbell. The door slowly opened to reveal William standing there with a full glass of hard liquor in his hand, ushering us inside. He wore his grey Armani for the occasion, and if I remembered correctly, it was the suit he always wore when he was about to

close a deal.

“It’s nice to see you again, William,” said Leighton, giving him air kisses.

“Well, don’t you look stunning.”

“Why thank you.”

Leighton had the biggest grin on her face, and it was strange to see because when we were together, she hated being dragged out to these things. She always believed that they were somehow beneath her, and that only made things harder for us. That was also before I found out what a real psychotic bitch she can be. I thought, fixing my tie before William patted me on the shoulder, leading me towards the dining room to meet everyone else.

“I need you to stay calm, Preston. The last thing any of us want is a slip-up that will make fixing this mess anymore difficult,” he said.

“Don’t tell that to me, tell that to her.”

Leighton only rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious, Preston.”

I nodded my head, putting on a vibrant smile before I met with the board members, and the dinner finally began. We were all sitting at William’s large dining table, a few courses in, and I managed to hold a good conversation with every member there. I was finally starting to loosen up when the waiter brought out another bottle of wine, and I turned to look over at Leighton who seemed to be doing a good job of keeping everyone occupied as well. At least you’re holding up your end of the bargain.

“So, Preston, it’s nice that you and William both decided to have us for dinner tonight, but we must discuss what’s happening to the company. The board is rather worried about what might be the outcome here.”

“I assure you, Bart, that the investigation is coming to a close very soon. Despite what you might be reading in the press, you don’t have anything to worry about,” I said.

“That’s great to hear, Preston, but it doesn’t change our decision. I know your father believed in you, gave you control of the company because he was sure you could keep it out of harm’s way, but until this investigation is over, we need to make some changes.”

“What kind of changes?” I asked. It took every ounce of my self-control not to slam my fork right through the ceramic plate in front of me.

“We’ve decided to give William more control of things for the time being. Now, I know that may seem upsetting, but I should remind you that no time in the past has there been this much public outrage about this,” he said.

“I am the major stockhold-”

“And we are the board that oversees management of the company. Owning the company is not the same as running it, and you know that perfectly well. As an owner, you can disband the board, but do you think that this is the right time for this?”

“Bart, surely there has to be some other way we could do this,” said William.

I was comforted by the fact that he didn’t seem excited about this. It made me feel good to know that I had someone in my corner.

“This is what’s best for the company right now. Once everything settles, things will go back to normal.”

Dinner concluded and William led us all into his library for more drinks. I had a hard time keeping up with conversation after what I’d just heard, knowing that at any moment, the rug could be pulled out from under me. I felt a soft hand rest on my shoulder and when I turned around, I saw Leighton standing there sympathetically.

“Now, that was the last thing I expected to happen, Preston. I’m so sorry.”

It was the first time in a while that she’d sounded so sincere, but I appreciated it because I didn’t have any energy left in me to bicker.

“Thank you, Leighton. Thank you for coming too,” I said, even though the words physically hurt as they left my lips.

“The pleasure is all mine. Let me see what I can do about ol’ Bart over there. Maybe he just needs someone to convince him that taking away your rights isn’t the answer here. Hold my drink.”

I raised my eyebrow at her, now with two glasses in my hand, watching as she strutted over to Bart. He seemed pleased to see her. I watched his eyes travel down her body, and how he got a little too close to her, but she didn’t seem to mind. I caught her looking back at me with a smile, and I raised a glass in her direction.

If there’s anyone that can convince that man to get off his high horse and let me handle things, it’s you. I thought, sipping on the thick, dark liquid in my glass, wishing I could just leave. My mind drifted off to Katherine and I wondered what she’d been doing. I found myself missing her more than I wanted to admit, and I was practically walking myself right into a trap here.

If she ever finds out that I've been spending time with Leighton, I don't think that she's ever going to forgive me. I changed her mind about me once, but something tells me it's going to be nearly impossible to do a second time. What the hell am I going to do now?

### Chapter Nine

#### Katherine

I sat on the couch in my living room, going over countless documents until I heard my cell phone ring. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest and for a moment I thought that maybe I'd lost track of time again, but that's when I got a good look at the name on the screen.

"You do know I'm coming into the office today, right?"

"Yes, well I wasn't going to wait all of that time to make sure we were still on for dinner tonight," said Preston.

I smiled brightly, rolling my eyes as I started packing files into my work tote.

"We are definitely still on for dinner tonight."

"Good. I've got a few more surprises up my sleeve," he said.

"Yeah, we'll see about that," I teased.

I wanted to ask him how dinner with the board went and I still had a million questions flitting around inside my mind about the Laurier deal, but I just couldn't bring it up. I relished in the fact that we were finally at a good place again, and I absolutely did not want to ruin that. I pulled my hair back into a low ponytail, grabbing my keys, rushing towards the front door so fast I nearly ran right into

Poppy.

“Where are you off to so early? I thought you didn’t have to leave for the office until nine?”

“I actually have a meeting with my client out of the office before that. I don’t want to be late. We’ll catch up tonight, okay?” I asked, slipping into my shoes.

“You got it.”

It wasn’t a long cab ride before I was standing outside of the little brunch spot where I was supposed to be meeting William. It was there, standing in the cool morning breeze that I thought about the missing money that I couldn’t seem to track down. For the past few days I’d been trying not to think about it because I knew that the closer I got to the truth, it would either make or break my budding relationship. You can’t think like that, Kat. This is your job. I wanted to separate myself from all of this, or even step down from the investigation because there was a clear conflict of interest building, but I couldn’t. I was too close, and I just had to hope that when I found out the truth, there’d still be a chance at a relationship with Preston. There won’t be if he’s really behind all of this, but until I find proof, I just can’t believe that.

I walked into the restaurant and the hostess led me to Mr. Wolfe’s table. He seemed to be much happier than usual, smiling brightly, and offering me a full spread of food before we even got down to business. It was strange to see, but I went along with it. As much as I felt like there was something he’d been hiding, he was the one that had given me all the information that got me this far. Now I just had to figure out whether his suspicions about Preston had been right or if my client was more involved in all of this than he was letting on.

“Katherine, it’s so nice to see you. I hope that everything is going well with the investigation. Has there been any more news?” he asked, playing with his eggs.



I took him through everything I learned, watching the change in his expression carefully, but for some reason he didn't seem all that surprised. I furrowed my brow, taking a sip of my water before we continued.

"Seems like you've been taking advantage of all of the information after all. So I take it you haven't been able to track down the money yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't," I responded, shaking my head.

"You know, Katherine, I didn't want to be right about Preston, but the more you learn, the more I think I may have been onto something. I remember that right before my brother passed, he purchased a hotel he was going to turn into a Manhattan gem, and he gave it to Preston. I wouldn't be surprised if that money is hidden in the paperwork of that building," he said.

He cut into his eggs Benedict, getting a few homestyle potatoes on his fork, and I watched him eat so peacefully. I sat there completely shocked, wondering why he hadn't given me this information earlier, and that is when I started to have a real bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. Preston, you know that I've been investigating the Laurier account but you didn't mention anything about this hotel. Are you really hiding something here?

"Katherine? Katherine, are you okay?"

Mr. Wolfe waved his fork at me, snapping me back into reality, and I knew that I had to get straight back to work. I need to know what happened there and I need to know now.

"Would you be able to get me access to the paperwork for this deal? I would also like to see the place if that's alright with you. If this really is what you think it is, then you might have a case here after all. If this sale came out of the Laurier account, and

Preston somehow pocketed all of that cash, I'll have no other option but to report him," I said.

My stomach was doing backflips now and I felt like I was about to throw up my entire breakfast. You need to calm down. You don't know anything for sure yet. I told myself, but it didn't help the way I felt.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Katherine, but if that's the way it has to be, don't let me stand in your way. I'll have someone get in touch with you about the paperwork. It's quite confidential so it would be best if I send it to your home or your office instead of your temporary one at Kingsman Enterprises. It's going to take me some time to get it, but I won't let you down. Let's find out the truth so we can close this, shall we?"

"We shall. Thank you, Mr. Wolfe."

I grabbed my things, deciding to take a long walk back to my apartment because I needed time to think. I walked down the Manhattan sidewalks, trying to figure out what I was going to do now. I knew I was going to be at the edge of my seat until I heard from Mr. Wolfe again about the paperwork and information he's going to dig up, but now it all had me questioning Preston. Did he just come back into my life because it was convenient for him? Is he just trying to lead me astray? I remembered him joking about it, but at the time all I believed it to be was playful banter.

As far as I know, Mr. Wolfe didn't have any direct involvement with this deal, but something about the way he's been feeding me information still seems strange. Ugh. Am I ever going to figure this out?

I didn't even realize how long I'd been walking until I made it into a busier part of town. The sidewalk was packed with people going about their busy lives, some with shopping bags in hand, others with briefcases. I stopped at a little coffee shop a few blocks away. I decided that I could use a little pick-me-up before I headed back home

to comb through all the files I had again. I need to make sure I don't miss anything before Mr. Wolfe hands me what I need. I thought, entering the store as a gust of cool air hit me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:52 am*

It was quite hot, which was unusual for this time of year, but I didn't mind it. I basked in the scent of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries. I got up to the counter, glancing at the menu board behind the cashier, deciding on a macchiato.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes, thank you," I said, handing her enough cash.

She punched it into the register, handing me my change and my receipt before I made my way over to the pick-up area. The place wasn't as busy as I thought it'd be around this time, but I didn't mind stepping away from the chaos that was the busy Manhattan streets. I glanced over my shoulder for a moment to see a woman standing there and when our eyes met, she quickly looked away. I didn't think anything of it at first until I felt her approach from behind me, and I wrinkled my brows, wondering what she could want.

I looked over at the counter to see if her order may have been done, but it hadn't yet. What does she want? I took in her bright auburn hair, the freckles across her pale face, and the way she clutched her black purse like she was nervous.

"Katherine? A Macchiato?" I heard the barista call out.

"Thank you."

I grabbed my drink, trying to rush right out of there, but she followed me. I turned around, ready to confront her, and that is when she stuffed a tape recorder in my face.

“Katherine Hollis?”

“What is this about?” I asked, still trying to walk away from her, but she kept up. It didn’t seem like she was going to stop until she got some sort of answer. I was confused, uncomfortable, and definitely ready to just head home. I headed towards the street, trying to wave a cab down as she started firing questions at me.

“Word on the street is that you’re the one handling the audit for Kingsman Enterprises. Would you like to comment on that?”

I stared at her, my mouth nearly dropping to the floor. My heart started beating so loudly and I felt like I couldn’t breathe, especially now that the world was about to find out my connection to the investigation. The entire time I felt comforted by the fact that everyone was supposed to honor their non-disclosure agreements, but with all the leaks recently, I should’ve known better than to think someone wouldn’t talk eventually.

“No, I wouldn’t.”

I tried to wave down a cab so I could get away from this reporter but they just whizzed past me, deciding not to stop. I wasn’t going to give up because I needed to get home. I needed to get away from the people that were now going to be watching my every move. They don’t need a comment from me to run with the story. That’s how this works.

“You’re also rumored to be sleeping with the head of Kingsman Enterprises and notorious bachelor Preston Clarke. Is that true?”

“No, it isn’t. Now, I have no other comments. Will you please leave me alone?” I asked.

It was no use. She kept bombarding me with more questions to the point where I was sure that this was more than just someone chatting a little too much with the press. She knew details about me that no one else was supposed to know and it made my stomach turn. I finally managed to get into the backseat of a cab, slamming the door and ignoring the taps on the window as I finally headed straight for my apartment.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, but I was scared. If there's ever anything that would jeopardize this investigation, it would be the press speculating when they have absolutely no idea what they're talking about.

When I arrived outside my building, I was glad to see that the press hadn't gotten ahold of my address and were waiting to hit me with more questions. I rushed inside, kicking off my shoes and tossing my work tote aside to see that Poppy had been home.

"Pops?"

"Wow. What the hell happened to you?"

"I just nearly got mowed down by the press. That's what happened. They know that I'm the one auditing Kingsman Enterprises and they somehow know that I've been seeing Preston lately. What am I going to do? I have to call Jamie. Someone needs to shut this down," I answered, frantically.

Poppy got up, slipping out of her beige blazer, slinging it over the back of the dining chair before making her way over to me. She led me to sit, and that's when we got to talking about everything that happened. I knew better than to tell anyone about what was going on with work, but I'd been so overwhelmed and I couldn't keep it quiet any longer. Poppy hung onto every word, nodding her head ever so often as she absorbed all of the chaos I'd been dealing with these past few days.

“I just don’t know who to trust, Pops. I don’t know if this deal with the hotel has anything to do with Preston, and if I find out that it does, I don’t know how I’m going to handle it. Now that the press knows who I am, I don’t know if I can do my job anymore,” I confessed.

“What does your gut say?”

“My gut says that Preston couldn’t possibly be involved in something like this. He’s a lot of things, but I don’t think fraud is one of them.”

“Then you need to get to the bottom of this no matter what, Kat. Look, something is obviously going on here and with all the uproar, it’s better you be handling it than someone who wouldn’t even give Preston a real chance. I know it’s tough, but you can get through this. Lately, Preston has been good to you. He’s made up for lost time, or so it seems. Don’t throw that all away yet. Not until you know what really happened, okay?”

“You’re right. Thanks, Pops. What the hell are you even doing home in the middle of the day?” I asked, trying to distract myself.

“Meetings got canceled so I decided to come back home to grab a few things before I need to be at the courthouse. I’ll be back later tonight and we’ll talk more. Right now there’s nothing you can do but do your job.”

I felt comforted by her words, and I was finally starting to feel better until she left. I started from scratch, combing through every piece of information I learned, and putting the pieces together. It looked bad, pointing to Preston more than any of his associates or even Mr. Wolfe. I knew that once I got the rest of the paperwork and I knew more about the hotel deal, I’d have the answer I was looking for. I just hope it’ll be the right one.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:52 am*

The hours passed and it was starting to get dark out when I heard my cell phone ring. I rushed over to answer it, staring at the screen for a moment, as I'd completely forgotten about dinner with Preston. I knew there was no way we could be seen together right now, and I just needed some time to clear my head. Every moment I spent with Preston these past few weeks had been incredible, and he always knew just what to say to calm my doubts, but I couldn't let that happen this time. At least not yet.

"Kat, I'm calling because I finished up at the office early and I wanted to know if I should swing by now, or a bit later," he said.

"Hi, Preston. I actually don't think I can make it tonight."

"Is everything okay?"

"Y-Yes, I just have a lot of work to catch up on, and I'm not really feeling the greatest. I'll be back to your office tomorrow," I said.

"Do you need anything? I can-"

"No, no. That's okay. Thank you. I'll just see you tomorrow."

"Alright. Good night, Kat."

"Good night, Preston."

I hung up the phone quickly before he could get another word in because the last



thing I needed was for him to convince me to meet him anyway. I clutched the phone to my chest, wondering how I was even going to show my face at Kingsman Enterprises tomorrow, but I needed to comb through the rest of the digital files. Just do your job. Get to the bottom of this and it'll all be over. Then, you can handle it from there.

I woke with a pounding headache and my eyes struggled to stay open as I blinked away the sleepiness I felt. I stayed up nearly all night going over every file, document, and report I could until I just couldn't take it anymore. I tossed the covers from my legs, heading straight out to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee before I had to get ready for the day. I wasn't looking forward to running into Preston, especially now that he could've very well been involved in all the things I hoped he hadn't. The uncertainty is driving me insane. I need to put this to bed, and I need to do it now.

I glanced around the apartment looking for Poppy, but it seemed that she had already left for work. I gathered my things, getting ready to head downtown when my cell phone started ringing.

"Hello?"

"Katherine, I know you're probably coming in today, but it's a circus here, and I've sent a car for you. We've cleared the floor to ensure that nothing else gets in the way of your investigation and I want to apologize for how crazy the press has been. Surely you know about the leak. I have no idea how they got your name, but I promise you I will find out what happened," said Mr. Wolfe.

I sighed, realizing this was going to be much harder than I initially thought.

"Thank you. Is Preston aware of what's going on?"

“Yes, I’ve briefed him. You don’t need to worry about that. I’ve also tracked down the paperwork you asked for and I’ll send that to your office. Jamie has asked to look through it as well.”

“T-thank you, Mr. Wolfe.”

“My pleasure.”

Jamie wants to look through it himself? I didn’t think he’d be getting involved in this. I’m getting ahead of myself here. Maybe there’s nothing to find. Maybe this will all be over before we know it and we can finally let this go. I thought, but I worried that it wouldn’t be that simple. I headed out of my building to find a black town car waiting on the side of the street and I hopped inside.

“Good morning, Ms. Hollis,” the chauffeur greeted me.

“Good morning.”

I tried to offer up a smile, but I couldn’t. I was far too stressed and worried that everything was about to get turned on its head. One step at a time, Kat. You’re getting close to the truth. Once you know that, your decision will practically make itself.

I barely managed to get settled in my temporary office and take a deep breath before I heard a knock on the glass door. In came Preston with the electrifying scent of his cologne, his freshly pressed suit, and neatly trimmed beard. At the sight of him, every ounce of worry I had started to melt away, and that was exactly what I was afraid of.

“Kat, are you okay? I heard about what happened with the reporter and I know people are talking.”

“They’re more than just talking, Preston. They have my name and it won’t take them long to figure out where I work or where I live, or -”

“William and I have everyone we know calling in favors to shut this down. This never should’ve happened and I’m so sorry that it did. After our phone call last night, I knew something was up, and that’s when I found out what was going on. Once we know where the leak came from, anyone involved will be terminated. I’m sorry,” he said.

I began to fall right into his trap as he inched closer, wrapping his arms around me, but I quickly wiggled out of them.

“We can’t be doing this here. Not only do they know that I’m the one handling the investigation, but they also somehow know that we’ve been seeing each other. Maybe we shouldn’t. At least not for now,” I told him.

That was the moment I expected him to turn on his heel and run. I expected him to tense his jaw angrily, shaking his head, and moving onto the next woman in his sights, but he didn’t. He stood there with his arms crossed, raising his eyebrow at me, and I saw a smile curling up those perfect lips of his.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:52 am*

“Absolutely not.”

“What do you mean absolutely not?”

“I mean that just because you’re investigating my company for fraud and the world out there thinks they know what’s going on doesn’t mean I’m letting you go this time. I made that mistake once and I’m sure as hell not going to make it again,” he said.

I couldn’t help but smile as he leaned in, pressing his lips softly against mine before I quickly pulled away to make sure no one was looking.

“Fine, but when I’m here, we don’t do any of this.”

“Fine by me. I like having you all to myself anyway. Catch you later, Kat. I will be picking you up for dinner tonight, and don’t worry, we’ll keep it discreet,” he muttered, with a wink.

I felt my cheeks start to blush again and I watched him take off down the hallway back to his office. I rolled my eyes, getting back to work. A few hours later, I heard my cell phone buzz as a few text messages came in. I quickly checked them to see that Jamie was expecting me back at the office right away. What could this be about? Did he find something already?

I made it to the firm in one piece and I rushed right into Jamie’s office, barely taking notice of all the stares I’d been getting. I waited in the doorway while he finished up a call, and I watched as he paced back and forth near the boxes of files next to him. He seemed distressed, like he hadn’t been getting much sleep. His tie was undone, the

first few buttons of his shirt open, and the five o'clock shadow made the rest of his skin look rather dull. He motioned for me to sit, and I complied, looking up at him the moment he put the phone down.

“I took the liberty to start searching through the paperwork William sent over. Looks like we may have ourselves a winner, Katherine. Everything seems to be accounted for, but there is a document missing. William seems to think that Mr. Clarke might be keeping it close to home,” he said.

It reminded me of the time he practically told me that I needed to start snooping through Preston’s things to find something incriminating, but back then I had no idea what I was looking for. I knew that once I looked through all the information myself and found that missing document, Preston’s entire life would go up in flames. I really didn’t want to be the one to do that to him.

“Are you sure this is on Preston?”

“Mr. Clarke is definitely guilty here, Kat. I don’t know why you insist on making me spell it out for you. There’s enough here to raise suspicion, and once you get that smoking gun, we can let the authorities handle this.”

“What happens after?”

“After what?”

“When the investigation is complete and if Preston is found guilty, what happens to the company?”

“William will take over. It should’ve been that way from the beginning if you ask me. This is what happens when you let womanizing bachelors handle business. It’s all play and no work. Not to mention a whole lot of cheating. Get to it, Kat. Bring this in

and you will have the promotion of a lifetime.”

“Of course, Jamie. I’ll get it done.”

He doesn’t keep his documents at home. Where would it be then? I thought, and then it hit me. The gallery.

### Chapter Ten

Preston

Manhattan was lit with warm streetlights and bustling little boutiques that whizzed by as the black town car took me to Katherine's apartment. She came walking down her building's concrete stairs, clutching her purse underneath her arm, as her stilettos carried her right to the car door. Her long legs glistened underneath the light and that familiar diamond around her neck glimmered, making me smile.

"Kat, you look absolutely beautiful," I said, holding the door open for her.

"Why, thank you," she responded.

Her tone was low, soft like she was afraid that someone may have been listening, but she slid into the car, and I followed after her. She started to loosen up now that we were alone, but even though we kept up pleasant conversation on the way to our destination, I could tell she was distracted.

"You know, this is about the time on a date where I'd ask you how your day was and how work is going, but judging from the look on your face, I may not want to know," I teased.

"I-I'm sorry, Preston. I'm just a little distracted. Things have been a little stressful at work and my boss just wants me to close this thing so we could all move on."

"That's what we all want, Kat, but don't let it drive you crazy. Tonight, you're not

auditing me and I'm not lying in wait worried that you're going to report me to the authorities even though I know I've never cut any corners. Tonight we're just Kat and Preston. Two ridiculously hot people ready to have a good time. What do you say?"

"I say, that sounds wonderful."

She grinned and it was at that moment that I saw the girl I was falling for. I wanted nothing more than to help her get out of her head and get closer to her all the same. Every moment I was with her I knew that there was no damn way I'd ever let her go again. Fuck the press. Fuck the investigation. It's just you and me, Kat. You and me.

"So, what kind of surprise do you have in store tonight, Preston?" she asked, with a smile.

"Let's just say we're getting away from here for a little while. I've shown you my art, but I think it's time you see someone else's. Their collection is a lot better than mine," I responded.

She furrowed her brow at me and I smirked because I knew she was in for one hell of an evening. The black town car pulled up to the world-famous Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"I thought we were staying out of the public eye for now."

Her eyes lit up when she saw the stone steps leading up to the doors, the fountain that gushed water nearby, and how perfectly empty the place was. Her eyes widened when she realized that there wasn't anyone around and she turned to look at me inquisitively.

"There's no way we're alone here tonight, are we?"



“Oh, yes there is. Trust me, there’s no better way to see the Met,” I said.

I slid out of the car, outstretching my hand as she took it, and I led her up the stairs. We made our way inside, greeted by our hostess for the evening who had set up private dining for us. Katherine was absolutely floored, and I watched her eyes study every inch of the place in awe.

“You are absolutely insane, you know that?”

“I’ve been told once or twice,” I murmured, smirking at her.

I pulled out her chair, making sure she got comfortable before I took my seat, and we ordered drinks to start. I got a good look at her beautiful face, chiseled cheekbones, and those soft lips I couldn’t wait to kiss again.

“You really do know how to wow a girl, don’t you?”

“Yes, I definitely do. So, can I consider you wowed then?”

“Aha, yes you can.”

“You know, Kat, I did say that we didn’t have to talk about work while we were here, but I want you to know that if there’s anything you’d like to ask me, I’m all ears. You look like you’ve been swallowing your words all evening,” I said.

Her eyes widened at me like she didn’t think I noticed and I smiled, taking a sip of my wine just as our amuse-bouche platter came out.

“I-I don’t know, Preston.”

“I told you that I’m an open book, didn’t I? You’ve probably looked at every expense

report and know every purchase I've ever made by heart now. There's nothing you can't ask me."

I watched her eyes shift around the room like she was debating whether to tell me what had been bothering her. She cut into her artichoke heart, before glancing back at me with her lips parted.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 4:52 am*

“I’ve learned that your father purchased a hotel after the Laurier account but there was no record of the transaction. I learned that it was in your name, and that you signed all the paperwork, so I’d like to know if there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“The money is missing? The money from Kingsman Enterprises after the Laurier account is missing and you think it’s tied up in some hotel?” I asked, and she nodded.

“It is, Preston. I want to believe that there’s an explanation for it, but there isn’t. There’s a missing document in the files I have, and if you have it, I’d like to see it,” she said.

She could barely make eye contact with me and I couldn’t believe it. I shook my head, reaching across the table to grab a hold of her hand, brushing my fingertips against her skin lightly.

“I promise you, Kat, you’ve got it wrong. I never signed any paperwork for a hotel. I wasn’t even aware we owned one. My father always joked about buying the Newmont, but I never thought he was serious. I never signed any documents. I promise you that,” I said.

She nodded her head and I wasn’t sure she believed that I was telling the truth, but it ignited something inside of me now. Now I knew that someone was feeding her information and possibly on their way to fucking up my entire life. There’s no way in hell I’m going to let that happen.

I watched as she studied my expression and the blank look on her face eventually

softened as if she finally believed me.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, Preston?”

“I’d never dream of it, Kat. You can trust me.”

“Then I definitely do,” she said, cracking a smile.

We finished up our meal and I held onto Katherine’s hand, leading her through each beautiful exhibit while we chatted. It was the first time we really got to talk about all the little things, and the stuff that we only ever brushed over before everything happened. It was one of the most refreshing nights I’d had in a long time, and being so close to her made me feel incredible. It took away all of the frustration that was slowly building inside of me, reminding me that I got just as caught up as she did in our little romance.

I didn’t want to think about the fate of Kingsman Enterprises. I didn’t want to think about how one little mistake could ruin everything I’ve spent my entire life building, especially if I wasn’t even involved to begin with. If this hotel deal does exist and my name is somehow on it, I need to find out. How the hell could something like this even happen? I’ll deal with it first thing tomorrow. I thought.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Kat, and I smiled.

“Thinking about doing this,” I said, pulling her in close, kissing her hard.

She tasted sweet, reminding me of just how sweet other parts of her had been. I wanted to feel that again, to whisk her off somewhere and relive all of that pleasure, but despite how happy she seemed, I knew she wasn’t ready. She’s still got a lot on her mind right now. The last thing I want is for her to regret another night together. Granted, I won’t be screening her calls this time. No, I’ll be looking out for them.

We sauntered outside and I took my jacket off, tossing it over Katherine's shoulders. She held onto it, smiling as we made our way down the steps. We took a stroll to enjoy the quiet evening because it was rare that a place like this was ever so peaceful. We approached the fountain, and suddenly, Katherine's heel caught in the grout and she tumbled headfirst into the fountain with me following closely behind.

We were both soaked, and I couldn't help but laugh. I pulled her close to me, caressing her cheek as I kissed her. It felt like forever before we finally got out.

"What a spectacle that was. It's a good thing there's no one here to witness it huh?" she asked, teasingly.

"It sure is. It'll be our little secret."

She rubbed her shoulders as she shivered and I helped her as we walked back to the town car. I tapped on the front window and the chauffeur rolled it down.

"Yes, sir?"

"Will you be able to turn on the heat? It seems that there was a little accident and now we're both freezing," I said.

"Of course. Right away, Mr. Clarke."

"Thank you."

I held the back door open and Katherine slid inside, having a hard time because the friction of her dress just wouldn't give way. We both laughed and she lay her head on my chest for a moment while we warmed up, but I couldn't help but kiss her again.

"I had a wonderful time, Preston. Thank you for being honest with me," she

murmured, softly.

“Of course, Kat. I want you to trust me as much as I trust you.”

Something turned inside of me when I said these words, but I subdued the feeling. This was not the time to battle ghosts of the past. I wanted to dissolve in my woman with no distractions.

I made sure she was home safe before I made my way back to my penthouse apartment, slipping out of my soaking wet Armani to take a hot shower before I crawled into bed.

The sun poured in through the sheer curtains, waking me up. It was the first time in a while that I genuinely felt well-rested and I took my time getting to my morning emails or answering the dozen missed calls I already had. Last night had changed something in me. It made me forget all about the chaos I had to deal with and the mere fact that my life could be completely uprooted at any moment. All I wanted was Katherine. All I wanted to do was be near her, feel her, kiss her, but when we weren't hidden away, none of that could happen anymore.

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She knows now that whatever she has is false because I told her the truth. That has to mean that this investigation is coming to an end and we can finally go out without the worry that we'll just become another front-page news story. That's all I want.

I took a hot shower, made myself a cup of coffee, and when I finally grabbed my cell phone it was ringing off the hook. I didn't even think to check who was calling and I answered expecting some urgent business update.

"Good morning sunshine."

I rolled my eyes, reminding myself that I need to start checking caller I.D. before I pick up so I can avoid calls like this one.

"Leighton. What do you want?"

"Oh no. Did someone wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?" she asked, with a giggle.

"Is there anything you need because I need to get to work. I have lots to do and I don't know if you're aware, but my company could go to shit at any minute."

"Yes, we're all aware, darling. I'm going to need you to clear your calendar for this evening. I need a date to this charity gala I'm attending."

"I'm sorry, Leighton, I can't make it this evening. I have far too much work to do," I muttered, hoping she'd just drop it.

“You’re going to have to just do that work another time, Preston. If I recall correctly, you owe me. Now that the word is out that your girlfriend is the one investigating you for fraud, it’s in both of our best interest to change that narrative. Don’t you agree?”

“What’s in it for you?”

“To have you on my arm again. Believe it or not, it’s hard to get anyone to listen to me without a man on my arm. As ridiculous as it is, I need to impress some people tonight, so you’re just going to have to come. You wouldn’t want me blabbing my big mouth, would you?”

“No, Leighton. I wouldn’t.”

“Good, then you’ll swing by to pick me up at eight sharp. Oh, and no town car. This is an occasion that requires a limo.”

“Mhm.” I hung up the phone, nearly throwing it across the room. Leighton knows too much for her own good. I can’t help but hope one day that comes back to bite her in the ass.

I checked through the rest of my messages, seeing one from Katherine that came in an hour ago. I texted her back, catching myself smiling, but I shook it off, getting ready for the day.

The office was quiet today, and it was much easier moving around knowing that Katherine wasn’t in her temporary office, combing through company documents anymore. I was glad that she had what she needed to put this thing to bed once and for all, but there was still the thought settling to the back of my mind that I wasn’t out of the woods just yet. The Newmont. I need to find out what the hell happened with that building because if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s not up and running. If it’s somehow in my name after all, I’m fucked.



I tried to pull the thought from my mind because I was sure I'd remember signing such a big deal. The thought of that much money being in the wind made my stomach turn, but I took a deep breath, picking up the phone to call William's office.

"Preston. What do you need?"

"Can you come down to my office? There's something we need to discuss."

"I have a meeting in fifteen minutes, Preston," he said, dismissively.

"Fifteen minutes will be enough. I am waiting."

"I'll be right there."

William sauntered into my office in his tailored suit and cream pocket square. His dark Brunette hair was freshly trimmed as was his beard, and I wondered what the occasion was because that was the only time he ever looked that dapper.

"Preston, I'm here, but please make this quick."

"I need to ask you about The Newmont."

"The Newmont?"

"Apparently, someone's been feeding Katherine information about a hotel that was supposedly purchased by my father and then transferred into my name almost immediately. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

I studied his expression closely, waiting to see whether his eyes would shift around the room or if a bead of sweat would trickle down his forehead, but there was none. He was calm, just as he always was, and that didn't surprise me. My own uncle was

on the bottom of my suspect list.

“No, Preston. I don’t know anything about that. When your father passed I had a lot on my plate. I cleaned up a lot of his messes, but The Newmont wasn’t one of them. Why, what exactly does Katherine think she knows?”

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“She was talking about some documents that I supposedly signed, but I never did. If money is tied up in that property, I need to know about it,” I said.

“I’ll find out. Look, whatever is going on here, we’ll fix it, okay?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m hoping for. Every day there seems to be something new popping up that I had no idea about. Doesn’t look good for being the head of the company, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s not too late to get ahead of this thing. I’ll go through the records, see what I can dig up.”

“Thank you, William.”

I spent the rest of the day struggling to focus, but couldn’t stop wondering how something like this could just slip through my fingers. I need to find out who the hell is behind this. I don’t know if I can wait for Katherine to be the one to tell me any longer. It’s time I take matters into my own hands.

I picked up the phone, dialing Richard’s number.

“Hello, Richard. Change of plans. I have a job for you.”

“Why the hell do you look so glum? Need a drink, darling?” asked Leighton, leaning close to my ear as she held onto my arm.

“As much as I’m here as a favor to you, I’m not enjoying myself. Now, can we just

get on with the night so I can get out of here?”

“Not until you lose the damn attitude, Preston,” she snapped.

She kept up a smile as she moved through the crowd of rich, snobbish people, making small talk while I stood there waiting for this nightmare to be over.

I grabbed a glass of champagne from the silver tray in the waiter’s hand, gulping it down like water before I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“William? What are you doing here?”

“I thought Leighton would’ve mentioned it. I’m here to work the crowd and do a little damage control so our reputation isn’t tarnished. The tabloids are running rampant and someone needs to reel them back in. I’d like your help since she managed to drag you out after all,” he said.

“You two have been chatting?”

“She may be a pain in the ass, but you know she gets things done. All I’m trying to do is take advantage of her charm. We could use it right about now.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I followed him as we chatted, laughed, and worked to change the minds of every person in the room. William seemed rather happy for someone whose company was hanging on by a thread, but I just believed that it was him trying to look on the bright side. He really thinks he can fix this by talking to a few people? What is that going to do?

“See that man over there?” he asked, and I nodded.

“He works at the Times and he seems to be taking quite a liking to Leighton. Maybe we can finally set the record straight.”

“Maybe.”

Spending my time in this grand ballroom surrounded by lavish decorations and decadent hors d'oeuvres only made me miss Katherine. I missed the way she made me feel, how comfortable I am with her, and I wished she could be the one I had on my arm for the evening. You'll have your chance. Once you set the record straight and she finally tells her client that there's nothing to find, we can all move on. I know she's going to do the right thing and she trusts me, so why do I feel like I'm missing something?

I headed home that evening, plopping onto my couch as I checked through my messages to see one from Richard. Nothing yet. Of course. Why the fuck am I even paying you?

I was about to toss it to the other side of the couch when I started dialing Katherine's number instead. I was in desperate need to get away, to escape from all of the stress that was finally weighing me down, and just be with her. I didn't care that it was after midnight or that I might wake her even though she had work tomorrow. I just wanted to hear her voice. You've got me hooked on you, Kat. I don't think that's going to be changing anytime soon. I thought.

“Hello?” she answered, sleepily.

“Hey there.”

“Preston?”

“I know it's late, but I wanted to ask how you feel about blowing off work

tomorrow.”

“And why would I do that?” she asked, teasingly.

“Another one of my surprises.”

“I-I don’t know. I have a lot to do, and-”

“And you wouldn’t want to spend the entire day out on the water on a yacht with me where we wouldn’t have to run into anyone we know?”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Come on, Kat. Let’s get away for the day. It’ll be fun,” I said.

“Fine, but I’m going to make you pay for waking me up.”

“Oh, I’m looking forward to it.”

### Chapter Eleven

#### Katherine

I tossed and turned beneath my sheets, trying not to disturb the open laptop and stack files at the edge of my bed.

I had so much to do that getting away felt like a crime, but I could feel the longing for adventure settle beneath my bones. I didn't care about the final report, the possible court proceedings that might follow this investigation, or what Mr. Wolfe was going to think in the end. Right now, it would just be Preston and I. A day away from the chaos. I mean, how could I pass that up?

I leaped out of bed, grabbing a woven tote bag, stuffing a change of clothes in with an extra bikini. I made my way into the bathroom to take a hot shower, blow dry my hair, and pick out the right one to wear underneath my flowy sundress. I was about to head out the door when Poppy stopped me with her to-go cup of coffee and her freshly ironed blazer.

“Where are you off to? New dress code at work?”

“I uh, I'm not heading into work today.”

She wrinkled her eyebrows, tilting her head trying to figure it out, and when she did, her eyes widened.

“No. He's taking you out, isn't he?”



“Maybe,” I said, coyly.

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea?”

“Says the girl that’s barely home anymore because she’s spending all her time with Chris.”

“You have a point.”

“We both just need a break. Work has been stressing me out and I know he feels like the world is crashing down around him every time the news outlets run a new story. At least this way we can enjoy each other’s company without having to worry about that,” I told her.

“Justify it all you want, but you’re falling for him all over again, Kat. I just want you to be careful this time, okay?”

“I will. I’ll see you tonight.”

“No you won’t!” she called after me as I took the stairs down to the lobby of my building.

Preston was waiting for me when I got out into the fresh morning air, leaning against his Aston Martin with his pastel-pink button-up shirt and khaki pants. I’d never seen him so casual before, and it was the first time in a while he really knocked my socks off.

“You definitely look like Brooklyn today,” I teased.

“Ouch,” he responded, with a chuckle and his hand on his chest like he just took a bullet.

He held the passenger side door open for me and I slid inside. He took the driver's seat, reaching for my hand as we drove down to the docks. My heart was beating fast and I couldn't quite understand why. It wasn't until he glanced over at me did I realize how crazy this was. This is not my typical Wednesday, that's for sure.

"Not used to skipping out on work, huh?"

"Nope, not at all."

"I promise I'm not trying to take you away from the audit on purpose," he teased, with a wink.

"Sure, of course you're not."

Preston led me down the long stretch of wood and I took in the light mist puffing up into clouds around the water. He took my bag, helping me up onto his yacht, and I couldn't help but be in complete awe.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Well, this thing isn't going to drive itself, is it?"

I smiled, watching him take the reins, and before I knew it we were on the water. I had a few moments to think, and as much as I didn't want to be, I found myself consumed by the thought of the missing document. I wondered whether I'd ever find it, if I'd ever be able to fully close this investigation, and I started to worry all over again. The yacht came to a slow halt out on the water as it waded, and down came Preston with two glasses in hand.

"Champagne?"

“Yes, please.”

He poured me a glass and I sipped on it lightly.

“How often do you come out here?”

“Not as often as I’d like. I spend most of my free time down at the gallery collecting art, and when I’m not, I’m usually at the office.”

“Another way to woo the ladies, huh?”

“That depends, are you wooed?”

It reminded me of the conversation we’d had and how he never failed to amaze me. It made me wonder just how many other women he had out here and how many of them he didn’t call the next day after he’d slept with them. I tried not to let it bother me, sipping on my champagne, enjoying the sunshine and the light, undulating movement of the boat on the water, but he knew something was wrong.

“What’s on your mind, Kat?”

“No, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it,” I said, with a soft smile.

“You can tell me.”

“Why didn’t you call me after the night after we-”

“I didn’t call you because I was an idiot. Every time I got close to a woman in the past, they’d either be after my money, my status, or they’d just want to bleed me dry. I’ve had a terrible track record with the women I did date and I promised myself I’d never get tied down. My father always said it made me look weak, and even though he was married to my mother, it was like he never saw that for me. It was all business to him. At first, I didn’t mind, but then I met you. I didn’t call because I was scared. I was scared of how you made me feel, and at the time, I didn’t want anyone to have that much power over me,” he confessed.

I leaned in, feeling my cheeks blush intensely.

“And now?”

“Now, I just want you. I don’t care what that means. I don’t care what happens. I just want you.”

He pulled me in close and I wrapped my arms around him, feeling his lips press against mine. He caressed my cheek, his tongue toying with mine as he laid me down right on the bow of his yacht while I melted into him. There was nothing but water for miles, and the soft crashing of the current lulled me. I ran my fingers through his soft brunette hair, helping him unbutton his shirt and he smiled.

“You sure?”

“Just don’t run away this time,” I said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He undid the ties at my shoulders and I slipped out of my sundress. As the thin fabric exposed my body, Preston showered every inch of my skin with kisses, making me shiver with pleasure. Every kiss ramped up the heat inside of me, making me want

him more and more.

He untied my bikini top, taking my breasts into his hands, devouring them with his eyes, and then into his mouth as he sucked on my nipples lightly. It felt so good to be so close to him again. Quiet moans escaped my lips as his tongue went clockwise around my areola. I buried my fingers in his hair as Preston's hands traveled down my spine and pulled down my bikini bottoms.

Suddenly, I gasped as a pleasurable bolt of pain penetrated my flesh. Preston bit my nipple so gently and yet it was enough for my body to shudder from desire. His fingers burrowed in the flesh of my ass, as his strong hands raised me up in the air. I felt absolutely weightless in his arms as my legs instinctively wrapped around his strong core.

Preston let go of my nipple and kissed me like he never kissed me before. It felt like he was barely holding himself back, like there was a beast inside of him that I was about to release.

He put me down on the table and spread my legs, trailing kisses down my body until he got to the small of my stomach. He didn't even hesitate, kissing the inside of my thighs before making his way to my pussy lips. They were absolutely soaked in anticipation of what he was about to do, of the release that would inevitably follow soon enough.

I let out a soft moan, running my fingers through his hair, his head between my legs as he sucked on my clit. He kept me on my toes by drawing hieroglyphics with his tongue, finding more and more ways to make me moan in ecstasy. I felt his fingers reach up, slipping inside my wet pussy, and I shut my eyes, trying to catch my breath. Preston moved faster and faster, bringing me closer and closer to the verge of orgasm... but I didn't want to go there just yet. Not before I tasted him again.

He got up, slipping out of his pants to reveal his long, rock-solid dick and I took it between my hands, getting down on my knees to suck it. My lips wrapped around the head and I began slowly devouring it. Preston's cock was so thick that I could barely fit it in my mouth, but I enjoyed every square inch of it. As his burning hot rod got deeper and deeper in me, my tongue trailed the roadmap of veins and I heard Preston moaning with pleasure.

He grabbed a handful of my hair while I enjoyed how incredible he tasted. I began sucking Preston's dick like there was no tomorrow and I could feel his heartbeat go faster by the throbbing of his cock. I lost myself in rhythmic movements of my head, swallowing my man's dick and enjoying every cry of pleasure that came from his mouth. His hand holding my hair controlled my movements and he made me go faster and faster, until he held my head still and began literally fucking me in my mouth. With every movement he made me his and I couldn't wait until the moment he would claim the rest of my body.

"You drive me crazy, Kat, I can't control myself."

Preston pulled out and I relished in the scent of his cologne as he laid me back down. His strong hands immediately spread my legs and I felt his titanium-hard cock against my pussy lips. The flame of passion in my pussy began burning so hot that I barely held myself back from planting myself on his dick.

He slowly moved his rod up and down with a mischievous grin on his face, teasing me. Preston knew all too well how much I wanted him inside of me. And yet when he finally impaled me, it felt like the very first time. He slipped his dick inside of me as my wetness coated it well. The pressure made me dig my nails into his arms, like I was fighting the urge to explode with pleasure, and he began thrusting.

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He grabbed me at the waist, thrusting his dick deeper inside of me, until I was crying out in pleasure. Preston fucked me faster and faster, harder and harder as he cried my name and I cried his. I squirmed under him, watching as he rubbed my swollen clit, driving his hard dick as deep as it could go until he suddenly stopped and picked me up again, his throbbing cock still inside of me.

Preston carried me over to the bed and fell down on his back while still holding me in his arms. Now I was on top of him and it was time to show him what Katherine Hollis was made of. Without moving I clenched my wet kitty around his enormous cock and I enjoyed seeing the surprise in his eyes. A moan of pleasure escaped his lips as I began moving my hips back and forth while squeezing his dick as hard as I could.

I felt every inch of him inside of me as my hands explored his body, map every nook and cranny of his muscular torso. Preston's hands squeezed my breasts as I moved faster and faster, riding my man and enjoying every second of it.

And again his strong hands picked me up and tossed me to the side, and a moment later Preston was on top of me again. He wanted to finish this on his terms and I was happy to surrender. This time he entered me swiftly and began pounding me like there was nothing else in this world but the two of us.

My body was filled with sensual bliss and I dissolved in his eyes until the orgasm rippled through me. It felt different, a thousand times deeper and stronger than anything I felt before. I held onto his arms, feeling them tense up, and he pulled out, coating my stomach with his warm load. I panted, trying to catch my breath, and he kissed me softly on the lips.

You really are something, Preston Clarke. I hate to admit it, but I'm falling for you all over again and I'm falling hard. Don't make me regret it.

We spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying some fresh fruit and the rest of our champagne until the sun started to set. Preston's phone rang in the pocket of his khaki pants and he reached inside, heading around the back of the boat to take the call. I didn't think much of it until I heard the way he sounded, the anger and frustration in his voice even as he tried to keep it quiet.

"Don't you call me again. I'm done," I heard him say.

He returned to me a while later, and I furrowed my brow at him.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, just the typical work stuff."

I nodded, trying my best to ignore the feeling in the pit of my stomach, while we enjoyed the rest of our time out on the water.

Preston dropped me back off at home later that evening, and it wasn't until we were both on the steps leading up to my building's front door did I remember how much work I still had yet to do. I tried to shake it off, leaning in to kiss him, and I just wished he didn't have to leave. He handed me my woven tote after our amazing day out on the water, smiling back at me.

"See, I told you it'd be fun."

"I suppose you were right."

"I'll be seeing you at the office. I hear you're on the verge of finishing up your



investigation.”

“Yes, well you’ll know as soon as I do,” I said.

“I hate to ask this, Kat, but do I have anything to worry about?”

His words caught me off guard, and I remembered a time where he’d asked me the same question, but even then I wasn’t sure. Now, I knew that he very well could, but I didn’t have it in me to tell him that.

“No, Preston. You don’t.”

He smiled, kissing me on the lips and on the forehead before he got back into the driver’s seat of his car, taking off into the darkening sky.

After work, I decided to meet Poppy downtown at one of her favorite little coffee shops because she’d been raving about their cheese danishes forever. I had been busy writing my report on my laptop so I wasn’t too worried when I received a text message from her telling me that she was going to be late.

I was hard at work until I noticed that someone was making their way towards me. She had light blonde hair and captivatingly blue eyes, making me think that I’d seen her somewhere before. Ah, yes. The boutique.

“Katherine! Oh my God, it’s so good to see you,” she said.

I glanced over at the door before offering her the seat across from me until Poppy could make it.

“It’s so good to see you too, Leighton. How have you been?”

“I should be asking you that. After all, I hear you’ve been shacking up with my boyfriend.”

Her words were so sharp I could’ve sworn I felt them pierce my skin. At first I thought I must’ve misheard her because there was no way we’d be dating the same man, but she just sat there with her chin in her palm, waiting for me to say something.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I’m talking about the fact that you’ve been seeing Preston behind my back. Did he not tell you that we’ve rekindled things? I’m sure that whatever little infatuation he has with you will pass, especially now that the entire world knows that you’re the one auditing him. You also accused him of fraud. Ever since I’ve been back in town I’ve been cleaning up his mess. I think you should do yourself a favor and stay out of his life. For good.”

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“I didn’t accuse him of anything. I was hired to-”

“Save it, darling. I know what you were hired to do. I don’t want you ruining my boyfriend’s career, but if you do happen to find something, he’ll need me to console him anyway. You don’t think that he’ll want anything to do with you if you expose him, do you?”

“Is there something to expose?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure you already know the answer to that question. Just do your job, Katherine. Once you’re done, you can crawl back into whatever sad, lonely hole you came out of. He dropped you once. Don’t think he won’t do it again.”

“He’s changed now. He would never do that to me.”

“Right. So, why did he take me out to the charity gala a few days ago? Why is he having dinner with me tonight? I know how he is, Kat. You seem to think you know him, but you absolutely don’t. No matter how long we’re apart for, he’ll always find his way back to me,” she said.

I sat there with my mouth open, watching her walk away. My heart sank into my stomach at the possibility that I may have just given Preston a chance that he absolutely didn’t deserve. Part of me wanted to believe that there was no way she’d be telling the truth, but I couldn’t help how angry I felt. The tears welled up inside my eyes and I shut them, trying not to cry. I was a fool to give you a second chance, wasn’t I? Men like you never change. I should’ve known better.

### Chapter Twelve

Preston

I sat at my desk watching the interns run from one end of the office to the other from behind the glass walls of my office. I'd called Katherine at least twice, but she hadn't called me back. I thought it was strange because we'd left things on such a high note, but all of that changed when I caught sight of the woman walking down the hallway. There she stood with her blonde hair pulled back into a French twist, her diamond earrings dangling from her earlobes, and yet another wildly expensive dress she probably didn't need.

"Leighton, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Well, after our little phone call, I thought it'd be best if we see each other in person so I could remind you that you can't just walk right on out of this agreement of ours," she said.

She folded her arms across her chest and I could see the glint of rage building up behind her eyes. She smirked mischievously at me, suggesting that she was already one step ahead of me, taking yet another jab before I even had the chance of reconciliation.

"What the hell did you do?" I asked.

"What? I didn't do anything. If it so happens that your girlfriend no longer wants to see you, that's because you couldn't man up enough to just see things through to the

end. I wasn't done having you on my arm yet, but you decided to end things. So, I did you a favor and ended things with that poor little bitch of yours."

"You're fucking crazy."

I grabbed my jacket, rushing out the door, but she stopped me.

"You do know that if you keep this up, everything you've ever worked for is going to crumble. All of the money, fame, luxury, and even me, it'll all be gone. Before you throw your entire life away for some bitch from Brooklyn, remember that she's the one that could potentially ruin your life. She's also the one that's now angry enough to do it."

"Get the fuck out of my office, Leighton. I don't ever want to see you again."

"Right, well, I'm sure that once this is all over, you'll certainly change your mind. I'm sure my daddy can loan you some money to get back on your feet when you lose everything. Granted, that's if you ever get out of jail."

I didn't have the time to listen to her bullshit anymore. I ran for the elevator, catching Claire on the way there, and I asked her to have my car brought around front. She nodded, heading back to her desk to make the call. I got into the black town car, taking it to Katherine's apartment. I buzzed the door, but there was no answer. I pressed the button for the mic, hoping she'd open it once she heard what I had to say.

"Kat, Kat. I need to talk to you. Look, I don't know what Leighton told you, but she's a self-serving, narcissistic bitch. Nothing is going on between us. Please, just let me talk to you."

I buzzed a few more times and I was about to turn around and leave when I heard a voice answer me.

“She’s not home, Preston.”

“Poppy?” I asked.

I only ever met her a handful of times, but I heard all about her from Chris. She was the first woman that made him feel like he could possibly settle down in the future, and for him that was saying a lot.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Can I come up and wait?”

“She’s not going to be home for hours. Are you sure you want to wait that long?” she asked.

“I’m sure. Please.”

There was a moment of silence before I heard the door buzz open and I rushed inside. When I made it to her apartment door, Poppy opened it up, and I caught a waft of her perfume as she was ready to head out the door.

“I’ll text Kat to let her know you’ll be here waiting. If she chooses not to come home, I don’t know what else I can do to help you.”

“I need you to tell her that there’s nothing going on between Leighton and I.”

“I’ll tell her. I really gotta get going, but I hope everything works out. Help yourself to the kitchen while you wait,” she said.

“Thank you, Poppy.”

I took a good look around her place and it was quaint, pretty, just like I expected it to be. I waited around for an hour before I made my way over to the fridge, wondering if there was any food in there I could use to make her something for dinner. Poppy did say to help myself to the kitchen. I thought, pulling out the few fresh vegetables she had and some leftover steak. I can work with this. I searched around in her drawers for some utensils and a pan, getting to work, realizing it had been far too long since I last cooked anything.

By the time I was finished, the sun had started to go down, and I lit the candlesticks I found in her kitchen drawers before setting the table. I cleaned up, making sure I didn't leave any dirty dishes in her sink, rolling up my sleeves just as I heard the key turn in the lock of the front door.

“Preston?” Katherine called out, looking over at the couch.

It took her a minute to notice I was over by the dining table, but when she saw the small spread of food, and the candles, her eyes widened.

“Hello, Katherine.”

“What is all this?”

“This is an apology. I never wanted you to meet Leighton, especially not like that. We dated a few years ago, but I ultimately broke things off when I realized how psychotic she was. I want you to know that there’s nothing going on between us, Kat. I’d never do anything to hurt you, not after what I did before. I need you to know that.”

“What about the charity gala?”

“She asked that I go with her because I owed her a favor for talking to someone from the Times to drop the story they were writing. It was William’s idea, and I know it was stupid. I told her afterward that I never wanted to see her again, and I meant that,” I said.

“You promise?”

“I promise. I will never do anything to hurt you. You’re the one I want to be with. You’re the one I care about. There is no one else and there won’t ever be. It’s you and me, Kat.”



She smiled softly, taking a deep breath, nodding at me. I wrapped my arms around her, lifting her chin, kissing her.

“Where did you find all of this food?” she asked, teasingly.

“Believe it or not, I cooked it.”

“Yeah? Well, let’s see how good of a chef you really are then,” she said, giggling.

I pulled her in close, kissing her once more before I pulled out her dining chair so we could share yet another lovely meal together before getting to the dessert...

I heard the home phone of my penthouse ring, and I reached across my bed to the side table to pick it up thinking it was the front desk.

“Hello?”

“Preston.”

“Leighton? What the fuck?”

“You weren’t answering my calls so I decided to go through your personal concierge.”

“I’m hanging up,” I said, sleepily.

“I have information that you might find rather valuable. Consider it an apology for how I’ve been acting lately. I’m downstairs in the hotel bar. Come find me if you want to know who hired Katherine’s firm to investigate you for fraud.”

She hung up before I could get another word in, and I rolled my eyes. You always

know how to get your way, don't you? I tossed the duvet from my legs, getting dressed quickly, and heading down to the bar to see her sitting alone with a Cosmopolitan in hand.

"Leighton."

"I'm glad you're here, Preston. Should we get something to eat?"

"Leighton, I'm only here because you've been a total bitch lately and you're about to offer me a pretty grand apology, right?"

"Right. Okay, well I've heard a pretty interesting rumor that your girlfriend has been having clandestine meetings with William. A little birdie told me that he's the one behind all of this," said Leighton.

"This is ridiculous. He's my uncle. You really will try to pull anything, won't you?" I asked, getting up to leave, but she grabbed my arm, tugging it so I'd sit back down.

"Step-uncle. But wait, Preston. There's more."

"I'm listening."

"As you know I've been trying to get the attention of Manhattan's most eligible billionaires, and one of them just so happens to play poker with William every Thursday evening. It's a high-stakes game and there are a lot of secrets exchanged at that table that never see the light of day. He said William continuously goes on about wanting to take over the company, and so far he's succeeding," she murmured.

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“No, he isn’t.”

“So, he didn’t get the board to boot you out in favor of himself?” she asked, studying my expression closely, her eyes scanning my face. “That’s what I thought.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would William risk his reputation just for the opportunity to tear me down?” I asked.

“Maybe because he feels pretty damn confident that you’ll be the only one to take the fall for this.”

“I don’t know, Leighton. William is a lot of things, but I don’t think he’d do this to me. Not after everything we’ve built together,” I said.

“I’m just telling you what I heard, Preston. That’s all.”

I thanked her, getting up to leave, but before I did I noticed that she glanced to the side, smiling at something. I turned my head but didn’t see anything or anyone suspicious. I must be getting paranoid. I didn’t think much of it, heading back up to the penthouse so I could process everything she said. There’s no way he could be behind this, could he?

### Chapter Thirteen

#### Katherine

I felt like I was on top of the world. It didn't matter much that I was caught up in the loose ends of the investigation nor did I worry that there'd be anything that Preston was keeping from me, because I fully trusted him. I got ready to head down to the Kingsman Enterprises office to work through a few last-minute things for my report before I had a meeting with William over lunch. Yet another one that I get to tell him there's absolutely nothing to find. No sign of the missing document and no indication that the money ever touched Preston's hands. I still had yet to see the signed document myself and until that happened, Preston was in the clear.

I have no doubt that something like this could've happened, but if it was Preston's father that did it, it's out of my hands without proof. I slipped into a tight little black pencil skirt and a blush-colored satin blouse, tousling my brown tresses before grabbing my work tote. I glanced at myself in my vanity mirror before heading out the door, looking forward to seeing Preston. I could practically still taste him on my lips, and I wanted nothing more than to feel that all over again. Remember, you need to be discreet. You don't need more people talking right about now.

I arrived at the office, swiping my keycard, pressing the button for the elevator, and stepping inside.

"Hold the door!"

I did as the voice asked, and in came Preston with that captivating smirk of his. I

basked in the scent of his cologne in the small space we were in, listening to the soft ding! of the elevator as it continued to climb up to the office floor.

He smiled at me, reaching over to the panel with elevator buttons, pulling the emergency stop. He inched closer to me, his eyes lowering to my lips, his hands grabbing my waist, and I beamed up at him. I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling the heat consume us both, and I kissed him hard. He pressed my arms up against the elevator walls, his fingers intertwined in mine, and I fell right into him.

“What if someone needs to use this thing?”

“Well, I own the building so they’re just going to have to wait,” he teased.

I felt his tongue in my mouth while I basked in how good he tasted. My hands traveled down his body, wrinkling his suit so I could find his belt buckle. I undid it, feeling his dick press into my inner thigh. I pulled it out of his boxers, running my fingers along the shaft, as he hiked up my skirt.

It felt surreal. I didn’t know what came over me, what part of could possibly think that doing this was a good idea. But I knew that I never was more excited in my whole life.

He pulled my lace panties to the side, brushing up against my throbbing clit before wrapping his legs around me, sliding his dick inside. He pressed my back up against the wall, driving his cock hard and fast inside me until I felt my eyes roll to the back of my head. He grabbed a handful of my hair, his forehead resting on mine, and I reached up to kiss him.

The thought that only a thin sheet of metal separates us from thousands of people in the building and that any of them could see us if the doors would suddenly open amplified my sensations a thousandfold.

A world of pleasure erupted between us, and for a moment we completely forgot where we were. He fucked me harder, faster, ramming his hard cock up inside me until my pussy started to swell.

Seconds felt like hours.

I dug my nails into his arm as the orgasm erupted through me, and he held me steady, enjoying the show. I squirmed, unable to contain the cry of pleasure that exploded from my lips, and I watched as Preston looked me right in the eyes as he came. My heart was racing and I just couldn't catch my breath when I was around him. Now, I knew for sure, I'd fallen for him.

"A-any chance we're going to be able to walk out of here with no one suspecting a thing?" I asked.

"That's what we're hoping for," he said, with a smirk.

He pressed the emergency stop and the elevator continued up while I tried to smooth my disheveled hair. Right before we made it to our floor, he leaned in to kiss me again.

"I never want to stop feeling this way, Kat. I know you don't either. I hope you have a wonderful day," he said, just as the elevator dinged. The doors opened, and out we went, going our separate ways for the rest of the day.

I unlocked my apartment door, setting my keys down, and I heard Poppy on the phone in her bedroom. It didn't seem like she heard me come in, but I made my way to the fridge to pour myself some juice. I was still on a high from the morning I'd had, and I couldn't wait to experience it again. I sat at the breakfast bar with my cold juice near Poppy's laptop, and I didn't think much of it until a notification made the screen illuminate.

It looked like she was perusing some gossip sites, and it wasn't until I got a better look that I read the headline on the screen. Manhattan's Favorite Bachelor Being Investigated for Fraud and Rekindling His Relationship with Ex-Girlfriend Leighton Blake? I rolled my eyes, thinking this was just another way for the tabloids to make money and tarnish Preston's reputation, until I scrolled down to see the pictures. My heart sank into my stomach as I studied them. The article said that these were taken last night. No. This doesn't make any sense. He said there was nothing going on between them. He said that there was no dinner. I thought, but I couldn't ignore what I was seeing right before my eyes.

They sat there close together at the bar, and the way she brushed up against his arm, the way they looked like they belonged together, made the tears start to stream down my face. I heard footsteps approaching from behind me, and I shut the laptop.

"Oh, Kat. I didn't want you to see those. At least not yet. Oh my God, I'm so sorry," she said.

"I should've known better than to trust him. How could I have been so stupid?"

"You're not stupid. He's an ass. If I ever see him again, I'm going to kill him."

"I might just beat you to it," I murmured.

I pointed to the cabinet with the wine glasses and Poppy nodded at me, pouring it up high so I could drown my sorrows. An hour later, my phone screen lit up with a call from him, but I picked it up, chucking it across the room, watching it land safely on the couch.

"Manhattan business sharks. All agenda, no heart. He played me so many times, Pops. How am I supposed to just go on and finish the investigation now?"

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“You’re going to hold your head high and not let him get under your skin again. You’ll wrap this up and move on. I promise you it won’t feel this bad forever,” she said.

“You’re right. There’s no use crying over him. It’s done. I’m done.”

I felt my heart shatter all over again saying those words, but I fought back the tears, heading straight to bed so I could sleep off this terrible nightmare. I clutched the sheets to my chest, allowing myself to cry. I didn’t check my phone, I didn’t want to hear any excuses. I just wanted to forget it all. I just want to forget you, Preston.

I sat on the lavish lounge chair in Mr. Wolfe’s living room, wondering why he chose to meet in such an intimate setting, but when he came out with an envelope in his hand, I began to understand why. I tried to swallow the tears that welled up inside my eyes, so I could focus on work, but it was taking every ounce of my energy.

“Are you all right, Katherine? You look a little uh, tired,” he said, sitting across from me.

“I’m all right, just looking forward to wrapping this investigation up for you,” I said.

“I’m certainly looking forward to that as well. I managed to get the spare key for Preston’s gallery for you as you did mention it’s one of his favorite places. I’d suggest heading there tonight since he will be at a business meeting which I’ll also be attending. If the file is there, you’ll definitely have the chance to find it.”

“I-I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”



“Katherine, you and I both know what’s going on here. I’m sure you want this investigation to be over much faster than you initially thought. Now that you know what kind of man my nephew really is, I’m sure you’ll do just about anything to finish the job. That includes finding the proof you need to sink him,” said Mr. Wolfe.

I nodded, gulping as he handed me the envelope with the little key safely inside.

I waited until nightfall to make my way to the gallery, and just from being back there for a few moments, it shattered my heart all over again. I felt my cell phone buzz in my pocket, taking it out to see that it was Preston calling again. I sighed, screening it once more so I could focus on the task at hand. I searched through the entire place, and I was just about to give up when I noticed one of the paintings was crooked.

I took it off the wall carefully to see that there was a document folded and taped to the back. I opened it up, rereading it a few times, realizing it was exactly what I was looking for. Bingo. I thought. I took one look at Preston’s signature, believing that I had proof he was engaging in criminal activity, but that’s when I noticed there was something strange about it. I furrowed my brow, stuffing the document into my purse to look over when I got home. I’m pretty sure Preston doesn’t write his C’s like that. I’ve seen his official documents. There’s something off about this. I thought.

I dropped my things at the doorway, rushing to my desk to pull out one of the documents I had with me, and just as I suspected, there was a slight difference in the way the C was written. I sat there absolutely baffled, wondering what was really going on here. If Preston isn’t the one behind this, then who is? Oh my God. William.

### Chapter Fourteen

Preston

What the hell have you done, Leighton? I asked myself, reading through the countless tabloid magazines and articles that stated we were getting back together. Katherine wasn't answering any of my phone calls, nor did she answer her door when I tried to buzz her apartment. There was no voice on the other end of the line this time, and I had no idea how else I was going to be able to explain myself. My stomach turned at the thought of how much she must've hated me now, and I knew there was only one person to blame.

I heard my home phone start to ring, and I picked it up, hearing the concierge's voice, but I didn't recognize it.

"Hello, Mr. Clarke."

"Hello, um where is Natalia?"

"She couldn't come into work today unfortunately. My name is Victoria and I'm here to help you with whatever you need. You have a visitor, sir."

"Who is it?"

"She says her name is Katherine. Should I send her up?"

"Yes, right away. Thank you."

My eyes widened and I rushed to the front door. I was ready to do whatever it took to make Katherine hear me loud and clear when I told her that there was absolutely nothing going on between Leighton and I. I was so afraid that she was going to shut me down for good this time and everything we built together would crumble down around us. I knew that with the investigation coming to a close, I may never see her again, and I just couldn't deal with that.

I heard a knock, opening it up, and I nearly slammed the door closed when I saw who was standing there.

"Leighton. Get out."

She put her heel in the doorway to stop it from closing, and I sighed, trying to keep my cool.

"I'm sorry, Preston. I had no idea that there were going to be paparazzi there. Besides, it's not like we did anything anyway."

"You know what, Leighton? It doesn't matter because the woman I'm falling in love with won't answer my calls because you just had to get in the middle of my business," I said.

She stared at me blankly and I wrinkled my eyebrows, wondering why the hell she would even be so confused.

"You love her?" she asked.

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did. I knew you were an asshole, Preston, but I never realized you were an idiot too. She's the one investigating your company for fraud. She's the one that has

made your life a living hell. What's wrong with you?"

"The only person that's making my life a living hell is you, Leighton. I need you to get the fuck out of my life. Get out of the city. Leave, and never come back," I spat.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do, if you know what's good for you, you'll do as I say. I have to figure out how I'm going to fix your damn mess before I lose Katherine forever. Unlike you, she's someone actually worth loving."

I saw the tears well up inside her eyes and I couldn't wait for her to bolt on out of my home. I didn't need her fucking things up any more than she already did, and now I had to do the impossible so Katherine could understand I never wanted this to happen. I'd never hurt you like that, Katherine. You're the only woman I want to be with.

"You can't kick me out, Preston."

"Watch me."

I grabbed my home phone, dialing down to the front desk.

"I need you to have this woman escorted from the premises. Her name is not Katherine, it's Leighton. Ensure that she never steps foot anywhere near me again."

Leighton looked like she was just about to cry and I grabbed her arm, carefully leading her out the front door of my penthouse.

"Fuck you, Preston."

“Just leave.”

I collapsed onto my couch, grabbing the television remote, so I could relax a bit. It was the middle of the day, and all that was on were a few talk shows, but that’s when it hit me. If Katherine’s not going to listen, I’ll have to find another way. The rest of the world needs to know that Leighton is and never will be the woman for me. It’s time I take matters into my own hands and set the record straight. I thought, fishing around in my pocket for my cell phone, grabbing it and dialing away.

“Claire, hello. I need you to do me a favor.”

“Of course, Mr. Clarke. What do you need?”

“I need you to call every goddamn TV station in the country and see which one of them would like to do an interview with me.”

“A-Are you sure that’s such a good idea, sir?”

“Just do it for me, please. Try Ryan down at Talk Takes. Everyone seems to be watching that these days,” I said.

“Right away, Mr. Clarke.”

“Thank you, Claire.”

I felt a bead of sweat trickle down the back of my neck as the makeup artist powdered my face. I glanced over at the set I was about to be sitting on, baring my soul on

national television, but I didn't care. If it's a spectacle they want. It's a spectacle they're sure as hell going to get. I sat in the foldable chair, calling Katherine again, listening to the sound of it ring, but this time she picked up.

"Look, Preston. I don't think you should be calling me anymore. We're done. So you can go on and be happy with your girlfriend, but just leave me alone. She's perfect for you. She fits your life. I obviously don't."

"Turn on channel 10."

"What?"

"Just turn on channel 10. Watch the next half-hour special. If you don't want anything to do with me after that, I'll leave you alone. I promise."

"Okay, fine," she said, and I could sense the confusion in her voice.

"You're on in five," one of the stage managers said, and I nodded.

I made my way to the stage, greeted by Ryan who ran me through exactly how the interview was going to go.

"I'm so glad you're doing this, Preston. There are so many people that want to hear what's going on in your life right now," he said.

"I'm glad I get the opportunity to tell everyone what's really been going on."

Ryan sat across from me with his light blonde hair slicked back, his suit jacket crisp, and that television smile that captured the heart of many across the country. He took me through the first few simple questions and I tried my best not to look directly into the camera, but once I remembered that Katherine was watching my every move, I

relaxed. I knew this was probably the only chance I'd get to tell her the truth, and if I wanted to salvage our relationship, I had to steal the show.

"So, tell me, how's your newly rekindled relationship with Leighton been?"

This is my opening. I hope you're listening, Katherine. I really do.

"Now, the press has done quite the job when it comes to giving people the inside scoop into my life, but they seem to always get the story wrong."

"Oh?"

"There's absolutely nothing going on between Leighton and I, Ryan. Do you want to know why?"

"Of course I do. I'm sure everyone at home wants to know just as much," he said.

"Leighton has made it her mission to ruin things between me and the woman I'm actually falling in love with. All she wants is to wear me on her arm like an accessory so she can mingle with all of my business associates. That's the way she's always been, and I'm not the kind of man that tolerates that. The woman I'm falling for is kind, smart, beautiful, and she deserves the world. There is no Leighton and Preston. There never will be," I confessed.

Ryan stood there trying to fight the smile that was curling his lips. I knew that he was going to bombard me with all kinds of questions about Katherine, but I promised myself I'd stay tight-lipped.

"Now, who is this lucky lady? Some speculate that it's Katherine Hollis, the woman that's rumored to be conducting your company's fraud investigation."

“The lucky lady knows exactly who she is. I just wanted to set the record straight and say my piece. She’s the one I want. There’s no one else. As for the investigation, whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty? As far as we both know, Ryan, nothing has been found that so much as indicates I’ve gone off the books. I don’t cut corners and I sure as hell don’t hurt the people I love.”

“That’s all the time we have for today. Tune in next time for another Talk Take!” he said quickly, before pulling me aside.

“What the hell was that?”

“You got the information you wanted, didn’t you?” I asked him.

“I wanted scandal, not you professing your love to some random woman,” he spat.

“Well, you should’ve thought of that before you let me on the air. Thanks again, Ryan. I’ll be seeing you.”



### Chapter Fifteen

Katherine

I clutched the warm teacup to my lips as the segment wrapped up, but I couldn't peel myself away from the television. I stayed in the same spot for what felt like hours, remembering how quickly I shut Preston out of my life without so much as asking him for the truth. Did he do that for me? I asked myself. He was always a private man, never the kind to bare everything he had on national television, but knowing that he wanted to get through to me that warmed my heart.

A little while later I heard the phone ring and I picked it up, my heart pounding in my ears.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

His voice was soft, low, and it sent a chill down the back of my spine.

"Yes, of course we can."

"I will be at your place in five minutes."

I glanced behind me at the mess of documents on the table and all of the evidence that I've been gathering for Mr. Wolfe, rushing back to pack it all up before Preston arrived. I didn't want him to know that his own uncle could've been the one responsible for his expected downfall, but I couldn't exactly say anything until I was sure. Jamie is sure as hell not going to like this one. Not only will I be going against

my client, but I'll also be ruining his relationship with his friend. Though I'm not going to let Preston go down for something he didn't do. That's not the kind of person I am.

I wondered for a moment if that was why Jamie picked me. A young auditor that was still learning the ropes certainly wouldn't have been my first choice for a job of this caliber, but now I was starting to understand why it worked out the way it did. He didn't believe in me, did he? He just wanted to make sure his friend was well taken care of. No questions asked.

I shook it off, hearing a knock on my front door, and I opened it up to find Preston standing there with a bouquet of peonies in his hand. They were my favorite, and I smiled, reaching up to take them from him when he pulled me close.

"Now, Katherine Hollis, did I not tell you that you're the only woman for me?"

He pressed his lips to mine and I kissed him back hard. I felt my entire body melt right there in the doorway of my apartment. And then he led me inside and made my mind and body explode with the force of a thousand suns...

Poppy came home that evening to find me mulling over documents all spread out on the coffee table. I started looking into Mr. Wolfe's accounts, but everything looked pretty clear. And then I remembered that Wolfe was his mother's name, and his birth name should also be Clarke because he and Preston's dad had the same father, but different mothers. I went through everything again, and when I finally found reports from his personal account, I knew I had him right where I wanted him.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"What?" asked Poppy, grabbing some water from the fridge.

“That two-timing son of a bitch has been sending me on a wild goose chase to sink the only other person who has control of their company. How could I have missed this?”

Poppy furrowed her brow at me, joining me on the couch, while she listened to every detail about what I’d learned.

“We need to know more and we need to act fast.” said Poppy.

“He told me that if I find anything today and need to contact him, he will be at some place called Nobu. You up for a little outing?”

She smiled at me, nodding.

“Let’s get the son of a bitch.”

Poppy and I grabbed our purses, heading straight out the door. We took a cab down to Nobu, and Poppy managed to get us a table. The hostess led us towards the back of the restaurant before Poppy interrupted.

“Would it be possible to seat us up front? Maybe here?”

“Those are reserved for a party of four tonight. I’m sorry.”

“No problem,” I chimed in.

Poppy and I smiled at each other while we finally took our seats, going over our game plan for the night. We just need to figure out what he’s up to. Once I find out the truth, I can fix this. I smiled to myself, realizing that after all this time, Preston wasn’t the bad guy. He was the one trying to hold everyone together, and I should’ve trusted him. Now, I certainly do.

We both ordered drinks, glancing at the door at the other end of the room, and that's when I saw him come in. He wore his expensive, crisp suit and red tie, leading his dinner guests to the reserved table. His phone rang, and I watched as he sauntered off to the bathroom to take it. I rushed after him, keeping my head down to make sure he didn't see me.

He tried to muffle the sound of his voice as he cupped the phone in his hand, but I was close enough to catch a bit of the conversation.

"It's almost done. She'll find what she needs to get rid of him. He should've never been in charge in the first place, and now he's going to be rotting in jail while I finally have the chance to sell the damn company. I don't like having to hold onto my brother's hand-me-downs. If your offer is still the highest, Kingsman Enterprises will be yours. We'll talk."

My heart sank into my stomach hearing his words, and I watched as he hung up, rushing back to his table. He's going to sell Kingsman Enterprises to the highest bidder and he's going to use me to do it? No way. Not on my watch. You're right about one thing, William. I'll find what I need to get rid of someone, but it sure as hell won't be Preston.

### Chapter Sixteen

Preston

I ran my fingers over my stubble, twirling the scotch in my glass as I answered a few dozen emails. The sun was starting to set over the Manhattan skyline and I kept glancing over at the time, knowing I had to leave soon for dinner with the board. I was hoping that the stories would've died down by now, giving me room to breathe, but it was like everywhere I turned, there was something new to worry about. I sighed, downing the rest of my drink, hearing my cell phone buzz in my pocket.

I stared down and smiled as Katherine's name flashed across the screen.

"Hello, Kat."

"Hey, Preston. I uh, I don't know how to ask you this, but since you made dinner for me last week, I'd like to return the favor," she said. Even though we'd grown so close in such a short amount of time, I could still sense the nervousness in her voice, and I imagined that was because she felt guilty for misjudging me. I chuckled, remembering how lovely that dinner between us really was.

"I have dinner with the board tonight, but I can come by afterward for a midnight snack, if you're up for it," I teased.

"That would be perfect."

I couldn't wait to kiss her again, to taste every inch of her, while we both got lost

between the sheets. It was the only thing getting me through the night. It made the ride to the restaurant that much sweeter knowing where I'd be once I wrapped up business for the evening.

I entered Per Se, adjusting my tie before making my way over to the large table set out for us. Everyone was already there, chatting, clinking their glasses together, and they all quieted down the moment they laid eyes on me.

"Preston, it's so nice of you to join us. We were just talking about the future of Kingsman Enterprises, post-scandal," said William.

I tried to stay calm, watching Bart's eyes shifting around the room, landing on me when I took my seat.

"Well, let's discuss. Shall we?"

Everything seemed to be moving along smoothly until I heard the sound of heels approaching from behind me. I turned around, catching the sight of a familiar blonde with her hair pulled back into a low ponytail and a smile that made me grit my teeth in anger.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Bart."

"You've got to be kidding me. What the hell are you doing here, Leighton?"

"Bart invited me. I know you boys are going to be talking business tonight, but we have plans to head out after," she said, waving at him.

I saw the look in his eyes that told me exactly where their night was going and I sighed. I grabbed Leighton by the arm, pulling her back towards the bathrooms so we could chat in private.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing? I thought I made myself clear when I told you to get out of town,” I told her.

“See, that sounded more like a suggestion to me. You weren’t too keen on giving me what I wanted so I decided to find someone who would. Where’s the harm in that?”

She smirked at me, and it was taking every ounce of energy not to completely flip out in the middle of the restaurant. I shut my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath before I tried to reason with her again. It’s like talking to a damn wall.

“You have until tomorrow to leave. Pack your shit and get out.”

“No. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my dinner date is waiting. I can’t wait to hear all about Kingsman Enterprises' future plans.”

“If you don’t do as I say, I’m going to ruin you, Leighton.”

“Right back at you,” she said, through her teeth.

I remembered the look on her face when I shut her out of my penthouse, the tears that were nearly streaming down her face, and at that moment I really thought I’d won. I should’ve known that she had a backup plan. She’s always a few steps ahead, looking for the next opportunity to completely fuck my life up.

We both headed back to sit down at the dinner table, and we managed to get our orders in before Leighton took her time cozying up to Bart. He was eating it up, and I downed two glasses of wine hoping that it would drown out the way I felt right now, but it didn’t. No, for something like this, I need hard liquor.

“Now that we’ve had time to eat, I think we should talk about what’s next for Kingsman Enterprises. As you know, William has been doing a good job of handling

things while we ride out this scandal, but I think it's time we make it a little more permanent," said Bart.

"There's no way in hell that's happening," I responded.

He turned to look at me, so disappointed, while Leighton hung off of his arm, giving me the fakest sympathetic look I'd ever seen.



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“Preston, I know that you’ve enjoyed your time being in charge and that may have been what your father wanted, but it’s just not working. The company isn’t going to survive any more scandals, and I’m sure you can occupy yourself with something else to enjoy your youth. Why waste it trying to play CEO.”

“You’re out of your damn mind, Bart. This is my company and I’m staying in charge. That is my right, and you can’t sit there telling me that I haven’t done wonders for this company ever since my father died.”

“Come on, Preston. He’s just trying to help,” Leighton chimed in.

“Shut the fuck up, Leighton. You shouldn’t even be here. I hate to break it to you, Bart, but my ex-girlfriend is only with you for your money and for taking a few jabs at me. She isn’t going to sleep with you tonight if that’s what you’re looking forward to,” I spat.

“That’s enough. I think it’s time we call it a night, shall we? Preston, we’ll talk tomorrow morning. It’s best you go,” said William.

William followed me out of the restaurant and we both stood there on the sidewalk while I crossed my arms, waiting for him to tell me what the fuck was going on.

“You need to pull yourself together, Preston. When you blow up like this, it only makes their decision easier for them.”

“Don’t you see what’s happening here, William? They’re trying to boot me out!”

“Look, I told you that I’m going to fix this and I will. You’re just going to have to give me some time, okay? If you want them to take you seriously, you need to stop acting like a child,” he said.

I started to calm down, knowing that it was more than just Leighton and Bart getting under my skin, it was the thought that I was on the verge of losing everything. William patted me on the shoulder, and I nodded at him, watching as he made his way back inside to diffuse the situation. It wouldn’t be the first time he had to do that. Maybe he’s right. He’s just looking out for me after all. I thought.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something I was missing. I couldn’t understand why the board was suddenly so interested in dropping me when there was a time all they did was praise my efforts to make Kingsman Enterprises the best it could be. I sighed, trusting that William would be able to handle this for me. He was a pain in the ass sometimes, but I knew he had my back. I took the town car to Katherine’s apartment, wanting nothing more than to wrap my arms around her, and forget every part of this awful night.

I walked up the steps, pressing the buzzer, and I heard her voice come over the speaker.

“Preston?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Come on up,” she said.

It had been a while since I’d been back to her apartment, and once I arrived at her door, taking in how beautiful she looked standing in her doorway, I knew I was falling in love. She smiled warmly at me, before her brows furrowed, like she could sense that I wasn’t having the best night.

“Preston, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve had a very interesting evening,” I said.

“Dinner with the board didn’t go well, huh?”

“I don’t think it could’ve gone worse. That doesn’t matter now anyway. I’m here with you. That’s what matters,” I told her.

She waved for me to come inside and I smiled. I could smell the incredible aroma of freshly cooked food in the air and the slight lavender scent wafting over from the lit candles on the table.

“You went to all this trouble, for me?”

“I want you to know that I care about you, Preston. I haven’t exactly been the most trusting person as of late, and I want to apologize for that. I wanted to do something to make it up to you,” she said, blushing.

“You have nothing to apologize for, Kat. I’m the reason you feel like you can’t trust me, but you need to know that I will never do anything to hurt you.”

“I know, Preston. I trust you. I really do.”

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close to me as our lips locked. I felt the warmth emanating from her body and it lulled me, making the entire night worth it. It made me want to tell her every ridiculous thing that happened that evening, and when we finally sat down to eat, it was like she felt the same way.

“Now, I know I probably shouldn’t even be asking this considering my role in your business at the moment, but what happened tonight?” she asked, taking a sip of her

wine.

“They’re trying to boot me out of the company so William can take my place. I still don’t understand why because I can’t imagine that a bunch of unproven accusations would make them come to such a decision, and I can’t help but feel like there’s more at play here. I just wish I knew what to do,” I confessed.

She looked at me sympathetically, placing her wine glass down, taking my hand.

“No one’s going to boot you out of your own company, Preston. They may try. They may make you feel like you don’t belong there, but you have some say. The Preston I know wouldn’t ever let something like this happen, and I know you’ll find a way out of it. I may have had my doubts about the kind of man you were in the beginning, but even then I knew you were always a damn good businessman,” she murmured.

“Is that so? I’m sure I’m damn good at a few other things, don’t you?”

She bit her lip in anticipation, nodding at me. I got up from my chair, undoing my tie, tossing it across the room before I took Katherine into my arms, lifting her up, so I could take her to her bedroom. She caressed my cheek, kissing me hard, making every single one of my troubles melt away. I laid her down on the bed, undoing the straps of her soft, short little dress, helping her out of it. I could see the blush of her skin, the look in her eyes that told me all I needed to know about what she wanted. It’s you, Katherine. It’s always been you.

### Chapter Seventeen

#### Katherine

I could barely catch my breath when I was around him. He was in my space now, the smell of his cologne wafting through the air, and I knew it would linger even when it was time for him to leave. But this moment felt like it would last forever.

Preston towered above me and his smirk made my heart beat faster and faster as he slowly removed his clothes. I devoured his chiseled body with my eyes. I began my feast with his cannonball shoulders, then my gaze moved on to his wide chest and then I enjoyed his abs as my main dish.

When it was time for dessert, I spread my legs and Preston dove in as if he was waiting for this. I felt the wetness trickle down his fingers as he parted my pussy lips, and I moaned when his tongue found my clit. He licked every inch of my pussy, sucking on it, driving me crazy. His curved fingers explored my kitty with almost religious zeal, discovering more and more new special spots that made me shiver with ecstasy.

I grabbed onto the sheets of my bed for support as the orgasm began to build inside of me, the rush settling beneath my bones, while he freed his rock-hard cock. I grabbed ahold of it, guiding it to my pussy lips and he slid in with ease. I felt the tip tug on my opening, my wetness coating his perfectly veiny, throbbing dick, and I knew I was in for one hell of a wild ride.

Preston went from zero to two hundred percent in a second. My body felt lost in the

whirlwind of sensations as my man fucked me hard while his strong hands traveled up and down my body. It felt like he couldn't get enough of me and I couldn't get enough of him.

“You feel so good, Kat!”

His voice awoke something primal deep inside of me and I found myself grinning at him while my legs wrapped around his torso. I began pushing him deeper and harder inside of me and I could feel how he went mad with lust.

The first orgasm almost swept me off the bed to the floor as every muscle in my body twitched and tensed, unable to handle the stream of pure sexual bliss. Preston smiled at me as he kept thrusting deep inside of me, making me come again and again. Now he decided how much pleasure I will experience and the mere thought of that made me want him more and more.

After an eternity of bliss he pulled out and I heard his voice again.

“Turn around,” he said.

I bit my lip, smiling as I obeyed. I felt Preston's hands grab a hold of my waist, pulling me closer to him, his dick finding its way back inside of me. He thrust hard, his balls slamming up against me, and I buried my face in the duvet to muffle my cries of pleasure. He drove his dick deeper inside, grabbing onto the back of my neck to hold me steady. His big cock reached so deep inside of me that I felt a whole new spectrum of sensations awakening in my body.

I arched my back almost involuntarily and by the increased intensity of Preston's screams I instantly knew that he liked it too. We were fucking like mad, two lovers lost in the flame of desire. I don't know how long it lasted, but the inevitable wave of orgasm once again plunged me into fiery pits of sexual ecstasy.

“Oh my God. Oh my God! Preston!”

“Yes, Kat, yes!”

I turned my head just enough to see his chiseled body behind my ass, his hands grabbing my cheeks, ramming his dick harder, faster until my pussy started to swell. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, right before I came all over again. My wetness dripped down the both of us, and I relished in the sound of Preston’s grunts just as his muscles tightened, releasing all of that pressure that pent up inside of him. I felt its warmth grow cold in minutes, but I didn’t care. I laid there with him, both of us an absolute mess, but there was truly nowhere else we’d rather be. Wow. I thought, realizing that after all this time, he still managed to drive me wild every second that I was near him.

It felt good to have him roaming through my apartment, getting a taste of what my life was like for a change. It wasn’t the lavish lifestyle he was used to, but it was comfortable, homey, and true to me. I had a few movie posters framed on the wall, a collection of plants that were barely hanging on for dear life, and a bookshelf filled with classic reads. I thought that he would’ve found a great deal of them boring, but he basked in it all, taking me into his arms as we both curled up on the couch together. I sported his crisp white button-up shirt, my bare legs in his lap, while we started a movie. His warmth lulled me, and before I knew it we were both falling asleep.

“Now, what do we have here?”

The voice jolted me out of my sleep and my eyelids fluttered open to see Poppy standing there with a smirk on her face. She raised her eyebrows teasingly at me, pointing to Preston who was still fast asleep. I managed to slip out of his arms without waking him, and we both made our way to my bedroom to chat.

“Man am I glad that I stayed over at Chris’s last night,” she said, with a chuckle.

“Ha, ha.”

“So, does this mean that you two are officially back together?”

“I believe it does. I’m not exactly sure what that means for us just yet because I don’t know if you’re aware, but I still have a report to turn in that might damage his company,” I whispered.

“Looks like you’ve got your hands full. I know you two will work it out no matter what happens. That is, if he’s not a shady businessman,” said Poppy.

“He’s not. That I already know, but that doesn’t mean he won’t get hurt when word gets out.”

“You’ve found more, didn’t you?”

“Looks like William is as dirty as I thought he was. I’m going to confront him with what I found. It’s time I make this right.”

“Go get em’, Kat.”

I glanced out of the doorway at Preston sleeping peacefully, and I really didn’t know how to tell him that the man he’d trusted ever since his father passed was the one trying to ruin his life. It’s up to me to fix this. Let’s see what William has to say for himself.



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I pulled out my cell phone, texting him to meet. He instantly texted me back to meet him at his home and I sighed in relief. I needed this to happen in a place where we wouldn't be seen, because if he chose not to cooperate, I'd have to play right into his hands to get him to confess. My mind was reeling with the possibility of what he might do, but I knew that there was one thing I certainly had to focus on, and that was protecting Preston. All you've ever done was make the right choices and everyone around you still questions your authority. Once this is all over, there won't be a board member or associate that ever questions you again.

I made my way into the shower, trying to come up with the perfect excuse not to have Preston rope me into spending the day with him. There was nothing I wanted more, but the longer I sat on this information, the less valuable it became. I have to do this, and I have to do it now.

I clutched my file folder to my chest, the chiffon tie around the neck of my blouse feeling tighter the closer I got to William's home. I thought long and hard about what his life must've been like after his brother passed away. Unlike Preston, spending his time grieving the loss of his father and simultaneously hoping to carry on his legacy, William had an entirely different plan in mind. Going by the last name Wolfe is only part of it. He probably thought going by his mother's family name would scrub him clean of being forced into his step-brother's shadow.

The cab pulled into William's large compound, with its wrought-iron gate and lavish shrubbery. I felt a little intimidated walking up the stone steps to his front door, but I took a deep breath, knowing I had to keep it together to get this done. I rang the doorbell, standing in front of the massive carved wooden masterpieces before me. It wasn't long before one of them opened to reveal a rather ecstatic William who was

probably expecting that it was near time to stick it to Preston. I suppose I'll be sticking it to you instead. I thought.

"Katherine, it's so lovely to see you. Please, come in."

"Thank you."

Stepping foot into his foyer was like being transported to an entirely different world. The marble floors felt cold, the perfect furniture looked like it hadn't been touched in ages, and there was a waft of William's cologne leaving traces in just about every room we walked through.

"You uh, have a lovely home," I said, unsure of what to say.

Come on, Katherine. This really isn't the time for small talk.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I'm-"

"Nonsense. Please, have some tea. I know that it's early and you probably didn't have much time to grab yourself some breakfast. I want you to be comfortable before we dive into the next steps of this arrangement," said William.

I couldn't say another word or do anything apart from nod. In just a few moments, one of his house staff came out with a silver tray of tea and small cucumber sandwiches. My stomach didn't so much as rumble, because it was too busy turning at the thought of what I was about to do.

I managed to sip on a little Earl Grey, watching William indulge in his morning espresso, and I knew I couldn't take it anymore. The anticipation was killing me, and

the thought that he was almost going to get away with ruining everything Preston had worked for filled me with rage. I sighed deeply, handing him the file. He opened it, pretending to look shocked at the first page which was the one he probably left me to find at Preston's gallery.

"See, I knew you were a good choice, Katherine. I knew you'd be able to find what was needed to bring Preston down. After all, he's done quite a bit of damage to this company already. I can't imagine what he'd do if he stayed in charge," he said, brushing his fingertips over his thick, greying beard.

"When I first took this job I was certain that a billionaire that just assumed his father's wealth and company must've been the guilty one. It seemed like a textbook case, but that was until I met you. The jealous uncle always wanting what his nephew had. That document is a forgery. You should've paid closer attention to the way Preston signs his C's," I said.

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. That is when he started digging through the remaining documents to find all of his financial records, even the ones he'd hoped to bury.

"Those are all just copies, mind you. I have the real ones stored away safely."

"Now, this is unexpected. You do realize if you decide to do something with this, you can consider yourself unemployed," he threatened.

"I'm sure Jamie might be upset, yes, but if he fires me, that's only going to make matters worse for him. You're the one that initiated this investigation, and I imagine you chose me because you thought I'd do exactly as you'd say with no questions asked."

"Turns out I was wrong about you. Look, this can go one of two ways, Katherine.

Either you take the missing document back to Jamie and you work out the legal proceedings to shut Preston down or I will find my own way to destroy you. Though, if you decide to do the right thing here, I can make it worth your while.”

I saw the look in his eyes, the one that told me he really believed he was going to be able to buy himself out of this one. It was then I realized that threatening him wasn’t going to be enough because just like he managed to bury all of the terrible things he’s done, he could probably bury the truth too... if he had enough time. Play into his hands. You can figure out a way to expose him, you just have to make it seem like you’re both on the same page here.

“Really. How so?” I asked, crossing my legs, laying my chin in the palm of my hand while I listened to him.

“Ah, see. There really is always a price someone’s willing to pay to get what they want. I can give you just a fifty thousand dollars to do this the right way, but there’s a catch.”

“I am disappointed, William. Did you really think that I won’t figure out your plan to sell the company? And in comparison to the company’s market value, fifty thousand is nothing.”

He smirked.

“I am impressed, Katherine. My offer is five hundred thousand. I won’t be getting the whole amount right away, and it will be hard to conceal money transfer.”

“I’ll think about it. What’s the catch you mentioned?”

“You’re going to have to do it publicly. I don’t want there to be any chance of you changing your mind. I’ll set up a press conference and you can tell the world that

Preston Clarke is a dirty businessman. That will do enough damage to remove him as head of the company, and with him being tied up in legal proceedings, by the time he finds out the truth, it'll be too late. Though, you'll be half a million dollars richer. You won't need him anymore," said William.

"Make it a full million and you've got yourself a deal."

I knew I had no intention of taking the money, but I wanted him to know that I was serious. If he even so much as caught a whiff of fear from me, this little plan of mine would blow up in smoke. William would have everything he wanted and I'd be the one trying to clear my name. I have one shot to make this right, The press conference. That's the day everyone will know what a colossal piece of shit you really are.

"Deal."

### Chapter Eighteen

Preston

I got the call that morning that jolted me out of bed, the incessant ringing sounded like it was drilling a hole in my brain when I finally picked up.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Mr. Clarke. I wanted to remind you about the gala you have this evening.”

“What gala, Claire?”

“The one where you’re being honored as New York Business Properties Association businessman of the year?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I would’ve thought they pulled out.”

“It seems like the committee was unfazed by all the publicity around your persona.”

“Thank you, Claire.”

I hung up the phone, feeling frustrated. The last thing I wanted to do was make a public appearance alone, and I knew there was only one person I wanted to accompany me. I dialed her number.

“Preston. You’re up early,” said Katherine.

“Claire just woke me up to remind me about the gala I’m supposed to attend tonight. I wanted to know if you’re up for another wild adventure. This time, in the public eye,” I told her.

There was an impenetrable silence on the other end of the line for a moment.

“What would everyone say when they find out that you took me as your date? The press would have a field day.”

“The press is going to have a field day regardless. It’s time we reclaim the damn narrative and give them something worth talking about. What do you say, Kat? Be my date? Drive everyone a little wild?”

I heard her chuckle and I smiled.

“You’re absolutely crazy, you know that?”

“Crazy, yes. Tired of having to hide the fact that I’m falling in love with you, also yes.”

I could’ve sworn I heard an audible gasp coming from the phone pressed tightly to my ear and I could practically hear just how widely she was smiling.

“If I were to go, what exactly would I wear?”

“Don’t you worry about that. I’ll send over a gown.”

“Preston...”

“Oh, you’ll love it. See you tonight at seven o’clock sharp.”

I hung up before she could get another word in and I was beaming. With you there, I can get through tonight. Who knows what the hell I’ll even be doing in a week or so when the investigation wraps up. It’s time to enjoy all the shit I never got a chance to because I let work consume me. It’s time to let loose a little.

The black town car pulled up in front of Katherine’s building, and I buzzed up, making my way inside to meet her at her door. She opened it up and my jaw dropped to the floor. There she stood in her floor-length black gown, her hair pulled back into a curled updo, and that diamond necklace I handpicked for her ages ago. It still shone perfectly underneath the warm lighting in her apartment, and she grabbed her purse, about to head out the door when I pulled her in close.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” I said.

She kissed me softly, and I wished I could take her right back inside, helping her out of this dress so we could spend the night alone.

“You look good too, you know? There’s nothing I like better than seeing you in an evening suit,” she said, teasingly.

“Oh yeah?”



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I started trailing kisses down her neck right there in the hallway of her apartment building, and she giggled, lifting my head up as I smirked at her. She shoved her wristwatch in my face, and I pressed my lips together, giving in.

“We’re going to be late. You don’t want to be late to your own gala where you’re being honored as the businessman of the year, do you?”

“For you, I don’t care if we had to skip it altogether,” I said, winking at her.

She rolled her eyes at me playfully, dragging me by the hand, while we made our way down to the car.

The hotel was packed with guests for the gala, entering in with their tailored suits and glittery gowns, and I took a deep breath. I knew that at some point tonight I’d have to give an address, thank everyone for hosting such an event, and reassuring them all that everything would be fine. I probably should’ve prepared something. I thought, but that’s when I looked over at Katherine. She gazed out the window, and I took in the sight of her, the scent of perfume, the way she was going to all this trouble to be here for me even though she wanted to keep things between us discreet.

You’ll be fine now that you have her by your side. Trust that. I told myself. The moment Katherine and I stepped out, there were paparazzi waiting with cameras to get a snapshot of what they were seeing. They called out to us, but we didn’t look in their direction. Katherine held onto my arm tightly, keeping her head held high, and there wasn’t a single moment where I caught a glimpse of any nervousness.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight, Katherine. It means the world to me.”

“It means the world to me too, Preston. I also think it’s time we be the ones making news with our own story for a change, especially because I trust you. I know that everything is going to work out just fine,” said Katherine.

“Does that mean that the investigation was a success?”

“I suppose you can say that. I just want you to know there’s nothing you have to worry about. Just leave the rest to me,” she said, and I furrowed my brow at her.

Before I could ask any more questions I was whisked away by some business associates for a chat. She waved for me to go, and I caught a glimpse of her a little while later with a champagne glass in hand, looking like she fit right in.

“Preston, I’m so glad to see that you came,” said William, raising his glass to me.

“Of course. I am being honored tonight after all. It’s surprising because of the way the board made it seem, it’s like they’ve already decided they don’t want me anymore. I guess there are a few people that still believe in me.”

“I believe in you, Preston. The board makes very difficult decisions, but for the moment it is better to honor them. Let’s not talk business tonight, okay? Tonight, we’re here to celebrate you,” he said.

“Then why the hell does this feel like a send-off?”

“Your father used to say the same thing at these events. Trust me, it isn’t over yet,” said William.

He patted me on the shoulder, heading over to a group of Manhattan socialites right when Katherine made her way back over to me. She engaged a subtle glance with William and he smiled brightly at her, which seemed a bit strange, but I wrote it off

as them just being polite. If Katherine says I have nothing to worry about then I need to trust her. Hopefully, once this is all over she can tell me who her client is and tell me what I need to do to prevent this from happening again.

Katherine put all of her trust in me and I worked hard to make her see that I was no longer the same guy that didn't call her back after an amazing night together. It was time I gave her the same courtesy. It was time I gave her my all.

"You doing okay, Preston?"

"As okay as I can be. This all still feels a bit strange with everything going on, but I'm glad I'm not alone."

"You won't ever have to be alone again. I'm here," she said, and her words warmed my heart.

The large ballroom started to quiet down just as William got everyone's attention to thank them for coming out tonight and to call me up to give my address. My heart started beating loudly in my chest, but I downed the rest of my champagne, fixed my tie, and took center stage.

"It's an honor to be here tonight with all of you. I first want to start off by thanking you all again for being here. If my father were here, he'd pat me on the back and tell me, "This is what it means to be a Clarke." He'd ignore all of the talk, accept his award, and move on. Though, I'm not him. As you all know, there has been quite a bit of chatter circulating about the state of my company. Right now, it's thriving just as it always has been. If that changes, you'll be the first to know."

I glanced down in the audience to see Katherine standing there with a smile on her face, and everyone around her started clapping. It felt good to tackle the rumors head-on, and to prepare for this nightmare to finally come to an end. Before I had the

chance to talk to her again, I watched as William approached her. He whispered something in her ear that seemed to startle her, but she shook it off just as he left. I approached her while she flashed me a warm smile.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

“Yes, it is. Mr. Wolfe just wanted to remind me what’s at stake with me being here. He mentioned that it’s going to be quite the media circus tomorrow,” she responded, and I nodded.

So that’s what that was all about. I inched closer to her, outstretching my arm so she could loop hers through, and we made our way around the entire ballroom so she could get the proper introduction she deserved. With every encounter, the worry on her face slowly started to melt away, and that was truly all I needed.

The festivities were in full swing and I was about to make my way over to get Katherine and I another drink before we had to sit down for dinner, but that’s when I heard the incessant sound of heels approaching from behind. Oh no. I turned around and there she was with her sleek blonde hair and wide smirk. She looked Katherine up and down, but I was surprised to see she wasn’t at all bothered by Leighton’s games.

“Oh look, Preston. You decided to bring your charity case out to the Upper East Side. How nice. Darling, you do know that he’s only going to all this trouble to sweep you off your feet so you don’t destroy him, right?” she reminded Katherine, but I watched as she just shook her head.

“It must be sad living a life like yours, Leighton. How does it feel to know the man you’ve been pining for your whole life doesn’t love you anymore? It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“I-I-”

“You what? Need to get back to the billionaire you’re trying to bed so you can keep the cash flowing? Sure, be my guest,” she said, waving her off.

I couldn’t help but smile, taking Katherine into my arms, as my hand caressed her cheek, my lips pressing up against hers. I heard Leighton scoff before she took off, and it felt so sweet.

“You’ve got one hell of a fire inside of you, Kat.”

“Yeah, well you should know. You lit it,” she teased.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### Katherine

The New York morning sun poured into my bedroom and I opened my eyes, immediately hit with the panic of what today would bring. I reached over to my bedside table to grab my phone, running through my missed calls to see that I had at least five from William. I sighed, knowing that once this press conference happened, there would be no going back. I gathered every bit of evidence I could, made sure that my final report was in order, saved, and backed up before I even thought about leaving the house because I knew Jamie would expect it all immediately.

I thought about what his reaction was going to be like, the utter shock, followed by disappointment because I couldn't help his dear friend. I really hope that you're not in his pocket, Jamie. As much as it's going to pain you, I hope that you're going to be on board with doing the right thing. I thought, stepping into the hot shower, letting the steam fill my senses, calming me down. I stepped out a while later, drying my hair and slipping into a pastel pink blouse and white slacks. I painted my lips a light pink to match, gathering everything I needed, and it was time to head out.

I barely made it to the door before Poppy stopped me, raising her eyebrows.

"You look nice. Extra nice. What's going on?"

"Channel 8. 10 a.m. Catch it if you have the chance," I said, grabbing my keys before rushing right out the front door.

A cool breeze hit me as I made it out onto the sidewalk and I managed to wave down a cab to take me to Kingsman Enterprises. I gulped the moment the car approached the building, and I tried to talk myself down from having a full-fledged panic attack.

You're going to do this, and you're going to be great. It's time the world knew the truth. That's what you came here to do, remember? You know now that the man you're in love with is a good guy. Do this for him. Do this for you.

William was waiting down in the lobby for me when I arrived, probably to have a word with me before Preston could catch wind of what was going on.

"Good, you're here. You remember what we talked about right? Once the press conference is over, I'll wire the money into your bank account. You're doing the right thing here, Katherine. Preston should've never been given my company. He wasn't ready, and he probably never will be. It's time we end this," said William.

"Yes, you're right. It's time we end this."

"Good. You have a few minutes before the press will start to swarm. Preston will make his way down soon enough. I'm sorry to break up your little lovefest," he said.

"As you said, I'll be a million dollars richer. So, what does it matter?"

I felt sick to my stomach as the words left my mouth, but he just stood there smiling at me.

"That's right, Katherine. That's right."

I adjusted the buttons on my blouse before making my way out to the podium in front of Kingsman Enterprises. It felt like my heart was caught in my throat, like the world around me just couldn't stop spinning, and I knew this was the moment I'd been

waiting for. I spotted a few of the board members sprinkled in the crowd that inevitably formed, all waiting for me to deliver the final verdict. They all stood there wondering whether Preston Clarke was guilty of fraud or not.

I grabbed the sides of the podium, glancing down at the file folder that contained everything I needed to say and all of the evidence to back it up, but I was afraid the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. That is when I turned to look behind me to see William and Preston approaching, and my stomach turned even more. Preston looked so disappointed in me, like he knew what was coming, but no one did. I could see the heartbreak in his eyes because he had no warning. He woke up today having no idea that I'd be standing outside of his company's building ready to deliver the final word.

Before I had the chance to speak, he rushed to my side, whispering in my ear.

"What are you doing, Kat?"

"Just trust me."

He nodded reluctantly, and I looked over to see William standing there with the biggest smile on his face. It filled me with rage to know that he was the one that started this whole circus to begin with, all so he could have the rights to the company he absolutely didn't deserve. It's time. Let's do this.

"Good morning everyone. I know you all must be eager to hear what I have to say, but before I do I just want you to know that I've conducted quite an extensive investigation, which given permission by my client, I can share with you. Once the press conference has concluded, the appropriate legal proceedings will commence," I began.

"So, does that mean that Preston Clarke is guilty?"



“Why is there a need for legal proceedings? What did you find?”

The questions started to pour in, but I put my hand up, tapping the mic with my other so they’d all quiet down. The reporters stood there with their microphones as close to my lips as they could possibly get. I looked up into the crowd to see Jamie standing there with his hands crossed, anticipating my next move. William probably already filled him in. Now, like everyone else, he’s in for one hell of a surprise. I thought.

“I did find evidence that the head of Kingsman Enterprises is involved in fraudulent activity and deception regarding profit, but none of it was conducted by Preston Clarke. Preston Clarke had no knowledge of any fraudulent activity happening within his company because the real criminal here, his very own uncle, had a plan to destroy his nephew so he could be the sole owner of the company. William Wolfe has presented forged documents with the intent of harming both Kingsman Enterprises and Preston Clarke’s reputation. At this time, necessary legal action will be taken. Thank you.”

I removed myself from the podium, bedding back inside the lobby just as William grabbed me by the arm, causing the file folder to fall, scattering everywhere.

“You psychotic bitch. Do you have any idea what you’ve just done? This is not what we agreed on,” he spat.

“You wanted me to do the right thing, and so I did. You couldn’t possibly think you could wave a million dollars around and somehow entice me to intentionally harm Preston. Now, get off of me.”

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Preston rushed to my side, taking one look at his uncle who desperately tried to plead with him, but Preston punched him so hard in the jaw, blood started trickling down his lips.

“I hope you know you’re out of a job,” said William.

I looked up to see that Jamie had joined us now, and I was surprised to see he didn’t look angry after all. He smiled at me, nodding like he was proud.

“She’s not out of a job, Will. If anything, she’s going to see that promotion I promised her. We’ve been friends a long time, but you couldn’t possibly expect me to go along with this. Have fun in jail, bud.”

The cops swarmed, taking William away in handcuffs, and I finally had a moment alone with Preston before I’d have to process all of the paperwork that would soon ensue.

“For a moment I thought that you are like all the others... that you are going to betray me. You scared me big time, Kat.”

“I know, but if I would’ve told you, you would’ve tried to stop me. The world needed to know what William was doing before he had a chance to destroy any of the evidence against him. I did what I had to do to protect you. I’m just glad to know that you really are a good guy,” I said.

“I may have been shitty to you in the past, but if there’s one thing I can say it’s that I never lied to you. Thank you for everything, Kat. You’re the reason I still have

everything. Above all, I have you.”

He caressed my cheek, lifting my chin, kissing me hard. It felt so good to not have to hide anymore. We could finally be together, we could finally have everything we both wanted. It was quite a wild ride getting accustomed to how things worked in his world, but it made me feel good to know that he wasn't the typical Manhattan shark. He wasn't out for blood like the rest of his business associates. He did good business, and he did it right. You're really something, Preston Clarke. Now, it's time for you to show the world what you're really capable of.

Preston and I sat in the conference room, watching all of the board members file in. They all looked so glum, like they just had their asses handed to them, and it made me feel incredible. I knew they were dragging Preston through the mud, siding with William because they'd convinced themselves that he was right all along. Now that has changed, it's given Kingsman Enterprises a fresh start, and it will certainly become Preston's legacy.

“Thank you all for coming. I know we've had quite an eventful morning, but I hope you can see now that trying to remove me as head of the company wasn't the right move. The man you trusted, the man that you believed would keep this company on the path to success was the one robbing you blind. I have Katherine here to take you through the details so you know exactly what's been going on,” said Preston.

I cleared my throat, telling them about the investigation, the Newmont, the misplaced money, forged documents, and how badly William wanted to hide it all so he could get what he wanted. With every new detail that came to light, some that were left out of the press conference entirely, the board members sat there looking absolutely shocked.

“How long has this been going on for?”

“Since Mr. Clarke senior passed away. Mr. Wolfe managed to keep everything hidden because he was in charge of Mr. Clarke’s affairs before Preston was welcomed into the company. Now, he’ll be rotting in jail for a very long time once his trial is complete,” I told them.

“Preston. I-I don’t know what to say-”

“It’s okay, Bart. Let’s just remember this the next time you want to boot me out over dinner, huh?”

Once the meeting concluded, it was just Preston and I. He slid his rolling chair close to mine, running his fingertips along my cheek, kissing me softly. I pulled away for a moment to look around and make sure no one was watching, but that was when I remembered that we didn’t have to hide anymore.

“Old habits die hard, huh?”

“Yes, they do,” I said, smiling.

“Kat, I just want to thank you again for doing this, I know that none of it could’ve been easy, especially because I imagine there was a time you thought I could’ve been guilty.”

“Even when William tried to lead me astray, I trusted my gut. My gut told me that even though you can be a little rough around the edges, you’re certainly not a criminal. Thank God for that. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I had to haul you off to jail.”

“Well, it’s a damn good thing you don’t, because now you get me all to yourself,” he said, teasingly.

He kissed me again and I relished in the comfort of all of our troubles finally being over. It was time I got to see Preston's world without all of the scandal looming over us. It was time I got to learn about the man he really is. I want to know you, Preston. Everything about you. Everything you never got to say. Now, it's time we begin again. Now, we finally have our chance.

### Epilogue

Preston

The executive chair in my office felt a little more comfortable today while I went through my afternoon emails, getting everything back under control. The office was bustling with interns, assistants, and countless packages were being funneled in, but it still felt empty. It felt empty now that Katherine was no longer sitting in the corner office, a few steps down the hallway from my own, where we'd shared such incredible moments together. I smiled to myself, thinking about how wonderful the night ahead was going to be, since we'd both been looking forward to it for a while. There's something I need to do first.

I heard a knock on the glass door of my office and I waved for Claire to come in. She had her iPad nestled in her arm, and I had a feeling she was going to start reading off my upcoming meetings, but I stopped her before she could.

"Claire, I'm going to need the rest of the day. Any meetings I have, please cancel them. There's somewhere I need to be."

Her mouth nearly dropped to the floor and I could practically see the anxiety in those brown eyes of hers.

"Sir, as you know there are many people that want to meet with you ever since -"

"Ever since William nearly destroyed the company and everyone nearly lost their jobs? Yes, I know. I'm heading down to meet with him now. It's about time I had the

chance to confront him properly,” I said.

“Sir, the meetings aren’t -”

“I’m sure you can find a way to work around my busy schedule. Fit a few in during lunch for the rest of the week. Thank you, Claire. Oh, and please have the town car brought around to the front for me.”

“Right away, sir.”

She rushed off, heading back to her desk to call down for the car. I grabbed my new suit jacket, slipping it over my shoulder just as I heard my phone start to buzz.

“Hey stranger.”

“Kat. Now, how do you have time to call me in the middle of the day when you’re a hotshot at work now?” I teased.

“I’ll always have time to call you. Are we still on for tonight?”

“Of course. It’s about time we had dinner at my place again. With all that’s been going on, I haven’t had the chance to properly wine and dine you.”

“Ha, well we both know just how good you really are at that. I’ll see you tonight.”

I nearly felt the words slip out of my mouth, the three little words I’ve never said to any woman before in my life. I stopped myself, knowing that I wanted Katherine to hear it in person. I wanted her to know that I was in this for the long haul. Tonight. I’ll tell her tonight.

I walked into the quiet, barren room with nothing but a table and two chairs in it. I

tapped my fingers on the surface, looking up as the buzzer sounded and in came William. He'd already been sporting orange, handcuffs dragging on the ground, and he looked tougher than I imagined him to. His beard was wildly disheveled, his hair a mess, and he was practically snarling at me from across the table when he finally took his seat.

"If you need anything, I'll be right outside," the officer said.

"Thank you."

The door finally shut and I took a deep breath, remembering just how many strings I had to pull to have this meeting in the first place. I stared blankly at William, watching as he shifted around in his seat, barely able to make eye contact with me.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice so low it was practically a grunt.

"What do you mean what do I want? I want to know what the hell happened to you, William? I want to know why the fuck you'd go to all this trouble to ruin me. We were in this together," I said.

I couldn't help but feel hurt by what he tried to do to me. We were family, and at the end of the day I really expected that he'd always have my back.

"I did what I had to do because I spent my entire life living in the shadow of your father and I wasn't about to repeat fucking history with you. You're just a goddamn kid. You have no idea how things really work out there," he said, pointing behind me just as much as his chains and handcuffs would let him.

"I don't know what kind of shit my father used to get up to, but I'm not him. I'm not going to stand for cheating my way to the top. You should've known better than to cross me. Now, your life as you know it is over. Even if your lawyers somehow



manage to get your ass out of here, I won't ever let you step foot near the business again. You're done, William. You're done."

"You're an idiot to think you won't end up like me, Preston. When business gets real, when shit finally hits the fan, you'll make the same decisions I did. You'll make the same choices your father did to give you the perfect life you had. It's only a matter of time."

"No, I won't. You know why? It's because I'm not you and I'm not my father."

"Then who are you?"

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“I’m finally what Kingsman Enterprises needs. Preston Clarke, a real goddamn leader.”

The sun started to set over the Manhattan skyline, the clouds thick amongst the purple, pink, and orange hues as I got dinner ready. I rolled up my sleeves, chopping vegetables on my wooden cutting board, preparing the perfect Italian dinner. I set the table, lighting the candles I had Claire purchase because I didn’t have any of my own, heading to my liquor cabinet for the perfect bottle. 1996 Chateau Latour. The bottle that started it all. I thought.

I had just set out the bread and salad to start when my home phone started to ring. I answered it quickly, wiping my wet hands on a dishtowel.

“Hello, Mr. Clarke. Ms. Hollis is here to see you,” said the concierge.

“Thank you. Please send her up.”

I rushed to the door the moment I heard the sound of her heels come down the small hallway, and when I opened it up, I took in just how absolutely stunning she looked. I didn’t waste another second, pulling her into my arms, tossing her purse over on the chaise lounge so I could kiss her. I felt her soft lips on mine, the warmth of her glistening skin on my fingertips, and I didn’t want to let go.

Everything was just as it was that night a few months ago. The fire burned brightly in the living room, the light jazz music played in the background, and she looked up at me, with a smile I’d never quite seen before. I saw the tears gloss over her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away before they could fall.

“You did all of this? It’s just like -”

“Like the night I nearly lost you forever. I will never make that mistake again, Katherine.”

I took her hands in mine, brushing along her knuckles as she smiled warmly at me.

“I love you.”

The words came spilling out so fast I just couldn’t stop them. Once I realized what I’d said, I stood there with my eyes wide, wondering how she’d react. She must’ve noticed because she looked at me, chuckling.

“What?”

“You’ve really never said that before to anyone else, have you?” she asked, her voice low and soft.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve never felt like this about anyone before, Kat. You’re the only woman I’ve ever truly loved, and the only one I ever will. I love you, and I trust you,” I said again, so she heard me loud and clear.

She reached up to caress my face, the smile on her face was one that set my whole world on fire, and mine followed so strongly it made my cheeks hurt.

“I love you too, Preston.”

It was the kind of relief I didn’t expect to feel, because even though I didn’t think there was a question about it, it still felt so strange to hear. I pulled her close, outstretching my hand so we could dance to the jazz playing over in the record player. It was much more perfect than I could’ve ever imagined. It was a night I certainly would never forget.

The End