



The Billionaire & the Nanny:

Part 4

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: The only woman I'm not allowed to f*ck is living in my house, taking care of my baby...

Kase Alana Frasier really is beautiful. From the first time I see her, I can't stop fantasizing about what I want to do to her. If I pulled that golden hair out of that bun, I bet it would spill all over her shoulders. Her body is banging curvy, and there's even a little bit of belly on her, which I don't mind at all. It's sexy. I bet she'd be soft and sweet to the touch. I know I need to be hard on her. I need to keep things very professional. She is Liam's nanny, after all. But the strange thing is, the more I demand from her, the hotter I get for her. Even seeing her so flustered from my constant orders is sexy. My c*ck stiffens imagining her nude in front of me. I am always hard when she's near, smelling her, needing her, wanting her more and more despite what a bad idea it is. Because I can't give her anything. My entire life is a lie. Alana thinks that my wife died and left me with a son to care for. She thinks I'm a grieving single dad trying to run a huge advertising business... But nothing could be further from the truth. And if I let her get sucked into the black hole that is my world, this beautiful, innocent girl will never get free of it. I can't do that to her. So even if I take her physically because I'm too weak to resist, I have to make sure that she never, ever falls in love with me.

Alana I never wanted to be a nanny. But then the stock market crashed, and I had bills to pay... Which is how I ended up working for the richest, most arrogant, demanding, and downright scariest man I've ever met. Oh, and did I mention he is absolutely stunningly gorgeous? Kase Hardwin is all man. All height and hair and intense dark eyes. No smiles, no warmth, no bullshit. Just a finely-assembled man on a mission to torture me with his incredible looks and his perfectionism, his need for control. When I am around him, Kase Hardwin makes me feel stripped down to my core — makes me feel as though I am completely naked before him in every way. I have to catch my breath when he looks at me, even just a passing glance. And when he finally touches me, it's as if the whole world stops. Because what Kase Hardwin can do with his hands, his tongue, his everything... it's enough to make me lose my mind. Kase tells me over and over again that he's too damaged to ever have a relationship. . As we spend more time together, he makes clear that this can never go beyond the physical.

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Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:01 am

Alana

I can't believe this is happening.

I'm about to start a nanny job, of all things, for an elite, upper-crust member of NYC's high society. When I thought I'd gotten away from a life of servitude for good. When I thought I'd wedged my way into a better life.

How in the fresh hell did everything go so wrong?

Staring at the high-rise on the corner of Fifth and 48th, freezing my butt off in the minutes before I'm scheduled to start, I wish I could press the Reset Button on my life. I wish the stupid stock market would've never crashed. Never would've taken my job. My real job, not this nannying-position-gig-thing.

Which will be temporary, God help me.

I swore I'd never, ever be "hired help" ever again. As a kid, I had no choice then—my parents worked for the Holland Estate in upstate NY. We lived on their property, so I had to watch as my parents wiped their snooty kids' noses, cleaned their dirty kitchens, and did all the other jobs nobody ever wants to do for people who don't care about them.

But it didn't have to be my choice when I grew up.

I went to Cornell School of Finance on a full scholarship, graduated summa cum laude. A month later, I landed a job with the Lodwick Brothers, the prestigious global

bank, the kind of company where people dream of working. It all fell flat when a month later, my fast track to success and wealth came to a screeching halt. Lodwick Brothers had collapsed from financial mismanagement, their employees all left without a job, security, or anything to hold onto.

This, after I put a sizeable down payment on an apartment on the upper west side.

A week before I was set to start working.

And now I have no money.

Yay, me!

Luckily, my parents' new bosses are part-owners of Le Nanny, so they were "kind enough" to set me up with a nanny job, even though I've never babysat a kid in my life. Not to worry, they told me. They'd vouch for me and my abilities.

So here I am, about to meet Kase Hardwin, millionaire ad agency guy, who apparently doesn't want to care for his own offspring full-time, despite bringing the child into this world.

Why do people have babies again? Le Sigh.

It's only temporary, Alana. A few months, tops. Until you get a job in your actual field.

No point in standing here hating what my life has become, so I push through the revolving doors and enter the warmth of East River 1, determined to make the best of this most shitty situation. How hard can it be? You wipe a few butts, change a few diapers... Maternal instinct will kick in even though I'm only twenty-one. It'll all be fine!

The concierge stands and nods at me. “May I help you?”

“Hi, Alana Frasier here to see Mr. Hardwin with the Newfound Ad Agency?”

“Ah, yes, Miss Frasier. He’s expecting you.” The graying man reaches behind his desk, almost surely to press a button.

“Thank you.” I walk past the concierge and enter the elevator. As the glass enclosure closes and shoots up the tube, my heart rises in my throat. Whether it’s the speed of the elevator or my nerves making me feel sick, I’m not sure.

You can do this. You graduated Cornell, for God’s sake.

I’m not lower-level people. I’m middle-class people, and I made sure to get a middle-class start in life so I can work my way up. I know being a nanny shouldn’t feel like a slap in the face to me, but it is considering how hard I worked not to end up like my parents.

I take a deep breath, and the doors open.

The Newfound Ad Agency takes up the entire twenty-fifth floor, probably more, and as I step out, I watch people bustling, heels click-clacking on shiny floors, and well-dressed men and women having professional discussions about professional things. There’s hubbub, energy, excitement. Exactly why I wanted to work at Lodwick Brothers, except...

I’m the hired help.

Dressed in the first-day boring outfit of black skirt and white top that Le Nanny suggested, my hair in a bun, and sensible shoes on my feet, I could not feel any crappier about myself. I’m back to nothing. Square One all over again. I almost turn

around and climb right back into the elevator, determined to figure out another way to fix my life when I spot him...

Coming at me.

Walking the runway at Fashion Week - Milan.

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Wearing a finely-tailored gray suit, he strides toward me. All man. All height and hair and intense dark eyes. No smiles, no warmth, no bullshit. Just a finely-assembled man on a mission to meet his new employee at the door. When he stops, a cloud of deliciousness wafts over me.

“Miss Frasier, I’m Kase Hardwin.” He reaches the spot where I stand sinking into the floor. He takes in my entire body with one visual scan, turns on his heels without shaking my hand, and I literally die. Because I’m not naked. But Kase Hardwin makes me feel stripped down to my lady bits, hardening nipples and all. “Follow me, please.”

I have to catch my breath. And wrap my arms around my torso. And calm the hell down. Holy shit, I feel like everyone is staring at my schoolgirl reaction, but how can I not react this way? That Roman god statue stuffed into perfectly-fitted pants is...Kase Hardwin? The man who hired me to care for his child?

Someone somewhere giggles at my suffering.

Ignoring the whispers, I follow the man down a long hallway, trying to conjure up the right words for that moment when I will inevitably make a fool of myself. Nobody told me my boss would look this way or make my stomach quiver into melted mush. We enter an expansive office with more angles than curves, more shadows than light, more coldness than warmth.

Wait.

Is that a playpen?

Kase walks up to the rectangular corral, picks up a tiny human pumping his little arms and legs, and holds him close to his chest. With a kiss to the little guy's rosy cheek, he hugs the baby in the most loving way imaginable. My heart immediately melts into puddles of awww. Well, what do you know? I misjudged this man. Took him for a soulless bastard, but look at him being all Dream Dad.

"Miss Frasier, this is my son, Liam." Kase regards his son with a touch of sadness in the corners of his eyes. But why is the baby here? Shouldn't he be at home? I thought I was coming here to get the talking-to, then go to his house and begin work.

"He's adorable," I say, approaching with a smile.

But Liam draws into his father, resting his face against Kase's chest, and Kase looks like he has no intention of handing him over to me. "He's without a mother."

"Oh."

"She died of a brain aneurysm a few months after giving birth."

"Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry to hear that." His wife died?? Why couldn't Le Nanny clue me in on this, so I don't look as shocked as I feel? That is the saddest thing I have ever heard. "How old is he now?"

"Six months."

"This must be so hard on you," I say. "Having the baby at the office with you and all..."

"Only because I'm overloaded with work. Not because of him."

"Of course not." I mean, he's his son. He wouldn't exactly suggest his son is a

burden, would he?

Kase sighs. “I don’t want a nanny—I need a nanny. If I could, I’d take care of Liam full-time, but it’s just not possible. I had no idea...” He pauses, bounces the baby a bit, then looks out the window at something I can’t quite follow.

“No idea?”

“Nothing.” He sighs again, and I sense his pain. Life had other plans for him instead of his own. I could not empathize more.

Suddenly I’m filled with sadness for this man. Here he is, standing in his cold office, looking lost, holding a motherless child, undoubtedly thinking about his wife who perished right as their life was just getting started.

I feel something else, too...like I shouldn’t be witnessing such an intimate moment, like the two of them should be dancing and humming to some quiet lullaby while outside, rain threatens to dampen the morning.

My heart races, as I try to gather my wits, because Kase Hardwin is, by far, the sexiest man I have ever laid eyes on. Not just because he’s handsome as all hell, finely built, well over six feet tall with Italian model looks, but because he’s holding a child. A six-month-old ball of squish who depends on him, smiles every time Kase drops kisses on his cheek. I’m so used to seeing rich parents not giving a shit about their kids, pawning them off to house workers. It’s refreshing to see Kase this way with his son.

All my life, I’ve been so driven and focused, I’ve barely had any interest in men. College guys were, frankly, embarrassing with their hormone-filled attempts at getting my attention, but this man—this man practically slaps the tears out of me, drops me to my knees. It’s like some secret door has opened, unleashing lust I’ve

only heard about but never seen for myself. He's so immeasurably hot with his love for this child, I have to wipe my forehead and look away.

Holy shit.

"I'm working fifty, sometimes sixty hours a week, so I can't watch him all the time, or I would," Kase explains, looking at Baby Liam. Placing the baby back in the playpen, he hands Liam a little stuffed bear, which immediately goes into his mouth. "It's bad enough I'm trying to assume the role of both parents."

"I understand."

"I don't think you do." He gives me a harsh look.

And suddenly, I'm nobody again, daughter of parents in the lower ranks, and I can't even tell him that I'm not really a nanny, or he'll fire me on the spot. Nobody wants a finance manager handling their baby.

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“I understand life changes,” I tell him. Maybe that’s too bold, and maybe I should just stay quiet and do my job, but I’m not cut out for nannyng and realize I’m going to have a hard time being submissive. “My life has taken unexpected turns, too.”

“Has it?” he asks with minimal interest. A good thing, considering I don’t want to have to explain what happened with Lodwick Brothers. “Well, Miss Frasier, I’m sorry I won’t have time to hear all about it. I have a conference call in five minutes that I have to prepare for. In the next room, you’ll find a converted nursery. Used to be my conference room. Please take Liam and the playpen in there, now that you’re here, and see if you can get him to fall asleep.”

“Yes, sir.”

The moment I reply, he glances up from his desk papers. Eyes bore through me. The intensity, the hunger... All of a sudden, I feel like I said something sexual when I didn’t. Or didn’t mean to. But as I replay the “yes, sir” in my mind, I now hear the undertones of charged, innocent lust in my feminine voice following his deep one.

Yes, sir, I’ll do as you say.

Yes, sir, I’ll undress for you right away.

Yes, sir, I’ll spread my legs on your desk and watch as you slide your massive cock into me.

I rip my gaze away from Kase with wide eyes and head straight for Liam, brushing the intrusive, sudden thoughts off my mind. What in the hell? What was that all

about? Wiping sweat from my forehead, I implore all indecent thoughts away.

“His bottle is the mini fridge. You need to warm it up. I’ll come in after my call to see how you’re doing.” Kase sits at his desk. “I have to get back to work now.”

“Everything will be great.” I smile, stooping to pick up Baby Liam who looks like he’d rather have a pterodactyl sweep him away than have me touch him. “Everything will be just fine.”

The good news is that he doesn’t cry when I pick him up or carry him off into the nursery; a converted work room with a foam puzzle floor, a beanbag, toys of all shapes and sizes, and an electric swing. I give Kase Hardwin one last look and close the door softly.

Heading to the mini fridge, I pull out the bottle of formula but don’t see a microwave to heat it up. Instead, there’s a device that looks like it could possibly heat up milk.

I can’t figure out how to use it, and Baby Liam begins getting more and more agitated as he sees the bottle of milk on the counter, the one I have no clue how to prepare. “Hold on, little guy. Sit here a minute while I figure this out.” I set him down inside the playpen, but he only whines, and there’s no way I can have him whining while Kase is about to take his phone call, so I hand him the milk bottle—plain cold.

The baby takes one sip, makes a face like someone farted, and tosses the bottle out of the playpen. It hits the floor just as Liam lets out a big, tear-filled cry.

“Shh, it’s okay,” I say. Panic fills my chest. “I have a finance degree, I can certainly figure out how to warm a bottle.” I turn the buttons of the device on and off. Where do I put the damn thing?

I fumble with the controls. I turn up the heat.

“And now, we wait while it warms. See? Easy peasy.”

Meanwhile, the baby is crying, his face bright pink, his eyes squeezing out big, fat tears, all the while I imagine my new job going poof before my very eyes. Suddenly, I hear a click and an electronic hum. “Miss Frasier?”

The sound is coming from a walkie-talkie device at the end of the counter. A baby monitor. Of course there would be a baby monitor. I am so stupid. Not only that, but there’s a video camera perched in the corner of the room, too. Great.

“Miss Frasier? Come back inside. We need to talk.”

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Kase

The odd nanny I've somehow been assigned walks back into my office—dirty blond hair in a tight bun, glasses I want to pluck off her face, nervous hands clamped in front of her. She really is a creature of beauty if you don't count the look of terror on her face. "You called me, sir?"

"What is this?" I point to the other half of the baby monitor sitting on the corner of my desk.

"A baby monitor?" She winces.

"That's right. And what does a baby monitor do?"

"Lets you hear everything being said in the next room?" She cringes.

"Everything being said," I stress. "And every cry coming from the baby. Miss Frasier, did the agency let you know how much I'll be paying you for your services?"

"Yes, but I—"

"I'm not finished." I cut her off. I'm the employer here, and so far, she's the incompetent caretaker who needs to be quiet while I'm scolding her. "Good, because for the amount you're being paid, I expected someone qualified, and so far, I'm not seeing that."

"It's just that—"

“Such as right now, Liam is crying yet you came in without him,” I tell her, tapping on my desk. I’m trying desperately not to be annoyed with her. After all, she’s new and everyone’s allowed to have a first crappy day, but so far, the challenges haven’t been too steep.

“I’ll go get him.” She scuttles off, but I call her back.

“Miss Frasier?”

She turns around.

Fuck. The young woman before me really is beautiful. I bet if I pulled that golden hair out of that bun, it would spill all over her shoulders. Her body is banging curvy, and there’s even a little bit of belly on her, which I don’t mind at all. It’s sexy. I bet she’d be soft and sweet to the touch. Even seeing her so flustered is sexy.

My cock stiffens imagining her nude in front of me.

I shake off the thoughts before I pitch a fucking tent in my pants.

“I told you the nursery has everything you need, including a bottle warmer. If you could place Liam’s bottle inside and turn it to this mystifying setting called ‘WARM,’ you might achieve your results.” I hate to be a sarcastic bastard, but seriously, this isn’t rocket science. “You could also hold my son, so his screaming doesn’t distract me from the conference call I’m about to have in ten seconds.”

“Yes, sir. That’s what I’m trying to do...”

“Oh, and Miss Frasier?”

Clearly agitated, she pauses at the door, glancing at me with worry in her big, hazel

eyes.

“Degree in finance?” I ask.

She holds one finger up. “Sir, I’ll be right back to explain.” To her credit, she runs off to get Liam despite leaving me hanging, and I hear the beeps of the phone call starting.

“Kase here,” I speak into the headphones speaker. “Everyone get started. I’ll jump in in a second.” Putting the call on mute, I get up from my seat and head to the connecting door. Miss Frasier appears with Liam. My heart squeezes every time I see that kid and his big blue eyes just like his mother’s—my best friend, Evie.

Too bad I’m not Liam’s father.

When Evie and I first met, I was new at Newfound Ad Agency, and they began sending me to industry events around town. Despite she and I hitting it off right away and her being absolutely gorgeous, we never slept together. I’ve made it a rule all my life not to get involved with women. In bed, sure, but that’s it. Once and twice, and they’re out. Except for Evie. Evie got to friend status. Soon, best friend status.

One night, she came to my door crying, telling me how the asshole who she’d been dating had impregnated her and wanted nothing to do with her. She cried so fucking hard, I couldn’t let her leave until I’d made a promise. I told her it would all be okay, and at that moment, I absorbed her problems as my own. Before the sun came up that morning, I’d promised my life away. To pretend to be the baby’s father. To pretend that we were in love so her douche-y, ailing, billionaire motherfucker dad wouldn’t think she was having a child out of wedlock.

I signed my life away. Signed it with a kiss to her cheek.

The only real kiss Evie and I had was on our fake wedding day.

The façade was only meant to fool her father long enough until his death, since the old man's been sick for a long time. Nobody expected Evie to die of a brain aneurysm instead. Now, her six-month-old is in my care a month after her death, and no one knows I'm not his actual father. Least of all Liam.

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And now, seeing Miss Frasier holding the baby, trying to soothe him, I see a little bit of Evie in her. Not ready to be a mother, just like Miss Frasier is clearly not ready to be a nanny. Something inside of me hurts for her. She looks so vulnerable standing there. I've tried my fucking best to stay away from women except to satisfy my urges. One, because I lost my mother in college, and two, because I lost my best friend—the only two women I've ever loved.

Yet, I can't tear my eyes away from Alana Frasier. Can't retreat into hardass mode, because there's something about this young woman. Still, I can't afford to figure it out. I have to keep far, far away from her.

I scoop the baby out of her hands and force my eyes to Liam's face. "Hey, buddy." I wipe the tears from his cheeks and bounce him around a bit until he quiets. "Listen, I'm about to have a meeting, so I'm going to need you to go down for your nap, okay?" As if to make my point, I push his blonde head onto my shoulder. "See? Sleep."

Liam takes my cue and sticks his tiny thumb into his mouth to suck on it. So stinkin' cute. His sobs ebb then flow, then ebb again, until he sighs against my chest. If only Evie could see him.

"Thank you for showing me," Miss Frasier says meekly. "I can take over now."

"Finance, Miss Frasier?" I reply.

She looks up at me. Those eyes. "I...I graduated with top honors in finance, but I come from a family familiar with childcare, Mr. Hardwin. I assure you."

“You sure about that? Because you look more clueless than the time our mail guy entered the ladies’ bathroom looking for the mail room.” Before Liam can get too comfortable, I hand him over to Miss Frasier. “Here. Just hold him like that, with his head against your chest. Sing if you have to, or hum. He likes humming. I’ll check on you after the conference call.”

Miss Frasier looks like she has more to say, but I start closing the door. “I can handle this, Mr. Hardwin,” she says anyway. “Rest assured, I got this.”

“We’ll see.” I smirk, as Miss Frasier copies my hold on Liam and bounces him the same way I bounced him. Okay, not bad. She can learn. Maybe it’s first day jitters after all. As much as I would have fired her by now under normal circumstances, something about her isn’t normal. Something about her feels off the charts.

Benefit of the doubt creeps in. Finance degree. “I got this,” she said. I like her determination to succeed, even as Liam’s cries pick up again.

“Shh, shh, Liam. Let your daddy work. Let’s talk about this nap thing, shall we?”

As she closes the door, I shake my head. Craziness. Pure craziness. Not only did my fake wife pass away, but her child is now my son by default, and I don’t even have the time to care for him, as much as I want to—because who wouldn’t? He’s a cute kid. But I have a company to run. Newfound Ad Agency has always been my top priority, which is why I get paid millions to run it. I don’t do relationships, I don’t do love, and I especially don’t do fatherhood.

But I do do promises.

And my last promise was to Evie saying that I’d take care of her and Liam until her father died. But life’s full of surprises, isn’t it? A year ago, I’d just learned that Evie was pregnant, and a year later...I have a son. I have to see it through, raise him, and

do my fucking best to be his dad, since his real dad was nothing but a sperm donor.

Clicking back onto the phone call, I announce my arrival and listen in. But it's hard to concentrate. Because the video monitor in front of me displays the woman in the next room, holding Evie's child, doing her best to get him to fall asleep. I'm filled with a strange urge to ditch the call and go in there. Find out more about her. Smell her skin, her hair, see what her breasts feel like in the palms of my hands, sink down between her legs.

I'd be fine if it were only a physical response.

But I want to talk to her, too. Find out why the finance-turned-nanny.

She's tantalizing with those wide, innocent eyes. Fresh out of college and starting out in the world. I don't know why, but I find myself wanting to show her things, tell her about life, teach her, take her under my wing, but there's no fucking way. I don't have time for interns, and I don't have time for feelings.

My plate is full enough as it is.

Still, I can't stop staring at her in the video monitor. Once Liam is down for the count, she leans back against the counter, pulls down her hair, and I catch those long tresses spilling over her slender shoulders. Just as quickly as they come down, she ties them back up, re-knots the bun, and straightens her glasses.

A smile threatens to break through my face. Miss Frasier is one of those women who has no idea how gorgeous she is. She might have an idea, but she doesn't. Not really. She hasn't learned the powers of her feminine ways yet, and I'm willing to bet that's because no man has pulled it out of her.

You can't be that man, Kase.

She's hired help—nothing more, nothing less.

Despite the fact that I'm still on a call, Miss Frasier pokes her head through the door again. "He's asleep," she whispers.

I put the call on mute again. "Thanks. Get me some coffee now, would you please? Cream, no sugar." I unmute the call. "When can I get those reports, Price?" At the door, Alana is giving me a strange look. I mute the call one more time. "Problem?"

"I just..." She scoffs, shakes her head, as if contemplating whether or not to speak her mind. "That's not my job, Mr. Hardwin. I'm sure you have a secretary for that, don't you?"

A-ha. Spunky attitude. Even hotter than she was a minute ago. "You're right, but I did your job of quieting the baby for you, didn't I? So now you owe me for using my time to teach you how to do your job. Actually, one sugar would be great. Thanks."

I unmute the call again.

Miss Frasier looks like she'd rather be anywhere than here. I don't get it. Most people are excited to start their new jobs, and I would've imagined a young nanny to be bright and peppy, happy to be holding babies. Instead, Miss Frasier looks like she hates this job and hates me.

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I mute the call again. “You’re still here. How interesting.”

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re serious or not.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“I’ll get you your coffee, Mr. Hardwin, but from now on, I’d like to focus solely on caring for your son, if that’s alright by you. I also think that bringing him to work is a bad idea. He needs to be home in a loving environment, not in a conference room turned nursery.” Her lip trembles, and I see her fingers quivering until she holds them all together.

“I don’t pay to hear your opinions, Miss Frasier, but since we’re on the topic...tomorrow we’ll move the arrangement to my home. You’ll work there, sleep there, eat there full time. You look like you need the job, or else you wouldn’t be here. But I warn you, if I have to teach you how to do your job, then you have to be flexible and acquiesce to anything I need...”

Anything.

The danger of my own words filter through the room, across the space between us, and into her consciousness. Glassy eyes widen just a notch, and her body...those luscious round tits...perk up inside her blouse. No denying it. Her nipples harden at my words, just like my cock hardens inside my pants. What the fuck is going on?

I want this woman.

I want her so fucking bad, and I just did the worst thing I could do.

I invited her into my home.

“Are we clear?”

Slowly, she nods. “Understood, sir.”

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Alana

I get him the damn coffee, note the smartass smirky-smile on his face when I deliver it, then sit in the nursery, hating the fact that I did it.

I've never been more humiliated in all my life, and that includes when my parents used to work for the Holland Estate. Who does this guy think he is? I know how people like him are. They just want to put you in your place by acting like they're better than you. Using his employer position and my obvious need for money to make himself seem bigger. Make me look lower class than him.

This is EXACTLY why I didn't want to take the nanny job in the first place.

I swore I'd never put myself in a position of servitude ever again. It's why I went to college, why I studied finance. So I could become a banker, make a shit ton of cash, and never owe anyone anything ever again. Yet here I am again, being told what to do, and I couldn't possibly be more confused about it.

On one hand, I don't like taking orders. It's a personal thing because of my upbringing.

But on the other, I have to admit there was something satisfying about bringing Kase that coffee after he asked for it and seeing the pleased look on his face. The unruly half of Alana Frasier makes me want to see that look more often, though. See the corners of his lips turn up in just the right way. What else could I do to see Mr. Hardwin smile like that again?

The way he looks at me with those dark eyes underneath heavy brows makes my heart kick up speed and my panties get wet. Which I hate. But I don't have control over my body, so now I have this battle waging inside my head.

I decide I won't think of Mr. Hardwin anymore, unless I'm talking to him. I spend the rest of the day focusing on baby Liam who sleeps for about an hour then starts crying all over again when he wakes up and sees it's still me with him.

"Come on, work with me here," I whisper to the baby so that Kase won't hear me through the monitor.

Baby Liam manages to calm down, I guess when he sees that his father isn't coming in anymore to hold him. I place toys in front of him, but the blue-eyed cherub only stares at them, then at me, like wondering if he's supposed to play with them. He crawls over to my purse in a chair and grabs at it, then begins digging inside it. "No, Liam. That's not for playing with."

But Baby Liam believes otherwise. He finds my keys inside my purse and plucks them out, flipping them around in his hands, then pushes them immediately into his mouth. Ew. He looks so happy to be playing with something other than his real toys, and for once, and he's not crying, so I let him keep the keys.

All day, I watch people walk down the hallways, popping in and out of Kase's office. It's clear that everyone admires him, and the women—young, old, hot or not, doesn't matter—all throw themselves embarrassingly at his feet. I mean, yes, he's especially good-looking, in charge, and powerful at the office, but do they really like when he talks to them the way he talked to me? And what's even crazier? When he talks to these office women with their short skirts and flirty tops, I feel my chest contract. I feel my blood boil, as though the man were mine. What is that all about?

Jealousy? Over a man who irritates me?

Maybe I should quit before the day is over. Just quit while I'm ahead, before I get deeper into this Alice-like situation. Before I drink the wrong potion and find myself unhealthily obsessed over my new boss. A man I can't stand.

This right here is enough to make me want to quit.

But I can't quit.

If I do, I may as well get a job flipping burgers on the corner, or answering phones for a dental office, because jobs are scarce now and the truth is, I'm lucky. I should be grateful as hell for this nanny job. It pays enough to help me keep my apartment in the city and still have a savings after a few months. So, I have no choice—I have to swallow my pride by moving in with Kase and Baby Liam.

A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. And if that means slapping on a happy smile and dealing with someone's superiority complex for a while—so be it. It's all a means to an end anyway. So I eat the proverbial cookie, drink the proverbial tea, and fall down the proverbial rabbit hole like Alice after the Mad Hatter.

* * *

When I arrive at Kase's mansion on the Upper East Side, I don't know if I'm to feel envious, angry, or in utter awe. A beautiful brownstone with gilded door handles, the place makes me think it belongs to someone else instead of the cold, steely gray man I met at the ad agency yesterday. For some reason, I envisioned Kase living in something ultra-modern, but this place looks more like your typical old money.

Maybe that's it—maybe this property was handed down to him.

So rather than dealing with a self-made millionaire, I'm dealing with a brat.

The good news is that now I won't have to face him every morning. I can just report to whichever servant he's appointed to watch over me, and I won't have to deal with his condescending bullshit all the time. I may not know much about handling babies, but guess what? I'm a fast learner, and I'll pick it up in no time without his help, thank you very much.

Ringling the doorbell, I focus on making it a great day and not fucking up. Today will be better than yesterday. At the very least, Baby Liam will get to play at home now and not have to sit at Daddy's office all day long. Poor kid. The door unlocks, and I put on my fake smile—the one I'm going to use from now on—ready to meet another member of Kase's staff.

But instead of another servant, who should open the door looking fine as fuck in jeans and a nice buttoned long-sleeved blue shirt? The man himself. My panties practically turn into a soaked sponge, and my stomach churns out butterflies, as he steps aside. "Miss Frasier. What a delightful surprise. I was almost sure the agency would've sent me another nanny today after your difficult first day yesterday."

I step in and note the lush interior, feeling my heartbeat in my throat. I'm doing this again. I'm working for a snobby rich person again. "What do you mean? It was a great first day," I say, determined not to let him get to me. "I loved meeting Liam and seeing where you work."

Kase looks at me sideways. "Are you sure you're the same nanny as yesterday? That one was frustrated as hell with me just for asking her to bring coffee."

"Maybe it was the tone of voice used." I smile, taking off my coat and hanging it on the foyer coat rack. "Maybe she just likes being treated with respect."

Kase closes the door and walks in ahead of me. "I don't think I asked for anything unreasonable. My secretaries get me coffee all the time and don't bristle over it."

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Your secretaries all think you're a god, I think to myself. "Why are you here?" I ask instead. "I thought you had work to do and I would be meeting a housekeeper or someone at your home today."

"First of all, I don't have housekeepers. A team comes once a week to clean, but I don't hire full-time service, Miss Frasier. I come from humble background and don't need it. Definitely don't need anyone snooping down my back either. You're the first person who'll ever live here besides me."

I'm floored.

In a home like this one? He doesn't have full-time service? That's unheard of. How did he earn this home? I know he's a top dog at the ad agency, but this is an old Manhattan home, and you don't get to live in a place like this by coming from humble beginnings.

I follow him into the living room, furnished with excessively expensive paintings, statuettes, furniture, and artifacts. You can tell his wife used to live here at some point, because there's photos of her on the walls holding little Liam, and suddenly, my heart breaks all over again. I have to remember, when I'm thinking of him as an asshole, that this man is mourning the loss of his wife, the mother of his child.

And now, I'll be the first woman to live here since her death.

"Second of all," Kase says, picking up Liam from his swing, cuddling with him a moment before handing him over to me, "I'll be working from home a few days."

“A few days? Why?” It’s not that I’m panicking, but okay—I’m panicking. So much for not having Kase around all the time to look down on me.

“To watch you. Make sure you’re assimilating nicely. No offense to you, Miss Frasier. I would stay home a few days no matter who the agency sent for a nanny. I need to make sure you’re the right fit for Liam, seeing that I work full-time, and you’ll be the one to raise him. I’m sure you can understand that.”

Slowly, I nod. “Fair enough.” But still, I can’t help but feel that he doesn’t trust me. That he’s staying home just to make sure I don’t feed the baby kerosene or dip him in a flea bath instead of a nice warm lavender soak.

The second Baby Liam slides into my arms, he reaches his little chunky arms toward Kase asking for rescue. “Nuh-uh,” I walk away toward a window overlooking Central Park on the brink of blossoming with springtime colors. “Maybe it’s better if Daddy isn’t here to give you options.” I glance at Kase standing against the counter, arms folded over his chest.

“What does that mean?” he asks.

“All I mean is, it would be easier for Liam and I to get along if you weren’t here all the time watching over us. The very fact that you’re in the same room as me means he’s going to prefer you, of course.” Go, shoo, get the fuck back to your office, I want to tell him. He’s only making my job harder by insisting to stay.

“I can see that, so I’ll stay out of the room, but you’ll indulge me a few days. After all, Liam’s life is in a stranger’s hands, and I want to make sure I’ve made the right choice.” With that, he smirks and exits the living room, just as Liam starts to cry.

“Don’t listen to him, baby,” I whisper in his ear. “It’s like he wants me to fail, but you won’t let me, will you?” I pull the keys out of my purse and hand them to Liam

who immediately stops crying and becomes engrossed in the shiny metal. Easy peasy. And soon, Kase won't need to watch after me anymore.

* * *

Everything is going just fine, but that night, I apparently commit the mother of all sins and begin dipping the baby into the bath water before testing it with my elbow. Though the water wasn't too hot—just barely lukewarm—Kase barks at me from the hallway where he'd been watching me in secret the whole time.

Honestly, I can't work this way and come infuriatingly close to quitting.

“Stop!” he yells, comes into the bathroom and takes the naked baby from me. “How do you know this isn't scalding hot if you don't touch it, Alana?”

I scoff but keep my control. “I can tell, Mr. Hardwin,” I say, my voice shaking. “Hot water feels...well, just hot. There's steam rising from it, and I don't feel any warmth coming from the tub at all.”

“It could be misleading,” he says, kneeling in front of the tub and putting his hand in. He sees that the water isn't going to give his son first-degree burns and finds another excuse to be mad at me. “You also didn't put the mat down, so then what? He's just going to slide all over the tub?”

Seriously?? Does he think I'm that stupid? “I was going to hold him the entire time, Mr. Hardwin. I would never leave a baby sitting in the tub all by himself, even if I'm only one foot away!”

We stare at each other for a moment, and I have to wonder—is this about my ineptitude? I know I've never cared for a baby, but like I said before, some things just come naturally. He's blowing this out of proportion.

My heart races inside my chest, and for a second, I think Kase is going to lunge at me, kiss me with passion and fervor, but instead, he plops the baby in my lap and moves out of the bathroom.

I feel like we just avoided a car accident with my stomach in my throat and my head pounding like a drum. The bath goes exceptionally well, and I even get Liam to take his bottle without qualms before bedtime. “Sleep well, little guy,” I tell him, covering him with the blanket and stroking his cheek.

He might’ve been difficult yesterday, but today he’s already better.

I retire to my room and let out the biggest sigh ever.

What am I going to do? There’s clearly tension between me and Kase, but I can’t exactly ask him to stay away from me while I do my job, and I can’t ask him to stay away from his kid either, when the whole reason he needs a nanny is because he has to work. As stressful as this job is, I need it.

I need money.

There’s a knock on my door. I’m hesitant to open it, because a) I don’t want to deal with Kase Hardwin anymore today, and b) I’ve already changed into my sweatpants and tank top for the night. Cracking my door open, I peek out to find him standing there, leaning against the door frame. “Can I talk to you a moment?”

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“Sure.” I push the door open slightly but don’t invite him inside, if that’s what he’s expecting. I cross my arms to cover the fact that I’m not wearing a bra and put on that professional Alana smile.

Kase’s eyes wander, aware that I’m braless. “I’m not sure what I’ve done to upset you, Miss Frasier. It’s clear there’s tension between us.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. First of all, he’s even hotter than hell now that he’s in a T-shirt, not looking like the ad executive I saw yesterday but an athletic hot dad in gym shorts. I have to look away. Second of all, does he not realize the way he talks to me? Still, I can’t blame my boss so I err on the side of personal issues.

“Look, it’s nothing,” I sigh, rubbing my forehead. “I’m just stressed because I need this job.”

“Isn’t this one of the best nanny jobs around, though? Your agency assured me you would be thrilled to have it.”

“I am. It’s great. It’s just that...” I pause, wondering how much I should tell him. Maybe honesty would be the best policy here. He would see me as a human being and not a lower-level sex object he can order around. “I’m not even supposed to be nannying. I’m supposed to be working at Lodwick Brothers right now.”

His eyebrows fly up. “The bank?”

“Yes, the bank,” I say. “And once things calm down in the industry, I’ll be working at another bank, making what I was supposed to be making before everything went

kaput. Without half the aggravation.”

“Aggravation?”

Is he really that clueless? “Yes, Mr. Hardwin. You’re micromanaging me. You’re watching every move I make, which is making me even more nervous. If you hired me, you should just trust me that I’m going to do a good job.”

“I’ll trust you when I can see that you’re handling things.”

“See, that’s what I mean. I want to be treated with respect instead of ridiculed.”

“I’m not ridiculing you, Miss Frasier. Telling you your tank top with the unicorn on it doesn’t befit the business woman you clearly are, now that would be ridiculing you.” He smiles.

And there goes my core again, melting under the heat of his gaze again. How does he compliment me and insult me in the same breath? I just sigh. “Okay, I suppose.”

“How long do you intend to work for me, because I had hoped to hire a nanny who would stick with Liam for the long run, and now you’ve told me you’ll be leaving the second you can. Doesn’t exactly leave me feeling confident about this situation. Just be honest.”

I did just say that, didn’t I?

That was stupid. He could let me go right now after that admittance.

“I’ll be working for you for a while,” I say, trying to save my ass. Think money, Alana. Think savings. “The industry won’t bounce back for a long time, so yeah, I’m here for the long haul. No worries.”

“No worries? It’s clear you don’t want to be here, clear you don’t think I’m respecting you. How can I keep you onboard when you’ll be out of there the first chance you get?”

Our gazes lock. His dark brown eyes and mine, searching, trying to figure this quandary out. Part of me wants to throw my hands up and just leave. I don’t need this shit. But then I remember that I do—I need this shit. I need it more than I’ve ever needed anything, except a good fuck by a man like Kase Hardwin.

Holy shit.

I wipe my forehead. “Please don’t fire me.”

It’s all I can say. I hear the idea in his mind, feel the words poised on his lips. I’m about to be let go.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he asks.

“Because I’m not a quitter. I need this. I’ll do anything you ask from now on, and I won’t complain about it. I’ll prove myself to you.”

My words clearly unlock some sort of deeply-rooted curiosity, because his eyebrow crooks upwards. “Anything I ask?”

I’m in trouble. So much fucking in trouble. I would do anything this man asks of me right now, even if it means stripping down naked and sucking his cock dry. I want him. My body knows it, as much as my brain doesn’t want to admit it. I want him so badly. I’ve never felt this way about any man before in my entire life. He goes against everything I’ve ever thought to be sexy, but that’s how little I know. How much I have to learn.

I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place, and that hard place is Kase Hardwin.

I just know, the minute he leaves me alone with my combusting self, that I'm going to take a long bath, that I'm going to use those arms and that mouth and that body as fuel for my fantasies all night, and that at some point, I'm going to come so hard just from thinking about his lips touching me. Oh, yeah. I'm going down with this sinking ship for sure.

"Anything you need," I repeat. "And anything you want from me, too."

Kase

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling of Evie's bedroom, I think about Alana and how she's only twenty feet down the hall in another bedroom. In Evie's guest bedroom, the shiny one with the salmon and pink accents, the Victorian décor, the one fit for a queen, not a nanny. Except that Alana deserves to sleep there. She may not have much experience as a nanny, but she's worked damn hard.

You don't get hired by Lodwick Brothers unless you've worked your ass off.

When she told me that, I was thoroughly impressed. But it does present a problem. Should I keep her working for me? It's obvious she doesn't want to be caring for kids and the first chance she gets to escape this job, she will. I promised Liam I would take care of him, promised him I would give him the same care his mother would have provided, and there's no way Evie would've let a half-ass nanny take care of her own flesh and blood.

My best friend adored Liam.

I need to find someone who will adore him just the same.

It's obvious that Alana isn't the best choice, but I can't seem to let her go. The young woman is clearly sucking up some major pride to be here helping me. She needs the money, and more than that, I can't stop staring at her, listening to her talk, and watching her fumble in her interactions with Liam. In a way, I hope she'll fail miserably as a nanny so I can continue to show her how it's done.

She's just down the hall.

Twenty feet away.

Probably in that T-shirt, ready for bed. What does she do before bed, I wonder? I so fucking badly want to go over there and crack the door open, see what she's up to, but I've never been a stalker and I'm not about to start now. That blonde hair all pinned up is probably loose around her shoulders now. Those glasses are probably set on her nightstand. Does she touch herself while she's lying in bed?

I saw the way she watched me tonight as we had our little discussion. I know she wants me as much as I want her, but we can't do anything about it. Still, it wouldn't hurt to lurk down the hall, go grab a glass of water, and see if maybe I can't hear her talking on the phone or something. That wouldn't be stalking. That would simply be overhearing. After all, this is where I live now—Evie's house, now mine, since her old man still thinks we were married before her death—and I'm allowed to roam the hallways if I so feel like it.

Sometimes I feel guilty for living in a mansion I don't own. But then I remember that I've had a hard life. My mother raised me all alone, died before I graduated college, leaving me to my own devices. Soon after, my best friend died as well, leaving me her awesome little kid. When her boyfriend left her high and dry, I was there for her. If anyone's allowed to live in Evie's place, care for her son, and not feel guilt, it's me. I just have to keep telling myself that.

In my shorts, I slide off the bed and head out the door, determined to get a glass of water without waking Liam. Since his mother died, he's had trouble sleeping the whole night long, and the kid has to find a way of moving on—just like I did. I'm at the top of the stairs, about to descend into the darkness of the house when I hear it.

A soft moan.

It sounds like it could be coming from a TV or electronic device. Maybe my resident nanny likes watching porn before bed? I immediately harden at the thought. I'd be good with that. Then again, maybe she's crying softly in her sleep? Tiptoeing closer to her room, I crane my neck to hear better. Another soft moan. And another. Her bathroom door is open, the lights are off, but I can smell the sweet scents of bath bombs and other bath items. She must've taken a fresh bath just a short while ago.

More than likely, she's lying naked in bed.

I'll do anything, her words echo in my mind.

I can't help myself and enter the bathroom, touch her towel which is still damp, and hold it close to my face. Fuck. I can't do this. I can't be a fucking creep, creeping around. If I'm going to be obsessed with this chick, then I'm going to have to be straightforward about it. Besides, it's my house now, and I'm allowed to enter any room I damn well please.

Knocking lightly outside her door, I crack open and wait for her to acknowledge. I'm not one for peeping when uninvited, but for some reason, I can't help myself. I need to know why Alana's moaning is getting louder. She's touching herself, I know it, and I have to see it for myself.

"Mr. Hardwin." She gasps, pulls the comforter up to her chin. "Do you need something?"

My cock can answer that, and it will as soon as she sees the tent I've pitched in my shorts. I only get harder when I see that she's in a tight tank top in bed, her hair all wet, and her hard nipples poking through the ribbed fabric. "I heard a sound like moaning and wanted to make sure you were alright."

Of course she's alright. She's imagining herself getting reamed by your cock just like

you were dreaming about her in your room, idiot.

“I must’ve been having a bad dream,” she says. So fucking cute when she lies.

“It didn’t sound like such a bad dream. Are you sure it was a nightmare?” I could leave her room and bid her goodnight, but I can’t. I won’t. We both know what’s going on, and I have to see her, hear those sounds coming from her mouth right this very second.

“Yes, I’m sure.” Her wide eyes regard me across the room with fear, nervousness, embarrassment for having been caught in the middle of something naughty. “Have you decided whether to keep me or not?”

“I’ve given it some thought, but I’m still not sure. I need someone who’s into it, Alana. Someone who’ll stay.”

“I’ll stay. I’ll do anything you tell me, Mr. Hardwin. I swear.”

“You shouldn’t swear. Dirties your mouth. You have a pretty mouth, you know,” I say. She stares at me. Through me. Her nostrils flare, and I can almost hear her heart pounding through the flimsy tank top. “Show me what you were doing before I walked in.”

“What do you mean? I was...sleeping.”

“No, you weren’t. Show me what you were doing. I promise I won’t touch you. Unless you want me to. I want to see for myself. Hands off.” I hold my hands up to show she can trust me.

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She stutters and her face flares up with heat. “I already told you, I was sleeping.”

No fucking way was she sleeping.

I walk in and sit in a leather chair opposite her bed, facing her. My hand rests lightly on my crotch. If I could pull it out and stroke it, I would, but Alana seems new at this. If we enter into forbidden territory, we enter at our own risk and at her first move.

“Don’t lie to me, Alana. Show me what you did. Were you touching that wet pussy of yours and thinking of me?”

At first, our eyes are locked. I can feel her holding her breath, thinking hard about her response, but she doesn’t think too long about it. Apparently, she’s just as tired of playing this game as I am. “Yes,” she says.

I nod. “Good. Show me.”

“What do you mean?” she stammers, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“I mean, pull down that sheet and spread your legs, Alana. Show me what you were doing before I came in. I heard you moaning. Were you thinking about me fucking you?”

“Yes,” she says, resigned, laying back. I’m about to tell her to pull down the covers again when she does it without me telling her. She’s in light pink panties, and when she spreads her legs apart slightly, I can see she’s soaking through.

“Good. Now face me and do it. You’re beautiful, Alana. But I want to see how even more gorgeous you can get. Touch yourself.”

Sliding her hand into her panties, she closes her eyes and begins to touch herself, using two fingers to fiddle with her clit. Every so often, she dips down lower and fingers her pussy before bringing her fingertips back to her clit again. All this through her panties, but my imagination fills in what my eyes can’t see.

I push my cheek into my hand and just observe. “Take off the panties.” I won’t ask nicely and I won’t beg. I want her to do what I say when I say it. Whether it’s getting coffee for me or exposing her fresh, sweet pussy, I want her to react to my command.

With a moment of hesitation, she curls her fingers around the edge of her panties and slowly slides them down. My chest is going to explode from the anticipation, but I don’t show it. She’s fucking sexy. Blonde, fair skin, and a full, ripe body ready to be taken.

“Keep going. If I can’t touch you, I’ll watch you. You like it when I watch you, don’t you?”

She nods and works her fingers faster, dipping into her own slippery wetness and pulling it up to her clit. A long sigh escapes her, and I know she’s forgetting about her embarrassment and just starting to be free, let go, take herself to the next level. My hand pushes down onto my fully hard cock, twitching to be free, but I won’t pull it out. Not today. Possibly not ever.

I can’t get involved with Alana.

I just figured I’d satisfy my curiosity before this never happens again.

“What did you imagine us doing?”

“You, naked,” she says, spreading her legs completely now. I wish I could go over there and fuck her, just plow myself deep into her, and make her come. “Fucking me.”

“Ah, so you do like the thought of me telling you what to do,” I say with a smile. “You want me fucking you, don’t you? Hard and from behind, don’t you, Alana?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought. I knew you were a dirty girl. I knew you were just playing the coquette, pretending to be prim and proper with your bun and your glasses. But look at you. You’re just a dirty girl who loves cock and thinks about fucking, don’t you?”

“Yes...”

She’s going to come. I’ve hit that high note, that forbidden spoken thought, the one suggesting she loves sex, loves it like she should. “You wish I would turn you around and fuck you against that headboard, don’t you? Ram my cock into you and then when you come, flip you around and empty my balls on your face. Isn’t it, Alana?” I demand, my voice growing louder.

“Yes...” Her face begins to contort as she gasps for air, lips parted so beautifully, I wish I could put my cock there.

“Then, do it.”

“Yes...”

“Do it.”

“Yes...” Her fingers fly like crazy, working herself, but she doesn’t push over the edge, maybe because she’s still nervous about me being here, and so I can’t take it anymore. I fly to the edge of the bed and spread her legs, burying my face inside her sopping wet folds. Shimmering, slippery skin pushes into my face, as I feel her fingers dig into my scalp and pull me into her.

I eat the fuck out of her.

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She smells so goddamn good, so fresh and clean, so sweet and innocent. Opening my mouth wide, I lick the fuck out of her pussy, taking in that feminine essence, making her mine, giving her what she wanted—what she needed. With a final, long moan, she comes—hard as fuck—and holy shit, there is nothing better in this world than having this woman’s pussy mashing against my face, as she screams through her orgasm. Her muscles ripple, and her pussy clenches, as the waves rock through her.

I know I shouldn’t be doing this, but it’s too late. And I don’t care.

She trusted in me enough to do this, and I was pretty good about not touching her until the end, but by then, it didn’t matter anymore. She wanted me—needed me—to make her come. I smile even though my nose is buried in cum juice, and it’s such a fucking turn-on, I can’t stop. I keep licking her, pulling slightly on her hood, and lapping up that clit softly. With one hand on my crotch, I’m dying to pull my cock free and jack off while eating up this sweet girl’s pussy, but I hold back.

I feel like not doing so would mean a total loss of control.

At least this way, I’ve reined myself in somewhat. I can always jack off later when I’m replaying this moment in my mind a thousand times. The patience pays off, because Alana’s desire begins to build again, and I know she’s going for another orgasm. This time, I slide my fingers, two of them, into her pussy and begin fucking her with them.

“Imagine me fucking you, Alana. I wish I could,” I speak against her skin. “Imagine your boss fucking you, his nanny, every single night just like this. Would you like that, Alana?” I don’t know where the fucking question comes from, because I

shouldn't be having thoughts like these. I shouldn't even be here, exploring forbidden territory but I am.

And maybe I'm a pervert, but Alana's a pervert, too, and would it be so terrible if we got together every night and fucked our brains out? With a pussy like this, and tits like those... I reach up and cradle her breasts in my hands, feeling their slight weight, seeking out those hard nipples like pencil erasers. I squeeze them, pinch them, and pull on them until she's pushing all the way through her tank top.

"Yes, I'd love that."

"Good. Come for me again, Alana," I tell her.

With a frustrated little growl, she shifts against my face but seems dissatisfied with it, and so the unthinkable happens—she stands over me. This beautiful goddess of a woman is standing over me, knees bent, and dipping her slippery pussy against my face, grinding herself against my lips, my tongue, my mouth.

I can think of myself as her boss as much as I want, but there's no fooling anyone right now—she's totally making me her bitch. She grips my hair, and for a sweet, innocent young woman, she fucks my face like a boss, bucking and humping my face so hard, I can't even breathe. If I die, I die happy.

Screaming out loud, she moans into the four walls of her bedroom and quivers up against face. I'm not going to feel any nerve endings on my cheeks tonight, but it's okay, because I'll sleep with a smile on my face on this night.

"That's it. That's fucking it," I tell her, climbing out from under her, lifting her, and laying her down in her bed. Alana gasps for air. Slender arms curl around my shoulders. As I admire the sheen of light sweat that's formed all over her body, I wonder what the fuck just happened. Sexual tension just happened. My nanny just

showed me her full potential is what just happened.

But it can't anymore, and the moment she recovers, looking up at me with both satisfied and curious-to-know-what-I-think-about-this eyes, I step out of her bed and onto the cold floor once again. "We overstepped our boundaries, Miss Frasier," I tell her, knowing I sound like an ass but unable to do anything about it. "It can't happen again."

"But..."

"It can't happen again," I insist. No idea what she was going to say, but women always want to know where they stand with me following sex, especially true the younger they are. They always want to know where the relationship is headed.

I'll tell you where—nowhere. Because I don't do relationships. I don't even fuck my hired help either. This was my first. Before she can say anything else, I reach down and stroke her cheek. Soft and pink and full of flushed heat. I enjoy it for a couple of seconds, because I'll never see her ravished and delicious ever again.

And then, as quickly as I can, I scramble the fuck out of her bedroom, knowing I fucked up harder than ever, hating that I lost control when I rarely do, and close the door.

Alana

In the darkness of my lavish guest quarters, I tremble in bed, wondering what the hell just happened. Yes, I've had trouble keeping Kase off my mind, but I never thought he would actually come into my room and seduce me. I had no qualms about it, either. Just sure, I'll spread my legs and show you what I was privately doing before you came in. Why not?

Shame and disbelief course through me. How could I do that?

Did it not occur to me to tell him no, that I'm as professional as they come and there's no way in hell I'm going to engage in a hot masturbation session ending in even hotter pussy licking? Knowing him, it was probably a test, and tomorrow he's so going to fire me. He's going to say I'm not worth my weight in salt and boot me the fuck out of his house. And worse, he could report me to Le Nanny and I'll never work in this city again.

God, I feel so stupid right now, but I have to get to bed somehow.

After two orgasms, I'm more than spent. Still, tell that to my brain.

Eventually, after watching the shadows of NYC shift across the wall through the window, I fall asleep. When I finally wake up, it's to the sounds of Liam crying in the middle of the night. I pick him up and carry him, bouncing him around and whispering in his ear. "I know, baby. I know how you feel," I tell him over and over, and to my surprise, he eventually falls back asleep. Great, right as I get the hang of this babying thing, I'm close to losing my job altogether.

* * *

In the morning, I awaken before Liam. Throughout brushing my teeth and getting dressed, I'm on pins and needles. I have to go downstairs and face him. Tell him that I'm sorry for what we did, that it got out of control. I might even confess that I've never been with a man before, so I wasn't sure what to do, though clearly, engaging in sexual situations with my employer was not the right choice. I'll beg if I have to.

But while routinely checking my inbox, there's an email from Kase, and I just know it's my termination letter. When I open the message, however, turns out it's a twenty-page PowerPoint presentation on how to take care of Liam while he's at work.

Wait, he's at work?

I thought he said he was taking a few days off to watch over me. If by "watch over" me, he means dirty-talking his way through my masturbation all the way to orgasm, then so far, he's done a spectacular job. Rolling my eyes, I read the email from Kase over again. Though he claims that work calls, I realize his grand plan is probably to avoid me today.

That could be a good thing. Maybe I won't be fired. On the other hand, now I have to face him again through utter embarrassment instead of being given the chance to flee with my tail between my legs.

In the other room, the soft sounds of a baby gurgling and cooing in his crib echo through the monitor. I enter the room with a smile. "There's my little prince," I say, scooping him up and handing him his bottle, warm and ready on his night stand. At first, the little prince looks surprised to see me, but he doesn't cry or scream for his father.

I guess we're making progress.

The worst part of spending the day with a six-month-old is that he doesn't understand a word I'm saying. The best part of spending the day with a six-month-old is that he doesn't understand a word I'm saying. I literally have no one to confess my transgressions to. I can't exactly call my mom and tell him I've fucked my boss. I can't tell my friends either. I'm alone in this—it's too mortifying for me to admit.

But Baby Liam listens as I talk. And he's super non-judgmental, too.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I tell him during dinner. Six o'clock, and Kase still hasn't come back. At this rate, I can expect to be home alone all day with this munchkin.

Liam smushes a few peas with his fist then shoves them in his mouth, giving me those attentive big eyes. "Ba-ba..."

"I didn't mean to do it, Liam. Please don't think poorly of me. I just...I don't know. I've heard about the heat of the moment from other people. In movies, too. I just never thought it would happen to me. Not on my first night of work anyway. And definitely not with my boss."

Liam smashes another group of peas and giggles.

"It's not funny. We're talking your dad here. I could get fired."

Somehow, Liam finds that even funnier.

"Listen," I say, cleaning up the high chair tray. "It's soft music time, according to your father's PowerPoint slide #17. Then bath time, bottle, and bedtime by nine o'clock. By then, he should be home, and I should be fired. Okay? I love you, Liam. I know we didn't have much time together, but I do. Wish me luck."

“Ba-ba-ba...”

“Thanks. I’m going to need it.”

As we get ready for the bedtime routine, I feel my solar plexus tightening into a knot. Any moment now, Kase will come home, and my day of avoidance will come to an end. At some point before this night is over, I’ll have to face him. We’re going to have to talk about it. Once again, I’ll see his dark eyes. I’ll remember what he did to me, how he threw himself between my legs, and ate my pussy like it was the only thing on the menu and he was a starving traveler, fresh in from the desert.

The worst part about all this isn’t even the good chance that I’ll be fired.

It’s that I want what happened last night to happen again. I know it’s crazy, unprofessional, taboo, and so very wrong. He’s my boss, plus he’s older and more experienced than I am. But if I could have it happen again without any repercussions, I would. Again and again. Watching that tongue lap me up was beyond heavenly. It was sexy as hell. Intimate, and so damn naughty, I couldn’t hold myself together.

I want him to do it again.

I want to feel his mouth on me, his tongue, his heat enveloping me.

I even want to feel his cock inside of me, pounding, claiming. Even though I’ve never taken one in before, I can imagine how it’d feel. Massively huge. Filling. Basically nothing stands between us. If it happened last night, it could very well happen again. What would I do if the opportunity presented itself again?

Be stronger this time?

Or just let it happen?

I'm scared of what I truly want—a man to teach me, control me...maybe even use me. And minutes after Liam goes down for the count and I can breathe again, shower, and even fall asleep before Kase has the chance to arrive, I hear the sound of the front door sensor chiming through the halls, signaling he's home. And I know I'm fucked.

In way more ways than one.

Kase

All day, I've thought of her. This is a goddamn problem.

And all day, I've tried to stay away, engulfing myself in work projects, only checking in with Alana through texts. It's a tough spot to be in. On one hand, I wanted to go home during lunch and see the baby (and her) or come home early to spend time with Liam before bed. But now, because of the way I lost control around her, I feel like I can't go home.

I can't stay away either. I have to face this situation.

Entering the house, I hang my coat and lock up for the night, heading straight for the bar to pour myself a Jack and Coke. What happened was a one-time thing, Alana. It can't happen anymore. I told her this last night, but this time, I have to enforce it. I'm the boss here, goddammit, and the older one by about seven years. I think I can keep the monster inside the pants.

Heading into my office, I surround myself with books and papers in the hopes they'll keep me more professional. Staying away from her bedroom would be good from now on in general, too. And if you hear her masturbating again, leave her the fuck alone, Kase. Sinking into my leather chair, I lean back and sip from my tumbler.

I've been with hundreds of women. When it's clear there's mutual physical connection and no hazard for hooking up, I take that shit. Why not? We all need sex, and all it takes is two willing adults. But that's it—that's where the liaison ends. I've lost too many women I love in this life to invest any more emotion into anyone

else. I'm done with close relationships—parental, best friend, or romantic. I'm so good at letting go, at nipping it in the bud before it even has the chance to bloom, that I've been confounded all day.

Why Alana?

Why can't I get the nanny, of all women, out of my mind?

She's gorgeous, sure, but all the women I've slept with are out of this world beautiful. It just comes with the territory, with the money, and hey, I keep in shape, too. She's also smart, but I work with lots of smart cookies, so I have no fucking clue why I can't stop thinking about her.

Maybe it was the innocent way she gave herself over to me. Trusted me. Her reaction made me feel she needed someone—needed a man to take control. Too many women I've fucked don't need shit from me. They all get along by themselves. But Alana looked like she could've used a good fuck, and let's face it—there's nothing wrong with that.

Before I can think about the situation another second, I hear light footsteps outside my door. Stay strong, I tell myself. But the whisky is already taking the edge off, as well as making me bolder, so by the time she appears in my doorway—this time in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and hair in a swishy ponytail—I'm already wishing I could leave the house again.

“Mr. Hardwin, can I talk to you?”

“How was Liam at bedtime? Sorry I couldn't be here. Things got sticky at work.” I hate sounding like a deadbeat dad, but I needed the space. At least for a day.

“Better than he's been with me so far. I think we needed the time to get used to one

another.” Her voice oozes like honey. There’s a tad of southern in it. She also leans casually against the door instead of standing stiff and professional like usual.

“Excellent,” I tell her, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. “And how were you today?” I ask, following up with, “You can take time off if you need it. I realize you didn’t have a break today.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Too tired to go anywhere at this point. But uh...I wanted to say something...”

“No, let me. Look, Alana, I don’t know what happened last night. I guess before we’re anything, we’re man and woman first. So let’s just say that pheromones hijacked the situation. It’ll never happen again.”

Her face freezes. Eyes wide, she stares at me, assessing my words and analyzing their meaning. “Right.” One word she utters, but it carries so much heaviness, I have to think that maybe she’s disappointed.

Fuck, I’m disappointed.

Because she looks so fucking beautiful right now, even after a full day of caring for an infant. An infant who even isn’t hers, which is exponentially harder. Maybe I’m reading her wrong, but it seems like we’re not done here. We’ve only just started, and nobody has to know about this. “That is okay...isn’t it, Miss Frasier?”

“Well...”

I stand and come around the desk, stopping a couple feet short of her. Even from this distance, I can smell her skin and hair, freshly shampooed and blow-dried. Whether she showered after Liam went to bed for herself or for me, I don’t know, but I do know a woman will always get clean if she wants to get dirty.

And dirty is the only thing I can focus on right now.

“What is it about you, Miss Frasier?” I take a step forward and slide a finger through her hair. There’s a slip out of place and I can’t help but pull it down, frame it around her face, then graze her chin. “Why can’t I get you out of my mind?”

“I’m...not sure, Mr. Hardwin.”

Both my hands scoop around her face. Her eyes close, her lips part, and I can feel her trembling the closer I get. Alarms sound in my head—abort, abort!—but I can’t stop. I can’t stop because we’re two human magnets who can’t stop themselves from connecting, nor do we want to. I’m hard as fuck and growing harder with every moment. There’s electricity in the shrinking between us.

“I came here to tell you something, but now I forgot what that was.” She breathes, nostrils flare as they fight for breath.

“You’ll think of it later, I’m sure.” Running my thumb across her lip, I watch her mouth open as her tongue darts out and both lips wrap around my finger. My cock swells even more. I have to feel this mouth around me in much the same way.

“I wanted to do for you what you did for me last night,” she says quietly.

“Twice.”

She nods, as heat flushes through her face and neck. “But I’m scared. I’ve never done it.”

Whoa. She’s never done... “Done what, exactly?”

“Used my mouth.”

“To suck a cock, you mean? Like this one?” I take her hand and press it against my pants so she can feel what she’s up against. I’ve never met a woman who’s never sucked dick before and I think my brain cells just died by three hundred percent.

Nodding, she inches up against me, so we’re pressed together. I feel her tits spreading and her heartbeat pounding. I have to have her. Fuck everything I said before. It was all bullshit. The bullshit ravings of a madman. I’d be stupid to give this up. Tilting her chin up, I run my index finger along inside her mouth to get her to open up and then I plunge my mouth and tongue into her open, needy mouth.

I taste the sweetness of her tongue, suck in the softness of her lips, and guide her hand to my belt. With trembling fingers, she begins to unbuckle me, and once she’s pulled down my shorts and freed the fucker, she pulls back awkwardly to look at it.

I almost want to laugh. “Don’t worry, it won’t bite unless you want it to.”

Her eyes say it all. She wants to do something with it, but she doesn’t know what and her inexperience is as charming as it is heady, making me drunk with pure lust for

Alana. “What do I do?” she asks.

“Come here.” I take her hand and move to the desk then point to the leather chair. “Sit there and take it in both hands.” After she does and is looking up at me with those virginal, sexy eyes, I tell her, “Kiss it. Pretend it’s the best lollipop you’ve ever seen in your life.”

When she wraps her two, tiny hands around my bulging shaft, I have to bite my lip to keep from losing it. What is it about seeing a woman holding your cock, looking so small compared to you, so vulnerable but still so full of lust for your body? “Like this?”

“Just like that,” I say. My balls feel tight underneath me. “Take it into your mouth, Alana. Suck on it. Softly. Then pull it out of your mouth as you suck on it at the same time.”

She follows my instructions, and I make sure to help by holding her chin and pushing my veined, impatient dick into her mouth. As she sucks on it, I feel the tightness and the wetness of her mouth and suddenly want more. I want to see her naked, see her bouncy tits, and feel her slick, wet pussy. I want it all, I want it now.

Pushing Alana back, I take back my cock and stroke it lightly. “Open your blouse...take off those jeans. The panties, too. I want to see you undressed.”

“Yes, Mr. Hardwin,” she says. I take in this moment—this gorgeous young woman who works for me unbuttoning her shirt, exposing her gorgeous round tits in a white bra, then pulling her jeans down around her ankles. When she slides off her panties, I already know what I want next.

Reaching forward, I pull down the cups of her bra to reveal succulent pink nipples, and for a moment, I forget everything else. I force her to sit back and kneel down to

take them into my mouth. Flicking those nipples with my tongue, I wrap my mouth around each one and suck.

Once my cock strains and begins to ache, I lean back against my desk and feed Alana's hungry mouth. "Open wide." I slide my dick into her mouth, and she catches on quickly. Good thing she's smart, because I don't need to tell her anything else. She begins sucking and stroking and gagging herself and coughing all without my help.

"Is this good, Mr. Hardwin?" she says.

She's gotta be fucking kidding me. She's a pro is what she is, and suddenly, I can't think of anything other than coming inside her mouth. But her moans last night were some of the most delicious I'd ever heard, and my mind suddenly decides that it wants to hear them again before coming. "Touch yourself."

Big hazel eyes look up at me, questioning.

"Touch yourself. Make yourself come while you're sucking on me."

Taking my cock and slapping it on her tongue, she shoves the whole thing back into her mouth, and this has to be the goddamn happiest day of my life.

Yes, while you're feeding on my man meat. Holy shit. She may not have much experience with an actual, live man, but Alana has definitely spent a lot of time thinking this through. Hence the masturbation before bed. The girl knows what makes her happy.

"Beautiful," I say, because there's no other way to describe the scene before me.

I watch my cock slide in and out of this gorgeous woman's plump mouth, ripe tits exposed, wet pussy bare, legs spread open, as she begins to finger fuck herself while

slurping on my dick. Could life get any better? Yes. If I had this every day, for example, and after this, I may have to. I never stick with any woman more than a handful of times, but I might have to make an exception.

“Do you love it?” I ask. I have to hear it. I have to hear that rawness in her voice, the one that tells me she’s finally let go of all pretenses.

“Yes, Mr. Hardwin.” More slurping and sucking, and I know I’m about to lose it, but her first. I need to hear that sweet moan.

“Tell me.”

“I love sucking your cock. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you.” I don’t know if that’s true, but I’ll take it. She cups my balls, cradling them. Good, because they’re going to need it. Her other hand flies across her clit, blurred fingers pushing toward the finish line. The more she dips into that slick wetness, pulling out more juices and using it to work herself into a frenzy, the less I can control myself anymore.

“Do it, Alana. Fucking come.”

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All of a sudden, her open mouth shoves forward onto my cock, pushing it as far back as it'll go while one hand fondles her own breast and the other pats her clit over and over. Tears squeeze out of her eyes, as she chokes me back. Then, sliding back in the chair, she throws her head up and lets out the longest, achy, delicious groan I've ever heard. With her head tilted back, chin up and mouth open in ecstasy, she trembles with the residual waves of her orgasm.

Seeing her nipples harden and the wave of prickly pink wash over her light skin, I can't hold on any longer and move head of my cock near her mouth. "Open, Alana. Show me what you would do for me."

Her tongue sticks out, flat and beautiful, and right there, accepting this clear invitation, I empty my balls right into her mouth. Creamy ropes of cum squiggle onto her lips and tongue, and I stroke and stroke again until I've given it all to her and there's nothing left of myself. Fuck! So fucking good. So wrong! And so weak.

I've never hated such an amazing moment so much. Kase Hardwin has always maintained control. Kase Hardwin has turned himself to stone over the years, so much that he can't feel anymore, and that's the way he likes it. Yet, I feel such peace, such communion with this woman that I bend down to kiss the mouth stained with my lust, and savor it as long as I can, because I can't continue to let this happen. Even if I build a walled gate between her section of the house and mine, even if I have to strap a chastity belt to her body, or fuck—even to mine—I can't do this again.

This is asking for trouble. Huge trouble. All it takes is one employee to file a complaint against me, but how can there be any grievances when this is so damn mutual?

I turn around and zip up, collecting myself as best as I can. Catching my breath, I have to think of what to say. Do that everyday, please? No, that won't work. Never leave this house, Alana—you're perfect? No, too desperate. But that's how Alana makes me feel. Like I need her.

And that is the most dangerous feeling of all.

Because I don't need anyone, least of all a woman.

"What does this mean now?" The question slips quietly across the room, and I know I'll find her buttoning up and almost finished getting re-dressed.

I turn and see her standing, jeans back on, buttoning up the last button. Her hair is mussed, and her lips are raw red from kissing and sucking. She's both beautiful and annoying as hell. How could I be so stereotypically male and succumb to pure sex that way without an ounce of restraint, especially after a self-given pep talk?

"This means we fucked up again, Alana," I tell her. I know it's not what she wants to hear, but that's the fact. We did it again, allowing our bodies to control us. This can't possibly be good for our professional relationship nor that with Liam. I don't care how amazing that blowjob was. "Time for bed. Thank you for caring for Liam."

"Your son," she says, clearly irritated.

"What?"

"Your son. Why don't you ever say 'my son?' You always say Liam."

Her gaze is unflinching. Angry. Hurt. Not because of how I address Liam, but because this is all she can do to relay her true feelings. She'll take the proud route and refuse to admit how much my words hurt her, but she'll take it out on something else

I'm doing.

"I say Liam because that's his name." I give her a cold glare to ensure she doesn't bring it up again. Nobody knows—nobody except Evie—that Liam isn't my son, and Evie's gone. So unless Alana's been talking to my dead best friend's ghost or she's psychic, there's no way she could know the truth.

"I just find it odd," she adds. "No worries, Mr. Hardwin. I won't make the same mistake twice."

"You just did, though."

Her lips now a thin line, I can see I've struck a nerve. I've fucked things up with her, but that's the way it needs to be. "I wanted to make sure I wasn't imagining..."

"Imagining what?"

"A connection. Between us. But clearly, you have none. Goodnight." Breezing past me, taking the scent of sex and overindulgence with her, Alana leaves.

I close my eyes and breathe her in for the last time. Because I can't let a woman control me like this. I'm my own man, and I don't need anyone, especially not some fresh-out-of-college girlie making me feel bad for a decision I know is right. Closing the door to my office, I return to my desk, take what's left of my whisky and Coke and slam the fucking thing back.

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Alana

You know when someone takes your head, sticks it in a blender, and turns the setting to frappé? I don't either, but that's how I feel the next day.

Try taking care of a baby who hates you while his father decides to stay home again and watch over every little thing you do? Then imagine that you and the baby's father engaged in dirty monkey sex the night before. Then imagine that the baby's father goes around all day pretending like it never happened, leaving you to wonder what the heck is going on, and you have my life.

I have no idea if it'll ever happen again.

I have no idea if he even likes me, though I'm pretty sure he doesn't.

And yet, there's this unmistakable gravitational pull between us. I feel it every time we cross paths in the hallway, or when he takes the baby from my arms, brushing his muscular torso near me, or when he emerges from his room in a towel to fetch something from a closet, catches me holding my breath outside the nursery, then returns to his room.

Every moment feels breathless. Every moment feels like judgment, too. All I want to know is what he's thinking, but every chance I get to ask him about us, about what's going on, about whether or not this is a thing, whether the thing will be repeated, or whether said thing was just a fluke, he finds some excuse to change the subject.

Honestly, I wish he'd just go away. Go back to the ad agency and let me do my thing.

I don't understand why he hired a nanny if he was only going to supervise everything I do. Although I have to admit, I'm a pretty shitty nanny. I wish I could say that I get better with every passing day, but I don't. Liam has his moments when he's happy and playful, but something happens whenever Kase is around. Suddenly, Liam gets cranky with me, because he wants his dad.

Perfectly understandable.

I want his dad, too.

I don't want to want him, but I do. It's all I can think about—how he told me what to do last night, how he basically instructed me to perform for him, positioned me the way he wanted me. It must be nice to know exactly what you want sexually. Whereas me, I have no idea. When I'm with Kase, I'm thankful for his guidance. Otherwise, I'd stand there open-mouthed, not knowing what to do first. Some things just come with experience, and Kase definitely has it.

The crazy thing is, I want him to teach me.

But it's over. He said it was, and this time, I believe him.

Because right now, he's in SuperDad mode. In the kitchen, as I'm preparing Baby Liam's lunch of baby carrots from a jar, banana compote, and juice, SuperDad comes waltzing in, having clearly been working out in his downstairs gym. He's wearing a T-shirt that's dark gray in the sweaty areas and his biceps have that awesome sheen when a guy's been pumping iron. He must smell musky as fuck, but I don't care. I have to will away the warmth growing between my legs, tell myself he's not that same man right now. In fact, right now, he's on a mission to make my life a veritable hell.

“What is that?” He points to the open jar on the counter next to Liam's plate.

“It’s puréed carrots.”

“That’s not puréed carrots. That’s garbage, Alana. I thought I told you to make it fresh. Steam the carrots, drain, add water, purée in the processor.”

I nod and sigh at the same time, as I make a smiley face of the foods on Liam’s plate. “Yes, it’s Slide #13 on your PowerPoint. I know. But that’ll take at least twenty minutes to do, and he was hungry now,” I explain.

“I understand, but you have to plan ahead. Before he’s hungry, start the process so it’s all ready by lunchtime.”

Is he freakin’ kidding me right now? “Look, sometimes you just have to crack open a jar of baby food, you know?” Brand new parents, I swear. In a couple of years, he won’t act this way with his second child. If he ever has another one. I doubt it, because who will want to marry this guy? He’s so ultra-anal about everything.

Kase stares at me like I just flew in from Voyager 1. “That’s exactly the kind of lazy thinking I don’t want around my son.”

Wow, he actually said son instead of Liam. And wow again, an insult.

“That stuff has preservatives in it, too,” he adds, sneering at the offensive baby food jar. “When did you even have time to go out and buy it? I stocked the fridge with fresh veggies.”

“I ordered them from the app you mentioned,” I say. “On Slide #14b, Section 8, Paragraph 6. They got here in ten minutes from the corner store. If you know everything, though, why don’t you be the nanny?” Yikes. That was out of line.

But he looks at me in a new way, and it’s not really with disdain. Is it surprise?

Respect? “Okay. Why don’t you be the employer then? All you have to do is pull in fifty-eight million a year. Think you can handle it?” Picking up his phone, he nonchalantly starts checking stuff, as though my reply isn’t worth eye contact over.

Whoa, how much? I swallow hard. And I was so excited to be starting at \$60K at Lodwick Brothers. This nanny job pays close to that but doing stuff that doesn’t make use of my talents. “I could do it,” I reply. “Eventually.”

“Great, then let’s switch. I would love nothing more than to hang around a baby all day long.” He gives me a cheeky smile and struts off, all proud of himself.

Oh. I see. My job is easy. Okay, no problem.

I want to walk out. Leave this asshole right here to fend for himself—Kase, not Liam—but then I remember that I need that paycheck, the one coming to me in two days. I also like this kid, staring at me with big blue eyes, completely aware of the mini-fight that just happened. Smart Liam.

I don’t want to lose the apartment that took me so hard to find. I may be living here now, but once the market changes and I get my job in finance back, I’m going to need it. The location is prime. I also don’t want to go back to living with my parents, and honestly, dealing with Kase is hard, but living with my parents is harder. It represents failure, and I can’t. I just can’t.

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I have to take higher ground. “Look, Kase, I’ll prepare a fresh, gourmet meal of steamed baby carrots next time, okay? I’m sorry. It’s just...it’s good to go easy sometimes. He’s a baby, not a science experiment.”

“He needs the best start in life,” Kase mutters. “He’s already lost enough.” He walks away and pauses at the end of the kitchen, thinking about what just came out of his mouth.

Great, now I feel bad. Yes, yes, Liam lost his mother, and Kase lost his wife. I have to remind myself more often that these two are going through hard times. If Kase is crabby and bossy, and Liam is fussy, it’s because they’re missing the most important woman in their lives.

And suddenly, I feel emptier than ever knowing I can never fill that spot for them.

Still, I can’t help but feel like a stupid employee when Kase is in the house, and it stirs up all kind of old emotions I had worked so hard to eradicate from my life. Do this, Mrs. Frasier, clean that, Mrs. Frasier... The Hollands treated us like we were nothing. We could never get anything right because we were too stupid or too poor. It was their way of keeping control, by judging us, and Kase is no different, only more subtle about it.

He’s lost control of his life, so he takes it out on me.

As I begin feeding Liam his offensive jar of carrots, Kase comes over, drops a kiss on the top of Liam’s head, then slips down the hall and out of sight. I let out the biggest sigh my lungs have ever seen.

Can we talk about last night for a second? I want to ask, but I know he wants it to go away. Pretend it never happened. And so I swallow my pride and go on feeling confused for the rest of the day. And the rest of the next, and the next, and the next. If there's anything good to say about Kase, though, besides the fact that he knows how to run a tight company and can lick my pussy like a pro, is that he knows how to Dad. Kase loves Liam, hugs him, and wants him eating organic, fresh food. He holds him just right, tickles him just right, and he cares about his baby, and that's not something I've yet seen from rich families, especially the fathers. At least not the ones my parents have worked for.

It's sexy as hell. It occupies my brain more than I'm willing to admit. For an instant, I almost imagine him as the father of a child I might have. That we might be a veritable family in a parallel universe instead of boss, boss's child, and employee. An employee both of them happen to hate. And just as soon as the fantasy comes, it dissipates, and I'm Alana Frasier, nanny by life circumstances, all over again.

Poof!

Kase

A week later, I'm back to work and highly impressed with myself for staying away from Alana this long. It took determination and a healthy dose of masturbation, but it worked. But I'd be lying if I said those jack-off sessions weren't filled with memories of her open mouth, her sexy hazel eyes looking up at me, and that fine line of spit hanging off her chin as she choked down my cock.

Holy shit.

Then, I get a call. Though I haven't talked to him in a few weeks, my "father-in-law," Bert Roper, the man for whom Evie and I got fake-married so he wouldn't judge her for having a baby out of wedlock, wants to come and see us. "Miss the little tyke," he says about Liam, but I know he really wants to see the new nanny and make sure she's purebred and worth the money.

I'm nervous for several reasons.

One, because Alana's nannying skills are so not worth the money I'm paying her. But for some reason, I keep her around. I never would've put up with an ineffective employee this long, but I also sympathize. She's not a nanny at all—she's in finance, trying to earn some cash while waiting for the market to stabilize and start hiring again. Also, Liam seems to be starting to like her, or at the very least tolerate her, and this kid is a lot like me (which is interesting) in that he doesn't do well with change. If I were to hire a new nanny now, it would put him back to square one.

I'm also nervous because Bert Roper is an old school dinosaur who rules his family

and ad agency with an iron fist. Besides the fact he never would've allowed Evie to take over the family business if he'd discovered she'd had a child without marrying the father, he's also a staunch perfectionist. Every time I see the man, I feel the pressure to put everything in order for his visit. I live in constant fear that he's going to find out the truth about everything—about Liam having another father, about the fake marriage to his daughter, and the fact that I don't have legal rights to anything of Evie's.

He loves me, but if he were to ever find out, I could end up ruined in business. And I wouldn't put it past him to make sure I wind up dead either.

It's five minutes 'til four o'clock. I sit in my office trying to keep busy and not think about how every Bert Roper visit skates the edge of possible disaster. Alana walks down the hall, holding Liam, and glances into my office. Every look of hers brings erotic flashbacks to my mind. "Alana, could you change Liam into something nicer?"

She pauses, looks at the cotton onesie the baby is wearing. "This is nice."

I sigh. Why can't she just do what I ask of her? It's like she's got a massive iceberg on her shoulder that doesn't allow herself to be ordered. "It's fine, but my father-in-law is..." I don't have to explain anything to her. In fact, the less she knows about me and my life, the better. "Just please change him into something evocative of a wealthy man's child. Trust me on this."

Alana smirks. "Fine." I hear an audible sigh down the hall.

Two minutes until Roper's supposed to arrive. Alana has returned holding Liam in what could be a baptismal outfit. I have no idea who gave Evie this piece of work, but he looks like a girl in a cream dress. "Is that supposed to be better?" I check the time. One minute 'til four.

“I’m sorry,” she says, full of attitude. “Why don’t you tell me exactly which outfit you want him to wear, so I can be sure it pleases you?”

This woman and her mouth. The things I can do to it. The ways I can tame her. I have to admit, I think I like the fact that she doesn’t fawn all over every little thing I say like the ladies at the office. In short—Alana couldn’t give a rat’s ass.

I get up and wipe a speck of dust from my desk. “Because I would like for you, a grown woman with a job in childcare, to take the bull by the horns and make my request a reality, not be given every little instruction as though you were two years old.” My stomach’s in knots.

Alana glares.

Ugh, I fucking hate getting to this point with her, but she makes it so difficult.

“You know, Kase, I don’t appreciate being harassed like this,” she finally says, adjusting Liam on her hip. “Not by you, not by anyone.”

I stop a foot away from her and stare into her eyes. There’s flecks of green and brown and gold in them. There’s also heat and passion and spunk. Speaking of spunk... “Funny, I thought you liked being harassed.” I can’t help it and swipe my finger along her jawline.

Alana takes a shallow breath, presses her lips together in what looks like an effort to control her feelings, and walks off. “Can you tell me who this man is that’s coming to visit?”

“Bert Roper.”

“Wow. Thanks for elaborating, Kase.”

“He’s just...a friend, Alana. You don’t need to know anything else. And when did we stop addressing each other formally? You should be Miss Frasier, and I should be Mr. Hardwin, so make sure it stays that way, especially with Mr. Roper here, or he’ll wonder.”

“Wonder what?” She pauses at the end of the hall. Both she and Liam stare at me.

The doorbell rings. Fuck, the old man’s here. The sooner I get this visit over with, the better. When I open the door, I gasp quietly to myself. He’s looking older and more haggard than the last time I saw him, and that was only four weeks ago. “Hello, Kase. Where’s my grandson?”

I plaster on a fake smile. “Just your grandson, huh? No love for me?” I avoid using the word son-in-law, because it’s just not true. I hold out my arms.

Roper gets wheeled in by his nurse, Nettie, who’s been with him for the last ten years or so. Nettie is nice enough to give me a hug. “Poor Kase,” she whispers and pats me on the back then rolls in the old man all the way through the foyer, down the hall, and into the living room.

I check everything, as I walk behind them, making sure the house is impeccable and that there’s no baby toys, milk bottles, or plastic sippy cups on any of Evie’s teak furniture. “The house looks messier than normal,” Roper still manages to say.

I manage an easygoing laugh. “Well, there is a six-and-a-half month old living here. Speaking of which...” Moving past the wheelchair containing his oxygen tank and backpack full of life-sustaining supplies, I stretch my neck into the other hall to look for Alana. I wish she would’ve been standing here ready to receive us. “Miss Frasier? Mr. Roper’s here. Won’t you bring the baby out to see him, please?”

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“Oh, Kase. Don’t make it sound so much like a request,” the old man says, taking off his glasses and cleaning them with the blanket resting in his lap. If Nettie weren’t right behind him, he’d launch into a whole discussion about how saying please gives servants the impression they have a choice, that the best way to address them is by giving a clear order.

I may be living in a billionaire daughter’s home, and I may be a wealthy man myself, but I didn’t grow up with servants, and I certainly don’t care for pretending like I’m better than they are. Alana—wherever the fuck she is—is at the same level I was when I got out of college. Even though I do wish she’d make her presence known ASAP, she’s not a fucking dog.

“Right,” I say anyway. It’s easier to please the old man than arguing with him.

Luckily, Alana comes out of the restroom at that very moment. It occurs to me right then how she has to take the baby with her in order to go. In fact, she’s with Liam every waking moment, which must be rough. Wiping a bead of sweat, I say, “Mr. Roper, this is Miss Frasier, Liam’s new nanny. She’s doing a spectacular job taking care of your grandson.”

I give Alana an “I’m being generous and you better appreciate it” look.

“Hello, Mr. Roper. Very nice to make your acquaintance. What a lovely wheelchair you have there.”

I nearly slap my forehead. What a lovely wheelchair you have there? I could kill her. With my glare. With laser beams emitting from my forehead into her brain. Bracing

for the insult that's sure to come, I hear laughter coming from the wheelchair.

Roper's having a coughing-laughing fit. He shakes and lifts his hand to Nettie for something. Nettie reads this gesture to mean he wants a cigar and pulls one out from his bag, lighting it for him. Seriously? He's going to smoke even though he needs an oxygen mask? And around Liam?

The old man has balls, I'll give him that.

"Where did you get this one, Kase? Wal-Mart?"

"Le Nanny, sir. New York City's most reputable."

Roper gives Alana an up and down glance-over, then notices the baby for the first time. "There's my grandson. Bring him over to me, girl."

I see Alana visibly bristle at being called "girl." She takes tentative steps toward Roper, setting Liam down in his lap. Immediately, Liam cringes, his face fills with worry, and he turns right back around, throwing his arms up for Alana to pick him up.

Part of me cringes as well. "Oh, come on, Liam. Look at your grandpa!" I smile at the baby, encouraging him to stay with the old fart, even though I totally get his trepidation and whining that begins. But another part of me is happy for Alana. Finally, the baby prefers to be with her. I know that's just human nature—we want what's familiar to us—but I also think he's starting to care for his nanny, too.

Points for Alana.

I smile at her across the room. Seemingly shocked by my moment of gratitude, she relaxes and smiles back, reaching down to hold Liam's little hand instead of taking him away from Roper.

The old man looks up at that moment. He sees it—the smiles between us. Of course, anyone's allowed to smile at someone else, especially an employer looking to encourage or reward an employee, but Roper seems to know more. I don't know how he sees it in that fraction of a second, but he does, because the next look he gives me is one of disapproval.

Because Liam starts whining again and throwing his arms toward Alana, I say, "You can go, Miss Frasier. I think the baby needs to spend quality time with his grandfather."

She nods, appreciative of the chance to get away from this awkward meeting, and disappears.

Immediately, Roper turns his eyes on me. "Like the way you're spending time with the nanny?"

I hate the way this man feels he can say anything around his nurse. Nettie knows better than to look at me after Roper saying something so personal and insinuating. She takes a seat, choosing to stare at her nails instead.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," I tell him, pit growing in my stomach.

"I'm sure you do." Roper bounces Liam on his lap, but the kid grows increasingly agitated. "You think I haven't lived eighty years? I know when a man and woman have had relations."

"No, sir. I know you're wise and experienced and by far, the only and best father-in-law I've ever had." I tack on a witty smile for effect. "But I assure you, there is nothing...going on between me and my staff."

Roper waves away the issue since it's not what he came to discuss, right as Liam

reaches his melting point and lets out a long wail. Time for rescue. I reach down and swoop the baby from his arms. “He’s just hungry. It’s his lunch time right about now. Miss Frasier?”

At that moment, Alana comes around the corner, a scowl on her face, and when she looks at me, it’s clear she’s overheard the conversation. What did she expect? For me to admit we’ve had relations? “Yes, Mr. Hardwin?”

“Could you take Liam for his lunch? He’s a little antsy.”

Another glare at me, and thanks so much for stressing my name in front of the old man. “I’d be delighted to, sir.” Biggest, fakest smile I’ve ever seen from her.

Once Alana’s ushered Liam away to the kitchen, I turn back to Roper. “Anyway, sir, how have you been?”

“Another day above the ground, Kase. The question is, how are you doing? I still can’t believe my Evie is gone. Sometimes I think I hear her talking through the house, but she’s not there.”

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My heart aches—that’s how I’m doing. Though Evie and I weren’t romantic, she was still my best friend, the best damn ad executive I ever knew, a model of excellence for me and everyone who knew her. “I miss her, sir.”

“Of course. You loved her deeply. And Liam is proof of that.”

I swallow hard and try not to look like living, breathing evidence of a huge, fat lie. “True, sir. True.”

“Well, there’s more to this visit, Kase, than just smiles and questions. I wanted to let you know that my lawyers are working on contracts to pass off the business to you.”

If a cough could make your head explode, that’s what nearly happens. My windpipe fills with spit, sending me sputtering for a second. I have to turn my head and collect myself. “Excuse me?” Evie’s father wants to pass off their multi-billion ad agency to me? The same one I’ve admired my whole life?

“Well, of course, you’re my son-in-law, and my daughter’s no longer here. You’re the only man for the job. Without you, Newfound Ad Agency wouldn’t be where it is. They’re lucky to have you.”

“But sir, I would never expect to take over your business...”

“Nonsense, if Evie’s not alive to run it, then nobody else will do the job. I’ll order to have the place shut down.” He puffs his cigar, luckily being content to suck on it without lighting it inside the house. “However, as the husband of my late daughter and father of my grandson, it would give me peace of mind to know the business will

have a family legacy, Kase, so think about it and let me know.” He taps the back of his wheelchair.

Nettie stands, indicating he’d like to go.

One good thing about Roper’s visits—they’re short.

The family business. Only the most prestigious ad agency in the country.

Mine?

For billions and billions of dollars?

For the first time in a while, since Evie’s death, I feel sick and teeter on the edge of throwing up. The room swirls around me, bends then rights itself again. I’m not fit for this position and I know it. I’m not the man Roper thinks I am. I’m a fake, a good ad exec, yes, but not the right man for this job. But if he shuts down, Evie’s legacy goes with it. Everything she worked hard for.

I can’t let that happen.

I can’t be a fraud either.

What the fuck will I do? First came Evie’s death, then I got full custody of Liam, then Alana entered this crazy shit show, and now Roper’s thrown a curveball at me.

The moment he leaves the house, I head upstairs, ignoring Liam’s bubbly laughs, ignoring Alana giving me strange looks from the living room, ignoring her burning urge to ask me a million questions. I ignore my phone, all texts and calls, and head straight to bed. Despondent, not knowing what the fuck I’m going to do, I lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling for the rest of the day.

Now would be a good time to pray.

If only I believed.

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Alana

“So, there’s nothing between us?” I march into Kase’s office. I don’t care that he’s only been home five minutes or that it’s been a whole day since that old man came to visit. I’ve been stewing ever since I overheard that weirdo conversation.

“Good evening, Miss Frasier. I’m doing well. How are you?”

Trying to disarm me, show me the error of my ways. Well, I’m done. Done with his crap, with his secrets and his pretending that there’s nothing going on between us. I’ve seen the looks across the rooms, I’ve felt the brushes of his body against mine as he’s reaching for his son, and I’ve felt the tension straining between us, the one you can cut with a Play-Doh knife, it’s that palpable.

“Why did you tell Mr. Roper that there was nothing between us?”

“Really, Alana?” Kase slams shut a desk drawer and pivots his eyes on me. “I mean, really? You seriously wanted me to tell my father-in-law, the father of Liam’s late mother, that you, the child’s nanny, and I have engaged in sexual situations?”

“Well, not exactly like that, no.”

“Then, what? What did you want me to tell him?”

“I don’t know...” Tears burn at my eyelids, but I won’t let them fall. I refuse to let him see any weakness in me. “I just...did you have to be so adamant about denying it, though?”

“Why are you bringing this up now?” he asks. He looks so gorgeous in his pants and buttoned gray shirt, cuffs rolled up, drink in one hand.

I wish I could just forget this. Just go on with my job like I’m supposed to, but I couldn’t take it any longer. “Because I’ve played your game, Kase. I’ve ignored everything we did, just like you wanted me to. But in that room...” I point to the sitting room where Kase and his father-in-law spoke just yesterday, the same place where the old man advised Kase to treat me like shit. “You smiled at me when Liam wanted me to pick him back up. You appreciated me at that moment.”

“I did. I’ve never denied that, Alana. That doesn’t change the fact that I would never admit to anything so personal to a man I barely know.”

“Barely know?”

“Yes, for all his position in my life, I barely see the man. You can’t expect me to tell him that I’m banging the nanny when his daughter just passed away a few months ago. You’re not making any sense, hon.”

Hon?

Maybe I’m reading into this too closely, but he never calls me that, and there was a touch of sweetness to it. I know this is about more than the way he denied me in front of Roper. Of course, he’s right—he couldn’t just put that out in the open. I would’ve denied our relationship, too, if someone other than my mom or best friends asked me straight out.

But it’s not just that bothering me. It’s the whole secrecy. The whole bringing me into his life on one hand, but on the other, keeping me strictly out of it. “Why weren’t you happy with what he told you?”

“Which part?” Kase stands and walks over to me, hands in pockets. So cool and collected. I so wish I could adopt his demeanor. He stands in front of me looking so sexy and unaffected. “Were you listening in when you should’ve been minding your own business?”

“I was just in the kitchen, Kase. I can’t stop my ears from hearing. Why don’t you want to take over your wife’s business? It doesn’t make any sense. If I were you, I’d be doing cartwheels.”

“Good thing you’re not me.” His smirk borders on a growl, and I have to contain myself from letting my emotions show.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Alana, listen...I know you’re smarter than the average nanny.”

“That’s because I’m not a nanny,” I blurt, even though that’s not fair to other nannies the world over. There’s nothing about being a nanny that makes anyone less smart, but I can’t flick the fucking service chip off my shoulder. My parents were in service, and now looks like I’ll be in service forever, too.

“Yes, we’ve been through this. You’re naturally inquisitive, you want to understand everything, and you also seem to care about my life, but I’m telling you now—the less you know about my life, the better.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?” I can see he’s getting irritated with me, but I can’t seem to stop myself. I was a runaway snowball before I even waltzed in here.

“Why is it you can wedge your way into my room, into my bed, do whatever you

want with me, bring me into your office and demand sexual favors from me, but you can't answer a single question of mine? Do you think that's fair?" Feeling bolder than ever, I step farther into his office. He's not more important than I am—we're equals—and there's nothing wrong with my wanting to know more about him.

I think I deserve a few answers.

But Kase hovers over me, raising his hand to point. "You know what? I can be nice once, I can even be nice twice, and I have infinite patience, but right now, you're pushing my buttons, Alana."

"Good, maybe someone should."

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Nostrils flare, and I know I'm not going to get what I want. But at the very least, I've said my peace. From his playpen in the next room, Liam is getting fussy wondering where I am. Can't stay here anyway. "Listen, girly. You're not my mom." Point at my nose. "You're not my parole officer..." More pointing at my nose. "In fact, you're not even a good nanny. So keep yourself out of my shit. If I ever tell you anything, it'll be because you earned it, not because you forced it out of me. Got it? Now, go do your job."

My heart pounds like crazy.

I don't need this shit. I don't need this man ordering me around, I don't care how much money he's paying me. Some things are worth more than money, like self-respect and freedom. And for the last two weeks, I've felt like I'm living in a prison with only a cute little baby to make my time worthwhile. At first, I'd stupidly hoped that "whatever" was going on between me and Kase would develop into something more, but clearly, it's nothing.

And I've been too stupid and naïve to see that sooner.

"I'm going. And I'm following through with Liam's routine tonight, maybe even the morning. But after that, I quit," I hear myself tell him, on the verge of tears. "I don't need this shit from you, or anyone."

Storming out of his office, I hear Kase grunt and sigh, as I head to Liam and scoop him up, hugging him close. He becomes paralyzed at first, then wraps his arms around my shoulders. I swear this kid can sense that I need a hug. It's going to suck leaving him, but I can't do this anymore. I can't subject myself to this bullshit, this

confusion and forced limbo.

If Kase won't at the very least be a friend to me after the shit we've done together, if he can't even answer a couple questions, if he can't admit that there's something going on between us—maybe not to Mr. Roper, fine, that was out of line, but to me—then we're done. I mean, look...he can't even chase after me to see if I'm okay. He really doesn't give a shit.

And when Liam finally goes to bed that night, I trudge into my bedroom, pride all lodged up in my throat, and start packing. Yeah, I need the money, and this house and bedroom are absolutely gorgeous, plus that kid is going to miss me, but I have to go. I've been at rock bottom before, and I can be at rock bottom again.

* * *

My brain is exhausted from all the thinking, overthinking, and rethinking. I settle in with my iPad, ready to watch the next episode of Game of Thrones, when there's a knock at my door. I stiffen, clinging to the blanket, wondering if I'm feeling strong enough to open it. Yes, Kase has pissed me off for the last time, but a big part of me also wants to see him. Hear what he has to say. But I swear, if he starts ordering me around or making me feel like shit in any way, I'm closing the door in his face. I'll even leave tonight if I have to. Mom's always ready to accept me back home at any given time.

With a deep breath, I get out of bed and cross the room, unlocking the door. He stands there, in jeans and a faded Doctor Who T-shirt. He looks like anyone else, not the big-time ad exec or my millionaire boss who, for some reason, doesn't want to acquire a multibillion-dollar company. He eyes my bags waiting by the door. "Wow. You were serious."

"What did you think?"

“I thought maybe you were just mad.”

“Sorry, Kase. I don’t operate that way.” I cross my arms, partly to appear serious, but also so he won’t see my braless boobs reacting in any way to his pure hotness. Ignore the hotness, Alana. It bears no importance right now.

“Can I come in?” His dark eyes are soft, and his eyelashes are longer than any man’s have any right to be. I don’t care, because I’m going to stop looking at them now.

I glance away. “We can talk here.” I glance back. Only for a second.

With a heavy sigh, he stares at his cuticles a while. “I want to clear up a few things. First of all, I appreciate you. So please, don’t go.” He waits for me to react, but I’m not shaking any pom-poms for him, as fucking adorable as his face is right now. “Alana, you need to know that my life is complex as hell. And if I seem standoffish about it, it’s because I don’t want to drag you into my problems.”

“You don’t seem standoffish. You seem assholic.”

“Assholic?” A light grin appears then disappears.

“Yes, it’s a word. I just invented it.”

“Useful,” he grunts, crossing his arms. His biceps appear even bigger than they normally do, and I want to run my hands over them. Did I mention I hate Kase Hardwin? “I shouldn’t snap at you. The fact is, I get worked up about a lot of things that have nothing to do with you. In fact, you make these things better.”

I make his life...better? I glance at him sideways. Is this a tactic to get me to stay? Because I’m not budging. Though I will listen. “What are you talking about?”

“Alana, you might not believe me, because I’ve spent an inordinate amount of time avoiding this since you started working for me, and also, part of me doesn’t want to admit what took you ten seconds to realize and then vocalize, but...yes, there’s something between us.”

“Excuse me?”

“There is. At least, I thought there was. I might have totally ruined that, but if you’re determined to leave, then the least I can do is tell you that I haven’t stopped thinking about you since you first walked into my office. And then, since I walked into your room that first night, and every night since.”

“Then why do you always look pissed off to see me?”

“Because. You make me feel things I never wanted to feel.”

“Because you recently lost your wife, you mean? Because it’s too soon? I’m sorry. I’ve tried to be understanding of that.”

He stares at me a second or two. Did I hit the nail on the head? Why else would he look so caught off-guard? “Maybe,” he says, now rubbing his forehead. Clearly, talking about emotions is hard for him. “Alana, I want you. I want you in ways I can’t even comprehend, okay? So please don’t ask me to explain it, because I don’t get it myself. You have to understand that I’ve spent my whole life avoiding women...”

“Except for your wife, you mean.” I side-eye him.

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“Right,” he adds with difficulty. Uncrossing his arms, he approaches me slowly, reaching out a hand to caress my face. I want to retreat and tell him to go. Thank him for his honesty and the job, but I have to go. Except I can’t. “If we...if we were to, I don’t know...get together again, like the way we’ve been doing, you have to understand that my life and my past will always make it impossible to ever be together.”

Not that I was thinking about a forever kind of thing, but now he has me intrigued.

What about his past would prevent us from ever having a real thing?

Suddenly, I feel sorry for him, more than ever. I appreciate the honesty and the fact that he’s finally letting me in. If only a tiny bit, but that’s what I wanted. His hand cups behind my head. It feels strong, safe, and sweet all at the same time. It’s a touch that reminds me he’s human, and maybe that’s all I needed after his cold treatment.

“I get it,” I tell him. I don’t get it a hundred percent—the man is a walking, talking enigma—but I get it. He will admit to feelings but not commit to anything more. It’s fine. It’s the least I wanted, and I can accept that. I just couldn’t accept his stony refusal.

“You’ll never really get it, Alana. I’ll drive you crazy.” His other hand slips behind my head, and I feel myself falling, the room swirling, my knees weakening. “I’m giving you fair warning, hon. I honestly don’t know why you’d even bother with a man like me.”

I don’t either. He goes against every feminist ideal within me, ideals I was raised on,

ideals both my parents instilled in me. I know, in my heart, that this man could never give me love, but maybe I don't need love right now. Maybe I only want him. He's hiding so much pain, I see it all over his face and in his eyes. And if I can ease some of that pain, then I think I can be happy with that for now. If it'll mean being with Kase.

"Tell me what you're thinking. Please. You have this look on your face." Grabbing my hair, he twists it into a rope, and part of me feels like a child whose daddy is just getting her ready for bed, not a woman who desperately wants him to kiss her.

My eyes close. "I can tell you're holding in a lot, Kase. So thanks for telling me this much. You have demons, secrets. You're tormented like nothing I've ever seen, not that I've seen much in my twenty-one years." I laugh lightly. "But all you just said? Showed me you're a good man, a kind man with a heart. Even though that heart might be broken."

"I'm not a good man, Alana."

"You are," I tell him, opening my eyes and looking straight into his soul. "I grew up watching my parents care for kids. So many so-called 'fathers' who barely spent an ounce of time with their kids, but I've seen you, Kase. You love Liam. You love him to death. And any man who can do that is a good man to me."

"Fuck." He pulls me into his body, and suddenly, my cheek presses against his delicious chest, and he smells so fucking fantastic, I immediately know I won't be able to resist him. "I need you, Alana. I've never told anyone that before."

Not even his wife?

A million scenarios run through my mind. He keeps saying these things about never opening up, never needing anyone, never putting effort into relationships, but wasn't

he married? The thought occurs to me that maybe he married his late wife out of responsibility for the baby. If that's the case, he's still a good man to me.

I don't know what his demons are, but I'm happy we seem to be getting somewhere.

Suddenly, my face gets tilted up, and I don't care. At this point, he could move me around like a rag doll, position me however he wants, and I'd follow it. It feels good to be with a man. I've avoided men for so long, then the first one I get into sexual situations with happens to be the hottest thing I've ever seen, and the most difficult, too.

In a fog of lust and confusion, he kisses me, warm mouth pressing over mine, tongue sliding in softly, exploring, tasting, pulling out the anger from me, tossing it aside. I may hate myself in the morning for giving in, but I feel he earned that kiss with his admission. I kiss him back, and it's hard to tell who wants who more, because suddenly, I'm pulling him toward the bed, falling onto it, and pulling him on top of me.

I want to feel his weight pinning me down, feel his wide back underneath my hands, and feel his lips and tongue raking hot trails of desire across my neck and chest. "Kase...I have to tell you something." Not that it's a big deal, but fine, it's a big deal. "I've never done this."

He pauses, his face buried in my neck, and looks up, lips parted. "I've heard you say this before. I thought you meant what we did that day."

"No. I meant everything. I've never done any of this." I hope that doesn't stop him. I've never been one to save myself for marriage or even a love relationship, because honestly, I just haven't had time for sex. But if I could hand-pick someone right now to make this long-overdue drought end, then Kase would be my top choice. He already seems to know his way around my body.

His hands caress my collarbone, trace a line across my chest then down my side and around my nipple through my T-shirt. Through the thin fabric, my nipple reacts to his touch, as his mouth slides down and sucks it in through the shirt. Oh God, for as much as we've explored in other ways, we've skipped a lot of these foreplay things, and now I know why they come first. They're like appetizers. My core floods with heat, as he moves his mouth to my other tit and sucks in my nipple deep into his mouth through the shirt again.

Holy shit, I could probably come from just him doing this, I want him so badly right now. "Kase, you heard what I said, right? It doesn't matter to me. I just wanted you to know."

"I heard you." He lifts my shirt and hooks it under my chin, and then both his hands cup my tits and he squeezes them together. "Your tits are fucking beautiful, Alana." From one nipple to the next, he licks and licks again. Just watching his tongue flick me around like that makes my back arc into his mouth. I want him to take more of me.

At this point, I want him to fuck me already. I don't care if it hurts. I don't care if I bleed. I don't care if letting my boss take my virginity is sinful, it feels delicious, and I want it so hard.

"So, you don't care?"

"I care," he says, sucking my nipple hard then letting it pop out of his mouth before latching onto the other, bringing me to the brink of deliciousness. "If I didn't, I'd be fucking you in the ass right now, because that's what I really want, Alana. I want to take you, soil you, fuck you, and make you mine. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

“I don’t think you get it. You don’t understand what’s inside of me, hon. You don’t get that inside this man is something wild.” He plays with my nipples, lightly slapping my breasts, and my body gravitates toward him for more. “You won’t tame me. You won’t change me. You won’t get me to love you either. So you need to understand, little virgin, what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I understand...”

“I don’t think you do,” he breathes. My skin prickles with heat. “I warned you to stop bringing it up, but you insisted. You came to my office, you pulled that shit. I didn’t want to feel, but you threatened to leave, and that’s something I can’t have right now. I can’t tell you why, and you’ll never figure me out. But if you want me to fuck you, if you want me to take your innocent little pussy—that I can do.”

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“I want that. I want your cock buried deep inside of me, Kase.”

“Why would you want that? You’re pure and I’m not.”

“I don’t want to be pure anymore. I want you to dirty me. I want you to pull out when you’re almost there, and I want you to come all over my body.” His eyes glance at me over the tops of my breasts, fire in his pupils. I can feel his cock straining against my leg. “Fuck me, Kase. Don’t use anything.”

He doesn’t have to worry about safety. Not on my side, anyway. I’m as clean as they come without a sexual history. But I don’t care if he’s been with anyone either, and that part worries me. Not because I think he’ll have anything, but because I shouldn’t want to feel that close to him. It’s reckless, but I want to claim him. I want to make him mine after everything he just said.

It’s rebellious—after all, he just said I’ll never get him to love. Fine—but I will tempt him with fucking a virgin bareback. Isn’t that the ultimate for a guy? In a minute, he’s pulled down my yoga pants and panties in one movement, then spreading my legs apart, he stares at my exposed pussy.

His fingers slide a trail down the center of my pussy, as he soaks his fingers with my growing wetness then circles my clit. I almost lose it. “Sit up and take what you want, Alana.”

I’m not one for exhibiting aggressiveness, especially when I just told him I’m a virgin, but I know what he’s doing. He wants to make sure I want it. I sit up, looking into his eyes with heat I can feel throughout my body, and unbutton his jeans. As he

takes off his own shirt, I undo his zipper and grip his thick cock through his shorts. There's a spot of pre-cum on there, and I see the outline of his head.

“What's in your eyes, Alana? Tell me.”

“You're big. With a fat head,” I admit.

“And?”

“And I want to feel it pushing into me.” My own words make my muscles clench and squirm for him.

“Then take it out.”

I don't have to be told twice. Yanking down his jeans, he puts one foot on the floor, then the other, and steps out of both the jeans and the shorts. I have to take a moment to soak this in. Until now, I've never seen this man completely naked, and what I see is more marvelous than anything I could possibly imagine. He's sculpted muscle with a wide, strong chest, cut abs, and a light smattering of hair over his stomach reaching down to his cock, which springs out—a massive extension that almost doesn't look like it belongs to him.

His balls are clean and bare, and though I want to wrap my mouth around them and suck them into my throat, I want to feel his full power ramming into me—now. It's a feeling I've imagined a hundred times, and now that I finally get my chance, I don't know what to do.

Kase pushes my knees further apart, the closer they get in my muscles' quest to squeeze an orgasm out of my body. “Not yet,” he says, stroking his cock and sinking lower until he's even with my pussy. Pressing his head against the opening of my pussy, he sops up my juices and circles his head around my clit. I think he's going to

make this as easy and rudimentary as sex can get by going missionary about it, but then he says, “Turn around.”

“Around?” I ask, nervous for what’s to come. Did he mean what he said about the ass thing?

“Yes, flip over. If you want this, you’re going to get it full hilt.”

I turn over, on pins and needles with anticipation. I realize Kase seems to want to punish me for wanting him, for pulling feelings out of him when he didn’t want to talk about it, and now’s the part where he makes me regret I ever wanted him in the first place.

But I can make this just as hard for him as he’s making it for me. After flipping over and lying perfectly flat, I tease him by reaching back and spreading my ass open. “Was this what you wanted?”

“Don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll fuck you, that’s why, and you’re not ready for that.”

“You don’t know what I’m ready for, Kase. I might be new to this, but I’m not fragile.”

I feel a slap to my ass that makes me shriek into my mattress. “You sure about that?”

Smiling into the mattress, I’m so ready to come. He could do anything to me right now, and I’d scream for him. I pull my ass cheeks apart some more and slide my finger into my pussy. “Yes, I’m sure. Fuck me, Kase. And don’t be nice about it

either.”

I have no idea where this Alana is coming from. All I know is from years of watching porn, I’ve developed an affinity for things I’ve never had. The videos that always turn me on the most are the ones that teeter on the rough side.

“You’ll be sorry you said that, little virgin. Spread those lips for me.”

I spread them, feeling my own power in making him vulnerable.

“Come up on your knees,” he commands.

My pussy squeezes tight, nearly sending off waves of climax, but I hold it together. Suddenly, I feel his cock pressing right at my entrance. He pushes in slightly. I brace the pillow, pulling it in close, and closing my eyes. “Yes, push it in, please. Slowly.”

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“You’re not fragile,” he says. “You don’t want it slowly. This is how you want it, hon.” And then, gripping my hips with those giant hands, he shoves his cock deep into me. I scream out loud because of the impact, but also because he’s taken it—taken my virginity by assault—and I fucking love it.

“Yeah...” I sound like a cat meowing in a dark alley.

“Yeah?” he mocks my reply. “That’s what I thought. We have a little slut here.”

“Oh, shit,” I murmur, suddenly sopping wet.

“Tell me you’re a little slut.”

Shit, this is hard. Kase is taking everything I’ve ever been taught and turning it on its side, flipping it over, and fucking it in the ass. I want to say it. I want to say how much I love his cock buried up in my pussy, but I’m scared.

“Do you like having my cock in you like this?” He leans down and presses his chest against my back, pulling back on my hair.

“God, yes.”

“Then, say it.”

“I’m a little slut. I love your cock in my pussy.”

There’s a smile in his voice. “There you go. What else do you love?”

“You holding me down.”

“Do you like that I command you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like that I’m controlling you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to feel what fucking is like now?”

“God, yes, please, Kase. Do it already.”

“That’s what I love to hear you say, hon.” He caresses my face so sweetly, I know this is part acting, part teaching me about my desires. “Got your pillow? Now hold on tight.”

He pulls out then slams into me so hard, I see stars in the darks of my eyes. Pulling out, he slams into me again, sending quivers up my spine. One more time, and I’m done. He doesn’t even have to touch my clit. But he does—with his fingers pressed flat, he rubs circles around my clit as he slams into me one more time, and I lose it completely.

“I’m coming,” I tell him, feeling the waves explode through me, soaking his cock and making my nipples harden. Goose bumps erupt all over me. When alone, this is when it all ends, but now I have a partner. Now I have Kase, and that means it’s not over. He fucks me through my orgasm, gripping my ass cheeks, and slamming into me. With each thrust, I feel his balls slapping my cunt. I’ve never felt like such a little slut, and I’ve never loved that word as much as I love it right now.

But I'm ready for more whereas he's almost done. I can feel his body tensing up, his breath becoming more ragged, and this is when I get to exercise control over him. The next time he pulls out, I turn around and place my head underneath his balls. Taking his hand, I guide them to my tits and take a hold of his cock in my hands, his balls in my mouth. They're big and hang low and feel so good in my mouth.

"Say it, Alana."

"I love this," I say, sucking in one massive ball and then the other. "I love your balls in my mouth." With one hand, I tease my clit back toward another climax. I could fuck this man all day. If loving sex and loving this intimacy makes me a "slut," then I happily accept the moniker. But only in the bedroom. With my free hand, I stroke his cock faster, focusing more on the head now.

"You're going to make me come, Alana." His hands squeeze my tits, slap them, and push them together. He leans forward and applies pressure to my hand, urging it to make me come faster. "How do you like this now?"

I mumble something about loving it, about it fulfilling every crazy fantasy I've ever had about a hot man like Kase doing whatever he wants to me. And something about having this man's balls rubbing all over my face while I stroke him, while he strokes me, brings me over the edge again.

"Look at you, coming again." I feel the air open up, as he moves away, positions himself over me, and strokes himself fast and hard. His breathing quickens, and finally, he grunts long and loud, squirting ropes of hot cum all over my chest. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" I hold onto his thick thigh for support.

"Knew you would be amazing." Dipping his finger into his cum artwork, he slides his

fingertip around then brings it up to my lips. I suck on it and wish I could have more. “It’s what I was afraid of.”

He was afraid. The thought of this emboldens me, empowers me. So I do make him feel. So I do have some control. And when both of us have cleaned up, and he lies down in bed and swoops me into his arms, I feel a knot in my heart I hadn’t been expecting. With his warmth wrapped around me, his heart beating against my chest, and a satisfied soft breathing against my neck, I have a hard time separating love and sex in my mind. I want this man—I want him every day. I want him pushing me out of my comfort zone, showing me how amazing sex can be, and teaching me about myself in the process.

He’s let me in, if only for a little while.

Can this thing—whatever it is—between us last? I don’t think it can.

But I don’t care right now.

Here I thought he’d be gone the moment it was over, but he stays. And I sleep harder and longer than I ever have in my life. My nether regions are sore, and my pride’s a little hurt, but it was worth it. Because that was the most amazing.thing.ever. And Kase knows it, too. Because he stays all night and all morning. And when Liam wakes up after a long night’s sleep at 7 AM, Kase says, “I’ll get him,” and lets me snooze.

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Kase

Mind.

Blown.

That is all.

Alana

We had to hit the wall before we could move past it.

At least that's how it seems. Over the next few days and week, Kase and I fall into "sync." I almost don't want to think about for fear of jinxing it. But he goes to work in the morning, trusts me alone with Liam all the time now, and comes home in a way better mood. There are more smiles, more compliments, more "thank yous," and every night ends in his bed or mine.

Not every sexual encounter is rough. Some are slower, more traditional, depending on his mood that day. But they all end with us falling asleep together, and I can't remember a time in my life's history when it wasn't that way. Weren't we always a couple? Didn't we always have hot sex then collapse in a spent heap of happiness?

How did I live so long without this?

Without him?

Something else happens, too. Liam and I are like "this." He babbles, "La, la, la, la" every time he sees me, which I'm hoping is supposed to represent "Alana," he always wants to be wherever I am, and he cries if I leave the room. I'm his everything, even though the evenings are reserved for his father.

Watching Liam and Kase together is the most rewarding part of my day. When Kase throws himself on the floor and lifts Liam on his legs high into the air like SuperBaby, I honest to God want to bawl. He may not be perfect, he may be

secretive, and I still don't know what he's hiding from me, but he loves his kid. I have to always remember, no matter what he's done, he's a good father.

But it does make me wonder. What is it?

Is he wanted for armed robbery? Did he murder his wife? Is he wanted in fifty states? My morbid curiosity leads me to online searches about Kase Hardwin. It's odd knowing that I'm sleeping with a man I know little about. But luckily, nothing turns up other than the usual business articles featuring his company.

At times, Kase will scoop me into his arms and kiss me right in front of Liam. I know he's just a baby and probably doesn't understand anything that's going on, but I also know that's bullshit. Babies, children, pick up on things, and I'm shocked every time he leans in and kisses me sweetly right in front of his son.

What does this mean?

Are we a thing?

I don't know what the things are anymore. His words echo in my mind all the time, though.

I'm not a good man, Alana.

I shouldn't be with him. He's no good for me. And yet, I can't see how he's bad for me either, when I'm happier every day and smiling almost all the time. Can this last? When he clearly told me that I wouldn't get him to love me?

But isn't that what kisses in the kitchen in front of a baby are?

If this isn't love, that's fine. But then, WHAT IS IT?

Sometimes, it's as if Kase has suddenly remembered he's not supposed to have feelings, and he'll let me know it by being an asshole for a whole of ten minutes. It's like Bert Roper takes over his mind (not his body, thank goodness) and suddenly, he's ordering me around again. But rather than get offended by it, I just wait. Because it usually doesn't last long. And before I know it, he's staring at me again holding his son like I'm the best thing to ever enter his life.

I don't know.

What the fuck.

Is going on.

I wish I did.

All I can say is it's been the weirdest, most rewarding six weeks of my life. But...is this all we'll ever be?

One night, I'm giving Liam his nightly bath, lovely lavender scents filling the bathroom, as the baby splashes in the water over and over again having just discovered his power to make water move, when Kase walks in.

"It just occurred to me..."

His deep voice resonates behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see him standing there, pen in hand, clearly just working in his office.

"That?" I ask, pouring warm water over Liam's head of baby hair.

"That we've had such a busy month, I haven't given you any time off, Alana."

It's funny. I had thought about this earlier, weeks ago even, when I first started working here. I thought about it all the time—when am I ever going to get a break? But ever since that fateful night when I almost left Kase for good? I don't think about time off anymore. I'm happy taking care of Liam, and I'm happy that Kase takes over when he gets home, and I'm happy knowing they're both nearby and I'm not alone in this.

“Oh,” I say.

“You don’t want time off?”

“Well...” I wipe my brow and look at Liam’s chubby wet cheeks. So cute! “I, uh...I guess some time off would be nice. What do you mean? Like a few days?” Honestly, I wouldn’t want that. I wouldn’t want to be away from these two that long. What’s wrong with me?

“I meant like an afternoon, a day, or even an evening. Don’t you have friends you want to go chill with?”

“Do you want me to go, Kase? Like, do you need time away from me?” The thought just occurs to me that maybe he’s the one in need of a break, though I do my best to give him space, and I rarely ask him for any information about his past. He made that very clear from the beginning, and I’ve always tried to respect that.

“No, I mean...” He rubs his neck in that way when he’s thinking about saying something that will push him out of his comfort zone, pull him farther way from his goal of recluse except for bouts of exercising his kinky sexual habits. He’s on the brink of taking us another level.

I can feel it.

“Alana...” He sighs and leans against the door frame in defeat. Sweet defeat. His words are more beautiful than any I’ve ever heard him utter before, even the sexy ones. “Do you want to go out...with me? Tomorrow night?”

Alarms sound in my head. What does this mean? Is he breaking down some more? Am I “making him love me?” Or does he just want a mental break from it all, like most good parents, and needs a buddy to join him?

Either way...YASSS.

But I have no clothes for this. I have no dress. I need my hair done, and my nails, and my God, I haven't gone on a date in...shit...ever! I've had sex so many times now, but never gone on a date. I chuckle to myself. There in the bathroom, all sweaty and exhausted and nanny-like, I smile over my shoulder and say, “I'd love that.”

Kase

“Tomorrow night” ends up being early this morning. I spent all yesterday thinking about it and decided we could both use a day away from the city. Once the babysitter arrived, I woke Alana up to mild protest.

“I promise I’ll make it up to you. Pack a day bag. Warm weather,” I tell her and leave the room to pack my own bag.

An hour later, we’re at LaGuardia Airport, and soon after that, sitting in first class on a flight to Miami. Spring hasn’t brought much warmth to the city yet, so I thought a day in tropical heat would do us both some good.

“Wow, you don’t do anything half-ass, do you?” Alana feels the cushiony arm rests of the Boeing 757 and accepts the glass of champagne from the airline steward with a big, lofty smile.

“Especially you.” I lean into her shoulder, caressing her arm.

Goose bumps erupt all over them, as she gives me a mock-shocked look. “That’s for freaking sure. I can’t believe I’m on a plane to Florida, Kase. What are we going to do when we get there?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.”

“Oh, come on. You probably have a whole PowerPoint planned out with notes in the margins. Everything from cuisine to activities to emergency contact information.”

She chuckles and sips her drink.

“I’m serious. I don’t.” I lean back in my seat and close my eyes. “Feels kind of nice, actually. Aside from our hotel, we have the whole day, tonight, and most of tomorrow.”

“Where are we staying? Not that I know anything about Miami.”

“Right on Ocean Drive. South Beach. It’s a warm eighty-five degrees and nothing but sunny skies.”

She’s so quiet, I have to look at her to make sure she’s still breathing. Her eyes are wide with disbelief. “Kase, when you asked me out on a date, I thought you meant like, the MoMA or something. A walk through Central Park.”

“Are you disappointed?” And now I’m wondering if this was too much, too soon. To me, a day’s jaunt to Miami Beach isn’t a big deal, but I can see how it would seem that way to her.

“Are you crazy? No way! This...” She leans back, sighs, and looks at me when I rest my hand on hers. I don’t want to think about what any of this means. I don’t want to overanalyze. I just want to have a good time. It is what it is. “This is awesome.”

“It is,” I agree and within minutes, we’re taxiing down a dirty, half-melted snowy runway, heading for land of sun, surf, and sand.

* * *

Miami Beachin March might be packed with tourists, spring breakers, and locals all out for a romp around the barrier island, but for me and Alana, it’s a day away from reality. I’ve needed this. She’s needed this. We’ve both been under too much stress

lately, and nothing says “leave your worries behind” like laying on the sand in Lummus Park, listening to the great Atlantic Ocean swishing against the shore. Drinks in hand, we listen to a local band of steel drums playing something vaguely resembling Beethoven.

“You know what the best part of this is?” I ask Alana, lowering my eyewear to peer at her through the brilliance reflecting off the sand.

“That we’re in freakin’ Miami Beach?” She giggles.

“That you’re in a yellow-and-black bikini.”

She scoffs. “A super-extensive bikini you had to buy for me in a tourist shop because I didn’t own one.” When Alana laughs, there’s this lightness I can’t explain. It’s fun and flirty and reminds me of a little girl whose daddy has just told her she’s the most breathtaking princess in the world. And while I’ve been with women exotic enough to resemble human orchids, Alana is the kind of homegrown sunflower you find in your own backyard.

The big, bright blooming kind you want to stare at all day.

“It was my pleasure, Alana. And if I’m lucky, maybe you’ll let me take it off you later.” It’s the rum floater in my drink talking, but I don’t need any help wanting Alana. Every day, I’m baffled by her. Why does she captivate me so? Aside from being intelligent, sexy as fuck, beautiful, stubborn, and hardworking, that is?

Her hazel eyes capture the sunlight and appear green today. Her desire for me is clear from the way she bites the inside of her lip as she thinks of a witty response. She doesn’t have one, though, and I’m glad. I like rendering her speechless. I like her innocence and lack of flirt game. She’s like no other woman I’ve ever been with. She’s too good for me is what she is.

And holy balls of Babylon, the girl can get freaky.

I. Never. Expected. That.

I'm a big, dumb guy at heart and yeah, I'll admit it—I want more of that dirty, awesome sex. If that is how she is at age twenty-one, what's going to happen when Alana unlocks her full potential in her thirties? Or her forties even? She's going to be one of those full-fledged sexy-as-fuck MILFs. The thought of her being a mother and still retaining her sexuality long after having kids turns me hard right here on the beach.

And because I can't, or don't want to, imagine her having anybody's children but mine, I strain inside my shorts because there's nothing hotter in this world than a woman who still turns you on after many years, has had your babies, and belongs to you.

Holy shit. I nearly slap myself back to center.

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I've already lost too much and I can't imagine the pain I'd feel if I were to ever lose Alana, too. I faced the truth a long time ago, then I faced it again when Evie passed away—I'm a cursed man.

"What are you thinking?" Her voice floats on the breeze and for all its softness, still catches me off guard.

"You don't want to know."

"Actually, I do," she says, shifting in the sand onto her stomach. Her ass is so tight, I could bounce a seashell off of it. "But I know you won't tell me."

Good girl. She's learned and accepted my rule—ask no questions. Don't get involved. I deflect the attention off me by asking her a few of my own. "Why banking? If your family was in service?"

"That's why," she says. "They worked for families all their lives. I swore I wouldn't go down the same path and banking had some amazing potential."

"Did you want to be the rich guy for once?" I ask. "It's not everything it's cracked up to be, you know."

"You only say that because you have money, Kase. Why advertising?" She volleys the question back at me.

"Because I'm good at it. Sure, there's lots of other things I'd love to be doing, but advertising promised me big bucks, and after growing up poor, that's what I wanted."

“Wait...” She pulls down her sunglasses and stares at me. “You used to be poor?”

“What did you think, Alana? That I was one of your rich families’ kids? You shouldn’t assume.”

“I didn’t, I just... That’s why you just asked if I wanted to be the rich guy for once?”

“Yep. My mother worked her ass off. Two, three jobs sometimes, all so I could go to college, get a good job. My dad was never in the picture, so she was all I had.” I have to stop talking. I never imagined I’d be mentioning my mom today and can’t bear the pain, even though it’s been ten years since she left this stupid planet.

What good was it to work hard to impress my mother and make her proud when now she wasn’t here to see it? Life is a dumbass bitch sometimes.

“Wow, Kase, I had no idea. Thanks for telling me that. I guess we’re not so different after all, are we? You wanted a better life. I wanted a better life. I had a better life for two seconds.” She scoffs but I know she hates working as a nanny. “Before it was all taken from me.”

“You’ll get it back,” I tell her. “This is just temporary. I know your kind, Alana. Nothing will stop you from getting what you want.” In fact, that’s why we’re lying here together today. Because of her insistence that I share and feel, that I stop pushing her away. “That’s what I really admire about you.”

I was going to say love. It’s what I love about her, but I told her she would never get me to fall in love—because I would never drag her into my world.

* * *

In the evening, we hit the bars and clubs, so different from NYC. Here there’s salsa

music, reggaeton, half-naked bodies writhing in the heat, drinks made from mangos, limes, and coconut. There's long, tanned legs left and right, and someone's always flashing their cars out on the curb, no matter where we end up. Porsches, Ferraris, Bentleys, you name it.

The music pounds like a heartbeat, urging us closer, as Alana's pretty arms wrap around my neck, and mine capture her by the waist. Her tits look beautiful in the silvery top she's wearing, low-cut and natural. There's little to stop me from sliding the fabric aside and sucking on them right here in the middle of the dance floor. Why not? People around me are drunk as fuck and doing worse, and nobody cares.

Anything goes here.

As her tongue slips into my mouth, darting around to taste and lose herself in the alcohol fog, my hands run up her torso underneath her top, resting at the lower curves of her breasts. My thumbs slide up and caress her nipples which harden under my touch. If I could fuck her in this club, I would. She eyes me with caution but I only smile.

"Guess what I want to do?"

"Visit the old guys playing dominoes in the park again?"

"Close. I want to turn you around and fuck you hard from behind while I play with these nipples."

"Like this?" Pivoting in place, she grabs my haunches and pushes her ass against me, writhing up against my stiff dick like she owns it. And let me tell you—though no one has ever owned my dick but me—she can have it any time she wants. From now on, no matter what's going on in our lives, Alana gets a free cock pass. 24-hour, full-access to Kase's dick, all day, every day.

“Like that,” I say, sucking on her earlobe, pressing a finger against her lips. When her mouth yields easily and we’re three sheets away from fucking in front of every person in this club, I grab her hand, down the rest of my drink, and get the hell out of there.

Each time I look back at her, I catch that Alana smile. I never thought I’d say this, but I love it. It lights up my fucking day. I wish I could see it every day and then I beam when I realize I do. But what about when it’s time for her to go? What if they call her from Lodwick or any other bank she’s applied to and hire her?

I may as well enjoy this evening, because nothing lasts forever. I hope she’s not thinking that she’s breaking through to me, because she’s not. This is as close as we’re ever going to get and I’ll never let her in more than I am right now. I wouldn’t hurt her that way. This night on Miami Beach will soon be a beautiful memory, and I intend to make the most of it.

The moment we arrive back at the hotel, we’re making out in the elevator, making out in the hallway, and practically fucking up against the door. I fumble for the card key, stumble into the modern, sleek hotel room, and pick her up with both arms. It’s the fastest way I can get her to move. And then, setting Alana onto her pretty feet on our balcony overlooking Ocean Drive, I strip her of her glittery top, yank off her tight black pants showing off her bouncy ass, but leave on the four-inch black heels.

“Kase...” she tries protesting.

I shush her, kiss her deeply, then drop to my knees and spread her legs. I eat out her beautiful cunt, shoving my face into its slick wetness, licking that clit, and making it do my bidding. I cover my face in her juices, because I adore this woman. Adore this pussy. I would do anything for Alana, even if it means leaving her.

In my swirling brain fog, I love her while I still have her. In the darkness. In the

warmth. In the presence of the great expanse of watery universe before us.

Alana

Something has clicked in Kase.

I feel it in his touch—it's softer. Less about controlling me and more about exploring, taking advantage of the moment, this balcony, my body. It's...I don't know. Adoration? Whereas before, he was all "I'll show you what you want," now he only wants to breathe me in, taste my gifts, and show me all he can be.

It doesn't take long for my desire to build. I mean, we've practically been having sex with our clothes on the entire night long, from one club to the next. That's the thing about Miami Beach, I don't feel like anyone cares or is offended. Everyone's here for the same sensual block party. Even now, completely stark naked (except for my shoes) out on this balcony, I don't care anymore if someone can see us.

It's just me and Kase, the ocean swishing below, and the cries of partygoers up and down the strip. And Kase's tongue, Kase's mouth, Kase's hot breath, slicing me open, searing me from my ass all the way up to my clit, working it in circles, molding me on his tongue. My body gives in readily—because I feel I'm his now—no one has ever owned me before, and no matter what happens between us, no one ever will again.

Not this same way.

When he starts fucking me with his fingers and sucking on my clit in a faster rhythmic way, I can't hold on anymore and come, giving him my love. Joyously, he slathers his own face with my juices running out of me, and I relish in the roughness

of his beard. “Fuck yeah...” The stars swirl, the breezes float over my back and bare ass, exposed to the beach below.

I’m buzzed but I’m aware of everything and though he stands and spins me around, forcing my breasts up against the railing, spilling over the edge, my nipples hardening in the wind, I almost lose my footing. His arms reach around me tightly to keep me from falling. I was never falling anyway—it was the dizzying sensation from the orgasm plus the drinks I’ve had tonight, married in a hazy dance.

“This.” I feel a slap to my ass. Then another. And another. I’m sure my cheeks are red, but I don’t care, because then his hand covers and soothes the pain. “This ass is mine, Alana.”

“Take it,” I tell him without realizing what I’m unlocking.

“No. Not tonight.” After feeling every contour of my body with his hands, he spins me around and unbuckles his jeans, pulling down the front of his shorts to expose his dick which never ceases to amaze me. Long and fat and covered in veins, ugly and massive, it’s so suckable, I long to have it in my mouth.

But Kase has other plans.

Positioning himself under me, suddenly, he hoists me up and wraps my legs around his waist. My feet instinctively lock behind his back. I’ve always thought I’d feel self-conscious with anybody doing this to me, but Kase lifts me like I’m made of baby hair, positions my pussy right over the head of his cock, then lets me fall onto him.

I groan, as he skewers me, filling me all the way to my core, pounding and lifting me, letting me fall and bounce on his cock, as his fingers dig into my ass. His stance is wide for balance, his arms and abs taut from the positions and strain of fucking me,

carrying me, and standing all at the same time.

Somewhere below, I think I hear amused conversation of people who might've spotted us. I can't be sure, and I don't care, because I'm not there. I'm nowhere and everywhere at the same time, having an out-of-body experience as Kase batters my sore pussy with his massive cock, taking me higher, making me feel all sorts of new heights of pleasure I've never felt before. His tongue plunges into my mouth, our foreheads press together, and I swear, at some point, we meld and become one.

One person. One beast. One entity.

Something inside of me snaps, and I'm not the Alana I've always known. I'm desperate for deeper jabs, needy for his balls to slap my ass, wishing he could fill my entire solar plexus then spill his seed way up into my soul. My fingers dig into his back, scratch for more, and I'm frantic for him to come, to take me with him, for us to climax together, so I can scream it from this balcony how good this man fucks me, how much I adore him, and how panicked I feel that I'm going to lose him.

I can't lose him. We've come too far, and I've allowed myself to get too close.

But it might be too late, because as he moans and cries my name and shoots way up into my body, gripping my back and pressing his spent forehead into my chest to suckle on my breast, I feel something shift again. This man who's completely ravaged my body, who's wanted me all night and brought me to a city three thousand miles away for a day, suddenly sets me down on the ground and rolls slightly away.

As though he's gotten too close. As though he felt our oneness.

And decided it was too much.

* * *

When we return to his home in NYC, it's amazing how quickly we fall back into our roles. Though the rest of last night was peaceful, we slept the whole night together, then took off this morning on a plane back home, now Kase is back to busy, back to being Liam's dad, back to asking me to do things for him around the house.

Maybe this is just how it will be. Maybe with us, it's three steps forward and two steps back. I certainly don't feel like he's pushing me away, but he's being cautious, and something inside of me desperately wishes to reach him. What is he hiding? How can I help? Is it a trust issue? Maybe if he felt he could completely trust me, he could confide in me. It bothers me that we can be as intimate as ever but there still be a wall around his heart.

And I spend the next few days giving him that space he needs on the other side of that wall while simultaneously plotting to destroy it.

* * *

A week later, the day in Miami feels like a long-gone dream, Liam has graduated to solid foods, demanding Cheerios all day long, and Kase comes home from work happy. It's like we're all playing roles of mommy, daddy, and baby in a family with no name, trying out this repetitive dynamic to see how it fits. I don't bring up the connection we felt in Miami. I know better than to push Kase away, but at some point, he's going to have to give.

I scope out my perfect moment—on a Saturday when the three of us are taking a stroll through Central Park right as the temperature goes up, and I can actually wrap my sweater around my waist from how warm it's starting to feel. Spring is a time of renewal, new beginnings, and I feel it down to my toes. Liam has been babbling a lot more. I'm curious to see what his first words, but a sadness also hits me.

Will I be here for that event?

Will I be here for his first steps? His first run, his exploration phase, and his second year? I've been checking job postings every day, and though I still haven't seen a job I'd like to apply for, with pay high enough to pull me away from nannying, I feel we're getting closer. A sister company to Lodwick has just hired a new exec, and if they're hiring, then maybe others will begin again too.

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The park is serene, as we walk, pushing Liam in his stroller. All around us are families. We look like one of them, but we're not one of them, and suddenly, I'm feeling emotional. "You okay?" Kase asks, dipping his head to look up into my eyes. "You're quieter than usual."

"Yeah."

"What's wrong, hon?" he asks in a way, as though he doesn't really want to know the answer.

"Nothing, really. Just remembering how I used to go on walks with my parents sometimes and the kids they cared for. It always bothered me that these kids got better clothes than I did, better stroller, better shoes, better attention overall. I wanted that attention for myself. I didn't want them having my parents. I wanted my parents all for me."

"I'm sorry you went through that," Kase says. For a moment, he puts his arm around me, then he takes it away. Tears rise into my eyes, because for the first time since Miami, I want his touch. A gentle touch, not the sex we have almost every night. I want that moment again, the one where he came unhinged and nearly became himself right in front of me. But right as he noticed himself giving it up, he reeled himself in again.

I want to see the real Kase. The completely unfiltered Kase. It's something I need to see once and for all, so I can decide if I should invest any more emotion or energy into him. If I had it my way, we'd be dating now. We'd be together, people would know about it, and I could call my mother and tell her I've met someone.

But I'm neither here nor there, and that's not a place I want to be.

That's the place I lived my entire life. Not completely ignored by my parents, but not the apple of their eyes either. There was always competition, and this time the competition is Kase's past. I don't want to share Kase with his demons anymore. I want him to give them up. I want to know one way or another where we stand, so I can tell my heart which way to go.

I'm no good at acting and can't do it anymore.

"Alana, you're crying." Kase stops walking and faces me. Thumbs wipe my eyes and he pulls me in for a strong, safe hug. I want to melt into him and stay there all day, but I'm only hurting myself. If he's never going to talk to me, if he's never going to let me in, then I may as well do what's right and put an end to this.

"Yes, I'm crying."

"Why?"

"Because I have feelings for you, Kase. And even though we're closer than we've ever been, I still feel like you're a million miles away, and that's not something I ever wanted."

"I know. I told you, Alana. I told you I couldn't go too deep. I knew you'd want more."

"Why can't you give more?"

He pulls away. "I want to."

"Then do it. I'll help you. You can trust me, Kase. I don't want to be anyone's second

best anymore. I want full attention, full love.” The moment I say it, I know I’ve fucked it all up. He runs a hand through his hair and blows out that frustrated breath of his. “But I can wait,” I add.

Because now I’m scared of losing him.

Scared I said too much.

Still, it’s out there. Though I tried to play it cool by telling him I could handle this, that I could be with him and not need any emotion from him, I only pretended to be strong enough in order to get one step closer. The truth is, I love this. I love us walking together like a family. I love Liam babbling and looking up at both of us, and I love the way Kase looks at me like I would make the most amazing mother for his child. I would do this even if I didn’t get paid.

But getting paid is a fine line between me being his nanny and his girlfriend, and he’s sure to keep me on the payroll just so he won’t have to dig deep into himself.

“Alana, hon...let’s talk about this later over dinner. I know you want more from me, but I don’t know if I can give it. I’m a damaged man. With...memories...” He grips his head, shakes it. “And pain. I told you that.”

“I don’t think you’re any more damaged than I am, or the guy next door, or the guy in the apartment above us. We all have demons and secrets. We all have ugly parts, Kase.”

But he continues to shake his head, like I know nothing. Like I’m just a child with so much to learn. So I let it go, because I don’t want to be that girl. You know the one, the pushy girlfriend who drives her man away instead of luring him closer, because she wants, wants, wants, and can’t let it go.

Thing is, I may be young but I know when I love someone, when I'm willing to go the distance just to help them be happy, and I want that with Kase. I know I'm crazy—that he's my boss, and I'm his nanny with whom he's started a bad, very unorthodox relationship—but maybe it could happen. Possibly.

I mean, before anything else—we're just a man and a woman, right? Like he told me once.

Just then, his phone buzzes in his pocket, giving me a moment to think and him a mental break from PsychoNanny. I crouch to smile into Liam's face. I need a happy, bubbly spit smile right now. Liam doesn't think about whether he should love me or not. He doesn't worry about the consequences of love. He just loves. Liam knows a good thing when he sees it.

At that moment, a little kid of about four or five comes running down the path and swipes Liam's beanie right off his head then disappears into the trees towards a playground on the other side.

“Hey!” I yell, but the kid just sticks his tongue out at me and keeps running.

“What the fuck was that?” Kase looks up from his phone.

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“Just some kid.”

“Let’s get his hat back. What a little shit.”

“Not worth it, Kase. Not every battle is worth fighting. But some are.” I give him a side-glance and tap Liam’s nose. “Hey, kiddo. Ready to head back now? Hatless and all?”

“Bababababa, blubbbbb.”

“I agree. It is starting to feel cold again. Will we ever get out of winter, buddy? Come on, let’s go.” The incident with the boy frazzled me, reminded me that sometimes, we have to roll with the punches, deal with what we’re given.

Right now, I’m trying to handle the situation with me and Kase as best as I can.

“We can’t do dinner,” Kase says. My heart, already deflated on the edge of hopelessness, completely falls flat. “My father-in-law wants to see me tonight. Celebratory happy hour,” he says in a stately fashion. “Business associates from the company will be there. In fact, we gotta hurry.”

“We?” I say hopefully. Could it be he needs a date or at the very least needs me there to watch Liam, since Mr. Roper might wish to also see his grandson?

Immediately, my brain mentally searches the clothes in my closet. There’s a chocolate dress that would look really great for an event like that. If I’m invited?

Kase shakes his head with a scoff, like it's a silly idea. "No, hon. Not you. Just me. It'd be awkward to have the nanny there, don't you think?" He gives a little laugh, like I'm some retarded fool, then pushes ahead of me and Liam on a mission to get back as quickly as possible.

I'm left behind. We—me and Liam.

I know I shouldn't read into it, but I feel like shit all over again. Like the hired help, the loser at the bottom of the totem pole. The little woman who must stay behind and care for the baby while big man does big things at big business party. Grunt. Brushing it off my mind, I tell myself he didn't mean it. He grew up poor, for Christ's sake. But part of me wonders...or did he?

Kase

I could tell Alana wanted to go, but I can't risk it. What if she tells Roper what a lovely oxygen tank he has this time? Or what if Roper suspects that more is going on between me and Alana, not just sexual relations? The old man is more perceptive than I give him credit for. I wonder if he knew all along that there was no romantic love between me and Evie.

But between me and Alana?

The truth is, I just need a break from her tonight. She means well, and she has every right to want to know what's going on between us, especially after I nearly broke down that night on the Miami Beach hotel balcony. Another second holding her, and I would've lost it. As it was, the tears stung my eyes. I'd never felt that close to anyone in all my life. And I'll never feel that close to anyone again.

I couldn't let her feel it.

I had to push her away.

All week, I've kept a safe distance. I don't ignore her like I used to, and I don't order her around either, but I haven't shown my feelings for her. I'm not even sure what they are, and that's why I have to go to this business happy hour alone. I'll just tell the old man that his grandson was feeling a little under the weather. He did ask me to bring him along, and the only way I could do that was by inviting Alana, too.

It's better this way.

Bert Roper lives in a mansion north of Sleepy Hollow, one of those old places to rival the Rockefeller's home at Kykuit. I take the 6 down to Grand Central then buy a train pass on the Metro North. I have a car—a beautiful Bentley—but I rarely use it. All my life, I took the trains to get around, and I still prefer it even today. Nobody looks at you when you're on a train. Nobody wonders how much money you make. Everybody's on their own path, getting where they need to go. The synergy of so much difference coming together for one common moment gets me every time.

By the time I've reached the old man's estate, expensive cars of every make and model fill the driveway, and the house is aglow with warm yellow light. The house Evie grew up in really is an architectural gem surrounded by lush formal gardens, but now I see it so differently.

No matter how great we got along, having our industry in common, I never felt she earned her way to the top.

She knew it, too. Knew she never would've made it to the top on her own, having been handed a multi-billion dollar company by her rich father. She never made it a secret either, or tried to pass his successes off as her own. Because of this, I respected her. Loved her as a friend.

But there never would've been more between us, even if I'd allowed my walls down.

So, why the undeniable attraction with Alana?

Roper is thrilled to see me. He wheels around in his sports chair, introducing me to every single person in the room. Many I already know from the days I used to do conventions, before I rose to the top of the agency and started sending others in my stead. People are happy to see me. Many tell me how sorry they are for losing Evie, that she was a great woman who will be greatly missed.

By none more than her son.

My son.

Thanks to Alana, I've learned to see Liam as more than just a Keynote subject, a charge in my care, one who needs strict scheduling and monitoring. I've never spent as much time with him before, never seen him giggle so hard as when Alana is pulling him up by the arms on her lap then letting him fall flat onto his back. I swear, every time he laughs like that, I see his mother.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," Roper calls from his throne on wheels. "Now that we're all gathered and present, I'd like to formally announce the transfer of Roper Industries over to my son-in-law...Kase Hardwin."

The room fills with applause and cheers, people clap me on the back, and faces appear in my line of vision, but it's like I'm watching it all unfold from behind a thick sheet of glass. Voices slow down, smiles stretch like melting circus clown makeup, and all I can do is nod and force myself to smile.

"Congratulations, Kase."

"There's no one better to follow in my daughter's and my footsteps," Roper assures everyone, and more glasses of champagne are passed around. A few high-ranking officials of the company don't look too thrilled at the news, but they also don't seem surprised. The last thing I need is people hating me for receiving something I didn't earn.

I'm not Evie—he can't just pass the company over to me. I never agreed to this. He only told me to think it over. Crouching low by Roper's ear, I mutter through a smile. "Can't we talk about this, sir? I never exactly got the chance to accept your offer."

“Nonsense, Kase.” Roper pulls a drink off a silver platter and hands it to me. “After dinner, we’re signing the contracts.” He coughs, lights the cigar he’s kept in his pocket all evening, then coughs again. From a nearby chair, Nettie rolls her eyes at me and shakes her head.

Nobody notices Nettie, but I notice Nettie.

She could be Alana’s mother, father. She could even be Alana, sitting there, invisible to everyone else, but highlighted to me, saving money for her son’s college, silently battling breast cancer in an effort to live another day so she can see her son graduate. Mom didn’t get that chance, and part of me wishes I could, in turn, pass the business off to Nettie.

Lord knows she’s been by Roper’s side more than anyone all these years.

I don’t deserve this. I don’t half the things I’ve been given in life, especially Liam, but somehow, I made it into this family, and I shouldn’t be ungrateful. For the business, for Liam, nor for the old man’s attention. I smile at everyone. People are still clapping and giving me thumb’s up. It’s like some awful dream from which I can’t wake up.

Sometime after dinner and before the signing of the documents, I escape to the restroom to breathe in, breathe out, while staring into the mirror. Just sign the goddamn documents, Kase. You’ve always wanted to be a billionaire, and Evie would’ve wanted it. Yes, but I wanted to get there on my own, not be handed the golden chalice.

Suddenly, there’s a noise outside in the formal parlor. Someone is shouting at the top of his lungs, a man’s voice, and he’s angry. What the actual fuck? My defenses kick into gear. I run out of the bathroom, ready to take someone down if I have to. A few men are crowded around another man, and I immediately think someone’s had too

much to drink. Either that, or someone's not happy about this business arrangement.

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But then, I see who it is.

I'll never forget the fucker's face. I saw it one time when he came to pick up Evie at her home while I was there having a drink with her. He glared at me like I didn't belong, like I needed to get the fuck away from his woman, but she was never his woman. Real men don't leave their women during times of need, don't deny them or refuse to care for their infant sons. Real men step up to the plate.

"Where is he?" Raymond Silas shouts, his deep voice bouncing off the walls. He's drunk and he drove here drunk, too. What a loser. But suddenly, I realize the very grave danger about to befall this room of people. Raymond Silas's gaze zeroes in on me across the room. He points. "There he is. Where's my son?"

If a tiny speck of dust fell from the gilded chandeliers to the parquet floors at this very moment, we would all hear it. Fifty or more pairs of eyes all fall on me. And somehow, I have to respond.

The blood pump inside my chest feels like it's about to explode, and when Roper himself looks at me then back at Raymond then back at me, I know my life's about to implode.

"What do you mean, Ray?" I ask, shoving my hands in my pockets. I stand there, waiting, as he breaks from the men holding his arms and comes toward me.

"You know what I mean, Hardwin. Don't be a dick. Where's my son? Where's Liam?"

I see. Raymond Silas thought that Liam would be here tonight, having caught wind of the big celebration through the grapevine, I'm sure. As an ad exec for another company, news travels fast, but no one is more surprised than I am when he glowers down at me in front of everyone and declares, "This guy's not the father of that boy."

"Hey, Silas, go the fuck home," someone says.

"Let's hear the man speak," someone else declares.

"Hardwin, you best plead your case," Roper stutters. His cigar smoke encircles my head. I want to vomit. I feel like I'm in *Gone With The Wind*, standing in an antebellum mansion with a bunch of aging men who all think they know what's best for me.

"Ah, the opportunist finally arrives," I say with an easy smile. "I was wondering how long before you showed up. Where's your proof, Silas?"

"I'll get your proof, Hardwin, just as soon as I see my son."

"Liam will never be your son," I tell him. "You're just trying to wedge yourself into this family, but you had your chance, Silas. You ruined it."

"Keep telling your lies that you swept in and rescued Evie after a broken heart I caused, Hardwin, but you and I both know the truth—I'm the father of that baby—and Evie told me to leave."

Is that true? It can't be. Evie swore Ray was the one who left her. Would she have really broken up with him then asked me to marry her? I know she had feelings for me that I couldn't reciprocate, but she never would've trapped me that way.

Would she?

“This guy,” Raymond says, pointing to me, and teetering across the floor to Roper. “Is a fraud, sir. He never loved your daughter, only married her because she didn’t want me after I lost my position at Bernfeld Agency. She was all about the money—that bitch.”

I lunge at him. I don’t know what possesses me but nobody talks about Evie that way, even if he might be right about the way things went down between them. Grabbing him by the collar, I spit expletives in his face, as calmly as one can without offending the older generation in the room. “I don’t care who left whom...you don’t ever call Evie a bitch. Now, go.” I toss him until he falls on the floor, and he has to scramble to stand back up. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“You were never married, Hardwin. I’ve done my homework.” Then, to the entire crowd with his hand up in triumph. “They were never married!” Laughing like a loon, he wipes blood from his tongue. “A fraud, sir. I’m Liam’s father, and I’ll prove it. Sorry to ruin your evening.”

Finally, Raymond leaves, and I’m left without breath, without a leg to stand on, and completely blind-sided. How could that asshole do this to me? How could he come back after all this time and claim ownership over Liam? He’ll have to fucking kill me first before taking back my son.

That’s right—my son.

He could’ve come back sooner, he could’ve worked things out with Evie, he could’ve done any number of things. Instead, he claims paternity on the very night Roper’s to sign the company over to me?

Yeah, I call bullshit.

But there’s only one way to know for sure, and it’s sitting at home in my night stand.

I haven't had the courage to look through it since her death. All her last moments, her last conversations, her last messages just sitting there in a time capsule. Evie's phone. I have to look through it and find out the truth. Did she push Raymond out of her life to get to me, like he claims? Or is Ray the opportunist I've always known him to be?

I leave the house without signing any papers, as multiple people come after me.

"Leave me alone," I call, throwing my hand behind me. The waiting Lyft driver scrambles to attention and opens the door for me.

"Hardwin!" The old man's voice calls after me, weaker than I've ever heard it. "Is it true, Kase?"

I might be a number of things, but I'm not a coward, so I turn around and face him. I'm also not a liar—only lied for Evie, because she desperately needed my help, and in her eyes, I saw my mother who'd also been abandoned by her family for having a child out of wedlock. I look Roper in the eye and tell him, "It's true."

He sputters, and I leave, his coughs fading behind me.

No wonder Evie couldn't bear the thought of having a baby without the façade of marriage. Roper can barely handle the news. The baby might not be mine biologically, but I am Liam's father. More than that piece of shit ever was, and I'll fight tooth and nail to make sure it stays that way.

Alana

After that dumbkid took Liam's beanie in the park earlier today, it took 12.8 seconds for him to catch a cold. So now, I'm rocking him near the fireplace, hoping he'll fall asleep after hours of whining from not being able to breathe.

"Alright, buddy, alright. I'll ask your daddy to get you something to help on his way home from the party." I could order something from the corner store now, but I wouldn't feel comfortable opening the door to a stranger without Liam here.

"Babababaa...."

"I know, buddy." Pulling out my phone, I compose a text, knowing I won't get the baby medicine for another couple hours, even though something tells me Liam's going to be up half the night anyway. I'm only a few letters in when I hear the front door opening.

Not expecting Kase for a while—it's not even 10 PM yet, and his father-in-law lives up in the Westchester area—I stand, clutching Liam against me. We both stop breathing to listen. Footsteps stomp through the hall in a hurry, heading upstairs. What the hell? Kase would at least tell me it's him and he's home.

"Hello?" I call out, my stomach in my throat. If there's an intruder, my best bet is to go outside with Liam, run off, and get to safety. I hurry into the foyer, about to grab both our coats, when I hear a familiar voice cursing and then the sound of a wall or door being punched. "Kase?"

“It’s me, Alana. Don’t come up here.”

Something is wrong—very wrong. “What is it? What happened?” I start up the steps but stop. I might think I know him well, but you don’t really know a person until you’ve seen them through thick and thin.

Liam’s blue eyes are wide and soaking in the sounds upstairs. He looks to me for answers, but I don’t have any. I hum a little song until he lays his head down on my chest. We stand there so long, waiting for Kase to make an appearance that eventually, Liam falls asleep through my pacing and singing. Slowly, I make my way over to the play room where I can put him to sleep in his play pen. I’d much prefer putting him to bed for the night upstairs in his crib, but I don’t trust Kase right now.

He goes down easily. I put Liam’s blue bunny next to him and cover him with his cozy blanket, then close the door, leaving it ajar. Time to go see what’s going on. Did something happen at the party?

At the foot of the stairs, I call up, “Kase?”

Suddenly, a flurry of heavy footsteps sounds down the upstairs hall, and he descends the stairs in a hurry. I wish I could tell him he looks handsome in the suit he’s wearing, because it does, and I was too annoyed with him earlier to tell him, but there’s something in his face. Something serious has happened.

Over his shoulder, a bag is slung. “Move, please.” He brushes past me toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I hold onto his arm instinctively.

He pauses to look at it, then yanks his arm away. “Away from here.”

“What’s wrong?”

He pauses, hangs his head, half in shame, half in despair. For a moment, I think he’s going to lose it. “I don’t know, Alana. I just...I need to get out of here.”

“Kase...” I rush over to him, hold his arms firmly, and look up at him. “Tell me what happened. We can talk about this, whatever it is. Just...don’t go.” Panic rises in my chest. If he leaves, what’ll happen? Do I stay put with Liam? Do I report his leaving to the police, tell them that my employer took off without a trace?

“I have to leave, Alana. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of for a few days—”

“What? No. Kase, please.” I tug on his jacket, but he only pushes me back and re-slings his bag over his shoulder. “Where are you going?”

“No fucking clue.”

“Please tell me what’s happening. I can help.”

“You can’t help, Alana!” he shouts. His icy glare on me is a warning. I’m pushing him. But I can’t simply let him go either. Liam needs him—I need him.

“Why are you acting like this?” I beg.

“I’m not who you think I am.”

“Who are you, a murderer? Are you wanted in fifty states? Because, if you are, I still don’t think I could undo the way I feel for you, Kase. Tell me what’s going on. Please.” Overwhelming emotion overcomes me. “I love you.”

He stares at me, long and hard. “You don’t know what love is until you’ve lost the

most important person to you, Alana. You have no clue.”

“I know enough,” I fight back. “No, I haven’t lost a wife like you have, but—”

“I haven’t lost a wife, Alana!” He pinches the bridge of his nose and breathes slowly until he’s calm. He looks at me. “I was never married. I didn’t love Liam’s mother.” So, it’s as I thought...he only married her because of the baby. But then... “In fact, I’m not even Liam’s father.”

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I can't stop staring at him. "What?"

"I'm not his father. I'm nobody to him, Alana. I married my best friend to get her out of a quandary, and now my life's fucking falling apart."

"Why did you do that?"

"She needed me. She risked losing her inheritance, because her father's ancient and would never go for her being a single mom. It's the same bullshit that happened to my mother."

"What happened to your mother?"

"Never mind, Alana!" He storms toward the door and turns the handle.

I have to speak now or risk losing him. "But you love him, Kase. You take care of him. He loves you like his father, so that's all that matters. I don't judge you." In fact, this might be shocking, but it's nothing that can't be solved.

"That's not all that matters," he says, torment in his dark eyes. "Liam's father came to the party tonight. Caused a huge scene. He plans on taking him, Alana. He plans on taking my son." Kase cringes into his fist, and suddenly, I feel how hard this is for him. He wasn't Evie's husband and he's not Liam's father, and now it's clear to everybody that he's been lying.

Fuck.

“I’m nobody to Liam. I’m nobody to anyone.”

“You’re everything to me.” I pull him in, burying my face in his chest, and push the door closed. “Stay with me, please.”

“Alana...” My name comes out a whisper. Kase collapses in a heap of sobs against my body, but then he pulls himself together, drops his bag, and carries me up the stairs. “I need you so fucking badly.” No explanation necessary, but I know this won’t solve everything. Somehow, we have to keep him from losing Liam.

Kase drops me to my feet then shoves me against the wall roughly, all without reaching his bed. My arms are forced up and my shirt is pushed up over my head. Hungrily, he latches onto my tits, squeezing and sucking them hard, and my body arches into his mouth. I need more. I need him completely. I never realized how deeply I want to be his woman until tonight.

“I can help you, Kase.” I don’t know how I could possibly, but somehow, we can navigate this shitstorm together. “Make love to me, please.”

He grunts in response, pulls off the rest of my clothes, and drags me to the bed. Suddenly, I’m flat on my back and he’s between my legs, shirt yanked off, and his pants around his knees. There’s something feral in his eyes. He’s not a man tonight but something entirely new. Maybe his demons have finally possessed him and now I’m going to feel the consequences of my pursuit. He’s going to show me why I should’ve stayed away from him, like he warned me to so many times.

Kase pants, grits his teeth, and tells me to open my legs wider. I do as he says and he mutters, “Slather your ass, Alana. Take that delicious pussy juice and smear it all over your ass.”

My body tightens, though with fear or anticipation, I’m not sure. All I know is that

I'll do anything for him, just like I told him that first day. Anything. If I have to bend over and take it up the ass for the first time to get him to stay, then that's what I'll do. I know that goes against everything this world has ever taught me, but this world doesn't understand how much I love and trust this man.

This man I shouldn't want but do.

This man I shouldn't pursue but can't stop.

This man I adore.

I do as he says then watch as he sheds the rest of his clothes, knees between my legs and pushes the head of his cock against my pussy. Dragging it around, he gets it wet then pushes his fingertip against my tight asshole. I've heard things. About pain and getting filled and feeling like it's just too much, but I can do this.

I want this as much as he does, even if I'm a little frightened too...

Across Kase's face is an eclipsed moon of conflict. I can tell he doesn't want to hurt me or take advantage of me anymore, but I can also tell that I'm his only solace in this world and needs me now, more than ever. And that's all I ever wanted—to be his woman.

"Go slow, please," I tell him. It's my only request.

Kase moves from my pussy to my ass and begins to push in slowly. "I can't promise anything." I know. Tonight he's an alpha wolf and I'm his submissive mate. I can't control his speed anymore than I can control his pain.

But I can ease it.

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply to relax and feel Kase's massive cock beginning to fill me. There are no words to describe the depth and intimacy of this act. All I know is that in less than two months I've gone from complete virgin to Kase's willing cockwhore, and I wouldn't change a fucking thing.

When he's in all the way, and I'm feeling like I'm going to explode, he leans down and kisses me strongly, with purpose. His eyes burn into my brain. "You win, Alana. You want me? Here I am."

He's got a plan, and I know what it is: he wants me to regret my decision to love him, by making this difficult and rough, so I'll never want him again. But what he doesn't understand is that he could never push me away. As long as he'll have me, I'll want to be with him. Even if he's about to hurt me.

Suddenly, he pulls back and pushes in again. I cry out loud, gripping the sheets. He's wrong. It doesn't hurt, it overwhelms me, pushes me higher, teaches me new things about him. New things about myself. When he sees in my eyes that I'm not about to give up, that I want it harder and stronger than he's ever given it to me before, he becomes unhinged.

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Flipping me over, he pulls me to my knees, handling me like I have no free will, when everything about this is exemplary of my free will. All of it. And sooner or later, he's going to realize that I'm the woman for him. Looking back, I see Kase preparing to push in again, only this time, he lets a long line of saliva fall from his mouth onto my ass. Swirling his cock around the fluids again, he pushes into my ass.

I moan and arch back into him. "More...harder," I tell him.

"You're a fucking masochist for pain, aren't you, Alana? If you were smart, you'd leave me, find yourself a nice man who can love you the way you deserve."

"I don't want a nice man. I want the man I love." Talking over my shoulder as he reams me in the ass is rebellious as fuck. No matter what he does to me, he won't break me, won't wear me down. With every push, I'll push back. With every slam, I'll slam back.

Before I know it, he's full force fucking me, hoisting his foot onto the bed for leverage, balls slapping against my pussy. There's pain, but it's sweet pain, good pain, the pain of breaking down barriers and creating new pathways.

Another way for us to become one.

I will never not want this.

Kase

Alana's still here.

She should've quit that day, should've ignored me and stuck to her job. Instead, she blocks the door to keep me from leaving, doesn't judge me, and shares her entire body with me. That's trust. She accepts me as I am. What I ever did to deserve this fearless, persistent, gorgeous woman, I'll never know.

But here I am, pounding her in her virgin ass.

So beautiful. And fucking hot. And she's mine—all mine. I could be a dick and take her for my own. She said it herself—she'd do anything for me, though I don't know why. I don't deserve her, and she deserves another man.

But the thought of another man doing what I'm doing now burns my balls. No fucking way can I let someone else get this view, have this woman.

My hands grip her cheeks, hold her still as I fuck her, and it's a minute before I realize she's touching herself throughout all this.

“You like this, Alana?”

“I love it. Come for me, Kase. Come inside my pink little asshole.”

Holy fuck, this girl knows what to say every time. The moment I hear it is the moment that electric wave rises up through my balls and shoots out and up, radiating

all throughout me. “You’re getting it,” I tell her through a tight groan. “You’re getting your wish.”

“Yes, Kase. Come inside me. Make me yours.”

“You are, Alana. You’ll always be.”

Even if I can’t be with her. I can’t tell her this, because she’ll never understand what I’m about to do. Once my body is spent and I literally cannot move another muscle, I throw myself in bed, lie back, and pull her on top of me so she’s sitting on my face. Everything blends together, scents are musky, but I don’t care. It’s the most intimate way I’ll ever see her.

As she holds onto the headboard, her clit pressed up against my tongue, I lick her, fingering her in the pussy until I begin to feel those muscles squeezing together. She’s perfect, beautiful to me, and incredibly sexy, the way she grinds herself on my face, using it to reach her angles and sensitive spots. Finally, she finds one that she likes and begins rocking back and forth, as I keep fucking her over and over with my finger.

“Keep doing that...”

My hand reaches up to cup her breast, giving it a little slap and pinching her nipple for good measure. Suddenly, her knees form a vice around my head and squeeze, as she cries out loud and climaxes hard and long, more of her essence coating my tongue and face. I love this woman. Will always.

But I can’t tell her. Can’t bring her hopes up. I’m out of words to describe how love just isn’t meant for me. Hopefully, she’ll forgive me in time. And once we’ve kissed our long, deep post-coital kisses and rubbed each other’s backs, once we’ve gazed into each other’s eyes, and once she’s fallen asleep, I pick up my bag, rifle through

my night stand drawer for Evie's phone, and go anyway.

Because life is Murphy's Law. I know, the moment I give into Alana, accept her love, and start the path of partnership, that'll be the moment something tragic will happen. An accident or disease will claim her, and I'll have to go through that vicious cycle of excruciating emotional pain all over again. There's only so much one man can take.

And I've met my quota for one lifetime.

* * *

Late at night, I walk into a random hotel on the Upper West Side. No clue the name, no clue the time. All I know is the price is right, and I need a place to be alone. At some point, Alana will wake up and find me gone. She'll curse my name and call me a coward, and maybe I am, though I prefer to think of it as loving her. By cutting myself off from her, by helping her think of me as an asshole.

This way, she'll never have to deal with the crap that is my life.

Sitting at the hotel desk, I send off a series of emails to all my secretaries and assistants. I won't be in for a few days. I need to regroup, figure out what to do with my life. There are plenty of messages awaiting me from people at Roper's happy hour who witnessed the spectacle that was his drunken proclamation of paternity.

What made that asshole think he could just show up there and make an announcement like that? Was that supposed to put Roper on his side just to make him hand over the business? Raymond was never there for Evie's company, never put in the work, never kept his life straight enough to warrant high praise from the big boss. In the end, he must've known he wasn't good enough for Evie or Liam because he left. Not so different from you, huh, boss? My conscience tells me. Shut up. I face my responsibilities. Just because I need to withdraw for a few days doesn't mean I don't.

Once I'm settled in, I whoosh out a heavy breath then take Evie's phone and stare at it, as it charges. Once the phone logo comes up, I enter her password, which she easily gave me in case of an emergency during her pregnancy, and start looking through her messages. I have to find out if Ray was telling the truth and Evie left him. If it's true, it's a game-changer. It'd mean that I was stupid enough to fall for it. It'd mean I married her under the impression that I was helping her out of a jam when really, I participated in deception. But worst of all, it'd mean that I'm not the rightful father to the baby.

I find the text messages between Evie and Ray from early on in the pregnancy, and it's clear they engaged in many a text war. Nervously, I read each and every one, from the early ones where they were a happy couple. There's even one where Evie says I don't trust Ray. Damn straight I don't trust him. That was my first impression of him, and I told her so.

In another text, she tells him the exciting news that she's pregnant and sends him a photo of the pregnancy stick test. It took him a while to respond to it but eventually, he replied with a heart emoji.

That's it? That's all you say when your woman tells you she's pregnant? What a fucking loser.

After that, the texts get progressively more depressing, and eventually, it's clear that Ray has left the building. By the end of the first trimester, he wasn't responding to any more of her messages, and then began all of Evie's texts to me and her friends telling us what a disappointment Ray was turning out to be. In her inbox, I find an email thread with one of Ray's friends, trying to talk some sense into him and coax him out of hiding.

She wasn't lying.

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I look up and close my eyes with a small, satisfied smile. I knew she wouldn't lie. I never should've doubted her to begin with. Ray's the opportunist, the liar who'll stop at nothing until he gets what he wants. He'll step on as many toes as he needs to. Ray left Evie, didn't participate in the pregnancy, and it's all right here on her phone. Putting the phone back in my bag, I sigh knowing I have what I need, if it ever comes down to a courtroom.

Three days. I spend three days holed up in this suite, ordering food and ignoring calls. Alana texts me the first morning, a question about Liam and what she should do about a rash he's developing. Her tone is stern, includes nothing about us, and my heart aches knowing she probably hates me for leaving. I left her plenty of money in the account, and she should have no problem getting Liam to a doctor for the rash, but I just can't be there for her today.

I have to figure out a plan first.

* * *

The plan arrives two days later in the form of an idea that wakes me up so fast, I nearly hit my head on the night stand. No fucking way Ray is going to take Liam away from me. Even if he does prove paternity, the judge will know who was there throughout the pregnancy—me. Throughout the birth—me. Throughout his upbringing thus far—me. Plus, there's all the text messages and emails on Evie's phone.

Liam is my son, by heart and virtue, and awarding custody to Raymond would be the worst thing any judge could ever do. Still, I can't ignore the panic in my heart

knowing I could lose him at any moment, and because of this, I get the grand master plan to go home and take my son on a vacation—just me and him alone, away from the city. Where will we go? I have no idea, but wherever it is, Ray will have to find me.

* * *

I can hear him giggling as soon as I unlock the front door. Liam, having a grand old time in the bathtub, splashing and screeching like a dolphin. That kid sure loves the water so much, he'll probably become a swimmer in the future. I head up the stairs toward the happy sounds, knowing today will probably be the day Alana leaves for good. I can't imagine she would take much more of this after all I've done to her.

All part of my plan to help her move on and find a life without me.

Pausing at the bathroom door, I knock softly to announce my presence. Alana's kneeled at the bathtub, that perfect shape from behind a sight for sore eyes. "Hey," I say.

She doesn't reply, but Liam's face lights up like a sunbeam and he proceeds to splash the fuck out of Alana. I bite back a laugh, but what I really wish I could do is cry my eyeballs out. I left these two alone, I put Alana through hell, and now I'm about to tell her it's time to go.

"When you're done there, could you pack a bag for Liam, please? I'm taking him for a few days."

At this, she has words for me. "Where are you taking him? He's just getting over a cold."

"Don't worry, he'll be fine. Make sure to pack his jacket."

“And what am I supposed to do while you’re gone?” Vicious eyes glare at me over her shoulder. I wish I could unsee them, but now they’re there, burned into my consciousness forever.

“You can go home a while. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“You’re going to hide him,” she says.

“No. I’m going to spend time with him. I have a feeling this will all go south, hon, and I want to spend as much time with Liam as I can. I know you think I’m a coward, but I’m trying, Alana. I tried to be a good father, got fucked. Tried to be a good husband, got screwed. Tried to be a good friend, shafted. Tried to honor my mother’s memory...”

Ugh, I can’t fucking finish that one.

All this happened because I couldn’t let what happened to my mother happen to anyone else ever again. Welcome to my life.

Alana finishes the bath, wraps Liam in a fluffy towel, then moves past me. Circles ring her eyes. I’m sure she’s been up every night because of Liam but also because of all the uncertainty I’ve caused. After she sets Liam on his bedroom floor with a bottle, she comes out of the room and stands in the hall.

“Listen, we’re not so different, you and me,” she says. “I lived around rich families all my life then the minute I got out of that world, I got sucked back into it. Nothing else to do but hold your head up, grin and bear it. You, you stayed away from relationships and falling in love, only to find yourself a wonderful best friend, then you got snagged into being a father.”

“What’s your point?” I ask, itching to get away from this lecture.

She crosses her arms, and for a split second, she looks like my mother whenever she was mad and ready to give me a talking-to. “My point is that you don’t get to choose the people you love in this life. The universe chooses them for you.”

“I don’t believe in the universe making decisions for me,” I say.

“What else would explain how we got here when neither of us wanted it?”

“I call it misfortune.” Spinning and heading toward my room to pack a bigger bag, I try to get away from Alana and her fortune cookie wisdom.

“Well, I call it fate,” she says, following me. “And loving you was never my misfortune, Kase. Believing I might earn your love in return was.” Her words sting but I can’t look at her, or I’ll want her again. She has power over me, the power to make me stay, and I can’t let anyone control me that way again—ever.

“You earned it alright. But this is how my love is, Alana. Incomplete and aggravating. You don’t need this kind of love. Nobody does.”

“I guess you don’t love me enough to change then.” I hear her voice catch at the end, and when I glance her way, I see her crying. I fucking hate when she cries, especially since I know she doesn’t do it to manipulate me. In fact, I’ve never seen anyone hold her tears in better than Alana, so seeing them run so freely now makes me feel like the biggest douchebag alive.

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“I love you enough to let you go, Alana. And one day, you’ll thank me for it.”

* * *

Our vacation is at a cabin by the lake somewhere north of Bear Mountain. It’s a long haul, but I’ve needed this distance from the city. I’ve needed the solitude, the fog on the surface of the lake every morning, and my daily hikes with Liam strapped to my back. Together, we look at trees, at frogs, at cool rocks, and we even share meals by a handmade fire.

We think of Alana a lot. I know Liam misses her, because he gets this big question mark on his face when I hand him his milk bottle. He slaps it a lot and says, “Nananana?”

“Yeah, buddy. Alana’s not here. I know. I’m sorry about that, but she’s just your nanny, kid. Nothing else.”

Nothing else. Just your nanny. Even my own words don’t sit right with me. If anything, she’s his everything. His morning, his naptime, his evenings, his bedtime lullabies, his nights, his everything. And I sent her home packing just like that. How amazing would it have been to bring her along with us? To spend time here together as a pseudo-family, having the times of our lives? But I couldn’t set up those expectations, not for her, not for Liam.

“Buddy, don’t look at me like that. The sooner you get used to women falling out of your life, the better off you’ll be.” I’m firm and happy with that assessment except that Alana never dropped out of my life. I dropped out of hers. Minor detail that we

don't need to talk about now, because we have two more miles to hike back to the cabin.

Extinguishing the fire, I make my way back home, if we can call it that. I haven't seen my own house in months, since the night Evie died. I've pretended that her house is my house ever since, and even Liam looks like he could live out here with me indefinitely. It's beautiful and so peaceful. We could start a new life out here. Just me and the big boy.

But as we arrive back to our area and I trudge toward the cabin that's been our home for a week now, I almost see the car parked out front with my eyes closed. I've imagined it arriving for days now, I just didn't expect a cop car to accompany it. It came to me as I was driving here through the melting snow—the boy at the park, the one who took off with Liam's beanie hat that day.

Someone sent that boy to do that job.

Someone needed the hair and skin cells inside that hat for a paternity test, and deep inside, I knew the results for that test would come to haunt me any day now. Hence these much-needed last days with Liam.

A woman steps out of the car, along with an elderly gentleman. Badges are flashed, and I know that life as I know it is over. "Mr. Hardwin? I'm Ilsa Hernández from Department of Children and Families. We have a court order to remove Liam Hardwin from the premises. Say your goodbyes and we'll meet you inside."

Alana

Sitting in the Brooklyn apartment I leased thinking it'd be my home while I worked at Lodwick Brothers, I should feel happy. But instead, it's the shittiest feeling in the world. There's one sad sofa from my college apartment, one crappy mattress with no headboard or footboard, a few dead plants, and boxes everywhere. The place has sat empty for two months, waiting for that first big paycheck from Lodwick, the one I was going to use to furnish the place.

I have the money, but it was earned working for Kase so I haven't been to my apartment this whole time. I'm not even sure it feels right here anymore. After waiting a few days at Kase's place, hoping he's return any moment with Liam, I finally packed my bags and came "home." But it was hard to leave Kase's. His house had become, not just my workplace for two months, but my home away from home, my transition after college and whatever awaits me now.

His house empty and sad when I left, I fought back tears. No sounds of Liam babbling and laughing, no sounds of Kase ordering me around, which is better than this utter silence...no one to talk to.

There's also solace in the quiet. I know, that the moment I tell my mom what happened, she'll be calling every day, my friends with whom I've been out of touch, will also start calling, and my father will want to know what happened there and did anyone hurt me. I'll have to explain. So for a few more days, I'll sit here in silence surrounded by white walls, and wonder where I should go from here.

But after a while, the silence deafens me, and loneliness consumes me. The gravity of

losing it all finally applies its full weight onto my shoulders, and before I know it, I'm bawling on the saggy sofa. I don't know where the tears come from; I've done such a good job holding them back, and in a way, I knew it would amount to this. I knew I'd lose Kase. He made it clear from the beginning that I should stay away from him, that he wasn't a good man for me, but no—I had to push it, didn't I? I had to feel like Superwoman, the girlfriend who would change Kase Hardwin.

Stupid, silly girl.

You know nothing.

And now, you have nothing.

Stuck to my job is what I should've done. Worn blinders so as to not be swayed by Kase's rugged good looks. But no, I had to go and get blinded by his handsomeness, affected by his demeanor, and taken in by his mysterious layers. If I sit here crying into my pad thai, I have no one to blame but myself.

I gave him everything that I had, but what he needed most was space. Though it wasn't my fault that he left, I feel like it was. I know that Liam's biological father coming back into the picture was the impetus that made Kase lose his shit, leave town, and take Liam with him, but I can't help but think that his involvement with me didn't help either.

All this time, he thought I would judge him. He thought that my knowing about his past would make me see him differently, but what he doesn't realize is that my opinion of him hasn't changed. If anything, I can't help but see him in an even better light now. How many people do I know who would've married their best friend with no romantic involvement whatsoever just so her family wouldn't judge her? Just so her baby wouldn't grow up without a father?

That took guts.

Kase did what few men would ever do, and to me, that makes him a hero.

But he'll never see it. He'll always think he's not good enough for me, he'll always think he can't love again just because he lost his mother and then Evie. I understand his pain. At least, I see where it comes from, but it doesn't have to be that way. Life has no guarantees, and even staying away from love won't guarantee happiness.

Me, I'd rather go all in—love completely at a high risk than never love at all.

But now, I'm not sure I'll ever have the chance to tell Kase that.

He's gone. And soon, I will be too.

* * *

In the morning, the nail on the coffin arrives.

Le Nanny calls to let me know that “due to abrupt changes in circumstance,” I've been let go from the Kase Hardwin job, effective immediately. Kase has provided for an extra month's salary plus bonus, which is enough that I won't have to worry for a while, and his letter stated that if I needed more, to let my agent know, so he can arrange for more checks.

I know he's trying to take care of me, or at least he's doing this out of guilt, but I don't need his charity. I'll be applying to bank jobs all day long and tomorrow as well, and if I don't hear back from any of them, then I'll just return home to my parents. I'll start all over, like I always have.

I'm not worried about getting along in life. I've always kept my head above water,

done the dirty things that nobody wants to do in order to make a buck. I even took care of a child who wasn't mine for ten weeks straight when I am, quite possibly, the worst nanny in the world, out of duty. Who knew that in that time, I would grow to love this little boy? That I would miss his voice in the mornings when I awaken to a plain apartment devoid of love, giggles, and chubbiness?

My tears for missing Liam and Kase take up permanent residence on my face. So much that when I go out for a walk, people on the street actually look at me then glance away. The cashier at the corner market actually asked if I was okay, and I lied and said that I was. But no, I'm not okay and never will be again.

Finally, in the evening of my seventh day back at the apartment, I hear on the news that Raymond Silas has assumed custody of Liam Hardwin while legalities are worked out, that the paternity test came back as positive, and that Raymond and his family are thrilled with the decision.

But meanwhile, my heart breaks for Kase.

No longer at Newfound Ad Agency and nowhere to be found, Kase is missing, and my anguish for his safety burns my soul. Where could he be? Wherever he is, I know that he's dealing with this all on his own. As the most a-social millionaire I've ever known, besides Batman, I know that Kase will not reach out for help. Even if it kills him, even if he knows I can soothe his heart and make him feel better, he will not reach out to me, and this is what ultimately kills me every day—that he won't let me in.

Kase Hardwin doesn't trust anyone enough to help him get through this hard time. Doesn't trust me. I know I'm only twenty-one, going on twenty-two soon, but I'm not stupid. I've had my moments of weakness with him, sure, but only because I've never felt such overwhelming passion and love before like I have for him.

“You need me, Kase,” I cry into pillow as I begin the 9th season of Friends on Netflix. In this old show, everyone leans on each other for support. They’re the antithesis of Kase and me, and I don’t know why it can’t be different. What I do know is that I have to get over it. Wipe the snot from my nose and get over the fact that Kase will never come to me. He’s a damaged, tormented man, and no amount of girly love will change that.

He needs therapy to help him love again, not my persistence.

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In the meantime, I have one thing to help me feel better about the shitty state of affairs that is my life—the financial gurus at Thames Group have emailed about my application. They'd like to know if I can come in on Monday for an interview. Starting salary is equal to about what I make working for Kase, and I should be doing cartwheels right now.

If this gig works out (and they seem super eager to fill this position ASAP) then I get to keep my apartment, get to start over where I wanted to be in the first place, and get to work in my chosen career. I should be over the fucking moon, but I'm not. Somewhere, in the back of my stubborn mind, I kept hoping Kase would trust me enough to call, tell me where he is and what's going on. I kept hoping that maybe, just maybe, he was getting Liam back and I could come back to work on Monday. I kept hoping that, even if the situation with Liam was in limbo, Kase would at least want me back—just me—to be with him, help him get through life.

To be his girlfriend.

But I guess that was too much to ask for. Now, it appears I have everything I've ever wanted—the job, the dream apartment, a career in the big city, never having to wait on rich people ever again. And now that I finally have the world at my fingertips, the way I'd hoped and felt the day I graduated from college...now I don't want it.

I want to be Liam's nanny.

I want to see Kase everyday.

I want to make love to him and maybe be a family. I want the arguments, I want to

push his buttons, and I want to go on walks with my boys in the afternoons. My boys, Kase and Liam. I want to play games with them and laugh while watching movies, and see Liam laugh when Kase tosses him too high into the air, because when they're both smiling, my heart feels full, fuller than it ever could sitting at a desk at Thames Group's fancy schmancy offices in midtown.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Which is why I sail through the interview on Monday morning without even the slightest hint of nerves. Not giving a fuck, as it turns out, is a great way to kick ass in business.

Ironically, getting asked if I can start immediately by the hiring manager doesn't even come as a surprise to me. I reply "yes." I'd be happy to start right away.

But inside I feel nothing.

Kase

What do you do when you get a message telling you your fake father-in-law is on his deathbed and wants to see you? Especially when, the last time you faced him, you were outed for being a liar and a total fraud?

I'm sure he wants to tell me what a huge fucking disappointment I am to him, how both his daughter and I made his last months of life a living hell, and how I should choke and hang in my own web of lies.

You face him, that's what you do.

If that's how he wants to spend his last moments, telling me I'm an asshole, that's his right. I should let him have his moment. My only other choice is to be a coward and hope he doesn't hire someone to off me after he's gone.

Leaving the cabin that's been my hideaway for the last month, I drive toward the city. I hate this car, hate the money that paid for it, and hate everything that has to do with my success. It's all built on bullshit and lies. None of it matters. The only things that mattered to me in this world are now gone.

Pulling into the private hospital only the city's richest can afford is like driving into the Trump Tower meets St. Patrick's Cathedral. St. Anne's rises like a beacon for the heavily insured and walking into it feels like I've entered The Emerald City. I find my way to Suite 45 and find several people I know standing around outside the room talking quietly. Some are execs from his company, some are family members, cousins of Evie's, many of whom were at the party the other night. They all quiet down when

they see me.

I'm a dick, the man who lied to everyone.

I see it in their hateful stares, hear it in their scoffs. Fuck them. They don't know anything about my life. They don't know what I had to go through, the dilemma I was faced with when Evie asked me to bail her out. And until they've walked miles in my shoes, they can't say shit. I shift past them, keeping my eyes on one person—Nettie. She stands outside the door, hands clasped, eyes red. Will she really miss the old man? Well, why not. When you spend enough time with someone...

"Is anyone in there?" I ask her.

"The nurse is. His liver's shutting down. They're giving him morphine now."

"Should I wait in line then?" I gesture to the crowd behind him.

"They've all said their goodbyes. You'll want to go in as soon as the nurse is done."

"Okay." I stand with my back against the wall, wondering what he'll have to say to me, what I should say to him.

I don't think I can tell him I regret what I did.

If Evie were alive to ask me to help her again, I would do it again without a doubt in my mind. If her dishonest relationship with her father is a byproduct of the judgment he was sure to pass on her for having a child out of wedlock, then that's on him. Too late to do anything about it now.

"Nice move," one of the execs mutters. I look up at him and see he's talking to me.

"You thought you'd be slick, huh?"

I would say “suck my dick,” but Nettie’s here, and I’m a gentleman. “I’m sorry, do you pay my bills?” I ask.

“No, but you tried to get Roper to. Asshole.”

He’s implying I married Evie and claimed paternity just to get Roper’s inheritance. That isn’t, and never was, my intention, but clearly that’s what everyone thinks of me now. Fuck him. Fuck everybody. Except Nettie. Nettie’s a saint.

I don’t honor him with a reply and at that moment, the nurse walks out of the room anyway. “Hardwin?” She looks around.

Hands shoved in my pockets, I tell her, “That’s me,” and walk into the room as she holds the door open for me. The door closes behind me. The suite is furnished a lot like a penthouse at The Plaza Hotel with all the finest amenities, which is silly if you think about it, since this is hospice. In the middle of the bed is Bert Roper, frail, wrinkled, and dying.

Oxygen feeds his nostrils, and a machine by his bed wheezes while another one beeps and another one ticks. There’s a bag under the bed collecting what’s in his bladder, I assume, and this brings me too close to memories I’d packed and stored away from my mother’s last days battling breast cancer.

The old man, eyes closed, shifts slightly when I touch the bed to alert him to my presence. “Sir, you wanted to see me? It’s Kase.”

His eyelids flutter as if attempting to open, but they remain closed. Here comes the part when I get reamed by the old dinosaur. “Kase.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes.” The window offers a nicer view than death, so I accept it. “Mr. Roper, I can’t imagine what you must think of me, but I

just wanted to say...I loved your daughter. And when she said she needed my help, I didn't hesitate. I'm sorry if that goes against your own personal beliefs, but I tried to honor her and honor your grandson. I would do it again."

"Listen..." His hand flips up and lands on the bed again. "I had...Nettie..." He takes wheezing breaths in between words. "Look through Evie's things. We found it, Kase."

"Found what, sir?"

"The truth. Journals she'd written after Raymond left her high and dry."

Journals? Yeah, I remember Evie always carrying a journal or two in her bag. I assumed they were just for jotting down ideas for the business, not for writing personal thoughts. "What did they say?" I ask.

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“Raymond bailed like the little rat that he is,” he says. “And she was afraid to tell me about the pregnancy with a father who didn’t want to have anything to do with the baby. Afraid I would hate her for it.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s alright. My fault for being too strict with her growing up,” he wheezes, coughs, cringes in pain, then breathes again. “You did the right thing, Kase. I don’t judge you.”

His words send me into a tailspin of emotion, inside my chest and head. On the outside, I bite my bottom lip and hold it together.

“I just wanted you to know that I knew. I wanted to tell you I’m sorry for everything you went through with your mother, and then my daughter...raising Liam on your own...”

I didn’t raise him on my own. I had Alana to help me, and there will never be an amount of money to compensate for that help. If I have to, I’ll take care of her financially for years to come as a thank you, if she would accept it. But I know she won’t. Alana’s her own woman.

“Like I said, I would do it again, sir.”

“I’ve done everything I can to make things right,” Roper stutters then coughs. I feel like maybe he shouldn’t be using his energy to tell me any of this.

“Sir, I don’t want anything from you. I appreciate your thanks, but the only thing I could ever want from this fiasco is my son back.” Liam and someone else...Alana. I denied her once before in front of Roper, but I won’t do it again. My feelings for her need to be known. She doesn’t work for me anymore, so there’s no reason to hide it. “And his nanny. I loved your daughter as my friend, but Alana...”

“Is your woman,” Roper finishes for me. “Son, I’ve been around. I know adoration when I see it. I can’t do anything about Liam, unfortunately. He’s Raymond’s biological son, but the girl...go after her.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. She’s gone.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Sir?”

“She’s not gone. She’s somewhere waiting for you to tell her. So go tell her.”

I have nothing to say. Like it’s so simple? Like she won’t hate me for leaving her, for taking Liam away, for being a fool who’s too scared to love again. “It’s too painful, sir. I lost my mother then my best friend, even my little boy.” My throat closes as the sobs form. “I couldn’t...”

“Nonsense,” he wheezes and squeezes his fist. “Life’s too short to worry about pain. Pain, so what?” He scoffs. “Pain is tolerable, but love is irreplaceable. The joy you feel cancels out the pain and takes you beyond...” The way he shakes his head and seems to disappear into his memory makes me wonder if he ever had a woman he loved and lost besides Evie’s mother, Greta, who died when Evie was still in high school. One of the reasons we clicked so easily, having both lost our moms early on.

“Stop wasting your time,” Roper mutters then enters a coughing fit so profound,

blood tinges his lips. I reach for a tissue and press it to his mouth then toss it into the trash by his bedside. “Stop wasting your time,” he repeats.

Not once does he open his eyes this whole time, but now he pries one open to look at me. Reaching out his hand, he waits for mine. I hesitate to give it to him, because I’ve been here before handing my mother my hand, but this time, something comforts me. Death is inevitable but some of us never get the chance to say goodbye. At least I get to say it with Mr. Roper.

I take his frail hand in mine, and he squeezes.

I have to get out of here before I lose it in front of all those schmucks outside. “Take care, Kase,” Roper says.

“You, too,” I reply, and he smiles. “Say hi to Evie for me. Tell her I love her.” And with that, I let go of the old man’s hand and head for the door.

The same nurse as before comes back in, checks something on the machine, then gestures for the family to come inside and surround Roper’s bed. This is my cue to leave. I’m not family, I’m not a friend. Fuck, I’m not even an employee of his. But just as I’m almost out the door, someone grabs my hand.

Nettie.

With one look and a tilt of her head, I know she would beg to differ. She wants me inside around Roper’s bed with the rest of them. I’m his son-in-law and the man who cared for Evie the most, even if we were only friends. I belong there, her look tells me, and I better get inside for the group farewell, or I’m going to get it.

“Yes, ma’am,” I whisper and follow her inside.

* * *

A week later, I'm sitting in a lawyer's office overlooking the Metropolitan Museum. Spring is finally here, all the snow has melted, and small tufts of green are starting to sprout all over the lawn. It's almost Liam's first birthday. I'll never forget it. Evie was a trooper and delivered him without any epidural or meds. I told her there wasn't any reason to be prideful, she could ask for all the medication she needed, but I'll never forget what she said—the pain felt good, it felt right. It wasn't the pain of loss or heartbreak like she'd felt her whole pregnancy after Raymond had left her.

It was the pain of joy.

I can't help but connect this with what Roper told me a week ago today. That pain is a part of life and we shouldn't stop from living just because of it. For a man whose daughter felt she couldn't tell him the truth, who we all thought would be judgmental, Roper had some great words of wisdom. Makes me sad that Evie didn't give her father a chance. That she judged him just as easily as she thought she'd be judged. Like father, like daughter, but none of it matters now.

They're both gone.

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“Mr. Hardwin, I’ll begin with the reading of the Will and Testament of Albert C. Roper and if you have any questions for me, please wait ‘til the end.” He begins reading all the legalese opening the document and comes to the part that mentions me. Course, I knew I’d be here somewhere, or else I wouldn’t have been invited but I didn’t expect what the attorney read aloud. “I nominate and appoint Nettie Curtis Bowman of New York City as Assistant Personal Representative of my estate, and I request that Kase Hardwin of New York City be appointed Personal Representative. If my Personal Representative fails or ceases to service, then I nominate the Assistant Personal Representative to serve.”

The lawyer cranes his neck, as people around the room mutter and grunt their displeasure.

“In addition, I appoint Kase Hardwin as the Chief Executive Officer and owner of Newfound Ad Agency...” And I don’t know what is read after that, because my ears are ringing. I’ve been given the entire estate of Albert C. Roper along with his business, and every person in the room now hates me.

Ask me if I care.

But I’m worth billions and billions of dollars now, and while this should come as a happy surprise, I’ve never felt more empty in my life. I have no mother, no Evie, no Liam, no Bert Roper, no life, and no Alana, but I’ve got a bank account full of money.

I sign the papers I’m supposed to sign and shake the hands I’m supposed to shake, and at some point today I’ll have to call Nettie and give her the news. She’s out of

town and never expected to be invited into this meeting, but all this will change her life. I will make sure that Nettie Bowman, Mr. Roper's caretaker, a woman everyone thought was "just service," "just the hired help," gets her fair share of his inheritance.

Liam gets a share too, but I'm his fiduciary, so it'll be a while before he can access it.

When I arrive home, it's warmed up, a beautiful day, but inside the house, it's cold and empty. Just me and my mansion. Everyone thinks money is the key to happiness, but I have nothing to fill my soul. On the floor, poking out behind the rocking chair in the living room, is Liam's blue bunny.

I pick it up and stare at it, remembering the little boy I lost, the mother who birthed him, the woman who cared for him, and the grandfather who loved him. Where is he now? Somewhere wondering where his real family is and why we don't come rescue him. I can't, little buddy. It's out of my hands. Squeezing my eyes shut, I finally allow myself to feel that pain and lose my shit completely.

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Alana

Commuting to Thames Group in Midtown is everything I ever dreamed about working in New York City. The train rides from Brooklyn, the walking past Rockefeller Center, the hustle and bustle to grab coffee before the lines get too long.

Plus, spring has sprung, and even though it's rainy this morning, it's warm, and I'm so ready for a change.

Turns out I didn't need to buy the coffee, because Thames Group has their own little café when you first walk in. A gorgeous older woman, Mrs. VonUriel, introduces herself as my supervisor, and after showing me off to all the people in her department, tells me that the entire café, complete with every type of coffee under the sun and its own barista, is strictly for employees. After that, I'm shown to a work room with cubicles and told that after work today, there will be a happy hour down at Lindgren's.

"If there's anything else you need, just let me know. Welcome to Thames Group, Miss Frasier. I hope you'll be very happy here."

"Oh, I know I will," I reply, giving her a big first-day grin, and the moment she leaves, I sit and settle in. Looking around, I touch my computer keyboard, my drawers, my empty space, ready to be filled with spreadsheets and highlighters. Mrs. VonUriel said she would email me some documents to fill out, but in the meantime, I slowly set up my cubicle.

Yeah, it's a cubicle, a tiny compartment in the work force, but it's my own space, and

I don't have to clean any poop or make any organic baby food according to specs outlined in a PowerPoint. My smile fades as I realize how sad that makes me. I'd actually gotten pretty good at making organic baby food and changing diapers is never fun, but the look on Liam's face when I was done and lifting him was always priceless, a little "thank you for taking care of me, babababa."

The first thing I do is send myself one of the hundred selfies I took with Liam and make it my desktop image. A smile immediately pops up on my face, but now I'm so nostalgic and yearning for him, I wish I could call him up and talk to him over the phone. Relax, Alana, you knew that nannying would be temporary. Yes, nannying would be temporary, but nobody ever tells you that you fall in love with the kids. Well, not the girls I talked to anyway. Seemed they were always complaining about the spoiled brat kids, but Liam wasn't there yet.

And Liam wasn't spoiled.

Liam was a baby who needed a mother, needed his father, and has ended up in the hands of a man who never wanted him to begin with. A tear slips from my eyes and rolls down my cheek, but I wipe it before I get any more emotional on my first day at work.

"Is that your baby?" Another older woman pauses at my cubicle with a mug in hand.

"Huh? Oh, no. Just a boy I used to take care of." Just a boy I love and miss.

"Babysitting?"

"Nanny job."

"Oh. Well, he's super adorable. Look at those big blue eyes! My gosh!"

“I know.” I stare at Liam’s gorgeous little face. Though he didn’t have Kase’s features, he could have easily passed for his son any day. Because of that handsome smile. “I miss him.”

“Reach out to the family,” the woman says. “Sometimes they’re totally fine with nannies coming back to see the kids again. In fact, it’s good for the kids, too.”

“Maybe I’ll do that.” I smile and hold out my hand. “I’m Alana Frasier.”

“Cassie Moran. From reporting.” She shakes my hand and smiles a lot. “Good luck on your first day. And watch out for the guys around here.” She looks around to make sure none of them are listening. “They all have the hots for you.”

The hots? Oh, she means they find me attractive. “Okay, I’ll watch out for them.” I smile awkwardly and shake my head. Are they wolves? Do they shoot you with a stun gun if they like you?

The day goes pretty much as expected—eating lunch alone, visiting the office café three too many times, and shuffling papers around so it looks like I’m doing something. I know there will be more to do soon, but the important thing is—I have a job. I should be grateful. It’s my dream job. I should be happy.

Still I can’t shake the feeling of loneliness. Nannying wasn’t perfect, Liam and Kase weren’t perfect, and we were always fighting or struggling in some way, but they felt like home to me. At Thames Group, I feel, at best, like a stranger in a strange land.

After work, I attend the happy hour knowing I’m going to feel awkward. All the guys that the woman told me about earlier seem to be there, all ranging from my age to about thirty. The older and probably married ones keep their eyeballs to themselves, but the younger ones all keep coming up to me and asking me how my first day was.

None of them are rude. None of them do I have to “watch out for.”

In fact, the worst one I had to “watch out for” was my previous boss, and as crazy ass-backwards as it sounds, I miss our dynamic. Some might call it dysfunctional, some would label it sexual harassment, but it wasn’t. It was entirely consensual and I miss it. These guys all seem like babies compared to Kase and after being with him, I know I could never date a younger guy (or one my age) ever again.

I like Kase and his dark, brooding ways, his commanding ego, and his moodiness. I liked knowing that he was hard to please but that I possessed the ability. These guys would probably come at the drop of a hat. I could see them salivating at my naked body. Kase’s eyes would flash but he wouldn’t salivate. He wasn’t a horny dog. He was a man—all man.

And for a very short time, he was mine.

* * *

When I finally arrive back at the apartment, it’s nearly nine o’clock. I’m so exhausted, I could go to sleep right now and stay in bed for two days. There’s an envelope slipped under the door. Seeing it’s from Le Nanny, I open it and pull out a check for twenty thousand dollars. A “bonus,” it says on the letter. From my former employer, Kase Hardwin, for “the great work and extra effort” I put in.

I don’t know what to think. By extra effort, does he mean all that sex? All those things?

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Or, he could genuinely mean all the work I did for Liam and want me to be taken care of for a few months. In which case, while I appreciate the gesture, I don't need it. I don't need Kase's money, and I sure as shit don't need his charity. Like I told him, I had a job lined up before working for him, and now I'm back on track. The sooner I can wipe him from my memory, the better.

I'm about to tear up the check when my mother calls. "Hi, honey. How was your first day?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Did you hear the news?"

"No, what news?" When my mother talks about news, she thinks everyone should know what she read about. Even feel-good stories about little kids giving up their allowance money to buy kids with cancer gifts constitutes news in her eyes.

"A woman, a caretaker, a home nurse I think, received a billionaire's inheritance. Can you believe it? Google it, Alana."

I roll my eyes. Of course, a story about a servicewoman being gifted a bunch of money from her zillionaire employer would make my mom's radar. "Okay, I'll Google it. What else?"

"What else?" She scoffs. "That's pretty big. It's the same as winning the PowerBall. She received his entire estate or something to that effect. Could you imagine the Hollands leaving us their entire property and money while we worked for them? Why

doesn't stuff like that ever happen to us? Right, George?"

In the background, I hear my father grumpling. I know how he feels. I wish my mother would change the subject too.

"That's great, Mom. I prefer to earn it the old-fashioned way," I say.

"Prostitution?" My mother snorts.

"What? Mom. I mean working for it."

"Honey, 'the old-fashioned way' refers to prostitution. I sure hope you haven't taken any money for sex."

My father grumphs again and tells my mom to knock it off.

"Are you kidding me? I'm talking about working my ass off. I may not seem it right now, but you're talking to a future banking executive right here."

"Oh, honey, I know. I'm just kidding."

She may be kidding, and maybe this is a sore spot, but sometimes I wonder what Kase and I were all about. Did I think there was more between us, but clearly, he only wanted extra services? The after-hours, nighttime kind? If that's the case, then prostitution wouldn't be too far a description from the truth.

Everything becomes clearer after a while. Hindsight is 20/20, as they say.

Great, I couldn't possibly feel any worse right now.

After the enlightening phone call from my mom, I Google it, because...why not.

Because the story is fresh, there are many articles from one hour old to one day old. I click on the most reputable source of them all and open the article. That's when I see her—the black nurse who came to Kase's house that day wheeling the old man, Kase's father-in-law, Bert Roper. But he was so rude when he talked about the dynamics between employers and their hired help.

The article goes on to mention that the old billionaire was also part of a highly-publicized custody battle between Kase Hardwin and Raymond Silas, and there's a link to their story awarding Silas with custody. The courts didn't care that Kase had texts and emails proving Raymond to be a deadbeat dad for the first half a year of Liam's life. In the end, because he came back and the paternity tests all came back as positive, they awarded him custody anyway.

A photo of Kase leaving the courthouse makes me stop everything and sigh.

Even if I never speak to him again, I will always feel sorry for him for losing Liam. I saw it with my own eyes—he loved that boy. He loved him like he was his own son, and that's harder to do than being a biological dad and you have no choice. Adoptive parents, like stepparents, too, they have a choice. And they choose love.

Why, then, couldn't he choose love for me?

Taking Kase's check, I do a mobile deposit, but instead of putting it into my own checking, I put it in my parents' linked with mine. Maybe they'll never win the PowerBall, and maybe the Hollands would never give them their inheritance, but their daughter might earn a bonus for working hard, and I might be able to give back to them. Because at least I have my parents.

It's the least I can do for everything they've ever given me.

Picking up the phone, my finger hovers above Kase's name. I want to thank him for

the bonus, but the real reason I want to call him—I miss him. I’m looking for any excuse to talk to him, but I can’t do it. He’s not the man of my dreams. I could’ve sworn he was. The sooner I forget him, the happier I’ll be.

Putting the phone back down, I let out a long sigh, enter the kitchen, and pull out leftover takeout instead.

Kase

It's the longest train ride of my life.

Downtown to the Financial District, but that's not why it feels so long. It's because I'm heading to see Raymond Silas at BestBank, the company he's currently heading. After two weeks at home with a lot to think about, I finally got tired of the ghosts of those I love, some dead, some still alive, haunting me day and night. I finally got tired of working my ass off to arrive at nothing.

"Sir? You'll need to sign in." The receptionist's finger is on the trigger, ready to call down security if I don't cooperate.

But that's not me, so I turn towards the pretty young woman behind the glossy black counter. "I'm here to see Raymond Silas, please."

"Raymond Silas doesn't take unsolicited calls. You'll have to make an appointment." Her green eyes glance away a moment then return to me with a wince. "Are you Kase Hardwin?"

"Yes, why? Is there a Wanted poster with my face back there somewhere?"

"Actually..."

"Just tell him I'm coming up. Trust me, he'll want to see me."

"Mr. Hardwin? You can't go up..."

I enter the elevator right as a security officer heads my way. I'm already here and I won't be making a fucking appointment. I don't negotiate with fucking terrorists who steal what they want when they feel like it. The elevator doors close. "See you on the thirtieth floor, boys." I flash a smile.

For the first time in months, maybe even years, I feel like myself again. Business was always my forte. Relationships, not so much. But I can learn how to be better. And the people I love have taught me a lot about that.

When the elevator doors slide open, there's already three people waiting for me in suits. Behind them about twenty paces is the scumbag I'm looking for. "What, you can't do your own talking, so you have to send people my way?"

"What do you want, Hardwin?"

"We'll talk behind closed doors."

"We'll talk here. Whatever you have to say, you can say it right here."

"Fine, have it your way—I have a present for you."

Raymond stares at me with those beady little blue eyes of his. I fucking hate that I can see Liam in them, but I tell myself that's just genetics. The kid has his mother's everything else and with the right upbringing, he'll never have to end up like this asswipe. Raymond waves the people away. "Come to my office."

"I knew you could be persuaded." I smile, walking past the guards and office personnel. "Hey, how're you doing? Nice tie." Following the sewer smell down the hall, I enter the rat's lair and have a seat, putting my feet up on his desk.

"Can you...get your feet down, please? This is an office building."

“I’ll put my feet wherever I goddamn well please, Silas. After you took everything that mattered to me, my feet should be the least of your worries.”

“Don’t make me call security back to remove you.”

“If they remove me, you’ll never get your present, and then how will you be able to afford your new house in Fiji?”

“What new house in Fiji?”

“The one we all want you to fucking move to, because we can’t stand being around you anymore. You can get there with your new super yacht, too. While wearing your Speedo made of gold.”

“What’s this about, Hardwin?” Raymond shouts, pounding the desk.

“Ooo, temper, temper.” I wag my finger at him. “Good thing Evie dodged that bullet.”

“Too bad she didn’t dodge the one that killed her.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” I slam my feet on the floor, as Raymond picks up the phone to call security. I open my briefcase and take out papers. Deeds, titles, Articles of Incorporation, everything to do with Albert C. Roper’s business, Newfound Ad Agency. “This...” I push the papers his way. “Is why I’m here.”

“What is this?”

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“Oh, you can’t read. I forgot.” I pull the papers back and read them for him. “It’s the company, Silas. Bert’s fucking company. I know how much you want it, so much that you just had to come crawling out of your ant pile to claim paternity. If you don’t want it, that’s fine...”

“Stop.”

“What?”

“Why are you doing this?” His side-eyeing and hem-hawing makes him look a bit like an indecisive blind turtle. “Why would you give it to me?”

“I’m not giving it to you so much as making an exchange.”

“An exchange for what? Oh, wait...” He reclines back in his leather seat and picks up a pen to chew on. “You think I’m going exchange the kid for it.”

“The kid? His fucking name is Liam, asshole. And yes.” I lean forward. “We both know you don’t care about him. We both know you only claimed paternity so you could win favor with the old man, but once word got around that he’d be handing off the business to me after Evie died, you changed your tune. And then, when he shanghaied you by leaving you out of the will...” I laugh and shake my head, leaning back in my seat. “Oh, man, it’s too much.”

“How much is it worth?”

“What?” I crane my ear closer.

“How much is it worth?” he shouts.

Aww, he’s annoyed by my tactics, like I fucking care. “Twenty-five billion,” I tell him. I turn and reach into my bag for another set of papers—adoption. Reaching farther into my bag, I pull out my best pen and hand it to him. “Sign right there...on the X.”

“You think it’s that easy,” Raymond growls, staring at me then back at the papers.

I sigh. And sigh again. “I get it, I get it...you have to act like you care so I can never tell the story of how easily this went down. Dude, come on. I read like fifty-five of your texts to Evie, all of them in escalating tones of anger about how much you were not ready to be a father and never would be. I even had them in court with me as evidence ready to show, but apparently, nothing mattered after you guys showed the genes were yours.”

“I want an appraisal.”

“Oh, you don’t believe me? It’s probably worth even more than twenty-five billion, but I didn’t think you’d be that picky.”

“You’re keeping some of it for yourself. I want the whole thing. I’m the one that brought that company to where it is. I’m the one who worked day and night with Evie to make it what it is. Then you come along and take it all...”

“I didn’t take shit. You ran off because you couldn’t handle a woman who loved you—” Now, I’m the one shouting, but I have to stop. And think. Because I’m the biggest fucking hypocrite on this earth. He ran off, because why? He couldn’t handle a woman who loved him?

My heart pounds. It’s all so clear now.

“I want an appraisal and whatever it comes out to, the whole thing is mine,” Raymond says. “And I still get visitation rights to see the kid.”

“Nah, fuck you. I’m not getting into a parental agreement with you. I’m offering you a shit ton of money. All I want is my child.” I stand and cross my arms. If I don’t control myself, I’ll end up fighting this dude and then I will end up down at the precinct and never see my child again. “I raised Liam. I watched him grow inside his mother’s belly. I sang to him. At night, right before she went to sleep, he’d get the hiccups inside of her, and I’d have to rub her on the left side, right under this rib here to get him to stop. Since he was born, I’ve taken care of him. I come home early from work just to spend time with him. He’s probably cried every night since you’ve had him. That’s because he’s wondering where I am, where his nanny is, and why we haven’t brought him his milk with his little blue bunny yet. What’s his favorite vegetable?”

“What?”

“What’s his favorite vegetable?”

“I don’t know. I just got him.”

“That’s right. You don’t know because you don’t care. It’s baby carrots, motherfucker. Not the organic shit, because he doesn’t like it. He likes it straight from the Gerber jar.” A crazy laugh escapes me, because only Alana and I know that. “Like his nanny used to give him.”

Alana’s face illuminates in my mind. Suddenly, I can’t see anything but her. The food stains on her shirt, the apron full of smashed, wet Cheerios, her blonde ponytail swishing around as she swung Liam in circles.

Fuck.

I miss my family.

“I won’t keep any of it. It’s all yours. Just give me full custody, visitation granted only upon request and individual appointment. No schedule.” Not like he’ll ever take advantage of it. This is nothing but a pissing match, a power struggle, but I just don’t see how he could ever think this is unfair. “Don’t be a bitch, Raymond. Take the money.”

Raymond looks at the papers again. “Are these mine to keep?”

I nod. “Have your lawyer look over them. Call me in and we’ll do this in mediation. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy. But first, I need your signature. Good faith that you’ll go through with the adoption process.” I point at the X and hand him the pen. “If you loved Evie and you love Liam at all, let him go home.”

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With another look at me and a huge sigh, he takes the pen.

* * *

It's a hot May day when the doorbell rings. Everything in the house is perfect. His crib is perfect, his play room is perfect, little blue bunny is back in his rocking chair, I'm fully stocked with baby carrots and some nice new beets I want him to try. I can only hope that he still recognizes me, that six weeks hasn't been too long for his brain to erase the memory of me and Alana.

Heading to the door, I can't wait to see him. I've never quite burst with joy before, but now I know how it feels. Jumping down the last three steps, I skid all the way to the door, just as it rings again. I open the door, but it's not Liam. It's Nettie.

"Hey!" I'm happy to see her, but uh...why is she here?

"Can I come in?"

"Of course, how've you been, Ms. Bowman?"

"Doing just fine, Kase. I wanted to bring by a little present since I know he's coming home soon, and I happened to be at the toy store. I know his grandfather would've wanted me to get it for him." She pulls a gift bag out of her shopping bag and hands it to me.

"Thank you so much." Reaching into the bag, I pull out a big T-Rex that's about as tall as Liam himself. "Wow, check this out!"

“I know you used to call Mr. Roper an old dinosaur.”

“Oh—”

“No, no...it’s okay. He knew it. We used to have a good laugh over it. Told me that one day, I’d have to have him stuffed and put on display at the Natural Museum.” She giggles, and for the first time ever, I see Nettie Bowman’s natural smile. I see the woman she is, not the house nurse.

“It’s awesome. Thank you so much,” I say, giving her a hug. “He’s coming home today, you know. Should be here any minute. Would you like to come in for some coffee and wait for him?”

“Oh, no, no. I have to get going.” She steps back to the door and adjusts her hat. “Will that nice young woman be coming back to care for him as well?”

“Alana? Oh. No.” My lips press into a thin line. “Not sure where she is anymore, actually.”

“Can’t be too hard to find her, Kase.” She winks at me. And in that wink, I get it. All of it. I may not have a position at Newfound anymore, I may not have a billion-dollar company to my name, but I have all I need. I only had to lose it all to realize what that was.

A knock on the open door pulls my attention away from Nettie, and there stands a woman—the same case worker who took my boy away, Ms. Hernandez—holding the most precious gift I’ve ever been given. Raymond couldn’t even deliver Liam himself. Idiot.

This is it.

Will he remember me? Will he draw away shyly, recoil into the woman's arms? Nettie studies the goofy smile on my face. Ms. Hernandez coos into Liam's ear. Please, please, let him remember his home—his real home. Liam's big blue eyes look around, up at the chandelier, down the hallway, and up the stairs, taking it all in.

He looks bigger, older in just the short time he's been gone.

"Hi, Daddy," the woman says on his behalf, and I just about lose it.

"Hi, baby." When I see she's going to set him on the ground, I crouch and open my arms. Everything I ever wanted, right here in this little package. The only thing missing now is Alana. And like Nettie inferred with her sly wink, it's time to go get her and make this family complete.

Liam doesn't crawl. Holding Ms. Hernandez's hands for assistance, he walks—yes, walks, toddles at eleven months—straight toward me with that big goofy grin on his drooly face. "Dadadada..." Right into my arms.

Alana

Things get easier.

And even though I'm still aching in my chest most of the time, each day brings renewed promise. Maybe because it's spring, and the flowers and rain help rejuvenate my spirit. I shudder to think how I'd feel going to work every day during winter after never seeing Kase and Liam again. My heart would've shriveled up and died by now.

But the people at work are nice enough, and the attention I get every day from the nice guys who work there at least remind me that I'm wanted. Too bad I'm not interested in any of them. I'm back to where I started before I met Kase—in need of no man. All about my career.

It's a slow start to the career, too. Here I thought the world of banking would be exciting, but all I pretty much do is read reports, create reports, and enter numbers into spreadsheets. Hey, it's what I wanted. I can't complain, though at times I find myself wishing I could deal with the crazy, unpredictable-ness of caring for the little boy I miss. The little boy I love.

No, Alana, stop.

It was a chapter in your life, not the book. Life's only beginning.

These are the mantras I tell myself every day in the hopes they'll erase the deep-rooted pain I still feel. Who knew you could mourn the loss of such a small part of your life? Was my life that boring before, or...was Kase my soulmate who somehow

got away? I want to believe that anyone who's meant for you will eventually find their way back, like a carrier pigeon or a loyal pet lost out in the woods, but I'd never met anyone as tormented as Kase.

And I know I never will again.

Arriving at work, I greet the front desk and head straight for the café, picking up my French vanilla soy latte. The barista smiles at me. "Oh, hey," she says brightly, like she finally knows me and I'm not just the new girl anymore. The other workers behind the counter stare at me, smiling, too.

I feel like Emma Stone in *La La Land* when she finally becomes the big-time actress and everyone on the production lot coffee shop is star struck in her presence.

Did I enter another reality?

I can't put my finger on it. It's like love and happiness have sprung. People chatter more than normal and even weirder, some of it's directed at me. Or maybe I'm just caught in whatever's infecting the office. But something's going on. As I head to my cubicle, I see heads popping up like meerkats in the prairies of Africa.

"She's coming."

"That's her."

Whispering.

Stares.

Is it my birthday? I mean, it's possible I've been so distracted that I forgot. No, not my birthday. Not for another month. Some sort of belated "Welcome to Thames

Group” surprise, maybe?

That would be weird.

“Hey.” I smile at Brad, a cubicle guy who nods at me every morning, whose leering stare I can feel following my ass down the hallway every morning.

Today, he says, “No wonder.”

I slow down. “Excuse me?”

“No wonder you never give me the time of day.” He chuckles, nothing mean or vindictive, just a genuine realization. I have no clue what he or anyone’s talking about today. Then, he does this...his eyebrows waggle up and down and...gestures with them. If eyebrows could speak, his would say, “Over there. Look.”

Following his lead, I glance over to my cubicle and...

Oh, my...God...

Surprise, shock, and...utter thrill rise into my chest, my heart chakra spreading warmth and adrenaline all through my body. A little blonde boy with blue eyes pokes out the top of my cubicle. Is that...Liam? He hasn’t seen me yet, but someone’s obviously holding him on top of my desk and pointing over the edge, as if saying see her? See Alana?

Liam, if that’s him (I approach slowly...it is), ducks down and comes back up holding the biggest, most gorgeous pink and white roses I’ve ever seen in my life. He waves them and screeches like the happy boy that he is, and the moment his eyes connect with mine, recognition injects right through him and spreads like pure joy.

Around me, coworkers gather. Are they in on the surprise?

A fuzzy blue bunny pops up too and waggles around. My eyes fill with tears.
“Buddy?”

Liam screeches and waves the flowers around so hard, petals start flying off. He bangs them on the edge of the cubicle right as a hand appears underneath him to control him. Around me, everyone giggles. I can only imagine who the puppeteer is behind this morning display. When I finally arrive at my cubicle, heart pounding like mad, I slow down and hold my arms out.

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Liam flies out of the puppeteer's hands and lands in my arms. The hug he gives me is everything I'll ever need today. I kiss his little cheek ten times in rapid succession. I can't do anything about the tears that start overflowing. But of course, there's more, because there's no Liam in my life without Kase.

Immediately, I see him. He stands and sighs from the effort of having carried Liam all this time. Inside my cubicle is his stroller, strewn flower petals, pens, pencils, highlighters, staplers, and erasers that have been chucked and thrown and played with in my absence, and a general mess. A mess I've missed.

"Kase! What are you doing here?" I'm so shocked and confused, I'm spilling my coffee in the hand that's holding Liam, and Cassie takes it out of my grip for me.

"I had no idea you knew Kase Hardwin," she whispers in my ear then gives me a knowing look. With a short stack of papers, she fans herself.

I don't just know him, I want to tell her. I love him, hate him, and ache for him every day of my life. I lay in bed at night wondering why my life took such a crap turn, why I can't have what I most want in this world, and how I'm supposed to move on without him. And now, he's here, and I direct all that energy at him with my gaze.

"I got Liam back," Kase says. Everyone around us hushes. "They took him from me, Alana. I couldn't handle it, couldn't cope. I'd lost it all."

"I can't imagine," I tell him.

He continues to keep his distance. He's wary, as if hoping that Liam will act as a

probe on this new territory, scoping out where my anger might still be but thinking about where his new hope might be colonized.

“How did you manage to get him back?” I ask. Because we’re talking privately, my coworkers begin to shrink back, minding their own business but still eavesdropping. I know them—noseys.

“I offered Raymond the old man’s business.”

“Newfound?”

“Yes. It’s worth billions. I knew it was all he wanted. I asked him to sign adoption papers in return, and he did. I’m Liam’s father now, Alana. Officially.” A certain peace settles over his face, his smile reflecting inner harmony. It’s a look I’ve never seen on Kase before.

I can’t believe it—Liam’s back home.

Kase approaches, slowly assessing. I’m receptive, though still hurt. Curling an arm around me, he reels me in, and I lose it. I start crying against his shirt. His buttoned work shirt thinly covers that strong chest, a body I’ve missed, a body I had thought of as mine then felt stupid when I realized it never was. Maybe I was wrong. Why is he here? To show me he got Liam back?

“That’s amazing, Kase. I’m so happy for you.” But what does this mean for me?

Liam wiggles, wanting to be put down, and I’m reticent. “He wants to go.”

“Let him. Watch.”

The second I set him on the floor, he crawls the cubicle corner, pulls himself to his

feet, and toddles into the workspace to begin picking up markers, pens, and pencils. I bite my lip to keep from crying again. “He’s walking?”

“Can you believe it? Right in time for this first birthday.” Kase hugs me then steps back. As Cassie comes in to swoop Liam out of view, clearly having been enlisted to help with the baby, Kase takes the roses and hands them to me. “For you, hon.”

Pink and white blooms fill my vision. They smell so beautiful, but what is this?

“Alana Frasier,” Kase says, “in honor of Liam’s first birthday...” It’s today—his first birthday is today! It’s been five months since I’ve known this lovely little family. “I want you to know that I was crazy for you from the first moment I met you. You walked into my office and right away, I knew you were special. At first, I hated you because of it.”

My coworkers all “awww.” They’re definitely eavesdropping, and now my ribcage is pulsing with anticipation. Is he doing what I think he’s doing?

“Kase...”

He holds out his hand so I can let him talk. “I hated you because you were the beginning of me changing, Alana. I had everything so perfectly in place—perfect fortress walls around, perfect forcefields up—then you come along and start shooting cannonballs at my defenses. I thought keeping you away from me would be the answer. But it only made me realize how much I missed you. And then, when they came and took Liam away, I really lost it all.”

Behind me, I hear sniffles from Cassie and other women coworkers.

I can’t believe this. I can’t believe Kase is here, in my office, pouring his heart out in front of everyone.

“But I’ve done a lot of thinking, Alana, and I know in my heart that I don’t have a choice in the matter. I have to love you. I have to let you in. You came into my life to save me. What kind of man would I be if I turned away my one and only angel?” He drops to his knees, and right at that moment, the meerkat heads pop up again.

I’m going to die. I’m going to die then wake up a completely new person with a new, bright future. The first time I tell my parents and friends that I have a boyfriend will be the same day I announce my engagement. Life doesn’t always happen the way you expect it to. But the surprise is always better.

“Kase...”

“Alana Frasier, I’ve thought long and hard...” He pulls out a small box from his pocket and opens it, offering it up to me. Inside is the biggest ROCK of pure awesome I have ever seen in my life. “There’s only one life for me,” he says. “A life with you. Would you please make me the happiest man on earth and be my wife?”

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Suddenly, from every cubicle in the room and every office, more roses pop up...way up...as my coworkers all stand on their chairs holding bouquets. Pink, white, yellow, lavender—every springtime hue one could possibly imagine, dozens and dozens of them, rustling, shaking, petals raining down. The room fills with the sweet scent of new love, their smiles dotting the floral landscape like pearl necklaces to accompany Kase's diamond.

I can't speak through my tears. Is this for real? Is this really happening to me?

A little patience was all that was needed. This is more than I ever expected. Be Kase Hardwin's wife? The wife of one of NYC's most sought-after bachelors? Who's been in the news and women everywhere have wanted him ever more after learning about his heartbreaking custody case?

I want to freeze this moment in my mind forever. The smiles, the faces hinged on my reply, even Liam as he reaches for roses everywhere, his big blue eyes filled with wonder. I haven't known Kase for very long, yet I know he's my man. I'll have all my life to get to know him more deeply, and it can only get better now that he's opened his heart.

"Yes," I say, beaming. "I'll be your wife, Kase."

The office erupts into cheers and laughter, and my coworkers all hug each other as though this celebration has been for them. And maybe it has. Maybe the love we make is for everyone, to give others hope, because if I can get engaged to this complex, sweet man, anyone can find happiness.

Kase slides the ring onto my finger and stands. I can't stop looking at the ring. I mean, holy shit, it's HUGE! Then again, everything about Kase is huge. I snort at my own thought. With one finger, he tips up my chin and gazes down at me. How I've missed those eyes, those lips. "Thank you," he says then kisses me. And it's the most rewarding, lovely kiss ever. Another moment to frame and cherish in my mind.

He's mine.

Kase Hardwin is mine. Maybe I earned him. Or maybe I just got lucky. But for whatever reason, I'm now his woman, and he's my man, and I'll keep doing whatever I need to do to keep him forever.

Cassie can't hold Liam anymore. He's wriggled in her arms so much, he literally leaps out and holds onto Kase's arm for support. "Hey there, kiddo, you want in on this hug, too, don't you?" Kase pulls him into our embrace, and now it's a group hug.

"I love you, Kase. And I love Liam. I can't wait for us to become a family."

"We already were one, Alana," Kase says through a sad, reflective smile. "I should've seen it before, but I was too scared to acknowledge it. Both of you are everything to me. If I lose you, I lose you. It's a risk I have to take."

I know how losing us has always been his demon. "But you won't lose us, Kase. We'll be here a long, long time, and so will you." I pull his face down gently and give him the softest, sweetest kiss I can muster. Suddenly, I feel little fingers on my cheek, as Liam leans in and drops a kiss on my cheek, too.

My family.

My loves.

My life.

Kase

I takemy woman to bed for the first time in two months.

For the first time as my fiancé.

I admire her gorgeous body, as she takes deep, full breaths, her swollen breasts pressing against her top. All I want to do is rip that blouse free and watch them hang over my face. If I have to tie her down and make her my love slave to make up for lost time, so be it. I'll never let her go to that apartment again, except to pick up her things. From now on, she'll stay with me. She's my woman.

Alana's stayed in this room a few times with me before, but never the whole night, now I can't wait to snuggle and sleep with her in addition to fucking her brains out. It used to be Evie's room but became my room after she died, and now it's ours. Something deep and feral stirs in my gut, though. I want us to have a place of our own. I want so badly to give into this need for a new place, relinquish this control I've kept over myself for too long.

Give in, my mind tells me, the same mind that's kept me away from happiness all my life. Now it wants me to win, take what's mine, make my own destiny, build my future with this woman before me. My dreams, finally coming true. Alana's in my arms, Liam's home and asleep, and now my life has a purpose—a real purpose. I used to work for money and status. Now I have real reasons to live, and this is what life is for.

Took long enough, but I finally got my shit together and made things right.

Taking her into my arms, I kiss her deep and long, trying to convey everything I feel for her in one embrace, knowing it's impossible. It's going to take a lifetime to show her. She moans low in her throat and bends her body into mine, literally trying to meld as one. We're connected, we were always meant to be. I was just too stupid to see it.

I kiss her harder, wrapping her arms around my neck, pressing those fucking beautiful tits against me. Such a perfect woman. I lift the blouse up over her head, unhook the bra, then slide down to take those breasts into my hands, playing and squeezing the nipples. Rosy, soft, and one day, will give milk to my children. But for now, they're mine, ripe and full. My cock is so hard, I want to take her right now but I kiss her again, lick the seam of her lips, nudge them open, and elicit a small groan from her. I can't get enough of her taste or her body, and my hands can't seem to stop exploring all of her.

She's more than enough and not enough all at the same time. She's the end of my story but the beginning of a new one. A new story for a new man. I'll be eternally grateful.

"I want you, Kase. Fuck me, make love to me, do whatever you feel..."

My heart soars hearing her say those words.

I thought I'd lost her. I thought for sure I'd waited too long, but she accepted me back. Nothing will humble a man as much as a woman who you don't deserve loving you. She kisses and licks my neck, and my desire grows harder, faster. Her hair splays out along the bed like tendrils of gold. God, I love her hair, her body, her desire for me. She sits up and slides off her work skirt—she looks so pretty working for this banking company, a very sexy professional, the kind that would have me fantasizing all day long if I didn't know her. If all those people wouldn't have been there, I so would've fucked her in that cubicle. We'll have to revisit it one day.

If she stays with the company.

Because she doesn't have to. Though I don't work for Newfound anymore, I have millions of ideas for a new company to start, and it won't take long. Just like I built Roper's empire for him with Evie, I'll build my own again. She won't have to work another day in her life. I'll work for her, though knowing Alana, like me, she would take the trains instead of the Bentley. She'd work for the enjoyment instead of playing the part of kept woman.

I'm fine either way. I just want her to be happy.

I watch her get naked, drink her in, captivated by every inch of her lovely skin being revealed. Clearly, she's tormenting me and loves it. "Fucking beautiful," I tell her, gripping her thighs tightly. "Keep going."

"Yes, Mr. Hardwin."

"Oof. You're killing me." I pick her up and slide her up along the bed on her back, latching onto her luscious tits, swirling my tongue around each nipple until I hear groaning with need. I love how responsive she is, how she throws herself into sex like she does everything else in life.

I enjoy every second of sucking on her tits until I've got her begging me in a breathy voice. "Please, Kase. Fuck me."

"All in good time," I tell her, sucking and licking and nipping, wondering how I ever managed to let her go. Underneath, she writhes and grasps, driving me into a frenzy of lust. Straddling me, her dark golden hair spills over her shoulders, and I know right then that she's my goddess.

Hand chosen for me.

My angel of love. And healing. She'll heal my heart, I know she will.

Grinning like she's got me where she wants me, she leans down to kiss my chest, and when she pulls up, I see her hand sliding into her cleft, tickling and working up her clit. "Did you think of me while we were apart?" I ask, sliding my fingers through her hair.

"Every damn day."

"Did you touch yourself like you did that first night you were here?"

"Every damn day."

I smile but feel sad at the same time. Though I tried to masturbate in her absence, I couldn't. Everything reminded me of her, and using porn was only a huge bust. Every thought was about her body, her face, and before I knew it, I felt too depressed to feel good. I'm glad she could, though. "I missed you, Alana."

"I missed you more. I thought I'd lost you forever."

My smile takes up my whole face, but I moan when her fingers rake down my naked stomach, ripples of sensation traveling through my body. My cock twitches for attention. It wants to seek and bury itself in her soft body, and she knows it. But she wants to tease me even longer, so she slides down the length of my body, kissing every inch as she goes. My brain feels like it's going to explode. All I wanted was to come home and fuck her hard, get it out of the way, bring it home.

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But this is better, as agonizing as that is.

She kisses my belly button and drags her chin lower. “Oh, God, put me in your mouth already, please.”

“Yes, sir. Happy to please, sir,” she says with a naughty smile.

“God, I love you.”

And calling her God isn’t too far from the truth. Sex and love is the closest thing I’ll ever feel to God, especially when she swallows me in and my moans fill the room. No holding back, no worries about how much control I have. I’ve relinquished it all to this woman, and she knows it. She knows I’m completely hers.

After sucking me off for a minute, putting me into a state of oblivion, she slides up and rubs her naked pussy on my cock, getting me all worked up even further. If she keeps that up, I’ll come right here. I’ll come all over her, and she’ll wonder why she ever got involved with such a loser teen boy.

Rubbing her clit with my thumb, her breaths sharpen and nipples harden under my touch. I have to have her now. I can smell her musky desire, which only turns me on more. She shifts on top of me, restless, dips a finger between her swollen pussy lips and coats her fingers with her juices. Then, like the little slut I love, she feeds me her fingers.

“Oh, yeah...” I suck on them, lapping up every drop of my gorgeous angel, stroking my cock, unable to resist touching myself, brushing my thumb over the sensitive

head, and waiting while she positions herself over me.

Where did this beauty come from? How did I get so lucky?

Taking her by the hips, I ease her onto me, as I fill her so completely, her mouth opens and I feel a wholehearted completeness come over me.

“So full of your cock, Kase.”

“Yes, baby, full of my love.” It’s the first time I call her baby and that’s how she feels, like my treasure, my jewel to care for, my woman to please. Pulling out, I slowly thrust back inside of her tight sheath, starting a steady rhythm. She tightly cinches her legs against my sides, as I grit my teeth and totally take in the pleasure.

So tight and wet, so fucking unbearable.

The way she looks at me, touches me, the way her pussy clenches around my cock every time I thrust inside of her soft, womanly body, every movement pushing me higher toward my own climax and her own as well. She rubs her clit as she dances over me, taking herself on a ride with my cock as the joystick, filling her core so deep.

She’s woman at her full potential—scintillating, powerful, and fertile.

My balls pull into me, as they prepare for release. Alana can sense me getting closer, and her body responds with a pink flush climbing up her stomach like vines. “Fuck me harder, Kase. Make me yours, make me yours, love...” Though I want to sit up and turn her around to fuck her from behind, she’s so close, so I wait. Finally, after a few more grinds, she pulls herself together, her body tight and coiled, and moans out loud.

“Yes, that’s it. Come for me, baby. I love you, Alana.”

Wave after wave hits her, her nipples stiffen into hard peaks, and I wait patiently for her to come down from her high. Once she floats back to earth, I spin her around, push her into the bed, stomach down, and revel in the view. She’s flat and face down. I love the submissive position and knowing I’m going to fuck her while she’s pinned down.

Filling her pussy all the way to my cock’s hilt, I hold it there and shudder. Then, sliding out, I slam her hard once, pull out then ream her again. With each thrust, she shudders and mewls, driving me to do it again. And again. Her ass cheeks shake with each thrust from the impact, and I love feeling myself buried deep inside her, becoming one with her. With my chest rubbing her back, I lean close and tug on her hair, kissing her ear, tugging on her lobe with my teeth. “You’re mine. My soon-to-be wife. Whatever you need, you come to me.”

“I’ll come to you, my husband,” she says.

And that’s it.

That’s all I need. Just knowing I’m her man and no one else will ever enter this temple of beauty, goodness, and fertility pushes me over the edge. I spill my seed deep into her cunt, pumping and pumping my love into her, planting and securing my future. “My wife to be, my love.” My orgasm fills my brain, overcomes my body, and gives Alana full control over me.

I am hers.

I curl into her and spoon her, kissing her neck, and wrap my arms around her. This woman tolerated me, believed in me, then saved me from my own doubt. My demons and shadows. Because of her, I have another chance at life. She deserves everything. I

can't help but wonder if my mother sent her down to take care of me. Or maybe Evie hand-picked her from the skies, connected the dots, and made things happen in heaven like she made things happen on earth. Either way, I am blessed. And because of Alana, I am, finally, for the first time since I was a child, whole again.

Epilogue

If a year ago, someone would've told me I'd be walking into our new ad agency office in midtown, a block away from Saks 5th Avenue, in the heart of New York City, I would've said, yeah sure. Keep dreaming. Like that's ever going to happen. But here I am, after a whirlwind weekend of celebrating our little guy's 2nd birthday at the Museum of Natural History with friends, after opening up a multitude of dinosaur toy gifts (he's obsessed), and juggling being a mom with being CFO of Blondie Square, an up-and-coming boutique ad agency.

I'm exhausted out of my mind, but that could be several other things.

The first trimester will do that to a woman.

And secondly, it's been a hell of a year.

Kase and I had our wedding down in Miami Beach right on the sand with a few close friends, my family, and Liam, of course, wearing a tiny guayabera and shorts. So cute! Our honeymoon was in London, because I'd always wanted to go there, and the rest of our year has been spent opening this company from the ground up, basically building an empire.

My husband is the hardest working man in this business. I can see why the old man left him everything he did—because he deserves it. And I'm shocked that he somehow found time to spend time with Liam a year ago, too. But his rule is hard and fast—he leaves at 5 PM. Anything after that will have to wait until the next day, and he's never lost a client yet. It's because of this balance, this respect for home life,

family life, that makes him a good man.

Maybe because he never had that life as a child, because his mother was always working three jobs to care for him, and he had to take care of himself much of the time, that Kase respects private time so much. But having personal time also ensures that he's refreshed the next day, ready to take on the world.

And he has.

There are days, like today, when I can't stop staring at him and think, Holy shit, that man is my husband. That man, right there in that sexy suit, working his ass off at that desk while our son thrives at home with Cassie (we offered her the chance to watch Liam after they became thick as thieves that day Kase proposed to me) is my future. He often tells me that I saved him, but I know I did nothing of the sort.

As they say, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

He had to make the decision to love, and he did that all on his own. Because of his decision to put his past behind him and take on a new future, we are all in a better place. But my man is the smartest person in this building, and I will always be in awe of him. There's a reason why New York Magazine just called him the Hottest Billionaire on 5th Avenue.

Not only is he sexy, gorgeous, and more handsome now that he's married to me (chaching!), he's the hardest working man I know, the most loving and serious. Some women have to worry about their men around other women, but mine has never had eyes for anybody but me. Even now, even pregnant, he's more obsessed with me than ever, adoring my body from every angle, as I walk into his office.

"Good morning, Mr. Hardwin," I coo, sitting on his desk.

He spins from his file cabinet and his eyes rove over me like he's never seen me

before. Every day I'm the new girl who's just walked in, commanded the floor, and taken his attention away from the world. Every day, I'm brand new to him, and every day, he woos me like I might slip away from him if he doesn't do his job to keep me.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hardwin. How's my woman and my little one doing?" Kase tugs me toward him and lays his head on my small baby bump. If a man could purr, this is how he'd sound.

"Much better. No more morning sickness. I think it's finally going away."

"Well, that is wonderful news, because I got us something I think you'll enjoy." Pulling up his phone, he shows me a barcode embedded in an email.

"What is it?"

"Tickets for Hamilton. Remember you used to whine about wanting to see it?"

"Whine? I think," I lean down and kiss him gently, "it was more like longing, yearning..."

"Like the way I yearn for you every day? Or the way I long to see you naked tonight after the show? Cassie says she can stay all day. You game?"

At first, I think about our growing business. Our clientele is everything right now. Sometimes at the beginning of a new business, you need to stay after hours, put in the hard work, but that's the thing about Kase—he hires people to handle the overage. He never stops taking care of things, and that includes me. Besides, how can I turn down a Broadway date with the Hottest Billionaire on 5th Avenue?

"Hell, yes. That sounds perfect, baby." I slide into his lap and kiss him.

My life is a dream come true now.

A dream I never would've imagined having grown up in a small, hardworking family. Having grown up in a mansion, always looking in from the outside, wishing I could live like that one day. And yet, we don't live that way. Because we both came from humble beginnings. Doesn't matter how much money's in the bank, Kase and I live like a normal, married couple.

Despite the sadness and tragedy of his past, Kase has conquered all his demons and found his true calling—running his own company and taking care of his family. He's a good man, after all. I might be the woman who saw the promise in him and waited for him to figure it out, and losing Liam might've been the nail in the coffin, the fire under his butt to get his life in order, but Kase made the right decisions. Because he's Kase and he's smart.

And he's mine.

And New York City dreams really do come true.

THE END