



The Heiress's First Date

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Paris on a private jet? Check. Three impossibly hot billionaires fighting for my attention? Double check. My anxiety threatening to ruin everything? Oh, you better believe it.

Last week, I was just trying to survive a bachelorette auction I didn't want to participate in. Now I'm juggling the affections of my reformed nemesis, my longtime crush, and my best friend turned surprise suitor. And let me tell you, their idea of a "casual first date" involves crossing international borders.

When Alex suggests whisking me away to the City of Love, how could I say no? Between toe-curling kisses under the Eiffel Tower and nights that would make even French romance novelists blush, I'm starting to think I could get used to this whole dating-multiple-men thing.

But my mother's determined to ruin everything (as usual). I'm keeping a secret that could destroy all the trust our Fab Foursome has built. And because my life isn't complicated enough already, my best friend drops a bombshell that changes everything.

Don't miss books one and two in this fan favorite series: *The Heiress Auction* and *The Billionaire's Prize*

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1

KATHERINE

I squeeze King's hand as the elevator rockets toward the sky. He bounces up onto the balls of his feet, more keyed up than nervous. Which is a good thing, as far as I'm concerned.

Alex's arm tightens around my waist, and I lean into his strong frame. That last orgasm left me weak and deliciously boneless.

Somehow, they managed to once again stave off a panic attack, redirecting my attention to them. These men are part protector and part cocoon.

I turn my face into Alex's chest, soaking up his scent.

"You good?" he murmurs, kissing the top of my head. I thought I had Jell-O knees before. But the way this man takes care of me...

I squeeze his waist with my free arm and tip my face up to him. My stomach does a little backflip at the heat banked in his dark eyes. "I'm amazing."

"That's what we like to hear." Gabe leans against the wall, hands in his pocket, staring at me.

They're going to give me a stomach ache with all the fluttery feelings.

Ding.

Heat races over my skin. I know nothing will happen if I don't want it to, but it feels like the four of us have been racing down the Autobahn and we're about to arrive at our destination. My mind runs away with the analogy. Are we going to crash and burn?

The doors open and Gabe steps out, then holds out a hand to me. "Come on, Princess. I'll show you around."

His brilliant blue eyes draw me forward like the promise of a fine wine at the end of a long day. Placing my hand in his feels monumental, more risky than anything we've done before. His fingers close around mine, and he tugs me to him, cupping my cheek.

"I'll be right back," King says, pulling me from my trance.

I glance over my shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"Just need to grab something from your place."

Funny how it doesn't feel like my place anymore. It's been my safe space for two years, but these men have left their mark with the memories they've given me already.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if he wants me to go with him.

"I'll go with you so you can get back up here." Alex reaches over and hits a button on the panel.

The doors close, sealing them inside.

Gabe's hand slides into my hair, drawing my attention back to him. He ducks his head, blotting out the light, the world, reality. I can't look away and don't want to. Sliding my hands up his chest, I stare at his lips. Lips that have taunted me for so long, and now I can kiss them whenever I want.

He groans and wraps an arm around my waist, tugging my hips to his. "Feel that?"

The hard column of his cock pressed against my belly? Absolutely.

But also how taut his muscles are, as if he's holding himself back and that restraint is costing him. It's delicious, knowing how I affect this man who I've thought for so long was enemy number one.

"Mmhmm."

A giddy thrill rushes through me, and I press up onto my toes. His breath fans against my cheeks. Our lips brush, then lock. I meet him kiss for kiss, opening my mouth when his tongue teases me. He tastes like soda and whiskey.

He spins us and pushes me back a step until I'm plastered to a wall.

"Twice wasn't enough, was it, Princess?" He trails his lips down my jaw, and I tip my head away, making room for him at my neck.

Twice?

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“You need to come again, don’t you? Greedy little thing.”

He sounds pleased at the discovery. Like he’s happy to be figuring me out.

That makes two of us.

And I’m not going to deny myself. I tug at his shirt. “If you’re up for it.”

He thrusts his hips against me, driving that steely length harder into my belly. My pussy flutters around the vibe, knowing how amazing he feels inside me.

“You know I’m up for it.” The growled words send a shiver down my spine.

He’s most definitely up for it.

He presses a line of kiss down to my shoulder and then back up, nipping my jaw. Whimpering, I tighten my arms around him, thankful for his hold because I really do question the stability of my legs right now.

And it only gets worse the more he touches me, trailing those wicked fingers down my sides, past the hem of my dress. He gathers the material in his hands, dragging the tips of his fingers up my thighs.

“You’re all I’ve fucking thought about for days, Princess. You and that amazing little humming moan you make when you come. I’ve been trying to figure out how I can make you come while my dick is in your mouth because I bet that feels like heaven.”

He says all of this with barely any space between us. Frustration pours off him even as his words are breathy with wonder.

Gabe bends his knees, taking those seductive lips away from mine, and tugs my panties down.

Air leaves my lungs in a rush, and I drop my head back against the wall. My hands fall to his shoulders as I steady myself.

“Step,” he murmurs, on his knees now.

I lift one foot, then the other. The vibrator is losing the battle of gravity with how crazy wet I am. I clench my muscles to keep it in place.

“Did you just put those in your pocket?” I ask, chagrin twisting my stomach. And right behind that riot of emotion is a kick of arousal. My panties are in Gabriel Rothburn’s pocket.

“If you’re a good girl, you can have them back later.” The challenge in his words lights me from the inside out.

I trace a finger along his cheek to his lower lip. Those sinful lips part, and he nips the pad of my finger, then sucks the digit inside. Heat races over my skin, and I let out a shaky breath. “Maybe I don’t want them back.”

Smart man that he is, he instantly knows what I’m implying. That I intend to be bad. Naughty. Reckless. Pick your word.

His jaw drops, releasing my captive finger, and he groans as he rests his forehead against my belly. I laugh, rubbing my hands over his shoulders, delighting in the fact that I’ve made the tech tycoon short circuit.

When he looks up at me, those brilliant blue eyes sparkling with intent, all the pieces of my life fall into place. Everything leading up to this, all the schooling, board meetings, and society events, paved a path to bring me here. To Gabe's apartment. It feels right. A touch forbidden but exactly where I'm supposed to be.

“While you're down there?—”

His lips pull up into a smirk. “Yes, Princess?”

He kisses my hip and then pushes my dress up to my waist. With a groan, he leans in, lips nibbling a line toward my clit.

I can't get the words out when he's teasing me like this. It's as if the air in my lungs is frozen and my brain has forgotten how to send signals to my tongue and vocal cords.

My juices coat the inside of my thighs, and, some other time, I might feel the burn of embarrassment. But not today. Not when he's so enthralled.

Nudging the vibrator aside, he licks my clit. The single swipe of his tongue causes a chain reaction. My hips tilt toward him, offering myself to his kisses. My nipples harden to the point of pain. I whimper my need because he's right. Twice isn't enough. Not when I was surrounded by three prime specimens of male perfection.

My hormones are firing on all cylinders.

“Take it out,” I whisper.

“You sure I shouldn't turn it on and dial you up to a ten?” His voice deepens, positively wicked.

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I slide my fingers into his hair and tug just enough to make him wince.

“I’m done with the toy.”

His eyebrows wiggle. Naughty, naughty man.

“Is that right?” He licks me again. “Hold your dress, Princess.”

I do as he asks, scrunching the skirt beneath my breasts so I can watch him.

His palms slide across my skin. “Do you need something,” he tugs the vibrator gently, “less mechanical?”

The silicone slides free, leaving me empty, pussy clutching at nothing. Tossing the toy aside, he groans and leans into me again. “You’re so flushed. Dripping. It’s sexy as fuck.”

If anyone else was giving me such a thorough inspection and a blow-by-blow of my lady parts, I might dissolve with mortification. But Gabe is such a scientist. So analytical. And right now, he seems thoroughly bemused, almost proud to have made my body react in such a way.

Spreading my lower lips with one hand, he presses his other arm across my hips, holding me to the wall.

I drop my head back and close my eyes. My senses are on overload. Every breath he takes teases me. But it’s not enough. Not nearly enough.

“Look at the mess you’ve made for me.” The pride in his voice brings another rush of moisture, which he, of course, notices and groans happily. He licks a straight line up to my clit, feathering back and forth, then slowly circles, driving me mad.

“Mmm.”

He hooks his hand beneath my leg and drapes it over his shoulder. I keep one hand speared through his hair. Those talented fingers dive back between my legs, holding me open for his mouth.

Then he eats me out like a man who hasn’t dined for a week. It’s messy and noisy and fucking perfect. He thrusts a long finger into me, curling it just right and a tiny firework zings through my veins, prepping me for what’s to come.

But then he leans back, taking those lips away from where I need them most.

My eyelids pop open. “Gabe?—”

He kisses my thigh and groans. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to hear you say my name just like that.”

“I need you.”

“I know you do, honey. But we should wait for our friends.”

I hum in displeasure only because I was spiraling up that mountain of pleasure at breakneck speed. He’s not wrong, though. The idea of the four of us together sends a fresh burst of heat over my skin.

“You could always forbid me from coming,” I say, but it sounds like a plea. What can I say? I love having his mouth between my thighs.

“You really are a vixen, aren’t you?”

It’s not a no.

I smile.

“Is that what you want? Me teasing you until you’re begging for it? ’Til you’re boneless and growling my name? Can you promise you won’t come?”

Can I?

It sounded good at the time, but his pleasure is impossible to miss. It leaches into his voice, his touch, the throaty growls that turn me inside out.

He nips my hip bone and then kisses a path along the line between my leg and hip. Across my mound to my other hip. Everywhere but where I need him most.

“Please—”

“Promise me.” He pauses over my clit, and I feel his heat.

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“Gabe—”

“That’s it, Princess. Beg me.”

Ding.

The air leaves my lungs with a whoosh, and I roll my head along the wall, wildly turned on and needing release. The doors part, and Kingston’s gaze locks with mine.

He smiles. It’s the kind of smile that makes the corners of his eyes crinkle with happiness.

But just as quickly, he schools his expression as he takes in the whole sordid scene.

“I see you started without us.”

2

KATHERINE

Alex and Kingston stride out of the elevator, and my fingers lose their grip on my dress. Gabe lowers my foot to the floor and sits back on his heels.

“She asked me so nicely.” He shoots a mischievous grin over his shoulder, completely unapologetic.

“No doubt,” King says, holding out a hand to me.

I take it, letting him pull me closer as I try to read his expression. His pretty, cool-green eyes aren't sparkling like they normally do, but he seems relaxed. That calm, confident boy I've known most of my life.

Alex steps around us, giving Gabe a hand up. There's a small shopping bag in his hand, but before I can ask about it, Gabe slides a hand across the small of my back.

"Thought you were going to show her around," King prods.

The two men stare each other down.

"Don't be jealous, K. You'll get your turn. I didn't have dessert with my dinner."

It's a little barb because they were pulled out of meetings. Not that Gabe had to come with Alex. Heck, Alex didn't have to come either.

I'm sure Roman had everything under control.

"Aww. If I'd known, I would have brought you some of Momma's tiramisu," King says, letting Gabe's jibe go. "It's the best. Tell him, Kat."

"It's very good." I squeeze King's hand and then go into fix-it mode with Gabe. "I'd love to see your apartment."

They lead me deeper into the luxurious penthouse, King's fingers laced through mine, Gabe's hand at my back. I don't know what exactly I was expecting, but it wasn't the colorful, cozy space.

Luxurious velvets and polished brass, sleek lines and plenty of curves. Floor-to-ceiling drapes and a breathtaking view of the city.

“Powder room,” Gabe says, pausing outside a small room that’s brimming with color. Were the jewel tones his idea or Alex’s?

Deep teals, vibrant emerald green, brilliant goldenrod, with plenty of soft, pale neutrals. The green dress I wore to the auction would be right at home here.

“The bedrooms are down that way,” he says, waving a hand toward a wide hall that runs the length of the building.

“And this is our entertainment room.”

It’s a large, square space with a massive screen to the right, flanked by sumptuous red curtains. They remind me of old-school Hollywood.

Gabe steps away from me and pushes two massive ottomans together. “I figure we’re not all going to fit in one bed.”

“We could get something custom-made,” King says. As much as he tries to deny who he is and the privilege he was born with, it still shines through from time to time.

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“Tonight?” I tease.

Alex circles the back of the sectional and shoves it forward until it meets the ottomans. Meanwhile, my brain races in different directions. I cross the room.

“I love this,” I murmur, petting the insanely soft fabric. It feels like the world’s most luxurious corduroy. The warm gray color gives the space a masculine feel, and it’s easy to imagine Gabe and Alex kicking back after a long week, watching an old favorite.

I bet that doesn’t happen as often as they’d like.

“Hit that button behind you,” Gabe says. “The one on the right.”

I turn and King steps over to a panel next to the door, following Gabe’s instruction. There’s a soft whir behind us, and I glance back as thick drapes move to cover the window.

“Think we’ve already given everyone more than they paid for tonight,” Gabe says as they push the sides of the sectional in, making a single massive bed.

There’s zero censure in his tone, just frustration. Alex grunts in agreement, circling back to me. Those keen brown eyes lock with mine, pulling me to him.

My stomach tightens, and the heat of embarrassment races over my shoulders. I hate that, once again, I’ve drawn unnecessary attention. “I’m sorry we disrupted your evening.”

Alex prowls toward me, dropping the little bag and reaching for me. I face him, a thrill running through me. Being wanted by this man will never get old. I slide my hands up the solid wall of his chest and across the crisp, warm fabric of his shirt.

“Up.” The word is a growl as he cups my ass.

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I jump, wrapping my legs around his hips.

His hum of pleasure makes me wet again. I pepper kisses across his cheek to his chin and then along his jaw, reveling in the feel of those strong arms holding me aloft.

“I’m sorry about the picture,” I whisper. “I hate to cause you?—”

He silences me with a kiss, his tongue sweeping deep to tangle with mine. Ohmygosh. I love the way he takes control. Just steamrolling past my worries to douse me with desire.

I suck on his tongue, and he does the same to mine. A racy little tit-for-tat. Our moans fill the air, swirling around us like a seductive symphony.

He wraps an arm around my waist, holding me so tight. It’s almost hard to breathe, but who cares. If I pass out, he won’t drop me, I’m sure of that.

I grind my hips against him, wet and needy. And his cock promises I won’t be disappointed.

“Hold on,” he murmurs, then settles onto one of the ottomans.

He brushes the cardigan off my shoulders and tugs down the straps of my dress. My nipples ache for his attention, but he takes his time kissing my neck, exploring my shoulders.

“Arms up.”

I do as he asks, getting exactly what I want. One less layer between us.

He lifts my dress over my head and tosses it away. There’s a throaty groan from somewhere behind me, and I glance over my shoulder. Gabe stands there in the dim lighting, cock in hand, stroking slowly.

“Couldn’t wait any longer, Princess. You’ve got me so worked up.”

I shoot him a smile and then turn my attention back to Alex.

He reaches behind me, deft fingers unhooking my bra. It joins the dress on the floor, and he cups my breasts, his warmth searing me. I will never get enough of this man. The way he studies me and touches me. How protected I feel whenever he’s around.

I rock my hips against the hard length of his cock, whimpering because the friction against my clit feels so damn good.

“You’re all overdressed,” I purr, shooting King a look over my other shoulder.

He strides forward, hand sliding up my back and into my hair. His fist tightens, giving me a little bite of pain. I gasp, and he swoops in, oblivious to Alex’s personal space, turning my head and tipping my chin up.

“Is that what you want, Wildfire? The three of us naked?” He brushes a kiss across my lips. It’s too brief, leaving me bemused. “You don’t need to answer that. It’s written on your face.”

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“It is?” I tighten my hold on Alex’s shoulders because dang, if they don’t make me lightheaded and swoony.

“Mmhmm. That’s your ‘I want three hot guys to ravish me’ face.”

Huffing a laugh, I glance back at Alex. The hunger there makes my insides swoop and soar. So steady. Always ready and waiting for me. Gah, I want to make him come so hard his eyes cross.

“Correction,” I say.

“Hmm?”

“Not three guys. I want three very specific, very hot men to ravish me.”

The corner of Alex’s mouth tips up, and I swear, I fall the last little bit for this big, brooding bodyguard turned CEO.

3

KATHERINE

I don’t know exactly when I started falling for Alexander Hunt, but staring at him now, feeling those dark chocolate eyes bore into me, I can honestly say it’s not a surprise. Like so many of the best things in life, our path to each other was a slow build, like an aged parmesan.

All the signs are there. The giddiness bubbling in my chest every time I think of him, wondering what he's doing. Which is often. The way there's zero judgment from him. It's like he exists in this beautiful, neutral place where the only thing that matters is if I'm safe and happy.

Raking my fingers through his dark locks, I smile and let the feelings run wild in my chest. Or maybe it's hormones.

"Three hot men, hmm?" He stares at my lips, which are plump and thoroughly kissed, thanks to him and Gabe. Then he skates a finger up my spine, reminding me just how naked I am.

Gloriously, I feel no shame. No embarrassment. Quite the opposite.

They make me feel like a goddess.

I nod. "Know anyone who might be interested?"

He ducks his head to the tender spot between my neck and shoulder, inhaling. My pussy clenches, achingly empty and oh so wet. I'm surprised she can work up the enthusiasm after all the orgasms these guys have given me lately.

But that greatly underestimates the feel of Alex's lips against my skin. The powerful way he bends me back over his arm and seals his lips around my right nipple. Staring up at the smooth ceiling, I relax in his arms, moaning as his lips work their magic. Sucking me deeper, harder, pulling all my focus to that singular point.

"So hot," King whispers, and Gabe grunts his agreement.

Alex moves to my other breast, working it into a fever pitch. Those long, drugging pulls of his lips leave me whimpering. I squirm in his lap, needing relief. Needing

more.

“Alex—”

He hums, and the vibration moves from his lips to my nipple and straight to my clit. My gasp is ragged and raw, the needy sound bouncing off the walls.

“Please...” I beg, but I don’t even know what I’m begging for. My thoughts are cloudy with lust, drowning out everything but a single word. More. More. More.

More touches. More kisses. More naughty words and heat-filled stares and hard cocks made to drive me wild. More evenings like this and promise of tomorrows. More time learning and teasing and tempting and making our fantasies come true.

More.

More.

More.

He lets my nipple pop free of his lips and leans back until I’m upright in his lap again. It’s a bit of a head rush, and his look doesn’t let me escape. His fingers flex into my hips.

“Don’t joke about that. We’re more than interested, and you know it.” The possessive purr in his words is a balm to my soul. I secretly want to hear them again and again.

I press my lips to the corner of his mouth, overwhelmed by how turned on I am. It drips through every vein, making me want to rub against him like a kitten who’s just found catnip. Later, I might wonder how easily I fell into this. But the energy in this room is perfect. Heady. Like destiny plucked our names from a hat and wove our

stories together.

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My mother is the furthest thing from woo-woo, and my upbringing was incredibly strait-laced. But I'm done ignoring what I want, what feels good, what feels right. Alex was right earlier. I'm not done with them. I don't want to go back to the way things were. It's time to hold on with both hands and see where this wonderful ride takes us.

Behind me, the rustling of clothes makes my pulse skitter. I told them they were overdressed. Sounds like they're rectifying that. There's the snick of a zipper being tugged down. The low hum as one of them shucks their clothes, no doubt brushing their aching cock.

I thread my hands through Alex's hair and lean closer, wanting nothing between us but sweat. "I need you."

A low grumble travels up his throat, and he grabs my ass. "Same, Katie Bird."

I brush along his stubble-covered jaw. My eyelids flutter as I inhale his cologne. "Mmm." I swear I feel the blood heating as it pumps through my veins. What is in that stuff? Why does it smell like sex and sin? Why do I want to lick him?

"Take me out," he orders, that velvety voice getting impossibly deeper.

Yes!

I lean back so I can reach between us and undo his pants. He sucks in a breath as I lower his zipper. Has he been wanting this as much as I have? Thinking of me throughout the day? I hope so.

The thought of distracting a man with so much discipline makes me feel powerful. Limitless.

“This is so much better than that stupid meeting,” he grouses.

“Right? We should boycott meetings. No more meetings,” I tease, slipping my hand inside his slacks. He’s big and hot, straining for freedom.

Alex sighs the instant I take him in hand. “You’re very convincing.”

“Luckily, you know the boss,” I say, giving him a slow pump.

His hands slide over my bare ass, keeping me in his lap. That’s all I want. To be in this bubble with him. I glance over at Gabe, then King, before returning my attention to Alex. They’re really all here. Hungry gazes, gorgeous bodies, burning me up with their attention.

“I do,” Alex agrees, a tendril of pride in his voice. “I should make that happen.”

I don’t really think that the CEO of one of the world’s biggest security firms is going to outlaw meetings, but the idea makes me grin. It’s fun to dream. It’s also fun to make him tense beneath me and hold his breath.

Sliding my thumb across the sensitive spot beneath the head of his cock. I watch his irises flare with desire. I want to learn everything that gives him pleasure. Every. Last. Thing.

His skin is hot and smooth as silk. “Such a handful,” I murmur.

It feels good to tease him. To bring that smile to his lips. To make him feel sexy and desired and even cherished.

“If I didn’t have meetings, I don’t know what I’d do all day,” Gabe murmurs, coming closer.

“I know what you’d do all day,” King quips, a smirk in his voice. “Or rather, who...”

I grin at him over my shoulder. “That assumes I have no meetings or work of my own.”

“Let me have my dream, babe.”

How long would their businesses survive without them? At the moment, I don’t care. Everything outside these walls is unimportant when I’m naked in Alex Hunt’s lap.

His hand closes over mine, tightening around his cock, showing me how he likes to be touched. Gah, he’s gorgeous. I need him now. No more teasing.

Leaning in, I whisper a kiss over his lips. “I want you to fill me up.”

His cock flares between my fingers, gaining more girth.

“With my cock or my cum?”

The dirty words scorch my cheeks, and I love it. They give me the freedom to be my true self and say what I’m actually thinking. No more playing it safe.

So I smirk at him and tell him the truth. “Both.”

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4

ALEX

BOTH.

The purr in that single word fans the flames inside me.

“Damn, Katie Bird.”

She smirks at me like she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

Feeling.

How there’s a beast inside me that wants to claim her.

Her lovely blue-green eyes sparkle with the light from the wall scones. I need a picture of her. Just like this. So young and vibrant, holding court from my lap.

“Think you can manage that, big guy?” she asks in a voice that’s the perfect combination of sinfully sweet and seductive.

Can I fill her up?

Oh, Beauty, you don’t have to ask me twice.

“King—take her.”

Her best friend doesn't hesitate. Simply steps in behind her, wraps an arm beneath her rib cage, and lifts her straight off my thighs.

At the same time, I grab the sides of my button-up shirt and jerk them apart, buttons flying in all directions. Her gasp is music to my ears. The way her eyes widen and then rake appreciatively down my chest will be seared into my memory.

Shrugging out of the tattered shirt, I ask, "Like what you see, Katie Bird?"

She bites her lip and nods.

King sets her feet down, then slides one hand between her legs, cupping her sex while the other closes over her right breast. She lifts a hand as she sinks back against him, tangling her fingers in his hair.

I'm not surprised by her brattiness. King and I left her alone with Gabe, and he brings out this side of her. And I certainly don't mind this woman knowing what she wants and becoming a sexy siren to get it. We'll give her whatever she needs, and she knows it.

"Dang, Wildfire. You're so getting fucked."

"Really, really well," Gabe adds.

I keep my gaze locked with hers as I stand and shove my pants and boxers down while toeing off my shoes. My urgency as I yank off my socks makes her giggle.

Damn.

There it is.

The sound that drew me to her in the first place. That had me seeking her out at every event since.

Her gaze is quick but thorough, sweeping over me from my toes to my ears and everywhere in between. Does she realize her expression gives her away? It's obvious from the way her lashes droop and her lips part that she likes what she sees.

I run my fist over my cock and then answer her earlier question. "I can more than manage, Beauty."

I stalk forward the single step, closing the distance to King, and then pluck her from her best friend's arms.

Squeaking, she wraps herself around me like a little koala. Arms and legs tight to hold her aloft. But I've got her, hands beneath her thighs. She's not going anywhere.

"But say stop and we stop, understand?"

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She nods. “I don’t want to stop.” The nails from her right hand graze through my chest hair, and then she presses her palm over my heart. “I want every naughty fantasy we’ve had about each other.”

How does she know me so well?

With a grunt of approval, I turn back to the sectional-turned bed and kneel. Crawling forward, I lower her to the cushions. There’s a moment of pause as our eyes lock.

She slides her hands over my heated skin, kissing every inch she can. And at the same time, her hips tilt up, beckoning.

Gabe and King climb up along either side of us, but I don’t pay them any attention as I swipe the head of my erection through her drenched slit.

“So wet, Beauty.”

“I should hope so,” King says, a hint of pride in his words. He runs a hand over her shoulder as if he can’t help himself.

“You ready for me?” I ask, even though I’m sure she’s primed from the toy King bought.

“So ready.”

Her golden hair is fanned around her head, giving her an almost angelic glow. But her expression is pure sex. Sin. Need. She strains against me, heels locking and tugging

behind my lower back.

That's sexy as hell. I slam my hips forward, wedging my erection inside her with a single, amazing stroke.

Heaven.

Her head tips back as a needy, unintelligible cry leaves her lips. She digs her nails into my shoulders, and fuck if I don't love the feel of this kitten's claws.

I duck my head, feathering kisses along her jaw as she adjusts to my size.

"Okay?" I lift my head, searching for any sign of distress.

She nods and hums a breathy "Please..."

"Please, what, Princess?" Gabe asks.

Her gaze never leaves mine. Surrounded by our best friends but stuck in this bubble together. She's amazing.

"Fuck me."

King groans as if he's the one dick deep inside her. "You heard the lady."

My lips twitch at his hoarse order, and I pull my hips back. "My pleasure, Beauty."

Bracketing my arms around her slender shoulders, I unleash all the desire that's been building in me. Every party where our eyes met across the room, wishing I could steal her away to a dark corner. I fuck her into the cushions like a man possessed. A man obsessed. Because I am.

My senses light up every time I slide into her tight heat.

Her pussy ripples around my cock, pulling me deeper, holding on, tempting me to let go. It's what she wanted.

My cock and my cum.

She shudders and shivers, whimpering.

Fuck, she's amazing. Hips cradling me just right, those sexy stems urging me on, never looking away.

“Fuck, you're beautiful, Wildfire.”

King's words remind me we have an audience. Two men who desire a connection with her as well.

As much as I'd like to keep her all to myself, I sit back on my heels, pulling her ass up onto my thighs.

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“Look how well you take him.” King rolls toward her, kissing her shoulder, then moving down to her breast.

Holy shit.

“Keep doing that.” A groan rumbles from my chest. “She’s gonna squeeze my dick off.”

Gabe huffs a laugh, then leans in to kiss her. “What a way to go.”

No kidding.

My eyes cross as her muscles ripple around me. The woman must do Kegel exercises on the regular.

King tortures and teases her breasts while I slam my hips to hers. I need her overcome with pleasure. Delirious and never doubting our connection again. Next time that pesky doubt pops into her brain, she’ll remember this night and squish it like a roach.

With an arm wrapped across her thighs, I shuttle back and forth. Just a few inches, but they’re all we need. At this angle, I’m constantly rubbing her G-spot. She’s helpless to do anything but hold on and let herself fall overboard.

Sliding a hand down her thigh to her clit, I circle once, twice, firmer the third time.

She gasps against Gabe’s mouth.

“Come for us,” he whispers. “Come on Alex’s cock.”

Yes.

Around and around, I circle. Firm strokes, slipping and sliding in her slickness. When I get the pressure and rhythm just right, she detonates, snatching her lips away from Gabe’s as a cry rips from her throat. Her body locks up, back arching as her cunt clamps around my cock.

I hold still, and my head drops back as I mentally flick through tomorrow’s to-do list. It’s not much help against the delicious moans pouring from her lips. My balls draw tight, ready to let loose, but I’m not ready yet. I want her to come at least once more.

Finally, when she comes down off her orgasmic high, I drop my chin and take her in. Her color’s high, a glorious flush across her chest, and her lips are swollen from Gabe’s kisses.

She frowns up at me. “Holding out on me?”

“You come first.”

Her sultry grin reappears. “I like the sound of that.”

“Thought you might.”

“Roll over,” King says, scooting off the bed.

I know what he wants. And I’m more than happy to give it to him.

Sliding an arm under her back, holding her close, I flip us so I’m on the bottom. Katherine’s jaw drops, and she squirms, trying to get more comfortable. Her hands

press against my chest as she lifts up, then slides back down, rolling her hips at the bottom.

Her throaty moan almost sets me off, the minx.

“Want to do the honors?” King asks.

She cranes her neck to see what Kingston is talking about. He tosses Gabe a bottle, but he’s still holding something in his hand.

“What is that?” she asks.

5

KINGSTON

Katherine blinks at me, and her jaw drops, lips forming a small O. Her strawberry gold locks tumble down her back, a tangled riot. And man-oh-man, if that doesn’t call to my fingers.

I’d love to wrap it in my fist and hold on tight.

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But right now, she's trying to figure out what I'm holding, and when she can't, she turns to Gabe. I love watching her mind work.

“Lube?”

“Mmhmm.”

I crawl between Alex's legs and run a hand up her spine. She presses back into my touch. This is straight out of my fantasies.

Well, not the other men. That wasn't part of it. But watching Alex Hunt fuck her into the cushions was a massive turn-on. Almost as massive as the dick still buried in her pussy, stretching her wide.

Gabe seemed particularly interested in his best friend's cock. His earlier words whisper through my mind. Alex is straight.

Meaning he's not?

Focus, King. Focus.

“You going to let us take your ass, Wildfire?” I skate my hand down, cupping a round globe and giving it a squeeze. Time slows, and my blood heats to lava levels as I tease the puckered hole between her cheeks. “Let us fill you with our cum? It's going to feel amazing, but we need to prepare you.”

She blinks up at me in the dim light, a cute little owl-like expression. Curious and

almost confused. Probably because I'm still tracing my fingers back and forth, teasing her nerves in a surprisingly delightful, deliciously dirty way.

Gabe squeezes in next to me, hot pink bottle in hand. "Use your words, Princess."

"I think we broke her."

Alex grunts his agreement.

She comes back to the present, pressing against my fingers with a needy "Yes."

Crouching over her back, I press sloppy kisses along her spine. I want to eat her up. Just nip and lick until she's delirious with desire.

"Yes, you want Gabe to pour lube all over my fingers so I can tease you?" A thought occurs to me. "Have you ever done anal, Wildfire?"

She shakes her head, and those silky tresses tease my nose. Fuck, she smells like paradise. Coconuts, jasmine, citrus, and the ocean.

"You good, Alex?" I ask.

"Perfect."

Gabe and I share a smirk at the tightness in Alex's tone. He's barely hanging in there. And why wouldn't he be with the way Kat's rocking and rolling her hips? I know how amazing she feels. Imagine how tight she must be after so many orgasms. Hell. When do I get a turn?

"King—" Katherine's voice is breathy.

“Yeah?” I glance at Gabe, who flips open the cap on the lube.

“Need you...”

Her whine makes my eyes roll back and my cock weep. “Working on it, love.”

“Hurry.”

Gabe drizzles the lube between her sexy ass cheeks, and I work it into her gently. Just the tips of my fingers, watching her for any signs of distress. She pauses her movements on Alex’s dick, moaning as I sink a finger deep. Then two. Gabe adds more lubrication.

Alex groans at the press of my fingers along the delicate tissues separating my fingers from his dick. I wonder if he’s ever done this. If he’s okay with what we’re about to do. But I have no doubt he’d call a stop to anything he’s not comfortable with.

“So tight. She’s gonna squeeze the hell out of us,” I tell them. Then to Gabe, “Coat this.”

I hand over the polished silver toy. Gabe doesn’t even blink at the proffered plug. Just accepts it and pours a copious amount of shiny, clear lube over the tip. I groan at the sight and drill my fingers deeper. That should not be so damn erotic. And I should not be imagining those long fingers slathering my cock with lube, ringing and twisting until I can’t take any more.

Forcing my gaze away, I return my attention to Katherine. “Ready for this, love?”

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“Please.”

“You ask so nicely.”

“Told you,” Gabe says.

She presses back against my hand again, taking Alex deep.

Gabe slides in next to me, shoulder against mine. My lust ratchets up another notch. It’s been a while since I’ve been with a man, and having two here is shorting my circuits. Between Gabe’s brilliant mind and classic male beauty and Alex’s tough guy exterior and heart of melted chocolate, it’s hard to remember that I came back to New York for Katherine.

“Deep breath, Princess.”

I pull my fingers out, and he slides the toy against her ass, teasing her with shallow thrusts that have her tossing her head. My chest tightens. I cannot wait to fuck her there, wrap my fist in all that shiny hair like I’ve dreamed about so many times. Her trust in us is everything.

Alex groans. “Hurry.”

“Are we making you lose your legendary control?” Gabe teases.

Legendary control? Fuck, that’s hot. I want to make him break, to snap that control like a glow stick. And if I can’t do it myself, I’ll help Katherine do it.

“Dammit, G!” Alex’s bark blows Katherine’s hair away from her cheek.

She giggles and drops a kiss against his lips.

No doubt the plug is making things so much tighter for him. But I appreciate how careful Gabe is. This is clearly not his first rodeo. He takes his time, watching her movements, her breathing, every detail that gives away her pleasure or discomfort. I guess I should have expected nothing less from a brainiac who changed the micro-payment industry before he hit twenty.

“Good girl,” Gabe murmurs, sliding the toy home. “Look at you, Princess.”

“Our depraved queen. Riding her man, stuffed full of cock, with a dazzling sapphire between her cheeks. You’ve got us so damned hard, love.”

She makes a sexy little moaning sound. It’s part purr, all pleasure. “Good.”

God, she really is the woman of my dreams. Letting loose and losing all her inhibitions when she’s in bed. That single word is going to play through my head on repeat till the day I die. Which, heavens willing, will be a long, long time from now. After we’ve traveled the world, fucked on every continent, raised a brood of little golden-haired boys and girls. And?—

“King—” She reaches a hand back, grabbing my thigh. “Gabriel.”

I lean forward, pressing my chest against her back. “We’re here, Wildfire.”

We touch her everywhere, keeping her body loose and sated.

“More than your share,” she tells Alex, who laughs.

He grunts. “Says who?”

“Me,” she whimpers.

Alex grabs her hips and lifts her almost completely off the monster between his legs. It glistens with her juices. Gabe and I groan, sharing a look.

Dead. Just dead. I can't be losing my mind over that. Over a man I can't have. I drop over to the side and watch the show.

My fingers clench with the need to grab my aching dick and give it some relief, but I won't. Not yet. Instead, I let the need sizzle over my skin.

They're perfect together, her skin so creamy and pale against his. That smattering of freckles that have driven me wild with wonder for years. My gut tightens as Gabe moves in behind her, coasting his hands up the back of her thighs.

She gasps and shivers, but Alex doesn't let up. Hands clamped over her hips, he rocks her up and down like she's a pocket pussy.

I see what Gabe means. How has Alex not come yet? My balls are screaming for release. But then, from the corner of my eye, I see Alex's right foot point, toes curling.

He slams her down, hips lifting as a groan tears from his soul. “Mine.”

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“Yours,” Katherine cries, echoing Alex’s uttered ‘Mine.’

The moment is messy and perfect.

A tangle of limbs. Spiraling emotion. And I don’t even care that another man just claimed my best friend as his own.

Who even am I?

But everything about this feels right. Like we were on four different paths, destined to meet here and now. That sounds hokey, but it’s the truth. If I hadn’t left six years ago, we never would have found our way to Gabe and Alex.

And the amazing part is, even while she’s in his arms, I know she hasn’t forgotten that I’m here. Or Gabe.

Alex moans, head tipped back, showing off all the muscles and tendons of his throat. The man is an Adonis. Muscles straining. Feet flexing and pointing. No doubt painting her insides with his cum, just as he promised.

Watching him lose control is incredible. Intimate. Binding us all closer.

Katherine sits tall, taking him deep, owning him. Owning all of us.

She slips a hand between her legs and teases her clit until she cries out. Her shoulders curl forward as her fingers prolong her orgasm.

Her face is a mask of pleasure, jaw dropped, eyes squinted closed. Then her head tips back, raining all that gorgeous hair over her shoulders as she moans.

“You make the best sounds, Princess,” Gabe says, hands cupping her breasts, his fingers still glistening from the lube.

Her hips rotate in Alex’s lap, tiny movements as she spirals downward, wringing every last bit of bliss.

I’ve never seen anything more stunning in my life.

And I love that I already know her so well. Her sounds. The way her skin tightens. Our connection is stronger than ever.

My cock bobs and dribbles with precum, every muscle in my body tight with readiness. But as much as I’d love to snatch her off Alex’s dick and impale her onto my own, I sit tight because I don’t want to miss a thing.

Gabe presses a kiss against her spine and then excuses himself, backing off the ottoman and striding for the door. A few seconds later, I hear water running, but the sound is drowned out by Katherine’s lusty sigh.

She collapses between me and Alex, then flops onto her back, sucking ragged breaths into her lungs. Her gaze meets mine, and the corners of that kissable mouth turn up in a satiated smile. She’s never looked prettier.

6

KATHERINE

I blow a strand of hair off my face and grin over at Alex after I look away from King.

His massive chest heaves as he tries to get enough oxygen. His hair is wild, standing in all directions, and he stares up at the ceiling like he's shocked.

Wreck Alexander Hunt. Mission accomplished. I give myself a mental pat on the back and suck in a lungful of air.

I take quick stock of my body, starting with my well-loved pussy. These three might just be the end of me. I hadn't planned on King stuffing me full with a butt plug and getting ruined myself. Because Alex is not a small man in any way, shape, or form. So Alex plus the plug stretched me to my limits. And I loved it.

"I've never come that hard before," I admit to no one in particular.

King rolls closer, a happy sound rumbling from his chest, those light green eyes sparkling with intent that leaves me breathless. "Challenge accepted."

When he says challenge accepted, I have no doubt he'll succeed. My clit throbs at the prospect. Down girl.

I need five minutes.

Gabe saunters into the room, wiping his hands on a dark gray towel. He tosses it over the arm of the sofa and crawls toward me.

Okay, three minutes.

My stomach does a cartwheel, and I instinctively spread my thighs.

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His best friend's cum slides out of me in an obscene show, and by the look on his face, he sees everything. I try to close my legs, but his hands snap to the inside of my knees, holding me open for his inspection. "Such a pretty mess, Princess."

"Gabe..." His name is something between a moan and a sigh.

His gaze flicks up to mine, and he looks so pleased with himself. And with me. He shoots Alex a quick look, almost like he's making sure his best friend is still here, still in this with us.

He slides his palms up the inside of my legs, not tickling me exactly, but I'm ready to come out of my skin. Somehow, he takes me from relaxed and sated to hot and ready. And I don't think he even tries. He just does. He's learning how I like to be touched. Heck, he's learning things about me I'm not sure I knew about myself.

"Just like Alex promised." His thumbs slide through the slick. "He always keeps his promises; did you know that?"

My heart soars at that. I reach for Alex's hand and lift it to my lips, kissing the back. What kind of promises would he make me? A girl can dream.

King scoots down the sectional and strolls off, bare feet padding against the wooden floor. But I don't have time to ask after him, to make sure he's okay, because Gabe ducks his head and tongues my clit.

My back snaps like a whip, thighs spreading, and every ounce of focus in my body redirects to that single point of connection. Then his hands are on me again, spreading

my legs impossibly wider.

“Hold her,” he grunts, and Alex tugs his hand from mine, hooking it around my knee.

“Ohmygod. Gabe!” My hand shoots down, threading through his hair. My hips lift, driving my pussy against his waiting mouth, and he devours me. Long licks swiping through the wet mess. Teasing between my lips, then driving up inside me.

It’s forbidden and glorious, knowing he’s tasting Alex and me. Knowing he’ll take Alex however he can get him.

“Don’t say that like you’re not enjoying yourself.”

I lift my head to gape down at him. He smirks at me and then dives in again, those electric blue eyes not wavering from mine.

How could he even think I’m not enjoying myself? I swear electricity shoots straight from his tongue up my spine and zings around my brain like a pinball. I give his hair a little tug, pulling him even closer. He growls against my clit, and I drop back against the pillows, losing myself to the sensations.

Did I say three minutes?

Make it zero.

Alex’s fingers flex into my thigh before he switches hands. Rolling up onto his elbow, his big body curls around me, offering me that steady support I crave. Does he have to smell so yummy? Would it be weird if I licked him?

“You’re incredible, Katie Bird.” He brushes a kiss over my lips and then whispers, “I love the way you let us love you.”

My heart bounces around in my chest, and my breath whooshes out, unsteady. The L-word on his lips does amazing things to my lust-drunk brain. It's like a warm bear hug. One that I've desperately needed for so long.

Blinking up at him, I try to form words. String together a complete sentence. Something, anything, vaguely coherent. But I fail miserably because they have officially melted my brain.

Kingston returns, sliding on the sofa to my right. He mirrors Alex's position, clasping my right thigh and tugging it higher. The strength in his hand, in those blunt-tipped fingers, is impossible to ignore. He climbs things for fun, tests his grip strength on the regular, and occasionally does one fingered pull ups.

It's not enough and at the same time, I'm on overload. I need more of them. To feel Gabe inside me, surrounding me. And King.

“Are you ready for me, Princess? Or do you need a break?”

Thoughtful Gabe Rothburn might be the sexiest of all his many facets.

Do I need a break? Maybe. But I don't want one, so I shake my head and tug on his hair until he moves over me, shuttling his cock against my pussy.

His handsome face makes my stomach squeeze, and I reach for him, pulling him down into a kiss. His lips are wet and tangy with my release and Alex's. The combination spikes my need, driving it impossibly higher.

He tilts my hips up, and the tip of his dick notches against me. I exhale, oh so aware of the plug because of this position. I'm achingly full and yet not full enough. It won't be enough until they're all filling me to the brim. Surrounding me.

“Do it,” I whisper against his lips.

He pushes forward an inch, just enough to tease me. I bear down, but I’m still so empty.

“You want my cock?”

“So much.”

“Will you beg for it?”

He lifts his head, and a tendril of hair flops down against his forehead. His words are teasing, but there’s a truth behind them that makes me study him.

He needs to know that I’m in this with him. That I want him and that this isn’t just a wild orgy on his couch. Once again, I get the impression of a little boy who needs to be loved. Nurtured. Protected.

I push the hair off his face and drop my gaze to his lips. The me from two weeks ago would never have begged Gabe for anything. But so much has changed. My newfound clarity sets me free.

“I need you, Gabriel.” I rake my fingers through his hair again, gentler. “I need you to fuck me like you mean it. Like you’ve been wanting to for way too long.”

I know, because I’ve been wanting that too.

7

GABE

Katherine truly is going to ruin me.

And I’m not sure she didn’t just scramble my brain with her breathy declaration of

need.

How does she know I've wanted her for so long? Could she tell? I thought I was keeping myself in check. But not trusting someone and finding them insanely sexy aren't mutually exclusive.

I drive my hips forward until I can't go any farther. Her head tips back, showing off the creamy column of her throat. I lower myself to my elbows, muscling King and Alex out of the way, and nuzzle her smooth skin. She smells like a dream.

"Okay?" I ask because she's got to be extra sensitive.

She nods. "Don't hold back." She runs a heel up the back of my thigh, and my hips jerk even tighter to hers.

Her laughter is deliciously husky, reminding me of darkened rooms and expensive Scotch. She is one of the finer things in life. The type of woman I never could have expected. Never would have dreamed of.

"Did I break you?" she teases, her hands playing over my chest.

"No, but I'd love to see you try."

Her lovely eyes flash with challenge, and her nostrils flare the tiniest bit as her chin lifts.

"Oh, you've done it now." King huffs a laugh.

"What was it you said?" she asks King, then turns her attention back to me. "Challenge accepted."

It's Alex's turn to laugh, and she shoots him a quick smile before pushing on my shoulders. Alex brushes a kiss against her forehead and murmurs, "Give him hell."

"Thanks," I say dryly. Totally appreciate having his support. Seems like he's on her team now.

"No problem." He crawls to the edge and settles against the cushions, stretching an arm along the back of the sectional.

Katherine pushes against my left shoulder again, and I roll, somehow keeping her tight to my hips. Her hands land on either side of my ears, and her hair drapes around us like a golden curtain. My heart flips.

The butt plug makes the fit so much tighter, and when she moves, my nerve endings light up. And the way her tits drag over my chest nearly makes my eyes roll back in my head. God, I love the feel of her skin against mine. So silky smooth.

My hands glide down her back, over her hips, then up her sides. She shivers beneath my touch.

Then she ducks her head, trailing little kisses over my shoulder, up my throat, along my jaw. Every press of her lips winds me tighter. She's not even bouncing on my dick yet, and I'm already seeing stars. How the fuck does she manage that?

But I'm not going to rush her. No way in hell am I telling Katherine Montgomery to hurry up. We could do this all night, and I'd be the happiest man alive.

Alex shifts, and I see his long leg out of the corner of my eye. Okay, so those two might have something to say about me hogging our girl, but I'm not worried about it right now.

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“So what’s your plan, Princess?”

“Mmm?” She hums against my Adam’s apple.

“For breaking me.”

“Oh.” She sits up, hands pressing against my chest.

I memorize the feel of her, the weight of her, the hot clench around my cock. My toes curl, and I try to ignore how amazing that silky slide is. But I could no sooner stop my own heartbeat.

“Is it multi-part? What’s step one?”

She lifts off of my lap until the tip of my erection is barely inside her. I don’t like it. Don’t want to lose the connection between us, the easy glide.

Grabbing her hips, I push her back down as I lift my hips. Her jaw drops, and a breathy cry leaves her in a whoosh. She’s a picture of pleasure. A seductress that would send any man to his knees.

She wiggles around on my dick, and I clench my jaw. Fucking plug. I hope Kingston has the same experience—tight as can be and so fucking slick, thanks to Alex’s cum.

Katherine bends her elbows, coming down on my chest like a kitten who wants something. I wouldn’t be surprised if she started purring. Her nipples graze my chest again, and I suck in a sharp breath.

“I was thinking,” she whispers, gaze roaming my face, “that I’d just edge you. Until. You. Come.”

My groan is echoed by King and Alex. At least there’s solidarity between us.

I tug her down for a kiss. “Always knew you were a tease.”

“You like it.” The slight tug of her lips does wild things to my heart. I’ve never felt this free before. This comfortable. Hell, this is playful.

“I love it,” I correct. Playing with her gets my juices flowing and makes me want to conquer and shout from rooftops.

She rocks forward, then slams her hips back, taking me to the hilt. I can’t stop my groan. She does it again. And again. Winding me tighter. I go over my schedule, all the paperwork and endless details that need my attention tomorrow, but nothing stops the build. That slow, steady spiral up the mountain.

And just when I think she’s going to tip us over the edge, she sits up. Turning to King, she curls a finger, calling him over. He kneels at her side and cups her cheek reverently.

She leans into his touch and wraps an arm around his waist, then presses her lips to his. My abs tighten at the erotic display. He sips from her lips, then deepens the kiss, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She opens for him, those dreamy little sounds pouring from her like an open faucet. I love the way they enjoy each other. How obvious their relief is to no longer be living in the shadows of their attraction.

My cock jerks involuntarily because what can I say? A man has his fantasies. And these two swapping spit around my dick is at the top of my list.

She reaches for his cock, jacking him slowly. He groans into her mouth, straightening so he can change the angle of their kiss. It's more dominant, driving into her mouth, biting her lower lip, making her whimper.

I snatch my gaze away because that is not helping me stave off my orgasm. Which was probably part of her plan. The minx. Turning my head the other way, I glance at Alex and find him stroking himself. Long, lazy strokes. Our eyes meet and hold.

I swallow, lips dry, not daring to blink.

Katherine gyrates her hips, teasing my needy dick as she makes out with Kingston. Meanwhile, I'm in a staring contest with my best friend. The one person who's been by my side since moment one. Almost two decades. Who's supported me. Who gave me the chance to follow my dreams.

He's everything.

I love him so fucking much it hurts.

It's a physical pain in my chest, a bruise on my heart.

Slowly, his gaze leaves mine, moving over to Katherine and King.

I blink back frustrated tears and close my eyes.

Katherine hums a sweet, pleased sound and then giggles softly. "I think we did it. We broke him."

I smile and blink up at her. "Gotta try harder than that, sweetheart."

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Does my voice sound funny? Thick and clogged with emotion?

The cushions shift as King moves in behind her, hands closing around her breasts. He lifts and presses them together, creating a delicious display of deep cleavage. She's a handful, our girl. And she preens in his hold.

I ghost my hands up the inside of her thighs, loving the way they bracket around me. She braces her hands against my chest, smiling down at me with so much confidence and mischief that it feels like a piece of my soul returns.

I brush a thumb over her clit, watching her face for the moment I hit just the right spot. But I feel it in the way her pussy grips my dick. A tight squeeze. A needy moan.

“Yes. . .”

“That the spot, sweetheart?” Two can play this game. She thinks she's going to break me? Make me lose my control? Crash into a spent slumber?

My dick has zero doubts.

But my competitive spirit is strong. I tease her more. Firmer strokes until her hips move over my lap like she's trying to keep a hula-hoop aloft.

King plays with her nipples, gentle tugs, brushing his thumbs over the rosy peaks. Oh, I like this. Having a teammate to help me drive my girl wild. The man knows what he's doing. Years of pent-up desire make him an attentive lover. Proven by the way she's whimpering in our grasp, losing time with her hips.

“How are you feeling, Wildfire?”

“Don’t stop. Ever.”

His chuckle is dark and slightly manic. “Never?”

She shakes her head, her honey-gold hair shimmying over her shoulders. There’s a fine sheen of sweat above her brow. “Never.”

God, I love the sound of that. Fucking her like this every day. Every night. Watching her fuck my best friend. I’ll take him however I can get him.

And King? He’s a gorgeous fucking bonus. And he’s reading my mind.

“Your wish is our command, Princess.” Digging my heels into the ottoman, I thrust upward. Her tits bounce, threatening to spill from King’s fingers.

She cries out, hands clasping my chest, trying to hang on. “Gabe?—”

“Yes, Princess?” Another thrust. More jiggling. Her jaw drops, and her mouth forms the sexiest O.

I keep moving, and King’s right there with me, driving her toward the edge.

As I feel her start to tighten, I stop, my hand falling away from her clit.

“Stop teasing me.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I like teasing you.”

King pulls back and gathers her hair in one hand. He presses an open-mouthed kiss

against her neck.

“Ready to make your boy lose his mind, Wildfire? Ready to let me fuck your gorgeous ass?”

Her eyes peg me then, going from lusty to intent in the blink of an eye. “Mmhmm. Yes, please.”

Oh shit. They were playing me. Teasingme.

Later I might laugh about it, but not while King is pulling the plug from her ass. The pink bottle sails through my peripheral vision, and King snatches it from the air.

“Lean forward, love.”

She sinks down on top of me, pillowy breasts pressing against my chest. King hisses, and I glance past the woman in my arms to see him lathering his cock. His dreamy sea-foam green eyes meet mine in the soft light. “You good with this?”

“Hell, yes.” Make us see stars.

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The corner of his mouth hitches, so fucking confident, ridiculously handsome. I've never wanted to kiss a man more.

Katherine kisses my chest and my chin, teasing one hand through my hair. "Have I told you how handsome you are?"

Her soft question pulls my attention from her best friend.

"You think so?" Elation zings through me.

"Painfully so. It's rude."

I throw my head back and laugh. I will never get enough of this girl.

King moves in closer, one hand clamping over her hip. "Relax for me."

Her breath whooshes out, and she rocks forward, away from his intrusion.

"Easy, Princess. I know King would rather die than hurt you." I cup her cheek, falling deeper under her spell. And his.

"He's right," King admits.

"How do you know that?" she whispers.

"That's my girl. Let me in so I can make you feel good," he says.

I glance up at Alex. “Because that’s how I feel about this jackass.”

Alex grunts, hand stilling on his dick. “Who you calling a jackass?”

“They’re over here teaming up on me, and you’re just playing with your joystick.”

He laughs. The sound wraps around me like a warm blanket, soothing parts of me I didn’t know were agitated. How does she do it? How does she bring out the best in us?

“What do you expect me to do about it?”

I glance back at Katherine. Her eyes have lost focus again, and they start to roll as King strokes deeper.

“Fuc—” I feel him. So much bigger than the plug. And I swear he’s rubbing against the underside of my cock on purpose. “Distract her.”

King’s tendons are on full display as he holds himself rigid, pumping his hips gently. “God, I can feel you,” he grinds out, jaw clenching.

“I can feel you too.”

Katherine whimpers. “I can feel you both.”

“Good girl. Keep breathing. Almost there.”

My lips curl up in a smirk that I see reflected on King’s face. She sounds like she’s in heaven. “Are we making your toes curl yet?”

She squeezes her eyes shut, breathing through her mouth. “Oh god.”

“That’s not our name, Wildfire.”

She sags against me. “Mmhmm.”

I never thought I’d see Katherine Montgomery rendered speechless, but as King and I find a rhythm, driving her incoherent seems possible. Probable.

“What are our names, Princess?”

She moans again.

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That sound. I slam my head back, losing my mind. Thankfully, King doesn't miss a beat. Just keeps a methodical push/pull. In and out, hips angled so he's rubbing against her inner walls and my aching dick. Fuck, I've never been this hard.

Then he pauses, and her unsteady puff of air plays over my chest.

“Gabe asked you a question, Wildfire.”

When did his voice get so dark and growly? Why do I feel it over every inch of my skin? Like a sinful caress.

Who cares what I asked? I don't. Couldn't care less. The only thing that matters is?—

“Gabriel, my adventure and Kingston, my joy.”

It's hard to focus on her words when she presses a kiss over my heart. I'm her adventure?

King presses in again, and I swear he tilts his hips to stroke me harder. Katherine's pussy tightens, ringing me like a fist.

Fuck.

Katherine pushes against my chest enough to glance over at Alex. She stares at him for a long beat as King fucks her ass. “And Alex. My lighthouse.”

I stare at her profile, jaw dropped. That's how I've always seen him. My guiding

light. My safety. My shelter.

The orgasm I've been holding off rushes up, storming me. My hands clamp over her thighs, holding her down as my muscles tighten, threatening to snap. Blood roars in my ears. My vision dims at the edge. Above me, she cries out.

King slams deep, groaning. I feel his cock flexing, surging as he comes. He presses tight, one hand braced by my hip as his other wraps around her middle, hanging on. We're a mass of straining, mewling pleasure.

And the whole time, Katherine squeezes me so hard. They're beautiful when they lose control. Messy hair. Shuddering breaths. Lowered lashes. Straining muscles. It's almost like we're becoming one. Puzzle pieces clicking together tightly.

Katherine collapses against my chest, and King's lazy gaze meets mine, steady and sated. When can we do that again, his look asks.

Soon.

Really fucking soon.

That confident smirk reappears, and he pulls out, then crawls off the ottomans, heading for the bathroom.

Wrapping my arms around Katherine, I roll my head along the cushion and look at Alex. He's the one missing piece of the puzzle.

8

KATHERINE

It's dark when I wake parched. I blink, but my eyes are gritty. I didn't take off my makeup last night, and I'm already paying for it.

Fabulous.

I extract myself from Kingston, who's impersonating an octopus, wrapped around me like he'll never let me go. Alex's massive hand is clamped over my hip, and as I start to shimmy out from under it, he gives a low, sleepy growl, wraps his arm around my middle, and tugs me across the cushion to his chest.

Who knew Alexander Hunt was a cuddle bear?

"Stay," he murmurs, adorably sleepy.

"Need water," I mutter back, already prying his fingers from my boob.

"I'll get it." He sounds more awake now.

I roll over. "Stay here. I've got it. Sleep." I press a kiss to his chin and he sighs, relaxing back into the pillows.

Grabbing the first shirt I find, I tug it on. My fingers slide down, searching for the buttons, but meet nubs of thread. It's Alex's shirt.

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A zing of pleasure shoots straight to my love-drunk pussy. The hussy had way too much attention yesterday and should sleep for a week, but darn if my clit doesn't throb at the memory of Alex, so eager to have me that he ruined a gorgeous dress shirt.

I pad through their apartment, the wood chilly against my bare feet, thankful for the small wall sconces lighting the way because the space is massive. Easily three or four times bigger than mine.

I round the corner to the main living space, where the floor-to-ceiling windows offer a ridiculous view of the skyline. In front of them is Gabe, shoulders hunched, hands in the pocket of his slacks. I pause as I take him in.

He seems... lonely. Lost in thought. Tired, even. The twinkling kaleidoscope of color from outside plays over his naked torso.

I tuck Alex's shirt tighter around my waist. Watching Gabe like this feels like an intrusion, as if I'm somehow privy to his innermost thoughts.

I wish.

Should I go back and leave him alone?

If I continue to the kitchen for a glass of water, he's bound to hear me.

Then, as if sensing my attention, his chin lifts, and his spine straightens. He glances over his shoulder, face half in shadow and half lit by the glow of nearby buildings.

The breath leaves my lungs, and my stomach clenches at his beauty. My feet move of their own accord, carrying me forward as if he's pulling me.

"Hey," I whisper.

He stares at my feet before his survey moves slowly up my body. My skin tingles with awareness. "I like you in our clothes."

Relief bubbles through me, making me feel lighter. I sway toward him, drawn to something I can't put my finger on.

He slides a hand around my lower back, tucking me against his side. I press my cheek against his bare chest and look out at the city below. The man really does have the world at his feet.

His heartbeat is steady, and his skin is warm. In the past, it was easy to see him from afar and wonder if he was actually a man or a robot. The rumor that he doesn't sleep runs rampant through Manhattan. And here he is, awake in the middle of the night.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask.

There are several long beats of silence, so long I tip my head up and look at him.

"Couldn't stop thinking about your lighthouse comment."

Oh.

It was the heat of the moment. The memory is hazy, clouded by pleasure and hormones. Was that—did I mess up?

He squeezes me. "I've always thought of Alex as my lighthouse."

My gasp is loud in the quiet apartment. Happiness and alarm spear through me, a wild combination.

“Really?”

That’s so... What are the chances?

“I met him at one of the lowest points in my life. And he was just there. Unwavering. Supportive. This quiet beacon.”

I’ve always felt that way when I saw Alex at various events. The way he moved through society, listening and watching. The night of the auction, I was stressed beyond belief, and the snowball of anxiety kept growing and speeding up. But Alex was there when I needed him most.

“He’s good at that.”

“My family never believed in me the way he did.” There’s a pause as he stares out at the skyline, and I can almost see him falling back through time. Remembering those early days. “He liked that I was smart and had my head in the clouds. He understood my ambition and never derided me for it.”

Taking his hand in mine, I tug him toward the living room. The thick rug is soft beneath my feet. Twin sofas are flanked by low-slung chairs. There’s not a throw pillow in sight, but that doesn’t surprise me because this is his bachelor pad. I settle into the corner of the nearest sofa and pull him down next to me.

It’s surreal being in Gabe’s apartment. After dark. On his couch. His cum still inside me. Like a dream.

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And there's something about the city glistening outside the windows, the quiet. It feels safe to admit things that have been on my mind and my heart. "I've always liked that about you too. I was fourteen that summer when you were on the cover of every finance magazine and half a dozen others."

He groans, turning toward me and tucking his foot behind his other knee. He slides an arm across the back of the sofa, and I lean into the circle of his embrace.

"I snuck them past my mother and grandfather, devouring all the details I could find."

"Why?"

I drop my chin and tug Alex's shirt tighter around me. Is he ready for the truth? Am I? Should we rehash the past? Part of me thinks it doesn't matter. So much time has passed, and my grandfather is dead. But I also understand the curiosity and the need for closure.

I'll never get that with my grandfather. If he hadn't died, would I have ever woken up from the trance they cast over me? Would I have played the game and kept doing what they told me to do?

Gabe tucks a knuckle beneath my chin and lifts it until I meet his gaze. "Why did you read all those articles?"

His blue eyes are dark and watchful, and the intensity of his stare resonates deep in my bones. I want to tell him everything. I want to ask him all the questions that have played through my mind a thousand times. But I'm terrified of opening old wounds.

Our relationship feels so new, so tenuous.

But I lick my lips. Be brave, Katherine.

“I wanted to learn about the man my grandfather hated.” It’s the simple truth. A girlish curiosity. Back during a time when I was steeped in family drama. My mother would rail about my father. Grandfather would lose his mind over Gabe. It was like they needed an antagonist in their life and would find one, willing or not.

Puzzle pieces fall into place, and it’s a pattern I’ve never noticed before. Now that I’ve seen it, the blinders fall away and my past looks different. It’s easy to separate myself from the girl who wanted to fit in and be loved by her family.

“And what did you find out?” Gabe’s voice is curious but also trepidatious. Like he’s scared to discover what I found out or how I saw him—I don’t know which.

Are we finally going to talk about it? Will he tell me what happened?

“You’re brilliant. But I already knew that.”

He tugs on my hair, a smile ghosting over his lips. “Yeah?”

“Anyone who intimidated my grandfather the way you did? Oh yeah. I didn’t need Forbestelling me you had a once-in-a-generation mind.”

I shiver, remembering all the feelings I had a decade ago as I read those words. The awe. The admiration. The confusion.

His hand falls away, and he retreats. But I can’t let him do that. Not again.

“Gabe. . .”

A second ticks by. Then he looks at me again. I scoot closer, sliding a hand over his thigh to anchor us together. “Will you tell me what really happened between you and my grandfather?”

No one likes rehashing their past, I get that. Add in a traumatic experience, and it’s a wonder he didn’t leave me on the sidewalk Friday night. That he talks to me at all.

“You know what happened,” he says.

A typical brush-off, Gabriel style. I squeeze his thigh. “I want to hear it from you. Because I don’t trust my grandfather’s side of things. Not that he ever told me any specifics.”

“What did he tell you?”

I press even closer until I’m practically in his lap. “Like I said, it wasn’t anything specific. It was more of a grudge. Any time you were in the news, he’d scoff and mutter. He was such a bad sport. The one time I asked, I was young.” I swallow, a fresh memory scalding me. “I wanted to know what it was that you’d done to make him hate you. You know how children are. I couldn’t comprehend it. He didn’t give me a straight answer.”

I was too young at the time to put two and two together. To press him on it. And over time, it just became a thing. We hated Gabriel Rothburn. They did, anyway. I was distrustful because whatever my grandfather’s reasons were, I assumed they were true. Reasonable.

“His voice was like a crack of thunder. Loud. Terrifying. He told me it didn’t matter what had happened. That you simply weren’t to be trusted.” I can’t look him in the eye as I repeat those words. I wish I’d been stronger, more inquisitive. “It was years before I asked him anything again.”

My name is a rough whisper as Gabe pulls me closer, cupping my cheek.

“I’m okay.” I nestle against his palm. “But I hate that he hurt you.”

He tips his forehead against mine. My shoulders drop, and I take a deep, soothing breath.

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Whatever his story is, it's obvious that he was hurt. Deeply. While my grandfather's pride might have just been wounded. A superficial cut.

Gabe straightens, staring at me for another moment, and then looks away.

“He showed up at my school one day, just like you see in the movies. Dark car. Sunglasses. A driver. The whole bit. I knew who he was because I read every financial magazine and newspaper article I could get my hands on. He was a giant in the banking industry and I wanted in.”

The awe in his voice is unmistakable. I know the feeling. Meeting someone you've read about. Someone untouchable. It's incredible. Akin to meeting a favorite author or a movie star, I suppose.

“He was so complimentary. Took me out to lunch. I was enamored. Here was this titan of the industry, and he was interested in me and my fledgling company. The fact that he wanted my opinion floored me. He flew me to New York. I'd never been on a plane before and there I was on a private jet. I was meeting people, and it was all so amazing. Like the world was finally welcoming me. Embracing me. He took me to my first polo match. Sent me to his tailor.”

Gabe's voice cracks. Tears burn my eyes, and my nose aches with unshed tears.

“I soaked it up. It was like having a grandparent who understood me. Believed in me. I'd never had that before. And he just kept reeling me in. He said he had an apartment he never used, so I should give up my dorm. And, of course, his place was way nicer. I didn't have to share a bathroom, and it was quiet. I could think. I could work.”

I curl closer, tumbling down memory lane with him. My grandfather so rarely showed me his charming side. It's easy to see how a young man who was desperate for attention and praise could fall prey to a devious man.

“By that point, the company was popping off. I had to make some hard decisions, and it was rapidly becoming too big for me to do alone. I needed resources and help. And I had school. It was a lot.”

Oh gosh. I see where this is going.

I know I need to hear the rest. To hear him out. To learn the truth. But I don't want to. I want to kiss him and keep on kissing him. To wash away those memories. Replace them with good ones.

But there's no washing away this kind of betrayal.

My grandfather tucked Gabe under his wing.

Made him feel like he belonged.

“What happened?”

“He wanted me to sign some paperwork. To make my living in his apartment legal. I'd never heard of something like that before, but by that point, I trusted Henry. If I needed to sign something to keep everything on the up and up, hand me the pen. But the courier—or whatever he was—didn't have a working pen. He seemed like he was in a rush, and he didn't want to leave it with me. So I waved him inside and went hunting through the junk drawer. Thank goodness for that crusty ballpoint pen. It gave me just enough time to get curious about the stack of papers because it was awfully thick for a housing agreement. So, I started reading the document. There were parts I didn't understand, but the part where I would be signing away thirty

percent of my company? That was pretty fucking clear.”

9

GABE/KATHERINE

“Promise me this isn’t going to get weird between us,” I say, thrusting the basketball at Alex’s chest.

He dribbles it twice and then makes his shot. It spirals around the rim and drops through the net.

“Why would it get weird?”

I lift a shoulder. I couldn’t sleep last night, which is nothing new. And spilling my guts to Katherine? That part was unexpected. But cathartic. I love the way she never stopped touching me. Comforting me. Her quiet curiosity had pried the information out more easily than a crowbar.

But her fury when she found out what her grandfather had done?

I didn’t realize it would mean so much to me, not only to have her eagerly listening but also to feel her anger. It’s so different from all the times when she’s been utterly emotionless, a block of radiant ice.

Alex props the ball against his hip and gives me his full attention. I tell him about my midnight conversation. He doesn’t seem the least bit surprised by Katherine’s reaction.

Before her, he was the only one I confided in. Now we’re both involved with her. There was a moment last night when my heart felt like it would explode.

I got the girl, but he's always been the one I wanted. Of course, I keep a tight rein on it. I'm not that big of an asshole. I'd never pressure someone into a relationship. But in the heat of that moment, it was way too easy to blur the line. To look at my best friend and have my guard drop.

I'm terrified to ruin two decades of friendship.

What if I can't keep my feelings under wraps when the three of us are together? It's like she's a conduit or something. I forget how to use my "you are not in love with your best friend" face.

We've always been solid, but things change, right?

Women change things.

Alex puts a hand on my shoulder. “Breathe. Talk to me.”

“I—” I glance over at him, seeing my confidant of almost twenty years.

“I know,” he says, and I don’t doubt it. He’s good at reading me. Has always spoken Gabrielfluently. “I get why you’re worried. It’s new, but that doesn’t mean it’s bad, right? And if we’re all enjoying ourselves and we don’t let jealousy win, it could work out better than any of us imagined, right?”

My brows lift because the man’s obviously thought about this.

He throws an arm around my shoulders. “Do you remember when we first met, and you were so overwhelmed by the city and the classes and all the people?”

I nod, anxiety gripping my stomach like a giant fist.

“But you were so excited. So ready to make all your dreams come true. This is the same thing. A new adventure. New people. A new path. You get to pave it, just like you did back then. And I’ll be right here beside you.”

Alex gives the best pep talks. Truly.

“Breathe.”

I take a deep breath.

He slaps me between the shoulder blades. “Let it out, jackass.”

Chuckling, I exhale, feeling a little calmer. But then I look up at him out of the corner of my eye. All the dormant feelings surge. But there are a host of new ones, too.

“I get all of that. But I don’t want to lose what we have for anything. Or anyone,” I add.

“How do you think you’ll lose me?”

I shrug. “Maybe you guys decide you’re perfect for each other and run away to Boston.”

He sighs, shaking his head like it’s the craziest thing he’s ever heard. But is it?

I glance around, making sure we’re still alone. And I keep my voice low because sound carries across the oak floor.

“She obviously adores you. You make her feel safe and seen. She turns to putty when you’re around.”

She said it herself. I’m an adventure. He’s her lighthouse. Eventually, adventuring gets tiresome. Monotonous.

“And?” He rolls the basketball across his hip and hands it to me. “Come on. We’re done for the day.”

He gives me a prod toward the elevators, and then we’re zooming skyward. “Go on.”

“I don’t know, man. It’s all messed up in my head.”

“Clearly.” He turns and leans back against the paneled wall, watching me in that keen way that feels like he sees too much.

I mirror his movement and toss the ball at his chest. Of course he agrees that I’m off my rocker. Floundering in the weeds. Like I said, he sees it all. He knows me. “Thanks.”

He catches the ball easily, propping a foot against the wall. It’s a casual pose, showing off all his muscles in the most mouth-watering way. The damp t-shirt clings to his torso, and I avert my gaze. Are we to the penthouse yet?

“Gabriel.”

My stomach drops.

“We’re not going to run off to Boston and leave you and the bestie behind. If I was going to take her anywhere, it’d be a private island in the Caribbean where I could keep her in a bikini for days on end. Or naked.” He smirks and sends the ball hurtling across the small space at me.

“How thoughtful of you.”

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The elevator gives a cheery ding as it levels out and the doors whoosh open.

“Come on.” He slings an arm around my shoulders and tugs me out of the elevator. “We agreed to date her, right? But if she picked one of us, the other would lose out. Not just on that relationship, but?—”

He doesn't finish the sentence, but I hear what he's trying to say. We'd miss out on time with each other.

Nodding, I swallow. “This is better.”

“Of course this is better. No one's the third wheel.”

“Right.”

“I like you for her. You're adventurous. A total yes-man. You understand better than anyone how much she needs that in her life.”

I drop the ball in a chair and head for the kitchen. After tossing him a bottle of water, I twist the cap off mine and down half of it.

He leans against the massive island, backlit by the early morning light.

“I don't feel good enough for her,” I admit, then finish my bottle.

He watches me like I'm a puzzle. A ripple of awareness shimmers below my skin. I wouldn't admit that to anyone but him, but we don't have secrets. In fact, it's

pointless for me to try to keep a secret from him.

He sees right through them. I can bullshit my way through interviews, convince the world I'm completely confident, but Alex knows the truth. He knows my weaknesses.

And he's never once held them against me.

In fact, he's just the opposite. Shoring them up. Heading off vulnerabilities. Boosting me when I need a leg up.

Which is why, as much as I like Katherine, I'd walk away in a heartbeat if it meant ruining my friendship with Alex.

"You've got a voice in your head you need to squash," he says, cocking his head. "Is this about Henry?"

I shrug. I'm honestly not sure where the doubt comes from. But it's like a bumble bee in the back of my mind, buzzing. Driving me crazy with its never-ending chatter.

"Is it the age difference?"

"Maybe." I crush the bottle and toss it in the recycling bin.

"Well, she's not dating you for your money."

"So it's my pretty face?" I grin at him, and he laughs.

"Doubt it. Kingston's gonna win that battle."

"Thanks." I stare at him for a long moment, and my heart presses against my rib cage.

"I'm serious though." I wave a finger between us. "I won't do anything to endanger

our friendship.”

He straightens to his full height, shoulders back, water bottle in one hand. He clamps a hand over my shoulder. “Neither will I.”

I nod because I need his reassurance like a child needs his favorite blanket. He tugs me into a hug.

“I’m sorry for being emotional,” I murmur. “I slept like crap.”

The sectional is great in theory, but we need an actual bed with enough space for all of us.

He gives me a squeeze. “There’s no need to apologize.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.” My voice breaks. I’m such a sap.

“You’re not going to find out.”

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That quiet assurance carries me through my day and almost makes up for my lack of sleep.

Katherine

Katherine: I've got tea.

LaShonda: what flavor?

Katherine: Gabriel Rothburn flavored.

LaShonda: spill it!

LaShonda: I bet it's juicy.

Katherine: But first, help me decide on the shoes for this outfit.

I take a quick pic of the teal sheath dress. I love the cap sleeves and slender, matching belt. And the V-neck style makes it feel a dash daring, which is basically my personality now.

Once we decide on my new Jimmy Choos—the color matches the dress so the choice is obvious—I finish getting ready for work and text her every chance I get.

Katherine: First, my grandfather was iniquitous. We knew that though.face with rolling eyes emoji

Katherine: He totally took Gabe under his wing. Sought him out. Gave him an apartment! I still don't know how he found out about Gabe's company but it's obvious he targeted him. Gabe was in college and I'd bet every penny in my bank account that grandfather saw an easy target.

LaShonda: that's evil.

LaShonda:angry face with horns emoji

Katherine: Totally.

Katherine: He tried to get Gabe to sign paperwork saying it was for the apartment. Gabe read it and saw he was about to sign over 30% of his company!

LaShonda: omg

LaShonda: seriously?!

Katherine: Those were the words straight from his mouth.

LaShonda: you two have gotten close.

Katherine: You have no idea.

LaShonda: tell me! best friend code. i want deets.

Katherine: Later. My blood is still boiling.

Katherine: Like I knew grandfather bent the rules to suit him. But that's just...

Katherine: I don't have words.

LaShonda: I have one. Criminal.

Katherine: Right?!

LaShonda: at least you know why there was bad blood.

Katherine: Honestly, I can't believe he speaks to me. If his grandfather tried to steal 30% of my company his whole family would be dead to me.

LaShonda: you're such a scorpio.

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LaShonda: but yes. agreed. that shows his character.

LaShonda: but also, your ass is amazing and so are the girls. bet that went a long way in getting him to talk to you.

Katherine: zany face emoji

LaShonda: when are you going to see him again?

Katherine: No definite plans. But I wouldn't be surprised if I saw him tonight.

10

KATHERINE

I'll admit it.

I'm walking a little funny this morning. It was a scurry to get down to my apartment, shower, and dress, all while being careful with my well-used muscles.

If Roman noticed me moving more gingerly than normal when he picked me up, he hasn't given it away, bless him. He hustles me onto the elevator in the Chanler & Cort building and hits the button for my floor. A handful of others crowd in with each floor we stop at.

Pulling my phone from my purse, I give in to the need to check in with them. It's our first group text.

Katherine: Thanks for an amazing night, even if I am walking funny this morning.

I grin as I imagine the look on their faces as they read my message.

Ding.

“Excuse me,” I say, squeezing between two middle-aged men.

I feel the heavy weight of people’s stares as I make my way to my office. What’s gotten into— oh. I forgot about the drone pictures.

My cheeks heat, but I lift my chin. The attention isn’t new, but the reason for it certainly is.

Somehow I doubt they’re whispering about the boss’s granddaughter anymore and instead are snickering about their coworker being dragged through the press.

Charlotte stands next to her desk as I walk up. She wiggles a finger around in the philodendron’s dirt to check if it needs to be watered. Inside, I preen a little, happy that I’ve spread my love of plants to those around me.

“Good morning, Charlotte.”

“Good morning, Miss Montgomery.”

She murmurs a hello to Roman. His deep voice rumbles back, her name sounding warm on his lips. I hide my smile and step into my office. I’ve got a full plate today and no time to let the outside world distract me.

Charlotte gathers a stack of notes and follows me into my office.

Maybe one day she'll go paperless, but scraps of recyclable paper are the least of my concerns at the moment.

I circle my desk, vividly remembering lunch earlier in the week with Alex. A shiver races up the backs of my thighs. Yanking my thoughts out of that salacious gutter, I stow my purse and settle into my chair, determined to stay focused on work.

Charlotte goes over my schedule while I log into my computer. After pointing out the emails I need to respond to, she makes me a cup of tea and leaves the memos behind.

My phone chimes with a text from Ford. Smiling, I reach for my phone, promising myself this is the last distraction.

Ford: Come to Dad's for Memorial Day weekend.

Hmm. Would the guys go with me? I want them to. I want to see Ford and Sutton... and even my dad. But I don't know how to ask that without going into things.

Katherine: I'll think about it.

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Ford: Bring Kingston.

Katherine: If he's in town.

It's my standard line about King.

Ford: Don't act like he's not holed up in your apartment.

I grin and turn my attention back to my email, crossing and uncrossing my legs as I go through my inbox. Nothing feels normal.

I smirk to myself.

Maybe this is my new normal. Leaving the bed in the morning, well-used and with a swat on the ass, feeling the hungry gaze of my men as I make my exit. I could get used to it.

I probably shouldn't because the shit would truly hit the fan if word got out that I was in a relationship with three men. But that truth didn't stop me last night, and I doubt it'll stop me in the future.

The three of them are like a drug, and I forget common sense when they look at me.

My phone buzzes, and I reach for it. Speak of the devil.

Kingston: we're all walking funny this morning.zany face

I suppose that's what we get for the multiple rounds. It's going to take me a gallon of water to rehydrate. Definitely need to get Charlotte on that. Meanwhile, I sip my tea, put my phone down, and try to get a handle on my to-do list.

After exactly three items are jotted down, my phone buzzes again. I glance over. A notification bubble flashes across the top of the screen, displaying a message from Charlotte.

Charlotte: Mom incoming. *skull emoji*

Sighing, I sit back in my chair, not the least bit surprised.

I swipe the message away, sending it into the ether. Call it a sixth sense, but I quickly navigate to my voice memo app and hit record before placing my phone face down beneath my monitor.

A knot of dread sits heavy in my stomach. It sinks deeper as my mother crosses my threshold. Like I'm in the ocean and a wave has snuck up behind me, slamming me in the back and knocking my feet out from under me before dropping on my head.

The head of Human Resources is right behind her. She nods to Charlotte, who closes the door behind them.

Not a friendly chat, then.

Then again, when have my mother and I ever had friendly chats?

"Hello, Mother. Ms. McKune. What can I do for you?" I wave a hand toward the chairs across from my desk.

My mother holds up a hand and they both remain standing. "This won't take long."

See. Not friendly.

“Okay.”

“Given your latest,” she waves her fingers like she’s shooing away a fly, “adventure, I’ve spoken with the board?—”

She pauses, letting the word hang in the air between us like a four-day-old helium balloon. My stomach sours, and my mouth goes dry, but I keep my mask carefully in place. Show no emotion. Don’t let them see you sweat.

There’s a flicker of challenge in my mother’s eyes because she wants—no, expects—me to fold. To cave and scamper, falling in line as I always have.

But the pause stretches long enough that Ms. McKune steps in. “The board would like you to take some personal time.”

My gaze flicks to the middle-aged HR rep. “Personal time.”

The heat in my veins shifts, the blood slows, and it’s as if ice moves through me. Sharp. Jagged. Freezing. My toes curl in my beloved Jimmy Choos.

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My mother chimes in again. “Think of it as a vacation, darling.”

11

KATHERINE

“Charlotte, could you bring me a box, please?” I give the call button on my desk phone a vicious jab.

My temper rises like a tidal wave.

The way they just expected me to fall in line blows my mind.

I was on a rooftop with a man. How scandalous.

“One box coming up,” she replies.

I turn to my computer and create an email to Ms. McKune, making sure to send it to the general HR address. Let’s create a paper trail. Fingers flying over the keyboard, I recap what was said by both her and my mother. Then I play innocent and double-check that they intend for me to really be out of the office for three weeks.

That’s a long time to be away without someone to manage my workload. Which I brought up just to see if they’d thought this through. Needless to say, the answer wasn’t convincing.

I can’t freaking wait until everyone realizes I was not a nepotism hire.

Charlotte steps through the door just as I hit send. Okay, I stab the button, which the mouse doesn't deserve, but it feels good.

She remains silent as she hands me the legal box, already assembled, and my appreciation for her doubles again. The CEO and the head of HR visiting have got to have tongues wagging. I need to be careful how I play this out. What I say. Not that I think Charlotte will run off and spread anything around the water cooler, but you never know.

I'm tempted to walk out without any instructions. Let the whole department burn.

"Thanks."

"Anything else?"

"Not right now."

She nods and heads back to her desk.

It's time to play the long game.

Hands trembling, I start with a careful round of Tetris, filling the box with my plants. I shoot Charlotte a quick email with instructions on where to direct calls and that she should work with my boss to reschedule appointments. There's a perverse satisfaction in being a team player 'til the end. Especially when I've read the employee handbook cover-to-cover, and it seems like my mother and Human Resources did not.

Then, I put my phone in my purse and look around for anything else I can't live without.

They want me to fall on my sword?

They're going to find out just how hard I can swing back.

???

I'm in the backseat of Roman's SUV when my phone chimes with a familiar and much welcomed tone. The box of plants is on the seat next to me, and the kaleidoscope of green soothes me ever so slightly. Retrieving my phone, I pull up the group text with Kingston's sisters. My hands are still vibrating, and not in a good way.

Mel: so...

Mel: what are your intentions toward our brother?winking face emoji

Katherine: I take it you saw the picture.

Soph: oh yeah

The youngest Saint sister chimes in.

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Ava: it's everywhere

I groan, which makes Roman check on me in the rearview mirror. I shoot him an I'm okaysmile. But I don't really feel okay. At some point the Ferris wheel has to stop so I can get off, right?

Katherine: it might have just cost me my job.

Mel: WHAT????

Katherine: My mother showed up with the head of HR.

Soph: face with symbols on mouth emoji

Mel: That's awful. It's not your fault paps are cretins.

Katherine: Tell me about it.

Frustration burns in my chest. I want to run and just keep on running. Run until the last two months make sense. But I also want to hit something. Hard. The image of the punching bag at the gym swims before my eyes.

It's quickly followed by the memory of Gabe and Alex sauntering over, looking deliciously sweaty. Even through my rage, my attraction simmered. How was that less than a week ago?

I slump back, resting my head against the headrest. These gorgeous shoes didn't even

get half a day's wear. But they sure did sound nice stalking across the floor.

My phone vibrates again.

Mel: What can we do?

Ava: we'd boycott the bank, but we did that ages ago.

They'd really lose their shit if they knew about the stipulations of the trust.

So why am I not losing mine? Three names and oodles of orgasms come to mind.

Soph: how about brunch? Meet you at the club in an hour?

Girl time sounds amazing. But the thought of going out in public right now sends a bolt of dread through me.

Mel: I'm in.

Ava: Me too.

Ella: I'm still in LA.crying face emoji

Mel: come home!

The club isn't exactly public. But how much do you want to bet one of my mom's friends will be there? Ten grand says she'd give me a disapproving look.

Ava: Come on, Kate. We haven't gotten to bug you about the auction details yet.

Oof. I should have known that was coming. But I really don't want to rehash that. It

sounds more glamorous than it was.

Still, my tummy tingles at the memory of Gabe's eyes locking with mine across the ballroom. The way my skin sizzled under Alex's survey. At the time, I was trying to stifle the anxiety of being on stage in front of a crowd. But the attraction and awareness were there.

I drop my phone to my lap and glance out the window. The sidewalk shimmers in the morning sun. It's going to be a hot one.

King mentioned lunch with a friend.

"Roman, could I make a quick stop?"

There's one thing that'll make me feel better. Girl time will help, but a trip to my favorite plant store will be the balm my soul needs.

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“Of course, Miss Montgomery.”

I give him the address and then glance at Ava’s text again. It will be nice to see them. To catch up and be surrounded by friends. Trustworthy friends.

In all the time I’ve known King, I’ve also been close with his sisters. Mel with her upbeat personality. Sophie, who’s the oldest and most take charge. She’s fun, but she doesn’t cut loose like her sisters do. Not anymore anyway. Then there’s Mel’s twin, Ella. Studious. Careful. More reserved than her twin but kind and funny. Ava’s the baby, and she knows it. King’s the second oldest and protective of all of them.

Katherine: I’ll be there.

The replies are immediate.

Mel: yay!

Ava: excellent.

Soph: see you then. Miss you Ella!

Mel: Miss you, Belly-Button!

I snort, a full-on snort, in the back seat of the Rover. When will they let that silly nickname go? Poor Ella. But I giggle anyway because it’s never not funny to be reminded that there’s more to this world than zeroes in one’s bank account.

They grew up in the same circles but were so far removed from life in my mother's house.

A few minutes later, we arrive at the curb in front of Simon's tiny plant shop. The facade is painted a deep, neutral green. Sleek silver letters over the door and window spell out Leaf Me Alone. The combination is modern with a tip of the hat to the old building.

Roman opens my door and offers me a hand. Slipping my purse over my forearm, I step out. Blessedly, there aren't any cameras pointed my way. I hustle across the well-worn sidewalk and push open the door just as I get another text. I glance down to see Gabe has finally joined the group text loop.

Gabe: It's okay. We won't need our walking muscles when you sit on my face later.winking face emoji

My cheeks heat, and my lips curve up as a thrill races through my veins.

Warm, humid air swirls around me, filling my lungs. It smells of earth and moisture, vibrant green life and sharp fertilizer.

My smile falters.

Behind the counter is a large worktable, and in the middle is Simon. He squats next to a massive pot with a large jade plant in it. Bonnie, his employee, tugs the plant toward her while Simon tugs the pot. She looks like she's about to tumble ass over tits, tongue poked out as she gives it everything she's got. Simon's long, wavy hair cascades around his face, and a harsh breath blows it away.

“Stupid. Fucking. Roots. Saw in”—he grunts—“half. I swear to goddess.”

The whole scene is an episode in contortion. I try to hold in my snicker. Really, I do. But it bubbles out of me.

“Need a hand?”

12

GABE/KATHERINE

GABE

I don't expect a reply from Katherine, seeing as it's the middle of the morning on a weekday. But I keep my phone on my desk as I read through the latest projection report. Everything looks steady, which I appreciate after those first few years of rocket-ship-like growth. At the time, it felt exponential and exhausting, which explains why my body is trained to function on so little sleep.

My phone vibrates across the glass desktop and I reach for it, report forgotten. There's a new group text. Me, Alex, and Kingston.

Kingston: good thinking!

I assume he's referring to not needing to use our walking muscles when we see Katherine later. I smirk, imagining her riding my face. Crying out with pleasure as Alex and King watch.

Gabe: thought you'd like that.

Kingston named the conversation “Katherine's Guys.”

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If I needed any more evidence that this is a thing, the three of us, the four of us, rather, this is it. Black pixels on my screen. Undeniable.

Kingston: Are you guys free tonight? I thought I'd cook.

Alex: can you cook?

Kingston: of course!

Kingston: you doubt me?

I hear his voice in my head. See those pouty lips and that hurt, almost puppy dog expression. Then I remember the way he looked as he came, filling Katherine's ass.

My dick twitches, eager for another round.

Alex: Happy to be proven wrong. 

Gabe: feel free to cook at our place if you want. I'll get Vic to give you a card.

I shoot Vic a quick note and then flip back to the group text, studying the name.

Gabe changed the name of the conversation to "3 eggplant emojis, no smiling cat with heart-eyes emoji."

Katherine

Two sets of eyes shoot in my direction. I give Simon a little wave, feeling better just stepping foot in the door. I'm surrounded by friends and plants. Friends who like me for me and plants who have very simple requirements.

His shop has been a sanctuary for me, and I need his plants and vivacious personality more than ever.

"Katrina!" He steps my way, letting go of the massive pot.

It rocks back and forth precariously. He gasps, his dark brown eyes swerving back to the project at hand. Luckily, his assistant has a good hold on the bush-sized jade plant and manages to keep her balance.

"You're just in time." His smile is wide. Full lips. Bright white teeth. He glances past me.

I follow his gaze to where Roman takes up position near the shop door, hands folded in front of him.

I turn back, happy to have something else to think about for a few minutes.

"How did you get yourself into this?" I wave toward the plant.

I start to put my phone away and my cheeks turn bright pink as I read Gabe's text a second time. No time for that now. Taking a cooling breath, I slide my phone into my purse and tuck it behind the counter before stepping toward them.

The space is overflowing with pots, plants, tools, and spray bottles full of peroxide mixtures and fertilizers. It smells of dirt and vegetation, with heavy, humid air and a hint of fish emulsion.

“It’s an orphan.” Simon frowns and gives the pot another tug.

“Somebody left it in the alley this morning,” Bonnie adds.

“Wow. Well, at least they brought it to you.” I’ve had to bring a few plants back to him. Finicky types that just weren’t happy in my apartment. There’s no shame in realizing a plant is outside your expertise and finding it a better home.

“It’s a rootbound mess,” he says.

“We’re trying to salvage the pot if we can, but it needs to come out.”

This is not the right outfit for this sort of thing, but I reach for the pot anyway. Made of thick clay with a wavy design, I can tell it’s old. Worn. And the plant has obviously been in there a while.

Bonnie gives a tug as Simon and I hold the pot in place. A smirk curls my lips at the thought of a photographer catching a picture of this. Me in my work-appropriate attire, dirt beneath my nails, one brush away from snagging my dress. I love it.

We play tug-of-war with the pot and giant plant, but it doesn’t give up.

“Have you tried tapping the pot?”

“Yep.”

“Twisting as you pull?” I ask.

“Miss Montgomery?”

I turn to Roman, who’s a handful of feet away now.

“May I?” He gestures toward the pot.

I step out of the way, waving him forward. “Simon, Bonnie, this is Roman. Roman, this is Simon and his assistant Bonnie. He likes to call himself my plant dealer,” I whisper conspiratorially.

“You don’t have someone else, do you?” Simon asks, sounding suspicious. He holds out a hand to Roman, eyeing him, not even trying to hide his curiosity.

Roman’s lips twist, but he shakes Simon’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Simon glances between the two of us, obviously adding two plus two and getting five.

Bonnie waves, and Roman gives her a nod, then reaches for the pot. Simon steps around and grabs the trunk that’s as thick as his wrist.

“How old do you think it is?”

“Forty, maybe fifty years,” Simon answers and for a moment, we all pause, looking at each other.

I peg Simon at maybe thirty-five. And Roman? Late twenties. Same for Bonnie.

This plant could be older than all of us.

“Let’s be careful,” Bonnie murmurs, adjusting her grip.

Roman nods. “Ready?”

“Go.”

They tug.

Roman’s biceps bunch beneath his inky dark shirt. Simon and Bonnie look like they’re in the fight of their life. And then, as if deciding that they’re really just trying to help, the plant pulls free, and Roman lowers the pot to the floor.

The root ball resembles a piece of petrified wood. Call me crazy, but I’m glad this old plant found its way to Simon’s doorstep. He’ll take care of it.

“Nice job,” Bonnie says as they lay it down.

“Thank you, Roman.”

“Yes, thank you. That was intense,” Simon murmurs.

“No problem.” He returns to his spot by the door.

Bonnie hops down from the workbench and disappears into the back of the store.

Once they're out of earshot, Simon glances my way with a gleam in his eyes. "I want to hear everything."

"I just came for a plant," I quip.

He makes a tsking sound, waving his finger back and forth. I feel like I've known him forever. He took care of plants for my grandmother years ago. When she passed, my grandfather did away with his services because he didn't care for most living things. Certainly not green things.

I still have most of Grandmother's collection, though.

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“You know the rules. Your money’s no good here. Gimme the gossip.” He wiggles the fingers on both hands in a ‘gimme gimme’ motion.

I sigh and pretend to contemplate something truly salacious. But I’ve got nothing. No juicy tidbit from Ford. Definitely nothing I want to share about my mother.

“I’m about to go to brunch with Kingston’s sisters. I bet I’ll have something later.”

He smiles. “What about him?”

He nods toward Roman.

I tip my head to the left. “My bodyguard.”

Simon’s brows lift. “Paps?”

“Yeah.”

“And the two dreamy billionaires who paid for a date with you. Where are they?”

I shrug. “At work, I guess.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You guess?”

I just smile at him.

“You’re not going to tell me where you disappeared to this weekend?” He purses his

lips slightly, trying to appear put out. I roll my eyes, and he laughs.

“If you must know,” I say in my most hoity-toity voice. “I was in the Hamptons.”

“Girl!” He grins and looks like he’s about to pump a fist. I didn’t realize he was so invested in my love life.

Then he looks me over. “I thought you looked extra glowy when you walked in.” He waves his hand in a sweeping arc, indicating all of me.

I lace my fingers. “Can I have my plant, please?”

He glances over his shoulder at the sad jade plant. “You can have her once I get her fixed up.”

“I was thinking a small one.” Where on earth am I going to put something almost as big as me? I don’t know why I’m trying to figure that out. Simon’s probably already got a spot in my apartment picked out. He comes over several times a month to make sure all my plant babies are happy and healthy. He’s their grand-human.

“You’ll take what I give you, sis.”

We burst out laughing. It’s a weird arrangement, I know. But it works for us. He treats me like a regular, average Jane. And in my world, that’s rare.

“Fine. Bring her over when she’s healthy.”

He nods. “Enjoy your brunch.” He lifts a hand to Roman. “Nice meeting you!”

KINGSTON/KATHERINE

KINGSTON: DO YOU HAVE A PASTA MACHINE?

Gabe: I don't even know what that is.

Kingston: it helps make pasta. You know, the spiral shapes or the spaghetti noodles.

Kingston: you guys aren't gluten intolerant are you?

Kingston: I guess I could do zucchini noodles.

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Gabe: zucchini noodles?face with a raised brow emoji

Kingston: or spaghetti squash...

Gabe: what the hell is spaghetti squash?

Kingston: not gluten intolerant, I take it.

Gabe: no.

Kingston: you could have just said so.

Gabe: and miss this vegetable education? Not a chance.

Kingston: so no pasta machine, huh?

Gabe: you're lucky we have a can opener.

Kingston: roger that.rolling on the floor laughing emoji

I've seen his kitchen, though. He has far more than a can opener if the espresso machine is any indication. I wouldn't be surprised if he has a private chef on retainer.

I brave the elevator, scrolling through the latest funny videos Katherine sent, and wave to the guys at the front desk. Outside, it's partly cloudy and breezy, and I wouldn't be surprised if it rains later. That'll be nice. Rain slows everything down, sending people inside. I might be claustrophobic, but I don't hate the idea of being

trapped with Katherine.

I shouldn't shop hungry, though, or I might end up buying half of William Sonoma. Since the home goods store is close to Katherine's office, I shoot her a text.

Kingston: hey, I'm coming down your way. Wanna grab lunch?

Excitement buzzes through me when I see three dots bouncing along the bottom of the screen. It's such a silly thing, but I secretly live for her attention.

I guess it's not such a secret anymore.

Katherine: I'd love to, but I just sat down for brunch with your sisters.

Brunch?

On a workday?

I double-check the date and time on my watch.

Kingston: tell them I said hi.

Good for her. It's not that I want her to skip school, so to speak, but I'm glad she's doing something to make herself happy. As wild as the last few days have been for me, I know they've been far tougher for her.

She hides it well, but down deep, she's always been a sensitive soul. I love that she's close to my sisters. They adopted her as an honorary Saint years ago. My chest tightens. While I appreciate that my family has always been there for Kat, been good to her and shown her what a family should be like, I hate that her relationship with her parents has been so rocky.

A cab careens around the corner, and I step back onto the sidewalk as my fellow pedestrians shout and raise their fists.

New York. Wouldn't be a normal day if you didn't see your life flash before your eyes.

My gaze lifts to the buildings. So familiar and yet so foreign.

How long until the unease sets in? The itch to get away and travel. I haven't felt a single twitch yet aside from the love/hate relationship with the elevator.

With the coast clear, I jog across the street amid a crush of others.

What could be a bigger adventure than falling for the girl of your dreams? And this . . .
. . . situation with Alex and Gabe? That's definitely keeping things interesting.

My phone gives a trilling chime. Haven't heard that sound in a while. After making sure I won't plow anyone over, I check the notification. It says Katherine is close by.

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Well, that's the best news I've heard all morning.

Katherine

The club is as posh as always—bountiful flower arrangements, gleaming woodwork, glittering chandeliers, and impeccable wait staff. And the best brunch this side of Central Park.

Melina, Mel for short, rushes through the round tables and plops into the chair across from me. “Sorry I'm late.”

Her dark hair is sun-kissed, as is her complexion, and she has her mother's big, brown eyes.

“We haven't been here long,” I assure her.

“No worries. Ava was telling us about the swing dancing class she took,” Sophia says, a mischievous smirk gracing her painted lips. Always a bold red for Soph. In fact, it's her signature color. Designed and named for her.

It's good to have parents who own a cosmetic empire, I guess.

Mel perks up. “Oh? How'd that go?”

“Such a good workout. I might keep going,” Ava says, reaching for her water glass.

I can't imagine being that free. Just letting my body do whatever. I mean, I know

there are steps and choreography, but if it's not a basic waltz, it didn't exist when I was growing up.

My Bellini arrives, and I take a thankful sip. Hopefully, the alcohol will take the edge off my nerves.

"You guys should come with me," Ava says.

My gaze collides with Soph's. I can almost read her mind. That sounds like hell.

She's not wrong.

Then again, I'm tired of living in the shadows my grandfather cast. Ford's always reminding me how much life there is to live.

He's not wrong either.

"Could we arrange for private lessons?" I ask.

Ava squeals, drawing attention from nearby tables. She has the grace to duck her head and lower her voice. "Of course. Come on, Soph. It'll be fun."

"Which of your hunky guys will you bring?" Mel asks, turning her focus to me.

All the attention turns my way.

My hunky guys. What would they say if they knew just how close the four of us have gotten? It's all fun and games now, but the instant they learn the truth... My stomach sours, and I take another long sip from my glass.

"What? You knew we were going to ask," Ava says.

I sigh, hands in my lap, my nervous system on overload. This week has been a lot. The auction. Gabe's half-livable beach house. That life-altering threesome. Learning the truth about Gabe's history with Grandfather. Learning the truth about Kingston.

"Kingston!" Mel hops up from the table.

Did I say that out loud?

The back of my neck tingles with awareness.

Nope. He's here. He has to be.

I crane my neck, glancing back to see Mel scooting between tables to hug her brother. His eyes lock with mine over her shoulder, and my insides melt. My heart lifts. My soul sings.

He's totally underdressed but obviously doesn't care. Striding forward, he grins at me with the easy smile that I have had to hide my reaction to for years.

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I don't think there's any hiding it anymore.

We make room for him, and I feel his sisters' attention ping-ponging between the two of us, noting how close he sits.

"We were just asking Katherine who she was going to bring to swing dancing class."

Kingston grins, easy confidence dripping from every pore. "Me, of course. I saw Alex and Gabe's moves last night and?—"

My eyes go big, realizing what he's about to say. What he's implying.

"Their moves?" Ava parrots.

"We all know I'm the athletic one," King amends. "Where's the class?"

Good save.

"Who cares? I want to hear about the auction," Mel says.

"No," I groan the word.

"Such a bummer your flight was delayed, K," Ava says to her brother.

"Yeah, let's not remind me of that."

Soph watches and listens. Mel and Ava might be the instigators, but I'd bet every

dollar in my bank account that Sophia Saint is putting two and two together right now and getting four.

They chatter for a few more minutes, discussing Memorial Day plans and all the weddings Mel will be in this summer. I'm just glad to not be the center of attention.

Because even though I knew they'd want to discuss the auction, and even tease me about Kingston, I don't have the first clue what to tell them. Are we hiding what's between us? Surely, we have to. But from everyone?

We need to figure that out because right now, this doesn't feel like my secret to tell.

"I should go," King murmurs.

"You don't have to," Mel says.

"I've got some shopping to do."

"Shocker."

"See you when you get home from work," he directs at me, and my jaw falls.

I was headed back to my apartment after this and figured I'd tell him then about the latest developments with my mom.

"What?" He glances at each of his sisters and then back to me.

The knots in my stomach tighten. He's gonna be pissed. Rightly so. I'm not exactly numb to the bullshit; I've just lived with it for so long that it's like I expect the subterfuge. My mother's tricks. My grandfather's whims.

Those soft green eyes implore me to tell him the truth. He's sweetly curious but steadfast.

"My mom told me to take a vacation."

His brows lift. "Because of our picture?"

I nod, then roll my eyes. "She met with the board. They think I'm bringing bad press to the company."

"None of this is your fault."

His reassurance is like a warm blanket. Cozy. Perfect.

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“I know.”

“For how long?”

I shrug. Honestly, I’ve got bigger issues than my job at Chanler & Cort.

“I can’t believe she created this mess, and she’s making you the fall guy.”

“Can’t you, though?” I can one thousand percent believe it.

Everyone falls silent because we all know the truth. They’ve lived it with me.

“I mean, yeah, I guess I can.”

“Totally,” Mel says.

“What are you going to do?” Ava asks.

There’s a lightness in me I’ve never felt before. Freedom? Something. Something addictive.

“For now, whatever I want. Brunch with friends.” I smile at them.

“That can’t be legal,” she murmurs.

“When has that stopped her?” When it comes to rules, my mother is very much her father’s daughter.

King crosses his arms over his chest. This isn't over for him. That's the sign that his stubborn streak is about to come out. I slide my hand up his thigh and give him a reassuring squeeze.

“There are worse things in the world. This isn't anywhere near the top of the list. We all know that. So let's just forget about my family's drama and enjoy our day, okay?”

“You shouldn't have to ignore it. They shouldn't start it,” he grumbles, hand covering mine.

I give a sad laugh. “I think it's too late for her to change.”

As the words leave my lips, a thought pierces through the fog. It might be too late for my mom to change, but it's not too late for me to change.

Kingston

After I say my goodbyes and give Katherine a forehead kiss that has my sisters gasping, I head out, leaving them to gossip and do whatever else girls do at brunch.

I reach for my phone, look up the nearest smoothie spot, and head in that direction. I could have stayed and ordered with them, but I wasn't exactly invited. Besides, the pasta's not going to make itself.

Stabbing the text icon with my thumb, I change the group text name again. This time to Three Guys and a Lady.

Lips twitching, I send them a text.

Kingston: I fucked up.

14

ALEX

ALEX: WHAT HAPPENED?

Gabe: Did you buy spaghetti squash? I looked that up and it's just weird.

Kingston: what? No.

Kingston: that picture of Kat and I on the roof? The board wants her out of Chanler & Cort.

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 9:05 am

Alex: How do you know this?

Kingston: I crashed her brunch with my sisters.

Gabe: Out permanently?

Kingston: Her mom told her to take a vacation.

Gabe: Vacation is good.

Alex: This isn't your fault, King. It rests squarely on the shoulders of her mother. Lucinda hasn't had Katherine's best interest at heart in a while.

Kingston: maybe ever.

Kingston: I know it's not my fault. But still...

Kingston: feels like it.

I get it better than most. It's a special kind of hell to think you're responsible for someone else's misfortune. Especially when it's someone you love. But that's honestly not the case here. And Katherine would never think any of this was King's fault.

No. All this shit beneath her mother's shoes is of her own making.

I can't think of a single reason King or Katherine or Gabe or I could be responsible.

We're not the ones who signed her up for that auction. And we're not responsible for the demons that traumatized her and gave her panic attacks.

Gabe: you didn't fly the drone.

Alex: or take the pictures.

Kingston: right. you're both right.

Alex: so what's this about spaghetti squash?

???

Turns out Kingston can cook. Somewhere along the way, the man picked up killer pasta skills.

Gabe and King gather our plates and head into the kitchen, leaving me and Katherine at the round breakfast table. I love that there's not a head of the table or harsh corners. Everyone's equal here. There's a little plant in the center of it that wasn't there before, adding life and charm to the space.

Outside, rain patters against the window. We're so high up that clouds block the view of the skyline, essentially wrapping us in a cozy cocoon.

Katherine swirls the cabernet in her glass slowly, methodically, lost in thought. I trail my thumb back and forth over her hand, content to soak in her presence.

She's more relaxed than I expected. Then again, a good Cab and a plate of pasta will do that.

The clank of plates and silverware can be heard in the kitchen.

“All I’m saying is, my housekeeper will be here in the morning,” Gabe grumbles.

Sounds like he’s trying to get out of chores.

“It’s not hard,” King shoots back.

Katherine’s lips twitch. You don’t have to be a mind reader to know her brain dove straight into the gutter with King’s comment. She’s not alone.

“I know it’s not hard. But that’s why I work so fucking hard. So I don’t have to wash my own dishes.”

The kitchen falls silent, and I quirk a brow. Katherine grins, then presses her lips together, trying to stifle a giggle.

“You made billions of dollars so you don’t have to load a dishwasher?” Kingston sounds completely flabbergasted.

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As if coming up with an idea, implementing it, and making enormous amounts of money was as easy as getting dressed in the morning. I know who King's family is and the plethora of companies they own. And I have a rough idea of what's in his trust fund.

He's easily the most down-to-earth billionaire I've ever met. Content to hand-make pasta, do his own dishes, work in a bar, live on a sailboat, and share his best friend.

Maybe he's onto something.

"That's not the only reason." Gabe sounds like a little boy trying to backtrack his story.

Katherine squeezes my hand and takes a sip of her wine. If you'd asked me five years ago if I'd enjoy a night in with a woman and her two other lovers, I'd have laughed you out of the building.

But hearing Gabe and King's banter, watching the smooth spin of deep red wine in Katherine's glass, feeling her skin against mine, it's all just... right.

Like a never-ending slumber party.

She's not the type to fill the air with chatter. And right now, the silence is companionable. Gabe, King, and I seem more perturbed about her dismissal from her company than she does, regardless of how long her "vacation" is.

"Do you want to go back?" The question is out before I even realize I'm speaking.

Her gaze lifts to mine, and she shrugs. “I feel like I should be more upset, you know? Like I should have fought harder. But honestly, it was a relief. So I don’t know. Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and be angry about the whole thing.”

I can’t fathom being so chill after essentially being ousted from my job. At a company my family started.

“Or you could wake up tomorrow and fly to Boston with me.”

Her head tilts as she stares at me like she’s trying to decide if I’m serious or not. I am. I find myself thinking about her every available moment, wondering what she’s doing. If she’s smiling.

Because I just want her to be happy.

Other than Gabe, it’s been a long time since I considered someone else’s happiness. And for the last six days, that seems like all I’ve thought of.

“Really?”

“It’s just a quick trip. I’ll be back before it gets dark. Is LaShonda busy?”

Brows raised, she stares at me for a long moment. So long that I’m worried I got her friend’s name wrong. But then she blinks rapidly.

“Alex—” She says my name with reverence, then pushes her wine away before sliding from her chair onto my lap.

She cups my cheeks in her hands, and I wrap my arms around her, loving her slight weight. It’s real, grounding me. Her gaze searches mine, and my heart rate accelerates. It always does when she’s this close. When I can breathe her in.

“You are—” She kisses my lips softly. “The most thoughtful—” My nose. “Man—” My forehead. “I’ve ever met.”

Everything else fades into the background as she finds my lips again. Makes herself at home atop my thighs. She kisses me with an aching tenderness and so much appreciation. Pouring herself into it, into me. Filling me up till I feel like I’m soaring. Like I could take on the world and win.

I slide my tongue against hers, tasting the potent combination of pasta sauce and red wine. Her moan is music to my ears, sending my half-stiff cock into full-blown need.

We make out like a couple of horny teenagers. Hands everywhere, tongues tangling, and moans filling the air. I wouldn’t be surprised if the windows were fogged over. And I fucking love that. I love being in my own little world with her. To feel her trust and need burning so damn bright.

Finally, when I’m light-headed, I pull back. Her cheeks are pink, and her lips are swollen. My inner caveman is ridiculously pleased by that. A subtle mark that she’s mine. That I’ve pleased my woman.

The apartment is blissfully quiet except for our ragged breathing. I don’t know where the others wandered off to. Don’t care.

The only thing that matters right now is Katie Bird.

She trails her nails up the back of my neck, and I shudder. My cock feels like he might burst right through my pants to claim her. And the look in her eyes says she knows it. Feels it. Feels me.

There’s so much heat banked there I legit worry I might get scorched. In the best possible way, of course. She cuddles in close, raining tiny kisses across my chin and

along my jaw. The tip of her tongue swipes at my earlobe.

I growl, pressing her hips tighter to my erection.

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She giggles, sounding utterly delighted by my predicament. “I can’t get enough of you, Alexander Hunt.”

That just makes me groan again. “Keep talking like that, and I’ll be forced to bend you over this table.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” She smirks, those pretty pink lips enchanting me. “Were you serious about tomorrow?”

“You know I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t serious. My plane leaves at nine.”

“Then I’ll be on it.”

15

GABE

“So the other day, when you said Alex is straight...” Kingston says as we stand on the back deck of my beach house.

I had a feeling we were going to circle back around to this topic.

It’s a beautiful day. Clear with a soft breeze. The meeting with the designer was more than I could have hoped for. And King had a lot of interesting perspectives.

“Yeah.” I know what he’s getting at. At least, I think I do. But it’s not something I’m going to verbalize. Not yet. Not until I know where he stands.

Although actions are always a strong indicator of belief. And if that's the case where he's concerned, then he's definitely been sending some looks my way.

Hot. Needy. Inquisitive looks.

"Meaning you're not," he hedges, voice quiet and careful. Then he glances at me from the corner of his eye. Just a quick look, checking my reaction.

I can appreciate how he poses it. A curiosity. Yet not the slightest hint of condemnation. On the whole, Kingston Saint is incredibly laid back, almost to a fault. But he obviously takes action when it's needed. And we have a mutual on our enemy list. Lucinda Winthrop.

"I've never really put a label on it." Which is the truth. Because Alex has always been straight in my mind. In his interests and the occasional hook-up.

Whereas I felt like I was launched into a potpourri of possibilities as my business took off. Even before that, really. My time in college was so unlike anything I'd ever experienced back home.

I soaked it up like a sponge.

"Me either, now that I think about it," he says. "I was friends with a couple. We went to parties and hung out a lot. Things got heated at a club one night. We were too young, but the bouncers didn't care. The owner, however, didn't want to lose his licenses."

He smiles at the memory, staring down into the overgrown flower bed.

"We were hiding in the stairwell. She kissed me. He kissed her. The next thing I knew, he was kissing me."

“And the rest is history?” I ask. It’s startling how similar our stories are.

The corner of his mouth hitches up in an easy grin.

“Pretty much.”

“How long ago was that?”

He purses his lips, thinking. “Over a decade.”

So he’s had plenty of time to figure out who he is. Being bisexual is not a passing fling for him. I don’t know why that settles something in me. Maybe because I’m already super aware of how much younger he is. How it feels like I’m racing up to that point in life where most people are settling down or already well-settled.

Settling hasn’t been on my radar.

At least not in the traditional sense. Alex and I have always been tight. Hell, I think we were entrenched pretty much the moment I moved in with him in college.

Once I got past the shock of my life of going through hell and then meeting my guardian angel all in one year, I was in. And I was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. We’ve hung on to each other through success, fame, failure, betrayals, and so much more.

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I was there for him during his time in the military, and I funded his company when he started it. He was there for me as I stretched my wings, saying yes to everything life had to offer. And he congratulated me on every milestone I reached.

I can't imagine life without him. He's my ultimate ride-or-die.

"So, what do you think?" King murmurs, giving the railing a shake. It doesn't budge.

Like most things with this house, it was built well of good materials. But the spaces don't feel current. Or like home.

King turns his hands around, the heel of his palms facing out, and leans over the rail until his toes lift off the porch. The display of muscle as he shifts into a sort of Superman pose where he's supported by his arms is impressive.

I prop a shoulder against a post and watch, mesmerized. "I thought I was in shape, but I'm obviously delusional."

His lips twitch, and his soft green eyes meet mine as he lowers his feet to the ground. "I meant about Raquel."

"Oh." A flush of embarrassment heats my skin. "Right. Yeah. I like her."

She seems to get me and what I ultimately want this space to be. An oasis. Comfortable.

"But you're leery. Understandable."

“Yeah.” Turns out my last designer’s assistant gaslit me for months. My lawyers are handling it, freeing me up to try again.

He leans a hip against the railing, looking so at ease. Effortlessly handsome and dressed like he was born out here on this island amidst its fancy homes and picturesque little towns. I’ve never been a loafers guy, but he makes me want to give it a shot.

Hell, it’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him to take me shopping.

What is happening?

I’ve always been comfortable in my jeans and t-shirts and hoodies. Somewhere along the way I acquired a stylist who shops for my suits and such. And while I’m sure I look good, sometimes it feels like I’m playing dress-up. Probably because I’m not confident in my choices. I’d bet my favorite sneakers that King understands fabrics and accessories in a way that is completely foreign to me.

Kingston has the sort of style that makes an impression.

Katherine has that, too.

Were they born with it? Can it be learned? Why do I care?

“Well, for what it’s worth, she’s worked for my family for years. I don’t think you’ll have a problem with her getting the work done.”

“Oh, I’m sure I won’t. Lightning can’t strike in the same place twice, right?” What are the chances?

“Then you should hire her. You deserve your retreat.” He holds my gaze and my

stomach does a backflip.

Retreat. Oasis. Both words make my brain buzz with what can only be described as joy.

Kingston glances out at the water, and I follow his gaze, letting the charge between us fizzle.

There's a pristine white yacht motoring by, brilliant against the deep blue water. I can see the appeal. Coming and going when you please. A slower pace.

I'm starting to worry that I hit my head because I chased the adrenaline rush of building my business for so long. Racing against my past and all the demons telling me I wasn't good enough. And suddenly, I'm thinking of slowing down. Changing gears, shifting lanes.

What thefuckis happening?

"You ever think about that?" Kingston asks, chin jutting toward the yacht.

"I'm starting to." In fact, I'm starting to think about a lot of things I never considered before.

16

ALEX

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Right on time, our SUV slows to a stop in front of the airplane hangar. I'm reluctant to let Katherine's hand go. She shoots me a knowing look across the backseat. It's only a short walk.

Roman hops out and opens Katherine's door.

"I'll come around," I say so she'll wait for me.

She stays put, with no argument about how she can get out of a vehicle on her own. I know she can. I also know I love the serene but excited way she looks at me when I hold out my hand for her. That's exactly how I feel whenever I'm in her company.

Hand tight in mine, she steps out of the vehicle and once again, I'm struck with pride over the fact that she's wearing the outfit I ordered for her on Saturday. She looks so at home in the slouchy sweater and matching leggings with comfortable slip-on shoes.

"Thanks, Roman," she says, and he gives her a single nod.

"Have a good trip."

He's more than earned the day off.

Inside the massive building, the sleek Bombardier jet sparkles beneath the overhead lighting.

My pilot meets us at the base of the stairs, and I introduce him to Katherine. It feels

good to show her off, to stake that small claim, even if I'm sure he's read the news this week. He's professional enough to welcome her warmly and keep his questions to himself.

"There's a storm between us and Boston, so I'm afraid we're looking at a small delay," he says. "Bonnie will make you comfortable, and we'll be on our way as soon as possible."

Well, that's not the news I wanted to hear. It wouldn't be an issue, but the client I'm meeting is a notorious hard-ass and hates moving his schedule.

Katherine is so in tune with me, obviously noticing the momentary hiccup, and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Thank you for the update," I murmur, and then guide Katherine to the stairs. It's impossible to pull my gaze away from her curves as she climbs the handful of steps.

With my hand at the small of her back, I nudge her past the two groups of seats into one of the more private rooms in the back. There's a comfortable couch and a TV, not that we'll need entertaining. It's a short flight, and I want nothing more than to talk to her and soak her in.

"Sorry for the delay," I say, settling into the corner of the sofa.

She sinks down next to me, immediately burrowing against my side. "Don't apologize. Weather happens. And I'm not in any rush."

My chest expands with a deep breath, and her delicious scent tickles my senses. I want to drag her into my lap and find all the spots she dabbed her perfume.

But I settle for wrapping an arm around her waist and holding her close.

“Do you need to work on the way? I’m okay with reading a book.” She waves her phone.

“And miss a chance to talk to you? Work can wait.”

???

As expected, my client is a pompous windbag who adores the sound of his voice. There was an off-color joke right out of the gate and a mention of my newfound fame, asking me why Katherine was worth a million dollars.

I didn’t answer, of course. Not because I don’t know why she’s worth that and so much more, but because it’s none of his fucking business.

We’re not friends. We’re not buddies. We’re never going to play golf together. I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.

Guys like that just rub me the wrong way.

He and his business were inherited when I took over a smaller firm that does a lot of business in the city. And every time I have to deal with him, I think about firing him as a client.

Today, I almost pushed those words past my lips.

It’d be worth all the contract entanglements to never have to speak to him again.

Luckily, my Boston team handles him most of the time. And they handle him well. Today was no exception.

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After my meeting, I swing by the office to touch base with everyone. As I meet with the managerial staff, there's an odd buzz in the air. Hushed voices.

Everyone's terribly curious, which I get. I might own one of the world's largest security firms, but I go the extra mile to keep my name out of the news. If there's press, I want it to be about how well my team does their job.

Not about who the boss is dating and if he's at war with his best friend.

Normally, I don't let things bother me, but today, my body is keenly aware of how far away Katherine is. We're in the same city, but she's not by my side.

My muscles are tight with the need to track her down, but I don't want to interrupt her time with her friend. So, I try to keep my head in the game. As soon as my watch lets me know it's four o'clock, I'm out the door to the waiting SUV.

???

"This doesn't count as our date," I murmur, leaning in close as we follow LaShonda to the door.

Katherine sends me a delighted look, tightening her hold on my arm. "I'm glad to hear that."

Is it my imagination or does she sound like she wants to prolong all these 'not our date' dates?

And why do I feel so good when she clings to me like this? Immortal and proud, like nothing can touch me.

A thrill of excitement zings through my veins. I will never take for granted how easy it is to be with her. How steady and quietly confident she is, or how respectful she is to everyone who crosses her path.

That's not breeding or etiquette lessons. I'm positive of that because I've seen how her mother and grandfather moved through life.

No, this is all Katherine. Innate and effortlessly kind.

A quick elevator ride carries us up to the rooftop bar. "I found this place not long after this one," LaShonda nods to Katherine, "headed back to greener pastures."

"Hardly greener."

They laugh in the way old friends do. Like two people who can communicate through a look. It's the exact sound that first drew my attention to Katherine. And just like that time, it warms me like a fine whiskey.

Soft jazz music carries across the rooftop from hidden speakers, along with a low murmur of conversation. I follow the women to a small, round table in the far corner, pleased with their choice of seating. I can keep an eye on everyone around us. Not that I need to. I assigned two men to Katherine as soon as we landed in Boston.

No way was I letting her loose in the city unguarded. Especially not after the latest round of pictures and speculation. Social media caught wind of Kingston's return, and now there are bets about who Katherine will end up with.

I understand a passing curiosity in the elite. The wealthy. That's been bred into us for

centuries.

But this feels like more than that, probably because, for the first time, I'm on the other side of the story. It's not just a client I'm watching. These are people I care about involved.

Blessedly, there aren't too many patrons here yet, and no one is paying us any extra attention. My men grab a nearby table, and I breathe a little easier.

Katherine orders a bottle of wine. I stick with sparkling water. LaShonda gives me a long look.

She's trying to get a read on me.

I get it. I'd do the same to any woman attached to Gabe.

Luckily, the one he has his eye on is the same one I do.

"I'm glad we got to hang out, Alex," LaShonda says, giving me another one of those thorough once-overs. She shoots Katherine a smile, the kind that says they've been talking about me and she's looking forward to grilling me.

Bring it on. I have nothing to hide from her. From either of them. "Likewise. You two always seem to have a good time."

LaShonda's brows lift above surprised brown eyes. "We do?"

I incline my head as the memory flashes through my mind like it was yesterday. "The first time I ever saw Katherine, she was with you at an event. The two of you were laughing."

From the corner of my eye, I see Katherine's jaw drop.

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“Really?”

I look at her then. She really doesn't understand the hold she has over me. I grab the base of her chair and pull her closer, then drape my arm over the back of it. She sinks into the shelter of my arm, completely relaxed.

“Really. You were wearing a stunning black dress. Strapless.”

“What was I wearing?” LaShonda asks, sitting back in her seat. There's a hint of 'gotcha' in her tone.

I'm glad Katherine has someone like LaShonda in her corner.

“You were wearing yellow. A one-shoulder dress and sky-high heels.”

LaShonda's brilliant red lips twitch, and she offers me a stunning smile. “He's good.”

Katherine runs a hand down my thigh, leaning closer. “I couldn't agree more.”

The server returns with our drinks, and LaShonda orders a handful of appetizers before returning her attention to her best friend.

“So, what are you guys doing for Memorial Day?” LaShonda asks, reaching for her wine.

I feel Katherine's glance like a caress against my cheek.

“We haven’t talked about it yet. Are you still going to the Cape?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I have an invite from my father. Ford and Sutton will be there.”

I glance around the rooftop out of habit but also because there’s a new awareness I’ve never felt before. It’s deep and personal and tinged with anxiety. But also excitement. Being out in public with Katherine feels real in a way I hadn’t expected. No one’s paying attention to us. There are no drones overhead. No one snapping photos with a cell phone.

But it feels like a real date. Like a declaration. And I underestimated just how much I’d like that.

“Do you want to see him?” LaShonda asks, and I get the impression she’s not talking about Ford or Sutton.

“I think I do, actually.” She turns to me. “Do you have plans for Memorial Day?”

“Gabe and I usually hop down to Canouan for the long weekend, but?—”

“Nice,” LaShonda says appreciatively.

How do I tell Katherine I’d rather be wherever she is?

17

KINGSTON

The sun dips toward the horizon as we land at the heliport in the city. Gabe’s been

quiet and thoughtful since we left his house, which suited me just fine because I couldn't get that gleaming white yacht out of my head.

Is that the answer?

No skyscrapers with their never-ending elevators. Endless places to explore. Every luxury Katherine could want and many she wouldn't care about.

While I love my little sailboat, it's always been a solo experience. There's room for two, but it's tight and not comfortable for more than a week-long visit. The right yacht would have all the amenities we could need to get away... or hide out in plain sight.

And if it had a helipad, we could come and go as we please, docking in places we otherwise couldn't fit.

Excited by the idea, I pull out my phone and navigate to the group text.

Kingston: Do you guys get seasick?

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Gabe pulls out his phone. "I'm standing right next to you."

I shrug. "Just wanted everyone on the same page."

"It's not like we've ever done the Bering Sea during crabbing season, but Alex and I can hold our own. Still thinking about that yacht?"

"Yeah."

"Same. Hungry?" he asks as we head up the dock to the Rover waiting for us.

But it's not alone. There's another one identical to the one we took this morning from the apartment.

"Always. I know a place with great sandwiches and zero bull shit."

"You're speaking my language." Gabe waves a hand, the universal hand signal to lead the way.

A man in all black steps out of the other SUV, eyeing us. He's about my height and built like an MMA fighter, with a neutral expression on his face.

Gabe makes a soft, amused sound, and I glance over at him.

"What?"

"Looks like you got yourself a bodyguard." His lips curve at the corner. It's so

distracting I take a few seconds to register his words.

“I what?”

We’re still walking. Getting closer to the vehicles and the no-nonsense man in black.

Gabe clasps my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. Tech boy’s got strong hands.

I didnotneed to know that.

“Don’t freak out.”

“Why would I freak out?”

“I don’t know. You look like you’re about to spiral.” He tugs me closer, patting my back.

“I do?” I’m confused as to what’s going on.

“You wouldn’t be the first person to resist protection.”

“Mr. Saint,” the man says, closing the dozen feet between us. “I’m Tomasz Kowalczyk. Mr. Hunt assigned me to your detail.”

I blink at him, then pivot toward Gabe. “Did you know about this?”

He gives a single shake of his head.

“Don’t worry. It means he likes you.” Those words are delivered with a reckless smile that does wild things to my pulse.

And my stomach.

I mean, of course, I want Alex to like me. But being assigned a bodyguard feels like I'm in the inner circle now. A flush of pleasure sweeps through my veins, warming me from the inside out, and it has nothing to do with attraction. No, this is belonging.

“Interesting.” I glance back at my new shadow. “Okay. What do you need from me?”

???

Tucked in the back of Anthony's deli, I down half a soda and then reach for my bag of chips.

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“How’d you find this place?” Gabe asks, sliding onto a stool next to me.

The black-and-white checkered tiles have seen better days, and the person at the cash register is cranky as a goose, but the staff is practically family, and the food is always excellent.

“I’ve been coming here since I was little. I’m not sure how my parents found it, now that you mention it. Anthony has just been one of those figures in the background of my life, you know?”

Gabe’s brows lift, but he remains silent.

“I make it a point to stop by whenever I’m in town.”

Gabe half turns, glancing at the collection of photographs on the walls. Celebrities, politicians, regulars. Anthony treats them all equally. “I like its character.”

“Me too.”

Out the front window, I see my new bodyguard talking with Gabe’s. “You always have a body man?”

“Most of the time. They keep their distance. Until they don’t.”

I cock my head. “Meaning?”

“There was a stretch when I was in a lot of magazines. On TV. That kind of thing.

Let's just say I had increased security those years."

He says that so nonchalantly, like being a whiz kid and popular to boot is normal. But what sacrifices had he made to accomplish everything he has? What has he missed out on along his way to the top?

I can imagine him at a conference with a team of men in black surrounding him, cutting through the throng of people like a hot knife slices through butter.

"But not so much lately?"

He shrugs. "Being with Alex is like having an extra bodyguard."

My lips twitch. He's not wrong.

"Does it bother you?" he asks, reaching for his soda.

I glance at Tomasz again. Protection is necessary for a certain segment of the population. I've always been aware of that. At the same time, I've always tried to live my life in a way that doesn't leave me looking over my shoulder. Which is absolutely a place of privilege, I get it.

And it feels a little weird that Alex made the decision without consulting me, but I'm sure he had his reasons. Tomasz seems like a good guy, so no complaints there. Being shadowed all the time, though... That will take some getting used to. And maybe it'll only be until the current storm surrounding Katherine blows over.

So I glance back at Gabe and shake my head. "Hope he can run."

There's a flash of bright white teeth as he grins. "Oh, I'm sure he can keep up. Alex hires the best of the best."

Anthony appears from the back, a plate in each hand and a yellowing apron tied around his belly. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Gabe murmurs.

“Thanks, Anthony.”

“Sure, sure. Good to see you, King. How’ve you been?”

We make small talk, and I introduce him to Gabe, who seems a little surprised at the average, everyday welcome. Anthony isn’t the type to read *Forbes* or keep up with the latest tech. He likes things old school and if it isn’t broken, he’s not going to fix it.

He’s also not the type to pay much attention to the media, which is probably what my parents appreciate about him.

“I’ll let you guys eat. Thanks for coming in.”

“Of course.”

As he heads off, Gabe takes a big bite of his Italian sub, and the groan that comes from his chest makes parts of me sit up and take notice. Parts that should stay dormant so I don’t embarrass myself in front of old family friends.

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“This is amazing.”

I smirk. “They’ll be thrilled to hear that.”

“How have I lived here so long and never tried this place?”

“Did you know about it?”

He shakes his head.

“Then you can’t fault yourself.”

He pauses mid-chew as if I’ve just said something extremely profound. After a moment, he gathers himself and finishes his bite.

His gaze drops to my lips. “Do I have a glob of mustard or something?”

I wipe my mouth with a napkin, and he shakes his head. Awareness crackles between us, the kind of potent electricity that I’ve only felt with Katherine.

Oh hell. As if our situationship wasn’t complicated enough.

I look away, not ready for him to see the emotions churning through me. Not ready to dissect them myself.

The bell over the front door rings its familiar tune, and I reach for a handful of chips.

“Thanks for coming with me today,” he says.

“No problem. Glad I could help.”

“I want to move fast on the renovation.”

My gaze flicks to him. Just a brush. Then moves around the room. “Money greases wheels. You know that.”

He nods. “Yeah. But?—”

“I know.” It’s actually pretty sweet how attached he is to that house. And to the project. Bringing something back to prime condition isn’t easy. I can’t wait to see how it turns out. What the future will bring?

That’s a scary thought. There are so many unknowns. Alex. Gabe. This new attraction brewing between the two of us. And the world is not likely to embrace such a unique relationship.

“You okay? Something wrong with your sandwich?” he asks in a hushed tone.

The sandwich is fine. It’s all thewhat-ifsswirling around in my brain, making me uneasy.

My phone buzzes in my pocket just as he leans away to reach for his.

“Text from Alex?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

Alex: You guys mind if I steal Katherine for the weekend?

KATHERINE

I lace my fingers through Alex's as we approach his plane. What an amazing day. My soul needed this. Time off. Time away.

It'd been hard to say goodbye to Shon. No one keeps me grounded the way she does. Not even King.

The attendant greets us at the top of the steps. The old me would have dropped Alex's hand, not wanting to give any ammunition to the stories about us. But if I trust his bodyguards to keep our secrets, surely I can trust his flight crew.

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A little voice in the back of my mind whispers about fancy cameras and drones. The little voice isn't wrong. In fact, it's been proven right multiple times in the last week. Still, I silence it and squeeze Alex's hand.

"The bed's made up, Mr. Hunt," the attendant says as we pass.

Pausing between the groupings of chairs, I glance back at him. "The bed?"

He nods, letting my hand go, then immediately sliding his against the small of my back and gently nudging me deeper into the plane. We pass through the section we sat in this morning to a space with a bed, a chair, and a low dresser. There's a door beyond, open to a gleaming bathroom.

"In case you want to sleep." He reaches into the go bag atop the dresser and pulls out a white t-shirt. Just like at Gabe's beach house, he hands it to me, and I relish the softness.

"On the way back to New York?" It's a short flight, and I'm not tired yet.

He steps closer, crowding me against the dresser as he slides those massive hands around my waist. I melt instantly, loving how safe and desired I feel with him.

"Run away with me."

My jaw goes slack. Run away... from King? And Gabe?

"Just for the weekend," he amends quickly, and I relax against him. "I've already run

the idea past the guys.”

The thrill I get at those words.

The guys.

My guys.

What can I say? I’m a greedy bitch and love the way that sounds on his lips. I love seeing their names across the top of my text messages.

I toss the t-shirt on the bed and slide my hands up his chest. I’m amazed he doesn’t have to duck to fit on the plane, but I’d be willing to bet he bought this plane because it fits his tall frame.

“And what’s the idea?”

“I thought we might go to Paris. For our date. I’m friends with the head of security of the Luxembourg Garden.”

He says it all as if it’s no big deal. Just whisking his girl off to the City of Light for a romantic weekend away. And I know it will be romantic with him. And the gardens!

Of course, he’d do something thoughtful like that. Because this is Alex. Mr. Details.

“That sounds amazing. Let’s do it.”

He gives a brief nod. “Let me go talk to the pilot.”

He heads back the way we came, and I dive for my phone.

Katherine: omg. He's taking me to Paris.

Shon's reply is almost immediate like she was sitting around waiting for my text.

LaShonda: Of course he is. Man is addicted to you.

LaShonda: Have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

I suck in a deep breath, wildly excited for this adventure with him. It feels like a fabulous dream. I don't want to wake up.

His returning footfalls are soft on the carpet, and I turn just as his arms slide around my waist.

I shiver as I stretch up for his kiss. I've been needing this all day. His strong body, those firm lips, this drip drip drip of desire through my veins.

In the background, I hear the crew close the door. Low voices. Reluctantly, I drop down onto my heels and smile up at the man who's come to mean so much in such a short time. His dreamy brown eyes are hazy with lust, and I love the fact that a single kiss affects him so deeply.

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Getting lost together is quickly becoming my favorite pastime.

He inhales deeply and then drops a hand from my back to scramble for the panel on the wall. Double doors slide closed, ensconcing us in the bedroom.

My heart trips.

We're finally alone.

Alone with plenty of time to ourselves.

He turns us, taking two steps back, and then settles into the chair. I step between his knees, hands on his shoulders. Giddiness flows through me like an endless river.

He lifts his lips for a kiss, and his hands skim down over my ass before sliding upward again, this time beneath my sweater. My body comes alive at his touch. So sensitive, so eager.

I lift my head and smile down at him. "Thanks for an amazing day."

"My pleasure."

I give a happy little hum. "I think the pleasure's about to be mine as well."

His lips hitch up in one of those rare half-smiles that makes my heart trip. There's not much reason for smiling in his business, dealing with danger and constantly looking for safe exit strategies. I can see how that'd get transactional, especially from the top.

Running the company rather than dealing with a single client.

“Definitely,” he rumbles.

His thumbs glide over my ribs, higher and higher, until they settle beneath my breasts. My breath stalls as I wait for him to touch me. To tease my aching nipples.

Who am I kidding? I’m aching all over. Not the painful kind, but with the sort of anticipation that clouds judgment and leads to bliss.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I lower my lips to his. The plane starts to move, and I stumble. He catches me against him and, in a lightning-fast move, settles me across his thighs, arms banded tight around my waist.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be your seat belt.”

I melt at the corny line and rain kisses across his cheek. “I’m never worried when I’m with you.”

A full-body shudder quakes through him.

Cupping his cheek, I turn his face to mine. “You okay?”

He gives a jerky nod.

I kiss the corner of his mouth. “You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

There’s a long pause. Another inhale. Then he leans his forehead against mine.

I soak in the feel of him, committing it all to memory. The tight hold, the way his inky lashes seem to rest against his cheeks.

“That means a lot,” he says, voice laced with gratitude.

That he can tell me anything?

I smile. “You’ve already seen me on some of my worst days.”

Which, in the scheme of things, haven’t been all that bad. But he doesn’t point that out. He doesn’t make me feel silly or melodramatic. He just nods a slight nod that lets me know he hears me.

He understands.

“Since my sister was killed, it feels like all I’ve done is worry.”

GABE

I rub my chest, trying to ease the ache inside my ribs.

“Everything okay?” Kingston asks from the other side of the back seat.

Can he tell I’m stewing? Probably.

My guy seems to have a sixth sense about things like that.

The SUV bounces over manhole covers and uneven pavement on the way back to our apartment building. I’m pleased with how the day went and have a good feeling about the new designer and her team, but there’s something not quite right.

I’m happy for Alex and Katherine because, deep down, I know that he needs time off. A real vacation where he’s not on his phone. He thinks I don’t see him checking in with his team, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I know his habits.

I have no idea how he managed to clear his schedule so last minute, but then, he’s a force of nature. And for Katherine, I’m pretty sure he’d move mountains.

So yeah. I’m happy for him. But there’s also a part of me that’s sad. That must be the cloak of melancholy I can’t seem to shrug off. I don’t want to examine the feeling too closely, so I nod.

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“Yachts, sandwiches, or Alex?”

I turn and look at him. He’s so freaking open. Like a puppy who’s never been hit. Is it youth or character? Not that he’s that much younger than me.

Still, he’s lucky.

“What makes you think it’s one of those?”

“Educated guess.”

“That sandwich was amazing,” I say to buy myself time. Well, that’s not exactly true. It’s not just time, but privacy.

While I don’t doubt my driver’s loyalty, there are some things I can’t risk. My friendship with Alex will always be at the top of that list.

Kingston looks away, leaning toward the door. “Yeah. Anthony knows how to make ’em.”

He leaves me to my thoughts, which I’m not sure is a good thing. Sometimes, getting lost in my own head can be a dangerous thing. I tend to overthink when left to my own devices, which is why I keep busy.

???

“Want to watch a movie?” he asks as we step onto the elevator.

I have a report to read, and I wanted to research quantum computing related to finance. And given that I was out of the office today, a little voice whispers, ‘You’re behind.’

Fuck it. What's the point of working so hard if I can't take time off and enjoy myself?

Whether I'll feel guilty the whole time is a different matter entirely.

"Sure. My place?"

"Sounds good." He pulls out his phone, his thumb moving swiftly over the screen as the elevator soars toward the sky.

I shouldn't stare, but I can't help it. I find him fascinating. But when he worries his lower lip, that little hint of vulnerability makes me curious.

Is something bothering him?

"What are you thinking? Action? Sci-Fi? Fantasy?" He pegs me with a look that makes my stomach tighten.

I ignore it and shove my hands in my pockets.

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“You don’t strike me as a rom-com guy,” he adds.

“I don’t mind a romance.” Why do I sound so defensive? “But I like it better when it’s woven into a fantasy world.”

The corner of his mouth curls up, and I have to force myself to stay put. The way his blond hair curls over the tops of his ears is utterly distracting, and my fingers tingle, wanting nothing more than to sink deep.

“I would have guessed you were a Star Wars fan.” His green eyes sparkle as if he’s delighted by this newfound information.

I shrug. “I like Lord of the Rings better.”

His attention drops back to his phone. “Never saw it.”

“What?” The word bursts from my lips. Or maybe my soul, I can’t be sure.

He chuckles and pockets his phone as the elevator levels out. “I guess we’ve found our movie.”

I glance at the watch on my wrist. “Too bad we don’t have time for a proper marathon.”

“How long is it?”

As we step off the elevator, I explain the difference between the theatrical version

and the extended.

“It’s an extra two hours? That’s an entire movie.”

His incredulity makes me laugh, and damn, it feels good. I clap him on the shoulder and give him a little nudge toward the hall. “Come on, virgin.”

He stops. “Who you calling a virgin? You were there the other night.”

“When it comes to the masterpiece that is Lord of the Rings, you’ve still got your V-card. Come on, I think you’ll like Legolas.”

I wave him in front of me as we enter the theater room. The furniture’s been moved back to its original position, but my mind immediately remembers it crowded together, creating a massive bed for the four of us.

Like me, King pauses. Is he remembering our night together? Feeling Katherine between us? I don’t know if I’ve ever felt more free. More like me.

He steps forward, trailing a hand along the back of the sectional, petting the soft fabric.

“Are you really okay with them going off together?”

He asks the question I’ve been pondering since Alex sent us that text. Since we looked at each other across the old faux wood table in Anthony’s Deli, searching each other for an answer.

Ultimately, we’d told Alex to go for it.

What else were we going to say? Anything short of ‘Have a great time. Bring us back

a croissant and an Eiffel Tower paper weight.’ was sure to be the wrong answer. They’re our best friends.

I don’t even have to ask King because I already know his answer. Katherine’s happiness is everything to him. Just like Alex’s happiness is everything to me.

“We knew they were going to have their own date,” I say. “We all are.”

He nods, still not looking at me. The tension rises, and my heart rate picks up.

“What about you?” I ask. Is he not as into sharing as he wants Katherine to think he is?

That can’t be right. He was totally into it. Just like I was.

“Yeah, I’m okay with it. It’s just weird. Being here without her. She’s one of the only reasons I come back to New York. I could meet my family anywhere. My mom’s in Italy a few times a year. My sisters love Greece.”

He turns and leans back against the sofa, legs stretched out, hands resting by his hips.

My BS meter is quiet, not detecting anything amiss. But there’s definitely something he’s not telling me. Which isn’t surprising. We hardly know each other.

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I'm not about to divulge my darkest secrets to him. I shouldn't expect him to return the favor.

"Popcorn?" I ask.

"Definitely."

I cross to the built-in bar where an old-fashioned-looking popcorn machine sits, measure out the popcorn, and load it into the machine. There's also a concession-style shelving unit full of candy and a mini fridge beneath with assorted beverages and beers. I jut my chin toward it.

"Help yourself. There's beer."

"You guys live very well, which is saying something, given the street I grew up on."

Pride fills me like a helium balloon. "That's the goal. That's been the goal since the moment I left Nebraska. All it took was one look at Boston, the houses in Beacon Hill, the sailboats gliding over the water, the skyscrapers standing tall."

He reaches into the small refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of beer and holds it up to me. "Want one?"

I nod. "Thanks."

"This is a long way from Nebraska," he muses.

“Yeah. I don’t miss having to share a room with my brothers, that’s for sure.” Mostly, I don’t miss trying to hide all my books or read beneath the covers. Those fuckers always told on me for staying up too late.

“All I have are sisters.”

“Lucky.” And I mean it. The man has a natural advantage where Katherine’s concerned. Growing up around women gives him an understanding I’ll likely never have.

I both love and hate the way women are such a mystery. Except that Katherine seems like an open book now that I’ve gotten to know her. She’s not strung as tight as I once believed. That’s all a facade she lives behind. Like a bubble that protects her.

Once the air is heavy with the scent of buttered popcorn, I queue up the first movie, and we settle on the sectional, legs stretched out, the bowl between us.

“Still can’t believe you’ve never seen this.”

“I was busy.”

With a tap of a button on the programmable remote, the lights around the room dim, and the curtains close, cocooning us. King’s right. We live very well, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

This room was worth every penny. As a child who never got control over the remote, this space is something I could only dream of.

As Frodo begins his journey, I sneak a glance at my new friend. He’s utterly absorbed, just as I thought he would be. He’s an outdoorsy type who likes his freedom, so I have no doubt all the action will resonate.

We reach into the bowl at the same time, and our fingers brush beneath the sea of butter-covered popcorn. A tingle of awareness races up my arm. Does he feel it, too?

20

ALEX

My throat tightens, and I want to snatch the words back. I rarely talk about Courtney.

Almost twenty years later, that day feels like yesterday. Sometimes I stare at my cell phone, the memory of the call from my father that shattered our seemingly safe world fresh in my mind.

We all lost our innocence in the blink of an eye.

Katherine burrows closer, so in tune with me. She doesn't say anything, just sits in my lap, arms clinging to my waist, waiting for me to make up my mind. But I can feel the curiosity vibrating through her. And who wouldn't be curious?

I tighten my arms around her, soothed by the way our breathing syncs. Slow, steady inhale. A shuddering exhale loosens the tension binding my torso.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” she whispers.

I duck my head, inhaling her familiar scent. Do I want to open my chest and expose my most vulnerable parts? No. I don't want to relive the past. I don't want to open myself up to that. When people hear what happened, I hear pity in their voice. I see the sorrow in their eyes.

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It's a punch to the gut every single time.

No, I don't want to relive it.

I've lived a good life keeping everyone at a distance. Not letting anyone get too close.

Anyone but Gabe.

"You don't have to," she adds, pressing her hand to my chest. "But I'm happy to listen."

Peace washes through me, cleansing me from the inside out. Is it that simple?

No pressure. Just someone willing to listen. The epitome of support and being there. A quiet, comforting solace that doesn't make demands may be the best gift someone could offer.

Katherine makes it easy, effortless, to crack open my ribs and let her into my heart.

"Her name was Courtney. She was my bratty little sister, and I loved her like crazy."

Katherine's arms tighten at my waist, giving me comfort and silently encouraging me to continue.

"She is one of my first memories. This beautiful little baby was in my mom's arms, and my dad was telling me I had to be a good big brother and keep an eye on her."

I haven't thought about that in years. My throat tightens, and it takes several deep breaths before I can continue. "She always gave as good as she got, though. We used to play video games and bicker about everything under the sun. She was kind but sassy, and I loved teasing her."

"Such a brother," Katherine says, a smile in her voice.

"I was." I loved being a brother. Having a built-in friend.

Happy memories come flooding back. Our first sailboat ride in Nantucket. How she decided that she was going to run the marathon with Mom, but she was far too young, so we cheered at the finish line instead. The utter joy on her face the first time she ever rode a pony.

But those happy memories give way to the saddest moment of my life, and my chest aches. I close my eyes, wishing for the millionth time that things were different.

But if I could go back and change things, would I be where I am now? Would I have leaned on Gabe? Would we have remained close?

I can't imagine my life without him.

Would I have started my company?

Would I have met Katherine?

Suddenly, I'm not so quick to want to go back in time. Which is crazy. I should want to go back and save my sister. To go running with her so she wouldn't have been alone on that trail. Right?

"Courtney was murdered during her evening jog. We lived in one of the safest parts

of Boston, but?—”

It wasn't enough. Evil doesn't respect boundaries.

“I'm so sorry.”

That's it. That's all it takes to cleave me wide and let all the pain come rushing back, making me ache like I haven't ached in years.

The second guessing, the anger, it's all right there. Tangible. Strangling me.

“Breathe.”

Katherine's quiet order jars me out of the retrospection, and I take a ragged breath.

She leans away from me, turning to rest a hand on each of my shoulders. “There you go. That's better. Oxygen is good for you.”

Her humor lightens the moment, and I cup her cheek. How can she look at me like I'm her hero when I've failed so desperately in the past?

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Whatever she sees on my face has her shaking her head. All those golden-red tresses slip over her shoulders, tempting my fingers. I should have kept my fucking mouth shut. I'd already be inside her.

Her eyes narrow.

“Almost got a smile out of you.” She squeezes my shoulders.

I huff a laugh because it's impossible to do anything else when she looks at me like she's daring me to stay silent. To stay morose.

“How do you do that?” I ask, chest full of awe.

“Do what?”

“Know exactly what I need.” Reach inside and soothe me like a healing balm.

“I'm a people watcher, Mr. Hunt. And I've watched you for years. Across the room at all those galas where you'd nod at people in their tuxedos. Every time you stopped by to meet Gabe after our board meetings. I always wondered why you never let yourself be happy. And now I know, don't I?”

Her eyes twinkle like gemstones, full of conviction and warmth. Not an ounce of pity. Pain, yes. Understanding, absolutely. That's the most beautiful part. When she looks at me, it's like she sees me in ways no one else can. The depths of my soul feel brighter under her steady gaze. Like I can handle anything, tackle anything.

And all that time, I thought I was the one doing the watching, the daydreaming.

Would she have ever made a move if I hadn't gone to that auction with one goal in mind?

Her lips pull up, and I realize how pointless it is to second-guess the trajectory of our relationship. We're here now. She's in my lap, in my arms, looking at me like she knows my every secret, and she's okay with all of them. Every dark deed I've done to protect my family, my friends, my country. Every time I've had to play hardball. Every boundary I've had to set and enforce.

She tilts her head, gaze searching my face.

"You're still beating yourself up, aren't you?" Again, her words are gentle, coaxing. But that soft smile turns pensive. "You know one of the things I find most intriguing about you?"

I shake my head, endlessly curious about everything she thinks.

"You're comfortable being uncomfortable. Whether it's in a tuxedo where you're trying not to tug on your bow tie or in a room full of silver-spooned assholes who think everyone else is beneath them. You are so used to being uncomfortable you were willing to sleep on the floor a week ago. You're so used to being uncomfortable you just constantly live in that state of being. I admired that about you for a long time. So many people are afraid of a little pain, a little friction, but not you."

"Why do I feel like there's a but in there?"

"But. . . will you ever let yourself be comfortable? If not happy, content? Will you let yourself fall in love?"

KATHERINE

Before Alex can answer my question, the plane phone rings. Am I imagining the resignation in his eyes as he reaches for it? I hold my breath so I don't scream.

My questions hang in the air between us.

Will you ever let yourself be comfortable?

Will you let yourself fall in love?

"Hunt," he says, gaze dropping to my lips.

Can he read the frustration in me? Does he feel the tension taking over my limbs?

Of course he can. This is Alex.

He cups my cheek, swiping his thumb over my lips. Holds it there, a silent order.

"We're ready. Thank you." He puts the phone back in the cradle. "Time to buckle up."

Oh.

Okay.

That's an answer, I suppose.

My stomach sinks as he lifts me off his lap as if I weigh no more than a feather. He doesn't say anything as we buckle up. Or as the plane speeds down the runway and lifts effortlessly into the sky.

His gaze stays locked on mine as we gain altitude. I swallow as my ears adjust. My heart pounds in my chest, desperate for an answer. But I can't ask again. Uneasiness chokes me because I'm pretty sure I've handed over a sizable chunk of my heart to this man, and I'm equally certain that he has a hangup about love.

It'd make sense, right?

Someone who's suffered the sort of tragic loss he has would hold himself apart, build walls around himself and a moat around his heart.

It finally makes sense. The way he doesn't date. The way he seems to exist on the periphery of society, attending events but never truly participating.

But there's hope. Gabe made it across the moat and scaled the walls.

The ache in my heart intensifies and spreads until it fills every corner of my body and soul. This is a man who loves his family and who deserves all the love life has to offer. A partner. Friendship. Passion. Affection and devotion.

Maybe—

The phone rings again, and he answers it. One second becomes two. I'm ready to come out of my skin.

“Thank you.”

Just like before, he puts the phone back in the cradle, staring at me until my nerves are vibrating. Then, the tension snaps as he jerks his seatbelt loose and reaches for me. Undoing my belt, he pulls me back into his lap, lips crashing against mine as if I'm oxygen and he's drowning.

“Alex—” I mumble against his lips. He shoves his hand in my hair, holding me where he wants me.

Oh my goodness. He's so big, so in control, and I'm so happy to hand it over to him. When his tongue slides against mine, everything erratic settles inside me. The tension drains away and I grip his suit jacket, holding on for dear life.

He pulls back a fraction, and I blink at him.

“To answer your questions,” he whispers, his deep voice rough but husky. “Yes, yes, and I already have.”

Why are we talking?

Wait.

My kiss-addled brain focuses on his words. He's answering my questions.

Yes?

Yes, to being comfortable. Yes, to being happy.

“You already have?”

Does that mean?—

“You’re impossible to resist.”

“What?” My voice is sharp with confusion.

His lips twitch, and my heart soars.

“You can’t be surprised, Beauty. Your laugh bewitched me years ago.”

“Yeah, but—” I have no other words as my brain tries to process everything he’s said. I need full sentences. Nouns, verbs, maybe an adjective.

He trails his hand down the column of my throat, and then a fingertip traces over my collarbone.

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“But?” His gaze meets mine.

“I don’t understand.”

“The only thing you need to understand is that I tried to resist your pull, to remain in your orbit but not succumb to your spell, but it didn’t work like that. I’ve been falling in love with you for what feels like forever.”

I gasp as happiness explodes through me. “Same.” I kiss him. “Same. Forever.”

His fingers tangle in my hair, and he pulls my head back. The bite of pain makes my nipples harden and my clit tingle.

“Say it. I need to hear you say it.”

I know exactly what he’s asking for. And his breathlessly gruff tone says he’s having a hard time believing this isn’t a dream.

That uncertainty makes my heart swell and my lips curve. I sit up straighter, tracing a finger over his left eyebrow and down his cheek. “I love you, Alexander Hunt.”

He groans and tugs me forward, slanting his lips across mine in a needy kiss. This is exactly what I’ve been dreaming of. Time alone with him, where we can relax and enjoy each other. Where he stops holding back. Where we ignore the world and our positions within it.

He’s definitely not holding back anymore. His glorious body surges beneath mine, all

hard planes and an even harder cock. I move to straddle him, thankful that there's just enough room in the chair.

The plane swoops, and my stomach does the same. Alex's arms tighten around me, keeping me tucked firmly against his lap. I'm not going anywhere. This is the only place I want to be right now.

"I need you," he says before trailing his lips along my jaw.

"Then have me."

He rocks forward, tilting me back as he stands. I squeak and cling to his shoulders, tightening my thighs around his hips. But there's no danger of him dropping me. He's a tank.

"You're so fucking incredible," he murmurs, lowering me to the bed.

His broad shoulders blot out the overhead light, and all I see is him. He fills my senses.

"I could say the same thing about you." He shakes his head ruefully, hands coasting down my body.

His fingers hook over the edge of my leggings and pull them down, jerking my sneakers off with eager hands. He tosses the lot over his shoulder, and they land in the chair we just vacated.

Without hesitation, he reaches for my right ankle. Lifting it, he peppers kisses along the inside of my calf and my stomach flutters at the tenderness in him. Such a big man and so in control of himself. So connected to me and finally getting in touch with his own feelings again.

I reach for him, but he straightens. Rising to his full height, he stares down at me with those warm chocolate eyes and sheds his jacket. My stomach flutters at the impressive display of masculinity. He folds the garment with almost military-like precision and then drapes it over the back of the chair.

Oh, I like this game. Slowing down so we can hopefully speed up again.

His fingers move to his tie, tugging the knot in that classic impatient gesture that makes me purr. Anticipation seeps through me, bittersweet because I don't want this night to end, cranking up my desire.

I sit up on the bed, swinging my legs around to kneel. I skim my hands down my front, and his eyes follow the movement.

I lift the hem of my sweater, feeling deliciously naughty with every inch I reveal. It doesn't matter that we've been intimate before, that he's seen me without a stitch of clothing on.

The heat in his eyes and the unsteady movements of his fingers working the tie free is all it takes to make me quiver with need. I love that we hardly need words. He does all the communicating he needs to with a glance, a touch, a lusty groan.

His gaze is like a caress across my belly, over my breasts. And as soon as my sweater joins the pile of discarded clothing, he reaches for me, looping his tie behind my back.

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KATHERINE

The silky material of his tie makes me shiver.

“Cold?”

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“Turned on.”

He drops the tie, sliding his hands across my skin, branding me and making me want them on my breasts and teasing between my thighs. He works my bra free as I undo his buttons in an urgent dance.

I push his shirt down his arms, and my pussy clenches at the sight. “You’re so gorgeous,” I mutter.

It’s an oath and curse.

“Ditto.”

His thumbs graze my nipples, just a soft brush. They’re on their best behavior, sitting up, begging for his attention. And he gives it willingly. Bending, he sucks one needy peak into his mouth. I hold on to his biceps for balance, gasping as my nerve endings catch fire. My pussy is so wet, so ready for his touch. And every tug of that masterful mouth adds fuel to the flame.

“I need you,” I moan.

He shucks his shirt, tossing it into the pile, then scoops me up, laying me flat on my back. Gosh, I love how well he listens.

There’s no cat-and-mouse game, just mutual pleasure.

He moves over me again, lips roving, tasting my skin. I arch beneath him as I reach

for his pants. He's too far away and moving farther as he navigates the length of my body.

The space isn't big enough for both of us, so I crawl backward, settling against the pillows. He gives me a smoking hot look that singes my panties.

“What do you need, Beauty?”

“Your mouth.”

Fuck. The way it curves up at the corner in that knowing smirk. I rake a hand through his hair. He leans into my touch, eyes closing as he savors it.

Once again, I'm struck silly at the tenderness in him. And now that I know more of his secrets, it makes total sense. Of course, he's big and tough and protective and also gentle and kind.

He drops a kiss between my breasts, lips nibbling their way south. I suck in a breath. He licks a circle around my belly button, and a giggle bubbles up my throat. My body flushes with heat as he licks me through the lace of my panties.

My hips lift, offering myself to him. Needing more of his tongue, those lips. But he seems genuinely happy to lay there and tease me, working my clit through the fabric until I'm a panting mess. Until the fabric is completely soaked.

Only then does he peel my underwear away, leaving me completely naked and at his mercy. Which I'm perfectly okay with.

“Fucking heaven,” he murmurs and presses a kiss against my left knee.

My jaw drops at that first unencumbered swipe of his tongue against my slit. Oh

yes.I've needed this so badly.

He settles against the bed, draping an arm over my midsection, holding me still. Not that I'm going anywhere. Certainly not when he teases my clit with the tip of his tongue, delighting my nerves.

I spread my thighs, making as much room for him as possible, driving my pussy against his waiting mouth. His groan is wicked, and I love the way it bounces off the cabin around us.

He delves deeper, spearing me. My head falls back, and I go boneless. Why does this feel so good? My jaw drops, a cry of pleasure on my lips. I don't want it to end. I want his mouth on me, those powerful hands, the dark glint in his eyes as he watches me slowly unravel forever and ever.

I bite my lip and cup my breasts, needing more. More touches, more sensation, more heat, more everything. It's greedy and perfect and wonderful. Each pinch of my fingers mirrors a flick of his tongue. And then he drives two fingers inside me, stretching me wide.

I curl forward, a myriad of words tumbling from my lips along with needy sounds. I'm not the least bit embarrassed. That's what he does to me. Gives me confidence and acceptance and strength.

And touches me. Just. Right.

My pussy tightens around his fingers, holding them where I want them. Where I need them. And he keeps on making love to me with his mouth like he can't get enough and won't ever stop.

I'm the luckiest woman on the planet. Fully aware of it.

And as the pleasure of my orgasm peaks and then spills over, limbs tingling, nerves quivering, I cry out his name. He groans against me, curling his fingers forward to brush my G-spot. I'm split wide and see stars. My body tightens endlessly, clamping down around him, curling in before blowing apart. Melting. Falling. Sinking back.

“So fucking good,” he says, lips glistening with my release.

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I relax back against the pillows, gloriously spent.

“Couldn’t agree more.” I feel so light and almost... giddy. There’s no other word for it.

He withdraws his fingers and licks them clean, all while staring deep into my eyes.

“Happy?” he asks, pushing up to settle by my side. He splays a hand over my heart, and I know he can feel the rapid thump-thump-thump because it’s still racing from my orgasm.

I nod and hum a yes, reaching for him. All that tanned skin and dusting of black hair makes me want to touch.

Propped up on an elbow, he glances down the length of me. I slide a hand up his chest and cup his cheek, pulling his lips to mine. I swipe my tongue across his lower lip, tasting myself. So tangy and delectably naughty. A groan rumbles from his chest, and he pulls me tight to him. This is exactly where I want to be.

“Mine,” he says against my lips.

“Yours.”

He tips his forehead against mine. “You make me want to forget about the company and just run away with you.”

“That’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said.”

“Sweeter than I’m in love with you?” Who knew Alexander Hunt had a romantic side? I didn’t, but I’m swooning.

“Okay, that was sweeter.”

He smiles, and my heart soars.

“Something you want to tell me?” he asks, wanting me to reciprocate. His tone is almost playful but still delightfully growly.

“Mmm huh,” I tease, sounding innocent.

“I’m waiting.” His fingers flex into my hip.

Lightness bubbles through me, and I smirk at him. I want to bask in all of my feelings, of course. But there’s something truly special about teasing this giant, protective bear of a man.

I walk my fingers up his chest and press a kiss to his jaw. I shouldn’t let him wait any longer.

“Do you want to hear me say I want you to forget about your company and run away with me? Because I do. Despite what the citizens might think, New York isn’t the only city in the world. What do you say we turn off our phones and get lost in Europe?”

“Beauty—” He growls the endearment.

“Or were you waiting to hear that I’m crazy about you? That my heart paused when I saw your paddle in the air and kickstarted when you found me on the sidewalk mid-panic attack. That this week has been one of the best of my life and I want to repeat it

over and over?”

“All of it?”

“I mean, there are parts I could do without.”

“Which ones?”

I love how curious he is and how he wants the details. “The media. Being on stage. My mother. Tyler.”

He hums and slides a hand into my hair, pulling my head back gently. My body immediately softens. “Yeah, I could do without those.”

“Anything in particular you’d like to repeat?” I ask. Tell me what makes you tick.

“Everything else.”

My eyes go wide. Everything? Really? Interesting.

Very interesting.

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“What about you?” He kisses a path down my throat, the scruff of his cheek gently abrading my skin. “What would you repeat? Or add?”

There’s the invitation I’ve been looking forward to. My pussy practically purrs with excitement.

“Well, I’d like to join the mile-high club.”

23

GABE

Something wakes me from the best dream ever. The images are hazy, lingering as I blink into the darkness. The four of us were on a yacht, sprawled across a large sun pad and stripping each other bare. Touching, exploring, not a care in the world.

Soft breath and a dead weight on my shoulder draw my attention back to the present as I swipe a hand across my eyes.

What time is it?

I roll my head to the right and find Kingston passed out. I can’t make that good of a pillow, but he doesn’t seem to care. There’s just enough light to see the popcorn bowl next to him.

Which means there’s just enough light to notice how gorgeous he is with his relaxed expression, lips slightly parted and golden hair tumbling across his forehead. His

impressive chest rises and falls with each breath.

My heart squeezes inside my ribs.

We're all in with Katherine. That fact is irrefutable.

So why do my fingers itch to brush his hair back and press a kiss to his forehead?
Why do I enjoy his heat and the hard planes of his body?

I should slip away and go to my own bed. Right? I could offer him the guest room.
That would be the safe option. The smart thing to do.

So why am I hesitating?

Because this is nice.

Because I slept peacefully. I dreamed. I don't remember the last time I dreamed. And
I want more. Sleep. Dreams. Everything.

I grab a blanket from the back of the sofa and drape it over us the best I can with one
arm. He doesn't wake, just shifts closer, burrowing deeper into my side. A fresh sense
of tranquility washes through me, unlike anything I've ever felt before. It's different
from when Katherine looks at me with that prim little pout and calls me by my full
name, drawing me to her so effortlessly. And it's different from when I'm with Alex,
who anchors me, keeping me calm and grounded.

Closing my eyes, I let myself drift off again. Wouldn't it be amazing if I could have
all three?

???

I take back all the generous thoughts I had about Kingston in the middle of the night.

He's not beautiful with an amazing body. He's a freaking monster.

"You're killing me," I grumble, sweat pouring from my brow. The sun is barely up and rather than address the cozy way we woke up, I immediately agreed to his suggestion to go for a run.

Burning off some steam had sounded good. Forty-five minutes ago.

"You've got this. One more mile."

He said that a mile back. My hammies have protested every step since then. I thought I was getting plenty of running in on the court with Alex, but that's obviously not true.

"How did I let you," I suck in a much-needed breath, "talk me into this?"

He's barely winded.

What the actual fuck?

Neither is my bodyguard, for that matter. We don't pay them enough. He hadn't been the least bit phased by Kingston's casual "We're going for a run. Just a few miles." He simply asked for a few minutes to change. And that was that.

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A few turned out to be five.

And we're not done yet.

"Tomorrow," I say, trying not to gasp, "I'm picking the work out."

Kingston slaps me on the shoulder. "Okay, old man."

Then he speeds up.

The buzz of competition floods my veins, giving me a second breath and a bit of righteous outrage.

I match him step for step because I'm not old, and he's not going to win.

As if sensing me pulling abreast, he lengthens his stride. Shit.

It's okay. I've got this. I'm taller. I work out regularly. Though, obviously not as much as Mr. Parkour King.

I give him a shove. He trots around a tree, laughing, and joins me back on the path as if nothing happened.

Just like we didn't discuss waking up on my sectional sofa this morning, wrapped around each other like pretzels.

He slows his speed, thank goodness.

I have just enough brain power to admit that it was nice to wake up next to a man and even nicer that he obviously didn't care that he was waking up next tome. But that's as far as I'm going with that line of thinking. My life is complicated enough without adding another relationship.

Using my t-shirt, I wipe the sweat from my eyes.

The trail narrows, and Kingston zips in front of me, legs eating up the distance. Instead of watching where I'm putting my feet, my eyes are drawn to the slope of his shoulders and his sculpted arms. Fuck, he's so fit.

I shouldn't be ogling my running buddy, but I can't keep my eyes off the muscles rippling down his back. Or the curve of his ass that's partially hidden by his running shorts.

An errant limb slaps me across the chest, like a sign from the universe to get my head back into the game.

Which is easier said than done.

"See, almost there," he calls over his shoulder.

A perverse part of me wants to grab his chin and kiss him until he's breathing as heavily as I am.

But I shake the thought off just in time because we make it to the edge of the park and out onto the sidewalk. A minute later, his watch beeps and he slows to a walk.

My body cries out in relief. Rest. Maybe an ice bath.

But he doesn't let me stop. Or catch my breath.

“Come on. Keep walking.”

I know what he's after. A cool down. A proper stretch. Because Kingston Saint is nothing if not proper when it comes to his exercise regimen. Which is fucking hot, not going to lie. I love anyone who's at the top of their game and dedicated to their craft.

He cozies up to the side of a building and props the toe of his shoe against the wall.

I lean over and clamp my hands over my knees, sucking in a deep breath.

“You gonna be okay?” he asks, genuine concern lacing his tone.

“I see your game plan, Saint.”

“Oh yeah?” He switches feet, stretching his other calf.

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“Kill me so you have less competition with Katherine.”

He barks a laugh and turns toward me, kicking a foot up behind him and holding onto it. Pretty fucking flamingo.

Tension cranks up another notch between us as our eyes lock.

“That’s not a terrible idea,” he says, then switches legs. The jerk doesn’t even lose his balance. Doesn’t he have any flaws?

That’s it. I’m hiring a personal trainer.

I straighten, hands on my hips, staring down at him. He really doesn’t have any flaws. At least not from where I’m standing.

“Mr. Rothburn!” I glance over my shoulder just as a man with a microphone starts running toward me.

“Fuck—”

My bodyguard intercepts the reporter, but he shouts his questions anyway.

“Are you worried your actions with Katherine Montgomery will hurt your company?”

Who the hell are these guys? They’re like cockroaches coming out of the woodwork. And every one that gets smashed turns into another.

“Come on,” King says, jerking me forward. We jog to our building, bursting through the door and across the lobby.

It’s our lucky day. The elevator is waiting for us and swoops skyward, leaving the craziness at the street level.

We lean back against opposite walls.

“I feel like a goldfish,” I murmur to the ceiling.

“In a really expensive fish tank,” he adds, eyes closed.

No kidding.

God. At the rate things are going, someone’s bound to start poking around and find out Alex lives with me. And while I don’t care if the world knows, he might. He’s far more private.

I don’t want the rumors to hurt him. The press can be ruthless.

The elevator levels out with a welcomingding. Kingston lets out a small sigh, stepping forward before the doors open, revealing the elegant foyer of Katherine’s apartment.

“Come on. Katherine will kick my ass if I break you.” He strides off like he owns the place, completely comfortable in his own skin. And there’s so much of it on display that I look everywhere but at him as I follow him through the apartment.

“Kick off your shoes and lay face down,” he says, snapping his fingers and pointing at her sleek sectional.

Why?

What the hell is he talking about?

He strides around to the TV console, opens a drawer, and pulls out a zippered case. “You don’t take orders very well, do you?”

It’s an innocent comment. An aside really. But it hits a target inside me that I haven’t addressed in a long time.

“Depends on who’s giving them.” I roll my shoulders, hating the uneasy feeling in my stomach. I spent too many years living by everyone else’s rules. I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend the rest of my life living for anyone but me.

King holds up a massage gun and works a head onto it. He lifts a brow, jerking his chin toward the sofa.

Frowning, I toe out of my shoes.

“Fine.” I sigh and lay down, trying to hide my relief. Wasn’t I a young buck yesterday?

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Young nerd, a little voice whispers in my ear.

“Your legs will thank me.”

The first touch of vibration to my calf makes me question his statement. I suck in a sharp breath, using all my willpower to stay still when everything in me wants to move away from the pressure.

It doesn't get any easier as he moves up and down my leg. The rounded head drills into my muscles with shocking precision. A firm, warm hand follows the progression, kneading the aches away.

Fuck. This should not be a turn-on.

“Breathe, Gabriel.”

I let out the breath I've been holding and reach for a throw pillow, curling around it. My childhood was full of hard manual labor and plenty of beatings from my older brothers. A little pain is nothing new. A thing of the past, blessedly, but this is something else entirely.

King clamps a hand behind my left knee.

My brain skitters, imagining his palm rubbing higher. Those strong fingers teasing me.

I suck in a breath and mentally recount the alphabet backward. Z, Y, X...

Seriously, I'm a sweaty, writhing mass of humanity on Katherine's couch. X-rated thoughts should not be flitting through my brain right now.

"Are we gonna talk about it?" he asks, digging into my thigh.

"About how I'm not gonna be able to walk later?"

The dull pain mingles with the pleasure of his touch. Oh hell, is this a new kink being unlocked?

24

KINGSTON/GABE

Gabe's question hangs in the air as I work my hand down the back of his calf. The coarse hair tickles my palm, but I keep up a steady manipulation of his muscle. Between the heat of my hand and the massager, he should be right as rain.

However, he's full of shit.

He knows what I'm talking about. How we woke up on his sofa like two octopi—or is it octopuses?—wrapped around each other. Also, that he snores. Just a little. It was actually sort of endearing.

However, I'm not that surprised by his deflection. He has a reputation to protect, and I can respect that.

So when his phone rings, I back away, giving him privacy. I turn the massager off and stow it back in the drawer as Gabe pushes up into a sitting position and connects the call.

“Yeah?”

Disappointment clangs through me, and I both love and hate that I’m self-aware enough to recognize it. Losing his attention is an odd thing to be unhappy about. But the hollowness in my chest is undeniable, like an empty little sphere waiting for him to ask me to join him for breakfast.

Dramatic much?

Like I haven’t been eating breakfast by myself for a decade. And yet, suddenly, I don’t want to be alone.

Sighing, I circle the sectional and head for the shower.

The apartment feels extra empty without Katherine in it, and I make a mental note to check on the jungle of plants. If all else fails, I’ll call Simon for help.

I turn the water on and strip out of my clothing.

What is she doing right now?

Never mind, I know what she’s probably doing. And how ironic is it that I flew halfway around the world for her, and now she’s not that far away from my sailboat? With another man.

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Stepping beneath the spray, I try to push those thoughts out of my mind. I'm happy for Katherine and know how she's always wanted to spend some time in Paris, but it hits differently when the four of us aren't together.

I don't know what that means. What any of it means. And with this attraction between me and Gabe brewing, I feel like I'm on a spin cycle.

After I finish my shower, I wrap a towel around my hips. I need sixty-four ounces of water and a protein shake, in that order.

I'm not surprised to find Gabe gone when I walk back into the living room. He's got a job to go to. A whole company worth of people relying on him.

What do I have?

Gabe

I pinch my nose, ready for the day to be over. I'm paying for taking the day off yesterday. Back-to-back meetings. Far too many people wanting my attention. Not needing it. No. I get the feeling that the uptick in activity is simply to get a look at me, to see if the CEO is besotted with the #twomilliondollargirl.

Stupid hashtags.

I can't remember the last time I cared who someone was dating. Other than Alex. I always care what he's up to. Not that he dates.

You know, other than flying Katherine halfway around the world to the most romantic city on the planet. That's one hell of a date.

"Gabe?"

I zone back in and find my head of public relations staring back at me, brows lifted above her black-rimmed glasses. My afternoon can of Coke sits on my desk between us, untouched.

"Sorry. Long day."

She sits back in her chair, tablet resting in her lap, still looking at me like a bug beneath a microscope. Is it that wild, that uncommon for two best friends to?—

Never mind. I already know the answer to that question.

"This really doesn't bother you, does it?" she asks.

"The press?"

"What they're writing about you."

"Should I care what a bunch of narrow-minded people who've never met me think?"

"If it hurts the company, yes."

The company.

I suck in a breath and hold it.

Somewhere in the last seventeen years, it stopped being my company and

becamethecompany. When did that happen?

I let the breath out.

I get it. Honestly, I do. We have employees, people, and assets to protect. And I take all of that seriously. Their livelihoods are important to me.

But it's unfathomable for people to think I'm that different this week than I was last week.

Except, Iamdifferent.

My heart squeezes, almost gleeful at the discovery. Or rather, the admission.

For the first time since my micro-payment pipe dream went live almost two decades ago, I don't want to be here. I don't want to make improvements and expand our reach. And it's not just because I want a massage and a nap.

I'm utterly bored with all the bullshit crossing my desk. I'm frustrated that I have to talk to PR about another statement. I miss coding.

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“I suppose it’s too late to remind people that my private life is private.”

Her jaw drops, and I can’t help but laugh.

“I guess that’s a no.”

She nods several times, a polished and professional bobblehead doll.

“You’re one of the wealthiest men in the world, Gabe. One of the youngest self-made billionaires ever. You have a high-profile best friend who you’re seen with all the time, and the two of you just bid two million dollars to date an heiress. I’d say your private life is the talk of the town.”

I turn my chair so I can stare out at the skyline.

What is King doing right now? Knowing him, he’s probably in the gym or making a protein-packed smoothie.

Whatever he’s up to, I’m willing to bet he’s not as frustrated as I am right now. He’s not having to answer to PR. And he probably doesn’t feel like a monkey trapped behind the glass at the zoo, being stared at by a classroom of kindergarteners.

But I get it. I represent the company, blah blah blah. That doesn’t mean I want my private life on the front page of every rag in town. And I sure as shit don’t want Katherine’s name or Alex’s name dragged through the mud.

My shirt collar feels extra tight.

“Is there anything I need to know? You don’t want to get caught in a circle of... untruths,” she says gently like I’m a toddler that needs coaxing.

Lies.

She means lies.

I know what she’s getting at, but that’s none of her business. Full stop. I put my foot down at sharing my sexuality with anyone I’m not dating.

My phone vibrates atop my desk.

Turning back, I glance at the screen, and my pulse skips as I read the text from my team.

Rogers: Cort checks out. Numbers are good.

All these years, I’ve worked and built to this moment. Playing the long game, moving the chess pieces across the board to build my scrappy idea into a household name. And now, a little over fifty-one percent of Chanler & Cort is available for the taking.

Sure, the price tag is roughly the GDP of Antigua, but it’s a solid deal.

If only Henry Chanler wasn’t dead.

My jaw clenches, and I run a hand down my face.

I wish Alex was here. I know he’s only a call away, but this feels monumental. And he’s been my sounding board for so long. We’ve talked about this plenty over the last year, but still.

“Is everything okay?”

I don't know.

A month ago, I would have said yes. It's better than okay.

But now I'm second-guessing myself. I'm not even sure why, which gives me brutal heartburn.

“Yeah,” I lie. Popping the tab on my soda, I take a big sip. “There's nothing you need to know about my private life.”

25

ALEX

My coffee cup is halfway to my lips when Katherine emerges from the bedroom wrapped in a white bathrobe. She looks completely at home in the opulent hotel room surrounded by luxurious fabrics in creams and golds.

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More importantly, she's well-rested—we slept like the dead once we made it to the hotel—and utterly lickable. Her hair is tucked to one side, showing off her throat and the copious amounts of whisker burn I left there on the flight over.

She glances out the window at the city, blinking at the bright morning light.

Pretty as a picture.

I stand, drawing her attention. Damn, I love the way she looks me over, her eyes so warm. Like she's happy to see me, relieved I'm here. As if I'd be anywhere else when I could be with her. We covered that last night.

“Hungry?” I ask.

Her gaze lowers to the table where there are three different boxes of cereal, a bowl, a spoon, and a carafe of milk. A gasp falls from her lips, music to my ears, and she rushes forward, reaching for the middle box.

“If this is your thing with King, I get it. There are croissants and fresh fruit. It's technically lunchtime, but?—”

She drops the box and cuts me off with a kiss, hands cupping my cheeks. I set the mug down with a clang, pull her against me, and move to my seat again, settling her on my lap.

I love her slight weight resting against me, the delighted sounds pouring from her lips.

“How did you know?” she asks between kisses, hands roving my face, neck, chest.

“A green-eyed bird might have texted me.”

“He did?”

I nod, and she melts right before my eyes, glowing with happiness. Little moments of kindness mean the world to her. It’s hard to imagine growing up in such a cutthroat environment and extra heartbreaking to know such a simple text could bring such breathtaking joy.

And yet, it obviously does.

Her smile is wide, and her eyes are watery.

Her hands move to the belt of her robe, tugging the tails of the lopsided bow. “I kind of love that you guys are teaming up on me.”

I push the lapels of her robe away, marveling at her creamy skin. The generous swell of her breasts calls to my lips. I want to nuzzle and lick and suck every inch. Starting with the pretty pink tips.

It takes considerable willpower to remember what we’re talking about. Teaming up on her. “Yeah?”

The idea of sharing her right now makes my chest tight. But at the same time, I’m fully aware that I’d do anything for this girl. She wants cereal for breakfast. Ordered. She wants to cuddle between me and our best friends? We’ll buy a bigger bed.

Every smile she turns my way sinks me deeper for her.

It's both exhilarating and terrifying to hand a piece of me over to someone else.

She nods.

“What do you want to do today?” I ask because although I have a list in mind, it occurred to me that she might want some say in our itinerary.

She makes a delighted humming sound. “Eat breakfast. Make out with you. Shower. Make out some more.”

I dip my fingers beneath her robe, cupping her breasts. Her nipples pebble against my palms, silently begging for attention. I'm only too happy to provide it.

“What about you?” she asks, straight-faced like I'm not teasing her with my thumb.

But I am, and she presses herself into my touch.

“Your schedule sounds perfect.” And very much in line with how I'd like to spend the weekend.

“Doesn't it?” She grins, her eyes lighting up like a baby who's just had her first bite of cake

I hate to do anything to dim that sparkle, but I give her the bad news because honesty is the best policy.

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“I am waiting for a call, though. I’ll keep it short, and then I’m free until Tuesday.”

She doesn’t even blink at the possible intrusion. Just how often did her parents put her second, third, or worse on their priority list?

“I get you for three whole days?”

“Plus the rest of today.”

She makes a low purring sound and quickly turns. My hands fall away as she pushes everything down the table, making a clear space.

“That’s the best news I’ve ever heard,” she murmurs as she turns back to me, fisting my shirt.

Damn. She’s a dream come true. My fantasy come to life.

I’ve never met a woman who enjoys sex the way she does. Who wants me for me. Not connections. Not my bank account.

She tugs me forward, not a hint of hesitancy in her. That’s so sexy. I lose myself in her kiss, touching her all over. Her lips part with a sigh, and I take advantage, sweeping my tongue into the warmth of her mouth. She sucks on the tip, and my cock presses against my slacks, insistent.

Need boils in my veins, and I push her back onto the table, coming down on top of her. Her thighs spread, welcoming me, and her heels lock behind my back. Like

getting the fucking keys to the kingdom. She's all mine. So very much mine.

I can't give her up. Can't back down.

Need to taste her and tease her and make her scream my name as she comes on my cock.

Damn, I am so very gone for this woman, and it's only getting worse. My need to possess her and be possessed by her...

She squirms beneath me, hands sliding down my sides. I feel her fingers at the button of my slacks. I want her touch more than I want my next breath. To feel those cool fingers, her soft skin against my hard, raging hot erection.

Damn.

My office should be calling any minute, and I can't find a single care.

"Alex—"

"Yes, Beauty?"

She moans, tipping her head back. Her neck calls to my lips, begging for my brand, and the horny teenager in me wants to mark her. To suck a bruise on her pretty pale skin for all the world to see.

And yes, a perverse part of me wants Gabe and King to see it, too.

Why am I so obsessed with leaving my mark on her?

I've never felt the slightest urge with anyone else.

She gives a sultry little hum and it's all the permission I need.

Her sigh, as I latch onto her throat, is magic.

I slid a hand down her front, cupping a breast, pausing long enough to tease the nipple. It strains against my fingertips, begging for sweet pain and a bite of pleasure. But I don't stop. Can't stop.

My cock begs for release. For her wet heat.

I suckle harder, and she moans, fingernails digging gently into me.

Her silky skin guides the way to her pussy. It's so needy and I can't help but want to tease it, tempt it, please it. I want to spoil her with so many orgasms she never leaves my side.

Which is a startling thought when, just a week ago, I was sure I could claim her and not hand over my heart in the process.

What an idiot I was. She's absolutely bewitching, body and soul.

“So slick.”

“That’s all your fault,” she purrs, eyes twinkling with mirth.

How have I existed without her in my life?

There’s the answer, isn’t it? I’ve been existing. Not living. That stops now.

“I’ll gladly take the blame.”

She rocks her hips against my fingers, coating them in her wetness. I tease her clit, and her thighs spread, making more room for me. I hope this table holds because there’s no stopping. Not until we’ve both tipped over the edge to euphoria.

Every circle of my thumb over her clit makes her tight cunt clench more. She leans back on her elbows, watching me with hooded eyes. My pulse pounds through my veins, wanting to make her come but needing to be inside her.

Such a quandary.

Her head drops back, all that gorgeous hair falling in a silky wave. Later, I intend to wrap it in my fist and relive that amazing blow job she gifted me in her kitchen. Her enthusiasm slays me.

“So close.”

“Good. Come for me, Beauty.”

“Please don’t stop.”

Her skin tightens as her orgasm grips her. She tries to thrust against my fingers, but with her thighs spread and feet dangling, she has no leverage.

“I’ve got you,” I promise, keeping steady pressure on her nub.

“Ale—” My name dies on her lips as the orgasm detonates. Her pussy grips my fingers, flooding them with another wave of wetness.

She collapses against the table, robe gaping open, hands cupping her breasts. A light flush covers her skin, making her look rosy and vibrant. Her lips part as she sucks in a breath. She’s more kissable than ever.

“Damn, Beauty. I want to take a picture of you just like this, spread out on my table, looking so fucking edible.”

26

KATHERINE

Now this is the kind of wake-up call I could get used to.

Pleasure hums through my veins, and I suck in much-needed oxygen. The elegant hotel suite is bright with the afternoon light, and the table is hard beneath my back. I don’t care. I wouldn’t change a thing.

Because everything has led to the hungry look in Alex’s eyes. Is he serious about the photo?

I give voice to the question humming through my brain. “Really?”

He looks at me like I'm the most gorgeous thing he's ever seen in his life, and I'm not going to lie; it goes straight to my head. And my heart.

He's mending things he didn't even break.

Years of my mother harping on about my weight, openly frustrated and detesting my acne, her nonstop disappointment with my hair color.

It all melts away.

To her, I was always a problem. Something to be fixed.

But to Alex, I'm lovely. Worthy of praise and adoration.

"You're right," he murmurs, straightening. I swear I see battle armor click into place around him. "I'll just have to use my memory."

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His hands coast up my thighs, then down again, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I tangle my legs around his so he can't retreat because I feel him mentally pulling back.

"I'm not saying no, handsome."

If anything, I'm saying yes. See me. Love me. Crave me.

I lift up onto my elbows, robe gaping open. I'm completely on display and he looks his fill, throat bobbing as he swallows. I've never felt more sexy or alive.

Isn't that the dream? To be so connected that you just can't get enough of one another? To feel supported and empowered? Maybe that's not everyone's fantasy, but it's mine. He's shown me over and over how much he cares about me, from showing up at the auction to rescuing me from a potentially public panic attack.

He's shaking his head as I speak, closing his eyes as if that'll stop my train of thought. I smile and reach out a hand, sliding it up his rock-hard abdomen.

His dark chocolate gaze sweeps up my body, soft and full of love.

"You know I'd never do anything to jeopardize your safety."

"I know," I assure him. "I trust you."

That truth cracks me open and sets me free. It's like a wave surges up from deep within my soul, lifting me up, filling me, nourishing my inner bruises.

I flex my fingers into his abs, grounding us both. This. This is what I want—now and every day from now on. Pleasure and peace rolled into one soul-nourishing combination. And I want to remember these moments and this trip when I'm old and gray.

Speaking of old and gray...

“Take your picture, Alex. My boobs are never going to look better than they do today.”

His lips twitch, and after a beat, he reaches for his phone.

A little thrill races through me. This is easily the most scandalous thing I've ever done. For the first time, I'm living by my own rules and embracing adventure.

He unlocks his phone, so smoothly efficient that I don't have time to second-guess anything. The heat in his eyes makes my stomach tremble.

He glides a hand up my middle and arranges the hair over my shoulders. I'm not sure I've ever seen this level of concentration from him. It's heady and delicious. There's truly something special about having your lover's unbridled attention.

“You're a work of art.”

The compliment makes me flush. At the moment, I feel like his canvas and try to remember exactly how I was posing.

“Thank you for making me feel beautiful.” I cup my breasts and take a deep breath, trying to find that relaxed, post-orgasm glow. “How's this?”

“You are beautiful, Katherine. Inside and out.” After another second of

contemplation, he pulls the robe up over my right breast, covering it completely. “Tip your head back.”

I follow his instructions, which makes me even wetter.

“A little more... there.” He takes my right wrist and lifts my hand until it obscures my face further.

I part my lips, nipping the tip of my pinky finger.

He groans, and I slam my knees shut, needing friction. But his hips are in the way. “Damn, Beauty?—”

He sounds almost choked up. Rough and growly and perhaps in need of a sip of water. The sweet words amp my need. I swear he has hidden powers. A touch of magic. He’s barely touching me, and yet, I’m well on my way to another orgasm.

I can’t see him from this angle, but I feel his hand positioning the bottom of the robe over my pussy. Then he leans back, stepping from the circle of my thighs.

A heavy inhale bounces off the walls. He groans again, this time long and so appreciative I can’t help but laugh.

“Told you you’re stunning.” He holds his phone out for me to see.

The woman in the photo is in the throes of passion, totally absorbed by her need. Her skin glows, flushed across her chest, and her curves are lush. Inviting, even.

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I swallow.

“I didn’t—” My eyes meet his, overcome. “I didn’t know I could look like that.”

He puts his phone away. “Now you know what I see when I look at you. A goddess.”

I purse my lips, ridiculously touched, and reach for him. I need my arms around him, his weight on top of me, that massive cock inside me.

He curls over me, bracing one hand against the table and then dips his head for a searing kiss. His tongue sweeps past my lips, tangling with mine, making love to me. I clutch his hips, kissing him back, drowning in sensation. Hot, hard, breathless.

His hips grind against mine, the hard length of him making me wetter, needier. I’ll never get enough. Even though he definitely has more than enough to offer.

Skating my fingers down his sides, I pluck at his zipper. There’s something about being taken by him when he’s fully clothed that makes me feel extra wicked. Like I just couldn’t wait and needed to seduce him.

Which is so on point. Breathing the same air as Alex makes me want him.

He thrusts against my hand, and I smile so big my cheeks will hurt later. So eager. I love that. I love him.

“Need you,” I moan against his lips.

“Same, Beauty.”

He ducks his head, nibbling down my throat. The scruff on his cheek teases my sensitive skin, and my pulse pounds wildly, my breath hitching so I don't miss a thing.

Gosh, he's big. And hot. So hard and ready.

I give him a long, slow pump that pulls a growl from his lips and makes his forehead drop to my shoulder. The next one has him thrusting into my grip.

I guide him to my pussy, relishing the quick testing thrust of his hips and the way he coats himself in my wetness. And then he pushes into me with a slow, firm stroke that steals my breath. This is so much more than sex. It's a kindred connection, and my body welcomes him, giddy at his possession.

“Yes—”

When he's finally seated, holding himself steady, he looks down at me with an almost puzzled look on his face. “You're so tight.”

I smile, running a finger down the bridge of his nose. “It's all those Kegel exercises.”

He grunts and pulls his hips back, giving a small, short thrust.

The phone by my head rings with an unfamiliar tone and vibrates against the polished wood. Without missing a beat, he reaches for it. I freeze, ready to give him privacy. Tie my robe, hop off of the table, make a beeline for the bedroom.

But he doesn't let me. He keeps me pinned, right where I'm at, impaled on his glorious erection.

He connects the call and holds it to his ear. “Hunt.”

27

ALEX/KATHERINE

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” Magnus Berg, my right-hand man, says. Despite his tough appearance and badass name, he never grew out of his love of childish games.

And just like every other time, my reply is the same. “Give me the bad news first.”

From her spot on the table, Katherine’s hands move to close her robe. I give a single shake of my head, and she pauses, questions in her eyes. I can’t answer with words, so actions will have to do because I’m certainly not stopping what we’ve started.

I’ll keep this call quick.

I grip my phone in my left hand and slide my right up Katherine’s torso, stopping right above her heart.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

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So steady.

She sucks in a scandalized breath, and her lovely blue-green eyes widen. God, what she does to me.

I meet her gaze, willing her to read my mind. That's right, honey. I'm not ending this call until you come all over my cock. Until you're sticky with my cum.

I could do this all day. Until my back aches and my knees give out and my ankles protest. My dick would have to wave a white flag, but it'd be worth it.

Her hands snag the edge of the table as I pick up the pace. She bites her lip, trying to remain quiet, but the sight makes me feral. Or maybe it's the feel of her bare and slippery smooth around my shaft. I literally have trouble hearing what Magnus says. The edges of my vision seem hazier than normal. All my concentration has narrowed to my dick.

“Winthrop said Chanler was complaining of chest pains the week leading up to his death, but he never saw a doctor. We looked into his death, and there was no coroner's report. And the timing of the coroner's retirement is suspicious.”

I pull my hips back until just the tip is inside her. Anticipation makes her tighten her legs behind my back, trying to impale herself. I love her determination. Her lips twist, and I can tell she wants to beg for more. To feel me deep, possessing her.

My muscles tingle and tense, wanting the same thing.

“Oh yeah?” I say, encouraging Magnus to continue, even though his words are barely registering.

I shuttle my hips forward, and her tits bounce in time with my movements. The feet of the table dig into the rug, and the dinnerware clinks gently.

If I have my way, this is what every day will look like for the rest of our lives.

Minus the business call.

Her brows lift. What does she see on my face? I don't think I'm a terribly open book. In fact, G sometimes gets frustrated because I'm not terribly emotive. But I'm starting to think Katherine sees things no one else does.

“Chanler wasn't cold for four days before the coroner punched his ticket.”

I grunt, not the least bit surprised. Did Lucinda think no one was looking? That no one would pay attention? The man was a billionaire, which put a target on his back. Was he brought down from inside his own family?

It wouldn't be the first time.

And if my hunch is correct, what does that mean for the beautiful woman squirming on my cock?

When it comes to Katherine's security, I'll play offense, defense, hardball. Whatever it takes.

Right now, that's digging into Lucinda Winthrop's trash. Uncovering all the things she'd rather I not know.

Katherine's head drops back, showing off my mark on her throat. Damn, I love that. And the fact that she allowed it. Wanted it. Embraced it.

"Get the team to look into the financials," I say.

"On it."

I slide my hand down, teasing Katherine's clit with my thumb. She bites off a whine, and I fuck her harder, dropping my hips so I can hit her G-spot. She's clinging to the edge of the table now, legs locked around me, taking everything I have to give her so beautifully. And not offering a single objection to the semi-public nature of our tryst.

Damn, I'm a lucky man.

Getting luckier by the second.

"And the good news?"

Nothing's going to top the fact that Katherine Montgomery loves me. Claims me. Welcomes me into her silken heat.

"I have all the information you requested on Tyler."

My hips still and Katherine gives a soft sigh of protest.

A fissure of pleasure rushes through me that has nothing to do with the gorgeous woman clamping around my cock. I very much like to know who I'm dealing with. Who's a threat. Who's an ally. Tyler was a complete unknown, but not for long.

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“Excellent, send it over.”

“Already done.”

“Anything interesting I should know?”

“His family’s English. Old money. He’s on this side of the pond, looking to expand their holdings. He’s done his share of partying, but now it looks like he’s moved on to clubs frequented by Mrs. Winthrop.”

“Her specifically?”

“Our investigator saw them last night. Said they looked, and I quote, very cozy.”

Well, damn. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what cozy means in that line of work.

“See if you can find out how long that’s been going on.”

A whimper bubbles up her throat. I slide my hand up and cover her mouth. She lets out a harsh exhale, eyes locked with mine, and then her eyelids droop as she melts beneath me.

“We’ll keep digging,” Magnus says, sounding far, far away.

The world slips into oblivion around us as Katherine’s cunt ripples around my dick, tugging and coaxing. Swallowing me in a sea of heat, pulling me under.

My jaw drops, and I barely manage to hold back my moan of ecstasy. She whimpers beneath my hand. Damn, I need more. I need to be rid of these clothes and off this call.

“I appreciate it. Let me know when you discover anything pertinent.”

I disconnect the call, practically tossing the phone away. Then I pull my hand away from her lips, stopping to tease her nipples on my way to her hips.

She moans in earnest. “Oh, thank god.”

I clamp my hands around her hips. “Sorry, Katie Bird. You’ve got me wound tighter than a spring.”

Her hands lock around my wrists. “Don’t apologize. Just make me come.”

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, and my breaths come in ragged pants as I give her everything I have. She’s a moaning, insatiable mess, twisting on the table beneath me.

“So good. Don’t stop.”

“No chance.”

I lift her legs straight up and wrap an arm across her shins, holding them to my chest. The change in position sends me deeper.

“Oh!” The ragged sound tears from her lips, beautifully garbled as she starts to come. Skin tightening, legs locking against my shoulders, her sweet pussy milking me.

“That’s it, Beauty.” Every pump of my hips makes the table rattle, a delightful

percussion to her lusty cries.

She pulls me over into oblivion with her, her cunt so tight that I can't hold back. Don't want to. I'm in it with her.

I slam my hips one last time and give her everything I've got.

When we finally come down from our high, my clothes are disheveled, the front of my slacks damp, and sweat along the back of my neck.

She smiles up at me, lazy and sated. The most beautiful creature I've ever seen.

I ease her legs to my sides and bend down for a kiss. Her arms tighten around me, holding me like she'll never get enough, never let go.

"I love you," she murmurs against my mouth, peppering me with sweet kisses.

"Love you." It's amazing how I didn't think romance was in the cards for me. Didn't want it to be. But there's no turning back now, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

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Katherine

After we eat and shower, where he washed my back —and everything else— I finally get a chance to check my phone. I'm not surprised to find it overflowing with messages. I touch base with LaShonda first since I'm sure she's on the edge of her seat for news.

LaShonda: I love Alex. He's perfect for you.

LaShonda: and girlllll... the way he looks at you.fans self

My lips twitch.

Katherine: You're not wrong.

He damn near scorched me with his eyeballs when I was laid out for him like a breakfast feast. I'm going to have to start wearing sunscreen when we have sex.

She starts typing back immediately.Called it. She's waiting for news, just like the bestie she is.

LaShonda: How's Paree?

Katherine: Well, we haven't left the hotel room yet, but it's amazing so far.

Katherine: Wait, how did you know I'm in Paris?

LaShonda:rolling on the floor laughing emojiHe might have mentioned it while you were in the ladies' room.

Katherine: sneaky

LaShonda: So you haven't left the hotel room yet?

Katherine: Nope. A stylist is bringing up racks of clothing, shoes, everything we didn't bring. He's spoiling me.

LaShonda: as he should. As. He. Should!

Laughing, I switch over to Kingston's text, which is short and to the point.

Kingston: I miss you.

I step to the window, pull back the curtain, and look out at the view. It's that or dance around the suite like a love-drunk fool. I'm still finding it hard to believe that we actually get to be together. That we were carrying a torch for each other. And now, we can tip those torches against one another and go up in flames together.

My nipples bead beneath my robe, the little hussies. Like we didn't just come on the table and then again in the shower.

Katherine: I miss you too.

Kingston: Call me later?

Katherine: Of course.

Katherine: Are you okay? I didn't mean to abandon you.

Kingston: You're not my babysitter.zany face emoji

Kingston: I'm meeting some friends tomorrow to take some photos.

Katherine: Can't wait to see them. By the way, Simon's scheduled to drop by the apartment tomorrow.

Kingston: Don't trust me with your jungle?

Katherine: we're still working on your succulent-parent skills.

Kingston: I should probably get him to take a look at Stan while he's here.

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Katherine: You're such a good plant dad.

My grin stretches from ear to ear. He's really taken to that little succulent. Is it possible to explode from giddiness? If we keep this up, I might find out.

28

KINGSTON

I'm almost to my sister's door when my phone vibrates in my pocket, followed by a robotic voice proclaiming 'text message.' That's the tone I set for Gabe, which humors me to no end. I really should set up more personal text tones for people.

I wrestle the packages in my arms and retrieve my phone, ridiculously eager. Which is something I'll have to dissect later.

Gabe's name pops up in the little bubble across the bottom of the screen and sends relief through me since he's been radio silent for over twenty-four hours. And at the same time, my jaw flexes because I don't like what that means.

In fact, I freaking hate that the man ghosted me, and now that he's popping back in my messages, I'm gleeful.

That doesn't stop me from tapping the bubble and reading his message.

Gabe: thanks for the suggestions. I'll pass them along.

My lips twist and relax, pleased and annoyed. With him. With myself. With everything about this day. Except for the pictures. Those came out amazing. It never fails to surprise me just how much a competent photographer can do for an already incredible shot.

Focus.

Kingston: Look who's alive.

Three dots pop up immediately, as if he was awaiting my response. There's that fissure of pleasure again. But then the dots disappear. Why I read so much into that, I don't know.

But I do.

I felt like we were on this wild ride together, and he suddenly hopped off the train. Now the brakes have given out and I'm racing down the mountain, alone.

Okay, that's a bit dramatic.

A lot dramatic.

My thumb hovers over the screen. I want to say something else. Something that doesn't sound so bitchy. So needy. But I'm not sure what.

So I slip my phone into my pocket and hustle the last half block to Ava's place.

She opens the door all of two seconds after I knock, a wide smile on her face. Uh-oh. I'm immediately on high alert because when are any of my SisMonstersthishappy to see me?

“Hey! Come in.” She waves me into her apartment.

She plucks the bags of our favorite Chinese food from my arms and steps back so I can cross the threshold. Ava’s place is spacious with raw brick details. Her style is cozy and colorful. She reminds me so much of Mom with her love of patterns and zest for life.

I follow her to the living room, which is open to the kitchen and the dining table beyond. Vibrant paintings dot the walls, but all her plants are fake. No time to baby things, she once told me.

Which also explains the lack of a man in her life. And yes, I do find it ironic that I told Wildfire I don’t need a babysitter.

I’ve lived on my own, thriving for years.

So when did I become a needy puppy, reliant on a pack?

She glances at me over her shoulder, big brown eyes keen with worry. “Why do you look like someone stole your yacht?”

I bark a laugh. “I don’t have a yacht.”

She waves a hand. “You know what I mean.”

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I do.

We settle on the couch that costs more than the sail on my boat and spread the cartons across her coffee table.

“Water?” she asks, popping up.

“Please.”

I slide my hands down my thighs, ignoring the desire to pull out my phone and text Gabe again. The ball’s in his court. He needs to shoot his shot.

Ava asks one of her little robot assistants to play jazz, then returns with a tall glass of water and a wine for herself.

“So what’s going on?”

“Nothing much.” Yeah, that’s a lie. And the quick quirk of her brows says she knows it too.

This is the problem—and the blessing—of growing up close to your siblings. They know all your tells. And they happily call you on them.

After my call with Katherine, I was climbing the walls, and Ava took me up on my offer to bring dinner, so I guess I should have been prepared for the inquisition.

“Nothing much? I saw the pictures of you and Katherine on the roof. I’m not buying

it.” She unfolds the flaps on the rice and fills the bottom of her bowl.

Yeah, that’s hard to deny. Half of Manhattan probably saw us looking cozy on Mama and Father’s roof.

My interest in Katherine isn’t a secret. It’s just a little surreal to be talking so openly about... my feelings. I’ve pushed them down and straight-up ignored them for years.

And my sisters know that.

So there’s an extra sharp glint of delight in her eyes when she asks, “Where’s Katherine?”

I grab the carton of chow mein and shove some into my mouth. Chew. Ignore the heat. She’s still waiting for an answer, almost preening with pleasure. Like a tiny shark that smells blood.

“In Paris with Alex.” Yeah, I sound like a jealous boyfriend. I totally hear it.

“Oh.” She finishes filling her bowl with her favorites. There’s going to be so much left over, which she loves. She splits open the paper wrapper and pulls out chopsticks.

“Yeah.” It’s not like I don’t want Katherine to go and enjoy herself. I wholeheartedly do.

But I feel incredibly out of my depth. More so than I have in years.

And as I look around the room at all Ava’s colorful artwork, my mind darts back to those three dots from Gabe. There and then gone.

What was he going to say?

Did I come on too strong? Fuck, friendship comes naturally to me, so why am I so weird with him? We have plenty in common.

We like sports. Katherine. New experiences.

“What’s really bothering you, King? You knew she was going on a date with these other two guys.”

“Not when I came back. But—” Yeah, once I got the lay of the land, I was... fine... with it. But maybe I’m not as fine with it as I thought? I don’t know.

“Are you worried she’ll fall for them?”

“Oh, she already has.” I know her like no one else. I can hear it in her voice. She’s head-first for Alex. More reserved about Gabe.

Ava’s brows vault up to her forehead. I’d laugh if I wasn’t so out of sorts. “Say that again.”

“It’s complicated.”

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She huffs a sigh. "I'll say."

Then she hands me a bowl so I'll eat like a civilized person instead of a college kid and scoops heaping spoonfuls of all my favorites. I snag some chopsticks. "Start talking."

Balancing the bowl on my knee, I reach for my water glass. Yeah, I'm still buying time because I'm not sure I can form full sentences at the moment. It's all a jumble in my brain.

"Okay," she says when I don't say anything. "Why do you think she's fallen for them? It's been what, a week since the auction? Did she say something?"

"Because I see it in the way she looks at them, and I can hear it in her voice. It's everywhere. From the time she spends with them to the way she's rearranged her life to be with them. It's just... obvious."

And it burns me like the world's worst bout of indigestion.

"You've seen her with them?"

I nod. "The other day, I cooked pasta and Gabe and I were in the kitchen doing the dishes, but she and Alex were at the table holding hands, talking. She's comfortable with him."

"More comfortable than with you?"

I nibble at my food. Is she more comfortable with Alex? Maybe. Maybe it's different.

I really don't know how to feel about that. I've been her ride-or-die for years. She's always been able to come to me, to lean on me. That hasn't changed.

For me anyway.

But it's obviously changed for her.

A hunk of carrot hits the back of my throat wrong, and I cough. Ava smacks me on the back, immediately changing the subject.

"And can we circle back to the four of you eating together?"

"Do we have to?" I force a smile. She matches it with one of her own.

Rolling my eyes, I push to my feet and grab my glass before heading into the kitchen for a refill. I snag her bottle of Chardonnay, likely a selection from her travels. As I pour her another glass of wine, the story of the past week pours out, too.

I can't sit down. No. I pace. Like a panther stuck behind a fence.

My arrival in the Hamptons. Our trip back to the city. I leave out the more salacious details, of course. She saw the picture, and I told her about cooking dinner.

Ava sits back against the arm of the sofa, her warm brown eyes widening with every sentence that falls from my lips. Her chopsticks hover in the air.

"So you're poly."

I pause, take a sip, then sigh. "Yes."

The corners of her mouth turn up in a pleased smile. Soft, knowing. But she's not screaming or crying or any of the other worst-case scenarios that have clogged my brain like a death spiral.

"You don't sound happy."

"How can I be happy when she's halfway around the world and Gabe won't talk to me?"

"Come here." She pats the cushion next to her.

My muscles are stiffer than they should be as I circle the coffee table and settle next to her.

"Why won't Gabe talk to you?"

Of course, she'd pick up on that.

I shrug. "No idea."

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She huffs a sigh, and I slouch deeper into the couch. “Be straight with me, Kingston. Now isn’t the time to play the aloof professor.”

God, she really does know me too well.

“Why is this difficult to talk to me about? You know I love you and support you.”

She’s right. Of all my sisters, she’d be the least shocked to discover my attraction to Gabriel. Hell, she’s probably suspected already.

“It just is.”

“Because it’s not conventional.” She nods as if that explains everything, then reaches for her bowl, slurps a noodle in a way that would send our mother to an early grave, and pegs me with a steady look. “Fuck conventional, King. If it’s not making you happy, then fuck it.”

29

KINGSTON

She’s right.

I know she’s right.

Hell, that’s always been a personal motto of mine. If it doesn’t make you happy, screw it.

But hearing the vehement reminder from my little sister makes me sit up straighter. Our world has always been a kaleidoscope of privilege and duty. Expectation and indulgence. My siblings and I think our parents walked a fine line between giving us the best but expecting us to do well and not succumb to the pressure cooker that is business in New York City. Which is a blessing given how large our family is and how vast the businesses are.

“You’re right.”

She shoves my shoulder and gives an evil snicker. “Of course I am. Have you met me?”

“How’d you get to be so wise?” When I was little, I desperately wanted a brother. But it wasn’t meant to be, and now, I wouldn’t have it any other way.

My sisters are smart and talented in so many ways that I’ll never be.

“I learned from the best.”

I bump my shoulder against hers, feeling better. Like the sand has stopped shifting beneath my feet. I mean, I’m sure the undertow will still be there in the future, threatening to drag me down, but I’ll deal with them then.

The little robot voice interrupts and Ava frowns at my pocket. “What was that?”

“Gabe’s text sound.” I guess he’s finally got a response to my look who’s alive comment.

Her lips twitch. “What’d he say?”

“I’ll check it later,” I say, even though my skin is on fire with the need to pull out my

phone.

“Mom’s not here. No one’s going to slap you for checking your texts during dinner,” she says, shaking her head. Then she leans in like we’re sharing a secret. “Especially if it’s from Gabe.”

I release a slow sigh. It feels good to have someone in on this secret with me. I should probably have cleared it with the others first before sharing. It’s a big deal. But the label feels right and I like having it there in the back of my mind. Just like I like having my sister’s approval.

Poly.

There’s a gravitas to the word polyamorous that foursome just doesn’t have. Foursome feels like it’s all about sex, but what I want with Katherine is so much more than that. I’ll have to examine that later because I’m already reaching for my phone to see what Gabe said.

Gabe: the news of my death was premature.

Oh hell, that’s funny. I even hear his voice in my head.

Lips twisting, I type back.

Kingston: everything okay?

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Three dots.

I wait.

I hold my breath.

They disappear again, and I sag.

But then they reappear. What the hell is wrong with me? Seriously? Why am I hanging on to his every word?

“Breathe, K.”

Ava puts her food down and turns toward me, tucking her foot under the knee of her other leg. With her arm on the back of the sofa, I feel her attention. She’s not trying to read over my shoulder. That’s something Mel would do. But Ava’s curiosity is legendary.

“You like him, don’t you?”

Do I like him? Yeah, when he’s not playing hot and cold. I shrug.

“It’s okay if you do.”

Of course it’s okay. I mean, well, maybe it’s not okay in the scheme of this... relationship? Situationship? Whatever the heck this is.

“It’s okay to be infatuated, attracted, in love with him. As long as you’re okay with it, right?”

I hear the question in her voice. How does Katherine fit into all this? And that’s an excellent question. I came back for her. To sort out things between the two of us.

This would change things. You know, if we acted on the connection that sizzles whenever we’re within five feet of each other.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

Gabe: yeah. important deal came up and I had to jump on it.

That actually explains a lot.

Kingston: understandable.

What must that be like? Driven and determined with big goals and bigger dreams?

“Your shoulders just crawled up around your ears. What’d he say?” She rubs a hand over my back, soothing the wildness in me.

I tip the phone toward her so she can read the conversation.

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ve just never had that kind of drive, you know?” I wave my hand around as if that explains everything. He’s not that much older than me, but he’s done so much in his life. He certainly didn’t run halfway around the world to serve drinks in a beach town bar.

Reminder, King, there's nothing wrong with that.

I love those types of towns and that type of job because I enjoy meeting new people and making their day a little brighter. I don't want... I can't be stuck in a glass cube on the sixtieth floor of a building watching the world go by.

"Yeah, you have." She nods. "Just not in business. But when it comes to your fitness and your nutrition—" She cuts a glance to the containers on the coffee table. "Present selection excluded. You've always known what you want and gone after it."

"I thought I did. This week feels different."

"I would imagine so. Your dreams are coming true."

This time when my phone alerts us to an incoming text, she cocks her head to see the screen.

Gabe: wanna watch the next movie tonight?

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“But what if I have a new dream?” I ask, totally unsure. Can you really change your mind so quickly? It’s been a week. An amazing week. I almost don’t trust my good fortune.

She gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Then go make it happen.”

???

Gabe greets me in the foyer. “Hey. You eaten yet?”

He’s wearing well-loved jeans and a t-shirt that hugs him loosely in all the right places.

Desire swamps me, and for a moment, I let the fantasy play out in my head. Striding forward, closing a hand around his throat, pulling him in for a kiss. I’d take my time to learn him and what he likes, but then everything would go off the rails as we gave into our attraction.

I come back to Earth with him waving a hand in front of my face.

“You okay?”

I shake my head, clearing the erotic images from my mind. Which is harder than it should be. “Yeah. And yeah, I had dinner with Ava.”

“Ava?”

Is it just my imagination, or does he sound a little... something. Protective?
Concerned? Curious?

“My sister.”

“Ahh.”

He takes a step back, then turns, all easy, fluid movement. I follow him into the kitchen, looking my fill.

“Something smells good,” I say, inhaling the deliciously rich scent. Herbs and onions with a hint of something just a little spicy. It’s bold, just like the owner of the apartment.

“I had my housekeeper whip something up.” He moves to the stove, which has the overhead light on, making the posh kitchen extra cozy. The saturated cabinet color and brushed brass accents are surprising choices. I would have thought he’d prefer cool grays and painful neutrals. After all, that’d been the original intent with his beach house. Prison minimalist.

But the cabinetry is just a few shades deeper than his eyes. Barefoot, he pads to a drawer and pulls out a spoon. Then stretches overhead for a bowl. His shirt rides up, showing off a sliver of skin.

There it is again. That funny tremor in my middle.

“Have you heard from Katherine?” he asks as he ladles what looks like some sort of stew from the white Dutch oven on the stove. Top of the line, of course.

“Yeah, I talked to her before I headed to Ava’s.” Before I crawled up the wall like a demented horror movie villain. Good food and good company turned that around.

He nods. “She sounds happy,” he says as if it pleases him.

Which is wild because they gave each other a wide margin for so long.

“And Alex?” I ask.

Gabe wipes up a spill, seeming a little lost in thought. This isn’t the same man I met a week ago. Some of his sharp corners have worn down.

“He seems... I’ve never heard him sound like that.” He moves his plate to a spot at the end of the island where two stools sit. “Wine?”

“Sure.”

“Red?”

“Is there any other kind?” I tease.

He huffs a laugh and disappears around the corner. I can’t help but follow, curious about his home. I’ve been here before but didn’t pay any attention to the color of his upholstery or the fact that he has an epic wine cellar. “Holy shit.”

The words tumble from my lips as I step into the softly lit room. It smells of polished wood and money. Lots and lots of money. Thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of wine. And at the far end of the room is Gabe. Squatting in front of the far racks.

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If you'd asked me yesterday if he had a nice ass, I would have said it was average. Not everyone takes squat day seriously.

But those jeans are doing something for him that squats never could.

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GABE

Call me crazy, but this wine cellar is one of the reasons I fell for this apartment. The space is straight out of my dreams. Modern and luxe with a tip of the hat to old-world elegance.

When I was young and still living under my parents' roof, I came across a magazine that featured a big fancy house and inside was this amazing wine cellar full of bottles from around the world. The article talked about owners' love of visiting new places and how wine was the ultimate souvenir of a life well-traveled.

Everything about the glossy photo gripped me by the throat. The rich woods and system of cubbies, the fancy light fixtures, the brick floor, and the cozy atmosphere.

As the oddball in a family from the middle of nowhere, getting out of farm country was extra appealing. Not just because everything was flat, sometimes hot, sometimes freezing, but always landlocked.

Getting away, traveling, and living the life no one else in my town would ever dream of was the ultimate goal. Collecting wines from around the world had seemed like

stamps in a passport at the time.

A passport I didn't even own yet and wouldn't for another dozen years.

So when I saw this sleek space with the honed tile and beautiful wood shelves, I fell hard.

Wine, on the other hand, was an acquired taste.

I tend to prefer reds to whites. No surprise that Kingston is the same. But I bet he's got a more refined palate, thanks to his upbringing.

I blow out a breath because it feels like he has so many of the things I've always envisioned for myself. But, by some cosmic roll of the dice, he was born to it and seemingly wants little to do with the life he was afforded.

Ten years ago, that would have made me angry and sour. Now, I've achieved everything I ever dreamed of as that eighteen-year-old from Nebraska.

I hear a soft footfall on the tile behind me.

“Holy shit.”

The hushed curse is a dead giveaway that King has joined me. But I would have known he was here without a word from him.

It's the heat of his gaze on my back and the feeling of being watched that sends tingles through the pit of my stomach. The way his attention is so heavy over my body, almost like a weighted blanket.

Then it's gone.

My heartbeat drums heavily through my veins, and I gently put the bottle of French Merlot back on the shelf.

I clear my throat because it feels dry and rough. “Cab or merlot?”

“Hmm... either.”

His voice is soft now, intimate in the small space, and it wraps around me like cashmere. There’s that hint of upper-crust accent and the almost casual surfer dude vibe that makes for an interesting combination.

“See anything you want?” I push to my feet and turn around.

He makes a contemplative humming sound as he steps forward. “Should we have champagne? You said something about a deal.”

His gaze flicks from the racks to me and holds. The tension between us snaps tight, and I try to remember what we’re talking about. A deal?

Oh, right.

My text earlier.

The reason I was up all night and wanted nothing more than to drop into bed. But I sensed King’s frustration from the three clipped words on my screen.

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Look who's alive.

He's not wrong. I ghosted him hard. Wrapped up in my own turbulent feelings. Out of sorts with Alex so far away. At war with myself over the Cort acquisition.

Part of me felt guilty as I called everyone into the office for a late-night meeting, all while ignoring King's texts. But there was a part that was absolutely sure time and distance were necessary.

A golden brow lifts as he awaits my answer.

"It's not a done deal yet."

He steps closer, only a few feet away now. An arm's length. My pulse picks up speed, and my breathing does that weird, shallow, low-in-my-lungs thing.

Fuck, he's beautiful.

There's just no other way to say it. Golden skin, haunting eyes the color of sea foam. God, his cheekbones. But it's his lips that have a lock down on my attention.

It's his lips that leave me flustered. Daydreaming. And then cutting off all communication.

"So something else, then," he says, and I swear he's whispering.

Holy. Fuck. Yes.

Wait.

Does he mean... No. He's glancing at the wine selection. Isn't he? I narrow my eyes. Wait. Is he staring at my crotch?

I pull my shoulders back a fraction. Why? I have no idea.

He reaches for my belt buckle. My breath freezes in my lungs. I don't dare move a muscle. Ohmygod, this is happening. Is this happening, or am I dreaming?

He reaches past me. I glance down and see those long fingers wrap around the neck of a bottle. It's fucking indecent the way my mind substitutes my dick for that bottle.

Is time really slowing down, or is he just pulling the wine out all slow and seductive-like?

"I've heard good things about this one," he murmurs, reading over the label.

My breath rushes out, embarrassingly harsh in the quiet space. I lick my lips and swallow back my lust. Why the hell does he smell so good?

"Yeah, ugh, I was saving that for a special day." I reach for it, and our fingers brush. Electric sparks shoot up my arm, and my grip tightens so I don't drop it. "I think this is it."

I set the bottle on the shallow display shelf to my right, not trusting myself right now.

"Are you sure?" He jerks a thumb toward the floor-to-ceiling racks overflowing with wine behind him. "We can pick something else."

"I'm sure."

Somewhere in the last twenty-four hours, several wrinkles in my life ironed themselves out, and all the uncertainty I felt when I woke up next to Kingston after our movie marathon is gone now. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm on the right path.

Making peace with the past. Ready to really grab my future by the horns.

Or the hips. Whichever.

"Your dinner's getting cold," he says.

I don't care. "That's what microwaves are for."

His light green eyes pin me where I stand, then narrow on my lips.

He's thinking it.

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About what it'd be like to kiss me. Awareness skitters up my spine, and heat scorches over my shoulders. I rock forward on my toes, closing the distance between us.

We're almost equally matched in height, with him just an inch or so shorter. I've never noticed the difference until now. He always seems so much larger than life.

It's my turn to take him in. Slowly. Thoroughly. The broad expanse of finely honed muscle, shoulders I want to sling an arm around. But it always comes back to his lips.

He's unnaturally good-looking, which is probably why my threat radar sounded loudly the moment he showed up in the Hamptons. And there was a little bit of interest in his kiss, too, if I'm honest. The way he laid it on Katherine. It looks like he kisses with his whole body. Every ounce of him, melding and merging, pouring into his partner.

There's a rough edge to him that's delightfully different from the people I know. The people I've been with, men or women.

He masks it well, of course, under all that impeccable breeding and effervescent charm.

That turbulence must be what drives him to climb light poles and leap off buildings.

He mentioned getting together with friends that morning. But I haven't had time or brain power to see if he posted anything online. "How'd your photoshoot go?"

He shrugs, and my focus zeroes in on all that shoulder muscle. Stacked. Carved.

Curved beneath his shirt.

My fingers twitch against my thigh, wanting to trace that trap, learn the shape of his deltoid. Fuck. He's a work of art, and it sends my brain into an anatomy-addled spiral.

"Good. Got some usable shots. Didn't break anything."

I glance down at his hands, hanging loosely at his sides. Does he injure himself often? He must. He's a daredevil in disguise.

"I'm glad."

"You are?"

I nod. "Of course." I reach up, cupping the side of his neck. "Need you in fighting shape when Katherine gets back."

He swallows, all the tight muscles in his neck rippling beneath my palm. Then, as if he needs to steady himself, he rests a hand on my waist. I hate the fabric separating our skin. Why don't I walk around shirtless more often?

"Is that the only reason?"

I'm not Mr. Read-Between-The-Lines, but even I hear all the queries beneath that question mark.

"No." I shake my head, closing the distance between us. I'm not going to elaborate when what I really want is to give us what we've both been looking forward to.

He sucks in a sharp breath, and his hand comes up between us, right over my heart.

Anticipation crackles as I ease forward. His lashes lower, and my lust ratchets higher.

And then, just as his breath feathers against my lips, his fingers press into my chest, pushing me back. “We can’t.”

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KINGSTON/GABE

Gabe rocks back on his heels, taking those kissable lips with him. The lust in his eyes cools as he nods slowly.

My heart aches, there’s a sharp pinch in my chest, and I want to call my words back. Tell him we absolutely can kiss. But that’s the hormones talking.

“You’re right,” he says.

His lips twist, and his jaw clenches and releases, a sure sign that those words were hard to admit.

My shoulders drop a fraction, relieved that he understands and that we’re on the same page. Even if this isn’t the page we want to be on.

“It’s not that I don’t want this.” I wave a finger between us. “But I came back for Katherine.”

Another nod.

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“And it’s not about you versus her,” I rush to add, not sure if I’m making any sense. I’m drunk on desire, spiraling into the place where my feelings get jumbled and impossible to articulate. “I just think we should talk to her before. . .”

I should talk to her.

The idea makes my stomach woozy, like a rough night on my sailboat. There are so many things Katherine doesn’t know about me, things I can’t tell her. Things I’ve kept carefully contained, locked away in the shadows.

But Gabe watches me with those cunning blue eyes that see the world like a game of chess. It’s that engineer brain, calculating and rebuilding, moving pieces across the board. Knowing when to retreat and when to advance.

It’s sexy AF.

And terribly disconcerting.

“Yeah. I get it.” With a final nod, he drops his hand from my shoulder and reaches for the bottle of wine. “We’re finally in a place where she’s more likely to cup my balls than kick them. I don’t want to mess that up.”

My lips twitch, and I can’t hold in my laugh. See what I mean? Chess pieces.

He’s got it all figured out.

“Understandable.” I’m sure there are some kinky dudes out there who don’t mind a

swift kick to the nuts, but I'm not a masochist. Gabe's right on the money.

I watch him walk out of the cellar, more conflicted than ever. My head tells me I did the right thing, but my body isn't so sure. I run a hand over my face. My skin's still on fire, pulse thundering through my veins, arousal pumping through me.

My phone makes a happy, trilling sound, Katherine's new text tone, as I follow Gabe to his kitchen. Speak of the devil. Er. Angel.

It's funny how just hearing that sound makes my mood lift. Smiling, I fish out my phone.

Katherine: wish you were here.

Three dots pop up and then a picture. It's blurry for a fraction of a second, and my brain automatically anticipates a pretty picture of Paris.

It sure as shit doesn't expect the gorgeous, boudoir-style shot of my girl, laid out on a table, a fluffy white robe covering parts of her, hand over her other breast, head thrown back, biting the tips of her fingers as if she needs something to snack on and just can't help herself.

"Fuck me." Gabe's hoarse declaration sounds from around the corner.

Couldn't have said it better myself. My lust kickstarts, and my feet pick up the pace.

I find him standing next to the kitchen island, one hand on the bottle of wine, the other holding his phone. He stares down at the screen, his jaw slack, looking at the same picture I am. I glance at the text again, realizing she sent it to both of us. Because, of course, she did.

Her thoughtfulness is one of my favorite things about her. Once she lets you into her life, you're in. And while we may not have put a label on this relationship, it's obvious that she's thinking of Gabe and me even when she's halfway around the world.

"It's like she's trying to get me to fly over there, meetings be damned," he grouses, wine forgotten.

"Us," I say and flash my screen at him.

"This woman. I swear." He rubs a hand over the back of his neck, and my fingers are ready and willing to offer him a massage. Soothe his tension. "It's like she has a sixth sense or something. Perfect timing. Along with a finger on our pulse, knowing just how to drive us crazy with desire."

He's not wrong. As if I wasn't already keyed up.

"You don't think we should..." He leaves the sentence unfinished but mimics a plane taking off with his hand.

"She's on a date," I remind us both.

"Right."

We're silent for what has to be a full minute. Him staring at his phone, me staring at mine.

With a sigh, he puts his phone down and finishes uncorking the wine. "I've never been jealous of Alex before."

"Me either," I quip, lightening the mood.

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He smirks as he puts his bowl into the microwave. “We’ll just have to return the favor.”

Then he’s off in search of wine glasses, leaving my jaw on the floor. Return the favor? An image immediately flashes into my mind. Gabe spread out naked on a big bed, a sheet carefully covering his cock, that sultry smirk gracing his lips.

Shit.

My dick presses against my zipper, so needy and aching to be touched.

“Have you thought about where you want to go on your date?” he asks, returning with two goblets, unaware of my torment.

It’s all delightfully domestic. A glittering city sits outside the windows, with soft lighting inside, setting a cozy mood. He pours me a glass of vino as if we do this all the time. This is our life together.

I swirl the wine, focusing on the rich burgundy color. “Yeah. I’d actually like to go back to Greece. We took a trip there a few years ago, and it was incredible.”

It would have been more incredible if I hadn’t been fighting a hard-on for two-thirds of the week.

“You?” I ask.

He settles onto a stool at the end of the island, a steaming bowl in front of him.

“Well, Paris and Greece are out,” he says, a hint of wry humor lacing his words.

“It’s a big world.”

Gabe’s fork pauses in midair, and he turns toward me. “When did you become so wise?”

I stare into my wine, Marko’s words drifting through my mind. What are you waiting for?

“The night I decided to come home.”

Home. Huh. I haven’t thought of New York as home for almost a decade. It’s the chaos castle where most of my family resides, where my best friend lives, where my desires felt too out of place. Too weird. Too stifled.

I’m tossed back to a week ago, when I first returned, and Katherine, in her enthusiasm, had almost said, ‘I didn’t know you were coming home.’ But she’d stopped herself. Because she knows me, knows how I feel about New York and elevators and...

None of that matters anymore, though. Yes, I still hate little metal boxes that I can’t see out of. But this feeling of belonging surpasses that discomfort and fear and anxiety.

Katherine is home. The way her eyes light up when she sees me. The instant opening of her arms. The way she knows me and accepts me, cheers me on. The way she loves me and forgives me.

“You okay?” Gabe asks and I glance over, seeing he’s polished off his meal.

“Yeah.” I really am. I mean, am I still conflicted over my attraction to the man next to

me? One hundred percent. But there's also a peace I haven't felt in a long time.

Gabe

I take a sip, savoring the bouquet. Every time I blink, I see that picture of Katherine, and my blood heats.

I can't believe I was about to kiss her best friend.

I mean, I can. Because it's so fucking fun to make her melt, and he's the epitome of fun-loving. And they're both hot enough to boil water. Seriously, no one should look so sexy swirling wine, but King is a work of art.

Every movement. Every smirk of those full lips. That casual nonchalance.

I push away from the countertop and put my dishes in the washer. "Ready for part two?" I ask.

Those soft, green eyes meet mine, and parts of me spin around in glee. A month ago, hell, twenty-four hours ago, I was sure I needed my head examined. But now I've woken up from that fog.

This is right where I'm meant to be and who I'm meant to be with.

Living a life that's anything but ordinary because I've carved it out for myself. The money, the status, the apartment, the friendships.

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I've fought hard for every single bit, and I'm not about to stop now.

"Come on," I nod toward the other side of the apartment, ignoring my fatigue. "You're really going to like Legolas in this one."

He actually reminds me a lot of the light-footed elf. They both possess an unearthly grace. And he might have been born with a highly polished silver spoon in his mouth, but it's obvious that he's willing to fight for what he wants.

Which is Katherine.

I need to remember that.

On the way down the wide hall, he pauses in front of the collage wall.

"They're just snapshots from my travels." I'm not a great photographer, but when I saw this expanse of wall, I knew I wanted to see mementos from my trips. All the places I've gone. There's plenty of space left for all the places I'll go in the future.

"Impressive."

"I've got a surprise for you."

"Oh yeah?" He steps away from the picture wall and follows me past the theater room.

I second-guess myself every step of the way. Is this too forward? Will he think I'm

weird?

Shrugging off the doubt, I reach for the doorknob.

“You don’t have a life-sized cardboard cutout of Aragorn, do you?” King teases.

“You wish.”

“I mean...” He shrugs, lips curling up.

“I could wait until Katherine returns, but I don’t want you thinking... I know I had a bit of a freak out after our run.”

“When you went radio silent?” he inserts.

“Yeah.” Unease creeps over my shoulders. “That’s over now. I mean, mostly?—”

“Open the door, Gabriel.”

A spike of pure lust shoots through my veins, followed by an immediate acquiescence. What the actual fuck? When did his voice get so deep and... dominant?

I shove the door open, revealing the mini-makeover I had my team complete this afternoon. A yoga mat. A small sectional sofa. A side table by the window where his little succulent sits.

“You can do whatever you want in here. Decorate or whatever. I just wanted you to have a space of your own.”

He shoulders past me, striding to the middle of the room, then turns in a full circle.

“Seriously?”

Is that a good seriously or a ‘what the fuck’ seriously? I lean against the doorframe, trying to act cool and casual, but there’s a riot raging in me.

He walks over to the table, bends, and inspects the plant. “This is amazing. When? How?”

“This afternoon. It’s incredible what money can do.”

He makes a sound somewhere between a sigh and a scoff, flicking his attention to me.

“You just have a spare room lying around?”

“A few, actually. This used to be two penthouses.”

“And Alex has his own room?”

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“His own wing. It was going to be a temporary solution while he found a new place, but I don’t think he’s going anywhere,” I tell King.

We have an indoor basketball court downstairs, so there’s no way he’ll give that up. Not to mention, it’s convenient for both our offices. We get to see each other every day. And Katherine’s just a few floors below us... for now.

“I had them outfit a space for Katherine as well,” I add.

His brows lift. “Bold.”

I shrug. “Hopeful.”

“Can I see it?”

I nod and step back. The next bedroom over has a bed for her, a multi-shelved contraption for her plants, and a cozy chair and several lamps, all in the colors and the slightly feminine yet modern aesthetic of her apartment.

“You’re going to make her cry.”

“Happy tears, I hope.”

“You fight dirty, man.”

“I play to win,” I say, studying him as he looks out her window. It’s a river view, the same as his. Once I got my head out of my ass, it was clear to me that I didn’t want to

lose Katherine. This whole week has felt like the culmination of a crash course on Katherine, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

But I want him, too. I see a lot of myself in Kingston. That zest for life. Always saying yes. Living for adventure. Making the most of things. That's him. And it's me. And it could be us.

"You really are a collector," he murmurs, turning back to me. "Your pictures, trips, wine. Those memories. And now, people."

I hadn't thought of it like that, but he's right.

"Come on, I have one more thing you're going to like."

I weave my way through the apartment, across exquisite wood floors, to my bedroom. Pushing open the double doors, I'm met with the scent of fresh linens and sandalwood. Along one wall is the most massive bed I've ever laid eyes on, and I'm once again impressed that my team was able to pull all this together in such a short time. I wouldn't have trusted anyone else with the task, but my assistant once again proved he could move mountains. And California king-sized mattresses.

"Wow," King says, stumbling to a stop at my side.

"No more falling into the cracks of the sectional." Perhaps this is wishful thinking, but I want more sexy times with the four of us. But I also want comfort and reasonable rest afterward.

He slaps me on the shoulder. "I like the way you think."

Then he steps forward, petting the bedding. They made it up like a hotel. Crisp white linens and fluffy pillows. My own cloud in the sky. One I won't mind sharing with

the three of them.

“Surprised you don’t have a TV in here, though, Mr. Tech Tycoon.”

Smirking, I stride over to my nightstand and hit two switches on the side. Simultaneously, blinds lower across all the windows and in the center of the room, over the foot of the bed, a large flat-panel television descends from the ceiling.

Kingston whistles, then laughs.

I love my toys and creature comforts. I see no use in working so hard if I can’t enjoy my off hours.

“I’ve got the perfect idea of how you can return the favor,” he murmurs, voice dripping with mischief. He kicks off his shoes and then sprawls across the mattress. “At least partially.”

Trust him to know how to work a camera angle. Feet bare, legs crossed at the ankles, and his hands behind his head, his biceps bulging.

And just like that, my lust returns. I take a deep, steadying breath because he looks good enough to use as a dessert plate.

I pull out my phone, launch the camera, and approach the mattress. His lips curl up. “Make sure you write ‘wish you were here’ when you send her the pic.”

32

KATHERINE

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 9:05 am

So this is love.

A picnic in the park on a warm spring day in Paris. Flowers all around, perfuming the air. Children laughing in the distance. Dogs barking.

Alexander Hunt at my side.

No one pays us any undue attention, which might have something to do with the half a dozen men he has watching us everywhere we go. Not having paparazzi on our heels has been heavenly. We're just an ordinary couple out to enjoy all Paris has to offer.

Bliss runs through me like warm honey. He's stretched out on the picnic blanket next to me, propped up on one arm as we watch the world go on around us. I cuddle closer, a smile curving my lips, every cell in my body happy and sated.

"I've never felt like this before," I whisper, almost more to myself.

He nuzzles my temple. "Like what?"

I swear, he's not the same man that left New York a handful of days ago. He's almost... relaxed.

"Like I'm glowing from the inside out. Like nothing bad can touch me." I duck my face against his chest, feeling shy at the admission.

Alex curls a finger under my chin and lifts it until I meet his gaze. There are so many

unspoken words in his dark eyes. Questions. Affirmations.

“I’d love to tell you nothing bad will ever touch you again, Beauty.” He tucks my hair behind my ear. I swear I nearly swoon. “But I can promise you I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe and happy.”

Well, that did it.

I melt into him, lifting my lips to his. If only my monthly frenemy hadn’t shown up yesterday, I’d haul him back to the hotel and ravish him. Heck, I might not make it that far.

“You say the best things,” I murmur.

He smiles softly. “Surely I can do better than that.”

A giggle bubbles up inside me. “Are you challenging yourself, Mr. Hunt?”

“Maybe.”

A bright light snags my attention, and I look away from him, trying to find the source. On the other side of the park, a mother is wrangling her kids for a photo. They’re all dressed in cute spring outfits, and though the mom looks harried, they’re all laughing.

Without prompting, I sense Alex turn his attention their way.

Mom gets a few photos before the kids dissolve into a pile of laughter. She just smiles and joins them.

I don’t want to wish my life away, but I crave that kind of freedom. To be yourself

and enjoy the company of those around you without a thought of how it'd look to investors.

That family lives life out loud and it's beautiful and messy and fun.

"Take a picture with me," I say, patting the pockets of my dress for my phone.

"Let me. My arms are longer." He takes the phone, flips the camera around, and lines us up on the screen.

I lean into him, letting all the joy show on my face. We might be surrounded by his bodyguards—not wearing all black for a change so they don't attract attention—but today's been perfect. A taste of what life could be like away from my mother and the company and the pressures of the board. Alex's only expectation of me is that I enjoy myself, and I couldn't ask for more.

I press a kiss against his cheek as he snaps a few more photos.

"Should we send it to the guys?" I ask, glancing through the shots. I love the one of me kissing him. He looks so smug in the best possible way.

It makes me want to kiss him all over again. Like every chance I get. Sneaking them in the elevator, in the backseat of the car, while we're waiting to be seated at the restaurant. And he never shies away. He's never grumbled about too much PDA or told me I should think about the optics.

I took so many pictures in the gardens yesterday my phone was overheating. At which point, Alex had handed me his and told me to knock myself out. I was already walking around like a life-size heart-eye emoji, but he just sealed the deal with his smooth moves and thoughtfulness.

“If you want. But something tells me they’d enjoy it more if you were solo.” His gaze sweeps the length of my body, which immediately flushes. “And less dressed.”

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“Mmm... you might be surprised.”

After peppering another kiss against his chin, I sit up and shoot off a text to Kingston and Gabe. I miss them. It feels like no matter what I'm doing or where I am, there's a hole where they should be. I don't know how they became so essential so quickly, but I won't deny it.

Katherine: still wish you were here. But it looks like you two are having fun.

I glance at Gabe's pic of King, who's stretched out in a truly massive bed, a come-hither smirk on his lips. That spot next to him looks so inviting. I want to stretch out next to him, soak in the sunshine of his personality, and then strip him naked and do all the things I've been dreaming about for longer than is decent.

Katherine: save me a spot on that bedheart eyes emoji

Giggling to myself, I send our selfie to LaShonda. As I'm pondering what to write, a call notification pops up from my boss. For a single heartbeat, I consider answering it. But then I remember that it's a weekend. I'm on “vacation,” and I have no desire to help them out.

After sending his call to voicemail, I get back to more important people.

Katherine: not coming home. Send my things.zany face emoji

A strong breeze whips my hair around and I grab it, holding it down. Then I put my phone away, giving Alex my undivided attention.

“Sorry. Just wanted to check in.”

“I don’t mind.”

Indeed, there’s not a trace of annoyance on his handsome face. Instead, there’s endless patience, soft crinkles around his eyes and a soft smile that makes me need to touch him. Leaning back into him, I press a hand over his heart.

“I like that you keep up with your friends,” he adds.

“I’m glad. But this is our date. You deserve all my attention.”

He covers my hand with his, pressing it harder to his chest. “Just because we’re on a date doesn’t mean that the rest of your relationships stop.”

“It feels like they do. In a good way. When I’m with you, everything else fades into the background. It’s nice.”

“Same, Beauty. Which is why I need somebody watching our back at all times. You’re the best distraction.”

“You really do say the best things. Thank you for an amazing trip.”

“My pleasure.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “We should come back next year. A sort of first date anniversary.”

He talks like he’s in this for the long haul. Next month. Next year. All the years.

But I can’t hold him to that, right? And I shouldn’t let my hopes soar after a week of amazing sex and a romantic trip to Paris, ‘I love you’ said or not. I’ve still got to figure out a way to permanently untangle myself from my mother’s web. There’s the

inheritance situation, which reminds me that I need to check in with my attorney about that tomorrow.

Alex squeezes my fingers. “Why’d you tense up?”

I open my mouth to tell him I felt a raindrop. But Gabe’s words whisper through my mind. No lies between us.

That goes for Alex and Kingston, too.

As soon as I hear back about the inheritance and whether or not I do, in fact, have to get married, I’m telling them. Even if there’s a way around the stipulation and I don’t have to wed, it’ll put a target on our back. Even bigger than the one we’re already wearing.

So I sit up and turn toward him. My stomach sloshes uneasily, and I lick my lips as I prepare to tell him where my mind really went.

33

ALEX

Katherine leans away from my chest and turns, lifting a haunted blue-green gaze to mine.

I’m instantly on alert.

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Preparing for the worst is kind of my business.

“Talk to me, Katie Bird. I want to know all your thoughts, even your fears. Especially your fears.” I can’t fight her demons if I don’t see them.

“I want to come back next year. And every year after that. But I’m terrified that this is all too fast and that I’m going to wake up tomorrow and you guys will have scattered to the winds. Then I’ll be alone with my plants, crying into my caramel ice cream.”

The words are so heartfelt.

Earnest and endearing.

While I hate that she has doubts, I understand them. What we’ve started is far outside of her norm. And even though feelings are involved, it’s easy to see that she’d want, even need, to protect herself. Her heart. Her future.

And since her needs and future have always been tied to her mother, grandfather, and the family company, this must all be so new to her.

Standing on her own feet, away from them.

Finally having the opportunity to see who she is and what she wants.

Which is great for her and scary for me.

A breeze cuts through our picnic. It smells like rain and freshly cut grass. Katherine's hair whips around her face, turning the normally put-together woman into a wild sprite.

I reach out, tucking her hair behind her ear again. She leans into my touch, so familiar and at ease, even though I can see the turbulence beneath her calm exterior.

"I get it."

Her jaw drops, and her lips part in a tiny O.

"This has all been unexpected. Amazing, but unconventional." I keep my voice low, for her ears only. "The best week of my life, by a mile. But I get that it'll take time. Relationships aren't built overnight."

"You're right."

She licks her lips again, and damn, do I want to kiss her. To show her how I feel. I'm better at that. Words aren't my strong suit, but for her, I'll find the right ones.

"I'm not proposing we slow down. But what if we trust the process?"

Her smile lights me up inside, and I can't help but return it. She presses a quick kiss against my palm and then nestles her cheek back into my hand.

She's an incredible combination of fierce resolve and graceful acceptance.

Determined to stop her mother from ruining Gabe and independent enough to step out from the shadow of the Chanlers, no matter how tentatively. Except, she's not tentative, is she? When she'd had enough, she broke free with a swift stroke of a metaphorical knife.

“I don’t know what this looks like going forward. I don’t have a tidy label. But you’ve brought out a side of Gabe I’ve never seen before. You’re this amazing glue I didn’t know we needed.”

Do I tell her how I’d moved in with him under the guise of looking for a new place but secretly because I was worried about him. He’s been a different man this week.

“Because of you, he’s finally sleeping. He’s probably slept more this week than he did all last month.”

Her lips twist and then settle into a slight smirk. “Of course you’re more worried about him than yourself. Always the protector.”

She reaches up, curling a hand over my forearm and rubbing back and forth, sending that unconscious jolt of awareness up my limb and through my nervous system.

“I love that about you,” she murmurs.

My gut churns.

Such a telling statement. This woman appreciates being protected, which begs the question, why didn’t anyone protect her as she was growing up? I’m sure she had a body man, but emotional protection is far different.

Her phone chirps, but she doesn’t move. I see the glimmer of happiness shoot through her expression. It must be a custom tone because nobody could be that excited about texts. Whoever is messaging her, she likes them and welcomes the contact.

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There's another stiff breeze and Katherine tips her chin up, looking at the sky. Another enchanting smile curves her lips. "I think it's going to rain."

No sooner have the words left her lips than I feel a drop hit my cheek. There's a squeal of voices across the park and then a flurry of activity as Mother Nature sends everyone diving for cover.

Katherine doesn't move.

Of course she welcomes it. Will she ever stop surprising me? This princess who's finally escaped her tower.

She grins over at me, so much joy radiating from her that I sit in the rain, almost dumbfounded. Then she reaches for the remnants of our picnic, tossing them back into the basket the hotel provided.

I launch to my feet, take her hands, and pull her up. She snatches the blanket, and I grab the basket and her hand. Then we're off. Dodging raindrops as we race back to the hotel and laughing because there's something so refreshing about being caught out in the shower. Tourists are darting off, and the city is being cleansed.

My men keep up, protecting the woman who's come to mean everything in such a short amount of time.

She tugs me down a side street. Shirt speckled with raindrops, she glances up at me, all pink-cheeked and excited. There's a flicker of something mischievous in her eyes that reaches down inside me, unlocking an exuberance I haven't felt in decades.

Katherine gives my hand a firm tug and leans against a wall, gaze searching mine.

She drops the blanket and reaches for me, fingers clinging to my shirt. Desire coils heavy inside, ready to strike, to unleash, to throw her over my shoulder and race back to the hotel.

“Why are we stopping, Beauty?”

Not that I care about getting wet.

“So I can kiss you.”

I duck my head. The rest of the world falls away, and nothing and no one matters except for her. Us. This moment. Rain falls from overhead, drenching us in a late spring storm. “I thought so.”

Her lashes flutter closed as she stretches up, so eager for my kiss. The picnic basket plops against the pavement, and I crowd closer to her, caging her against the wall.

She gives a happy little moan.

The first touch of our lips is soft perfection. A brush of a butterfly’s wings. But I can’t stop there. Not with the way her body strains against mine. It’s like she sucks me in with her whole body, speaking without words. No. Shouting without words.

No sounds are needed. It’s all there in her hands moving over my shoulders, down my sides, and hooking through my back belt loops. It’s in the way the urgency of her kisses tick up. More and more energy ignites between us until her lips part and she teases me with that talented tongue.

Groaning, I open my lips, parrying back, losing myself in her and our kiss. Only

when we're both breathing heavily and reaching a fever pitch do I lift my head.

“What are you doing to me, Beauty?”

“Just marking items off the bucket list, Mr. Hunt.”

Damn, her sassy comebacks stoke the flames. I want to hear more about this bucket list, but first, it's time to get off the street.

34

ALEX

Back at the hotel, we drop off the basket and blanket with a smirking concierge. I'm keenly aware that Katherine and I look like cats that fell into the bathtub. This is the kind of establishment where that type of thing stands out.

Not to mention, her lips are plump and pink from my kisses. The other couple on the elevator take note as well. The matronly woman looks on with a curious expression, but the man smiles, and his gaze rests on Katherine a little too long for my liking.

I tug her against my side, and a floor later, they exit the elevator.

I didn't know I had such a possessive side, but I love leaving my mark on her. You'd think I'd hate sharing her, but I don't. The opposite, actually. I like knowing that if something were to happen to me, she'd have Gabe and Kingston. That knowledge brings me comfort.

As soon as we enter the suite, I take off my soggy shirt. Katherine's gaze is so hot and appreciative as it rakes over my bare chest that I swear steam rises off my shoulders.

Somehow, I managed to keep my hands to myself as we crossed the lobby and on the elevator. Mostly. But it feels so damn good to be able to touch her whenever I want. To know she welcomes my touch.

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I reach for her. Her skin is cold, and I run my hands up and down her arms, letting the friction warm her.

Together, we tug off her shirt, letting it plop to the floor. She stretches up on her toes, kissing me again. I groan, in heaven, with her in my arms. Utterly besotted with how freely she offers herself to me.

“Let’s get you into a warm shower.”

She makes a happy humming sound. “Yes, please.”

We move toward the bathroom, stripping each other as we go. The luxurious space is just wall dressing because she’s the star. Pressing kisses against my skin. Nimble fingers working my clothing off. An eager smile lighting up my universe. I barely notice the marble tile or the polished fixtures. They’re just colors and textures in my periphery.

Under the soft lights of the gleaming bathroom, she steps away. “I’ll be right there.”

While she heads for the water closet, I turn on the shower knobs, getting the water at just the right temperature. I tip my head back beneath the spray, wishing it could wash away my to-do list along with my worries.

Something to think about when I get home, not now.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Katherine asks, arms wrapping around me from behind.

I didn't even hear her open the door.

"Nothing you need to worry about." I turn, wrapping my arms around her, pulling her into the stream, and running my hands all over.

She watches me for a few seconds, a careful regard that makes me feel like a bug beneath a magnifying glass. "I'd like to worry with you."

I drop my chin, slayed by her unwavering solidarity. She holds me tight, cheek pressed against my chest.

"You've got plenty of worries of your own," I remind her, then bite my tongue.

What the fuck, Hunt? Why are you ruining a perfect afternoon?

"Hmm... true. But that doesn't mean I can't carry some of yours too. You don't have to tell me, of course. I'm here if you want to share."

I press a kiss against her hair. How did I get so lucky? She's offering, not pushing. Open and available, not demanding.

I don't think I've ever met anyone so willing to step in and help me. That's a bit by design, of course. I'll admit that I keep people at arm's length. I've lived a long time trying not to get too close. To not feel too deeply. To not become too attached because attachment leads to heartache.

At least that's what I told myself, and now I'm breaking all the rules.

"I'm not the kind of guy who daydreams—" The words tumble from my lips, but I don't even know what I'm saying.

Her hands move across my bare chest like a conqueror on her way to claim new lands. Utterly distracting, and yet...

“But you make me want things I’ve never wanted before. It’s hard to remember the rules I set for myself.”

She reaches for the fancy body wash she ordered and drizzles it into her palm. “Oh?”

Then, after rubbing her hands together and working up a lather, she reaches for me, coaxing me into spilling all my thoughts. It’s like when she touches me, I can’t help myself.

“I never wanted to feel loss again after Courtney died.”

Katherine gives a soft “mmhmm” and continues her quest. Hands sliding down my abs, around my navel, over my hips, purposely avoiding the part that wants her attention the most.

When I don’t say anything else because I can’t decide what to say, she gently turns me and starts the process all over again. Shower gel. Lather. Wash.

“I can’t imagine how hard that must have been on you. On your parents.”

“My dad told me to look after her.”

Her hands still on my shoulders. “When?”

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I sigh, thinking back. “I must have been eleven or twelve at the time.”

There’s a long pause as she gets back to the task at hand. Then, “You know it’s not your fault, right?”

I hear the unspoken truth she’s trying to convey without saying the words aloud. ‘You didn’t kill your sister.’

“Logically, I know that.”

“I get it. Your emotions are a different story.”

I grunt, wishing the emotions would leave me alone altogether. But if that was the case, I wouldn’t have felt the absolute delight in hearing Katherine and LaShonda laughing, see the pure joy on their faces, and feel lighter and brighter because of it.

And no matter how badly it hurt to lose Courtney, I can’t and would never wish away the solace Katherine has brought to my life.

“You’re a balm I didn’t even know I needed.”

She hugs me from behind again. “I feel the same way about you.”

“My turn,” I say, ready to get my hands on her and stop talking.

“Mmm... I’m not done yet.”

She steps back, hands on my hips, gently tugging me beneath the shower head to rinse off. The air is warm and humid and smells of something crisp and spicy with rich undertones. She drops into a crouch, washing my legs. A laugh bursts from my lips as she reaches the backs of my knees.

The vixen smirks up at me, and my cock flares to life. She's just too pretty, kneeling as she is in such a submissive stance. Her brow lifts as she's confronted with the undeniable evidence of what she does to me.

"Someone's eager for his turn," she murmurs.

"He's always eager for you, Beauty."

Her hands circle my left calve, stroking up and down in a way that shouldn't be sensual. It's innocent, tender. But my dick wants her attention, greedy bastard.

"But this was supposed to be about warming you up," I remind us. Maybe if I say it out loud a few times, it'll do the trick. But I doubt it.

"Oh, I'm plenty warm."

I groan at the purr in her voice. "Katherine."

She moves to my right leg. Still running slick hands over my skin, completely ignoring the erection bobbing in her face. "Yes?"

"We're not doing it."

"It?"

"Anything. We don't have to fuck every time we're together," I say, trying to be

respectful even as I grind out the crass words.

Her laugh is husky as she meets my gaze.

“First of all, my frenemy’s in town. But it’s not like I’m in a coma, handsome.”

Frackin' hell.

This time, she drizzles the shower gel all over my cock, the pearlescent liquid looking so much like cum. I grit my teeth and brace a hand against the wall, but that doesn't prepare me for her touch.

The way she circles my cock with those slender fingers, shuttling down and up again. Over and over as I groan.

“Second, my hands still work.”

“Fuck. Me.”

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Her laugh turns dark and wicked. I've never heard anything like it, and it seems almost unfair that I'm the only one here enjoying it. But I'm bastard enough to enjoy having all her attention on me. And only me.

With her other hand, she massages my nuts. My eyes roll back in my head, and my knees give.

"Almost clean," she says.

"You keep that up, and I'm going to get dirty again." At the very least, sticky.

"Good thing we're in the shower," she murmurs, thumb finding the sensitive spot just beneath the head.

My hips punch forward, and she laughs again. The sweet sound bounces off the walls, and it takes some mental gymnastics to keep calm when everything in me wants to scoop her up and press her against the wall.

Pulling her up into a hug is maybe the hardest thing I've ever done. But I'm serious about being with her, not giving in to my urges just because she turns me on.

"My turn," I say again, reaching for the shower gel. This time, she doesn't argue and simply enjoys a bit of pampering. "And this is about more than sex to me."

She inhales, the soft sound echoing off the polished walls.

"You're incredible," I murmur as I kneel before her, washing every inch.

She rests her hands on my shoulders for balance. “I’m just me.”

I press a kiss against her lower belly. “Well, just you, you’re very special.”

She cups my chin and tips my face up, disbelief making her lips part. But when she sees how sincere I am, how crazy I am about her, disbelief turns to pleasure.

Done with her legs, I stand and pull her beneath the spray for a rinse. It’s hard to focus on the task at hand when her curves are so silky smooth beneath my fingertips. But I manage because I’m serious about our relationship. Our connection isn’t solely physical.

“Can I wash your hair?”

“Please, and thank you.”

???

We snuggle in bed, her wrapped in her robe, me with a towel around my hips, my half-hard cock nudging the terrycloth. I wasn’t much of a cuddler before I met her, but I can tell how much she loves physical contact. Craves it. Embraces every touch, every opportunity to sink into each other.

“I could get used to this,” she murmurs, index finger absently drawing patterns on my chest.

“This?”

“Lazy Sunday afternoons.”

“What do you normally do on a Sunday afternoon?”

I don't even need to see her face to know she's curling her lip. "Tea, polo, regattas... whatever my mother put on my schedule as important. A lot of events to make connections. But never this."

"I'm glad about that last part."

"Yeah?"

"Mmhmm. If you'd been doing this with some other lucky guy, Gabe, King, and I would have never stood a chance."

"I've never done this with anyone but you."

"I'm a lucky bastard."

"Hmm... you're not a bastard."

"I'm a lucky man."

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“Just wait until my frenemy leaves. Then you’ll be really lucky.”

I groan, and my cock stirs. “Don’t tease me.”

“So sorry.”

I give her a squeeze. “I don’t think you are. I think you like having me wrapped around your finger.”

“I don’t hate it.”

I huff a laugh and close my eyes, contentment filling every corner of my soul. She’s right. This is bliss. We should make Lazy Sundays a standing date. I might even let the others join in.

Her phone chimes from the nightstand, ruining the relaxed moment. But I recognize Kingston’s text tone, and while I don’t relish the idea of letting her go, I know that the two of them are still sorting out this new facet of their relationship. I loosen my grip on her.

“See what he has to say,” I murmur, not moving.

She leans away and is back in a flash, nestling close as she reads her phone. “Well, that’s ominous.”

“What is?”

She flashes the screen my way.

Kingston: can we talk?

35

GABE

Traffic is terrible this evening, and I'm glad I insisted we utilize my driver. The dark tint on the windows blocks out the fading light and the chaos of the city.

Earlier, I'd gotten the courage to ask Kingston to go shopping with me. Given his family connections, he set balls in motion, and now the back of the SUV is filled with fresh new styles that I'm actually excited to wear. Things that feel like me, not just the outfits my normal stylist pulls.

Geek chic, King calls it.

Which is better than Impersonator CEO.

The car rocks over a manhole cover, jostling us. Beside me, King checks his phone for what must be the dozenth time since we left my apartment.

"Everything okay?"

With the divider up and privacy ensured, he nods as he places his phone on the seat between us. "Yeah. Just playing phone tag with Katherine."

"Ahh."

"I thought we were past this." He props his elbow against the door and rests his chin

against his fist.

“This?”

“Being on different continents.” Frustration laces his words, and I get it.

He came back to New York for her, thinking that without the distance, some of his problems would be solved. And as annoying as phone tag is, it’s so much worse with someone on a completely different schedule. Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt.

“I’ll just be glad when she’s back.” He runs his hands down his thighs.

What’s so urgent? And why does it make him nervous? I don’t know if we’re at a place where I can ask those things. Or rather, could I ask without sabotaging the easygoing camaraderie of the day? The trust we’ve built so far?

We make it home before I starve.

“What do you want for dinner?” he asks as we crowd onto the elevator, our bags at our feet.

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He couldn't resist a little shopping of his own.

“Thai? Pizza? Wings. Let's do wings.” It's been way too long since I've gotten to kick back, watch a game, and chow down on a saucy little chicken leg.

“Wings it is.”

He's on his phone as the elevator lifts skyward. I've noticed the habit several times now. But again, timing is important. I don't want to bring up something that will—

The car jerks to a stop with a grind of metal, tossing me forward on my toes. So many things happen at once.

I slap an arm across King's chest, steadying him as I brace a hand against the doors. The phone falls from his hand and skitters across the polished tile, stopping between two shopping bags.

The lights flicker and wink out, and a second later, a single bulb casts a blue glow over us.

Alarm floods my veins.

That's not normal. We've never had any hiccups with the elevators in this building. First time for everything, I guess. I take a deep breath and start to ask King if he's okay, but that's silly. He's obviously not okay even when the elevator isn't freaking the fuck out.

“Well, that was exhilarating,” I murmur, trying to keep things light.

“Uh-huh.”

The man doesn't sound the least bit convinced.

I look to see what floor we're at and if there are indicator lights on the panel. I've never paid much attention to it before. Funny how you can use something every day and miss the details.

“Looks like we're between floors,” I say, jabbing the door open button as a test, but nothing happens.

Well, fuck.

I hit the call button. It rings. Once. Twice. Three times. I hit the button again, hoping it disconnects, because we don't need that sound pinging around the tin can like a pinball.

Beside me, King is pale as a piece of paper. He hasn't moved. Didn't pick up his phone. I'm actually not sure he's breathing.

I turn and step in front of him. “Hey. They'll get to us. The backup generator kicked on, so I bet if we're having issues, another elevator is too. And maybe they hit the button faster than I did.”

No smile, no expression at all. He's still as stone.

“King.”

His gaze finds mine so slowly I swear I've gone gray by the time those sea foam

green eyes lock on me. The fear there is something I've never seen before. Wild, irrational, and carefully banked as if he doesn't want me to know.

I might not be scared of elevators, but I've felt fear like that. Like I wouldn't make it out alive. It's a miracle I don't freak out over small spaces, given the way my brothers liked to lock me in my closet.

They honestly thought imprisonment would make me less of a bookworm and more of a farm boy.

Little did they know, I eventually hid a book and a flashlight in my closet and would happily sit in there to read while they ranted.

I doubt King was locked in a closet as a kid. His family seems nicer and more understanding. Not to mention, someone would probably have heard him screaming.

So this is something else.

What did Alex do for Katherine when she had her panic attack? I have no idea what he told her before he put her in the back seat of the car, but physical contact seemed to have comforted her.

"It's okay. We're going to be fine."

Nothing.

"Would it help if I told you about all the safety features built into elevators these days?"

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There's a slight shake of his head.

Which is probably good because software is really more my speed.

I step closer, right into his space. Toe to toe, he has to tip his chin up ever so slightly. His eyes widen the tiniest bit as if he's surprised by my sudden nearness.

The space is oddly quiet and somehow loud at the same time. Our breathing is amplified. And I swear I can hear my heartbeat thrumming through my veins.

I reach for his hand, his arm is dead weight, and press his palm against my chest. "Breathe with me."

I take a deep breath, my chest expanding beneath his fingertips. His eyelids shutter, and he follows my lead. In and out. One slow, steady breath after another.

"That's it."

We stand, still and silent, little sounds from the building crowding in. Breathing in and out, together. Slowly, it must be a full minute, if not two, before his shoulders begin to relax and are no longer tucked up around his ears like a turtle. His hand softens beneath mine, even pressing tighter to my chest, as if he relishes and needs the connection.

It's hard to wrap my brain around. From the moment Kingston strode across Pierce Montgomery's back patio, locking lips with Katherine, I've seen his innate confidence. He carries himself like he doesn't have a care in the world.

But I guess we all have our secrets and hangups.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, his voice low, softer than I’ve ever heard before.

And wrecked. Absolutely wrecked.

I’m reminded of the boy I was when I left home. Of who I was when I first met Alex. I would never want anyone to feel like that. Like a shell of a person.

“You’ve got this. Let me try the call button again.”

This time, someone answers. The deep voice fills the car, telling us to sit tight.

I start to ask for details, but the connection is severed. The single overhead light goes out.

King’s sharp inhale is loud, echoing off the metal panels.

“Talk to me,” I say into the dark. It’s pitch black now. I use my free hand to turn on the flashlight on my phone.

“Can’t,” he stammers.

“I don’t believe that. You climb light poles with your bare hands and jump across alleyways like you’re Spider-Man.”

He gives a little huff.

“Do you remember the first time you met Katherine?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Me too. She had me at a total disadvantage.”

He doesn't say anything, but I can feel his tension rising again. His shoulders lifting, muscles tensing.

I type a quick message to the head of my security detail and also my housekeeper. Someone must know what's going on.

Letting go of King's hand, I cup his shoulder, massaging the stiffness away. He trembles like a frightened bunny, and I hate that he's so scared. I've never given the elevator a second thought, but seeing this and feeling his anxiety, I realize just how much he loves Katherine.

No one who has this much trepidation over elevators would willingly put themselves through this multiple times a day for anyone they didn't absolutely adore.

I send another text, this time to my assistant, then return my attention to the panicked man shaking beneath my palm.

“She has this wild ability to see the bigger picture,” I say. “Like a chessboard. All the pieces. All the possible moves. And then I open my mouth and she proves to me why I'm wrong. It's fucking amazing. That first day in the Winter-Farmington boardroom, I thought she was a tiger. Forget the fucking Wolf of Wall Street. She was all of twenty-two and sharp as a samurai sword.”

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“That’s Kat,” he agrees, voice rough.

I look around at the bags scattered on the floor. A small fortune in clothing and not a single bottle of water among them. I’m not used to feeling useless. Or conflicted, come to think of it.

“What can I do, King?” I whisper, starting to feel desperate.

How long has it been? Why is no one getting us out of here? And what happened to the backup generator?

I lick my lips and swallow back the frustration.

“Keep talking to me,” he whispers, voice rough.

Hah. That’s easy enough.

I manage a full two or three minutes of idle chit-chat before my phone buzzes in my hand. My security team is downstairs prying answers out of management and maintenance.

Should I tell King the fire department is here? That might freak him out more.

“What is it?” he asks.

Okay, time to fib. “You know how sometimes you get a grand idea and you’re so sure it’s going to work out but then someone tells you all the things that are wrong with it?”

I mean, that's what I pay my legal team to do, but..." I add a little eye roll for good measure.

His fingertips flex against my chest.

I take that as a good sign, coasting my fingers along the side of his neck and rubbing soothing circles with my thumb.

"They're finding your plot holes," he murmurs, more lively than he has been since the elevator car halted.

"Hmm." I like that. My plot holes. I'll try to remember that the next time one of my team shoots down an idea.

He frowns. "What?—"

Falling silent, he tips his head, listening.

I hear it, too.

Water dripping.

He stumbles a step, knees giving out, and I grab him with both hands, phone tumbling between us.

It sounds like rain in the elevator corridor. What the hell?

"This doesn't make sense." He shakes his head, his panic clearly increasing.

I jab the call button again. "Let's have a seat."

He's still shaking his head, losing himself to his panic. I've never watched anyone hyperventilate before, but with the way he's gasping, I'm sure he's on the verge.

No one answers the call. Hell, the light doesn't even come on. But I've gotta keep my cool.

"Okay?" I say. "Before you fall down."

I massage his shoulders, hoping my touch grounds him. He presses his other hand against my chest, not to push me away, more like clinging. Connecting.

He stares at my lips. I'm not sure if he's still zoned out or not.

"We can call Katherine if you want. Or, you know, I met the chief of police once," I offer, trying to think of all the high-ranking officials I've met over the last decade.

When I fall silent, we hear the water. No longer a drip, now a stream. Is the roof leaking? It wasn't raining earlier.

“Fuck it,” he bites out.

Rocking forward, his lips slam against mine.

36

KINGSTON

I lean into Gabe, hands on his solid chest. The world disappears as my lips meet his. Urgency pumps through me, fierce and hot and overwhelming. Like I might die if I don't kiss him. If I don't learn what it feels like to have his arms around me.

There's a moment of quiet shock. He doesn't move, but from the light of his cell phone, I see his lashes lower. Ohmygod. This is happening.

I don't let up.

I don't back down.

Closing my eyes, I sink into the sensations. My lips feel clumsy and awkward because I'm still trembling and not in a good way. Yet.

His hands grip my shoulders, holding me in place, and I could weep from that support. At how easily and readily he understood what was happening to me. I don't know what I expected from the cocky geek, but it wasn't soft-spoken reassurance.

His lips move across mine, testing, learning, and then he tips his head and groans. It's

an amazing sound, deep, needy, masculine. There's a growl of determination and also a hint of disbelief.

He's not alone.

I just told him we can't do this. That Katherine is it for me. But I'm sick of wandering around his apartment and then her apartment, feeling like a caged lion.

Happy, sure. Well fed. I get let out every day to romp and exercise, but then up I go again. Wanting something I can't have. Freedom to explore my deepest, darkest desires.

Gabe nips my lower lips, and the sharp bite of pain brings me back to our kiss. I flex my fingers into his chest, then smooth them up over his shoulders. Holding on for dear life because he knows how to kiss. How to make me lose my head and my inhibitions.

A little lick across the seam of my lips, and I'm opening for him. Teasing back with my tongue into the hot recess of his mouth. Need floods through my veins, and my cock stirs. Almost as if he felt it, he jerks me closer, his hands sliding low on my hips.

I surge against him, loving the way his tall, lean body fits against mine. The way he holds me steady as he devours my mouth. He's wanted this too. It's almost shameful how hot my skin is and just how badly I'd like to strip us both bare.

Our brief time with Katherine between us wasn't enough. It wasn't ever going to be enough, was it? Not with chemistry crackling like this between us.

We separate slowly. He lifts his head, and I gasp for air. My chest heaves as I suck oxygen into my lungs.

I swear it could be pitch black, and I'd be able to see the fire blazing in those amazing blue eyes.

There's not a hint of surprise on his ridiculously handsome face, and I appreciate that he doesn't throw my words back at me. But I can't help feeling like there's an elephant squeezed into this elevator with us.

My heart thumps against my ribs. Once. Twice. I wait for the panic to return. The uneasy sensation I've lived with for so long doesn't rear its head. How could it compete with all the hormones raging inside me?

"I came back for Katherine. Full stop. But," I say, "I don't regret that kiss."

Not the least little bit.

"Me either."

We stare at each other in the eerie silver-blue light, his hands on my hips, mine on his shoulders. I trace a thumb down the pulse bouncing in his neck. He swallows. I feel the tension in him, understand it so well because it's mirrored in me.

He doesn't say it, but I can almost read his mind.

I want to do that again.

So do it.

Energy crackles between us, alive with unspoken words. I might have come back for Katherine, but I found something so much more. In the shroud of darkness, where my deep-seated fear lives, I'm met with my darkest desires.

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Gabriel is just as tenacious as I am. Determined and adventurous, living life to the fullest. And right now, want is etched on his face. Somewhere in the last five minutes, we've ticked past supportive friends and into new territory.

'I want to fuck you' territory.

Desire stretches between us like a rubber band. Tighter and tighter. And then, when it's obvious I'm not saying no anymore, the band snaps.

Gabe slants his lips across mine. I open for him immediately, groaning because it feels so fucking good to be wanted like this. Unbridled and untamed. Like he's not going to stop until he's learned every last inch of me.

His hips press harder to mine, and I revel in the hard length of him. As if there was any doubt about how badly he wants this. Wants me. I press right back and slide my hand down, wrapping around his throat. His gasp is music to my ears, and I smile into the kiss, then thrust my tongue into his mouth.

He sucks on it, and my cock jumps, wishing and hoping for something it can't have right now. I grind against him, but there's no relief to be had. It only makes me want more. And when his hands slide down over my ass and squeeze, I know he's just taunting me.

Two can play that game.

I tighten my grip on his throat and push him back against the wall. He grunts on impact, and I immediately take over the kiss. It's a dance. Sometimes you lead, and

sometimes you follow.

Right now, he needs to know just how badly I want him. How I wish we were in his apartment so I could strip him bare. I caught enough glimpses of his body this afternoon to make me drool. Trying on clothes and being fitted for a suit has never been so tantalizing. Plus, I know what he's packing beneath those dark jeans. What I don't know yet is what it's like without Katherine in the middle.

He doesn't shy away from my possession, doesn't resist my hold. In fact, he pulls me closer, a leg wrapping behind mine.

His scent goes to my head. Crisp rain, evergreen forest with a touch of something subtly sweet and slightly musky.

God, I want to lick him. Bite him. Taste him.

He nips my lower lip. I squeeze his throat, growling with pleasure. He releases me, pulling back a fraction.

"You like it rough, don't you?" he whispers. "I felt it that night."

I freeze, not even breathing. He doesn't seem shocked or disgusted.

But then, why would he? He loves trying new things. Told me so himself. A man as open and as adventurous as Gabriel Rothburn probably couldn't care less about a kinky partner.

My breath comes out in a whoosh.

"Sit before you fall down."

I let him guide me to the floor. My pulse thunders in my ears, and I suck in a needy gulp of air. With my shoulders pressed against the metal wall panel, I glance over at him. There's just enough light from where his phone rests on the floor next to one of the bags. He glances my way, curious and calm.

"It's okay if you do," he assures me in that quiet tone that smooths out my ruffled feathers.

"I know, it's just..." I can't finish the sentence.

I swallow back all the fear and hesitation that I've carried since my early twenties. Knowing I'm just built different. Not conventional or vanilla, exactly. And yet, for her, I'm trying to be because it's what's 'normal.'

"Talk to me," he urges, utterly sincere.

I'm so tempted.

"What is it? You want to tie her up?"

"What?"

"Your kink. Something is holding you back. I just wondered what it was."

I blow out a sigh as I gather my courage. I've had his tongue in my mouth. This shouldn't be such a big deal.

He watches me with steady blue eyes and the slightest smirk. How can one be so smart and so good-looking? It's just not fair.

And why does he make me want to spill all my secrets?

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“Looks like we’ve found something to thwart your panic attacks,” he says, changing the subject effortlessly.

My shoulders drop a fraction. It’s odd how I couldn’t care less about being judged in any other arena of my life, but when it comes to this, my lips are sealed.

What the hell is wrong with me? Katherine’s my best friend. We’ve traveled together, stayed up all night watching old movies. I’ve helped her study for exams, and she had my back when I struck out on my own, away from family expectations and business.

But what I want from her—secretly, deeply want—is not conventional. There’s no way my fantasies are Park Avenue Princess-approved.

Gabe grins at me, somehow cocky and sweet at the same time. It’s fucking adorable and makes my spirits lift further.

“I’ve never actually made out in an elevator before,” he says.

“Me either.” And now I’m trembling for a whole new reason. Bittersweet relief travels down my spine, spreading to my fingers and toes. For the moment, my anxiety has faded, replaced with desire. “Who knew that could be the solution to severe claustrophobia.”

He smiles, gaze raking the length of me. I shouldn’t like it so much, and I definitely shouldn’t encourage it. At least not until we’ve talked to Katherine.

Thinking about my best friend cools my ardor, and I sag.

“I doubt it’s actually the cure,” he murmurs, sounding so smart and sure of himself. “But it’s one hell of a distraction.”

My discomfort bleeds back in from the edges. Starting in my mind with a thousand what-if statements. Questions. Memories. Fear. And soon, my body follows suit. Chest tight, breathing labored, skin prickling like I’m being stabbed with needles. I start to go numb.

And then Gabe’s there, slinging a leg across my lap, cupping my cheeks in his hands, pulling my attention to him like the world’s strongest magnet.

“You’re okay, King.”

A little of the dread melts away.

“Do I need to kiss you again?” The corner of his mouth hitches up.

“Don’t tease me with a good time.”

His weight on my legs is solid, grounding me. I suck in a deep breath and slide my palms up his thighs. He stays there, hands holding my face, gaze locked with mine. I can barely reconcile him with the person who Katherine used to get so steamed over. His compassion pulls me out of my tailspin.

“I like teasing you,” he admits, so soft it’s almost like it’s a confession.

Then he ducks his head, coming closer, hot breath feathering across my cheeks.

“You’re trying to kill me.”

“Why on Earth would I do that?”

“Less competition.”

“We’re not competing, King. We’re partners.”

Partners.

That sounds incredible.

I have an amazing family, to be sure. But there’s something so special about rallying a crew of like-minded people. Friends. Found family.

The way he’s staring down at me right now, hope alive in his eyes, expectation bracketing that sensual mouth, he feels the same way. This is a man who understands what it’s like to leave one’s family and build his own.

For years, decades, really, that’s been Alex.

And now he’s letting Katherine and me inside.

He’s making space for us in his life. In his apartment.

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I'm beyond touched. Overwhelmed really.

What the hell are they pumping into this elevator? My emotions are all over the place.

He smiles when I nod. "Partners."

I coast a hand up his stomach and hook in around his neck, pulling him down for that kiss he promised. Stretching up, I seal my lips with his, fears forgotten. As his tongue once again plays along the seam of my mouth, I groan and welcome him inside.

I'm instantly hard again, cock surging, screaming for relief. A touch. Anything.

But as gone as I am, I don't forget where we are. And while I'm pretty sure the cameras are down, I'm not willing to bet his reputation on it.

So I deepen the kiss and vow to keep it in my pants for now.

When he lifts his head, breathing heavily, the truth tumbles from my lips.

"I was young when my nanny and I got stuck in an elevator. It's been bad ever since. My parents moved to a different building, one where the elevator had a window. That made it better, but not great."

He sits back, hands sliding down my chest. "And that's how you manage on the sailboat."

I nod. "Windows. And lots of fresh air."

“You know the great thing about being an adult? You can do things you couldn’t as a kid. You’re not stuck, King.”

I glance up at him, past him, to the ceiling panels. All the anxiety melts away, and the familiar tingle of curiosity pulses through me. He’s right. There are all kinds of things I can do now that I couldn’t do back then.

“Help me up.”

For a moment, just a split second, he looks disappointed. Then his lips curl up the slightest bit, and he pushes to his feet, reaching for my hands.

“Give me a boost.”

“What?” His jaw falls.

I lace my fingers together and squat, showing him what I want him to do. “Like this.”

“Why?”

I point at the ceiling. “I want to see what’s up there.”

“Oh, good grief.” But he indulges me. I place my foot in his hands and reach for the metal panels as he lifts. My fingers glide along the edges, feeling for a latch.

“You know, if you wanted to put your dick in my face, you could have just asked,” he says dryly.

I glance down and find his cheek pressed against my thigh. Pleasure spikes through me, and a laugh bursts from my lips. Damn, that feels good.

Focus King.

I wiggle the panel off, thankful that it's decorative and clipped into place. I'm sure that keeps the weight down, but it doesn't exactly give me the warm fuzzies about how well this tin can is built. The sound of water grows louder, like it's running over rocks, but I don't feel any moisture.

The backup light flicks on, blinding me. I turn my head and shield my eyes. "What the hell?"

I drop down from the ceiling, and Gabe steadies me as I blink away the blue dots blurring my vision.

Behind him, the call button lights up, and a man's voice fills the air.

"You guys stand by. We're bringing you down to level three, okay?"

"Great," Gabe says, finding his voice quicker than me. "Thanks."

We have an instant to rejoice before the elevator starts to descend.

37

ALEX

Gabe's ringtone wakes me from a sound sleep, and I pat the nightstand, searching for my phone. Beside me, Katherine doesn't wake but the chime and my movement obviously disturb her. She nestles closer, arm draped across my chest.

Finally palming my phone, I answer the call, holding it to my ear. "Hey," I whisper, not bothering to see what time it is.

Outside, the city twinkles, and a shimmering golden glow lights our bedroom. We couldn't bring ourselves to close the curtains.

"Hey. Sorry to call so early."

Years ago, I promised him I'd always answer. Three a.m. Whenever. And I'm not going to break it now. He might have chronic insomnia, but he's not the type to reach out unless it's important.

I pull the device from my ear and glance at the time at the top of the screen—just after three-thirty.

"What's up?"

I slide out from under Katherine slowly, careful not to jostle her, and head for the living room.

“There was a massive flood in the building. Everyone’s been evacuated.”

I blink and run a hand over my face. What the hell is he talking about? A tidal wave? And which building?

I stare at the phone again, trying to figure out if this is all a bizarre dream. But I highly doubt I’d leave Katherine to answer a phone call in my dreams. We have much better things to do.

“Say that again.”

“Our apartment building. It flooded.”

“How? Is everyone okay?”

I pull the phone away again and switch to speakerphone so I can check my messages. There’s a handful from Gabe’s security team saying something about water coming down the elevator shaft. A picture of water spraying from the gaps in the doors. The next one says they’re evacuating the parking garage and the apartments.

I shoot back a quick text, asking them to keep me up to date.

“We’re fine,” he says. “I don’t think anyone’s hurt or anything. It’s just a mess.”

I grapple with what he’s saying, fighting the grogginess of sleep. I need to get in touch with my team. But first, I shoot off another text to a friend who does a bit of investigative work on the side. I want to know everything the building supervisors aren’t going to tell us.

Alex: Need you to look into something for me. Flooding at my apartment building. Let me know if you find anything suspicious.

I shoot over my address. The whole thing could be completely innocent, but after the last week, and with at least three high-profile people living in the same building, I'm not going to risk getting caught with my pants down. I need to know if there's something nefarious going on. I seriously wouldn't put it past Lucinda Winthrop to hire a crony to do her dirty work. Hell, she probably keeps one on staff.

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know so you didn't hear about it from the news or something. I got us a place to stay while that gets sorted." His voice softens. Why does he sound so tender? "A brownstone so King doesn't have to deal with an elevator."

"Sounds good."

"I'll text you the address and any updates."

"We're coming home today," I tell him.

"Good." His voice drops. "I think King could use a dose of Katherine."

Can't we all? "What happened?"

"He gets claustrophobic in elevators. Had a panic attack when it got stuck."

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“The elevator got stuck?”

“It stopped. I don’t know if stuck is the right word. The power went out, I’m guessing because water and electricity... not good bedfellows.”

Okay. That makes sense. And I’m not surprised Kingston had a panic attack. Every time he’s gotten five feet from an elevator, his movements get all robotic. He dives into his phone and I swear he’s either counting his breaths or the floors.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. I talked him off the ledge. Then he tried to climb out through the ceiling panels,” he says with a wry laugh.

“That doesn’t exactly sound like a smart solution.” But fear does weird things to people.

A lamp clicks on behind me and I glance over my shoulder to find Katherine wrapped in her robe, hair in a delightful disarray.

“I’ll text you when we take off,” I tell him.

“K. Fly safe.”

Katherine crosses to me, and I lose my phone before reaching for her. She slides into my arms like she was always meant to be there. Because she was.

“Hey,” she says softly, as if she doesn’t want to disturb the quiet of the night. But I’m pretty sure I disturbed her quiet. “Everything okay?”

God, I love this woman. It’s the middle of the night, and she’s checking on me. It’s such a small thing, yet it feels big. So many people don’t have that.

“Gabe called. There was a flood in our building. They’ve been evacuated.”

“What?” she cries, alarm ringing through the luxurious suite.

I guide her to the sofa. Settling on the cushion, I tug her into my lap. Why is it that anytime her cute little ass is propped on my thigh, everything seems right?

“I don’t know any details yet. Just that they were on the elevator when it happened.”

“Oh my god. I’ve got to call King. He’ll be out of his mind.”

She launches to her feet and races into the bedroom. A handful of seconds later, she returns with her phone, fingers flying over the virtual keys.

“Gabe handled it. King is okay,” I assure her.

She pauses, lifting worried eyes to mine. “He’s been afraid of elevators for as long as I’ve known him.”

I pat my thigh. “Gabe said they’re staying in a brownstone tonight. No elevator needed.”

She visibly relaxes at the news, then curls up in my lap again, tucked tight against my chest. Heavenly.

“His parents bought a brownstone,” she murmurs. “So he wouldn’t have to suffer.”

I can’t imagine trying to live and work in New York City and being terrified of elevators. There’s no land left, so developers just build higher. I can understand why he left.

“No wonder he’s so close to them.”

“Right? They’ve always been considerate.”

Which is the opposite of her own mother. She doesn’t have to say it. We’re both thinking it.

I’m grateful she had the Saints as an example, a refuge when she was growing up. There’s no doubt being a good parent is probably one of the toughest jobs in the world, but it’s always amazing to me just how terrible some are. The things Gabe told me about his childhood were chilling.

I press a kiss into her hair. “I’ll wake up the pilot so we can head home.”

“Wait,” she whispers, hand on my chest. “Don’t wake her. Not yet. There’s nothing we can do right now, anyway, right?”

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“Probably not. Gabe’s going to keep me updated, as will my team.”

“So we don’t need to rush.”

“No. I just thought you’d be anxious to get back.” And I’ll do whatever it takes to make her happy, even if it’s sending her back into the arms of her best friend.

She tips her chin up and looks up at me like I hung the moon, a half smile curving her lips. Damn, she’s pretty in the warm Paris glow. “I am. I just don’t want our time here to end, either. Not yet.”

38

KATHERINE

Alex’s dark eyes meet mine, and a smile hovers on his lips. He’s not a smiler, my Alex. But my admission pleased him.

I’m torn. I want to see King. Hug him. Make sure, with my own eyes, that he’s okay.

But if Gabe got them a safe space to stay, away from prying eyes... My heart squeezes. I want to know the full story. I want to hug them both.

Aside from that, what am I going to do? If they’ve evacuated our building, I’d just be in the way.

“Let’s just enjoy our last few hours in Paris, and we can fly home early.” I press

against his cheek. “Just not in the middle of the night. Let them sleep.”

“Okay,” he says, his voice dark and rough as his scruff. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

I know him well enough by now to decipher that sentence. He’s not planning to come back to bed.

“What about you?”

“I have some calls to make.”

I lean away from the circle of his arms and slide my hands to his shoulders. “In the middle of the night?”

I quirk an eyebrow, and his lips twitch. Gotcha.

“It’s not even bedtime on the East Coast.”

“Will it keep?” I ask, closing the distance between us.

He tips his chin up, those gorgeous eyes heating. “Perhaps.”

Holding on to him for balance, I straddle his thighs, the robe tangling around my lower body. A big hand slides along the exposed skin of my thigh, then jerks the fabric, freeing me.

“I could get some beauty sleep?—”

“You don’t need it,” he cuts in, adorably cheesy.

His sweet words set fire to my veins. Who would have thought Alexander Hunt

would have such a soft spot and say such lovey-dovey things? I adore this side of him. The softer, quieter side that he shows so rarely.

“Or—” I trail my fingertips down his naked chest.

“I like where this is going.”

“Do you?” I tease? Then I lean back, acting like I’m getting up. “I could go back to bed.”

He snags a hand around the back of my neck and jerks me down into a kiss. Warm, firm lips move beneath mine, an erotic dance that has me shifting in his lap. I need to be closer. I need less fabric between us.

He’s right. This isn’t solely about sex. But when I walked out here and saw him gloriously naked, bathed in the glittering light of the city, I immediately wanted to create a few memories.

Sinking my fingers into his hair, I sweep my tongue along the seam of his lips. He groans, and his hands tighten on my thighs. I’ll never get enough of him or those masterful hands. Nor his kisses or his heat. Definitely not the way he’s always thinking about what I need and how he can make me happy.

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I want to return the favor.

I will return the favor.

Sucking on his tongue, I grind against his crotch. He's getting harder by the second, prodding the underside of my thigh.

His hands twist in the tie of my robe, yanking me down against his erection. A ragged breath escapes my lips, and I use the interruption to trail kisses along his jaw. A deeply masculine groan rumbles from his chest, and I smile, giddy. The way he never stifles himself is such a gift for my soul. And my ego. I love knowing what I do to him.

My hands coast over his muscles, and let's be honest, it's like touching a furnace. I slide back a few inches and continue my quest with my tongue. Down the strong column of his throat, across his collarbone.

He jerks, a breath hissing between his lips when I flick his nipple with the tip of my tongue.

“Beauty—” He growls the endearment.

I slide to the floor, grinning up at him and his magnificent cock. It's a work of art. I glide my hands down his incredible body, so broad and honed, dusted with dark hair.

He cups the back of my head but doesn't try to control my movement. It's more like he needs the connection.

“Let me make you feel good.”

“You already do. Every time you smile at me.”

His words hit me deep, stealing my oxygen and overflowing my heart with all the best feelings.

“Stop distracting me with your pretty words, handsome,” I say, shooting him a teasing smile. He returns it, and I swear I start to glow from the inside out.

This man who knows the worst the world has to offer, who rarely smiles and is oh-so-serious, has found his joy. In me. In this relationship we’re building. Gulping, I duck my face, nuzzling his thigh.

His muscles flex, and his cock bobs.

“You’re the distracting one. Wrapped up in a fluffy robe, but I can still see down the front.” He reaches out and brushes the neckline over my shoulder. “I dream about your breasts. Did you know that?”

His thumb traces my collarbone, and my breathing shallows.

“All those curve-hugging dresses. The evening gowns that offer them up on a platter. They’re perfection. You’re perfection.”

My moan turns to a purr as I take his cock in hand.

So, while I was crushing on him, he was crushing on me. My mind races, wondering if either of us would have ever taken the first step.

But I shut the thoughts down because this is my reality now. And I’m not going to

miss a moment.

“Thank you.”

His skin is hot and silky, straining over his flesh. Such a gorgeous picture, washed with the peach light, head tossed back. And then he pins me with a look volcanic enough to melt rubber.

I swipe my thumb through the precum gathered at the tip, luxuriating in the ability to touch him like this. At three in the morning or whenever I want to. I'm utterly spoiled.

He spreads his thighs, making room for me. I blow warm air across the tip, and he sucks in a shuddering breath.

There's nothing like making my men needy.

All three of them have confidence in spades. Could have anyone they wanted, and they want me.

He smells like sleep and sin. My mouth waters, wanting to taste him. To feel him in my mouth, bursting across my tongue, gagging me. I'm high on power. Drunk on love. And oh-so-ready to make a new memory with him.

Tongue darting out, I lick my way around the crown of his cock, fluttering little licks that have his hips jerking. He's trying, unsuccessfully, to guide himself into my mouth, but I'm not letting him yet. And he's not about to force it.

He likes being teased. I can feel it in the way his body strains against the too small sofa.

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The whole time, I've let my hands wander. Cupping his balls, sliding up his abs, teasing the sensitive spot just beneath the plump head.

When I finally take him deep, we moan together.

“Fuck!” He threads his fingers through my hair as I fight to take him deeper.

He's so big. My lips stretch wide, and my jaw aches. I wrap a hand around the base and cup his balls with my other hand.

His hips buck, and his shaft expands between my lips. The hot spray of his cum splashes against the back of my throat, choking me. Tears well in my eyes as my body reacts, screaming against the invasion. I wasn't ready. I'd barely begun.

My drool and his cum slide down his shaft as I lift off slowly.

Because it's a mess and incredible and fucking naughty. He might have come, but bringing him that kind of pleasure spikes my own.

He palms the back of my head, petting my hair. “Fuck,” he says again, this time, disbelief coloring the word. “I'm sorry, Katie Bird. I've been so worked up.”

Smiling, I lick him clean, loving his salty flavor. I never thought I'd like it so much. But when you're with the right person?—

“Glad I could help.”

He hooks his hands beneath my arms and hauls me back into his lap, his long cock trapped between us. With a hand cupping my cheek, he steals a kiss. I rock against him, wrapping around him as best I can. He can be the tree, and I'll be the koala.

His tongue swipes my lower lip, and I shudder, opening immediately and sinking into the kiss. This gives a new meaning to French kissing. Deep, breath-stealing, lighting every nerve ending on fire.

Finally, when we're both starving for air, he pulls back but tips his forehead against mine.

“If that was helping, I'm going to need more help for the rest of my life.”

Seriously, he can't keep saying stuff like that to me. A girl could get used to it.

???

An hour later and after a shower, we're dressed and strolling to the Seine. There's an early morning bustle as the city wakes. Lights flicker on around us, and the scent of dough is heavy in the air. My mouth waters because even though New York makes the best bagels, there's nothing like a fresh croissant from a corner cafe in Paris.

Alex's men keep a reasonable distance. I don't. I cling to his arm, staying as close as public decency allows. But this is the city of love. Paris is accustomed to lovers.

Playing tourist with Alex is magical. No one cares who we are. The media has left us alone. No one follows us down the street with their phone out, recording us or peppering us with questions.

“Thank you for this,” I say, not for the first time on this trip. “I didn't realize how much I needed to get away.”

“Any time, Katie Bird.”

I press a kiss against his bicep. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

I try to remember the last time I was able to depend on anyone the way I can with him. Steadfast. Solid.

“I do.” He pauses beneath the canopy of a tree right in the middle of the sidewalk. After a quick glance around, he meets my gaze. “You woke me up, Katherine. Reminded me that life is for living. I was just existing for far too long.”

I squeeze his fingers, heat rushing up the back of my neck at the fierce praise. “I don’t want to exist,” I whisper.

Without that auction, I’d still be on the hamster wheel, running for my life and never getting anywhere. I cling tighter because the idea of missing out on this is physically painful. My stomach sours and my nose stings with unshed tears.

Now that I’ve felt this way, whole and calm and like I belong, I wish that for everyone. I wish I could feel it forever.

“I want to live.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and offers me another smile. “Me too.”

“I want to live with you. And Gabe and Kingston. I want to make memories and feel so happy I could burst every single day.” The truth swells up and pours out of me. It’s wild and new and crazy. Like seriously the craziest thing I’ve ever admitted, but it’s true. And it doesn’t matter about the timeline because I realize now that everything happened just as it should have, right on time.

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My stomach growls, and I laugh.

“Come on. Let’s feed you.” He wraps his arm around my waist, and I do the same.

We stop in a barely open shop. If I could bottle up the scent of this place, I would.

“Bonjour,” I greet the woman behind the counter. Then, I order our breakfast and espresso for Alex. Un Café au Lait for me.

Outside, we pick a cozy table.

“I love it when you order for me,” he admits, arranging his chair so he’s next to me. With an arm draped over the backrest, I snuggle in close and sip my coffee.

His admission surprises me. In my experience, men don’t like admitting they don’t know something. Or that they can’t do everything themselves. Grandfather would have had an aneurism if I’d ordered for him.

But this is Alex, and he’s a world apart from my grandfather.

“You do?”

“Yeah. It’s sexy.”

Did I mention I’m glowing?

If only we could just forget about going home. Gabe and King could join us here, and

this dream wouldn't have to end.

“What are you thinking about right now?” He nibbles at his croissant, and the scent of buttery-starchy goodness makes my mouth water.

“That I don't want to go home. Gabe and King could meet us here.”

“You'd have to teach us French,” he says without missing a beat.

“My pleasure.”

We eat in blissful silence for several moments. I drain my coffee and brush the crumbs from my lap. “Earlier, when I said I wanted to live with you, I meant live. Not cohabitate or whatever.” I wave a hand, rambling. Unease prickles the back of my neck.

Why isn't he saying anything?

He finishes his coffee and sets his cup aside. Then he hooks my chin with the tip of his finger, staring deep into my eyes. The air shifts between us, heavy with anticipation.

“I know what you meant, Beauty. And I certainly don't mind the other way either.”

“Really?” This all still seems so new and fast.

“Why does that surprise you?”

I huff a laugh and lift a brow, dislodging his finger. “You're a confirmed bachelor.”

“I was.” He glances at the little bistro table. “Let's walk along the river.”

With my hand in his, strolling to the Seine, I absorb everything. The uneven stones beneath my feet, the voices coming from the shops, even the wind in the trees. I don't want to forget a thing.

I'd like to bottle this moment. This single, perfect moment where I feel loved and in love. Where the expectations are quiet and so are my doubts. Like I might just burst from the happiness expanding inside me.

What a way to go.

We find a bench away from prying eyes. "What do you think the guys are doing right now?"

"If I know Gabe, he's probably on the phone looking for answers about what happened to the building and when he can get back inside."

I'd forgotten about the flood. My cheeks burn. "I should call King."

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“Before you do, I got you something.” He leans to the side and fishes something out of his pants pocket.

My heart lifts at the small box.

39

GABE

“Can’t sleep?” Kingston asks, voice rough.

His soft footfalls draw my gaze to the stairs behind me. He wears the same pants he had on yesterday, chest gloriously bare. Small lights along the staircase backlight him with a honey glow.

I shake my head and glance out at the garden behind the brownstone we’ll be inhabiting for who knows how long. Thank heavens for this place. This is the safe haven away from the chaos we need.

I have no idea what time it is, but I encouraged him to head to bed ages ago. With half a dozen bedrooms to choose from and an incredible oval-shaped staircase leading to all of them, he has his pick. No need to use the elevator.

Outside, the inky darkness is both eerie and peaceful. The shadowy yard is wall-to-wall plants with strategically lit trees. A path meanders through the plot, and there’s a water feature at the back, peeking between the vegetation.

But I barely see any of it.

My whiskey glass ran empty a while ago.

My eyes are glazed over from lack of sleep. Too much staring into space and too little blinking, if I'm honest.

I texted and made calls for hours. Vic, then the head of maintenance, my team. I don't want to be that guy, but I want to know when I can get back into my apartment. I like my routine. I like my stuff.

My mind is finally starting to downshift, but I doubt I could sleep if I tried.

King stops in front of the wall of glass, hands loose at his sides. His feet are bare, and although I've never had a foot fetish, right now, I'm digging this look.

The warm glow from the outdoor lighting plays over his muscles. His shoulders are a work of art. David has nothing on him. And I've felt those obliques up close. The gorgeous curve of his biceps.

Stop gawking.

Easier thought than done.

I drag my attention away and glance out at the vegetation. My goal was to make Kingston comfortable, but it occurred to me that Katherine would love this place. All these plants.

After living in the clouds for the last dozen years, being so close to the ground is unfamiliar. Even with the doors closed, it smells different down here. Earthy, sort of damp and magical. Does he smell it?

Maybe not. Living on a sailboat, he's used to being at sea level.

King is quieter than usual and I'm not sure if it's because of the elevator or our make-out session. Perhaps it's both.

I'm not going to regret such an amazing connection.

And I'm not going to force him to open up. He'll do it in his own time.

Even after everything that happened today, the quiet feels right. Companionable.

He turns as if sensing my feelings. His gaze flicks to the empty glass, then rakes me slowly from head to toe.

"Come on." He holds out a hand to me.

"What?" I stare at his palm, my body coming alive at the memory of his touch. His kiss.

"You need rest."

"I'm fine." I shrug a shoulder as I give the line that I've repeated so many times. As if it doesn't bother me that my dreams are tortured, my sleep is restless, and I take enough B12 to kill a horse.

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 9:06 am

“Yeah, you are. But you need rest, and so do I, and I can’t do that if you’re down here ruminating.”

Hearing such a complex word rolling off his tongue should not turn me on, but... it does. And he’s right. I could sit here all night reliving every minute we were stuck in that elevator. Driving myself mad with memories of his lips slamming into mine. Making up stories about Katherine and Alex and all the fun they’re having without us.

Night is fucking evil. And my demons know exactly how to hurt me.

He wiggles his fingers, waiting for me to take his hand.

I slide my palm against his, and his grip tightens. And just like that, the tables are turned. Now, he’s helping me. Tugging me to my feet.

There’s a charged moment when we’re toe-to-toe, still touching. Does he remember those heated moments? How good it felt when I straddled his lap and pulled him back from the darkness?

Anticipation sizzles between us, a lively current, whipping and snapping.

He said rest, but this doesn’t feel restful. It’s like a wave coming in. Swelling with hope.

But he lets my hand go and takes a step back. I feel the reluctance in his movement. What a pair we are. Me unable to sleep, and him terrified of elevators.

“I—” I stumble over my words. It’s hard to admit my vulnerabilities. But if he can do it, so can I. “I don’t sleep much.”

“I’ve noticed.” The corner of his mouth hitches up in a half smile that has me sharing more.

“It’s hard to turn my brain off. Sometimes I have nightmares.”

He nods and tucks his hands in his back pockets. “Okay.”

God, he’s handsome. My stomach clenches, aching and needy. But that’s the least remarkable thing about this moment. His relaxed posture invites me to say more. Or say less. He’s not rushing or pressing.

He’s just here, with me, waiting and content. One of the few people in the world who doesn’t feel entitled to a piece of me.

How fucking novel.

“Maybe we should watch a movie. Would that help?” he asks, throwing me back to the night we fell asleep on my sectional.

I shrug. “Maybe.”

I’ve tried everything, but honestly, the best sleep I’ve had in years has been this week when one of them is next to me.

He leads the way back to the bedroom he selected on the second floor. On the side of the bed nearest the door, the covers are thrown back. The slender lamp on the nightstand glows, waiting for his return. His shirt is draped over a chair in the corner.

“Which side do you want?” he asks easily, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

As if he’s not a born and bred billionaire and I’m not a self made man eight years older than him. As if we didn’t make out in an elevator only a few hours ago. As if there’s not enough tension crackling between us to power this block for a week.

But he was right the other day, too. We need to talk to Katherine. There’s a lot to discuss.

“I could...” I jerk a thumb over my shoulder, indicating the other bedrooms.

He glances past me and then looks me in the eye. “You sleep best when you’re next to someone, right?”

“I doubt I’d sleep well next to a serial killer.”

“Gabe—”

His hands move to the button of his pants.

“Yeah?”

There’s a soft snick as he undoes the zipper.

“Get in the bed.”

“You’re kinda hot when you’re bossy.” I stride around to the opposite side and peel off my shirt.

“You think so?” He shoves his pants down, then tosses them at the chair. In nothing but a pair of dark boxer briefs, he slides beneath the crisp white linens. Grabbing the remote, he clicks on the TV on the opposite wall and scrolls through endless streaming options.

“Is that what you’re so worried about? That Katherine won’t like you bossing her around in the bedroom?”

Stripping down to my boxers, I climb in next to him. There’s plenty of space between us in the king-sized bed.

“For the record, I don’t think she’d care. And it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I know.” After a moment, he asks, “What looks good?”

I settle against the pillows, and a bit of my anxiety slips away. “Anything.”

“Rom-com it is.”

I grunt, and he laughs. Rolling toward him, I reach for the remote. “Give me that.”

He snatches it out of reach, still laughing. “What? You said anything. This is

anything.”

He waves a hand at the screen, where Richard Gere flashes his trademark smile.

“A classic. But too...”

“Sexy?” King fills in.

“Yeah.” That’s the last thing we need right now.

“Less sexy. Got it.” He flips the channel, and we settle on You’ve Got Mail.

I slide down, trying to convince my body that we at least know how to do this. Fall into slumber. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and hold for a count of four.

“Gabe—”

A strong hand rocks me awake, and my body comes online. It’s still dark out, quiet. But my heartbeat rages in my ears.

“You had a nightmare,” King whispers, hand running up and down my arm.

His touch soothes me and I relax against the bed, the tension easing slowly.

“Want to talk about it?” he asks.

“Can’t remember it.” At least not this one. But it’s probably not different from all the others. Unable to escape. Trapped. Normal people probably don’t dream of farm equipment trying to murder them.

He slides closer, his front to my back, and drapes an arm over my chest. The weight

and warmth are so comforting.

“Is this okay?”

I nod.

“Words, Gabe.”

“It’s great.” Which is the understatement of the century.

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KATHERINE

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Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 9:06 am

Kingston: guys...we have a problem.

Alex: What is it?

Gabe: why aren't you asleep?

Kingston: because I can't sleep when Stan is stuck in your penthouse by himself.

Gabe: he's a he now?

Alex: who?

Kingston: Stan

Alex: who the hell is Stan?

Gabe: his plant

Kingston: do you know many women named Stan?

Alex: Can't say I do. Isn't Stan a succulent? Katherine said they can go a few weeks without water right?

Kingston: you think it'll be weeks before we can get back into the apartment?

Kingston: what about her other plants?

Kingston: they're not like Stan. She babies some of them. A lot of them.

Kingston: they're moody and temperamental and Simon comes by to care for them b/c they're a bunch of prima donnas.

Gabe: breathe, dude

Gabe: We'll know more tomorrow...later today.

Gabe: I'm sure Stan is fine. Probably enjoying the view.

Alex: I'll contact her plant guy and have him on standby for when we learn more.

Kingston: Simon! Good idea. We might need a rescue mission.

Gabe: Gonna climb up the elevator shaft like you're in Mission Impossible?

Kingston: if I need to.

Kingston: I've actually never done that before.

Kingston: could be fun.

???

Katherine

The SUV slows to a stop on a tree-lined street. Alex and I came straight here from the airport.

I'm eager to see Kingston and Gabe. And there might be a mixture of dread and

curiosity because King and I never did get to talk about whatever it was he wanted to talk about.

Knowing him, it could be surfing off the coast of Portugal or skydiving over a glacier. But I have a feeling it's a lot more personal than that. Which is why my stomach is in knots.

“Wait for me,” Alex says, his voice deliciously dark.

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Every mile closer to New York increased his tension. Now he's wound tight like a spring, and I hate that for him. But I love the way he takes care of me.

The driver opens the rear door, and Alex is there, hand outstretched. He looks utterly delicious in his dark jeans, and the lightweight sweater stretches across his shoulders and clings gently to his muscles.

I tuck my phone into my purse, once again pushing reality down a little longer. I missed another call from my boss and one from a journalist. I don't know how she got my number.

Taking Alex's hand, I step out of the black SUV and into the gloom. The drizzle is so different from the beauty we left in Paris, where it was bright and fresh and postcard-perfect. I glance around, bracing for paparazzi.

Miraculously, the sidewalks are empty.

Alex's hand settles against the small of my back, and we march up the thick stone stairs to a stately home. The facade is a cream-colored rock with half a dozen windows. Chunky urns overflowing with cheerful light pink and white flowers flank the entrance.

The thick wooden door swings open, and King stands there, hair disheveled. There's a twinkle in his eyes that hits me in the stomach.

My Kingston.

Remembering that we're still very much in the public eye, I step past him into a lovely foyer. Turning, I see King give Alex a nod before he closes and locks the door.

"I'm going to look around," Alex murmurs, disappearing into the house like he's part of the woodwork.

I immediately miss his steady touch, but my heart aches for King.

"Destiny's in the kitchen," Kingston calls over his shoulder.

"Nice!" Alex waves, and if I'm not mistaken, he double-times it toward the back of the house.

"Destiny, huh?"

I grin at Kingston, looking him over with eyes that have cataloged him for years. His hair's a bit disheveled, and he looks a little sleep-deprived, but overall, he's his normal, handsome self.

I don't know what I expected. Bloodshot eyes and hair standing on end like a cartoon character, perhaps.

"Their chef. Gabe says her cinnamon buns are legendary."

I glance around, wondering if there are other staff waiting in the wings. Kingston knows me well and shoots that stomach-melting half-smile my way. "He doesn't have a butler if that's who you're looking for."

I assumed not since I hadn't seen any sign of one before.

My heart trips over itself, and I drop my purse in my haste to hug my best friend. My

lashes flutter closed as his strong arms wrap around my waist. He clings to me, face pressed into the side of my neck.

“Are you okay?” I touch him all over. Even though I know he wasn’t injured, I can’t help but check. Fill my hands with his honed muscles, the gorgeous body I’ve come to know so intimately this last week.

“I’m fine.”

I lean back, not because he’d lie to me, but because he’d lie to himself. “Are you sure?”

He grins, knowing that I know his tricks. I love the happy crinkles around his eyes.

“Promise,” he says. “Glad you’re home, though.”

Home.

Has there ever been a sweeter word? Not in any language I know.

I throw myself at him again as pleasure and relief rush through me in equal parts.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur over and over, kissing every inch I can reach.

His hands circle my waist, and he laughs. “What are you sorry for?”

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“Leaving right after you got here. Leaving at all.”

He slides a hand up my back and sinks it into the hair at my nape. My body relaxes against his, and I let out a happy sigh. “You’re allowed to go on vacation, Wildfire.”

“I know, but?—”

“No buts.” He bends his knees so he can look me right in the eye. “I could get stuck in an elevator any day of the week. And it could’ve happened while you were in New York. No more guilt.”

He says that like it’s not his kryptonite. His worst nightmare. The monster in the shadows, always taunting him. “I hate that it happened at all, but especially when I was half a world away.”

And he’s right. Guilt burns through me like acid reflux.

“I missed you.” His grip tightens in my hair.

“I missed you, too,” I whisper.

“I missed doing this.” He slants his lips across mine.

I moan, my fingers squeezing his muscles, then loosening as I sink into our kiss. He tastes like coffee and smells like sin.

I missed this, too. But I can’t say the words when he’s stealing all the oxygen from my

lungs.

Clinging to his shoulders, I return kiss for kiss. Pouring everything I'm feeling into it. The longing, the relief, the happiness. I want to climb into his shirt and stay there, snuggled against him. I want to feel his heart beating against mine, crave the warmth of his skin. I want everything.

He nibbles his way down my jaw to the tender spot below my right ear. Chills ripple through me, not entirely unpleasant. He makes an appraising sound low in his throat like he understands just what he's doing to me. How weak he's making my knees.

And knowing King, he likes it.

He has a quiet competitive streak. It shows itself at the strangest times. Sometimes, he's competing with himself, and sometimes it's with others.

But until this moment, it didn't occur to me that he might end up competing with Alex and Gabe. That this euphoric first week might turn into a dick-measuring contest.

Smart, Katherine. Real smart.

But as quickly as the thought forms, he chases it away with strategic kisses down my neck. And then I lose all thought when he sucks at my tender skin, ramping up my already accelerating need.

"King," I whimper, not recognizing my own voice.

He lets out a dark chuckle and goes back to leaving his mark on me.

Holy smokes.

Electricity zaps through me, and my toes curl. He pulls me tighter to his hips, leaving nothing to the imagination. His cock grows, pressing against me, needing me as badly as I need him.

There's a faint ping sound, which I ignore. We're totally making out in the foyer of this incredible house, and I don't even care if someone catches us.

I widen my stance, feeling lightheaded and wobbly. It's all his fault. And again, he chuckles. Lifts his head. Stares at me with suddenly stormy eyes.

Then he lifts his wrist and glances at his watch. I hear the soft vibration as it buzzes against his skin.

“What is it?”

41

KINGSTON

Katherine lifts a curious brow.

The notification on my watch reads ‘abnormal heart rate.’

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No kidding.

Kissing her is like sticking my lips to a downed electrical line.

“You make my heart race,” I say, releasing my grip on her hair as I flash the display her way.

She reads the message, and her lips curve up, parting slightly. “Ditto.”

I take a half step back, and my dick protests. He’s not in charge of this rodeo, though, I am.

Less kissing. More talking.

Easier said than done when she’s looking at me like I’m a real live unicorn. That sort of adoration could go to my head.

“Did you have a good time?” I ask. Another step back and I reach for her hands. Focus on her trip, King. On the things we need to discuss, not how pretty her lips are.

She nods and glances over my shoulder. I glance back, the air shifting as Alex appears, looking a little less stern than he did a few minutes ago. Good snacks will do that.

“Katherine was about to tell me about your trip. Hope you guys took pictures,” I say.

Alex halts next to us, brow lifted like, 'Did you really just say that?'

"I meant of the city. Gardens. You know, the sights."

Katherine laughs.

"Your mind's in the gutter," I mutter.

"Guilty," she says with a snicker. "I wonder why that is."

His lips twitch, and he turns his attention to Katherine. "I need to head to the office for a little while. Gabe's going to be home late. Roman is on his way here."

Alex glances my way. "Everything's okay with Tomasz?"

"Tomasz?" Katherine parrots.

"My personal shadow," I say. "Yeah, everything's fine."

Alex nods. "He'll be able to keep up when you work out."

Okay. I get why she likes him. It's more than his pretty face and big... biceps. He's detail oriented and clearly always thinking of her.

Guilt slices through me like a razor blade.

There were plenty of moments over the weekend where I was most definitely not thinking of her.

"Is there any news about the water damage?" she asks, glancing between us.

“The last thing I heard was that they’re still looking into it. It sounds like a main pipe burst on a floor above your apartment.”

Her hand flies to her chest. “That’s not good.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Alex says and steps around us.

She follows him to the door, a hand sliding up his broad back. There’s a weird tugging sensation in my chest, but not like I’m worried about losing her because now that I’ve come to terms with my feelings, there’s no going back.

No second guessing.

But this feels like... a broadening. An expansion.

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She cares for him, and I care for her; ergo, I care for him too. And yet, it's deeper. More visceral. Inescapable.

Just like this thing with Gabe.

Remind me to never second guess destiny again.

Alex stops, hand on the knob, and Katherine stretches up. He bends down, accepting a kiss on his cheek. And fuck me, he smiles at her. Like an actual smile. Cheeks lifting, eyes crinkling, lips curving.

Mr. Stern Bodyguard has a soft side,

and her name is Katherine Montgomery.

What happened between them in Paris?

Six months ago, I would have come right out and asked her. Maybe even teased her a little bit. Because back then, I didn't think I deserved her. Didn't see how I could make it work between us. I wasn't sure how to make her mine.

And so we happily gossiped about everything.

But that was then, and this is now, and those two are falling hard for each other. I'd bet my sailboat.

Conflicted, I stalk forward.

Alex drops a kiss to her lips and opens the door. He lifts a hand to me, I give a quick jerk of my chin, and he's gone. She flips the lock, watching him go through the thin side window.

I brace a hand against the molding, caging her in. God, I missed her. A handful of days shouldn't feel like years, should it? I shouldn't want to throw her over my shoulder, carry her to my room, and keep her there until Thanksgiving.

But I do.

I want her body against mine.

Her scent in my lungs.

Her cunt gripping my cock.

She leans back, relaxing against my chest, hand clasping my upper thigh.

"You were telling me about your trip," I say, coasting my other hand down her side.

Her laugh is husky music to my ears.

"It was amazing, but I want to talk about you." She turns in the circle of my arms, leaning back so she can look up at me. Sliding a hand up my chest, she brushes my hair off my forehead. A silver bracelet slides down her wrist, the little charms catching the light.

I snag her hand. "A souvenir?"

Her gaze falls to the new piece of jewelry and the corners of her mouth lift in a soft smile. She licks her lips and looks straight at me, watching my reaction. "Alex gave it

to me this morning.”

She shimmies her wrist, and the charms fly. “A croissant, because I couldn't stop eating them. A flower to represent the gardens. The Eiffel Tower and the picnic basket from our lunch.”

Well, isn't he thoughtful?

The puff of jealousy quiets as I imagine her in the bracelet and nothing else.

In fact, I step back, tugging her along with me. We should just keep buying her bracelets. That way, when we fuck her, they'll jangle so sweetly.

Yeah, I like that idea.

She huffs a laugh and wraps her arm through mine. “You've got that look.”

“What look?”

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Seriously, the only thing that feels better than this woman cozying up to me is when I'm wrapped in her heat.

"It's your 'I want to ravish you look.'"

It's my turn to laugh.

"Show me around. Tell me about your weekend," she says, and yeah, I'm wrapped around her little finger because her wish is my command.

I guide her through the luxurious apartment, where no expense was spared, introduce her to Destiny, and then take her upstairs while I tell her about the movies we watched and eating out at Anthony's.

"Did you know Gabe has a wine cellar?" I ask, transported back to those heated moments.

I'm blathering because I don't know how to tell her what I really need to say.

She makes a soft, non-committal sound as she glances down at the vibrant backyard from the cozy bedroom.

I slide my hands over her shoulders, relishing the little shiver that courses through her. "What do you think? Will it do?"

"I love it. Gabe did well."

“Helps to have good friends with spare brownstones sitting around,” I say, not bothering to hide the dry disdain from my voice. “He said no one’s lived here in about two years.”

“That’s a shame.”

I drop a kiss in her hair.

“I’m glad you guys are getting along so well. It makes my heart happy.” She turns to me, pressing a hand over my heart, that bewitching smile on her lips. “This weekend, I kept thinking maybe it was all supposed to work out like this... With the four of us.”

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KATHERINE

There's a beat of silence.

“I mean,” I amend quickly, “we all sort of jumped into the deep end.”

King especially.

“How are you feeling? I know sharing a partner is...” I lick my lips, searching for the right word. “Unconventional.”

King gets really still, and my heart drops.

Why does my mind immediately go to a worst-case scenario? I retrace my words... getting along so well... four of us...

“Unconventional isn’t bad,” I say because the silence is brutal. The way he’s staring

back and forth between my eyes and my lips, looking confused and uncomfortable, makes me uncomfortable.

“Did—did something happen?” All of a sudden, I feel like I’m back in my grandfather’s office, my nervous system on overload, unable to control my runaway anxiety.

I’ve been over the moon all weekend, prancing around Paris with Alex, and King’s been here. He came back for me, and I left him.

True, he said I didn’t need to babysit him. He never has and never will. The world is his playground, and he wouldn’t be the man I admire so much if he were relying on me for entertainment.

“Well, an elevator tried to hold me captive,” he says finally, lips curving up in a smirk.

What?

That’s it?

I mean, that’s terrifying for him, but that’s... I take a steadying breath and remind myself that heart words are hard for him.

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I cup his cheek, making him look down at me. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He gives me that sort of tough guy chin lift as if to say, ‘I can handle it.’ But he shouldn’t have to. Not alone.

“We don’t have to talk about it, but I’m here if you need me.”

“I know. Really, I’m fine. All things considered.” He sighs, giving a slight eye-roll.

“Thank goodness for Gabe.”

I laugh softly, dropping my forehead against his shoulder. “Those are four words I never thought I’d hear either of us say.”

“Yeah.”

I look up at him again. “I’m glad he was there for you. Panic attacks are no fun.”

“I’d rather have a root canal.”

“You and me both.” My hands on his shoulders, I give him another little squeeze.

“But back to us...”

He ducks his head, blotting out the afternoon light, and slants his lips across mine. Warm, firm, working me steadily into a weak-kneed pile of want.

“I love it when you say that word.”

“What word?” I say against his lips.

“Us.”

My moan is soft and needy, an agreement and a plea.

But he lifts his head and slides his hands to my upper arms, prying me away from him. “We need to talk.”

“We were talking,” I tease.

He gets all stiff and awkward again. “I know, but this is important.”

“I don’t know that I like that sound of that.” I try to give a brave smile, but after all the warm, fluttery feelings from a minute ago, ‘talk’ feels like ice water to the face. Or a bomb.

He tugs me over to the sofa adjacent to the windows. “It’s not bad,” he says but sounds unsure.

No sooner does my ass hit the cushion than I hear voices downstairs. And then footsteps on the lovely curving staircase.

“I’m home! Where are you guys?” Gabe calls.

King’s chin jerks toward the door, and I try to read his expression. I thought after all this time knowing him, I’d seen everything there was to see on his face, but this, with his parted lips and slightly frantic lift of his brows, is new.

“Did Gabe say something I should know about?” I whisper. “Tell me quick.”

He darts a glance at me, curls in on himself a bit, and shakes his head. “Nah. Nothing like that.”

Good, because I’m not so far gone for the tech tycoon that I won’t yeet him into the Hudson if he said or did something to hurt my best friend.

“Up here,” I call.

His footsteps pick up the pace, and I imagine him taking the stairs two at a time. He comes through the door looking like he stepped off the cover of a magazine. Casual but polished.

There’s a soft whimper and whine sound, and ohmygod, I think it’s me. Kingston laughs.

“We did a bit of shopping,” King murmurs. “I might have forgotten to mention that.”

That’s an understatement. “You’re dressing my boyfriends, now?” I shoot him a smile and then meet Gabe halfway across the thick rug.

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“Boyfriend?” Gabe demands, pulling me against him.

I didn’t realize that until this moment, I was still a bit out of sorts. Tense and uneasy because I hadn’t seen him in days. Is that what it’d be like? Ill at ease whenever my guys travel? Keeping multiple calendars to know who is where and when?

But with his talented hands clasped around my waist, our thighs brushing, and that look of longing etched across his face, my stomach flips and my heart races and everything in me just feels settled.

“Do you have another title you’d prefer?” I ask, sliding my palms up his chest.

He purses his lips, deciding.

“King. Emperor. Supreme ruler?—”

“Hey now,” Kingston cuts in, and I hear him stalk across the room toward us. “I’m the OG King.”

“There can be only one,” I tease.

Gabe gives a good-natured shrug and glances over my shoulder. I feel something pass between them, but then his attention is on me again.

“We wouldn’t want to subject you to that. Boyfriend will do for now. Welcome home, Princess.”

“I missed you,” I whisper as he ducks his head to kiss me.

“Ditto,” he whispers against my lips.

Pleasure wells up in my chest, making me feel light and like anything’s possible. Even the four of us working out somehow.

I nip his lower lip. He groans and the vibrations reverberate through my hands, down my arms, taking residence in my core. He deepens the kiss, swiping along the seam of my lips with his tongue. Heat sweeps over my shoulders, down my back, calling up a seemingly never-ending need.

But then he lifts his head, bright blue eyes unfocused, lips parted.

Who knew Gabriel Rothburn could look bemused?

I smile because he’s adorable.

“Alex said you were going to be home late.”

“Yeah. I cut out early.” Another glance at King. “But I have to leave again in an hour or so.”

I give him a little pout. “Sad.”

He squeezes my hips and thrusts his chin King’s way. “Well, at least you have this one to keep you company.”

“I kissed Gabe.” King blurts the words like he can’t help himself, the tension releasing from him like an over-inflated balloon that somersaults around the room when you let it go.