



The Tycoon's Pet

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Description: Kayla

I have been in love with Paul Carlton since I met him chasing butterflies sixteen years ago.

Now, in a desperate bid to get out of debt, I am working as his housekeeper. I don't want to lose Paul, but I need to start my own life. Will my journey to get out from under his spell end in independence, or will this finally be the wake-up call Paul needs to notice the spark between us?

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Prologue

Kayla

“Don’t run, honey!”

But I kept running, the sound of my laughter trailing after me as I dashed across the sun-drenched garden of the Carlton Estate. I had loved coming there ever since Grams started working as their gardener a few months ago. I was enthralled by everything—the gorgeous, castle-like house, the beautiful, lush lawn, the abundant flower gardens, and the huge fountain in the front.

I was there to help Grams’ water the gardens that day, but I was quickly distracted by a butterfly, tracking it as it flitted from flower to flower. I ignored Grams’ warning not to run, quickly following it off into the expansive woods off the estate. Just as I was about to catch up with the gorgeous creature, I slammed into something...no, not something. Someone.

That was the first time I saw him. Paul Carlton, the son of the estate owner. He was a few years older than me at the time, just entering his teen years while I was still only seven-years-old. I stammered my apology for running into him. He just walked away.

I returned, sulking over losing my butterfly and Paul’s quick dismissal of me.

As I approached Grams back in the gardens, she asked me what was wrong. I told her about my interaction with Paul and she encouraged me to give him another chance, he had just lost his mother a few months prior and was having a hard time adjusting. I

promised her that the next time I saw him, I would be kinder and more understanding of his situation.

The next day, I was wandering around the grounds, hoping to see Paul again. Luckily, I found him seated on the dock at the estate's private lake. He had a stack of pebbles next to him and was monotonously tossing them into the water, appearing not to care if they skipped or not.

Sheepishly, I approached him, remembering my promise to Grams.

"Hi," I said, hovering a few feet away.

He looked up, recognition sparked on his face. "Well, if it isn't the butterfly chaser," he said, with a small smile. Slowly, I walked to sit next to him, glad he didn't seem to be mad about yesterday's incident any longer. I picked up a pebble from his stack and tossed it onto the lake. It skipped twice before plopping into the water.

"How are you so good at that?" Paul asked, turning to me with surprise.

"I used to do that with my dad back home."

Something like understanding crossed his face before he quickly looked away. "Seems like you're kind of far from home, Butterfly," he said after a moment.

I giggled at the new nickname. "My name is Kayla," I said shyly. "I'm living with Grams while my mommy and dad are going through a split," I continued.

Paul just nodded. Feeling shy, but remembering my promise to Grams, I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and took out a flower.

"Here, I wanted to give you this," I said, holding it out to him.

He hesitated for a moment before accepting it. “Yellow rose,” he said, raising his eyes to mine with a growing smile on his lips. “Are you asking me to be your friend, Butterfly?”

“How do you know what it means?” I asked him with surprise.

“I spend time with Rosemary too, you know. Your Grams is a flower genius, and she makes sure to tell me everything about them, too.”

I just smiled at him. “So... will you be my friend?”

“Yeah, Butterfly, I think I could use a friend right now,” he said, before reaching out his hand for me to shake. I grasped his hand and shook, starting a friendship that would change my life.

16 Years Later

“Earth to Kayla.”

I glance up to see my best friend, Bonnie standing in front of me with a bowl of popcorn in one hand and two glasses of wine in the other. It's a Sunday evening and as usual for us, we're hosting a sleepover in my little studio apartment. Bonnie had gone to make some popcorn while I flipped through my old photo album, but I got stuck on a particular photo of Paul and I, standing side by side in front of a Christmas tree. I was gazing up at him with a big toothy smile on my face while he stared at the camera with an irritated expression. But if one looks hard enough, one can see the slight tilt of his mouth. It's the barest hint of a smile but it's there...

It was the Christmas of the year I started living with my grandmother in the Carlton

estate after my parents divorced. Grams had set up the tree in the main house and taken tons of pictures, but Paul appeared only in this one picture, and it turns out it is the only picture of us from that time in our lives.

“You're doing it again,” Bonnie says, flopping beside me on the couch, leaning over to peer into the old photo album opened on my lap.

“Doing what?” I ask, feigning ignorance.

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“You zoned out. Again,” she says empathetically. “You've been staring at that photo all night; are you fantasizing about Paul again?”

My face instantly grows warm at the mention of his name. It's times like this that I hate how easily I blush. I let out a sarcastic scoff, snapping the photo album shut with more force than necessary. “No, I'm not.”

“Of course you are,” Bonnie says, her deep blue eyes twinkling with amusement as she throws some popcorn in her mouth. “You're so strung up on him. Sometimes, it's cute but sometimes, I don't know...” she sighs, letting her voice trail off.

“What do you mean?” I ask, searching her face with a slight frown.

She shrugs and remains silent for a while as if trying to pick her words. “It just seems like you revolve your life around him. I don't understand it, that's all.”

“What?! No, I don't,” I say, but my laughter sounds forced even to my own ears. “I have a life of my own, you know that, Bonnie.”

“Do I?” She asks, her expression uncharacteristically serious. “Why are you working as his housekeeper when you have a business degree and can literally work in any company of your choice?”

“I got that degree by working for Paul,” I say in my defense. “I was only able to put myself through school because he pays me a fortune.”

Bonnie shrugs, her expression unreadable. “So? Are you going to put your life on

hold forever because of him?”

“Of course not! It's just...” I let my voice trail off with a frustrated sigh. “You know how Paul is; he works so much that he forgets to take care of himself... he's always been like that. Besides, I promised Grams I'd take care of him.”

“And you have, for sixteen years, Kayla,” Bonnie says, shaking her head at me. “Don't you think you've kept your promise long enough?”

“He's my friend...”

“One you've been hopelessly in love with almost all your life,” Bonnie counters solemnly. And for a moment, I wonder if it's sympathy I see in her eyes.

“That's not true,” I protest weakly, staring down at the peeling leather back cover of the photo album. Suddenly, I regret taking it out from the old box under my bed. I should have left the memories buried, just as I did my feelings all these years. “I'm not in love with Paul.”

“Deny it all you want but you are,” Bonnie says, her voice gentle. “We both know you've stayed by his side with the hopes that he'll one day see you, and maybe acknowledge your feelings...”

“And is that so wrong?” I ask with a weary sigh, feeling a familiar weight settle heavily on my chest.

Bonnie's expression softens, and she places a gentle hand on my arm. “No, it's not wrong to love someone, Kayla. But it is wrong to put your life on hold for someone who might never see you the way you want them to. You deserve so much more than that.”

I let out a deep breath, my mind swirling with conflicting thoughts. Bonnie is right, but it's hard to accept the truth. I've been holding onto this hope for so long, and the thought of letting go is terrifying.

"I don't know how to walk away, Bonnie," I say, shaking my head slightly. "I've been a part of his life for so long. It feels like... like I'd be abandoning him."

"Maybe he needs to learn to stand on his own," she suggests gently. "And maybe you need to find out who you are without him. Honey, maybe it's time to start imagining a life where you're more than just Paul's housekeeper and friend. A life where you're happy, truly happy, and not just existing in someone else's shadow."

"Maybe you're right."

"I'm right, Kayla," she says in a firm tone that contradicts the gentleness in her eyes. "Who knows? Maybe there is a young, handsome Prince Charming out there waiting to sweep you off your feet."

For a moment, I try to imagine myself with someone other than Paul, but the image feels foreign, like trying on someone else's clothes. I shake my head, dispelling the thought. "I thought you didn't believe in fairytales."

Bonnie chuckles, leaning back against the couch. "I don't," she admits, tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth. "But sometimes, a little wishful thinking doesn't hurt. Besides, you deserve your version of a fairytale, even if it doesn't involve a Prince Charming."

"What's a fairytale without Prince Charming?"

Bonnie shrugs. "Well, for one, you could take that job offer from MedPlus. Being the brand manager for one of the biggest companies in Seattle is no small feat, Kay."

“How did you know about that?” I ask, staring at her with wide-eyed surprise. I never told anyone that I interviewed for the role or that I got the job.

“I borrowed your computer to send an email and I kind of stumbled on the offer from MedPlus,” she replied with a guilty smile. “Anyway, I was waiting for you to bring it up, but it's been a week...”

“It's just...” I let my voice trail off, shrugging hesitantly. “I'm not sure I want to take that route and it has nothing to do with Paul. I don't think I'm cut out for the corporate world and MedPlus seems like it would be a lot of pressure.”

Bonnie nods her head, smiling softly into my eyes. “I understand, Kay. But I wish you'd given it a chance, who knows, you may charm your way into the CEO's heart and find yourself entangled in a steamy office romance. That's a fairytale right there, complete with a Prince Charming.”

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"Hell, no," I say, scrunching up my face. "He's famously engaged to this stunning raven-haired woman; I think her name is Jenna? Never gonna happen."

Bonnie bursts into laughter, covering her mouth with her hand as she tries to contain herself. "Okay, maybe not the CEO, but you get my point!"

"No," I said, shaking my head as I joined in her laughter. "I don't even want to imagine it!"

Chapter One

Paul

She's fast asleep on my couch when I get home, her silky red hair spilling over the armrest like a fiery waterfall. I pause for a moment, just watching her, the rise and fall of her chest in a steady rhythm, and the way her features soften in sleep. She looks so peaceful that I can't help but stare. I can feel the stress of the day melting away just by the sight of her. She has a way of calming the storm in my soul. My Butterfly.

I grab a blanket from the arm of a couch nearby and gently drape it over her, careful not to wake her. She stirs in her sleep and then curls deeper into herself. My heart clenches at how tired she looks. She must have overworked herself doing things for me as usual. As much as I appreciate her effort, I wish she'd cut herself some slack and just relax. I'd be happy just to come home and share a glass of wine with her, talking about the day's events and listening to her soft, soothing voice.

As I head upstairs, I make a mental note to give her a raise. She does so much for me and, even though I pay her well, I'm still not giving her enough in return.

In my bedroom, I pause to look at the fresh clothes that Kayla laid out on the bed for me and a wave of gratitude washes over me. She thinks of everything, anticipating my needs before I even realize them myself. It's these small, thoughtful gestures that make her so indispensable in my life.

I make my way to the bathroom and after a quick shower, I change into the clothes she laid out and make my way downstairs. Kayla sits up as I approach, blinking sleepily and rubbing her eyes. She looks up at me, a soft smile spreading across her freckled face.

"Hey," she says, her voice groggy from sleep. "You're back late."

I smile back, feeling a warmth spread through me. "Yeah, late meeting with the sales team."

She nods and as she stretches, the blanket falls from her shoulders. The sight of the delicate curve of her neck stirs something inside of me; something dark and primitive... It feels familiar yet too strange to fully grasp. I push the thought aside, focusing instead on the moment at hand.

"You must be tired," she continues, her brows deepening in a worried frown as her deep brown eyes search my face. "I made mashed potatoes and chicken for dinner, want me to set the table for you?"

"No, don't worry about it. Want to join me?" I ask, sitting beside her on the couch. I just need to be near her right now.

"I'll have to take a rain check, Paul," she says, smiling apologetically. "I promised

Bonnie I'd watch an episode of Desperate Housewives with her tonight, so maybe next time."

Ignoring the pang of disappointment in my chest, I nod with a small smile. "Alright, next time then, but I'm holding you to that promise. Let me drive you home, at least."

She laughs, her red hair falling back as she chortles. "If you insist."

I pat her arm, "I most certainly do, Butterfly." At that, I can see the slightest blush on her cheeks, which immediately makes me heat up.

We chat comfortably on the short ride to her apartment. As we pull up, I have to admit, I am sad to see her go.

"We're here," I say, turning to look at her with a small smile.

"Thanks for bringing me home," she says softly, returning my smile. "Drive safely on your way back."

She unbuckles her seatbelt and reaches for the door handle, but I quickly place my hand on hers to stop her.

"Hey, Kayla?"

"Huh?"

I hesitate, clearing my throat awkwardly. I don't know exactly how to phrase how glad I am that she's still in my life, that she still looks after me every day. I want to show my appreciation and how much she means to me.

"I just want to say..." I'm interrupted by the sound of my phone ringing. It's the sales

director, probably calling with an issue that went unresolved in our earlier meeting. Regretfully, I think I have to answer or risk further disaster.

I glance at the screen and back up at Kayla with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, I have to take this call."

"That's fine, thanks for driving me home, Paul." And with that, she gently pulls her hand out from under mine, opens the door and slips out of the car. I watch her go as I answer the call, a feeling of unease settling in the pit of my stomach.

Maybe it's for the best we didn't have time to talk further. I need to keep our boundaries.

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The next night, I've received a call from one of my old business school friends—and world renowned supermodel, Christy Smith, asking to meet for dinner so she can share some news with me.

Christy has a way of making everyone feel seen and appreciated, and her warm, engaging smile can disarm even the most skeptical of souls. Her charm is exactly why we became good friends back in business school. I always kept to myself back then because I couldn't be bothered to socialize but one day, Christy and I were paired for a project. I acted cold and aloof to her, but she never let that phase her. She countered my prickliness with genuine kindness and soon I found myself warming up to her infectious enthusiasm. It's been five years since I last saw her in person, but she hasn't changed a bit.

“Oh, I am so glad you could make it!” she says, greeting me with a hug at the upscale sushi restaurant.

“It's great to see you, Christy,” I reply, genuinely pleased. “What brings you to Seattle?”

She holds out her left hand, waving her perfectly manicured fingers in my face with an expectant smile. It took a while, but I finally noticed the elegant diamond band on her ring finger.

“I'm getting married!” She exclaims, her eyes sparkling with excitement. My jaw drops in surprise, and I can't help but grin widely. She deserves this.

She fills me in on the details of her soon-to-be husband, a Parisian fashion photographer. She seems truly in love, and I am beyond happy for her. No one deserves this love more than Christy.

I must have a wistful expression on my face because Christy halts her story and asks, "Who do you have on your mind? I can see it in your eyes. Spill, Paul."

I raise my wine glass to my mouth, feeling a bit exposed. "I don't know what you're talking about," I say, smiling at her. "I'm single as a pole. One gossip blog described me as Seattle's most eligible bachelor."

"But there's someone on your mind, isn't there?" Christy insists, her eyes boring relentlessly into mine.

"Maybe you're right. I'm not sure why, though..." I murmur with a self-deprecatory smile.

"Sometimes, Paul, it takes someone else to point out what's right in front of you. If you can't stop thinking about her, there's a reason. Maybe it's time you figured out what that reason is."

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "It's complicated. She's my housekeeper and a longtime friend. She's... special to me and I don't want to ruin what we have. I'd rather keep her in my life as a friend than risk losing her altogether."

Christy remains quiet for a while, looking at me with an indescribable expression. "I have a feeling she won't wait around forever, Paul."

Her words hit me harder than I expected. The thought of Kayla moving on, of someone else making her laugh and being there for her, sends a pang of anxiety through my chest.

Pushing away the feeling, I lean back in my seat, taking a sip from my wine glass before looking at Christy with a breezy smile. We settle back in to our normal banter, and I am so lost in the great conversation with one of my closest friends that I don't even notice the photographers stooping outside the window.

Chapter Two

Kayla

"Secret Dating Saga?: Billionaire CEO of Carlton Group rumored to be dating supermodel, Christy Smith."

I read the headline over and over again until the words swim before my eyes, and then I glance at the picture plastered on the front page of the Daily Spark website—it's Paul with the extraordinarily beautiful supermodel Christy Smith laughing over dinner. The picture is warm, intimate, and oozing with fame and fortune.

I suddenly feel a pang of something I can't quite identify—is it jealousy? Sadness? I can't tell. All I know is that seeing Paul with Christy like that makes my heart ache in a way I'm not prepared for.

I close the tab, shoving my phone in my handbag with more force than necessary. Leaning back in my seat, I rub my temples, trying to ward off the headache that's beginning to form.

"Get a grip, Kayla," I mutter to myself. "Paul is your boss, and he's entitled to his own life. This isn't your concern."

But no matter how many times I repeat that to myself, it doesn't make the hollow feeling in my chest go away. I close my eyes but even then, the image of Paul and

Christy lingers, their faces etched into my memory. I let myself relive the memory of the night before, when Paul had driven me home, the warmth in his eyes, the gentle tone in his voice. He'd always been kind, but last night, there had been something— a fleeting, confusing moment— when it felt like there could be more to what we are. It was probably just my imagination, projecting my own feelings onto him. I'm sure of that now.

This article about him and Christy is just one of the many wake-up calls that I've gotten over the years; Paul and I are worlds apart; it doesn't matter that I've known him for years or that he considers me a friend... At the end of the day, I'm just a housekeeper and he's my boss.

I glance up as the bus pulls up to my stop. I grab my jacket and handbag from the seat beside me, hurrying off the bus. I begin my trek to Paul's house, grateful for the walk to have the chance to clear my head.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm letting myself into the house and am immediately filled with relief to find that Paul has already left for the day. The familiar silence of his townhouse greets me, and I take a deep breath, trying to center myself and focus on my work for the day.

I hang my jacket in the entryway closet and toss my purse on the granite kitchen island. I immediately get to work sweeping the rooms, dusting shelves, doing the laundry, cooking, and wiping the kitchen counters. Even the cleaning regiment isn't enough to vanquish the thoughts of Paul with Christy. The way they fit together in a way that made perfect sense—both beautiful, successful, and living in a world I could never truly be a part of.

While changing the sheets in Paul's bedroom, I catch my reflection in the mirror and I pause to look, really look. In my reflection, I see a woman who's gotten so comfortable with watching life pass her by from the sidelines. Bonnie was right after

all; I've put my life on hold for so long with the hopes that one day, Paul will see me.

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I've kept myself restrained to his shadow when I should have been working to make myself the center of my own world.

Gosh, I wish Grams was here to guide me.

I think of Grams and how she always encouraged me to find my happiness. In her rare lucid days during the worst of her Alzheimer's, she would always tell me: "Your happiness comes first, Kayla honey, always remember that. Don't dim yourself to fit into someone else's life. You are the star."

I miss her so much; I know she would help me move on from Paul and follow my dreams. I decide to take the rest of the day to firm up my business plan.

I make a call, hoping the Carlton's lawyer will be available to help me finalize some logistics.

It's time to take control of my own life.

Every detail in John Cowell's office, from the sleek, minimalist design to the subtle yet luxurious décor, reflects his attributes: precision, power, control. It's like every aspect of the room, including the man himself, is designed to intimidate.

John himself is a tall, imposing figure with broad shoulders and steely blue eyes that seem to see directly into the soul. John's reputation as a powerful attorney precedes him; he's rumored to have an uncanny ability to dismantle opposing arguments in a

matter of seconds, and he's known to only represent a selected one percent of the wealthy elites in town.

"I was surprised to get your call, Miss Jones," John says as his pretty blonde office attendant gently places a cup of tea in front of me.

"Thank you," I mutter, flashing her a quick smile. My hands tremble slightly as I pick up the cup and raise it to my lips, trying to compose myself. Finally, I drop the cup on the table and look up at him with a small smile. "I'm sorry for coming at such short notice. Thanks for having me."

John nodded. "I couldn't turn you back when I heard you were acquainted with Paul. How may I help you?"

"I– uh..." I clear my throat lightly and start again. "I want to start my business and I would like your opinion on the legal aspect of things."

"What kind of business are we talking about, Miss Jones?"

"A flower shop," I reply with a small smile.

John raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "A flower shop? That's a bit of a departure from the type of ventures I'm usually consulted on. But, of course, I'd be happy to help. What specifically are you looking for in terms of legal advice?"

"I want to make sure everything is set up correctly from the start," I say, gaining a bit more confidence. "I've saved up enough to get it off the ground, but I'm not sure about the legal requirements, permits, and any potential pitfalls I should be aware of."

John nods thoughtfully. "Starting a business, even something as seemingly straightforward as a flower shop can be complex. You'll need to choose the right legal

structure, such as a sole proprietorship, partnership, or corporation. Each has its own legal implications and tax considerations."

I nod, trying to absorb everything he's saying. "I've been reading about that, but it's still a bit confusing. What do you recommend?"

For the next thirty minutes or so, John guides me through the permitting process, business establishment, and everything else I could ever want to know about opening the shop. It's overwhelming, but I'm glad to be getting the information up front. It will make things easier in the long run.

I take a deep breath, as the weight of my endeavor suddenly starts to dawn on me. "I didn't realize there was so much involved. But I'm determined to do this right," I add with a nervous chuckle.

John offers a reassuring smile. "It's a lot to take in, but with the right preparation, you can get things off the ground. I can help you draft contracts, review leases if you're renting a space, and make sure all your paperwork is in order."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Cowell. I appreciate your help," I say, feeling a wave of relief.

He nods, his expression softening just a fraction. "It's my pleasure, Miss Jones."

I clear my throat slightly, my cheeks heating up as I lean forward in my chair. "I-uh—how do I go about consultation payment?"

"This one's on the house, Miss Jones," he replies, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Have a good day."

I leave the office feeling productive and ready to finally start taking my business plan

seriously. I head home and start surfing real estate sites to see if there are any shop spaces available. Nothing immediately catches my eye, but it's always fun to look.

As I am searching, Bonnie calls and I excitedly tell her about my meeting with John and this newfound enthusiasm for opening the shop.

"You sound so excited," Bonnie teased, her voice tinged with amusement on the other end of the line. "I haven't heard you this enthusiastic in a while. It's good to hear."

"I know, right?" I said, laughing softly. "It's just... I finally feel like things are falling into place."

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“I’m glad you’re finally doing something for yourself,” Bonnie says with a soft smile.

I remain silent for a while, trying to pick through my emotions. "My Grams was a gardener, you know?" I say finally, barely managing to keep the sadness out of my voice. "She dedicated most of her life to her garden in the Carlton estate and I grew up watching and learning from her. I originally wanted to study horticulture but had to put off my plans once Grams got sick. I think this is the least I can do to honor her. Being around flowers makes me feel closer to her, and I want to feel that way all the time."

Bonnie leans her head on my shoulder, then she says, "That’s beautiful, Kayla. I think your Grams would be so proud of you."

"I hope so," I whisper, my voice tight. "I really do."

"For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, Kayla."

"Thanks, Bonnie."

"I have a question... and please don’t think I’m being mean," Bonnie says cautiously. Nervous, but curious, I urge her to continue.

"Did seeing the picture of Paul and Christy at all influence this sudden drive to open the store you’ve been sitting on for years?"

My chest tightens painfully at the reminder of the photograph. In all the business of the day, I had completely forgotten about it. I know Bonnie has my best interests at

heart, so I answer her honestly.

“It sure did,” I admit quietly. “I saw that article and it became crystal clear to me; I can't be with him, Bonnie... He'll never be mine.”

Chapter Three

Paul

I can feel my chest burning with anger as I read the preposterous blog article about Christy and me. The headline was an exaggerated clickbait, and the content was filled with ridiculous speculations. How do people believe this crap anyway? It's like they don't have anything better to do with their time than to spread baseless rumors and fabrications. It's baffling how easily the public is swayed by sensationalism without bothering to verify the facts. This kind of irresponsible journalism not only damages reputations but also erodes trust in media sources. But who cares, right? As long as they're not the ones being targeted by these malicious articles, they seem to find entertainment in the drama.

“Bunch of hypocrites,” I mutter under my breath, snapping my computer shut with a tight hiss. I walk over to the window but even the majestic view of the city landscape does nothing to curb my frustration.

Moving away from the window, I walk over to the mini cabinet where I usually keep a stash of alcohol for days like this. Selecting an expensive bottle of whiskey, I pour myself a glass and gulp it down in one shot, then I walk back to my desk, dropping to the chair with a tired sigh.

It's only eleven in the morning but it already feels like a long day.

It's baseless trying to explain to a world that thrives on gossip and scandal that

Christy and I are just friends. Nothing more. It's so frustrating that I can't even enjoy dinner with a friend in peace. I wouldn't be bothered by the whole thing if Christy wasn't getting married in a few days; this could affect her plans for a quiet ceremony. I can already imagine those silly paparazzi reporters are already in her trail, sniffing around like a bunch of hungry hyenas. Christy's a great person, and she doesn't deserve to have her special day ruined by a bunch of sensationalized headlines.

I won't ignore this like I always do for every other scandal woven around me. This time, I'm going to set the record straight and make an example of blogs that like to peddle false narratives.

My mind drifts to Kayla, and an even heavier feeling settles in my chest. I wonder what she thinks of all this. I hope she knows better than to believe the rumors, but the thought of her seeing those headlines, of her doubting me, makes my blood boil.

I pour another drink but set it aside without touching it, staring at the glass as if it holds the answers to my problems.

Kayla.

I wonder why I can't stop thinking about her, even in the midst of this disaster. The confusion over our relationship is new to me, but I know it feels right to think of her constantly now.

My phone rings, jolting me from my thoughts. I glance at the screen, sighing as I answer the call.

"Hey, son." Dad's baritone voice booms over the phone, tinged with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. "I hear you're dating Christy now."

"Don't tell me you believe that crap, Dad," I say in a dry tone.

The deep sound of his laughter echoes in my ear. “Well, I know not to believe anything, except what you tell me.”

“It's not true, Dad. Christy is an old friend from business school and she's getting married in a few days.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You sound disappointed,” I say with a wry snort.

“I thought you both looked great together,” he replies with an exaggerated sigh. “Too bad I won't be getting grandchildren anytime soon.”

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“Aren't you getting way ahead of yourself, Dad?” I ask, snickering softly.

"Ha! You know me, son. I like to dream big. But seriously, I'm kind of relieved to hear it's not true. With the contract from the federal government still being all hush-hush, you don't need any unnecessary attention." He pauses, then clears his throat lightly. "So, what about Kayla?"

My body instantly tensed up at his question. "What about her?"

“Hatchets down, son,” Dad says with an amused chuckle. “I was only asking after her; it's been a while since she dropped by the house.”

I exhale, feeling the tension slowly dissipate. “She's doing great.”

"She's such a nice girl. I hope she finds a nice young man that'll love her right. I suppose I can expect grandkids from her too; she's practically my daughter."

His tone is casual... too casual, like he's trying to get a rise out of me. Unfortunately, he knows me so well that it's worked. As always, the thought of Kayla with someone else makes my stomach twist into knots.

“What if I don't want her to have kids with someone else?” I ask my father, so quietly I'm not sure he even heard me.

“Are you finally admitting your feelings for her?” Dad asks, the amusement in his tone clear.

“You know I have feelings for her?” I ask in disbelief. I've always wondered what Dad thought of my relationship with Kayla, but he's remained neutral over the years. He has always been fond of her, but I sometimes wondered what he'd think if we ever took our relationship any further than friendship.

“Son, it's been pretty obvious to anyone paying attention,” Dad says with a chuckle. “You practically have stars in your eyes when you look at her—even as a teenager and I've always wondered why you've held back for so long.

“I guess I was scared of her rocking the boat. I can't lose her.”

“Then don't,” Dad says simply. “You belong together anyway.”

I nod, the tension in my chest easing slightly. “You're right. I just need to remind her that her place is right beside me.”

“Go get her, son!”

We hang up, and I immediately begin wrapping up for the day, hoping I can catch Kayla before she's gone home for the evening. I am overcome with fear that she'll reject me, that changing our relationship will ruin everything.

Pushing aside my conflicting thoughts, I force myself to speed through email replies so I can get out of here. Just as I'm finishing up, I hear a curt knock on the door. The door is pushed open and John Cowell appears, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. Pushing down the groan that rose in my throat, I wave him in, forcing a smile.

So much for getting out of here quickly.

“Working overtime again, Carlton?” John asks with a wide grin on his face as he

walks over to my desk. He plops into the chair across from my desk, arching his brows at me. “Or are you waiting out the paparazzi lurking in your lobby?”

“I don't give a shit about them. They're all bark and no bite, anyway,” I mutter, leaning back in my chair. “So, what brings you my way?”

“I was in the building catching up on the recent acquisitions. I just wanted to stop by and see how you're holding up?” John leans back in the chair, crossing his legs. “I figured you could use a distraction.”

I let out a tired chuckle. “A distraction, huh? Well, you're not wrong. It's been a hell of a day.”

John's expression softens a little, and I can see the genuine concern in his eyes. “I saw the article; I know how much you hate dealing with the press.”

“That's why I plan to have you deal with it,” I say with a faint smile. “You're the expert at handling this kind of mess. How do you think I can make these people pay? I feel like I need to make an example of someone to get the others to back off.”

John's grin fades, replaced by a more serious look. “Carlton, I understand your frustration, but retaliating might not be the best course of action. It could backfire and make things worse.”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “So, what am I supposed to do? Just sit back and let them spread lies? Christy's wedding is soon and I need to make all of this go away before then.”

John nods, understanding the urgency. “I see. Okay, let's consider our options carefully.”

I lean forward, giving him my full attention. “What do you suggest?”

John takes a deep breath. “First, we could go the legal route. Issue a formal statement denying the allegations and send a cease-and-desist letter to the blog. If they don't comply, we can sue them for defamation. It sends a strong message, but it might take time and could still draw some unwanted attention.”

“I don't think we have the time for that. What else?”

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“Alright, here’s where things get a bit murky,” John says, lowering his voice. “We can leverage our contacts in the media. Feed them some information that will divert attention from you and Christy. It’s risky, but if done right, it could shift the spotlight.”

I frown, trying to wrap my head around his suggestion. “You mean plant a story?”

“Something like that,” John admits. “But it’s a gamble. If it blows up, it could cause more trouble. It needs to be handled delicately.”

I shake my head, the idea not sitting well with me. “That would mean stooping to their level, John. There has to be another way.”

John looks thoughtful for a moment before he speaks again. “Well, I could find out who’s behind the blog and put some pressure on them. Not in a threatening way, but let them know we’re serious about taking action. Sometimes, a little push is all it takes for them to back off.”

“That sounds more like it,” I say, feeling a bit of relief. “How quickly can we get this done?”

“I’ll get started right away,” John assures, his lips spreading slowly in an almost senile smile. “Watch the story disappear like it never happened.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, feeling some of the pressure in my chest ease. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Just doing my job,” Paul replies with a good-natured smile this time. “That reminds me, your housekeeper stopped by my office yesterday.”

“Kayla?” I ask, blinking at him in surprise.

“The very one,” he replies, nodding. “She wanted to go through the legal aspects of starting a business.”

“What?” I am in shock, wondering why Kayla didn’t tell me about the meeting, wondering why she didn’t ask me to go with her.

Does she even want me in her life?

“Did you not know about it?” John asks, his brows deepening lightly. “I thought you sent her my way.”

“I did,” I reply, keeping my expression neutral even when my insides were burning up.

“I see,” John says, although his expression suggests he doesn’t quite believe me. He pushes his chair back and stands up. “Well, I should let you get back to work now. I’ll handle the stuff with the media. See you around.”

I nod, forcing a smile. “Thanks for stopping by, John. Take care.”

As he leaves, I sit back in my chair, staring at the door. I can’t let this stop me, if I’m not honest with Kayla now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.

I have to get to Kayla.

Chapter Four

Kayla

I sink into the worn but comfortable armchair in Paul's living room, a steaming mug of coffee cradled in my hands. The rhythmic hum of the laundry running in the background is usually soothing, but today it barely cuts through the fog of anxiety clouding my mind. My head is literally swimming, thoughts colliding as I stare at the binder spread open before me, filled with pages of notes, plans, and checklists—all the details I need to nail down before I can even think about opening my flower shop.

Numbers and logistics have always been my forte, but this? This feels insurmountable. For as much as I've dreamed of starting my own business, bringing it to life is proving to be more challenging than I ever anticipated. Each page in the binder represents a hurdle I need to overcome, and the mountain of tasks ahead is starting to feel more like an avalanche.

Taking a deep breath, I try to steady my racing thoughts. This has been my dream for so long, and the thought of failing now, when I'm so close, is almost unbearable. I take a small sip of my coffee, slowly flipping through the binder. I've divided the plan into sections; finances, inventory, and marketing but the more I read, the more overwhelmed I feel.

Just as I feel like I'm about to get drowned in my fears, I hear the sound of a car in the driveway. I look up with a slight frown, wondering who it could be. It's only past midday, so I'm not expecting Paul back home anytime soon. Snapping my binder closed, I walk over to peep through the window just in time to see Paul's BMW pulling into the garage.

I make it back to the couch in time to throw my binder inside my purse. I've just settled back down when Paul walks in, looking dangerously handsome as usual in a dark blue tailored suit that fits perfectly against his tall frame. His eyes instantly find mine, their striking green depths burning with an intensity that ceases my breath.

My mouth suddenly goes dry, my heart beating abnormally fast.

“H-hi,” I stammer, shifting on the couch, nervously.

Paul steps aside wordlessly and I realize he isn't alone. Behind him is a tall, slim man in a colorful yet fashionable suit and a pretty brunette lady in a formal outfit that almost resembles a uniform. Both are armed with several packages, but mostly brand bags with expensive designer logos.

“This is Gabe Howard, Seattle’s finest stylist,” Paul says, gesturing at the man beside him. “He's a very busy man, so I barely managed to get him down here on such short notice.”

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“Hello, Kayla,” Gabe says, stepping forward. He nods slightly, holding out a perfectly manicured hand. “Pleasure to meet you.”

I take his hand, shaking it with a weak smile. “Nice to meet you too, Mr. Howard.”

“Call me Gabe. Mr. Howard sounds so ancient,” he says, flashing me a big grin before turning to look at the woman beside him. “Meet Amanda, my assistant.”

“Hi, Amanda.”

“Hello, Miss Kayla,” Amanda responds with a warm smile.

I turn to look at Paul in confusion. “W-what's going on?”

“We're here to style you, Kayla” Gabe answers instead, his smile unwavering. “You just have to sit still while we create magic.”

Amanda unfolds one of the packages with her, which turns out to be a foldable makeup chair and I watch in amazement as expertly finds a convenient space and rapidly sets it up. It all happened so fast; one minute I was standing around cluelessly, and the next I was being hustled onto a chair. Somehow, Amanda has managed to create a setup that looks like a mini studio and I'm both in awe and at a loss for why this is happening.

I glance at Paul through the foldable makeup mirror that Amanda had set up in front of me. He's sitting calmly on the couch, his posture relaxed although he seems busy with his phone. I frown slightly, wondering why he seems so unaffected by

everything going on around him when he's the one who suddenly brought chaos home and threw me right in the middle of it. I can't seem to understand what he's thinking...

What game is he playing?

"You have really beautiful hair," Gabe says, his voice cutting through the haze in my mind. "I'll make it even more beautiful."

"Thank you," I mutter, still undecided on how I feel about the whole situation. Despite my indecision, I still, my back rigidly straight as Gabby chops and clips away at my hair until it falls in soft, silky layers around my face. I watch in the mirror, mesmerized by how swiftly and skillfully he works.

Amanda, meanwhile, starts organizing various makeup products on the table, her movements precise and efficient. She catches my eyes and gives me a reassuring smile.

"Amanda will do your makeup," Gabe says, stepping back to inspect my hair. "And then you can try on a few dresses and accessories."

"Do I have to do all of that?" I ask, already dreading the prospect of changing into multiple outfits and trying on accessories. It all feels so overwhelming, especially considering how out of the blue this entire situation is.

Gabe chuckles, sensing my hesitation. "Don't worry, Kayla. I promise it'll be worth it in the end. Mr. Carlton paid millions of dollars to make this happen so just sit back and enjoy."

"Did you say millions?" I ask, gaping at him.

"Of course," Gabe replies with a dismissive wave of his hand. "My service fees alone

run up to fifty thousand dollars and he had to pay extra for calling me up on such short notice. Also, Mr. Carlton was very particular about the brands of clothes and accessories that we picked out. He insisted on exclusives only.”

I glance over at Paul again, wishing he would look up and meet my eyes, but he's so focused on his phone that everyone else in the room might as well be invisible.

After two hours of sitting through a makeup session and a dozen trips to the changing room, Gabe finally announces that they are done.

“Girl, you look stunning,” Gabe says, looking at me like he didn't just oversee the whole styling process. “You like?”

I'm staring into the mirror, but I can't seem to recognize the woman staring back at me. My usually unruly red curls now fall in soft silky layers around my face. The makeup is flawless, with a soft glow that makes my skin look radiant and my eyes pop with a subtle smoky effect. The dress I finally settled on is a sleek floor-length emerald green dress with a slight dip neckline and a slit that stops just above my knees, which Amanda paired with a simple pearl necklace that comes with matching earrings.

“I look... amazing,” I say in response to Gabe's question when what I really wanted to say is that I look like a different person— No, I feel like a different person, like someone that who belongs in that glamorous world that I've always watched from the outside.

Suddenly, Paul looks up and our gazes clash through the mirror. Time seems to stand still. There's something in his eyes, a feral intensity that makes my mouth run dry. His eyes held me down, their piercing green depths filled with emotions that got my stomach tightening up in knots.

“Do you like her makeover, Mr. Carlton?” Gabe asks, his voice breaking the spell. I look away from his eyes, my cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

“Yes,” he replies simply, and the moment we shared just seconds ago disappears like it never happened.

“Fabulous!” Gabe exclaims with an excited clap. “I’m glad you both like it. We should take our leave now.”

Paul nods. “Thanks for your time.”

“Anytime, sir,” Gabe says with an exaggerated flair. “We’re always at your service.”

Together, Gabe and Amanda pack up their equipment and within minutes, it’s like they were never there.

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I wait until the sound of their car faded into the distance before slowly turning around to face Paul. He's standing a few feet away from me, his eyes burning with a heat that set my body on fire.

"You do look stunning, Butterfly," he says, his voice sounding deeper, huskier, sexier, than normal and it sends chills down my spine. But I'm still so confused.

"What's this all about, Paul?" I ask, no longer able to restrain myself. He steps closer, stopping just in front of me and placing his hand on my cheek, a slow smile spreads across his features.

What is happening?!

"I thought it was about time I show you just how much I appreciate you. You deserve this. Now, let's get going, I'm taking you to dinner." Before I know it, he's grabbed my hand and is dragging me towards the front door—not the garage.

He opens the door to reveal a stretch limousine waiting for us by the curb. I'm shocked by the gesture, but I don't have time to question him further before we're in the back of limo, sitting nearly on top of each other, and Paul is popping a bottle of champagne.

We've both had a glass and spent a few minutes chatting our days as we pull up to the restaurant.

As we take the elevator to the thirty-fifth floor, I can't help but wonder how we even got here, what changed with Paul today?

The restaurant is secluded and features panoramic views of Seattle. It's stunning. Soft, ambient lighting and a gentle breeze added to the magical atmosphere. We're seated at a private table adorned with elegant candles and fresh flowers, the soft hum of classical music playing in the background.

The meal is an exquisite five-course affair, each dish more delicious and beautifully presented than the last. We start with a delicate amuse-bouche, followed by an appetizer of seared scallops with truffle foam. The main course is a perfectly cooked filet mignon accompanied by a rich red wine reduction. The best dish of the evening is the decadent chocolate souffle, so rich, yet so delicate it nearly melts in my mouth.

Throughout the dinner, Paul remains charming and attentive, his eyes never leaving mine for long. We talk about everything and nothing, the conversation flowing as easily as the wine. His presence is intoxicating, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

As we linger at the table finishing up the last of our wine, my palms start to feel clammy, and my heart starts beating at what feels like a million miles a minute. This whole night feels too good to be true, like someone is going to turn on the lights and reveal this was all an elaborate prank. I know Paul wouldn't do anything like that to me, but I can't help the thought.

Paul leans back in his chair, his gaze soft but unwavering. "You look so beautiful, Kayla. Thank you for joining me tonight."

I return his soft smile, but I can't help but wonder why he is suddenly doing all of this for me. "It's just... all of this feels so surreal. This dress, the makeup, dinner... it feels like I'm floating in a dream. It's all so lovely but I can't stop wondering; why? Why are we having such a fancy dinner that cost you a fortune when there's no special occasion to celebrate?"

Paul remains silent for a moment, then he shrugs, clearing his throat softly. "Like I said before, I just wanted to show you how much I appreciate you. I would be lost without you in my life, Butterfly."

"Oh," I reply, honestly feeling more confused than before I asked the question. Is this a date or a thank you dinner? The next step in our relationship or just a boss thanking his employee? It's impossible to tell.

I realize the silence has gone on too long and feel the urge to break it.

"Thank you," I say, forcing a smile when I simultaneously feel like bursting into tears. It means a lot, really."

Paul nods in response and for a moment, I think I see a flicker of something more in them. But then, it's gone, and he's smiling at me like all is well in the world. "Anytime, Kayla," he says. "You deserve it."

His words are followed by another awkward silence that stretches out between us, heavy and oppressive. I pick at the edge of my napkin, unsure of what to say next. The magic of the evening seems to be slipping away, leaving behind a cold, empty feeling.

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you, Kayla," Paul says, finally breaking the awkward silence.

"Really? What about?"

"You've been acting distant recently, Kay. Is there something I need to know?"

For a moment, I consider telling him about my plans to start my flower shop, but the words get stuck in my throat. I can't bring myself to say it, not now, not after

everything that's happened tonight.

“Distant?” I repeat, buying time. “I didn’t realize I was acting that way.”

Paul leans forward, his eyes searching mine. “We used to be able to talk about everything, Kayla... Remember during my college days, when we used to take evening strolls in the garden back at the estate whenever I came back home for summer breaks?” he asks, his lips stretching in a nostalgic smile. “You'd talk nonstop, keeping me up to date on everything that happened while I was away.”

I chuckle, flushing slightly as the memories flood my mind. “I was quite a bother, wasn't I?”

Paul shakes his head, his expression slightly reproachful. “You've never been a bother to me, Kayla. Not back then and certainly not now.”

There is a sincerity in his voice that causes my heart to ache. He’s right; things have changed between us but there's no going back. We're both on different paths now.

I look at him with a small smile, ignoring the tumultuous clash of emotions in my chest. “Thanks for saying that, Paul. And for today, this beautiful dinner, my makeover, it means so much...”

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He nods, returning my smile. The rest of the night passes in a blur, the weight of unspoken words hanging heavily between us. After dinner, we get back in the limo and have a much less relaxed drive back to Paul's.

When we get back to his house, he insists on driving me home. I reluctantly accept, knowing he won't let me refuse, no matter how much I want to just be alone so I can figure out what the hell is going on.

As we drive in silence, I stare blankly at the passing scenery, and the soft glow of city lights outside the car window. Anything to keep my mind off the man beside me.

After what seems like a lifetime but must have only been minutes, he pulls up to my house and brings the car to a stop. I turn to look at him, ready to thank him, and leave as quickly as possible, but I'm suddenly overcome by a crazy urge.

I should let the night end here... I should let him go but the words fall out of my lips before I can stop them. "Wanna come in?"

Chapter Five

Paul

"Of course," I answer her quickly, possibly too quickly. But this night has not had the fully romantic vibe I was hoping for, and I need to rectify that immediately.

As she leads me through the front door, I realize, with some sense of shame, that I've never been to her apartment even though she's at mine almost every day. It feels like

a glaring oversight, a reminder of how much she gives without asking for anything in return.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” she says, gesturing to the couch with an awkward smile.

“Thank you,” I mutter, lowering myself to the couch. “You have a lovely place.”

“Thanks, Paul,” she replies, blushing slightly. “Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Coffee?”

“Tea would be great, thanks.”

She heads to the kitchen, and I hear the sound of cups clinking and water boiling. I glance around, and my eyes fall on the framed photograph on the shelf. It's an old picture of Kayla and myself standing in front of a Christmas tree. She had her hair in pigtails, holding a flower stalk to her chest while she looked up at me with the biggest smile. A sense of nostalgia hits me as memories of that Christmas flood my head. It was a bittersweet period. It was my first Christmas without my mom but having Kayla beside me lifted my spirits, even though I didn't show it.

Kayla returns at that moment with a steaming mug of tea. She holds it out to me with a small smile.

“Thank you,” I say, accepting the mug and taking a small sip. The warmth of the tea spreads through me, soothing my nerves.

She nods, her blush deepening adorably as she gestures at her dress. “I need to go take this off.”

Pity. She looks ravishing in that dress. All evening, I've had to try hard not to let

myself get distracted by how stunning she looks in that dress, the way it hugs her curves, and that damn dip that gives a maddening glimpse of her cleavage. Even now, I'm barely restraining my mind from exploring the dark, dark thoughts on the edge of my consciousness.

Without waiting for my response, she walks away. As she disappears into her bedroom, and I take another sip of the tea, hoping it will calm me down, but my mind keeps drifting back to her... Different images play in my head, of her stepping out of that dress, standing naked in the shower as the water cascades down her hair, her glistening skin... I shake my head, trying to banish the thoughts.

Keep it together. You need her to want to be with you long term, not just for tonight.

But suddenly, I can't bear the thought of staying away from her for another second. I head in the direction of her room and find the door open. She's standing in front of the mirror in the corner, twisted around and looking at the back of her dress. She meets my eyes in the mirror with a small gasp.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Let me help you with that," I say motion to her clearly stuck zipper.

She swallows and lets out a small "thank you," before rotating so her back is to me. As I near her, I feel the warmth of her skin even through my suit. My fingers brush against her back to grab the zipper, and I watch goosebumps rise on her skin in response to my touch. The zipper is stubborn, but I manage to get it moving, revealing the smooth expanse of her back. Then I notice she isn't wearing a bra beneath the dress.

My mind goes blank, a haze of desire clouding my thoughts. She turns around slowly to face me, her lips slightly parted. Her deep brown eyes seemed to have turned darker, filled with unmistakable lust. She runs the tip of her tongue nervously over

her upper lip and that's my last straw.

I spring forward, capturing her mouth with mine in a hungry kiss. She gasps in surprise but instantly melts into me, her lips parting to allow me deeper. The kiss is urgent, all the pent-up emotions of the past few days pouring out in a heated rush. My hands find her waist, pulling her closer, while her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me down to her level.

The feel of her body against mine, the taste of her lips, her little needy moans... everything about her serves to drive me wilder. I let one hand slide up her back, feeling the smooth skin beneath my fingertips. She shivers under my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips that nearly pushes me over the edge.

I press her against the door, deepening the kiss and exploring her mouth with my tongue. Her inexperience is evident in the tentative way she kisses back, but it only makes me want her more and go a little feral. I move my lips to her neck, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along her throat, savoring the sweet taste of her skin.

Kayla's hands clutch at my shoulders, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps. I can feel her heart pounding against mine, matching the frantic rhythm of my own. I let my hands roam, exploring the curve of her waist, the dip of her hips, wanting to touch every part of her.

She arches against me, her body pliant and eager. "Paul," she breathes, her voice trembling with a mix of desire and uncertainty.

I pull back slightly, looking into her eyes. "Hey, if this is too much..."

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She shakes her head, her cheeks flushed, eyes dark with longing. “No, I want this. I want you.”

Her words are my undoing. I capture her lips again, my kiss fierce and possessive. She responds with equal fervor, her fingers digging into my back, pulling me closer. I lose myself in the heat of her mouth, press her closer against my body but yet again, I can't seem to get enough of her.

The front of her dress is falling beneath us, revealing her perfect, perky tits. I take one look at them and feel like a man who was lost in the desert and finally caught a glimpse of an oasis. I reach my hand out and Kayla gasps, before giving me a small nod to show it's okay to proceed.

I fondle her, her skin like velvet beneath my hands. She's the perfect fit and I can't wait to see where else we perfectly fit together.

I want more... so much more than she might be ready to give.

I force myself to pull back, resting my forehead against hers, both of us breathing heavily.

“We should stop... just for now,” I reluctantly say. She sighs, nodding her head in agreement.

A soft smile spreads across her face. “Thank you... For tonight. For everything.”

With a parting kiss, I leave. I don't stop thinking about her until long after I get home.

Chapter Six

Kayla

I close my eyes, slightly trailing my fingers over my lips, lost in the memory of that night a few days ago; the feeling of Paul's lips on mine, his strong hand on my waist as he pulled me closer, the feel of his hands on my breasts... It was magical. Everything that I've always dreamed of yet nothing like I ever imagined. The moment keeps replaying in my head, like a scene from a broken film, over and over again.

I can still feel the gentle pressure of his mouth, the way his fingers traced my jawline, the heat of his hands on my skin sending shivers down my spine, the intensity in his smoldering green eyes as he claimed my lips and branded my soul to his.

There's no escaping him now. Only a kiss and some light touching and he's ruined me for anyone else... I can't even conceive the thought of being touched like that by anyone else.

A knock on the door breaks me out of my stupor. It must be Bonnie, here for movie night—and hopefully for me to fill her in on everything that's happened with Paul.

“Hi!!” She greets as she comes in, unloading her bag loaded with candy and our favorite super sweet Moscato. Movie nights are always for sugar overload.

I can't even hold myself back for a second, “Bon, PAUL AND I KISSED!” I nearly shout at her and immediately start laughing as her jaw drops to the floor.

“Girl! Spill, tell me all the details!” she says, cracking open the wine and pouring us two hefty glasses. We sit on the couch and I tell her everything—the stylist, the dress, the limo, our dinner, and asking him to come in. By the time I finish, Bonnie can't believe the change in events either.

“No way! That sounds like something straight out of a movie,” she says, tossing some popcorn into her mouth to really emphasize the effect. Neither of us can stop laughing. “So, what now?” she continues. “Are you guys like... together?”

I bite my lip, uncertain. “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it since. He has either left before I get there in the morning or comes back late at night after I’ve already gone home. Do you...” I let my voice trail off, scared to admit the thought that’s been playing at the edge of my consciousness for the past two days after our kiss. “Do you think he’s avoiding me?”

Bonnie tilts her head, her brows dipping thoughtfully. “It’s possible he’s just busy. Have you tried talking to him?”

I shake my head. “No, I’ve been too nervous. What if he regrets it? What if he’s just trying to find a way to let me down gently?”

Bonnie scoffs. "Kay, you're overthinking this. The man went through all that trouble to surprise you with a fancy dinner and then kissed you like he'd been waiting his whole life for it. I seriously doubt he regrets anything."

I sigh, feeling a bit reassured but still uncertain. “I just wish I knew what he was thinking.”

Bonnie smiles, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. “You’ll never know unless you talk to him. Maybe he’s just as nervous as you are.

"Paul? Nervous?" I ask, shaking my head with a skeptical smile. "I don't think so."

“You’d be surprised,” Bonnie says, chuckling. “By the way, did you tell him about your plans to start your own business?”

I shake my head, my chest tightening with guilt. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I just... I haven't gotten a chance to tell him.”

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Bonnie's expression softens, her lips tilting in a small, sympathetic smile. "I think you should tell him before he finds out by himself."

I nod, giving her a grateful smile. "I will. Thanks, Bonnie."

"Anytime, love," she replies with a dismissive wave. "By the way, what's the name of the restaurant Paul took you to?"

"Why?" I ask with a puzzled frown.

She pulls out her phone from her pants pocket and raises it to my face with a silly grin. "I'm going to look it up and see if I can get a reservation for next week. It's my boyfriend's birthday and I want to do something fancy."

"Blue Bays," I reply with a nostalgic smile. "I think it'd be a perfect place for an intimate birthday dinner with Tyler."

Bonnie types on her phone for a while, then pauses and looks up with a slight frown. "I thought the name sounded familiar but now, I'm sure." She turns the phone screen towards me and on it is the article about Christy and Paul. I stare at the picture below the headline, my blood running cold as the realization dawns on me; it was the same restaurant where he went with Christy.

Why did he take me there? Maybe she was just a friend? But how could he just be friends with someone so... perfect?

The next day, I'm doing my best to distract myself at work, but it's pretty hard considering I work in the house of the man I can't stop thinking about. I need to know what his intentions were, whether it was all just an act, or part of something more.

I sit down heavily on the couch, burying my face in my hands. The uncertainty is gnawing at me, and I can't shake the feeling of being played. I need answers, but the thought of confronting Paul terrifies me. What if he confirms my worst fears? What if I'm just another name on his list?

I feel like I'm about to spiral over the edge and drown in my insecurities. Tears well up in my eyes but I blink rapidly to push them back.

Just then, I hear the sound of keys jingling at the door. My heart skips a beat. Paul is home. And it's early.

Panic surges through me. I quickly wipe my eyes, trying to compose myself before he comes in. I stand up and take a deep breath, forcing a smile onto my face, but my hands are trembling, and my heart is pounding in my chest. I glance at my phone screen, grimacing at the redness around my eyes. Hastily brushing away the remaining tears, I sit up straight, hoping he doesn't notice.

The door swings open, and Paul steps inside, his arresting green eyes immediately locking onto mine, intoxicating me. He stops in his tracks, his brows dipping ever so slightly as his eyes roam my face.

"Kayla?" he says softly, his voice filled with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I reply with a forced smile, shaking my head. "I'm... I'm fine."

He doesn't buy it for a second. He crosses the room in a few quick strides, his hands gently cupping my face as he looks into my eyes. "Talk to me, Butterfly. Why are

you crying?"

I can't hold back the tears any longer. They spill over, streaming down my cheeks despite my efforts to contain them. The dam breaks, and all the fear, doubt, and confusion I've been holding in comes rushing out.

"What do you care?" I mutter, sniffing. "It doesn't matter to you if I cry or not."

His frown deepens as he walks closer to me and cups my face in his hands, his thumb swiping over the moisture on my cheeks. "What are you talking about, Kayla? Please talk to me."

My chest tightens painfully at the tenderness in his voice and the genuine concern in his eyes. If only he could give me what I really want...

"Why did you take me to dinner?" I ask finally, raising my eyes to his face, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"I told you, I wanted to thank you for..."

"I never felt unappreciated by you, Paul," I cut in, grateful that my voice remained steady despite my jiggling nerves. "You have never treated me poorly and you pay me way more than is required for my job so why did you have to go out of your way to dress me up in expensive clothes and take me to some fancy restaurant just to thank me?"

Why did you make me feel like I was special? But I didn't ask that out loud. It would have been too humiliating.

"Kayla, I..."

“Why did you kiss me if you were just going to ignore me for days after,” I ask, my voice breaking at the end. I look away from his eyes because I can't bear the pain of seeing the rejection in them. I press my lips together, blinking back the tears pushing against my eyelids.

“Because I'm in love with you, Kayla. How can you not see that?”

His voice was so quiet, I wasn't sure I heard him right. I lift my gaze to meet his, stunned beyond belief. His green eyes, usually so unreadable, are filled with a raw, almost overwhelming emotion. I feel my breath catch in my throat, my heart thudding violently against my rib cage.

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“What did you say?” I ask, my voice coming out breathlessly.

Paul advances slowly, his movements deliberate and purposeful, his eyes boring into mine with an intensity that makes my body burn with a strange fire. I back up slowly, my heart thrumming with a mixture of fear and anticipation, until my back hits a wall. He stops directly in front of me, hooks a hand around my waist, and tugs me against his body. A soft gasp escapes my lips as I unconsciously grab onto his shoulders for support. Then he slowly lowers his head until his lips are mere inches from mine. I can feel the warmth of his breath on my face, sending shivers down my spine. I stare deeply into his eyes, simply unable to look away, waiting... just waiting on his command. Mercilessly at his mercy

"I love you, Kayla," he repeated, and this time I heard him clearly. I'm sure.

My breath catches in my throat, my mind reeling with disbelief and euphoria. I rack my head for what to say but before I can form any rational thought, his mouth claims mine. Hot. Hard. Demanding.

Chapter Seven

Paul

I can feel the exact moment she surrenders to me, showing me I've successfully erased all of her doubts.

She stands on her tiptoes, I lock my fingers in her hair and draw her even closer. She parts her lips for me, meeting the thrust of my tongue with her own. The taste of her

mouth is heady, and I can't get enough. A deep groan escapes my lips and press my lips harder to hers, plundering her mouth mercilessly, stealing the breath from her lungs and giving it back again. She whimpers, clutching at my shoulders to steady herself as her knees slightly give.

I break the kiss, duck down, and scoop her into my arms. She gasps, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her warm brown eyes meet mine, adorably dazed and confused. “Wh-what...?”

“I won't drop you, my beautiful butterfly,” I say, smiling into the enchanting depths of her eyes. “I promise.”

She nods, burying her head in my chest but not before I see the deep blush spreading across her face. Holding her securely against my chest, I carry her to my bedroom. I close the door with my shoulder and gently ease her to the ground. Not even a second later, I capture her lips with mine again, this time in a long, delirious, kiss that leaves us both breathless.

“I need to see you--all of you, Kayla.” I hear the desperation in my voice, but I couldn't care less, I need her.

She nods shyly, shivering slightly as her hands reach for the buttons of her shirt. I watch with rapt attention as she peels off her shirt and pants, leaving her standing in a matching pair of underwear that looks plain yet sends blood rushing to my head.

“All of it,” I mutter, my voice coming out gruffly. “Take it all off.”

She complies, hooks her fingers into the band of her panties, and rolls them down her long, long legs. Next is her bra and it takes everything in me not to butt in. I need to give her some sense of control...

Finally, she's standing in front of me, completely naked. She drops her gaze from mine, her face flaming with embarrassment. She presses her thighs together, self-consciously wrapping her arms around her body.

I let my eyes take in all of her, from her full, perky breasts that I haven't stopped thinking about for days to her flat stomach and curvy hips, every inch of her flawless body.

"Damn, Kayla. You are so gorgeous," I mutter, letting out a gust of breath. She blushes harder, ducking her head. I step closer to her, tuck a finger under her chin, and lift her face to mine but she refuses to meet my gaze. "Hey baby... look at me."

She raises her eyes reluctantly to mine, her gorgeous brown eyes brimming with a vulnerability that breaks my heart.

"I want you, Kayla," I say with what I hope is a reassuring smile. "But I won't do anything you don't want me to do. Tell me to stop, and I will."

"I..." she trails off, running her tongue over her lips in a way that makes my pants tighten uncomfortably. "I want you too, Paul. It's just... it's my first time."

I stare at her in awe, a wave of tenderness surging through me. I can't believe that I'm going to be her first. I don't know if I deserve it, but I'm determined to make it worthwhile. Pulling her against my chest, I wrap my arms around her, holding her until her body stops shivering and settles snugly into mine. "I'll never hurt you, my little butterfly," I mutter against her hair, then place a gentle kiss on her crown.

She looks up at me, her lips tilted in a soft smile that makes my heart skip a couple of beats. "I trust you, Paul."

Taking her hand in mine, I lead her to the bed and lay her back on the sheets. I stretch

out beside her, my face inches from hers. I lean forward slightly, brushing my lips over hers, running my knuckles over her bare belly in slow circles. I deepen the kiss, loving the lusty throaty sound that burst from her lips. I pull away abruptly, suddenly desperate to feel her body against mine. Shifting my weight slightly to my elbow, I hastily unbutton my shirt, but it seems to take forever so I pull it over my head and fling it aside.

Kayla gasps slightly, her eyes feasting greedily on my chest.

“Like what you see, baby?” I ask with a pleased smirk. “Want to touch?”

She nods wordlessly and I take her hand in mine, guiding it over one of my pecs while looking into her eyes. Then I let go, leaving her to explore my body. Her palm moves timidly over my abs, gentle and hesitant. My muscles contract under her touch and I watch, mesmerized, her expression waver between lust and fascination. She gets bolder, sliding her hand up my chest with a deliberate slowness until she gets to my nipple. She flicks it with her thumb, smiling coyly when she sees my expression tighten in response. She doesn't stop there. She makes her way back down, running her hand down my abdomen until her hand hovers above the band of my pants.

“Can I...?” She trails off, looking at me with an adorable plea in her eyes.

“Oh, please, honey,” I say with a slow smile. “I'm all yours.”

She takes hold of the button that fastens my pants, but her hands are so unsteady that I reach down to help her. The zipper gives way and she gasps when she realizes I'm not wearing underwear. My erection springs free, thick, and pulsing. I shrug the pants off my legs to give her easier access. And then we're both naked. Raw. Vulnerable.

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I let my gaze rake over her again, hungry for the sight of her. Her flowery scent teases my nose, heightening the savage lust burning in my veins. A snarl of obscenity escapes my lips at the sight of one taut nipple peeking out from between strands of red curls, her breasts rising with each rapid breath. I didn't think it was possible to want a woman this badly, to truly want her, to want to please her. Somehow it heightens my need for her, but it also leaves me feeling something I haven't felt for a long time—nerves.

I'd laugh if anyone ever told me I'd be anxious about sex but then again, I've never had sex with a virgin, or someone I love.

What if I disappoint her or, worse, hurt her?

Fuck!

"Come here." Heart hammering in my chest, I tuck a finger beneath her chin, duck down, and brush my lips over hers, gratified by the little shivers that passed through her. I'll take this slowly, giving her body and her mind all the time she needs to adjust and truly enjoy it. And then... I'll have her.

I fight back the desire to kiss her, instead letting her anticipation build as I trail my mouth over her shoulder, tasting the honey-sweet skin of her throat. I suck her earlobe, teasing the whorl of her ear with my tongue. Only when she begins to shake in my arms do I bring my lips back to hers. I kiss the corners of her mouth, nip her lower lip, tracing the outline of her lips with my tongue. Then, at last, I kiss her, inhaling her whimper as our tongues meet.

She seems to melt in my arms, every soft, sweet inch of her pressed against me, the feminine feel of her making my body tense, a bolt of heat searing through my gut. She kisses me back with all the fire in her soul, matching me stroke for stroke, her timid exploration of my mouth blowing whatever was left of my mind. I'm lost in her, lost in the scent and feel of her, need for her thrumming in my veins.

I lift my head, pin her arms above her head with one hand, then reach down with the other to cup her breasts, teasing her petal-soft nipples into tight hard buds. I tug them with my fingers and flick them with my thumbs. She gasps, then moans, a sound of unmistakable female arousal.

“God, I love your tits,” I moan gruffly. They're soft, yielding to my hand as I cup and plump them, their tips so sensitive that the merest flick of my thumb makes her shiver. Then I duck down, flicking my tongue over each puckered peak, then I close my mouth over her right nipple and suck.

She cries out, whimpers, arching her back, offering herself to me, her arms still pinned above her head.

“Oh, Paul...”

Driven by the plea in her voice and my own desperate hunger, I tug on her nipple with my lips, flick it with my tongue, and suckle it, cupping her other breast with my free hand, my thumb tracing circles on the sensitive underside.

God, she's so responsive!

Her breathing comes in shudders, her body trembling, her eyes squeezed shut, a look of torment on her sweet face. I shift my mouth to her other nipple, grazing her skin with the edge of his teeth, then sucking hard. I want to please her, want so goddamned badly to please her. I want to make her burn for me the way I burn for

her.

"Paul, please!" She squirms against him, her hips lifting off the bed, seeking relief. I raise my head and release her wrists, feeling her fingers clench in my hair.

I flick a nipple with my tongue, teasing her. "Please what, Butterfly? Want me to stop?"

She gives a frustrated moan. "Please don't stop!"

Only too happy to oblige her, I lower my mouth to a wet nipple, sucking and nipping her as I nudge my hand between her thighs, lift her right leg, and drape it over my hip, spreading her wide. I slide my hand over the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, teasing her, working my way slowly upward.

Christ, I can feel her heat.

It radiates from within her. Her sultry, musky scent pervades my head, igniting every drop of testosterone in my blood. She whimpers my name, her nails digging into my scalp, her hips rising each time my hand draws near, then twisting in frustration when I draw my hand away again. When I'm certain I have her on the edge, I cup her damp curls—and ease a finger

inside her.

She lets out a breathy moan, her hot, slick vagina gripping my finger tight. I hear myself growl like some kind of damned animal, my hips flexing as if my cock is buried inside her instead of thrusting against her thigh.

Slow down, Carlton.

Forcing breath into my lungs, I try to relax. I stroke her, sliding a second finger inside her, stretching her.

“In a few minutes, my cock is going to be inside you, stroking you just like this,” I say, looking into her eyes, hoping she understands what I mean.

She shivers, then tenses up, and I know she finds the idea both arousing and maybe a little frightening. And that was okay, because so do I. I don't want to hurt her, but dammit, I don't know if I can hold back much longer.

I gather her body's moisture, then withdraw my fingers and rub the silky wetness over her clit, the little pink bud swelling at my touch. Then I penetrate her again, sliding my fingers in and out, taking care to catch her clit with each deep stroke.

Her breath keeps coming out in ragged pants as I continue to stroke her, her face turned against my chest, her eyes squeezed shut, her body wracked with tension that seemed to arc through her and into me, shooting straight to my groin.

"I want you, Kayla." My words came out in urgent whispers as I flick her nipples with my tongue, unable to keep my mouth off her, my cock so hard it

aches. “I want to fuck you so bad it hurts.”

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Then she gasps, seeming to hold her breath as the tension inside her peaks and shatters. She lets out a shaky sigh, her inner muscles clenching around my fingers, a look of excruciating pleasure on her beautiful face as she orgasms. I ride through it with her, keeping my rhythm steady, trying to make her pleasure last. I rain kisses on her breasts, her throat, and her lips, as the quaking inside her slowly faded. After her climax had passed, I held her, a bittersweet ache in my chest at the sight of her lying in my arms. Her eyes are closed, her lips slightly parted, her breathing soft and easy. Her hair lays in a tangle around her face, her lashes dark against her cheeks, her lips curved in the faintest of smiles.

And I make up my mind right there. If she's had enough, if she's fallen asleep, I won't push her. I'll probably just go wank in the bathroom like I've been doing these past few days after our dinner.

Noble of you, Carlton. Stupid, but noble.

But she doesn't fall asleep. She looks at me eagerly. I immediately fuse my mouth to hers again, unable to get enough.

I wrap my arms around her, the two of us twisting and rolling on the bed in a tangle of limbs, hands exploring soft skin, seeking out new ways to give and take pleasure. And then she's beneath me, both of us breathless.

On fire for her, I reach into my bedside drawer and take out a wrap of condom, ripping off the wrapper with my teeth, my mouth filling with the taste of latex and spermicidal lubricant. I'm about to slide it down the length of my erection, when she places a hand on mine, stopping me.

“No, please,” she mutters, her eyes pleading

“Are you sure?” I ask, searching her face. Usually, "No condom" means "no sex" as far as I'm concerned. I haven't had sex without a condom since... Well, I can't remember when. But the thought of being inside Kayla, of truly feeling her, with no barriers between us ...

I groan, letting the condom fall to the sheets, then stretch myself out above her, wrapping her left leg around my waist. “I don't want to hurt you.”

She slides her hands up my chest, looking into my eyes. “I know.”

I lock my gaze on hers, slowly nudging the tip of my cock into her slippery heat. Her body resists my intrusion at first, my access impeded by a thin ring of flesh. Then, with the slightest thrust of my hips, I break through. Her eyes fly wide, and she gasps, then squeezes her eyes shut, biting down on her bottom lip. And it strikes me as unfair somehow that what feels so indescribably good to me causes her pain.

“Easy, honey,” I mutter soothingly, holding myself still inside her--no easy task. She's slick and

impossibly tight, the head of my cock teased by sensations I never would have felt if I was wearing a condom—subtle textures, wetness, heat.

The first stirrings of an orgasm tug at my belly, every instinct I have urging me to drive deeper, to bury myself in her snug warmth. But this is about her, about pleasing her, about giving her everything I can give her, because what she's given me- Jesus! - what she's just given me was priceless, far beyond anything I deserved.

I can feel her trying to relax, working through her pain.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, stroking her hair, raining kisses on her cheeks, her eyelids, her lips, and her forehead.

She smiles at me, her soft brown eyes with amusement. "It's not bad, really."

"Sure?"

She nods, her smile widening. "I promise."

I withdraw and push back inside of her, slowly, without taking my eyes off her. I do it again, and again, going deeper each time, gradually stretching her past the pain until I'm completely buried in her.

The sensation is indescribable.

I moan, whisper her name, my body shaking. "Oh, honey, you feel so ... Jesus Christ."

She wraps her legs around my waist as I start to move in deep, slow thrusts, stroking the hidden places inside her. At that moment, I can feel myself surrendering to her, my heart, my body, my soul... everything.

Her hands her everywhere; my chest, over the curves of my shoulders, and the muscles of my

back. "I love you, Paul! I love you!"

The words spill out of her in a breathless rush, carrying the genuineness of her love to me. I can't think, let alone verbalize a response to her. The ache inside me draws together in a tight, shimmering knot, as I continue to move over her, against her, inside her, our breaths mingling, our sweaty skin slapping desperately together as we

struggle to reach the peak.

“I’m not going to last, baby,” I gasp out. She feels like heaven.

She wraps her arms tightly around my shoulders as if to reassure me, and I increase my pace, slamming fast and hard into her until she cries out my name, her nails digging painfully into my back as she orgasms. Hard.

Her teeth sink into my shoulder, her inner muscles clenching around me as her body continues to tremble uncontrollably beneath mine.

Suddenly, my breath ceases, and I feel my control shatter, my body shuddering as I come apart in her arms, losing myself inside her with a deep, guttural groan.

“You’re absolutely perfect, Butterfly.”

Chapter Eight

Kayla

I open my eyes slowly, a deep sense of contentment immediately settling in my chest. Paul isn’t in the bed with me, but his side is still warm which means he must have just gotten up. I roll over to his side of the bed, burying my head in his pillow, inhaling his strong, masculine scent. It grounds me, reminding me that this is real, that he is real. I let out a dreamy sigh, turning to lie on my back.

I close my eyes as the memories of the previous night invade my mind, a silly grin playing on my lips. Last night was unarguably the best night of my life. Paul had made my first time special; more beautiful than anything I ever wished for or imagined. I trace my fingers over the sheets, remembering the way they tangled around us as we moved together. The way his breath hitched, the way he whispered my name like a prayer, the way his hands held me as if I were the most precious thing in the world—it was all perfect. It was more than just the physical act; it was a merging of our souls, a completion of everything we've shared over the years.

I open my eyes to look around his room. I've been in here a countless time over the years but this time it feels different. Everything looks the same—the familiar dark wood furniture, the large windows, the soft lighting filtering in from the slightly parted curtains—but now there's a new layer of intimacy, a sense of belonging that I didn't feel before.

Every corner of this room now holds a memory of the night before, from the way he looked at me with such intensity to the electrifying tenderness of his touch, the combined sound of our moans, and how he clung to me at the height of ecstasy. I've never felt so wanted, so desired. And oh, how considerate he was, so worried that he'd hurt me. I could see the pain in his eyes when he broke my sheath, and that made me feel instantly better despite the pain that shot through my body. The pain disappeared quickly and the pleasure that followed was incredible. The feeling of having him inside of me, filling me up, moving inside of... I never knew such depth of pleasure was possible. I want to feel it again. And again. Forever, if possible.

Reluctantly, I get out of bed, pulling on one of Paul's shirts. The soft fabric feels snug against my skin and hug myself for a moment, reveling in the warmth. I look up to catch the reflection of myself in the mirror, surprised at the silly grin on my face. Ignoring my sleep-mated hair, I hurry out of the room.

I need to find Paul, to see him, to feel his mouth in mine and his big strong hands on my body, teasing me...

As I pad barefoot through the hallway, I catch the faint sound of papers rustling in his office and I head in that direction.

When I reach the door, I gently push it open, then peek inside. "Hey, I..."

I stop dead in my tracks at the sight that greets me. Paul is sitting at his desk, my binder—the one containing my business plans—open in front of him. The contents are spread out around his desk as he broods over them with a furrowed brow.

A surge of emotions wells up inside me, shock, embarrassment, defensiveness, anger in rapid succession. I choose to dwell on anger.

How dare he invade my privacy like this? What the hell is he doing?

I storm into the room, my body shaking with fury. "What do you think you're doing, Paul? How dare you go through my things!"

He looks up, his clear green eyes flashing with surprise before they harden. He closes the binder and stands up, facing me. "Kayla, I—"

"You had no right to go through my binder!" I cut him off, my voice rising. "That's private! How did it even get here in the first place?" Paul's jaw tightens, but he doesn't say a word to defend himself and that angers me even more. "You think I can't do everything in there on my own, right? You think my dreams are silly, don't you? I know that look!"

"Kayla, calm down," Paul says, his voice steady but firm. "I'm not judging you. In fact, this is one of the most well-thought-out business plans I've ever seen. It's better than the vast majority of the proposals I get for new properties almost every day."

I stop, blinking at him in shock. "What?"

Paul nods. "I mean it. Your plan is impressive. One of your prospective locations is actually one that my firm is involved with. I think it's great and I can help you secure the property."

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. I close it again, feeling a mix of shock and confusion. I expected him to be mad at me for making plans without his input, so I lashed out, but instead he's complimenting me and even offering to help.

"You really think it's good?" I finally manage to ask.

"Emphatically," he replies. And I believe him. If there's one thing I know, it's the fact that Paul isn't one to sugarcoat things, especially when it comes to business. So if he says my business plan is impressive, then it is and that makes me feel good.

“But I have to ask, why didn't you tell me about your plans?” Paul asks quietly.

“I... I'm sorry,” I stammer with a guilty shrug. “I guess with my plans and all, I really didn't see myself coming through. What if the plan flops? W-what if I fail?”

Paul's expression softens. He walks around his desk and comes to stand in front of me, taking my hands in his to give me a reassuring squeeze. “It's a very feasible plan, Kayla and I assure you it'll be a success. Look at me, baby.” I lift my head, looking into the smoldering depths of his eyes. “Let me help you.”

For a moment, I find myself melting in the heat of his gaze, drowning in the reassuring promises lurking in their dreamy green depths but I quickly drop my gaze, stepping away from him. “It means a lot that I do this for myself, Paul. I can't rely on you to help me out every damn time. This is my dream; I should achieve it on my own.”

He remains silent, waiting patiently until I meet his gaze again. “What would Grams want you to do, Kayla?”

I frown, shaking my head at him. “Why is that relevant?”

He points to the business name listed on the binder—Rosemary's Place. “I know a part of the reason you're doing this is to feel closer to Grams. Would she have wanted you to use all the tools you have at your disposal? Or would she have wanted you to do it alone?”

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I bite my lip, thinking back to my conversations with Grandma. She only ever told me to follow my heart and my dreams. She never said how.

Paul steps closer, his expression softening. "Kayla, this is still your dream. I'm just offering to help you by providing guidance and resources. It doesn't make it any less yours."

Tears well up in my eyes again, but this time they're tears of gratitude. "You really mean that?"

He nods, pulling me into a gentle embrace. "Absolutely. I believe in you, Kayla. And I want to be there for you, in every way possible."

I rest my head against his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart. "Thank you, Paul. That means more to me than you could ever know."

He tilts my chin up, his green eyes locking onto mine with a tenderness that makes my breath catch. "Anytime, Butterfly. I'll do anything for the woman I love."

"I love you too," I whisper, just as his mouth descends on mine in a long, passionate kiss.

Just then, Paul's computer dings. He breaks our kiss to look at the email notification.

"What are you doing next Saturday?" he asks, continuing to rub his spare hand on my back.

“Ummm... probably nothing important, why?” I ask tentatively.

“One of my old business school friends, Christy Smith, is getting married. It’s a small ceremony followed by a reception at her parents’ house, I’d love it if you’d be my plus one,” he says with a smile.

His words make me burst out laughing. “Christy Smith, the supermodel, is your friend?”

“Yes...”

“I saw the pictures of you out with her and assumed she was someone you were seeing. I am so relieved,” I say, continuing to laugh. He returns my laugh and fills me in on the details of their longstanding friendship.

“So... will you be my date?” he asks again.

“Of course! I’ll be your date to anything, forever,” I say. And with that, we find ourselves tangled up on his office floor.

I can’t wait for more days like this.

Epilogue

Six years later

Paul

The last of the guests has left and Kayla has just walked a very pregnant Bonnie to her car. Our twin toddlers, Cade and Cole, have finally fallen asleep in my arms after running around all day. All in all, it’s been a fulfilling day and it’s made me so happy

to see my wife so filled with joy. Celebrating the fifth anniversary of Rosemary's Place meant a lot to her and I couldn't be more proud of how far she's come. I've seen how hard she's worked in the past five years to grow her business and build our home and family.

I fall in love with her all over again every single day and I'm just grateful for being able to share wonderful memories with her and our kids. Thanks to her, I feel like the most blessed man on earth. Even little things like watching her smile as she watches our boys sleep, or the way her eyes light up when she talks about her business, fill me with immeasurable happiness. I feel like the luckiest man on earth with Kayla by my side.

She reappears at the doorway, her face glowing with the happiness and pride of the day's celebrations. She quietly closes the door and walks over to me, her eyes softening as she looks at our sleeping boys.

"Hey, honey," she whispers, placing a quick kiss on my lips as she takes one of the boys from me.

"Hey," I reply softly, smiling at her. "It was a perfect day, wasn't it?"

She nods, a small smile playing on her lips. "It really was. Thank you for your unwavering support, husband. You're amazing."

I shake my head slightly. "This is all you, my perfect wife. You're incredible and I love you."

"I love you too, darling," she replies with a tender smile, juggling Cole in her arms. "Let's get these ones to bed."

Together, we carry the boys upstairs and tuck them into their beds. After making sure

they're settled, we walk hand in hand to our bedroom. As soon as the door closes behind us, I pull her into my arms and lower my mouth to hers in a long, ravishing kiss. I run my hands down her back to her ass cheeks, giving her a rough squeeze followed by a sound smack. She moans deeply into my mouth, pressing her body closer to mine.

“God, I've wanted to do that all day,” I say, pulling back slightly to smile into her beautiful brown eyes. “And I plan to do more. What do you think about us having a beautiful baby girl with your hair and eyes?”

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Kayla's eyes widen slightly, and then she smiles, her cheeks flushing. "A baby girl, huh?" she asks softly, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest. "That sounds wonderful. She'd be perfect."

"Of course, she'd be perfect. She'll look exactly like you," I mutter, reaching behind her to tug down the zip of her dress. She smiles at me, shrugging her shoulders so the dress slips down her arms, falling to the ground in a puddle. Then she takes off her lacy white panties and bra and it takes everything in me not to jump her right there and then. I let my eyes roam every inch of her body. "God, you're perfect."

She blushes and my heart clenches with an indescribable emotion. I love the fact that even after all these years, I still make her blush like the very first time.

"Your turn, honey. Take off your clothes."

My heart skips with excitement at her gentle command. "Yes, ma'am," I say with a playful grin, quickly shedding my clothes. Her eyes stay locked on mine, filled with lust and anticipation.

Once I'm undressed, I move closer, tuck a finger beneath her chin, tilt her face upward then kiss her again, this time gently, stroking her cheek with my thumb as I slide my tongue along hers. She rises on her tiptoes, slides her fingers into my hair, and draws my head closer, parting her lips for him, meeting the thrust of my tongue with her own.

She tastes faintly of champagne and smells like roses. I groan and kiss her harder, plundering her mouth, stealing the breath from her lungs and giving it back again.

She whimpers, clinging closer to me. Then I break the kiss, duck down, and scoop her into my arms. She lets out a surprised laugh and wraps her arms around my neck, clinging to me. She runs her mouth over my face, nipping my earlobe, trailing her fingers down my spine. My muscles bunched beneath her hands as I walked.

I lay her back on the sheets and stretch out beside her, my face inches from hers.

"I love you, Kayla," I mutter, brushing my lips over hers. I run my knuckles over her bare stomach in slow circles.

She shivers slightly, reaching out to cup my face with one hand. "I love you too, Paul. So much."

With a moan, I lower my mouth to her belly, scattering open-mouthed kisses over her skin. I work my way upward and her chest heaves in anticipation. But when I reach her breasts, I refuse to kiss her nipples as she expected. Instead, I press first my lips and then my cheek against her heartbeat, reveling in the beauty of her life.

She buries her hands in my hair, placing a tender kiss on my temple. I raise my head, locking my gaze on her for one, stretched-out second, hoping she sees the depth of my feelings for her; my love, gratitude, and commitment. My soul and my life— I hope she knows that I'd give it all for her in a flash.

I lower my mouth to hers in a deep, slow kiss, thrusting my tongue between her lips, exploring every inch of her mouth. I run one hand up her rib cage, my knuckles teasing the underside of her right

breast. Then I close my palm over the swelling, loving its full feel in my hand. Cupping and plumping it, I stroke my thumb over her puckered nipple, making lazy circles.

Then with a hungry groan, I drag my mouth from hers, lower it to her nipple, and suck. She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as her body buckles beneath mine. I move from one breast to the other and back again, teasing her nipples, tugging on them with my lips, flicking my tongue over their sensitive tips, until she goes out of breath, her body arching toward me. Then I take her right hand, draw it downward, and press it against her vagina, my hand holding hers in place.

“I want to watch you touch yourself,” I mutter, brushing my fingers lightly through the golden curls of her muff.

She runs her tongue over her lips, a nervous tick that has my cock raging with desire. Her eyes drift shut, and I watch as she strokes two fingers down her clit, slightly lifting her hips as her fingers circle the sensitive pink bud, then slip between her folds. She opens her legs wider, then slowly slides her fingers in herself and when she pulls them out, they’re coated with her juice. She rubs the wetness over her clitoris, a deep moan of pleasure bursting out from her parted lips.

“Oh, fuck,” I mutter, as a perverse thrill shoots through me. I cup my palm around my cock, pumping the hard length to relieve some of the overwhelming pressure that's pulsing through the straining veins.

“Look at me, Kayla!” I command gruffly. “Keep your eyes on mine.”

She complies, her gorgeous eyes locking into mine as we both continue to pleasure ourselves. Her thrusts grow faster, more desperate. Her breath hitches, her hips bucking slightly to meet her thrust. I pump my cock in rhythm to her strokes, barely hanging to my self-control by a thread. I watch her watch me and the action is so incredibly hot that it drives me too close to the edge.

To distract myself, I duck down and draw one hard nipple into my mouth. I suckle gently then flick my tongue over the puckered bud. She let out a strangled cry, her

hand flying to my head as her body stiffened beneath mine. She whimpers, her fingers clenching painfully in my hair as the first wave of orgasm racks her body.

“God, Kayla, you're so fucking sexy. I can't get enough of you.”

It isn't an exaggeration. Even after two kids, Kayla is easily the sexiest woman alive to me, her gracious curves, flawless skin, and full breasts...

I lap my tongue over the beaded velvet of her nipple once again, enjoying the taste of her skin, the way her belly quivered when I suckle— fuck, she was sure built to drive me insane. My cock feels so hot and heavy, like it'll burst open at any moment but I'm determined to stretch her pleasure to the maximum.

Sliding my hand between her thighs, I cup her, pressing the heel of my hand against her in slow, deep circles. She gasps, her hips giving an involuntary jerk.

“My God, Paul. W-what're you doing?” She asks breathlessly.

"Fucking you with my fingers," I reply, sliding two fingers into her sheath. She moans my name, her hands gliding down my back, her nails digging into my skin.

“Does that feel good?” I ask.

“Oh, fuck, yes!” She answered on a breathy exhale.

“Good.”

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I lose track of time after that, one minute stretching seamlessly into the next, nothing in my world but Kayla. Her pleasure becomes my pleasure, every whimper, every shiver guiding me as I sought new ways to please her, my brain buzzing, strung out on her flowery scent, the addictive taste of her skin, the provocative sight of her sweet body.

And she responds with equal vigor, her hips responding promptly to the motion of my hand, her thighs parting to give me better access. Attuned to her cues, I nudge one finger between her lips to tease her entrance, groaning with pleasure when her juice drenches my fingers. I give her clit

a little flick and her eyes fly open, her grip on my arm tightening.

“Paul, I can't... I don't think I can take any more.”

“Oh, honey,” I mutter, nibbling at her throat. “I've only just started.”

Then I rise to my knees, pull her knees apart, and lower my head to her thighs. Working two fingers into her, I begin a steady rhythm as my tongue flicks over her clitoris. She gasps, her hips buckling, rising to meet my thrusts. I settle into a rhythm, fucking and sucking. Her swollen little nub grows harder, and fuller, her breath coming in ragged pants. I can tell she's close to another orgasm. Her body has grown tense, every muscle in her body stretched so tautly that one would think she'd break.

“Come for me baby,” I mumble, my lips vibrating against her pussy lips. “You don't have to hold back.”

“Oh, Paul!” She moans, her nails digging sharply into my skin. She sporadically clenches around my fingers, her breathing frantic.

“Let yourself go, honey,” I whisper, lifting my mouth to hers in a quick hard kiss. I lift my mouth from hers, trailing it down the skin of her throat, my heart pounding in sync with the wild pulse he felt beneath my lips. My hips move of their own accord, rubbing my erection against her hip.

“Let go, Kayla!”

Her breath breaks and she comes with a shudder, arching off the bed, her inner walls contracting tightly against my fingers.

“You did great, honey. That's my girl.”

And then I'm above her, inside her, so deep that her body trembles with another bout of orgasm. I continue to push into her in hard, fast thrusts. I fasten my mouth to hers, giving her a taste of herself, and swallowing her erotic moans. She wraps her legs around me, offering me all of herself, as I fall over the edge and, with a deep groan, lose myself inside her.

We come together this time, and even then, I continue to slam into her sheath, keeping the pressure and rhythm steady, determined to prolong her pleasure in every way I can. And when I can't anymore, I cling tightly onto her, running my mouth over her breasts, her throat, and her lips, until the vibrations of our bodies slowly subside.

We lay quietly after, our bodies limp and breathing ragged. I can't say for how long we remain but it's the happiest feeling in the world. I looked into her eyes, simply unable to take my gaze away from her, as her breathing slowly returned to normal.

She opens her eyes and smiles at me. “That was... explosive. Do you think we made

a baby girl?"

"I'm not sure we did," I reply, stretching my lips in a suggestive smile. "I guess we have to try again."

"Paul!" Kayla squeals in protest, laughing as my mouth descends on her in a slow, delirious kiss.

Oh, I plan to make it a long night.

~The End