

*The
Promise:
Fulfilled*

BY MAHLATSE MOKONE

CHAPTER 1

"I love you, you know that don't you?" he asked kissing my forehead, I nodded "Yeah, I do." I breathed. "When are you leaving?" I asked. "The day after tomorrow." He said and I nodded. "I wish I could say goodbye to your family but that's not such a good idea for me, give Connie a kiss for me, tell her I'm sorry" I said and he nodded "I will." He said resting his forehead against mine. "Let's promise each other one thing princess." He said then paused "I think I found my other half in you, if that's true and we're meant to be together, nothing will stop that from happening. We'll end up together." He said and I smiled, "We'll find our way back to each other." He added "Like the boomerang?" I chuckled sadly "Like the boomerang." He repeated. He hugged me so tightly that I found it hard to breathe a little. "Will I ever see you again?" I wailed.

"If I'm right about us, definitely." He said and I nodded "Promise." I whispered...

I woke up with a slight jolt; I looked around my bedroom as if I'd never seen it before. With a quiet sigh I ran my hand through my hair and shook my head at myself. It's been eight years since that day and it's been a very long while since I last dreamt about it. Or him.

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand, it was still too early but the morning light was slowly starting to fill the room. I glanced at Jade and slightly smiled; Jade Thorne is my boyfriend for two years now. With his amber hair color and soft brown eyes to his lean build, he was a joy to look at. Add his intelligence, success, sense of humor and his subtle charm; he's what most women considered a catch.

I slowly got off the bed careful not to wake him up; I picked up his shirt and put it on. I silently went out of my bedroom. I was living in a luxurious condo right in central LA. The real estate agent said it's a great apartment for a bachelorette and I had to agree, but what really had me sold was the location. Seclusion was not for me anymore, but living here, my sometimes-lonely nights were filled with array of activity all around me. Its floor to ceiling glass walls offered me a more vicinage view of the city.

I walked down my hallway in slight amusement, the walls were filled with so many art paintings you'd think it's a museum. I came down the spiral staircase into my expansive great room. It had a blend of lite mahogany and cream-colored interior, both inviting and warm yet strong and modern.

I went to my kitchen island starting up my coffee machine and slightly frowned, I knew that my normal morning buzz was dampened by the dream I had.

I keep waiting for it to get easier and it never does. You never forget your first love right? With time I was starting to see truth in that saying.

Or was it the fact that there was no bitterness or resentment between us?

We just decided to go our separate ways; that decision was mutual and at the time it seemed like a good one.

We were young and very much in love, we both weren't ready to handle the direction our relationship was taking. We both had some growing up to do first, we both had to experience a bit more of life outside our consuming love. Should we have stayed together I probably would've been pregnant and married by

twenty. That's not what either of us wanted, so we decided to let each other go. With the promise that if our love was meant to be, we'd end up together. With each passing year I put less and less meaning to that promise, yet it still stuck with me. I don't regret the separation, but sometimes I can't help but wonder if Brandon was truly the one for me, or if I made a mistake by letting him go. I haven't seen him or communicated with him in eight years. If it wasn't for the nagging memories and the blue boomerang I felt an inexplicable need to keep, you'd think we never happened.

In some moments such as this one, I couldn't help but think of him. Where he is in the world, what he's doing, who he's with. Whether or not he's married, if he's a father to someone, if he's happy.

I hated those thoughts; they were nagging questions I didn't have answers to. Even though I knew that if I dug deep enough I'd get them, the only problem was that I might not like what I find.

Other times I'd wonder if he remembers me and asks himself the same questions; or if like me, with time decided to stop waiting for the unknown and live life.

I was suddenly engulfed from behind and I smiled "You're up." I said when Jade kissed my hair. "Coffee?" I asked and he chuckled. "And you wonder why I love you. Please." He said as I placed another cup for him. "When are we moving in together?" he asked and I laughed at his childish tone. "When we do, we're getting a proper house, a little outside the city." He said and I feigned offense "What's wrong with my apartment?" I asked.

"Don't get me wrong honey, its spectacular but how do you live here? The buzz of the city, it would drive me crazy." He said and I nodded in understanding, he's always hated that.

"Well it keeps me serene." I said, mostly because I like to minimize the moments when I'm alone with my thoughts. "Besides, I'm not ready to share my space as of yet." I added with an apologetic smile. He smiled nodding in understanding too, I was glad to see that he didn't take it the wrong way.

"You're a mystery Katelyn Gilbert, one I'm nowhere near resolving even after two years." He said then shrugged "I guess that adds to your charm." He said taking a sip of his coffee and moaning. "Delicious." He added.

I quickly rinsed my cup in the sink and checked the clock on the wall "I have to go shower and get ready for work." I said and he kissed my neck "Want me to help you?" he asked and I chuckled.

"One, you smell of bodywash, so you have the showering part covered and two, aren't you going to run late?" I asked and he glanced at the clock himself and cursed softly. He quickly grabbed his things off the granite counter and kissed me for a while. "Thanks for a great night." He whispered and I nodded.

"I'll call you, I love you." He said walking towards the private elevator, I smiled and waved him off as the doors closed on him. I huffed; even now I'm still unable to say I love you back to him.

I care about him deeply and he makes me happy, so what was wrong with me? The worst part is that I know I'm hurting him by not saying it back. With another sigh I went back up the stairs.

After a hot shower I felt a whole lot better and much more ready for my day, I opened my massive walk in closet and fished for a royal blue sheath dress and sky-high black Louboutins. I always dressed to kill; I called it my power suit, it

gave me a sense of power and control. One thing I've never been a fan of was make-up, I guess I got that from Mom, she only wore it when necessary. After a quick breakfast I went down to the foyer, I walked towards the tinted glass doors; the doorman opened them for me then tilted his hat in greeting. I walked down the small steps, towards my black Bentley. "Good morning Ms. Gilbert." Alfred said cheerfully as he opened the door for me and I smiled at him. "Good morning Alfred." I replied then climbed into the back.

Alfred was my chauffeur slash bodyguard, courtesy of my Dad's overprotectiveness. He's been with me throughout college and at first it annoyed me but I formed a special bond with him and I couldn't let him go after he served his duties to my Dad.

Tess was fond of him too, mainly because he was always there to get us out of sticky situations. I smiled to myself, looking out the window at the passing city. Tess and I went to UCLA together, it was a no brainer that we should go to college together. I majored in Risk Management and Economics while she on Psychology. After we graduated I went and did some internships at IMT, one of the country's biggest investment advisory firms. After a year I was an official employee but I decided to leave it and join my brother at G-Industries about a year ago.

Now I'm the MD of our U.S branches, I'd once considered transferring to our Australian branch but I couldn't bear to leave my friends and family.

"Thank you." I said after Alfred opened the door for me outside the huge building.

I walked towards my office and was followed by Rick Simmons, my PA. He was a classic California boy and handsome to boot. He was as gay as they come and what I loved most is that he's damn proud of it. We were also great friends and amazing partners.

"Don't forget that lunch meeting with the people from Klan Holdings." He said to me as we walked into my office.

"Noted, anything else?" I asked and he smiled "Yeah, those shoes are to die for. You know if I was straight and you weren't older I would so date you. You're smokin' hot." He said and I chuckled. "Well firstly I'm still your boss, and two, I'm 26, only a year older than you." I pointed out and he grinned.

I walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder "Ricky, you know how we're good friends and we're so open and honest with each other outside of our professional relationship?" I asked and he nodded "Lets not do that anymore." I added and he pouted.

"Ha ha." He said then he walked towards the door then paused "Oh, the boss asked to see you when you arrive." He added then he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 2

I walked towards JT's office; he has been working very hard in the company since he graduated from Stanford. And when Dad retired half a year ago as CEO, he stepped up to take his place. He has big shoes to fill but if anyone can do it, it's going to be him. He has already won the respect of the employees and business world, young as he is.

He and Tess have stayed together and seemed to be growing strong, before I knew it, they were married and now they have a 2 year old baby girl. Hilary Elise Gilbert was the cutest thing to ever walk the earth.

I knocked and walked into the striking office, JT has done very little to change it since Dad and it was a good move on his part. He looked up at me and stood up smiling, he briefly hugged me.

"Simmonds told me you wanted to see me?" I said settling into the chair opposite him "Yes, I wanted to know how the Klan Holdings take over is coming along." He asked settling into his armchair.

"Its practically a done deal if you ask me, I'm meeting with its management today to discuss the terms." I said. "Having the connections of a company like theirs under G-Industries will give us leverage in the telecommunications world." I added, "True, you think they'll put up a fight?" he asked, with a nonchalant tone. "I'd like to see them try." I said and he gave me a satisfied smile.

"You're good sis, I knew handing this one over to you would be a good move. Taking no prisoners, I like that." He said.

"Well, all is fair in the corporate world." I said with a smirk, and he chuckled.

"Father will be happy to know you haven't gone soft." He said with a blinding grin. "Have you spoken to them lately?" I asked, last time I talked to my parents they were still vacationing on their island.

"Yes, last night. They're in Bermuda, they'll be back this Friday." He said, "Mainly because they miss Hilary. Or so they say." He added and I chuckled.

"Ouch, and here I thought they missed us instead." I teased. "Is that all?" I asked.

"Not quite." He said then took out a crimson envelope from his desk drawer "This is an invitation to the BNI business conference. It was held in Rio de Janeiro last year, it's a prestigious event and I can't blow it off." He said and I frowned "Why would you?" I asked.

"I have to tie up some loose ends in Santa Barbra on the same day." He said and I nodded "You want me to go in your place." I said knowingly, taking the envelope and opening it, it was not short of extravagance.

"Yes, it's the day after tomorrow, I hope it won't be an inconvenience." He said and I shook my head, "Not at all." I said and he grinned "Excellent."

Alfred pulled up in front of a high-end restaurant and Ricky got out first and offered me his hand. "Ready?" he asked.

"I'm always ready." I said; his chuckle followed me as I led the way into the restaurant. The hostess at the door led us to the group of men sitting at the far table; the three of them were talking tersely among themselves. The chatter stopped when they saw us approaching. They stood up to greet us. I gave them all my no nonsense handshake, it was the first time we'd all met in person. From

what Ricky told me they were Dan Klan the current CEO, Jamie Klan their financial director and a member of the board.

"Ms. Gilbert, it's a pleasure to meet you." Dan said with an insincere smile as we took our seats "Although I wish it was under different circumstances." He added and I returned his smile "I couldn't agree more." I said.

After ten minutes of bleak small talk we got down to business. I listened intently and Ricky took a few notes as they stated their demands in an uneasy manner.

I held out my hand to Ricky and he gave me a file with our terms outlined, I handed it to them and talked them through the contents.

"And we're just supposed to lie down and allow this?" Jamie asked

"I don't think you're in any position to allow anything at this point, this is just a way of us forming a consensus we can all live with." I said.

"You're trying to take over our company, you expect us to live with that?" The other one said and I kept quiet.

"Ms. Gilbert, this company has been ours for generations, you're taking away something we've worked our entire lives for. You're familiar with that, surely you can't be that heartless." Dan said, with a barely calm tone. I stifled a flinch at the personal attack and kept my expression blank.

"We're not horrible people Mr. Klan." I said, "In fact you should be singing our praises. Your company is on the verge of bankruptcy; we're saving it. You'll still keep your jobs and positions, it's a win-win." I said.

"But we'll be answering to you!" Dan hissed, causing the people close to us to turn their heads and stare at us. Dan sat back in his chair and straightened his dark purple tie.

"I'd refrain that tone when speaking to Ms. Gilbert." Ricky warned and I stifled a smile, he was sweet but he was also my personal bulldog at times. Dan just glared at him and then at me.

"If you think we're just going to hand over our company you have another thing coming, we'll fight you tooth and nail." He said and I gave him an arctic smile.

"Do not antagonize us Mr. Klan, frankly we welcome the challenge. Bear in mind though that nothing is stopping us from tearing your company apart and leaving it to be scavenged upon." I said "We're simply doing this out of good will because we'd actually like to form a healthy and fruitful professional relationship." I added. I checked my Rolex; my job here is done.

"When you've had the chance to calm down, look over our terms again. We'll set up a meeting with our lawyers to finish this." I said then stood up, Ricky followed after putting some money on the table.

"Good day gentlemen." I said and we walked away. We walked outside towards the black Bentley. "You're a maneater." Ricky said with a chuckle "The truest kind." He added and I knew what he meant. I wanted to be the kind of businesswoman who can give powerful men a run for their money.

I paused on the door he just opened and looked at him "Didn't I just have them for lunch?" I teased and he grinned, nodding "And not a single calorie in place." He said and I gave him a smirk and got in.

My private elevator softly pinged and the doors opened, I turned the switch and soft light flooded the great room and kitchen. I put my laptop bag and handbag on the couch and I took off my heels. Carrying them with me upstairs.

I put my phone on speaker and looked for Janie on my contacts “Hey sis.” Her voice came through after two rings.

“Hey you.” I said as I undressed “You’re not at a bar getting drunk are you?” I teased and she chuckled “Are you keeping tabs on me?” she asked, “Isn’t it my job?” I asked, “Among other things.” She agreed and I smiled. Janie was now a sophomore at California State University.

“Do you hear any loud music in the background?” she asked “No.” I said “Yeah, that’s because I’m in my room studying.” She said with exasperation.

“Good girl.” I said unable to stifle a laugh at her tone. I missed her sometimes.

“JT told me that Mom and Dad are coming back this weekend, and you know they’ll want us all to have dinner, so make sure you’re at the estate this Friday.” I said. “In other words I’m officially giving you a break from books.” I teased.

“Gee thanks.” She said and I smiled “Gotcha sis, see you then. Love you.” She said.

“Love you too Janie.” I said and the line went dead. I went into my bathroom.

CHAPTER 3

After a long hot shower I got into my sweats and poured myself a glass of white wine. I settled into the chaise lounge next to the glass wall and I looked into the bright lights of the city.

Right now in the comfort of my condo, I'm just Katelyn. I shed my powerful businesswoman façade and I strip out of my power suit. Most people find that relieving but it only left me feeling vulnerable and empty.

My elevator pinged and I smiled as a beautiful redhead walked in carrying a dark haired baby girl. I quickly got off my lounge,

"Tess! I'm so glad you came." I said kissing both her cheeks and taking Hilary from her, Alfred followed too and placed a paper bag on the kitchen counter, "Thanks Alfred." Tess said to him before he left with a nod. "I brought our favorite Chinese food. To hell with a home cooked meal tonight." She said and I nodded "Amen to that." I said and nuzzled my nose against Hilary's. "Hey baby girl." I said and she touched both my cheeks and smiled in recognition. Her blue eyes twinkled up at me and I chuckled.

"I can't wait until she starts talking in full sentences." I said, and Tess went over to the kitchen island "That might be happening sooner than you think, she long passed the mama, dada phase." She said, "Do you know what she calls you?" she asked and I raised my eyebrows at her "Kiki." She said and I laughed. "Aw cute." I said "You can call me aunt Kiki anytime you want." I whispered to Hilary and she giggled.

Tess popped our food into the microwave and turned to me "You and your parents can't put her down, can you?" she asked and I snorted "What? Just look at her." I said then kissed her soft cheek.

Tess shook her head "I can't be the only one popping grandkids here Katie, help me out." She said and I rolled my eyes. "I'm working on it." I said dismissively and she shot me a skeptical look, then turned to retrieve our food.

"Is she hungry?" I asked after Hilary reached for Tess' carton, she shook her head "I fed her before we came here, she's just always curious." She said and I chuckled "Like mother like daughter." I teased but Tess frowned.

"Yeah, curiosity is not always a good thing." She said and I had a feeling she wasn't talking about Hilary anymore.

"Uh oh, what's wrong?" I asked and she shrugged "I don't know, maybe I'm being paranoid, but...JT has been a little off lately." She said and my brows furrowed.

"Off? How?" I asked, JT seemed like himself today, like any other day.

"Almost distant, and I can't help but think its because of that long-legged brunette bimbo he's been spending time with." She said, and I frowned.

"Georgina? They were college friends and they're business associates. She's based in Santa Barbra, isn't she?" I asked then my eyes widened when she paled, I cursed inwardly realizing I made a callous mistake.

"That's why he's going there?" she asked with a high-pitched voice and I shook my head "No, no, it's not like that. He's going to wrap up business with her, that's all, its strictly professional." I said too quickly then sat back and breathed out in a rush. "Come on Tess, you don't really believe there's anything going on there, do you?" I asked and she looked down.

"I don't know." She whispered "That bimbo wants him, and I can't blame her." she added and I sighed.

"Well she's not going to get him you know why?" I asked holding up her left hand "Because he's yours." I added showing her the huge diamond ring on her finger, thinking maybe she forgot its there.

She smiled "I couldn't have asked for a better sister-in-law you know." She said and I grinned, "I know, I'm God sent." I said sweeping my hair over my shoulder. We both laughed, we were halted by the sound of my phone ringing.

"Jade, Hi." I said and Tess started watching me closely "Hey honey, I tried calling you this afternoon but it sent me straight to voicemail." He said and I closed my eyes. "Oh yeah, I had a lunch meeting so I switched it off, I'm sorry." I said, "Don't sweat it, I was asking if we could do dinner tomorrow." He asked.

"I'd love to." I said, "Awesome, I'll see you then." He said then made a kissing sound before he hung up. I met Tess' speculative gaze "What?" I asked.

"Enough about me, what's going on with you and Jade?" she asked and I shrugged "We're doing great, what do you mean?" I asked. She shook her head "I mean where do you see your relationship going, moving in together? Marriage?" she said I raised my eyebrows at her.

"Whoa, slow down. It's only been two years." I said, "Exactly, it's been two years." She said then sighed "I'm starting to see a pattern here Katie and I actually like Jade, he's a great guy," She added and I nodded.

"True, he's wonderful." I said "Then why are you giving him the run-around?" she asked.

"What? I'm not giving him the run-around." I said with a frown, "No? He said the three words to you, sometimes even in front of me. You still haven't said them back, have you?" she asked knowingly and I kept quiet. She shook her head "Look, if this is about Brandon—" she said before I cut her off "Don't go there Tess, not tonight." I said then paused "I'm not holding a torch for him, you know that chapter of my life is closed." I added with the tone I reserved for business. Tess seemed unfazed by it

"Is it really?" she asked and I shot her a hard look and she held up her hands in defeat. "Okay, okay, no more talk about men, this is a girls night in after all." She said taking her wine glass. I smiled "Now you're talking." I said clinking mine with hers.

Ricky came into my office around closing time "I'm calling it a day. See you tomorrow" He said and I nodded, then I remembered something "Wait." I said and he stopped to look at me. "I have a fancy black tie business conference tonight." I said and his eyes widened "You don't happen to mean the BNI business conference tonight?" He said and I nodded. "I'd die to attend one of those, LA's buzzing about it," He said.

"You know I'd take you with me—" I said before he nodded, "But you're going with Jade, I know." He said dismissively.

"I was hoping we'd go shopping though, I need help picking a killer dress." I said and he smiled, "You came to the right man." He said with a fake Italian accent and it made me chuckle. "What are we still doing here? We don't have much time." He said. "Alright, keep your pants on." I said clearing my table and following him out.

We ended up going to a boutique I'd never been in before; then again unlike me Ricky was a fashion veteran. I then got the thought to introduce him to aunts Ally and Mandy; they'd hit it off for sure.

When we walked in Ricky air kissed the sales lady then introduced her as Sammy, his miracle worker. I stifled a giggle as I shook hands with her.

"Yes well, you know how he is." She said and I nodded.

"She needs an incredible dress, and she is my boss after all so do your best."

Ricky said to her and Sammy took hold of my arm. "You know I always do." She said to him and led me to the dressing rooms.

She let me try out a couple of dresses but I ended up choosing a red strapless ball gown. I walked out wanting Ricky to approve it as well.

"What do you think?" I asked twirling in front of him when he stood up from his chair; I knew I made the right choice when he said nothing. Ricky is never speechless.

"A Valentino?" He asked Sammy, but he kept his eyes on me. She nodded "Fresh off the runway." She said proudly and he clasped his hands together.

"That's the money maker right there, wow." He said then he looked at Sammy "It needs gloves, satin, elbow length." He said and she nodded and went away.

"You look amazing man eater," He teased and I smiled at him "I almost feel sorry for them tonight." He added with a chuckle.

When we were done I thanked him and he drove off in his BMW, Alfred took me back to my apartment. I stopped dead with my suit cover when I found three women waiting in the foyer, carrying cosmetic bags. This had Ricky written all over it, I pulled out my phone.

"Why is there an entourage in my foyer?" I asked after he answered, "No offense but I've seen your feeble attempt at doing your own make-up and hair and it's not going to cut it tonight, especially with that dress." He said and I sighed. "You can thank me later."

"Who are these people?" I asked as I waved at them, motioning for them to give me a second. "Let's just say I know people in all the right places. Sit back and let them do their thing." He said "Fine." I grumbled and hung up.

I walked up to them and greeted them "Follow me." I said leading them to my elevator.

I sat on my dressing table after Ricky's entourage left, he's right; they worked wonders on me. I guess I'll really have to thank him. I opened one of the drawers and pulled out a purple Buccellati box, I opened it and took out the simple diamond necklace Jade gave me for my birthday last year. I hardly ever wore it.

Why are you giving him the run-around?

If I was then it wasn't intentionally, I really do care about him and I don't want to lose him. I unclipped the hook and put it on. Ever since I gave my necklace to Mandy's daughter years ago I hardly wore any neck jewelry. But I wanted to wear this one, maybe to let Jade know that I care about him too. After one look in the mirror I went downstairs. Just then my intercom rang, "Yes." I answered.

"Ms. Gilbert, Mr. Thorne is waiting for you in the foyer." The reception lady said.

"Thank you, tell him I'll be right down." I said then hung up.

CHAPTER 4

"Holy hell." Jade said when I walked up to him; I smiled then curtsied. He took my gloved hands in his "You look like a dream." He said, "You don't look half bad yourself Mr. Thorne." I said; he looked handsome. He grinned, "Shall we?" he gestured with his hand, "Please." I said.

Alfred pulled up on the circular entrance of a fancy hotel and Jade looked outside the window and frowned. "We'll have to walk the red carpet first." He said and my brows furrowed too "Well Simmonds did mention that it's a huge function." I said and he nodded.

"True, but I would sneak in without having to go through the paparazzi." He said then looked at me "But with you that's going to be nearly impossible." He added. "Ready?" he asked when our car went next. "Yeah." I said and he opened the door to the blinding flash of the cameras. We walked the red carpet, pausing a little to pose for the paparazzi, which were practically screaming my name. Even though I grew up in the spotlight, I never get used to the attention.

Jade stepped away so they could get a shot of me alone, after one more smile I walked off. I met Jade at the end of the carpet, he offered me his arm and I took it with a sigh of relief.

"You didn't have to leave me you know." I said and he chuckled "What? You're the main attraction; I'm simply giving the people what they want," he said and I chuckled as we entered into the massive ballroom.

It was filled with business power players from all around the world in fancy attire. We only had a couple of minutes to ourselves before other guests started mixing with us. I recognized some of them and meeting others anew.

I left Jade with the group and went to find the bathroom.

I checked myself in the mirror and the woman next to me turned to look at me for a while "You're Katelyn Gilbert." She said with a smile "Of G-Industries." She added with an undeniable British accent and I nodded with a smile too.

"Oh congratulations on being Forbes' number one. Again." She said with tease in her voice "Thank you." I said; I wish I could take all the credit but G-Industries' success was a unit effort.

"How do you do it?" she asked and I chuckled "It's a family affair." I teased and she chuckled too, she said goodbye then walked out of the bathroom. I followed her out a few minutes later; I maneuvered through the crowd, which was a little easier because they stepped out of the way for me. That freaked me out a little. I looked around for Jade but couldn't spot him, he must've went to our table.

I bumped into a man and he turned and reached out to steady me with strong hands "I'm so sorry, I—" I trailed off as I looked up into the face of someone I never thought I'd see again.

"Brandon." I breathed; I felt the violent jumpstart of my heart like a physical blow as I met grey eyes. He watched me with the same look of shock and wonder "Princess." He said with a drawl I felt to the small hairs on nape. I don't recall his voice being that deep, or the rasp in his usually smooth voice. Then again I remembered a boy and this was a man standing in front of me. I haven't seen him in eight years yet here he was in front of me in all his impossibly gorgeous glory.

We continued to stare at each other, silently drinking in the sight of each other. He kept his athletic body, though it was much more developed now. He wore a black suit just like any other male in here but what he did to it was almost unfair. His golden locks were shorter, more masculine than the boyish cut imbedded into my brain.

His features were more chiseled; the small lines acquired with the years only made them more beautiful. And his grey eyes were sharper, more assertive and a tad darker. As I took in all these changes in him all I could think was, *I'm so screwed*. I was barely able to forget Brandon the boy, how am I supposed to forget Brandon the man? I know that seeing him now is going to mess with my head. Badly.

I heard someone call my name but I couldn't look away from the sight in front of me. "There you are." Jade said and Brandon's eyes dropped to Jade's arm around my waist. Without the stranglehold of his gaze, I glanced at Jade, barely regaining my equilibrium. Jade looked at Brandon and I introduced them

"Jade this is Brandon Carter. An old friend of mine." I said; my voice was higher than I would've liked. "Brandon this is Jade Thorne, my boyfriend." I added and they shook hands murmuring greetings, "Wait, Brandon Carter? Of Carter Corporation?" Jade asked and Brandon glanced at him then "Yes." He said. He has perfected his impassive stare; it revealed absolutely nothing. I bet he could see right through me though; he's always been the only one who could.

"Huh, small world. My father used to do business with your father. He sings the company's praises." Jade continued, "Thank you." He said.

"You don't mind if I steal her away, do you?" he asked and Brandon looked back at me, "Not at all." He said nonchalantly but I still knew him well enough to hear the slight edge in his tone. I walked away with Jade, resisting the urge to look back. "I wanted to introduce you to a college buddy of mine...hey, are you okay?" he asked, "You look a little flushed, should I get you anything?" he asked, "A drink, I need a drink." I said, I normally didn't have alcohol on events like this, but I was going to need it to get through tonight.

Jade left me at our table; there were a few familiar faces all around it. "You look incredible." The woman next to me said and I managed a smile for her "Thank you. So do you." I said really meaning it. I engaged myself in the conversation around the table, inwardly chanting *so what if he's here?*

I was not about to feel like a naïve and clumsy eighteen year-old again just because he decided to make an unexpected appearance.

Come dinner I hardly had an appetite, during the dinner the people from BNI handed out different accolades to businesses. The MC called G-Industries under best socially invested firm. I stood up to the roaring applause of the crowd and walked up the small stage to receive the award.

I willed myself not to look around the crowd for a familiar handsome face and I smiled posing for a few pictures then walked off stage. I breathed out when the spotlight was turned on someone else.

Carter Corporation was also honored with an award and Brandon ascended the small stage with powerful grace. I stared at him, my mind still reeling from the effect of seeing him again. I always thought he was gorgeous but now he was just a force to be reckoned with. I heard the two women on my left whisper to each other "You think he's single?" the one in the blue dress whispered. "I wouldn't bet on it, just look at him." Replied the brunette with a low chuckle.

After dinner and awards the band started playing again, coaxing the crowd to dance. Jade asked me to dance and I accepted gingerly, he led us to the dance floor and held me as we danced. When the second song ended someone tapped Jade's shoulder "May I?" Brandon asked and Jade stepped away from me. My breath hitched for a second.

"Of course." Jade said then he looked at me, almost asking me if I wanted him to go, I gave him a slight nod and he walked away.

I turned my gaze to Brandon and he pulled me into his arms, holding me too close to his warm muscular body. He was really tall; even with six-inch Louis Vuitton heels I only came up to his shoulder. He effortlessly moved us both because I was just frozen.

"Brandon—" I started "Don't Katelyn." He interjected "For a moment lets just pretend like we don't have a care in the world." He said in my ear over the beautiful music. I clasped my mouth shut and did exactly as he said, pretended like it was just the two of us.

I took in his amazing scent and recalled too, it was spicier now and absolutely intoxicating. All too soon the song ended and the crowd applauded the band bursting our little bubble. Brandon let me go then he raised my gloved hand to his mouth "Princess." He said, and I was hit with a memory of that day on the beach. He walked away and I stood there watching his retreating back.

I was suddenly swept away by Jade as another song started, he had a slight frown. "Intense guy, isn't he?" He said, he has no idea "Has he always been like that?" he asked and I nodded. "Oh yeah." I said, trying to sound casual, although now it seemed almost overwhelming. Or was it because it's been far too long since I'd been exposed to his intensity. I felt like a recovering addict forced to relapse. Jade watched me for a moment; I bet he was trying to figure out my reaction to him. I'd never told him about Brandon and I didn't want that to change. I smiled at him, soon we both started to genuinely have a good time. Jade had that effect on me, a moment with him and I felt lighter. I glanced around the crowd and I saw Brandon at the bar with a bronze haired woman. She had her hand affectionately on his arm as though they're old lovers. He was genuinely smiling down at her, not everyone was a recipient of those warm smiles. Was she his girlfriend? His wife?

I was too caught up with the rest of him to look for a wedding band. Even now he's still a magnet to the female species.

I felt a startling pang of jealousy, I had no reason to feel that way but I did and it bothered me immensely.

CHAPTER 5

I was making conversation with one of the founders of BNI when I saw Brandon head for the other exit. No doubt he was leaving, alone no less.

What happened to the bronze haired woman? *Maybe she was a friend*, I thought with begrudging relief.

I suddenly panicked, what if he's leaving for good? "Excuse me." I said to the lady I was chatting with and followed after Brandon. *What are you doing?* The little voice inside me admonished; even I couldn't answer that question, all I knew was that I had to see him again.

I quickened my pace through the crowd and went out the back exit; unlike the one in front, it was more deserted. He probably used it so he could avoid drawing any attention from the press. "Brandon." I called after him and he froze then turned to face me. I slowly walked up to him, almost afraid that any swift movements might cause him to disappear.

"Why did you come here?" I asked and his brows furrowed "I didn't know you'd be here, I swear." He said and I frowned, what was he saying? That if he did know he would've purposefully stayed away?

"Do you regret coming?" I asked and he gave me a heart melting crooked smile "No. I got to see you." He said. "You were just going to leave? Without saying goodbye?" I asked, involuntarily stepping closer to him.

"You seemed a little...preoccupied." He said then he looked over my head "Jade seems like a nice guy." He said with an undercurrent I couldn't decipher.

"Yeah, he is." I said and he met my gaze,

"He loves you." He said as a matter of fact and I just silently nodded. I swallowed past the lump forming in my throat because I felt like I was betraying him by being out here with Brandon.

His brows furrowed slightly "Do you love him?" he asked and I paused and blinked a few times, surprised by the question. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that." He said. I didn't notice the black limo on the curb or the chauffeur waiting until he turned away. I panicked again,

"Brandon..." I trailed off; I needed more time with him, yet I wanted to go back inside, back to Jade, that's where I should be. Brandon turned back to me and shook his head; "I'll be sticking around the city for a little while." He said. I was right; he could still read me so well.

I nodded, suddenly taking note that he didn't have a wedding band on. I also noticed that he didn't have his grey moonstone ring either. Like me, he must've passed it on to someone else, would I ever get to know whom?

He watched me long enough for me to blush but I couldn't look away. I always thought I outgrew that trait but he makes my cheeks flush with just a look. Like he always did.

"You are so beautiful princess, it hurts just looking at you." He said softly and I stopped breathing for a moment.

He gave me a parting smile "Goodnight." He said then glided into the back of the limo and the man closed the door after him.

I watched his limo disappear around the building; I hugged myself, confused with what to feel and what not to feel. I turned with exaggerated slowness and went back into the ballroom, knowing I was ruined for the rest of the party.

"And there she is." Jade said and I gave him a smile, pulling him aside a little. "I'm not feeling well, I think I'll just head back home." I said and he frowned "Are you okay? We can leave..."

"No, you stay." I insisted, he shook his head stubbornly "No, we're leaving together." He said and I wasn't in the mood to argue with him. He said goodbye to a few friends of his and we went out and into the back of my Bentley. When we arrived at my apartment he made a move to get out too but I stopped him. "I won't be much company tonight. Go home." I said "Alfred, can you please take Mr. Thorne home?" I asked "Of course Ms. Gilbert." He replied and Jade's brows furrowed in concern and fear?

I managed a reassuring smile "I'm just going to get some sleep, you should too. I'll call you in the morning." I said and he nodded, I kissed his cheek and got out closing the door behind me.

I saw the Bentley off and then went inside.

I went upstairs to my bedroom and took my time getting out of my attire and removing my make-up. The entire night played out over and over in my head, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Brandon's reappearance just turned my calm and organized world upside down and it felt like high school all over again. Except then the boy was mine, the man I saw today was not. And probably never will be.

I walked numbly into my closet and retrieved a box at the back. I fished through stuff I kept from college and some from high school. I took out the blue boomerang he sent me in what seemed like a lifetime ago. I never took it out let alone looked at it, yet I never could bring myself to throw it away.

I sat on the carpeted floor of my closet examining it like I did the first time I saw it. I fingered the engraving with our initials.

It's interesting, that no matter how hard you throw a boomerang, it always comes back to you. His words rang loud and clear in my head, *That's me with you princess.*

I told Tess that I wasn't holding a torch for him but after today, even I had to question the truth of those words.

I loved Brandon deeply, even at that age. The decision to separate was mutual but it hurt like nothing else, did I truly get over that? Get over him?

Without even realizing it, tears began to spill down my face.

You can love multiple people but you can only be in love with one. I had to face the probability that I was unable to fall in love with Jade because I'm already in love with someone else. I'm already in love with Brandon.

I placed the boomerang back in the box and I put my arms around my legs and wept. I wept for myself because I felt lost and confused with what to do. I wept for Jade because my inability to make up my mind was hurting him. I also wept the loss of Brandon, again.

As I got ready for work the following morning I had a new perspective on things. Yes, last night was a setback, but over the years I've learned to never wallow. I also realized that I couldn't let my entire world fall apart because Brandon showed up. We might have made a promise that we'd end up together but that was a promise made by two lovesick teenagers. We were hardly that now.

Besides, he was going to take care of whatever that brought him to town in the first place and then he'd return to wherever he came from. I may still have some feelings for him but that doesn't change a damn thing, hasn't eight years proven that? And then there was Jade.

I didn't want to throw away what we have over this. I'm even more determined to make our relationship work; we both deserved that much. He's a great guy, given time I know I could fall in love with him, how can I not?

And this new perspective also brought something to light as well; JT tricked me. Somehow he knew Brandon was going to be there and that's why he sent me instead. Knowing very well that we'd bump into each other eventually.

I put my coffee mug into the sink and called Jade's number, it sent me straight to voicemail. That's odd, Jade always has his phone on, besides I told him I'd call in the morning.

I told myself I'd try him later. I checked my watch; I grabbed my things and left my apartment. After checking in at my desk I walked towards JT's office, with one mission, give him a piece of my mind, over Tess and Brandon.

I walked in without knocking and found him on his laptop; he looked up at me almost expectantly. He knew this was coming and he was prepared for it. Why disappoint? I decided to address the Tess thing first,

"Katelyn." He nodded in greeting as I stepped further into his office, then I sighed knowing I couldn't approach this one with hostility. "What's going on with you and Tess?" I asked and that question threw him a bit.

"What do you mean? Have you spoken to her?" he asked and I nodded.

"The night you left for Santa Barbara." I said "She's worried about your relationship with Georgina." I said and he frowned.

"My relationship with Georgina is strictly professional, she knows that." He said and I shook my head "I don't think she does, and you're not doing a pretty good job of reassuring her." I snapped.

"I've never given her reason to doubt me Katelyn." He said, his voice eerie calm.

I rubbed against my forehead "I promised myself that I wouldn't meddle, but she's my best friend, so when she's upset, I'm upset." I said "But you're my brother and I protect your honor, and I hope to God it's true—" I said and his blue eyes flashed with anger at my insinuation.

"How could you even think that of me? You know I love Tess with all my heart."

He said tersely and I sighed, feeling guilty. "I know that." I said softly "She on the other hand tends to forget a little and it's your job to remind her. Fix it." I said and slowly he nodded.

I walked over and stood close to the glass wall, looking down at the streets of LA. Which were filled with people going about their lives. People constantly on the move; going somewhere, doing something, seeing someone.

"You knew Brandon was going to be there, didn't you?" I asked him quietly, keeping my gaze out into the city. I heard him sigh and stand up "I caught a glimpse of the guest list, I saw a Mr. Carter. It could've been anyone, it could've even been his father so I wasn't sure." He said standing next to me.

"Why send me? What did you think was going to happen?" I asked him and his brows furrowed then he shrugged, "You and Carter have some unfinished business to talk through." He said and I snorted.

"Really? It seemed finished last night." I said and he looked at me this time.

"Listen to me Katie, I know how you felt about him and I know what the separation did to you. You loved him and that just doesn't go away, even with time. I would know, I've been in love with your stubborn best friend for as long as I can remember." He said and I chuckled, wishing Tess could hear him now. She wouldn't have any doubts about him; he's smitten.

He paused for a minute, scrutinizing me "Are you still in love with Carter?" he asked and I tensed, I turned and walked towards the lounge area.

"That's an unfair question." I said sitting down "You know I'm in a committed relationship with Jade." I said and he nodded, "True and I like him, awesome guy but you're not in love with him Katie." He said as a matter of fact "Don't even try to convince me otherwise." He added when I was about to argue.

I looked down at my hands and shook my head sadly "I can't be in love with one man and be in a relationship with another, I'm not that kind of girl." I bemoaned and JT sat next to me.

"I agree, which is why you have to sort this whole Carter thing out." He said, "I'm not saying go back to him, all I'm saying is that you should meet with him and talk, you both need the closure." He added.

CHAPTER 6

The intercom on my desk rang and Ricky's voice came through "Jade is here to see you." He said and my eyebrows shot up "Send him through." I said; I've been unable to reach him all day.

Just then he came in looking a little standoffish, he was carrying a newspaper that he dropped on my desk unceremoniously.

I looked at him dumbfounded then I turned it over and saw a picture of Brandon and I outside the ballroom with the tag 'A trip down memory lane'.

I intently studied the picture; there was desperate longing in the way we were both looking at each other. Anyone with eyes wouldn't deny there was something between us. I cursed inwardly, damn the press and their invasion of people's privacy. I threw the paper back on the table.

Realizing why I couldn't reach him all day, he was deliberately avoiding me.

"You're really going to get upset over a gossip column?" I asked him and he picked it up again.

"I don't know Katelyn, you tell me..." he said then he began to read it "The stunning Katelyn Gilbert and Brandon Carter spotted outside the BNI business conference having a heart to heart. Ms. Gilbert apparently went after Mr. Carter just when he was taking his leave. We just have to wonder what they were chatting about. Sources tell us that the two were high school sweethearts, looking at them too; it's not hard to guess. Perhaps they're looking to rekindle their romance—"

I closed my eyes for a second when he stopped "Is this true?" he asked and I looked at him, he looked tired, he didn't get much of the sleep I told him to.

"Part of it, we dated in high school. I haven't seen him or been in contact with him until last night" I said and he nodded to himself "Was it serious?" he asked and I paused. "What kind of question is that? It was high school." I said and he ran his hand through his hair.

"I don't know, the way he was looking at you, the way you were looking at him, it seemed like things were pretty heavy between you two." He said and I stood up.

"None of that matters, its ancient history." I said and he frowned "It doesn't look like history...Do you still have feelings for him?" he asked and I paused taken aback.

How was I supposed to give an honest answer when even I was confused about that? "Katelyn?" he probed more sharply and I looked at him "I don't know, I...maybe it was seeing him again that's got me confused, I don't know..." I said and he paled.

"What are you not telling me about this guy?" he asked and I sighed leaning against my desk. I took a deep breath, if I was going to make this work I was going to have to tell him everything and that filled me with dread.

"We didn't exactly break up...not the conventional way," I added when his eyes widened "We decided it was best that we go our separate ways, it was a mutual decision. We haven't been in contact since then." I said and he continued to watch me with apprehension. "And?" he probed.

"We made a promise to each other." I said quickly "Its really not important—"

"What was the promise Katelyn?" He asked tersely and I looked down.

"That if we were meant to be together, we'd find our way back to each other no matter what." I said and he looked at me, pain evident in his brown eyes.

"The boomerang." He said and my eyes widened "What?" I asked

"The boomerang at the back of your closet, I figured it carried some meaning to you because I saw your initials. What does the BEC stand for?" he asked almost knowingly.

"Brandon Eddie Carter." I said quietly "He sent it to me after he left LA." I added and he ran a hand through his brown hair. "As a symbol of your relationship, like the boomerang, it would always come back to you." He said then he watched me with a look of desperation and pain.

"So you're promised to this guy?" he asked "Am I going to lose you to him Katelyn?" I pushed away from the table "What? I'm not...it was a stupid promise, made by two naïve teenagers." I said, "You can't put any meaning to it now, a lot has changed since then." I added then grabbed his face with both my hands "I for one have you now, I don't want that to change." I added and he paused for a moment then gently removed my hands.

"Just answer this one question for me truthfully." He said and I nodded.

"Did you love him?" he asked and I rubbed against my forehead, suddenly feeling very exhausted "Yes." I murmured and he nodded then turned on his heel and walked away "Jade." I called after him and he paused at the door.

"I just need some air." He said then he opened it and he was gone.

I stood staring at the door for a while. I realized then that Jade and I were never going to move forward so long as we have this whole Brandon thing hanging over us. JT was right, I needed to talk to him and put this all to rest.

I pressed the call button on my intercom "Yes?" Ricky answered.

"Get me in contact with Brandon Carter a.s.a.p." I said and the brief silence told me that he saw the tabloids too "I'm on it." He finally said and I sat back on my chair with a heavy sigh.

Over the past forty-eight hours things went back to normal a little, Jade and I haven't talked about the night of the conference or Brandon since that day in my office. But I knew he was still on edge, I wish I could reassure him off his fear that he was losing me.

Knowing it was eating at him only strengthened my resolve that meeting with Brandon was the only way to make this all go away.

Alfred stopped by a café and I got out,

I chose a less popular place to meet, out of fear that the paparazzi might spot us again and make a meal out of it. Besides I didn't want Jade to know either, he'd make a meal out of it too, he wouldn't understand. So I decided to spare him the second-guessing.

I went in and my eyes swept through the barely occupied café and I spotted Brandon sitting on the table by the far window. He was casually dressed in blue jeans and a white open-neck shirt, its short sleeves allowed a view of his muscular arms; he was staring at the phone in his hand.

For a moment I gave myself a break. Taken or not, I was still a woman and like any other female I couldn't help but appreciate the beautiful sight he was. He didn't see me, which gave me a chance to ogle him a little while longer.

The hostess briefly interrupted me. "Hello, Table?" she asked with a pleasant smile. I shook my head at her.

"No, I'm with him." I said pointing towards Brandon, her eyes widened slightly then she gave me a smile and nodded, she walked away "Lucky you." she said in a low voice, more to herself but I caught it. Lucky me? She had it all wrong.

I walked towards him after a deep breath and he looked up at me. He stood up and unleashed his infamous megawatt smile on me.

I think my brain short-circuited for a second having not seen it in so long. I returned it "Hey." He said and we hugged "Hi." I said,

Our embrace lasted a fraction too long, God he smells good, he smells of pure man. *Let him go now!* The little voice in my head scolded and I did. He pulled up the chair for me and I murmured a thank you. Thinking this was going to be harder than I anticipated.

He fluidly settled back into his own chair "How are you?" he asked, "I'm good, how are you?" I asked and he nodded "I'm alright." He said then he frowned after a small pause.

"Okay, lets stop pretending like we don't know each other." He said and I couldn't help but chuckle, we've never had such an awkward exchange before.

"Agreed." I said and he smiled "I already ordered, I hope you don't mind." He said then motioned to a waitress with his hand. "Not at all." I said.

Minutes later she brought two coffees and chocolate ring doughnuts, I chuckled incredulously picking up one, they were a favorite childhood treat of mine.

"You still love them?" Brandon asked with a smile "Are you kidding me?"

Something's you just never outgrow." I said popping a piece into my mouth.

"True." He said more solemnly, taking a sip of his coffee; I frowned.

"What's wrong?" he probed softly and I sighed, "I'm going to get into a heap of trouble with Jade over this." I said, thinking out loud and his grey eyes narrowed.

"Having doughnuts with an *old friend*? That's hardly a criminal offense." He said and I gave him a knowing look "He knows you were more than an old friend." I said "He saw the papers?" he asked and I nodded.

"Well I still don't see what the problem is...its not like anything is going on now." He said and I stared at him, "I think he's more afraid that the past might collide with the present." I said and he held my gaze in that stranglehold again, neither of us able to confirm or deny the possibility of that happening.

I suddenly found it hard to breathe and I dropped my gaze, gosh! Has he always had this kind of effect on me? "How is your family?" I asked, shifting to safer topics. "They're well. My parents are in Queens and Connie just enrolled in NYU."

He said and I smiled, "That's awesome, how is she?" I asked and he chuckled "All grown up." He said and I giggled, "I'm sure, you should see Janie." I said. I paused

"Are you also in New York?" I asked taking a sip of my coffee, "Yes, I moved there after college then my father asked me to take over his company. They were all living in Connecticut but decided joined me over there." He said and I nodded.

"How is the big apple?" I asked and he chuckled "Everything you hear, and more." He said and I chuckled. No doubt it was a big enough playground for a rich and handsome bachelor like himself.

"Is there anyone waiting for you back in New York?" I asked then bit my tongue, damn it! Why did I have to go and ask him that?

He paused for a moment, intently watching me over his cup and I couldn't suppress a blush. "No princess, there's no one waiting for me," he said.

One thing I've always loved about Brandon was that he never played games with my emotions. He could've easily made me think there was just to make me jealous and it would've worked oh so well.

He put his cup down with a shrug "Don't have much luck with long term relationships." He said and I gave him a skeptical look "You haven't fallen back into your old tendencies, have you?" I teased and he smiled.

"No, you exorcised them right out of me," he said "Besides, I don't think it counts when they're the ones leaving me," he added and I nearly choked on my coffee. Finding it hard to believe that any woman in her right mind would willingly leave Brandon. We changed the subject and talked out his ring and my necklace and whom we gave them to. We also talked about all the fun we used to have with our powers, for me that changed when he left.

"Enough about me, I want to know all about you." He said, and I told him all the supposed important moments and aspects of my life. He listened as if it was vital information.

"I haven't had luck in that department either." I went on "Until Jade." He finished for me but I just kept quiet.

"I'm glad you got to live your life Katelyn and wonderful experiences. It's what I've always wanted for you." He said and my gaze narrowed.

"Why do I hear a but coming?" I asked nervously and his gaze shifted a little.

"I want in on it Katelyn, I want to be part of it," He said and my eyes widened

"What?" I whispered, not sure I heard him correctly.

"I want you back princess, I want us back." He said and I reeled for a moment

"Brandon if this is about that silly promise..."

"That's exactly what this is about, I always intended on keeping it Katelyn." He said. "Forget about it Eddie, that was eight years ago, a lot has changed since then." I said and he nodded "True, but this—" he motioned in between us "—hasn't." he added and I couldn't even deny it, the attraction between us was almost palpable.

"In case you've forgotten, I have a boyfriend I have no intention of leaving." I said and his gaze narrowed. "Do you love him?" he asked.

"I care about him very much and he makes me happy." I said "But?" he probed and my jaw clenched as I glared at him, I can't allow him to use this against me.

"I want you back princess, and I don't intend on fighting fair." He said.

CHAPTER 7

"Screw your intensions Brandon, where were they a week ago? A year ago?" I quietly hissed, how dare he come now and stake some phony claim over me.

"Because we were going about our lives, weren't we? Now that you're here you think we can just pick things up where we left off?"

He watched me with calm and patient eyes as I continued my tirade.

"You left with nothing but a stupid promise, what did you expect? That I'll sit around and wait for you to come back, *if* you were going to come back."

He sighed "I didn't expect anything, I knew I was giving you up when I left. You could've been anywhere Katelyn, I didn't come here to seek you out." He said

"But looking at you now...I know I'll be damned if I didn't try to get you back." He added. I ran my hand through my hair "After all these years? Why now?" I whispered.

He took out his wallet and pulled out what looked like a photo, he handed it to me and I gasped my surprise. It was a picture of us at the pier on one of our many dates. He had his arm around my waist and the other one holding up the camera. His lips kissed my cheek as I laughed; we looked so happy, young and in love.

"Remember those two?" he said and I looked up at him "You kept this?" I whispered. "Ever since we took it." He said "I carry it around with me everyday, that got me into trouble with a few girlfriends." He said and I chuckled without humor.

"You know why they left me princess? Because they eventually got tired of competing with someone thousands of miles away." He said, and I understood then because it's exactly what I've been doing too. My past relationships prior to Jade were always compared to what Brandon and I had. Unconsciously or not, I did that and after some time, I'd break it off. Tess was right; it was starting to become a pattern of mine.

I put the picture down and swallowed past the lump in my throat "Why are you doing this?" I whispered and his brows furrowed.

"Seeing you that night was a rude awakening for me," he said "I'm tired of pretending like my world doesn't revolve around you Katelyn. I love you, if that didn't change over these past years, it never will." He added.

"I know you love me too." He said and I glared at him, his confidence sickened me but I knew that wasn't the real reason; it was the fact that it's true that upset me.

"You're a cocky bastard, you know that?" I said and he seemed unfazed by my insult.

"I only know so because I'm very much familiar with the symptoms." He said, "Sometimes when you look at me I feel like your seeing right into my soul." He added "And that smile lights up my entire universe. The feel of your soft skin is like a drug to me and sometimes I feel like your scent is going to drive me crazy." I paused for a moment and I stifled a snort,

"You haven't lost your touch Carter, still as smooth as ever." I said and this time he frowned at my tone. "You may think this is what you want now, only to realize its not. I'm passed the point of messing around" I added. "I don't need you

turning my life upside down. I was fine before you came along, so why don't you go back to New York and leave me alone." I said then I stood up and walked away from him, leaving him perplexed and a little irritated.

I walked out of the Café and Alfred was waiting for me on the other side of the road, I got in the car and he drove off just then my phone rang but I didn't recognize the number. I accepted and held it to my ear "I can see you kept your old number." Brandon's deep voice came through

"And you never called it, not even once." I snapped and there was a pause "Fine, lets say that I did and we kept constant contact, what would've been the point of it all?" he asked, "We both agreed that we needed to separate for both our sakes princess." He said more softly and I nodded to myself. I knew I was being unreasonable; I made it sound as if he left me but I clearly remember telling him to go. Letting him go.

"I know." I said quietly, my voice thick with emotion "It still didn't make it any easier though." I added and there was another pause.

"I know." He repeated my words "It was a year before I started feeling like myself again." He said. "I see you haven't outgrown your tendency to run either, we'll have to do something about that if we're going to be together." He said and I sighed. "I don't like this nasty tug of war that's brewing here Brandon, you pulling me towards you and Jade will only cling harder." I said.

"None of us want that Katelyn but in the end its your choice, what do you want?" he said, "You're really going to make me choose? You or him?" I asked. "That's what it will boil down to because I'm not going to stop princess, and sure as hell he wont give you up." He said "But what do you want?"

"For you to leave me alone." I said slowly, feeling emotionally exhausted "Next option." He said quickly and I looked at the passing buildings. "Goodbye Brandon." I said then hung up. With that I guess I chose Jade.

After dinner Tess and I went into the kitchen after clearing up the table, she leaned against the counter sipping her wine "I saw the picture of you guys on the LA Times." She said then grimaced. "And they say a picture is worth more than a thousand words." She said and I flinched. Knowing exactly what she meant, our little moment outside the ballroom was intense and it somehow translated in print.

"You didn't tell Jade you met with him?" she asked and I looked towards the dining room where he was chatting with JT and Dad.

I shook my head "I'm glad now more than ever that I didn't." I said and her brows furrowed "How did that go by the way?" she asked.

"Terribly wrong." I said, "He said he's still in love with me and that he wants me back." I moaned quietly and her brows shot up "Wow." She said then paused

"And how do you feel about that?" she asked and I shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know, shocked, confused...a little pleased, I don't know." I said.

"Wasn't that the idea all along, that you two will end up together?" she asked and my gaze shifted to Connie and Mom playing with Hilary in the great room.

"You can't just turn back time to how things used to be, we both made different choices along the way, we both moved on to an extent, we're two different people now." I said and Tess shook her head.

"I doubt that, besides he knows you better than anyone, even me," she said "And by the looks of that picture the chemistry is still there."

"Its not just that you know, there's Jade, I don't want to lose him." I said and she cocked her head to the side "As a boyfriend or as a friend?" she asked.

"Both." I said quickly then frowned "Whose side are you on?" I asked and she smiled "Yours silly. Always." She said. "I just want to make sure you're making the right choices for *you*." She added. "Besides you can't blame me for being a tad bit biased, Mr. blonde and delicious has always been your epic love." She said. And now he's back with a vengeance.

"Its kind of like a fairytale too—your first love promised to be your last." She said. I grimaced "Well its about to turn really ugly, really fast." I said and she shot me a sympathetic smile.

An hour later JT and Tess left soon followed by Jade and I. I hugged and kiss my parents goodbye and they both shook Jade's hand as I said goodbye to Janie.

"I'll call you okay? We have some catching up to do." I said after letting her go

"Okay sis." She said with a smile and Jade took my hand and we walked outside.

My family was fond of Jade and I was pleased that his own seemed to feel the same about me too. Jade opened the door to his Mercedes and I got in.

He drove to his house in Brentwood, his house was not a mansion but it was beautiful in its proportional size. Just like in my apartment I had some of my things here too. He still doesn't understand why we don't just move in together. Things between us have been strained because of the Brandon dilemma but they were getting better now. "Can I get you anything?" he asked as we walked into his living area. "Water." I said; I already had too much wine for tonight.

He nodded and went into the kitchen and I went up the stairs. I entered into his dimly lit bedroom and kicked off my shoes. I picked up the picture frame he had on his nightstand. It had a picture of us at JT and Tess' wedding.

I heard his door open but I didn't turn around, he put the glass on the dressing table "Can you unzip my dress?" I asked and he walked up to me and pulled down the zipper, then he kissed my shoulder reverently.

"You're gorgeous, you know that?" he whispered, his lips trailing to my nape.

"I believe you've said that a few times." I murmured and I heard his smile before he turned me around and took my mouth with his.

He lowered us to his bed and continued to kiss me as he undressed me. When closed my eyes and all I could see were grey eyes beckoning me.

CHAPTER 8

After lunch with Janie I found Ricky waiting for me in my office, he gave me the report I asked him to compile and he gave me my messages.

"Oh and Mr. Carter called, he said to tell you to stop avoiding him." He said and I sighed settling onto my leather armchair. I've been deliberately avoiding Brandon's calls. After what he told me that day in the café, the last thing I need is close contact with him.

"What's the real deal between the two of you?" Ricky asked "Did you really go out with him?" he asked and I nodded. "Back in high school." I said lamely and he smiled. "He really does want to rekindle the romance, doesn't he?" he asked knowingly then he sat down quickly "Do dish." He added with a suggestive tone. "I'm not dishing anything." I admonished, "Because there's nothing to dish." I added and his perfectly trimmed eyebrows shot up.

"I don't know about you." He said "Jade is a good guy and he's easy on the eyes but this Carter guy literally fries my brain cells every time I look at him." He added and I couldn't help but meekly agree and Ricky didn't even know the person behind the face.

"So he's rich, hot and single? If you don't want him I think I'll pounce on him." He said standing up and I chuckled, imagining that scene.

"Whoa, slow down tiger, he's as straight as they come." I said and he smirked "When has that ever stopped me huh?" he said and he turned away.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob and turned to me again with a solemn expression, something I hardly ever see from him.

"On that photo...I saw a side to you I never thought existed." He said.

What side? A vulnerable side? A desperate side? Of course he didn't, because I've learned to hide it very well over the years. "You're different with him." He added then he opened the door and left. I wasn't different with Brandon; I was just me, no façade. I wore it for the rest of the world, never with him because he could see through it. I sighed then distracted myself with work.

I was glad the day was finally over when I got home. After a long shower I got into my short satin nightdress and matching floor length gown. I went downstairs thinking after the day I had, I needed a treat. I pressed my intercom for the kitchen and I ordered chocolate-coated strawberries. Minutes later they were delivered to my apartment. I stood next to the kitchen counter and popped one into my mouth, I moaned at the delicious taste. They were as close to heaven as I'll get at this point in time.

My happy place was briefly disrupted when I heard slight commotion then my elevator pinged. Which surprised me because I wasn't expecting anyone tonight. The doors opened and Brandon stepped out with one of the security guards shouting at him. I gaped at both of them.

"I'm going to ask you to leave sir, or I'm calling the police." The security guard hissed at him but he had his eyes fixed on me only.

"It's okay Sam." I said after I found my voice "Let him go. Thank you." I added and after a moment's hesitation he went back in the elevator. I slowly turned my gaze back to Brandon, shaking my head at him.

"How the hell did you find me here?" I asked in exasperation, there goes my peaceful night. He walked towards me "That doesn't matter." He said. "What are you doing here then?" I snapped and he walked into the kitchen island "Isn't it obvious? Since you're unavailable on the phone, I thought a face-to-face communication would be more effective." He said standing on the other side of the counter.

"Have you thought about what I said?" he asked and my gaze narrowed, "No." I said, even though it was all I could think about. He chuckled "Liar." He said, his nonchalance only fueling my irritation. "I thought I told you to leave me alone." I said "And I thought I told you to give me the next option." He intercepted then he paused. His eyes slowly swept up and down my body in clear appreciation, "You're at your loveliest like this." He murmured with a heart-stopping smile. I blushed furiously as I closed the gown around me and folded my arms. "Please leave." I said, thinking maybe I should call Sam back, being alone with Brandon scantily clad was asking for trouble.

"I'm afraid I can't do that." He said, his eyes darkening with wicked and sensual intension; he made a move to walk around the counter.

"No, don't." I said backing the other way; trying to put some much needed distance between us. I felt like he was the cat and I was the mouse, somehow that excited me.

Woke a powerful and blistering, yet familiar desire I've always had for him. He shrugged innocently then he looked at the strawberries, he picked up one and he bit into it, holding my gaze. "Delectable." He whispered, and I felt my insides clench and white heat surge through me. Remembering the times he would say that when his lips graced every inch of my body. Oh why did he ooze so much sex appeal? I couldn't think through the haze it was creating in my head.

"You always did have a sweet tooth princess, I liked that." He added. He started walking towards me again and I continued to move around the counter away from him

"Don't come near me Brandon or I'm calling security." I threatened making sure we have the counter dividing us. He raised an eyebrow

"I won't let you do that." He said, still stalking me like a predator. "I'm warning you Brandon." I said over my drumming heart and he shot me a come-hither smile as we continued to slowly circulate the counter. "Come on princess, since when are you afraid of me?" he drawled. *Since I don't trust myself with you, especially when you're trying to seduce me!* I thought.

"We can do this all night you know." He said gesturing at our little cat and mouse game. Before I knew it he swiftly jumped over the counter and was on my side in seconds. I squealed my surprise and I tried to turn away but he grabbed my waist and lifted me up on the counter with swift ease.

"Unfortunately I don't have all night." He said. "Brandon! Let me..." I was silenced when he pressed his lips to mine; I open my mouth to protest. Big mistake because his tongue invaded it.

I moaned my pleasure and dispute, I pushed at his chest but he grabbed my hands and pinned them behind me. Causing my back to arch and my breasts to press against his chest. The tips hardened at once, instinctively responding to the virile specimen claiming me. I was completely possessed and helpless to his desire, which was starting to mirror my own.

With my heavy and panicked breathing, his heady scent only intoxicated me more. He released my mouth and kissed my jaw and neck instead "Please Brandon, release me." I beseeched desperately, knowing I'm inches away from returning his ardor. "I'm sorry princess, chivalry and diplomacy is not getting through to you." He said against me. "I don't want this, stop." I whispered, struggling but there was no escaping his hold.

"Your body is telling me otherwise princess." He said settling between my legs. My body? My body had a mind of its own and it was telling me to jump his bones. He held my wrists with one hand and the other went around my waist pulling my body closer to his, effectively stopping my fidgeting. "You're really willing to risk charges of sexual assault?" I panted and he chuckled darkly, a sound as deceptively alluring as his hold on me right now. "I don't think it counts when you like it this much." He said his free hand snaking into my hair as he nibbled my earlobe.

Causing me to moan and his warm breath made me shiver. It was unfair how he knew what to do in order for me to respond to him, willingly or not. It frustrated me as much as it still turned me on. With the lack of layers between my body and his hands, I'm surprised he's made no move to touch me intimately. I then got the thought that he just wanted me to give in to him.

"You're not going to ravish me, are you?" I breathed, knowingly. "You sure about that?" he asked, hitching my leg up to his hip and he kissed me again, this time the kiss was more feverish and carnal, taking my breath away.

"What's it going to take for you to stop?" I cried when he released my mouth again, unable to take any more of this sensual torture. "I want you to stop lying to yourself." He said more harshly "Admit it, you want to be with me too, you want me too—"

"Fine." I wailed, tears starting to stream down my face, being put in this vulnerable position was my undoing. "I love you. I always have and I probably always will." I cried, "When I'm with him, I'm thinking of you and it's driving me crazy." I added. "There I said it...now please let me go." I said, my voice breaking with a whimper.

Brandon pressed his face against my wet cheek "Why are you fighting me princess?" he asked with an anguished voice.

"Because I'm hurting Jade, he doesn't deserve that." I sobbed, feeling utterly battered. Brandon released my hands and lifted me off the counter, cradling me like a child as he walked towards the lounge. He sat us both down and he just held me as I cried.

"I'm sorry about that." He said after I calmed down "I didn't know what else to do." He added; I couldn't fault him, he's right. I have been lying to myself and he forced me to admit the truth, to myself first. I shook my head.

"I could never bear having only half of you princess, you *are* hurting him by continuing your relationship with him." He said. "You have to let him go."

"I know." I said with a throaty voice, "I just never wanted it to end like this. It's going to kill him to know I'm leaving him because of you." I added sadly, nuzzling my cheek against his shoulder.

"I know, it would kill me too, but sometimes saying goodbye is the best thing." He said and I nodded meekly. "I'm very lucky and probably undeserving of your love princess, but I want it...I need it nonetheless." He said then after a long while he stood up, "I'll give you your space and all the time you need to set things right."

When you're ready, come to me." he said and I nodded. He leaned down to gently kiss my forehead then he walked away. I watched him until the elevator doors closed on him.

I pulled up my legs and wrapped my arms around them; I unconsciously rubbed against my swollen lips. I knew what I had to do now and it filled me with despair.

CHAPTER 9

It has been two days since Brandon and I's fateful encounter in my kitchen. Like he promised, he's been radio silent. *When you're ready, come to me.* He said, as if he had so much to say and do when I did. The idea of finally going to him filled me with a sense of oneness and purpose.

A state I haven't been in for a very long time, but the whole thing was bittersweet. To get to the man I loved I had to first break the heart of a man I've come to care for deeply. In the end, I guess it just wasn't enough. The sad part was that it took Brandon coming back for me to realize and accept that.

I nervously fidgeted with the skirt of my white linen dress as I rode to his house. Jade had invited me over for dinner, I knew I couldn't keep dragging it out; I had to end it tonight.

Jade opened the door to me and smiled, he was about to kiss me but I turned by head and offered my cheek instead. I couldn't kiss him, knowing that I was going to break up with him.

"Smells delicious in here." I said and he smiled, Jade has always been a great cook. He once said it's a talent that runs in the family, which was true because his uncle opened up his own restaurant.

He walked me into his dining area and I stopped for a second, taking in the romantic setting of the table and surroundings. A romantic candle light dinner was the least moment you'd want to break up with someone.

"Wow...um, you really went all out didn't you?" I said, trying to tease him, "You shouldn't have." I added and he chuckled pulling up a chair for me. "You deserve only the finest." He said "Wine?" he asked and I nodded. Deciding to be courteous and have dinner with him first.

He served us a delicious meal, which would've tasted even better if I didn't have this terrible knot in my stomach.

"Jade, I wanted to talk to you about something." I started slowly but he countered me by nodding and taking my hand over the table. "Katelyn I know this past week hasn't been easy on us, but it showed me now more than ever that I need you in my life." He said and panic settled deep within me. His brown eyes caught mine "I love you Katelyn, and I want to be with you for the rest of my life." He

added then he shocked me by standing up and sinking down to one knee in front of me.

My eyebrows shot up as he reached into his pocket and took out a ring box and slowly opened it, revealing a marquise cut diamond ring. Before he could say anything I started crying, knowing what I'd say would shred him.

"Katelyn?" he asked, his voice laced with worry, I guess he sensed that my tears were not of joy. "I'm sorry Jade...I 'am so sorry." I said and his brows furrowed and he shook his head, "If you're not ready—"

"That's the thing, I'll never be ready." I said, and his entire demeanor changed, as if he was steeling himself up for a hard blow, which made me feel that much more guilty. "What are saying?" he asked.

"This relationship...it's never going to work out." I wailed and he shook his head "Don't say that Katelyn...gave us time, give us a chance." He said, softly beseeching. "I already did, two years worth. You're a great guy Jade, someone out there was meant for you and that someone isn't me," I said, he rested his forehead on my knees. There was a long pause

"This is about that Carter guy, isn't it?" he asked, when I didn't respond he looked up at me "He wants you back?" he asked and I slowly nodded. "He blew it when he left Katelyn, he might even leave again...but you and me, we're forever Katie." He persisted.

"This is not even about that." I said, "I'm never going to give you what you need. I'm never going to love you completely because I'm still in love with him. I'm always going to be in love with him." I cried, "It's always been him, he was my first...everything. He's my other half and I think I even knew it back then, that's why I made that promise. I knew I'd never be able to love another." I added quietly and he paled.

"Regardless of his intentions now, that's never going to change. But this is not about me; this is about you. Don't you see? I'm wasting your time, time you could be spending with someone who really loves you." I said and he shook his head. "All I want is you Katelyn, all I ever wanted was you." He said, pain etched deep in his voice and more tears ran down my face.

"Don't say that. Down the road you'll hate that I never gave more to you, it would eat at you that I'm in love with another man." I said softly "I don't want that for you, you deserve far better." I added and he continued to watch me with desperation. "So I really was losing you to him." He said and I realized then the reason for him proposing, he was trying to hang on to me however way he can. The motive to get married shouldn't be driven my doubt or fear. I knew then that I was doing the right thing by letting him go.

"I don't think you ever really had me Jade, no one did. I'm just sorry it took me this long to realize it," I said then he looked down, I cupped his face in both my hands "I 'am so sorry." I said, unable to handle his despondent expression. He gently removed my hands but hanged on to them, shook his head "You're a good person Katie, you deserve to be happy, you sound as though you don't." he said "I hope he makes you happy, and I hope he knows how lucky he is to have you." He added softly and I closed my eyes for a second.

He kissed both my hands and stood up "Jade." I started and he shook his head at me not to say anything, in all honesty, there was nothing left to say. He walked towards the back glass doors and looked out into the night. His stance remote and his jaw clenched, I knew that nothing could be salvaged from this. I broke up

with a boyfriend but in turn I also lost a dear friend in him and that devastated me more.

I gingerly stood up from my chair and took hold of my purse, I looked at him before I could take my leave but he was still staring out into the night.

"I genuinely cared about you Jade, there wasn't a day that went by since I met you that I hadn't wished that were enough." I said and he still didn't look at me

"Me too." He said, with that I turned on my heel and walked towards the door.

I got into my Bentley and Alfred pulled out with a worried glance at me through the rearview mirror. "Are you okay Ms. Gilbert?" he asked.

"No." I said and for once I didn't pretend that I was. I knew I couldn't bare to be alone tonight "Alfred take me to the Ritz-Carlton." I said and he nodded grimly.

Ten minutes later he pulled up on Olympic Blvd and he opened the door for me.

It was already past ten in the evening "Go home Alfred, I'll be fine." I said, after a moment of hesitation he tipped his chauffeur hat then ducked back into the car and drove off. After a run through at the stylish reception I numbly walked out of the elevator into the 17th floor and towards a suite that belonged to Brandon.

He answered the door after knocking twice.

With one long look at me, I knew he could tell I broke up with Jade. "Hi, sorry to just show up like this." I said, emotion still thick in my voice. Somehow seeing him now, threw me into another fit of tears.

Pain etched on Brandon's face as he immediately reached for me, pulling me into his arms. I tightened my arms around his neck, welcoming his comforting embrace like I needed it to breathe. He lifted me off the floor and kicked his door shut. Its only then that I noticed that he was shirtless, and only wore dark brown pajama pants; unlike that day in my apartment he went through a small hallway and into his bedroom.

For a moment I reveled in how strong he was and with his muscles in glorious display, that was a given. He sat me down to the edge of the bed and crouched down in front of me. "Don't do that princess." He softly beseeched as he wiped my tears away "Don't cry, it pains me," he added.

I nodded "Just hold me. Please." I whispered, almost afraid that he might turn me away. I honestly don't know where I'll go if he does.

He lay in bed with me holding me silently for a long while. His arms were the only place I ever wanted to be. I was planning on holding onto him this time around, with the hope that he never asks me to let him go again.

CHAPTER 10

Brandon gently swept hair out of my face and I nuzzled against his chest, "You really did care about him, didn't you?" he asked knowingly and I nodded. He chuckled without humor "I know I shouldn't be jealous but I 'am," He said. I kept quiet, I just wanted to hear him talk, hear his voice.

"When I watched him hold you while you danced, I envied him because I wanted to be him." He said, playing with a strand of my hair "It drove me crazy watching him with you, knowing you'd spend the night in his bed. That's when I knew I couldn't just go back to New York, but I wanted to. I had to." He added and I felt sharp realization hit me.

"You were really leaving that night." I said knowingly and his chest rose on a slow intake of breath. "Yes, I didn't want to complicate your life, I could see he made you happy, I was going to let you be." He said and I nodded to myself.

"Until I came after you." I finished for him,

"I'd let myself believe that what we had was over, but that night outside the ballroom, I felt it between us again, the attraction, the desperate yearning." He whispered, "I knew we couldn't avoid it as much as we couldn't deny we were still in love with each other." He added and I couldn't help but meekly agree, although I gave it my best shot. I chose not to acknowledge the fact that we were never going to be truly happy without each other, but he did.

"So you decided to come after me," I said with a hint of tease in my voice. "Trust me, I didn't like the thought of chasing after another man's girlfriend, no matter how in love with her I was." He said.

"But you figured that you'd just be taking back what's rightfully yours." I said and he chuckled, tightening his hold on me. "You know me well." He said and I smiled too "You haven't changed one bit." I said then paused, feeling the weight of all the time I've spent missing him. He pressed his lips hard against the crown of my head, his silent 'what's wrong?'

It was as familiar as it was heartbreaking.

I took in a shaky breath "It hasn't been easy without you Eddie." I whispered, "The independence you wanted for me, the dreams you wanted me to accomplish were fantastic but something was always missing. My life was whole yet so empty, sometimes I didn't see the necessity of it all, of the decision we made." I said a hot tear rolled down my cheek onto his bare chest.

He must've felt it because he sat up; we sat crossed legged facing each other. The look in his grey eyes pierced into my soul and I knew he felt the same way at some point. He gingerly brushed my tears away and buried his head in the crook of my neck "I know princess, you don't how many times I wished I could just come back." He murmured against my neck "Just to see you again, feel you again, smell you again." He whispered; his hold on me was making it hard for me to breathe. The pain etched in his voice cut me in half.

"Make me forget." I whispered and he cupped both sides of my head, looking up at me "Make us forget. That we ever missed each other, that we were ever apart." I added running my hands up his muscular forearms to take hold his wrists. His eyes smoldered with desire but unlike in the kitchen it wasn't mischievous or sinful, this one had a vulnerable, helpless edge that pulled at my heartstrings.

I also knew he was being careful because I was still emotionally raw from my break up with Jade. But I wanted him this way; I *needed* him this way.

"Make us forget." I whispered again and his time he didn't hesitate taking my mouth with skilled but frantic licks that almost had me crying again. He kissed me like he'd die if he didn't, like he was making up for lost time.

I was starting to pant when he kissed my neck and shoulder; he unzipped my dress, his movements slightly frenzied.

"You have no idea how many nights I've dreamt of you, having you sprawled on my bed, screaming my name as I loved you throughout the night." He said against me, his voice hoarse. His words sent scorching shiver down my spine, fueling my barely reined in lust for him. "Show me." I encouraged breathlessly.

He lifted my dress up and over my head, leaving me naked, except for the matching lacy bra and panties. He swiftly unhooked my bra, releasing my heavy breasts. He took a taut nipple into his hot mouth and I gave a helpless whimper of pleasure as he lowered me onto my back.

"I love you princess, you're so beautiful, so soft." He whispered, paying the other breast equal attention "I love how you bare yourself to me. That love and trust, I need it as much as I need to breathe." He added.

"Brandon." I gasped, its not like I could help it, he stripped me down to my soul every time. I loved how he made love to me, like he couldn't kiss me hard enough. Like he couldn't lunge into me deep enough, like he couldn't hold me tight enough. Like he couldn't make me or him orgasm often enough. Primal, raw and intense, and I reciprocated those feelings as well. I clawed at his back, gripped his hair, and straddled him with my legs. Meeting him halfway on our mandatory need to mate, to reconnect. As close as we were, we weren't close enough. And we both couldn't stop.

My eyes fluttered at the ceiling, then to my side at a sleeping Brandon. I smiled at the sight of him relaxed in sleep, thinking now he looked more like the boy I fell in love with, rather than the powerful male I saw at the dance. My eyes wandered greedily at his features, God he's beautiful. With his mussed hair and the slow rise and fall of his broad chest, he was quite a sight. One I knew I'd die if I didn't wake up to everyday.

My eyes slowly went down his well sculpture body, down to the brown linen sheet that hung loosely around his lean hips, just enough to reveal the V-shaped muscles on his lower abdominal. I involuntarily licked my dry and swollen lips, feeling white-hot heat stir within me again. How could I want him even after the night we just had? It was crazy how wanton he makes me.

When I lifted my eyes back to his face I found remotely amused grey eyes watching me with a look that clearly said 'like what you see?' I blushed.

"You have the lets-do-it-again look." He drawled, his voice throaty from sleep. "I don't think so, you barely gave me four hours of sleep, you...animal." I playfully pushed at his shoulder. I was also warily aware that I was sore.

He gave me a sly smile "You're sore, because you're so tight." He said bluntly "No, I'm sore because you're so big." I replied in the same manner, which brought a grin to his sensual mouth. *And because you've been nailing me all night* I thought.

"But my princess wants another orgasm and I should oblige her." he said reaching for me and I tightened the sheet around my naked body. "No, she doesn't." I said, not sure I can take any more.

"It wasn't really up to you." He said and I scoffed at him. He tugged the sheet away from me and took hold of the back of my knee; I closed my legs, denying him access. He bit the upper swell of my breast, I faintly cried out in pain and pleasure "Open for me." he hissed, and as turned on by the rough approach as I was I shook my head. "You really want to do this the hard way?" He said, I knew that tone and in response to it I pushed away from the mattress and tried to escape.

He quickly grabbed me and pinned me down again; sliding on top of me, he spread my legs. I bucked my hips but his two fingers went inside me and I gasped at the sweet intrusion. His expert fingers knew exactly where to touch and how in order to drive me crazy. But I fought against it, refusing to give him the satisfaction. "I hate you." I breathed and he smirked "That wont stop you from coming." He said, his thumb circled my moist and sensitive tissues and I moaned loudly.

My irritation with him only aggravated the sensations and I involuntarily opened my legs further for him. "That's it princess." He encouraged softly, as I began to grind into his hand shamelessly. The all but familiar feeling of an impending orgasm began to build into a crescendo "Look at me." Brandon said, with a twinge of command in his voice and I opened my eyes. The intensity of staring into his grey eyes heightened the pleasure and I came apart with a hoarse cry of his name. Before I could even recover his mouth replaced his fingers, because I was sensitized, he was gentle but ardent. Devouring me with slow licks that were surely driving me insane.

I clawed at the sheet and almost let out a helpless plea because he was deliberately prolonging my release. He arched my hips a bit then rolled them against him and I cried out as waves of pleasure rippled through me over and over again. I couldn't breathe when I pushed at his head, "No." I whimpered, deciding it's too much. "No more. I mean it Eddie." I said, my voice rising a bit hinting a warning. Brandon lied back on the bed beside me and I was still panting when I put my hand on my forehead, closing my eyes.

Brandon was taking my body over the edge, testing the limits of my own tolerance. He's been doing that throughout the whole night, I can't take anymore. I squirmed involuntarily, suffering the aftershocks of my orgasms. "Are you trying to drive me crazy? Is that what you want? A mentally ill girlfriend?" I muttered and I felt him kiss my nose so I opened my eyes to look at him. I sat up "Since when have you become a sex...maniac?" I mumbled, we've made love before but it was never like *this*. He was never like this.

He chuckled, "Since you grew into that—" I gestured at my naked body "—and I had to spend eight years without it," he said and I feigned sympathy, pursing my lips. "Aw you poor thing." I said and he made a sad face, humoring me "It was hard." He said. My gaze couldn't help wondering to his rigid member and I stifled a shiver. Damn he's insatiable.

"Hard?" I breathed with a raised eyebrow and he shot me a charming grin, grasping what I mean. "You get the picture." He teased, but my gaze remained riveted on it. Remembering how good he felt when I took him in my mouth. I wanted to do it again, maybe even give him a taste of his own medicine. "Don't even think about it." He said and the warning in his tone forced my gaze back to his grey eyes. "Or I wont be held responsible for taking you again." He

added. I took in a deep breath, the last time I did that he plunged into me for a good few hours. Who knows what I'll be unleashing now.

My gaze went to the clock by the nightstand, indicating that it's 7am and I suddenly remembered that I have work. Brandon followed my gaze, "I have to get to work." I said; pushing off the bed and a hand came around my arm. "Stay." He said, "No." I said, even if I didn't have work, staying cooped up in here...with him was a bad idea. The slight curve of his lips told me he understood too, "Okay, at least let me join you in the shower." He interjected. "Hell no." I said quickly, "I'll behave." He argued and I shot him a hard knowing look. He chuckled caving in, he let me go and I stood up. The slight throbbing between my legs induced a soft curse out of me.

Brandon's muffled chuckle made me glare at him, I picked up one of the pillows that fell to the floor and I threw it at him. He ducked it, laughing now and I stomped off to his in-suite bathroom.

Brandon came up behind me as I brushed my teeth and our gazes met in the mirror before his arms came around me. "Is that my toothbrush?" he asked with an amused tone. I rinsed my mouth and placed it back on its rack. "Yeah, is that a problem?" I asked and he raised his hands with silent surrender, which looked funny because I've been marching to the beat of his drums. I walked back into his bedroom and he silently followed behind me. He watched me as I got dressed and checked my watch, I had work but I wasn't sure I had the strength for it; I quickly texted Alfred to come pick me up.

"What?" I asked when I looked up at Brandon and he smiled "I'm trying to figure out a way to keep you here." He said and I chuckled.

"Unfortunately we're not all bosses, some of us have people to answer to." I said and he rolled his gorgeous eyes.

He walked to me and enwrapped me, pressing his lips to my temple "I'm not beyond begging." He said with a cute boyish tone. "You'll be my undoing." I said jokingly but I was dead serious, and so was he when he replied "It's only fair." He paused for a moment, making me turn to look at him questioningly "I have to go back to New York." He said and I stared at him for a while.

"Oh." I said; it felt as though ice-cold water had been splashed on my face. Of course, his entire life is on the other side of the country and he had to go back to it at some point. So why was I surprised? Or was it disappointment? Because he was so good at making me feel as though I was the only thing that mattered.

"Hey, don't be like that." He said softly, taking my hands and placing a kiss to my knuckles. "Like what?" I asked looking down but I caught his knowing look. I sighed, "I don't want us to be apart." I said softly and he shook his head "We don't have to be." He said and looked at him in silent question, "Come with me." he added and my eyes widened.

CHAPTER 11

When lunchtime rolled around I was itching to talk to Tess, I was still in a daze over what transpired over the last twenty-four hours. Though none was more shocking than Brandon asking me to move to New York to be with him. Could I do that? Move to another state and start a life with Brandon? God only knows I want to, badly. But my life is here in LA, my friends, my family.

I was just confused about it all and all I could leave Brandon with that morning was uncertainty. He knew what he was asking me to do was huge and he wouldn't have had he had any other choice. Having taken over C-Corp, which is based in NY from his father, he can't permanently move anywhere else.

I didn't doubt that the past couple of days he's spent here 'chasing' after me, must've cost him.

Hi, can we do lunch? I texted Tess and a minute later my phone vibrated. Sure thing, where? She replied, Let's go to our favorite Italian place. I quickly texted back and she agreed there soon after.

Like we agreed we met at the Italian restaurant ten blocks from the G-Industries building, walking into the place was like being teleported to Italy. We both came here as often as we could because the food was amazing. But mainly I chose it because I needed some comfort food, and they made the best kind. I made a mental note to not put off gym tonight. I wasn't too weight conscious ever since I stopped trying to get rid of my curves. Then again I guess I have Mom to blame; she was naturally a voluptuous woman although she was petite. I went to the gym three times a week but lately I've found myself too preoccupied with everything else. *Mainly Brandon*, the little voice inside me mocked.

When our food was brought around Tess and I were carrying a lite conversation, all the while thinking was going to miss her. Why would I think that unless I was decided? Had I unconsciously decided or was I hoping to hear her opinion first? Is that why I called her here?

I was telling her about work when she suddenly stopped me "Are you okay? You look a little tired today." She asked and I couldn't stop the vivid images of Brandon and I from running through my mind. I blushed and Tess gasped, a little too loudly.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, struggling to keep her voice low "No wonder you look tired, you spent all night banging Mr. blonde and delicious, didn't you?" she added and I didn't bother denying it, what I didn't understand was why didn't she guess Jade first.

"How the hell did you know that?" I asked with wary amusement "You blushed, you never do that unless it involves one man." She said and I nodded sheepishly, old habits die hard I guess. Her expression grew more solemn "And Jade?" she asked and my amusement faded as well. "I broke it off with him." I said "It was bad, he proposed and everything." I moaned and she placed a supportive hand over mine "I had to let him go." I justified, hoping it was enough to make me feel better but it wasn't. Tess nodded "You did the right thing, your relationship wasn't going anywhere." She said and I nodded grimly "He'll be okay, trust me," she added.

"I'm hanging on to that." I said and Tess' brown eyes narrowed. "What about you Katie? What now?" she asked and I took a deep breath "Brandon wants me to

move to New York—" I barely finished my sentence before her eyes widened "What?" she wheezed and I gave her a moment to gain her composure, I would've also be freaked out had I been in her shoes. "I haven't decided yet, I'm still trying to wrap my head around the idea." I said and she glanced at me "Wow. And what do you want to do?" She breathed. I smiled warily "That's the thing, I don't know." I said, "I mean, I want to be with him, I've always wanted to be with him, but I cant just pack up and leave." I added. She shook her head, looking more resolved than I was "What's stopping you Katie, really stopping you?" she asked and I fell silent for a minute. "See, nothing." She added and I shook my head "What about you and my family, my whole life is here." I countered and she didn't even look half convinced. "I'm going to say this because it's my job to say it," She said then grimaced "Even though I hate the thought and will miss you like crazy. But if you don't go, you'll be miserable and neither of us want that." She added. "Don't you see Katie? You've already decided." She continued with a sad smile "In the end you always follow your heart. And because Brandon has had it since forever, follow him instead." She added and I gave her hand a squeeze. "But..." I started and she cut me off "But nothing, we'll be fine. We all want you to be happy, if that's in another state then so be it." She said, then she looked like she was fighting back tears. "I'm really going to miss having you around." She said and my brows furrowed, feeling the same tears sting my eyes. "Don't you go and replace me with some fancy New York woman." She added with a chuckle "Are you kidding me?" I admonished with a lazy laugh as well.

I walked back to my office even more conflicted than ever, Tess' willingness to let me go only made it harder for me to do so as well. She said that I always follow my heart, but I don't like to that blindly. And that's what moving to New York will be like to me.

I had no idea what has waiting for me there except Brandon's love, that's the only thing I was sure of. Why wasn't that enough? Why was I even questioning that? I turned my office doorknob and walked inside, I barely made it further into my office before I stopped dead. I felt Brandon's presence before I even saw him. My head snapped to my left in time to see him stand up for the corner lounge.

We stared at each other, even though we were a considerable distance from each that didn't stop a charge from passing between us. Brandon was in a black long sleeved sweater and grey slacks, he complimented his look with a grey hat, pulled low over his gorgeous eyes.

He was back to being the urbane powerful man, rather than the intense lover I had all night. I tore my eyes away from him "Hi Eddie." I murmured, walking over to my desk. I placed my handbag on my table and shrugged out of my Burberry jacket. I heard him come up behind me then he took hold of my waist.

"I tried calling you." He said brushing his lips against my nape, "Oh, I must've put my phone on silent when I went to lunch." I said, the feel of his lips starting to raise the hairs on my arms.

His hands gripped my hips "How are you finding walking today?" He teased and I playfully hit his arm "Ugh! You're an idiot." I said, trying to wriggle out of his hold but he turned me around and kissed me. The kiss was deep and searching, it almost had the same desperate edge as the ones he gave me last night. I took

hold of his sweater, kissing him back, it was clear something was bothering him and I tried to figure out what it was.

I pulled back first, breathless and he leaned his forehead against mine. "Are we okay princess?" he asked softly and I closed my eyes for a second realizing what was eating at him.

"Of course we are; why would you think otherwise?" I asked and he pulled back to look at me "You sort of left me hanging." He said, "You sort of dropped a bomb on me." I countered quietly. A small smile graced his lips "I know, I'm sorry." He said and I nodded "I'm sorry too." I said. He raised an eyebrow at me and I glanced at my watch incredulously "You've only given me six hours." I pointed out, knowing he wanted my answer right then.

He breathed out in a rush, taking hold of my arms "Six hours of going out of my mind here." He said. I took hold of his hand and led him to the couch and sat him down, his grey gaze intent on my face.

"Brandon." I started never letting go of his hand, his expression gave nothing away but I knew him enough to feel the tension radiating from him. He wants us to work too "I love you, and I want be with you." I said and his eyes narrowed. "But it's not enough to make you want to move." He interjected and slight panic crept into me "I never said that." I said shaking my head.

"You were thinking it." He said and I frowned at the conclusion he's drawn.

"What are we going to do, because I can't do long distance princess." He said "I need you with me." he added caressing my cheek.

"I know; I need to be with you too." I said, unfortunately I was too insecure to have that kind of a relationship. Especially with a man like Brandon, feeling the way I do about him "I'll drive myself crazy worrying if some New York socialite is not occupying your bed." I added and he snorted.

"And I'll drive myself crazy thinking there's another Jade in the picture." He said and I touched his wrist "Its not a no Eddie, give me a little time, I know you don't have much of it but...please." I pleaded softly. He nodded then leaned over to brush a tender kiss to my forehead.

He stood up and I started feeling sick because I could feel a rift between us. He agreed to give me more time but why did I feel him slipping from my fingers. I watched his retreating back and I felt bile rising in my throat, nothing was stopping him from walking out of here forever.

Don't you see Katie? You've already decided Tess' words rang clear in my head and I jumped off the couch "Brandon." I cried and he pivoted in time to catch me in his arms, "Whoa, what's wrong princess?" he asked, caressing my hair as I tightened my hold on him "I don't want to lose you, I need you." I moaned and he made a troubled sound, He said and I shook my head too frantically "You don't understand." I said pulling back to meet his worried eyes "I want to come with you. Lets do it, lets go to New York." I said and his eyes widened for a fraction of a second, then he grinned.

"Are you sure?" he asked cupping my face and I nodded "I've never been more sure of anything in my life." I said, a tear rolling down my cheek and Brandon scooped me up spinning me around like a child, laughing delightfully.

I realized then that I'd do anything to get that reaction out of him even walk through hell.

CHAPTER 12

I finished clearing my office and took a moment to say goodbye to it. I loved my job too much to quit it, so instead I decided to relocate to our NY headquarters. I memorized its interior with the hope of recreating it wherever I end up. My phone rang and Brandon's name came up on the screen, I smiled answering it "You never told me you kept that boomerang I sent you." He said softly halfway through my hello. I took in a shaky breath, realizing he must've seen it on the pile I'm taking with me.

"Yeah, I couldn't bring myself to dispose it," I said, "It was the only part of you I had left." I added reluctantly. He made a disapproving sound and I could almost see him shaking his head. "You've always had me princess, by the throat from day one." He said and I smiled to myself.

"Quit going through my stuff." I teased and he snorted "Well you're stuff is also mine since we'll be living together." He said and I froze, Brandon took note of my silence as shock and sighed, "You honestly didn't think I'd let you live anywhere else but with me, did you?" he asked clearly not needing an answer.

"I never agreed to moving in with you. I agreed to move to NY to be with you." I pointed out and he chuckled, the sound curling my toes.

"Too bad because you agreed to both." He said then hung up before I could protest further. I took a moment staring at the phone then chuckled at myself. I went out of my office and down towards JT's, I came in after knocking once and found him on the phone, he raised a finger at me motioning for me to give him a second. I wandered around his office wondering how Brandon's would look like compared to it. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

JT put the receiver down and stood up, "You got everything you need?" he asked and I nodded then placed the keys to my office on his desk. When I looked up at him he was smiling at me. "I was actually wondering when this was finally going to happen, you two belong together." He said and I smiled at him.

"Thank you." I said and he raised an eyebrow at me "You were one of the few who knocked some sense into me, I needed that." I said and he chuckled. "Nah, what are big brothers for huh?" he said hugging me. Growing up JT always had my back, that has never changed and I hope it never will.

"We're going to miss you around here, I can almost hear Hilary asking about her aunt Kiki." He said and I chuckled.

"Geez you guys act as if I'm moving to New Zealand." I said and he chuckled too "It feels that way doesn't it?" he said and I agreed. He sat back in his chair "What time is the party tonight?" he asked and I rolled my eyes. "You're supposed to know, the person throwing it is your wife." I pointed out and he grinned.

"Well sometimes I can't keep up with her," he said shrugging and I chuckled "She'd be pleased to know that." I said walking towards the door. Trust Tess to throw a going away party. "See you tonight." I said before I went out, closing the door behind me.

Tess truly went all out; everyone was here from Angie and Jason to Alfred and my aunts Ally and Mandy. I touched Janie's shoulder and she smiled at me, looking away from Hilary on her lap.

"Be good while I'm gone." I said and she chuckled "Do I have a choice?" she teased and I smiled at her. She peeked to where Brandon and my parents were chatting, "Between you and me, he's always been my favorite." She said and I laughed. Janie has always adored Brandon ever since she was just a little girl; she was also forlorn when he left.

He formed a bond with her that I did with Connie.

"Of course he is because at some point he liked you more than me," I said.

Tess came over to me and took hold of my hands, "I promised myself I wouldn't cry." She said and I chuckled "Then don't because you'll make me cry too." I said then she pulled me in for a tight hug.

"Thank you for this." I said and she nodded "We have to talk often during the week and see each other at least once a month." She when I pulled back "Say no more." I said. I said goodbye to everyone then hugged Mom as Dad shook hands with Brandon, "Take care of her," he said to him and he smiled "I fully intend to." He said with vehemence.

I hugged Dad last and he kissed my forehead "Be happy angel." He whispered and my throat tightened with emotion. "I love you Daddy." I said then Brandon took hold of my hand and we went out.

"I thought it'd take more work to get on their good side." He said and I chuckled "They know you didn't break my heart and besides, they've known you since forever and most importantly that you love me." I said and he grinned.

"Good, because I have lots of it," He said and I smiled too sliding into the back of the Bentley and he followed.

We arrived at LAX about three in the afternoon; we went through the security checks then pulled up on the tarmac. Brandon's jet was almost as big as my Dad's; it had C-Corp on the fuselage and the company's logo on the vertical tail. I surprised Alfred when I hugged him, he was always professional towards me but we've formed a special bond over the years. It took him a moment before he hugged me back.

"Farewell Ms. Gilbert." He said when I took hold of Brandon's hand again and I nodded. When we reached cruising altitude I went to the bathroom to freshen up, a few minutes later Brandon came in and took me into his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked and I nodded "I'm going to miss home, I've always been a west coast girl." I said with slight tease and he smiled, resting his chin on top of my head. He met my gaze in the oval shaped mirror.

"Well you can be an east coast girl, you can be *my* girl." He said and I grinned at him. "Tempting." I breathed, caressing his forearms "Though I could use some comfort sex, thirty thousand feet in the air." I whispered and he chuckled, the sound was primitive and very alluring.

"Oh princess, I'm at your service." He said with a bite to my shoulder "Lose the clothes, I have to make a few calls." He added then walked out of the bathroom. I followed him out and went into one of the bedroom cabins, heated anticipation coursing through me was almost unbearable.

Our five-hour flight came to an end, though Brandon kept me busy for most of it. I had a goofy grin as I tried to fix my appearance in the mirror. Sadly there wasn't much I could do about my wide bright eyes, flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

I rejoined Brandon who still looked like his normal handsome self, and we walked out to the JFK airport tarmac. I've never been to New York myself but I was even more excited to be there with Brandon.

Apparently so were a couple of paparazzi, which started snapping pictures of us as we made our way to the sleek black Lexus sedan. I didn't stop and think that stories of Brandon and I's 'reunion' was worldwide news.

I found myself admiring Brandon's impersonal but adept acknowledgment of the press. He was even better at this than I was. "Warm reception." I said to him and he chuckled

"Well I 'am the king of this concrete jungle and I hope to make you my queen." He said pressing a kiss to my knuckles.

A dark brown haired man came out of the driver's seat to greet us and open the back door of the car. He had sharp emerald eyes and a slightly buffer build to just be a chauffeur. "Welcome back sir." He said to Brandon, and I could see they were close because Brandon hardly smiled at anyone he didn't know personally. "Its good to be back Quinn, this is my girlfriend Katelyn Gilbert." He gestured towards me and my heart suddenly leaped at him referring to me as his girlfriend. "Katie this is Quinn Sanders, my right-hand man." He added and Quinn extended a hand to me with a sincere smile.

"Ms. Gilbert, it's a pleasure." He said and I shook his firm hand "The pleasure's all mine." I said and he nodded then ducked back in the driver seat and Brandon gestured towards the open door. I slid into the back seat and he got in after me. My hand was firmly entwined with Brandon's but my gaze couldn't help but be riveted on the passing streets and buildings of New York.

With its atmosphere, pace and other worldliness, it was a city that took on a life of its own. And as the sun began to set and city lights came out, that notion was only confirmed.

Quinn stopped in front of one of the many skyscraper buildings; the street signs indicated that we were in Park Avenue. We went through the glass doors after the doorman opened them.

With my hand still in Brandon's he walked to the front desk, the woman behind it flashed him a grin that made me slightly uncomfortable. "Welcome back Mr. Carter" She said. I zoned out of their brief conversation as she started updating him on his messages.

I took in the modern interior of the duplex lobby.

Soon there after Brandon led me to the elevators but he surprised me when he turned a corner and went to a single one, which he opened with a key card.

"You own the building." I remarked as the doors closed on us. Suddenly I pardoned the front desk lady's over attentiveness.

Brandon shot me a sly smile "One of a few." He said and I couldn't hide my surprise. The private elevator came to a stop and we walked into an entry hallway, and down the small steps that led into the great room of his penthouse. "Welcome home." Brandon whispered in my ear and I smiled at him "That has a nice ring to it." I said and he smiled.

I walked around the great room, which as a light filled and expansive gathering area. It included a stone and marble fireplace, a magnificent chandelier, marble floor, and a red and beige interior décor. Strong, modern, yet warm; the open floor plan allowed me to get a view of the kitchen. Which had modern cherry wood cabinets, granite countertops and a vaulted ceiling. I had a feeling I was

going to love cooking in it. To my left was the dining area, with a mahogany rectangle shaped table and chairs surrounding its length. Not to mention the glass staircase adjacent to the huge fireplace.

Even as I took in the striking features of Brandon's penthouse, none was more remarkable than the view of Manhattan provided by the floor to ceiling glass walls. They stretched only half of the great room, which helped keep its warm essence. "Wow, this makes my apartment look like a doll house." I said and Brandon chuckled walking over to me.

He caressed my cheek, his eyes intent on my face for a while "You look tired." He said, "Gee, I wonder why." I said dryly and he smiled, it looked even cuter because it was a little sheepish. He took my hand and led me up the stairs.

CHAPTER 13

Brandon led the way into what was undeniably the master bedroom, it was tranquil and very much him. With his trademark subtle and sultry illumination, the interior was graphite and gloss black; almost the whole room was carpeted. I took note of the king sized bed framed by modern design headboard. My eyes darted to the glass wall opposite the bed, which had a view of the city from another side. The glass wall had a small seating place next to it, and to my right was an interior hallway with three separate doors.

Welcome home he'd said and it sounded so good coming from him. I'd like to believe this was my home but the reality was that not so long ago it was another woman's home as well. And that unsettled me deeply.

Just thinking of another woman with Brandon on this very bed was making my skin crawl and my jealousy flare. I wanted a place where he and I would make fresh memories, away from both our pasts.

"My luggage?" I asked lamely when I took notice of the Louis Vuitton suitcases next to the hallway. "Yeah, you were too busy admiring the place to notice Quinn bring it up." He said, with a ghost of a frown. I didn't doubt he felt or saw the change in my mood, he and I were always in sync.

"I need a hot shower." I said, "First door to your left." He said then caught my arm before I turned "Are you okay?" he asked and I gave him a smile "Sure." I said and he let me go. I knew it wasn't convincing because he looked like he didn't buy it, but he uncharacteristically let it go.

When I came back out wearing my satin pajamas I felt better, but only just. I watched Brandon's muscles flex as he shrugged out of his shirt, "Where are you going?" he asked as I tried to go passed him. I paused for a second "To look for the guest bedroom." I said and his eyebrows shot up "The what?" he said, his grey eyes steeling "You're not sleeping in the guestroom Katelyn, you're sleeping with me," he said and it wasn't a request.

"I really don't think that's a good idea, I think it's better if I sleep in another room." I said, trying to calm my frenzied heart.

Brandon folded his arms, and I tried to avoid how his muscles stretched because it was wreaking havoc on my train of thinking. "How the hell is that better?" he asked, his own irritation and confusion was starting to surface.

"I mean, you can join me, if you want to—" I said; starting to back away and he caught me by the waist before I could get too far.

"Stop." He whispered harshly, I instinctively tried to free myself "I mean it." He added with a commanding tone that curled my toes and ceased my wriggling.

"What is this really about?" he asked, and I paused knowing he's on to me. "Tell me." he said tersely when I didn't answer and I sighed in defeat.

"I-I don't want to share a bed you used to share with other women. I...know its silly but I can't do that right now." I whispered and he exhaled in exasperation. His grip on me loosened as if he was letting go but he didn't.

"Besides yourself, no other woman has been here except my stepmother and Connie." He said, shocked I turned to face him when he let me go. "I only moved into this penthouse a month ago and I haven't been in a relationship for over a year." He elaborated and I immediately felt stupid and guilty.

"Come on princess, have a little faith in me." he said with a deep frown "You

really think I'd bring you to a place, let alone a bed I've shared with another woman?" he added, looking like I just slapped him. I rubbed at my forehead "I know, I do, I just—" I started and he turned away. "Brandon." I softly beseeched, using both my hands to tug at his arm before he looked at me again "I'm sorry...I can be an idiot sometimes." I added looking down, and I peeked at him in time to see him smile a bit.

"True." He said and I gasped in mock outrage hitting him, that brought a chuckle out of him and I was glad my playful Eddie was back. "Do that again and I won't let you sleep." He threatened and I smirked at him "Oh I'm so scared." I said and he encircled me and I squealed when he fell onto the bed with me in his arms.

I woke up to a vacant space beside me; I sat up running a hand through my hair. It felt weird waking up in a different bed, a different city, in a different time zone. I got up wrapping the sheet around me, looking outside; it was still too early, well for me that is. Sleep is my best friend.

I walked into the bathroom and I immediately took notice of the steamed shower walls, indicating that Brandon took a shower not so long ago.

After a quick scrub I opened the door opposite to the bathroom and walked into Brandon's closet. It was big and very well organized, everything from formal to casual wear. He must have someone do that for him. My man was a lot of things, but he was not a neat freak. I grabbed one of his t-shirts and I pressed it to my face and inhaled, then I chuckled at myself. I'm obsessed.

I shrugged out of the bathrobe and got into it, because it was a little oversized on me, its V neckline hung loosely on my chest. I walked out and opened the third door; it looked like a spare closet except it was used as some kind of a storage room. I walked back into the bedroom glancing warily at the pile of suitcases that needed to be unpacked. I figured I'll attend to that later, but now I had to find Brandon. The only problem was that I had no idea where to look.

I walked out of the room down the sizable hallways; I smiled as I noticed a few paintings on the limestone walls. Like me, his interest in art never died out. I stopped in surprise when I came across another flight of stairs, how big was this penthouse?

Out of curiosity I went up them, taking note that they weren't as long as the ones on the first floor. The moment I came up them I heard Brandon's voice and I followed it with a smile. I stopped and leaned on the doorway of a home office, my gaze taking in my surroundings. Like other rooms in this penthouse, it was stylish and insanely spacious. It had deep tones with modestly graphic wallpaper and sculptural console lamps. The office credenza and wall cabinets only surrounded half of the room; the rest was a carpeted open space.

My gaze locked on Brandon who was standing next to the glass wall that overlooked central park. He used his Bluetooth earpiece to talk to whoever was on the other line. His deep voice sure and assertive, to the person he was talking to, it must've sounded intimidating.

To me it was absolutely irresistible. Looking at him now he really did look like the king of the concrete jungle beneath him.

I was careful not to make a sound and disturb him but like me in my office he must've felt my presence because he suddenly turned around. He regarded me with a smile that softened his mask of concentration. He continued his

conversation but the look in his eyes told me to come to him. I pushed away from the doorframe and walked in further.

"I'm paying you good money to fix this Max, don't make me regret handing this deal to you." Brandon ended the conversation then took out the earpiece, throwing it onto the black leather armchair.

"Morning princess." He said, pressing his lips to my hair when I came into his arms. "Hi Eddie." I said, thinking the shirt I wore didn't smell half as good as the man himself. "Isn't it a little early for you?" he teased and I chuckled, "For me? Yes, but I can see that doesn't apply to you." I said, "Why aren't you dressed for work?" I asked; I was sure he had a pile of work to get through now that he was back in the city. And I doubted his smart casual appearance now was his normal professional ensemble.

"I'm not going to work." He said and I pulled away to eye him with incredulity. He rolled his eyes as if the reason was obvious. "I have to make sure you get settled in," he said dismissively and I shook my head at him.

"That's absurd. I can get settled in very well on my own." I said, turning to face the incredible view outside. "Go to work, I'll be fine." I added countering his protest before it came. "I'm pretty sure I'll get settled in much quicker if you're not here to distract me." I teased and he chuckled, wrapping his arms around me from behind. "I'm distracting you?" he asked, "Hell, you're the one walking around in nothing but my shirt." He added, cupping my breasts over the shirt.

"Getting any work done is going to be a challenge if that will become a normality." He added taking my earlobe between his teeth.

I let out a low chuckle, placing my hands on top of his and prying them away

"Stop trying to get laid again and go get dressed." I said,

"Okay, okay, and you call me bossy." He said and I turned around and stuck my tongue out at him, causing him to grin.

CHAPTER 14

After getting dressed in a laurel green dress, I joined Brandon downstairs. He was leaning against the counter with a mug in hand, looking immaculate in his dark brown suit. It had a striking contrast to his golden hair. I was surprised when a woman walked into the kitchen and busied herself there. She had short and curly brown hair and she looked to be in her early thirties. Brandon hardly regarded her until he saw that I was staring at her.

"Oh, Katelyn this is Vicky James, my housekeeper." He said and the woman looked up at me with a warm smile. She extended a hand over the counter and I shook it "Its great to meet you Ms. Gilbert." She said and I extended the same courtesy to her. I was right about Brandon having someone, now I know whom. "What do you fancy for breakfast?" she asked and I paused for a while, the last time I let anyone do anything for me was back home. Ever since I moved out and went to college I got used to doing things myself.

"Um, surprise me." I said uncomfortably, I gingerly sat on one of the barstools. Feeling Brandon's gaze on me, I looked up at him and he continued watching me over the rim of his mug. Did he sense my uneasiness?

"I'll prepare the other closet for you, should I unpack everything in there?" Vicky asked and my gaze snapped to her in surprise. "Oh no, I'll do that—"

"Please Ms. Gilbert, it's no bother." She insisted and I decided to let it go, realizing that she's only doing her job.

"I have to go." Brandon said sparing his watch a glance, he walked to me and bent over to kiss my forehead "Don't give Vicky a hard time, let her help." He whispered, but his soft voice was still instructive and I nodded meekly.

He turned to walk away then suddenly turned back to me and kissed me this time around. "I love you." He said, "I love you too. Go." I said, I couldn't help but grin like an idiot and blush because Vicky was still here. She was doing an impressive job at completely avoiding us.

I turned my gaze back to her after Brandon disappeared up the entry hallway. "I need a run down of how things work around here." I said dryly, as she served me a delicious looking omelet.

"Certainly." She said with a polite smile, and I had a feeling I was going to like her. "Oh and call me Katelyn." I said and she nodded, "Juice?" she asked "Please." I said smiling at her.

Vicky gave me a thorough tour of the penthouse after she helped me unpack my things. I was right; it was bigger than I thought with a separate guest apartment, but what stunned me the most was the indoor swimming pool, wine cellar and the personal gym.

She also told me a little more about herself and that she's been working for Brandon for three years now. She was not here when we arrived last night then she explained that she lived in one of the apartments below us, like Quinn did too. She also mentioned that their apartments used this very elevator.

We were back in the great room when the intercom on the kitchen pillar beeped; Vicky took the receiver and briefly talked to the person on the other end. I didn't catch much of it as I glanced at one of the flat screens.

I gazed back at her when she walked back to me “I have to get back to work. Your visitor will be here shortly.” She said then went up the stairs. Leaving me bewildered, what visitor? I didn’t know anyone in New York.

Five minutes later a woman in business suit walked into the great room and I stood up from the couch, not recognizing her. She had sleek black hair pulled back in an unforgiving bun. The spectacles she wore framed her elfin features. One look at her and you could tell she was of Asian origin. I quickly took note of the earpiece she wore and the shiny PDA she carried as she extended a hand towards me. “Hello Ms. Gilbert, my name is Lana Madsen, I’m Mr. Carter’s personal assistant.” She said and I don’t know why I was surprised as I acknowledged her. “I was sent to set you up with anything you might need.” She said and I suppressed a groan. Brandon couldn’t be here so he sent his PA instead? “That won’t be necessary, I’m sure he requires your help more than I do.” I said as her fingers flew over the PDA. “Ms. Gilbert, he insisted that my being here *is* helping him and since that’s my job, put me to use. What do you want to do?” She said looking at me.

I stared at her for a little while “Take a moment to breathe?” I said and she actually smiled, I was certain she didn’t do that often.

“Excuse me,” she said then pressed a button on her earpiece “Madsen.” She said, backing away a little listening intently. “I’m aware of that but Mr. Carter is a very busy man, I will get you in contact with him when he’s been made available.” She said then walked back to me. “Sorry about that.” She said and I simply shook my head, questioning if I fully understand the magnitude of Brandon’s success.

Just then someone who I definitely knew came through the entry hallway. Constance Carter was Brandon’s little stepsister, now she was no longer the little girl I adored. Like Janie she was a beautiful young woman now. She had her brother and father’s grey eyes but took on her mother’s bronze hair.

“Katelyn!” she exclaimed rushing over to hug me tightly “Oh my God Connie.” I said. Pulling back to get a good look at her, “Look at you.” I said and she chuckled. “Look at me? Look at you! You’re gorgeous.” She said and I waved my hand dismissively, she pulled me into another hug. “I can’t believe you’re actually here, in New York, with my brother.” She said “Everything seems right in the world now.” She added and I chuckled at her enthusiasm.

It’s only when she glanced at Lana did I remember she’s still here. She was sitting on the single couch, effectively ignoring us and focusing on her PDA. “Hey Lana.” Connie greeted her and she looked up and her impersonal demeanor warmed a little. “Hello Constance.” She said. “What are you doing here? Is my bother home?” she asked and she shook her head with wary amusement. “Actually I’m Ms. Gilbert’s PA for the day.” She said standing up and I shot her an apologetic smile.

“You’re brother thinks I need someone to help me get settled in, since he can’t do it himself, he sent her instead.” I said and Connie’s eyes widened.

“Yes, of course. I couldn’t have come at a better time.” She said and I raised my eyebrows at her “You do need help with that and it doesn’t involve staying cooped up in here. I know this place is awesome but you need to see a little bit of the city.” She said excitedly. Oh no.

“Besides, I’m sure you need to stock up on essentials.” She said then frowned “And I doubt you were able to pack an adequate wardrobe.” She added. “Lets hit Fifth Avenue.” She said clasping her hands in anticipation. I sighed, knowing

there was no getting out of whatever she had planned. "Okay, let me get my bag." I said and she scrutinized me "You might want to step into something a little more chic." She said, "I agree." Lana interjected and I frowned down at my dress "What's wrong with the way I look now?" I asked and she smiled "Well you're stepping out for the first time and first impression is important." She said, *especially when you're Brandon Carter's girlfriend* they didn't have to say it aloud, it wasn't lost to me. "Because I'm Brandon's girlfriend?" I mused out loud and Connie shook her head. "Because you're Katelyn Gilbert, you're a fashion icon." She chimed and I chuckled then rolled my eyes at her exaggeration. "Alright." I said.

Thanks to Vicky, my clothes were neatly straightened and placed in the spare closet, my closet now I guess. Connie was right I didn't pack all my clothes, but they were adequate, for now at least.

I decided to wear a white close fitting mini dress; I also traded in my strappy sandals for nude Louboutin pumps. I undid my ponytail and raked my hands through my dark hair, letting it hang loose around my waist. One thing I refused to do was put on make up; they were just going to have to deal with it.

"And?" I asked after I came down the stairs and Connie grinned, "Perfect." She said. "Let's go; Kellan's waiting for us." Lana said and started walking towards the elevator. I shot Connie a confused look and she smiled "Kellan also works for my brother, much like Quinn." She said and I nodded as we walked into the lift.

Kellan was the red headed, lite blue-eyed man waiting next to the Lexus when we walked out. Like Quinn he had an imposing physique, although he looked younger and less menacing. I got into the back with Connie after she introduced us. We ended up at a large boutique with a French name; Connie proclaimed it to be her favorite store in the whole of Manhattan. The posh second level store was less populated considering its size.

We picked and tried out many clothes I wouldn't have, had it not been for Connie. Her constant 'oh I love that one' and 'that will look great on you' kept us at the boutique for almost two hours.

"Shouldn't you be in class or something?" I teased her when I walked out of the change rooms wearing a lavender evening dress she had picked. She smiled "Nope, I'm on vacation for the rest of the fall." She said, "This looks fantastic, I have a gift." She added with a grin and I couldn't help but chuckle. The sales lady walked back to us "We're still good?" she asked with a warm smile. She's been very attentive ever since we walked in for some reason. "Yes. The dress needs shoes though, any suggestions?" Connie said to her and she nodded "I know just the pair." She replied then walked away. A weird feeling overcame me and my gaze lifted to the entrance only to see Brandon come through the automatic glass doors.

I almost ran to him, elated when his grey gaze locked on me "Brandon." I exclaimed when he caught me in a hug, how could I be so happy to see him? It's only been a couple of hours. "How are we doing?" he asked pulling back, sparing Connie a smile when she waved at him then resumed talking to the sales lady. Whose attention was forced back away from Brandon.

"Great, Connie couldn't wait to get me out of your penthouse." I said with a chuckle. "Our penthouse." He interjected. Just then I noticed Quinn standing outside next to a silver Porsche SUV. He wore dark sunglasses and the same long jacket Kellan wore. I've watched enough crime dramas to know that underneath

the jackets was a firearm and that behind the glasses, eyes were constantly scanning the area for any threat.

"You left work to check up on me?" I asked looking at Brandon and he gave me a sly smile "Yes and no." he said, "I was on my way to a meeting, so I thought I'd take a detour." He said.

"I'm guessing that's for the no, what's the reason behind the yes?" I asked, slightly amused. He paused for a fraction of a second "I wanted to make sure I didn't just hallucinate you being here with me," he said with tease in his tone but his eyes were serious. I smiled "Beguiling, aren't you?" I said and he smiled too "You like it." He said and I nodded "I do." I said grinning.

"I mean it." He said softly, I never doubted that for a minute. Everything Brandon says to me has always been heartfelt which made it all that more special. "I know." I whispered, suddenly wishing we weren't in a public place.

Brandon took my hand and slowly twirled me around gazing at my dress "You look stunning." He said, "Put everything on my charge account, Lana will take care of it." He added and I frowned. He wants to pay for my clothes? Hell no.

His expression turned into a mask of exasperation "You want to pick a fight over this?" he asked, "Yes." I said, standing my ground. "And you will lose Mr. Carter." I added and he shook his head "Okay, I don't want to fight." He said and I relaxed a little "One more thing. Could you lessen your entourage?" I said, and he looked around the boutique "Kellan stays." He said with an uncompromising tone.

I glanced at Kellan who was sitting in the waiting area, paging through a magazine with disinterest. "Okay." I said then he nodded giving my hand a squeeze. "I'll see you later." He said and I smiled nodding.

He called out to Lana, who was standing next to Connie a couple of feet away. Her gaze snapped to him immediately, Brandon didn't need to raise his appealing voice to command attention. She walked towards us and I was a bit surprised that she still maintains her impassiveness even with Brandon. Which was unusual, because women couldn't help but flash him come-hither looks and smiles.

Connie came to stand beside me as I watched the pair exit the boutique, "Is she always like that?" I asked, watching them through the glass walls. Lana got in the back of the SUV and Brandon followed her in after pausing to say something to Quinn. Connie chuckled "Lana? Oh yeah, I even think it comes natural to her. Its probably why my brother loves her." she said and my head whipped to her.

"What?" I squealed and she shook her head "No, that's not what I meant." She said and I chuckled at my own reaction "I know. Reflex, I guess." I said sheepishly. "What I meant was that she's the only woman I know who doesn't throw herself at him and I think he likes that as well. Besides, she's brilliant at her job." She said I nodded, I didn't doubt that for a second.

"So if you're worried about her, don't. She's also happily married." She said and I couldn't hide my surprise, I didn't take notice of any ring on her finger. Then again I didn't pay much attention. We walked back to the change rooms "I wasn't worried, I just—" I stopped when she started laughing at me, I shot her a mock glare. "You can't say stuff like 'my brother loves her' unless you're talking about me," I said and she stifled her laugh. "Roger that." She said and I shook my head at her chuckling.

CHAPTER 15

Connie and I were back at the penthouse later that afternoon, I was glad to have her there, talking my ear off. We sat in the lounge reminiscing on old times.

"Remember when Brandon crashed on the couch after the regional championship final?" she asked and I chuckled nodding. "Poor thing, they won but he was dead beat afterwards. He looked cute lying there." I said and she raised an eyebrow at me. "He didn't look cute anymore when he woke up." She said.

"Because you poured cold water on him!" I chimed in and she laughed, "Oh please don't act so innocent, you were an accomplice." She said and I giggled.

"I've missed you Katelyn." She said when we sobered up and I touched her arm "I know, I've missed you too." I said, then her gaze shifted, seeming far away.

"I was so devastated when Brandon told me you weren't coming to say goodbye."

She said and I looked down at my hands. Remembering that painful day, "I'm really sorry, I just couldn't do the long goodbyes...it would've shattered me," I said and she nodded somberly. "I know, he told me. I didn't understand at the time though." She said then shrugged.

"How have you been, really?" I asked and a ghost of a smile tugged on the corners of her lips. "Me? I've been great." She said then paused "You're wondering how he's been as well." She added and I grimaced. "Do I want to know?" I asked, more

to myself than her. She shrugged "Depends." She said "Brandon has been overachieving, in everything, but it seemed as though he closed off more and more with time." She added with a frown. "Sometimes it felt like I didn't know him anymore." She added, "I got used to how he was back when you were together and that Brandon disappeared when we left LA. He was so good at hiding it but I could see he was never genuinely happy." She added.

Connie left an hour later, but what she said about Brandon stuck in my mind. It also hit home for me. I was never really happy as well; I just liked to convince myself that I was.

Wanting more information I sat on our bed and switched on my laptop. I typed Brandon Carter on the Google search box. I read a couple of things about him, some of which I already knew. Apparently Brandon took over C-Corp fresh out of college, but his father played an important guiding role.

Under his management, the company has tripled its average turnover, and now has bigger entities than it has had in the past two decades. I continued to go through the staggering stats with amazement then scrolled back.

I came across the most searched items and the first one was in regard to his girlfriend. Against my better judgment I clicked on in then on images.

The first ones were of him kissing my hand when we arrived at the airport then of us at the business conference, dancing and when we were outside. As I continued to scroll down I came across a few where he was with a blonde, but most were of him and another woman who was stunning by far. She had long glossy chestnut hair and lite olive skin. She had dark brown eyes and she was a bit taller and more petite than me. Brandon and her were photographed everywhere together, in Central park, walking down the streets, at parties, at restaurants.

I frowned as I felt a sharp pang of jealousy, I wasn't a covetous person accept when it came to Brandon. Who was this woman?

Curiosity got the best of me and I opened the link on one of the pictures. The marvelous woman was Pénélope Martinez, a French supermodel. Having dated her for four years, she was Brandon's longest relationship to date.

Four years with the man I love I thought begrudgingly, I had to remind myself that this was part of the deal when we separated.

It went on to say that she relocated to London after their break up a year ago. Somehow knowing that she was thousands of miles away from Brandon now put me slightly at ease. *It doesn't matter; she's in the past. He loves you.* I chanted to myself then closed the page. No need getting myself more worked up than I already was.

I continued to read some more of the work he's done, including the charities he's funding. A few minutes later the bedroom door opened and he came in, I flashed him a smile when our gazes locked. "Welcome home." I repeated his own words and he grinned shrugging out of his jacket. "I could get used to having you on my bed welcoming me home everyday princess." He said walking over to kiss my cheek. "How was your day?" he asked, "Interesting, yours?"

He shrugged "Hectic, the usual." He said with a smile then lied next to me. "What are you doing?" he asked glancing at my laptop. "Marveling at your work, Connie wasn't kidding about the overachieving." I said and he chuckled dismissing my complement. "I just did what you told me to do." He said and I looked at him dumbfounded for a second then suddenly remembered.

Go and conquer the world, you deserve it. I once said to him before he left.

Seeing that I remembered, he tenderly brushed my lower lip "I tried to conquer the world so I could give it to you someday princess, I'm happy that day is here." He said softly and I smiled kissing him.

Having been sucked into the Brandon Carter vortex over the past forty-eight hours, it was time to breakout. I thought, what better way to do that than report to my first day of work in New York?

I felt more in touch with the old me as I dawned my power suit. Which today consisted of a lime green silk blouse and a black high waist pencil skirt along with matching Jimmy Choos.

I walked into the kitchen after coming down the glass stairs; I took notice of the small breakfast Vicky prepared on the counter. She herself was not here. I caught Brandon staring at me with a smile; today he looked edible in a charcoal grey suit. "What?" I asked, "You always seem capable of bringing a man to his knees looking like that." He said and I smiled.

"True, so you better watch yourself." I teased walking into the island, and popped a piece of croissant into my mouth. "I'm not scared of you." He whispered, his arms coming around me from behind. His lips traveled from my nape to my earlobe, which he started to softly nibble. Inducing a soft moan out of me and I held onto the counter for support.

His hands gripped my hips and pulled them against his groin, letting me feel every inch of him. The virile possession making it very clear whose boss. I bit down on my lower lip, the maneater Ricky liked to refer to me as, didn't stand a chance against Brandon. He was a force too strong for me to handle, not just

because of my feelings for him but also because of his powerful and untamable aura.

"But if anyone can drive me to my knees, it would be you princess." He murmured against my hair.

"Eddie." I moaned, "Let me go, or we're both going to be late for work." I added and he chuckled without humor then released me. After a brief breakfast, I followed him into the private elevator "My parents called to invite us to dinner tonight, they're in Manhattan." Brandon said, then I remembered that he once said they lived in the Hamptons. I smiled "That's sweet of them, I'd love to see them again." I said, Brandon's parents have always been accepting of me, which had always meant a lot to me.

We walked into the huge lobby and out the tinted glass doors. Brandon gave my hand a squeeze before he went towards the Porsche and I to the Lexus.

Kellan drove to the G-Industries' offices in midtown, I was astounded by the similarities the NY building had to the one in LA. In both the exterior and the interior. A woman named Janet Omen was the one to welcome and attend to me. She set me up with everything I'd need, which got me thinking that they were expecting me. She also showed me to my office, which was slightly bigger than the one I had back home.

It also had a classy interior, with a color combination of soft sage and toasted coconut. I already loved it and I doubted I was going to do much to change it. The half walls allowed a more vicinity view of midtown and the empire state building. I had a feeling I was going to love working here.

After work Brandon and I drove to his parent's house on the Upper East Side.

Entering the two-story residence we were greeted by Connie herself.

She was soon joined by Ellie who was even more ecstatic to see me; Ellie was still such a beautiful and sophisticated woman, like my mother, she aged very gracefully and I can only hope I do as well.

Brandon went over to hug his dad when he entered the great room with a welcoming smile. We all sat together for a little while before Ellie pulled me aside to catch up.

"I'm so happy you and Eddie found each other again." She remarked as I helped her set up the dining table. I glanced over to Brandon, who was talking animatedly with his father in the lounge. The scene made me smile.

"You were always good for him." She added and I grinned at her "You think so?" I said and she nodded "Isn't it obvious? You make him happy." She said.

We all ate a palatable dinner while engaging in a lively conversation around the table. I realized then just how much I missed this group; I never felt like an outsider with them.

"So Eddie, are you going to the Kinsmen benefit party this weekend?" Ellie asked and Brandon nodded. "It would be a great place to step out with Katelyn." She added and he smiled then glanced at me. "Oh I was not planning on leaving her behind." He said slowly sweeping my hair over my shoulder, causing me to blush. Brandon has never had difficulty being openly affectionate towards me in front of his family.

Brandon's father started coughing like he had pain in his chest and everyone's attention whipped to him. He raised a hand for them not to fret,

"Are you okay?" Brandon asked with a frown and he smiled "Yes." He said then turned to look at me. He started asking me about my family which effectively stopped the worried looks.

CHAPTER 16

I called Tess in the evening, knowing that in California time she'd be ready to knock off at work. "How is the big apple and Brandon treating you so far?" she asked after she told me about her day. "They're both great." I said, "And I'm going to this fancy benefit thing with him tonight." I said and she chuckled.

"Is that nervousness I hear in your voice?" she asked and I rolled my eyes. "Well yeah, its my first ever big event out here, with him." I said, "Just remember that you've done this a thousand times." She said and I smiled to myself.

"I'll keep that in mind." I said, "Alright girl, let me know how it goes." She said, "I will." I said then said goodbye.

Come time to get ready I decided to wear one of the dresses I bought with Connie a week ago. It was a champagne colored Marchesa floor-length gown. I decided to ditch my naturally wavy do and wear my hair long and curly. I also decided to be bold and wear crimson lipstick as my only accessory.

I walked over to Brandon and straightened his tie, which had the same color as my gown along with his square pocket.

I smiled, knowing he's the one who wanted us to match. I kissed his cheek, and I was happy to see that my lipstick was really smudge-proof. He grinned at me "You look beautiful." He said and I chuckled "As do you Mr. Carter." I said. Off the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of our reflection in the long mirror.

Getting a chance to see us as the world does. I had to admit, it wasn't a bad sight at all.

Brandon brought my attention back to him when he took my hand "Lets go show you off." He said and I laughed as he led me out of our bedroom.

"Town limo?" I asked Brandon as Quinn opened the door for us and I got in, he followed me in then shaking his head. "No, its mine." He said as the door closed. I raised my eyebrows at him, "Renting it every time I have to go somewhere gets tiresome." He explained and I nodded as if he was talking about a DVD.

We arrived at the city hall in no time, like he said he showed me off when we walked the red carpet. He did so with pride that made me giddy with happiness, as if I was his most prized possession.

The city hall was filled with New York's elite crowd, famous celebrities and some political delegates. We were stopped by almost everyone and I knew that was because the country's most eligible bachelor was on my arm.

We were having a nice chat with the Major when I spotted a familiar face.

"Excuse me." I said to the both of them.

I walked over and greeted one of G-Industries long-term clients. Regina was just as surprised and happy to see me. We chatted for a short while then she said goodbye, going to find her husband.

I was walking back to Brandon when I stopped, looking into the dark brown eyes of Pénélope Martinez. She stopped to regard me as if she recognized me too.

Much to my discontent she was even more marvelous in person, she was wearing a jasmine colored satin dress, and her chestnut hair was in a fancy updo. What was she doing here? Isn't she supposed to be in the UK? I then remembered reading something about the NY fashion week starting in a few days.

Her eyes narrowed "You're *her*," she mused, with an unmistakable accent. Before I could think about what she meant by that, I felt Brandon before an arm came around my waist. His hold was a little too tight.

"Penny." He acknowledged the model with an unreadable expression. "Hello Bran." She said with an alluring smile that made me wince. Watching them gaze at each other, I felt like the third wheel.

Brandon didn't bother introducing us "A word?" he asked her and she nodded "Sure." She purred then Brandon kissed my forehead before he walked away with her. I watched them go feeling raw and a little hurt. What did he have to say to her that he couldn't say in front of me?

"Ms. Gilbert." I pivoted to face Lana, who was looking beautiful in her eveningwear, "Hey Lana." I said with a detached tone. "You're working?" I asked, doesn't the girl get a break? "No, but being Mr. Carter's PA gets me a free pass to events like this." She said with a slight smile.

I liked that she's warmed up to me a little. "Where is he?" she asked looking around the crowd. "He's with his ex." I said, as if that was typical.

"Oh." She said and she suddenly looked everywhere but at me, "I heard the cocktails here are amazing." She said. I too warmed up to her then, knowing she was offering me company when I have been abandoned. We went to the bar and we ordered margaritas, I was glad she kept me distracted. She even pointed out her husband a few feet away from us.

I've been feeling like I'm being watched for a while now and when I looked up at the second floor balcony of the hall I understood why. Brandon was standing with Pénélope next to a pillar, with his hand on the railing looking down at me. He was still talking to her but his gaze intent on me, the model had her attention fixated on him and she was standing far too close to him. I shot Brandon a scowl, which didn't do anything to his impassive mask. He turned his gaze back to the other woman and I gulped down the remains of my cocktail in a rush.

Drinking on an empty stomach was not a good idea for me, considering my less than laughable tolerance for alcohol. But at this point I didn't care, "Another one." I said to the bartender.

I hardly acknowledged Brandon when he came back and come dinnertime Pénélope sat at our table. I didn't know if he invited her or if she invited herself, perhaps it was just my crappy luck again.

That didn't even bother me, what sickened me was the disconnection I felt between Brandon and I. Even the delicious food tasted like rubber.

I doubted he felt it though, he was too busy having a conversation with her, one I wasn't part of and I'm pretty sure wasn't welcomed either.

"This is a lovely song, dance with me." Pénélope said to Brandon, who tensed for a fraction of a second, "Come on, for all time sake." She said standing up and tugging at him arm. Could she be any less subtle?

Brandon stood up with a brief glance in my direction; it almost looked apologetic. Pénélope shot me a complacent look and that was it for me, I was done. The fact that she was prying my man's attention away from me wouldn't have hurt me as much, had Brandon not allowed her to do it.

The lady opposite me gave me a small sympathetic smile and I resisted raising my glass at her. I pushed away from the table; I've had enough for one night. I didn't even look back to check if Brandon noticed me leaving. I walked out of the hall, into the night. The constant buzzing of New York attuned to my wrecked emotions. I walked towards the sleek black limo and spotted Quinn already waiting while talking on the phone. He tucked his phone back in his pocket as I approached, it didn't take much to figure Brandon was on the other line.

"Take me home." I said to him and his eyes became grim, "I'm going to have to ask you to wait a little, Mr. Carter will be with us shortly." He said and I nodded impassively. "That's okay, I'll just take a cab." I said, turning "That's not advisable Ms. Gilbert." he said, anxiety clear in his voice "Please." He motioned towards the open back door.

I knew that if Brandon instructed him to keep me here, my leaving would get him into a heap of trouble. I didn't want to ruin his night too.

I sighed then slid into the back and he closed the door after me.

Five minutes later I heard it open again but I just kept staring out the window, not bothering to look at Brandon. I could feel his steady gaze on me but he didn't say anything on our ride back home.

When we reached the penthouse, I threw my clutch bag onto the couch.

"Damn it Katelyn, talk to me." Brandon finally said, rooted frustration and tension palpable in his tone. I shrugged lamely "There's really nothing to say." I said with a calm tone, I just wanted to go to bed and forget this night, preferably far away from him.

"Bullshit." He said then exhaled in a rush "What did you expect me to do?"

I turned to face him, feeling my fury return with a vengeance, and the alcohol in my system only fueled it. "Well I don't know Brandon, maybe you could've tried something like; 'Hi Pénélope, its good to see you, have a great night—' you didn't have to hover over her for the whole damn night!" I hissed.

He ran his hand through his golden locks, even when frustrated and irritable, he looked irresistible. "I 'am your girlfriend, yet you made me feel like the third wheel on you two, it was humiliating." I added quietly, wrapping my arms around myself. An unconscious move to protect myself that caused him to come closer to me.

"Seeing you upset her. It rehashed pain I didn't want her to take out on you." He said, "She always thought our break up was your fault. I had to make her understand that wasn't the case."

You're her Suddenly her statement made sense, no doubt she was one of the girlfriends who got pissed over the photo of us he carried around with him.

"Make me understand why you'd feel the need to push me aside to put her mind

at ease, why her? And what is so important that you just have to make her understand?" I snapped. My voice picking up volume a little "How I feel about you, and why I treated her the way I did." he replied his tone clipped "I was an idiot with her Katelyn, I hurt her even though that was never my intension." He added and I frowned "What are talking about?" I asked, he broke up with other woman as well; surely they must've been hurt too. "She suggested we get married." He said and I tensed, he shook his head "I panicked and shot her down, which inevitably ended the relationship." He added. "I had to set things right with her, if I hope to do right by you princess." He said desperately "I *need* us to work." He added. "Maybe we would if you don't hurt me like you did tonight." I whispered and he reached for me, engulfing my waist. "I need to be inside you." He said, his voice frantic. I tried pushing him away "No, let me go." I whimpered; I was still too emotionally raw and the hurt was still too fresh. "I can't explain it Katelyn, how I feel...let me show you instead." He said kissing me; I could never succeed in pushing Brandon away. He was the air I breathed; I couldn't stop wanting him, loving him, even if I wanted to. Tears began to roll down my face at that hopeless reality, "Don't fight me princess." He whispered kissing my neck "Let me love you." "How I feel about you is not healthy, but I need you Eddie. You can never hurt me." I moaned as he unzipped my dress. When it came to him I bruised easily and I hated that I couldn't do anything about it. All I could do is hope that he'll be careful not to break me. "And I'm not going to, God princess. Pénélope and the others don't matter, they never did but you...I love you. Too much. Can't you see that?" he murmured lifting me off the floor. "Watching you walk away shreds me every time." He added kissing my tears away "I need you too."

The following week went by much smoothly, and things were starting to settle down. I too was in a better state of mind, well that was until I ran into Pénélope at a restaurant when I went for lunch. I invited her to sit with me and have a chat. I wanted to make sure she wasn't going to be a problem anymore. I don't want a repeat session of the harrowing fight Brandon and I had over her. "I don't know what angle you were working on Saturday, and I don't care." I said calmly "But I'm going to ask you to stay away from Brandon, I think you two said what needed to be said at the party." I added, after thinking about it, it became obvious that she manipulated his guilt in order to make me jealous. She smiled and there was no malice in it, which surprised me "Relax, I'm going back to London tomorrow so I will be out of your hair." She said. "And as for the 'angle' call it delayed gratification. So what if I made you jealous for one night? You made me jealous for four years." She said and I winced. I couldn't imagine being in love with Brandon, knowing he wanted someone else. "I will not apologize for how he feels." I said and she shook her head "And you don't need to. I wouldn't take him even if he was available." She said, "As irresistible as he is, Brandon Carter is a dangerous drug one can get easily addicted to. Some women were smart enough to get out while they still can but I wasn't one of them." She added then paused.

"You're not one of them either." She remarked almost sympathetically and I swallowed hard, knowing her words hit home. Somehow she could see that I had it worst.

"Although you have something the rest of us didn't," she said, "You have his heart, and that will be your saving grace. He won't go anywhere." She added standing up. "Good luck." She said.

I nodded at her before she turned and walked away. I stared at her for a while perplexed by our conversation. Yet somehow something told me I was going to need the luck she just wished for me, fake or not.

CHAPTER 17

It has been six months since I moved to New York, even though it seemed like it was just yesterday. Time flew by and I had no doubt it was because I was happy. I made a mental note to thank Tess next time I flew out to California. She was right, had I stayed there I never would've known I could feel this way again. In compliance with the deal we made; I went out there once every month to visit her and my family.

I turned my office chair towards the large windows and looked out into the skyline of east midtown. I fell deeper in love with this city everyday, just like the man I moved here for. I smiled shaking my head at myself, *stop thinking about him and work* the little voice inside my head chimed in. I turned back to my desk. My freshly manicured fingers flew over the keyboard of my computer. I was briefly disturbed by the door opening. Stacey walked in; she was my newly appointed PA. She's only been here for a month and she was very eager to learn and work which is why I hired her. She was in her early twenties and was incredibly intelligent. Though she and I haven't yet formed the bond I had with Ricky, then again no one could ever replace him. I always made sure I visited him as well. "Here are those documents you wanted me to draft." She said handing me a file, I flashed her a brief smile,

"Call our Japan offices and ask for Vivienne Mathews, have her contact me a.s.a.p." I said and she nodded then walked out of my office.

I was deeply infused in my work, with the spring sun beginning to set. Even the sound of my phone ringing made me jump, I checked the caller id and smiled when Brandon's name appeared on the screen, I accepted.

"Katelyn." His distressed deep voice came through and my smile disappeared as I quickly sat up "Brandon, what's wrong?" I asked.

"My father's in the ER." He said "What?" I wheezed "Oh my God, is-is he okay?" I asked feeling my heart drop to my stomach.

"I don't know; I'm almost at the hospital." He said and I started clearing my table "Which one?" I asked, "Lenox Hill Hospital." He said.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, I love you." I said before I hung up, hoping that was enough until I could get to him. I grabbed my jacket off the rack and took my handbag then rushed out of my office.

When I came down the steps of the entrance I walked over to the waiting Porsche SUV. Kellan opened the door for me "Take me to the Lenox Hill Hospital, quickly." I said to him before getting in. He frowned but got in the driver's seat "Is everything okay Ms. Gilbert?" he asked pulling out of the curb.

"I hope so." I said looking out the window, my poor Eddie. I couldn't even begin to imagine what he's feeling. He loves his father dearly; he was all he had growing up since his mother left both of them when he was just a child.

Kellan maneuvered quickly through the New York traffic and stopped at the hospital in no time. That's when I saw the black Lexus in front of us. I didn't even wait for him to open my door; I rushed through the hospital's emergency entrance. I was barely aware that I was wearing five-inch heels as I got to the reception desk.

"Excuse me, Hi, can you tell me where the waiting rooms are?" I asked the lady in a frantic voice. "Down this corridor to your right." She said and I continued to hasten. When I entered I spotted Brandon first, who was pacing back and forth. Like me, he was still in his work clothes but his jacket was on the couch and his tie was undone along with the first two buttons of his dress shirt. My gaze shifted to Ellie and Connie on the sofa. As if sensing my presence, Brandon stopped pacing and his head snapped to me. I started walking towards him and he mirrored me, he caught me in a bear hug that knocked the wind out of me a little. I wrapped my arms around his neck, offering solace. "I'm glad you're here." He said "Me too." I said then he let me go. I walked over to Ellie and Connie; she had a comforting arm around her mom. Ellie clutched a wet tissue; she looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes.

"Oh Katelyn." She said, getting up to hug me then I hugged Connie. Who looked just as devastated but she was being strong for her mother, I gave her hand a squeeze for that. "What happened?" I asked Ellie, "I-I don't know, we were in the kitchen preparing a snack...he was fine one moment and then the next—" her voice broke and I rubbed her arm "—its like he couldn't breathe and he was clutching the area of his heart. I think it's a heart attack." She whimpered. I felt a bile rise in my throat as I turned my gaze to Brandon, "What did the doctors say?" I asked.

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair "They're yet to tell us anything." He said. "Lets hope he'll be okay." I said to Ellie, who nodded somberly.

We waited for twenty more minutes, which I knew for them seemed like decades. My arrival stopped Brandon's pacing at leased. I sat next to him on the couches; he had his shoulders hunched and his forearms resting on his knees, staring off into nowhere.

I rubbed at his broad shoulders and gently ran my hand at the back of his head, silently reminding him that he's not alone.

He looked at me; his grey eyes were filled with desolation and fear. It was a look I've never seen in him and it broke my heart.

He ran his fingers along my jaw and cheek softly; I didn't miss the silent thank you in the caress. He didn't have to thank me for being his safe place; it's what I

lived for. I held his wrist and nuzzled into his touch, continuing our mute communication.

My gaze snapped up to the doctor approaching us and Brandon's head whipped to look at him as well. We all stood up as he greeted us briefly, he looked grim, which was very unnerving. Brandon and I shot each other nervous glances, we both noticed. "He's not looking too good at the moment, he had a cardiac arrest. We're still trying to stabilize him." He said, then paused for a fraction of a second "There's a fifty percent chance he might make a full recovery." He added and I felt sick all over. Knowing he didn't want to say there's an even chance he might not survive.

"We had to perform an emergency surgery but his heart disease put him in a very critical condition." He said and all our gazes snapped back to him in shock. "What?" Brandon gasped, "What are you talking about?"

"He is suffering from advanced heart disease." The doctor said as if we're supposed to know that. My hand went to my mouth as I watched Brandon pale and Ellie sink back onto the couch crying. Brandon's dad was suffering from a terminal illness, and none of his family knew.

Brandon shook his head "There must be a mistake my father is—" he trailed off as if he remembered something. The look that crossed his features sent a cold shiver down my spine, without another word he turned and walked towards the exit. "I'm very sorry, we've done everything we can for him, it's out of our hands now." I heard the doctor say to Ellie as I went after Brandon. My heels were making it hard to keep up with his hurried long strides.

I called after him but he just kept on walking. I didn't notice Quinn's presence until he handed him the keys to the Lexus. Brandon said something to him and he nodded grimly before Brandon dashed out of the room. I tried to follow him but Quinn blocked my way

"Let him go Ms. Gilbert." He said I breathed in sharply "Let him go? Where's he going? I need to get to him Quinn." I said with a high-pitched voice.

"I can't let you do that, I've been told to take you home." He said solemnly and I wheezed "What?" I exclaimed "No, no, I can't go home, please tell me where he's going." I beseeched and he grimaced. "I don't know Ms. Gilbert." He said and I could tell he really didn't know. I turned and walked back with exaggerated slowness, God only knows what frame of mind he's in. I need to be with him, or I'll go crazy with worry.

"Go home Katelyn. It's getting late." Ellie said with a weak voice and I glanced at my watch. It was passed eleven and we all have heard nothing from Brandon, or his father's critical condition. I shook my head at her "I'm staying here." I said, "Maybe Brandon went home. We'll keep you updated on his father's condition." She said and I sighed, and stood up. I hugged them both and went out of the waiting room a worse wreck than when I came in.

Like Quinn was instructed, he took me home and like I suspected, Brandon was not there. I kicked off my heels and changed into my sweats. I felt cold all over, it's the middle of spring but I was cold. I went down to the great room and sat on the carpet next to the fireplace. It was past midnight when I decided to try Brandon's phone for the hundredth time. I got sent straight to voicemail again. "Where are you Eddie? Don't do this to me I'm worried sick about you, come home. Please." I wailed, and dropped my phone next to me. I wrapped my arms

around my legs as I shook all over. The stress and pain of the last couple of hours coming down on me hard as I silently sobbed.

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep on the carpet until I felt someone gently caress the side of my face and neck. "Princess." I heard Brandon's soft call for me to wake up and I did with a jolt and relief that left me breathless. "Brandon." I choked out, quickly pushing up to hug him. He buried his head in my neck holding me tightly to him "I'm sorry—"

"Shh, shh, its okay." I whispered, "As long as you're here." That's all that mattered, that he's here and he's safe.

We sat holding each other for a long while, both of us unable to go to sleep.

"I went to go see my father's personal doctor." Brandon finally said with a gruffly voice. "He told me everything. My father had been diagnosed with heart failure fifteen years ago and he kept it away from us. His doctor was just forced to help." He added and I rested my forehead on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry Eddie." I whispered.

"I don't understand why...why would he do such a thing?" he said, "We could've helped him, we could've been there for him, why didn't he let us?"

I then got the thought that maybe his father didn't want his family to suffer along with him. I could only imagine the kind of effect a terminal illness can have on loved ones and maybe he didn't want that for them.

Somehow I thought of that day we had dinner with them, he'd brushed off their concern when he started coughing. Would we have been that happy and at ease had we all known the cause behind it?

"Now I have all these questions and he cant answer them." Brandon added and I clung tighter to him, clueless on how I can lessen his pain. Our pain.

An hour later Brandon received a call and by the look on his face I could tell that it was to confirm his father didn't make it. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I watched him hang up with aching slowness. I flinched when he threw his phone into the fireplace and it smashed against its wall.

His head fell into his hands, "Brandon." I sobbed, crawling closer to him and wrapped my arms around him. After a few minutes he leaned into me, letting me comfort him as he cried too.

I looked out the glass walls towards the impending dawn above the horizon of Manhattan. It signified a start of a brand new day; one Brandon's dad couldn't live any longer to see.

CHAPTER 18

I stood up from my leather armchair and ran a hand over my stiff neck. My building tension was an aftereffect of the past three days. They've taken their toll on me. And with everything going on in our lives, the media attention surrounding Julian Carter's death was adding insult to injury.

I picked up my phone when it rang, "Hey Tess." I answered, walking next to the large windows. "Hey girl, how are you doing?" she asked, concern etched in her tone of voice. I sighed, "I've had better days." I said and there was a pause.

"I know, I'm sorry, I know how hard this must be for you." She said, of course it was hard on me too because I was connected to Brandon like that. When nothing was right in his world, I felt it too.

"How is he holding up?" she asked and I winced, "He's taking it too well." I said; Brandon was still himself at face value. In control and unshakable, but I knew deep down inside he was hurting, and he wasn't letting me help him.

"What do you mean?" she asked, "If I didn't know him as well as I do, I'd be convinced he's perfectly fine, but he's not." I said.

"I can't be there for him when he looks like he's okay, I need to get to the Brandon who is not okay and he's hidden him very well." I bemoaned looking outside.

"Just give him some time, he'll come around." She said; I really hoped so too.

"When are you guys flying in?" I asked; I knew they were planning on flying to NY for the funeral four days from now. "The day after tomorrow. We'll be flying in with your parents and Janie." She said; my Dad's plane, the *K-jet* as they affectionately called it, was big enough for them and fifteen other people.

"Great, I can't wait to see you guys." I said wishing I sounded more cheerful.

"Hang in there girl." She said comfortingly, "Thank you Tess, bye." I said then hung up. I looked up at the building dark clouds with a frown.

They said there would be a thunderstorm this evening and I've always hated them for some reason.

I got home and sent Vicky away for the rest of the evening, wanting to busy myself with dinner. I kept glancing at the entrance hallway, waiting for Brandon to walk through it and he didn't. I became more and more anxious as it grew later. I couldn't get rid of a nagging feeling that something's not right.

For once I cursed the fact that he hasn't replaced the phone he smashed yet. I decided to call Lana, "Katelyn." She answered, "Hey Lana, are you still at work? Is Brandon with you?" I asked a slight unease.

"No, I'm at home." She said and my heart sank "But Mr. Carter did mention working late tonight." She said and I stood up from the kitchen barstool. "Alright, thanks." I said then called Kellan and told him to wait for me outside.

I had to go to him for some inexplicable reason.

I looked out of the heavily tinted windows of the Lexus as Kellan drove to the C-Corp building in west midtown. Rain started pouring down when we arrived there. People knocked off work a few hours ago so the impressive building was a little deserted except for a few here and there, including security and janitors.

I opened Brandon's office door and went in, I visibly relaxed when I found him behind his desk with his back to me.

I closed the door behind me and he didn't turn even then.

He really was hard at work because his large desk was filled with files and spreadsheets. I walked further into his office, which was his home office recreated, except this one had lighter tones than the one at home.

We both didn't say anything as I stood beside his table, but I felt more at ease now that we were together, I wondered if it was the same for him too.

"I had no idea, we all didn't," he finally said, with a bleak voice as he continued to stare out into the raining and thundering skyline of the city. I looked down; I knew it haunted him that his father kept them in the dark about his terminal disease. I kept quiet, afraid that he might close off again if I said anything.

"Now it all makes sense. Why he was so hard on me, why he overworked me. He wanted me to achieve everything he couldn't," he said, "He was preparing me, giving me all of this—" he gestured at his office, his empire "—because he knew he was dying." He said and my throat tightened with emotion at the pain in his voice.

"The signs were there, I just didn't see them at the time." He said shaking his head "He was my father, how could I have not seen there was anything wrong with him...?" he trailed off and I couldn't stand by and watch him blame himself anymore. "Eddie." I said softly, scooting closer to him and he looked up at me. I settled onto his lap and he welcomed my embrace whole-heartedly. "You can't blame yourself for not knowing, he wanted it that way." I said with my arms around his neck.

"I don't condone what your dad did, but he kept it a secret because he loved you enough not to burden you with this." I said, "He knows you Eddie, he knew it would eat at you that he was dying and that you couldn't do anything about it. It would've killed you, he knew that." I added. His fingers contracted into my waist and he paused for a little while.

"I was strong enough to handle it, damn it, he should've given me a chance to." He said then he buried his head in the crook of my neck. "If you ever do something like that, I swear to God—" he said before I shook my head at him.

"I couldn't, you'd see right through me." I whispered, and he pulled back to study me a little. His hand moved from my waist and his thumb brushed tenderly underneath my eye, at the barely visible dark circle there. He frowned "You look exhausted." He whispered; his voice etched with worry. "I'm stressing you, aren't I? I'm sorry." He murmured and I shook my head rubbing at his forearm over his sleeve, I laid my head on his shoulder.

"I'm stressing because you're shutting me out Eddie, so I feel helpless." I mumbled, breathing in his wonderful scent, I could swear it had a calming effect on me. "I want to be there for you, let me." I added and he kissed my hair and just held me. An earsplitting thunder crackled and I flinched automatically.

Brandon's hold tightened on me, as if protecting me "You still hate them huh?" he asked softly. I grimaced, but it was good to see a hint of humor in him, "Tell me what you need, I want to get this back." I added tracing the line of his small smile. "Just be with me princess, never leave my side." He said, "That's all I'll ever need." He added and I cupped his face in my hands kissing him deeply. "I can do that." I whispered and he nodded then took my hand and kissed the inside of my palm. "Let's go home." he said then stood up with me in his arms and put me down to grab his things. He took my hand and we walked out of his office.

Julian Carter's funeral was held at the NYC Marble Cemetery, it was an honorable service, which was rendered intimately. Most importantly the press was kept at bay for the entire proceedings. I held Brandon's hand as he said goodbye to his dad, someone who has been there his whole life. I hoped he took comfort in the fact that he had me now and I wasn't going anywhere.

Afterwards friends and family gathered at his parent's house on the Upper East Side, "Thank you so much for coming." Brandon said to my Dad as they shook hands. "Anytime, we're here for the both of you." Dad said as I hugged Mom and Tess. Brandon asked to have a word with Dad and they walked away.

"How are you doing?" Mom asked and I smiled at her, "I'm okay." I said really meaning it. "No regrets?" Tess asked and I gave her a small smile "None what so ever, you were right to push me to move here." I said looking over to Brandon and Dad in the dining room. "I 'am at my happiest with him." I added.

Mom made a face "Aw my little girl is in love." She said and I grimaced "I'm hardly a little girl Mom." I said with mock disapproval and she smiled "You'll always be my little girl." She added, kissing my cheek.

I said goodbye to my family with the promise to visit soon, other guests said their goodbyes as well, and then it was just Brandon and I along with his family.

"I love you both so much, thank you." Ellie said hugging us as we took our leave too. "Are you okay?" I asked Connie and she nodded giving me a wary smile.

"I'll be fine, *we'll* be fine." She said referring to her mother as well. I pulled her into a hug "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?" I said and she nodded.

Brandon and I got out of the SUV and walked hand in hand towards the entrance of the lobby. I was surprised when he suddenly stopped; I looked up at him and found him staring at the waiting area in slight shock.

I followed his gaze to see a blonde haired woman walk towards us with wonder and hesitation in her expression. She might have been Ellie's age maybe, although you could tell she was a stunning woman in her youth. Like us, she was dressed in black; maybe she was at the funeral too.

"Hello Eddie." She said with a maternal tone, my eyes slightly widened as I realized this polished and elegant woman was Brandon's mother. I watched him swallow hard "Mother." He said; his voice wiped clean of all emotion. Brandon's mother looked at me then extended a hand towards me, which I took gingerly.

"It's good to finally meet you Katelyn." She said and I just nodded, still shocked.

After all these years here she was, but question was; what did she want?

"Can we talk?" she asked Brandon, unsure of herself. Her ice blue gaze roaming on Brandon's features, he just nodded. I could feel tension radiating from him and his grip on my hand tightened a little. He invited her up and he settled on the single couch opposite her, I excused myself to give them privacy but Brandon told me to stay. I settled onto the couch on Brandon's right, watching him regard his mother with cool indifference.

"You've grown into a handsome man Eddie, it's so good to see you." She said and Brandon didn't reply, he just gave her a look that said 'cut to the chase'

I would've felt sorry for the older woman had I not known what her leaving did to Brandon as a child.

"I was at the funeral." She said and Brandon nodded, his cordial nature taking over again. "I'm sure he would've appreciated you coming to pay your respects, I didn't see you." He said and she nodded. "I know; I didn't want you to." She

added and Brandon's eyebrows rose slightly "But you're here now. Why?" he asked. She took a deep breath "I just wanted to see you...and tell you how sorry I 'am about your father's passing." She said.

"Thank you, but had you really wanted to see me you wouldn't have to use my father's death as an excuse." Brandon said blankly. I stifled a flinch and his mother looked down. "I've made choices I'm not proud of Eddie, I will live with them." She said looking up, "Julian's death made me realize just how short life is and that at some point you have to look back and set things right while you still have this life." She added.

"I did wrong by you and your father Eddie, I didn't get a chance to say that to him but I want to say it to you now." She said and Brandon kept quiet, still regarding her coolly. "I know I hurt you when I left and I'm very sorry, I just wanted you to know that." She added quietly. Brandon paused for a few seconds then nodded, his demeanor softening a little.

"I accept your apology mother and I forgive you." He said sincerely, "But I don't want you in my life, anymore than you wanted to stay back then. I hope you understand that." He added and the woman nodded stiffly then smiled sadly at him. "I'll always regret not being a proper mother to you Eddie, but I'm proud to have given birth to you, its probably the only thing right I ever did." She added then stood up. Brandon stood up along with her, a true gentleman through and through. "I really wish you all the best." She said then looked at me "The both of you." She added and Brandon nodded "Thank you." He said and she smiled a little.

She turned and walked towards the entry hallway and Brandon sat back down when she disappeared. I stood up and walked over to him, I placed a hand to his shoulder "You okay?" I asked then he looked at me and gestured for me to sit on his lap. "Yes." He said after I did, "She made her choice twenty-one years ago, now I'm making mine." He added. "She is right about life though, and I'm glad I have you to share it with." He said and I smiled, "Always." I said giving him a chaste kiss.

CHAPTER 19

Brandon took me to a beach resort in the Hamptons the following weekend; he claimed we needed the getaway. I couldn't help but agree considering the draining past two weeks we've had. It was refreshing to have fun and be carefree for a while again. I really hoped it would be like that from now onwards.

Before we could leave tomorrow Brandon treated me to dinner on the beach, we had a three-course meal under a lit canopy draped in lite white fabric. The entire setting very much romantic and I felt pampered. Cherished.

The waiter cleared our table after desserts, I found Brandon watching me after I licked a bit of vanilla chocolate off my thumb. "What?" I asked with a smile.

"I love watching you eat desert." He said "Its quite an aphrodisiac." he added and I inhaled sharply, knowing exactly what happens when Brandon's turned on.

I let out a breathy chuckle "You just love to woo women, don't you?" I teased, gesturing at the dinner, at the moonlight view of the beach.

"I love to woo *you* princess." He said, and I raised my glass at him and took a sip of the delicious white wine, causing him to grin.

Ten minutes later a waiter approached us carrying a shiny platter, my eyes widened as he held it in front of me carrying the blue boomerang Brandon once gave me. I lifted it and the waiter ducked away.

"Oh wow." I said grinning, brushing my thumb against our initials. "No matter how hard you throw a boomerang, it always comes back to you. That's me with you princess." I recited Brandon's words like a cherished poem.

Brandon gave me his megawatt smile "Turn it over." He said and I did then gasped. Coming across a new engraving that read 'marry me' I looked up at Brandon with an incredulous chuckle. He stood up and kneeled in front of me, I looked down at him in wonder as he took my hands.

With the way we feel about each, him proposing was inevitable, the only question was when. I guessed that was answered now.

He chuckled sheepishly, looking a little nervous. Which was adorable because he's sure I wont turn him down. "I don't know what to say to you princess, there are no words for how I feel about you." He said and I shook my head smiling, "I think I can help you with that." I said and he rose an eyebrow "You can?" he asked and I nodded. I got up and kneeled too, facing him. He looked at me as if I was an angel sent from heaven especially for him. And that's why I was on my knees too; he was *my* angel. I closed my eyes and a tear rolled down my cheek, "I'm very lucky and probably undeserving of your love princess, but I want it, I need it nonetheless." I declaimed another one of my many cherished memories of him. I was always stuck on every word, every touch. I opened my eyes and they went to the opened ring box he held.

"Marry me," he drawled and I nodded frantically "Yes." I whispered and he grinned sliding the ring into my finger and kissed me, we fell onto Brandon's back, I laughed and cried as he kissed my entire face.

"Thank you." He whispered as we sat on the beach sand, I was sitting between his legs leaning my back into him and looking at the ocean. I glanced at the ring on my finger. It was a huge princess cut semi-mount ring with diamonds surrounding its entire body and a big blue gem in the middle. I didn't even want to think about how much it cost.

"You like it?" Brandon asked and I smiled, holding up my hand "I love it." I said and he chuckled "The tanzanite reminds me of your eyes and the cut is rather fitting for you." He said and I chuckled too. "I could get used to its weight." I teased, "Good, you're going to be wearing it for the rest of your life." He said. "Has anyone ever been more sure of a yes than you were?" I teased and he laughed "I wouldn't know, but I would've done anything possible in order to make you say yes anyway." He said.

Just then I thought of the conversation him and my Dad had at his parents' house. "When you were talking to dad the other day—"

"I was asking him permission to marry his beautiful daughter." He said and I grinned caressing his forearms around my waist.

Upon our return back in New York there was a lot to be done. Over the past month I had to tell my family and friends about my engagement and I had a wedding to plan. Brandon had suggested that we have the wedding in California. He claimed that it was my day and that it was only suitable that I have it on the one place I love more than anything. I didn't think it was possible to love him anymore than I already did, but he kept proving me wrong.

Tess was beyond herself with elation that we were going to have it back home which meant she'll play a more hands on role in the preparations. Brandon also had a big time NY wedding planner at my disposal. After going through the details together over a week she flew to LA, I had no doubt Tess will make sure everything came along nicely.

I cleared my office table at the end of the day, now with my wedding being a week away; I was taking time off work. Brandon and I were flying to California along with his family tomorrow. I quickly answered my phone Brandon's name came up on the screen. I got up from my chair "Hey Eddie." I said softly.

"Princess, something's come to my attention and I can't go to LA for at least a few more days." He said and I slightly frowned. "Oh, is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes, I just have to meet with a few important people and I can't put it off until we're back in the city, I don't want to cut our honeymoon short." He said and I chuckled. "Heaven forbid, you still haven't told me where we're going." I said and he chuckled this time around "And ruin the surprise? No." he said.

"You better make it in time for your own wedding Mr. Carter." I said and I could almost see his megawatt smile as he said "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Where are you? You still at work?" I asked, putting my phone on speaker so I can put on my jacket. "I'm at home, I wanted to spend some quality time with my fiancée before she goes away." He said and I grinned, "I'll be right there." I said quickly then hang up, rushing to my husband to be.

I came down the entrance hallway into the great room, wondering where Brandon was. I went up the second flight of stairs and heard him say something then laugh, followed by another male voice I didn't recognize. I stood by the open doorway of Brandon's home office.

The prominent portrait of me on the side of the room instantly caught my eye; it was a close up black and white candid shot. He took it when I was on the balcony of our suite in the Hamptons and I looked back in time to see him snap the picture. The turn caused my hair to swirl around me and it froze on that moment. I didn't know at the time that he'd enlarge it and put it on his wall. It's been there

for a while now but I still wasn't used to seeing it everyday. On the other side were two pictures of us together; one was of us at his graduation and another one on the red carpet of the benefit party.

Brandon looked up from his guest and he shot me his trademark smile standing up, the other man also turned standing up. He was almost as tall and muscular as Brandon, though he had black hair with ice blue eyes. He was handsome in his own right and had a more approachable demeanor than Brandon has.

"You weren't kidding about hurrying," Brandon whispered to me before he gave me a brief kiss, I chuckled "No." I murmured. He turned to the other guy introducing us; I noted he was more relaxed with him than anyone else. There was no denying they're close.

"Katie this is Tristan Ryder, and old buddy of mine." He said with a smile, and Tristan grinned extending a hand to me. "Katelyn its good to finally meet you." He said, and his tone indicated that he's heard a lot about me. "You too." I said with a smile as I shook his hand. "We've been friends since pre-school." Brandon added and I was a bit surprised. I didn't know of any close male friends, if he even had any. Brandon was adored among females but he didn't win any popularity points with males. Mainly because most of them felt threatened by his strong personality and alpha male mannerism.

"I flew in from Connecticut on business then I thought to stop by and extend my congratulations personally." Tristan said and I smiled. "Thank you, you're coming to the wedding right?" I asked and he nodded. "I wouldn't miss it, mainly because your fiancé asked me to be the best man." He said with a chuckled.

"That's fantastic," I said smiling at Brandon.

"Tristan missed his flight back home to come here so I offered him to stay the night, I hope that's okay with you." He said and nodded "Absolutely. I have to go help Vicky with dinner." I said then looked at Tristan "You've known him since pre-school? Wow, you and I must have a chat." I teased and he smiled secretively at me and gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up, causing Brandon to frown at both of us.

"Hold on, what's this 'chat' about?" he asked with feigned worry, and I chuckled walking away "Take a hard guess." I said then walked out of the room leaving them to their male bonding. I let out a low giggle when I heard Tristan suggestively say, "I like her already." and Brandon reply with a terse but playful "Oh shut up."

CHAPTER 20

When I woke up Brandon was gone and somehow I got the feeling he was not in the penthouse either. After a shower, I got into a pair of jeans and a blue tank top; I paired it with Manolo ankle boots and black denim jacket. When I got downstairs I found Tristan having a cup of coffee on the barstools, he was casually dressed. He looked up at me when I walked into the kitchen island.

"Good morning." I said to him and he extended the same greeting, "Do you normally look like that?" he asked and I chuckled at his weird question "More or less." I said after looking down at myself.

I went to the coffee machine and found a fresh cup waiting for me, exactly how I liked it. I turned to look questioningly at Tristan and he grinned "Brandon told me how you take it before he left for work." He explained and I smiled sheepishly "You didn't have to." I said taking a sip and he shook his head. "It's no bother." He said "Oh he said to tell you to stop by him before you go." He added and I nodded. There was a short pause, and then there was a glint of humor in his ice blue eyes as he regarded me. "I must say; I envy my friend's stamina." He said suggestively and I looked down blushing violently, realizing he must've heard Brandon and I last night. We both weren't very vocal so he would've had to be close enough to hear us.

He chuckled at my reaction and his carefree laugh made it extremely hard to get mad at him for invading our privacy. I shot him a mock glare and he raised his hands up "I was just passing through coming down here, I'm partially insomniac so warm milk helps me sleep." He explained. I was still blushing when I nodded "Discussing sex makes you uncomfortable?" he teased and this time I chuckled, "No, I get uncomfortable when I'm forced to do it with practical strangers." I shot back and he grinned. He then padded the stool next to him "Well then let's get to know each other." He said. I smiled shaking my head at him but I sat next to him "Are you always this...direct?" I asked taking a sip of my coffee. Surprised at how well he made it, though it lacked Brandon's touch.

"More or less." He repeated my words with a stifled chuckle. There was another pause but this one was more solemn than the previous one. "I'm glad you're back in his life." He said pensively.

"Eddie has always been somewhat of an asshole, his mother's callous departure from his life fucked with his head." He said, "Suddenly he moved to LA and came back a better version of himself, surely thanks to you." He added with a tight smile. "But he was unhappy."

I eyed him silently "I kept waiting for him to get over you and he didn't, he never will. He loves you." He said reverently and I nodded in the same manner. "With that being said I'm just going to lay it out there." He said looking at me this time. "When you run, it freaks him out. Badly." He added and I looked down, somehow I thought of a forlorn Brandon confiding in his best friend and I felt terrible. "I'm not condemning you and I understand the need to run, with guys like Brandon you always feel prone to heartbreak." He added.

Before there was that nagging fear, I thought back to the night I cried begging him to never hurt me.

"Whenever you feel like that, just know that you can hurt him just as badly too."

I looked up at him “I don’t mean to hurt him when I do I just—” I started before he stopped me with a shake of his head. “It’s normal to want to protect yourself, but with Brandon it’s redundant. He’s hell bent on doing that for you.” He said and I smiled a little. His mouth curved up

“And give him room to screw up, we’re men Katelyn, we’re bound to fuck up at some point.” He said with a hint of humor and I chuckled warily “But it’s the ones willing to fix it that are worth sticking around for.” He added and I nodded.

He checked his watch then stood up, “I gotta go.” He said and that’s when I noticed his duffle bag on the floor beside him. “You going back home?” I asked standing up too and he nodded. “I have to go pick out a tux anyway.” He said and I smiled at him. “Please don’t let him be late to his own wedding, deliver him to me on time.” I said and he chuckled.

“What are best men for huh?” he said and I smiled and we briefly hugged “It was great meeting you Katelyn. Thanks for your hospitality.” He said picking up his bag. We said our short goodbyes and I watched him disappear down the entry hallway.

I sighed, knowing I have to go pack, and I wasn’t particularly excited about going without Brandon, even for a few days. *I’m being a cry baby*, I thought as I shook my head at myself going up the stairs again.

I arrived at the C-Corp building right after noon and I made my way to Brandon’s office, I couldn’t help but admire the interior of the building and its resemblance to Brandon himself. Strong, urbane, incredibly beautiful;

I entered his office and found him talking on the phone. He smiled when he met my gaze and motioned me forward. “Princess.” He drawled after he put the receiver down and stood up. “Hi, haven’t you ever heard of the song ‘wake me up before you go-go’?” I teased and he smiled embracing me.

“I have but I don’t think it applies to people who love sleep as much as you do.” He said dryly and I chuckled,

“You all set?” he asked and I nodded “How long are you going to be?” I asked.

“Two-three days tops.” He said, “I miss you already.” I said kissing him, glad for my heels because I would’ve had to stand on my tiptoes to do so.

Brandon deepened the kiss, setting fire and urgency to it. He grabbed my hips and groan rumbled in his throat, “I really wish you weren’t wearing these.” He said against me, gently tugging on the denim that clung to me and he broke our kiss. I let out a breathy chuckle “I’m suddenly glad I’m wearing pants, I wouldn’t want your employees teasing me about your immaculate stamina.” I said, even though I knew his office is soundproofed and that no one else worked on this floor except him and the receptionist at the far end of the hallway.

Brandon raised a questioning eyebrow; I then remembered that he doesn’t know what I’m talking about. “Oh, it was just Tristan teasing me this morning.” I said with a chuckle.

Brandon frowned as he grasped what I meant “Did he now?” he asked, his voice eerie calm “I’ll have my own little ‘chat’ with him.” He added. “No, by all means leave him be, we both got a good laugh out of it.” I said with a smile “He’s quite character, isn’t he?”

Brandon leaned against his desk and smiled with exasperated humor “You have no idea.” He said, “Sorry I couldn’t spend that quality time I promised you.” He added more somberly. I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned my

forehead against his “Don’t worry about it, besides, I’ll have you for the rest of my life.” I said and he grinned. “Now that is a sure thing.” He added kissing me. I said my reluctant goodbyes and walked towards the door, I was opening it when I suddenly remembered what Tristan said to me. I turned back to look at Brandon “Oh and Eddie.” I said and he looked up at me just when he settled back on his chair. “I love you, I’m in this for the long haul. No more running. If I ever do, just know that’ll always come back to you.” I added softly “Promise.” I mouthed and an unfathomable emotion passed in his eyes. Not needing a reply, I walked out and quietly closed the door behind me.

I got in the back of the Lexus when my phone rang, I barely said hello before Brandon’s deep voice interrupted me “You can’t disarm me like that and walk out as if nothing happened.” He said softly, there was a vulnerable undercurrent to his tone. I closed my eyes at it for a second then opened them at the passing cabs and buildings. “It’s the truth.” I whispered. There was a long pause, “Thank you.” He said and I smiled tightly “For telling you the truth or for marrying you?” I asked. “Both.” He whispered and I nodded to myself.

“Scurry back to me Eddie.” I said gently, “You never have to ask twice princess. Be safe.” He said before hanging up. I held the phone to my chest for a while, thinking, I love this man so much it devastated me sometimes.

“Is everything okay Ms. Gilbert?” Kellan asked looking at me through the rearview mirror and I smiled nodding. Quickly wiping away the tear that escaped me. He claims I disarm him yet he incapacitates me without even trying.

Kellan pulled up on the JFK airport tarmac and opened the door for me. “Thank you.” I said after he assured me my luggage would be taken care off.

I walked up the steps of Brandon’s jet and Connie’s squeal of excitement caught me off guard a little. She jumped off her seat to hug me.

“How’s our bride to be?” she said and I chuckled “She’s fine,” I said, “Perfect because from now on, no frowning, lots of beauty sleep—”

She went on and I walked over to Ellie, who was smiling at our little exchange. I hugged her “Katelyn! Are you listening to anything I’m saying?” Connie pouted when I glanced at her “Of course.” I said and motioned with my hand for her to continue her ridiculous list of do’s and don’ts.

“However am I going to cope being a Carter woman?” I said to Ellie and she chuckled “With a polite and gracious smile.” She said and I chuckled.

* * *

CHAPTER 21

The crowd applauded us and the live band when they finished our first dance song, they started another and everyone joined us on the dance floor. Brandon and I continued to dance in our own little world, moving unhurriedly and gracefully despite the up-tempo song. I looked around the well-decorated tent; white and mauve flowers and gossamer graced the whole place.

"You look beautiful Mrs. Carter." Brandon whispered over my ear and I grinned looking up to meet his gentle gaze. I wished I could take the credit for looking the way I do, but it was someone else's blood sweat and tears that did.

My aunts Ally and Mandy had designed my gown personally and what they came up with was stunning. My dress had an off the shoulder long sleeved front and an impressively embellished bodice.

It had a silk bow on my waist right before the start of the tulle long skirt. The floor length skirt had the same embellishment on the edge of it and it didn't have a train.

My hair and make up were done by two different people, which I thought was completely unnecessary. But you can't hold off Tess, Janie and Connie together.

"I would say so do you, but that would be a serious understatement Mr. Carter." I teased and he grinned too.

In all honesty, who cares about me when Brandon is in vicinity, looking like he does now? He was in a three-piece silver sand suit that was no doubt of designer origin, in keeping with the theme color; he had a mauve tie and square pocket. "I want peel that suit off you, using my teeth." I added and he laughed with his head slightly back.

"Well at leased you have an idea of how I'm going to undress you later tonight."

He said, holding me reverently as we continued to sway to the song.

"C-Corp is going to branch out and LA is going to be one of the first locations." He said and my eyes widened "Oh my God, that's fantastic!" I exclaimed, knowing how much this must mean to him.

"That's why were remained in New York?" I asked and he nodded "We were going through the final details." He said, "It's always been my father's dream to expand to other places." He added and I squeezed his hand, "He would be so proud of you." I murmured smiling and he kissed my forehead.

"Do you know what this means?" he asked and my brows furrowed a little, confused "I can run the company from here, we can get a house somewhere close to the city—" my eyebrows shot up, cutting him off "You're offering me an option to move back home?" I breathed and he smiled, nodding. "That's my wedding gift to you." He whispered, caressing my cheek.

"I know you love and miss it here, I want to give you whatever your heart desires princess." He added. I took hold of his wrist pausing, still shocked from his preposition. It also made my heart swell with love and joy that he'd do just about anything to make me happy.

"True, home is where the heart is...that's until you fall madly in love with a dark, captivating and beautiful city, and its king." I said and he grinned, tightening his hold on me. I sighed resting my head on his shoulder "I love that you wanted to do that for me, thank you." I said. "I have a wedding present for you too." I added and he chuckled "You do?" he asked and I nodded girlishly.

"But you'll just have to wait to find out." I said and he made a groaning sound making me laugh as another camera flashed in our direction.

Dad tapped Brandon's shoulder and I smiled as he swept me into his arms as another song started.

"You look amazing angel. You remind me of your mother when we got married." He said and I grinned. I clearly remember their wedding photos and Mom looked a thousand times prettier than I do now. "Bet you can't help being biased on her part because she's your wife and you love her." I teased and he chuckled "Can you blame me?" he interjected and I shook my head.

They were part of the reason I wanted to have my wedding at home too; I hoped their essence would bless my marriage to Brandon. I also hoped it would be strong as theirs is, and looking at him laugh with my Mom as they danced together I knew it will. We'd make anything work, we have to; we can't live without each other.

I also danced with JT before I went back into my husband's arms, "Can I cut in?" I tensed when a familiar voice came up behind me. Brandon shot me an encouraging smile letting me go and I turned to see a grinning Jade. "Jade!" I exclaimed, hugging him "Whoa." He said, surprised a little by my enthusiasm, I quickly backed away sheepishly.

"Sorry." I said, knowing it was a little too much. The last time I spoke or even seen him was when I broke up with him after turning down his proposal. Jade kept smiling, looking affable. "What? Bring it in." he chimed extending out his arms again and I chuckled moving in for a long hug this time around.

My throat tightened with emotion, I had missed him; it only hit me then that I missed the friend I had in him.

We started dancing, he moved easily although he lacked Brandon's grace. "How is it that you're here?" I asked with incredulity, I didn't even want to hope he'd show up for me when I'm marrying the man I left him for.

He smiled "Well your husband invited me." he said and my eyebrows shot up "He did?" I asked and my eyes snapped to Brandon who was dancing with Connie, sensing my gaze, he looked at me and winked.

I want to give you whatever your heart desires princess. His words echoed in my head and I swallowed hard and mouthed 'I love you' to him.

"You sound surprised." Jade went on and I looked down "I do, well I didn't think you'd want to come—"

"Forget about what happened Katie, you were right, we were not meant to be. I'm glad you ended it," He said, "Besides, I've met someone. I really think she's the one." He added with a smitten tone and I gasped my surprise and delight.

"I'm happy for you, tell me all about the lucky lady." I said and he chuckled.

After dinner and toasts, as well as the endless wedding traditions it was finally time to take off.

I quickly traded in my white gown for a strapless cream dress, "Where is he taking you?" Tess asked, who looked amazing in her mauve maid of honor dress. She was the only one up there with me as I took my vows. Both Brandon and I decided to only have Tristan and Tess stand with us.

"I don't know, he says it's a surprise." I said with a little frustration causing Tess to laugh as she handed me my black pumps. I looked around my room; Mom and Dad did nothing to change it. I almost couldn't believe it was me standing here about to go on my honeymoon.

Tess must've seen my expression because she said "Crazy huh?" and I nodded. "We're done here, come on." she tugged me out of my childhood bedroom. After saying our goodbyes to our friends and family we escaped the rice storm into a white Maybach limo.

Minutes later it pulled out of the circular driveway. Just then I was hit with a flurry of memories of the times I'd pull out of this very driveway. As a quirky sixteen year old, an excited freshman, a rounded career woman and now a happy married woman. My attention was brought back to Brandon when he kissed my left hand, stroking the huge ring he put on my finger.

We boarded his plane in LAX and its then that I noticed that he'd traded in his suit as well. He still looked delicious in his smart casual clothes.

Soon enough the doors closed and the pilot told us to buckle up, he also casually uttered the flight duration

I stared at Brandon shocked "Twelve hours! Where are you taking me? The north pole?" I squealed, causing him to throw his head back laughing. "My lips are still sealed." He said and I shot him a mock glare. "You told them to say that didn't you? Just to keep me guessing." I muttered and he shrugged innocently. When we reached cruising altitude I unhooked my seatbelt.

"Because of your cruel antics I wont give you your present." I said standing up and his smile fell; it was almost comical. "Oh come on princess." He said reaching for me and I playfully slapped his hands off me. Then smiled, knowing I have him where I want him "Nah uh." I said going to the bathroom to freshen up.

CHAPTER 21

I'd never flown to a place where I'd have to sleep on a plane, which felt strange even considering the more than comfortable bed and fairly spacious cabin. I sat up from the bed and looked towards the round window of the jet, it was morning already.

Like always my early bird had left me to my slumber, I glanced begrudgingly at my naked body over the covers. *Why did you let him touch you!* I admonished it as though it had a mind of its own. I wanted to punish Brandon with a sexless wedding night until told me where he's taking me. But instead I ended up caving in, still clueless as to where we're headed.

Playing the seducing and resisting game with him was a lost cause to begin with. I chuckled at myself then, pardoning my body's weakness. *Its okay he can be crafty* I thought with a smile getting up from the bed.

After a pit stop in the bathroom I walked into the sitting area of the jet and found Brandon on his laptop. His fingers were flying economically over the keyboard; I quickly took note of the platinum wedding band he now wore. I had chosen it myself and that entailed going through three jewelry shops in order to find the one that perfectly suited him. The cavewoman in me couldn't help but jump up and down clapping as she chanted; he's mine!

He looked up when I walked over to him, he smiled when I closed his laptop and put it on the small table beside the couch.

"Work, no. Your wife, yes." I said settling onto his lap and he chuckled.

The flight attendant brought in breakfast and we ate as we talked through our wedding. "Thank you for inviting Jade." I said after he invited me back onto his lap, he buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply.

"You never have to thank me for making you happy princess, that's what I live for." He said and I leaned further into him and sighed with contentment.

"Will you ever give me my wedding present?" he asked after a long pause and I chuckled "Tell me where were going first." I countered. The look on his face told me I'd never win the battle of wills with him. I gave up thinking, oh why not?

He watched me with curiosity as I shifted my legs to both sides of him, and smiled at him. "I have your present." I said, "Right here." I whispered placing his hand on my abdomen. A few seconds passed before his eyebrows shot up as he caught what I meant. I grinned at his expression, a mixture of shock and elation.

"Congratulations Mr. Carter, you are going to a daddy." I murmured softly.

"My God, princess." He drawled crushing me to him, I cradled his head in my arms and we stayed like that for a moment.

"You're pregnant." he said pulling back, it wasn't a question but I nodded. He chuckled incredulously. "I wondered why on earth you were drinking sparkling cider, then I thought you and alcohol don't mix." He added.

"I didn't want to cause tiny Eddie any harm." I said and he chuckled, placing his hand on my belly reverently. "How? When did you know? He asked.

"A week ago, I took a home test and I got blue for knocked up." I said then frowned "I should've know the first time I threw up my waffles, I never throw up waffles." I added and he chuckled. "Don't I just know it?" He said and I gave him a tight smile. "I don't know how, I was on my pill, but I probably forgot to take it at the right time or the right way." I said with a shrug. The last three months have

been hectic; I got easily preoccupied. With the death of Brandon's father and the wedding planning a month later, it must've slipped.

The pill wasn't a hundred percent fail proof but in this case I might've neglected helping it play its role.

"One glitch and your seed go in for the kill." I teased and he chuckled, "Well like me, its persistent." He said and I laughed, playfully sticking my tongue out at him. "Besides, I didn't used to have to rely on the pill only before you." I said; Brandon was the only man I had unprotected sex with. I didn't with anyone else, regardless that I took contraceptives.

His grey eyes steeled a little "Good." He said, "If you're going to have any babies they have to be mine." He added and I grinned at his possessiveness.

"Well then, one down—" I said "Four to go." He interjected playfully and my eyes widened "What?" I squealed and then shook my head. "As cute as they'll surely be, I can't mother five mini Carters" I said and he chuckled "Yeah that's going to be a problem, in case you haven't noticed, I can't keep my hands off you." He said and I chuckled, "Three, that's all I'm giving you." I said and he smiled stroking my cheek tenderly.

"Thank you, this is the best present you can ever give me," he whispered and I nuzzled into his touch. Our moment was briefly interrupted by the pilot's voice "We'll be landing in Fiji within thirty minutes."

I looked at Brandon with clear surprise and he gave me a sly smile.

I slipped my sunglasses on as we walked down the steps of the jet, the weather was lovely and for a moment I still couldn't believe where I was. I chuckled "Wow Fiji? Well that I certainly didn't see this coming." I said to Brandon as he led the way to a waiting car. "As beautiful as this place is, we're just passing through." He said and my eyebrows shot up. He completely ignored my surprised expression as he greeted the driver and told him something.

"There are more surprises?" I asked as we drove out of the airport tarmac, Brandon smiled "Yes, you're going to love where I'm taking you." he said, "And where is that exactly?" I asked and he shook his head and I groaned causing him to chuckle.

Soon enough we made a stop at seaside and I got out of the car, I gapped at Brandon as I spotted an all but familiar yacht in the sea, waiting for us. *Janie's Heart* was my dad's huge yacht. Brandon took hold of my hand as we walked up to the docks. "Despite my protests your father insisted we use his boat." He said and I chuckled, "I'd love to have heard you try, you two are cut from the same cloth. He gave you a taste of *you*." I said and he grimaced.

"Either way, it will do. Besides, I know you love it." He said and I nodded, grinning. I then wondered if he planned for us to cruise the Fijian seas, it sounded heavenly. Soon enough our luggage was loaded and we started moving. "How long are we going to be out here?" I asked Brandon when we stepped into the deck, staring out at the incredibly blue ocean. Sort of wishing we never leave. "Not too long, we'll soon arrive at our destination." He said and my head whipped towards him, realizing I misunderstood. "Where are we still going?" I asked and he smiled. "Look over there." He pointed straight up ahead and seconds later I spotted a white mounting over the endless blue ocean. Indicating a small island of some sort. I stared at it in wonder and surprise.

"That is a private island named Nüali, meaning pure." He said as his arms came around me. "Do you know what your name means princess?" he asked, his lips trailing over my earlobe and my breath hitched.

"Pure." I breathed shocked to the brink of tears, recalling a distant childhood memory when I asked Mom what the name Katelyn meant. "Brandon—"

"The moment I heard about it I knew I had to bring you here." He added and I tensed, pivoting to face him. "You don't own it, do you?" I asked, my voice a little too high. He chuckled, then shook his head "No." he said and I visibly relaxed "Yet." He added and my eyes widened "No, I'm your wife now, so I have a say. You're not buying this island." I said folding my arms stubbornly.

"You don't fancy another wedding gift?" he asked, still amused, which was starting to wear off on me as I chuckled warily.

"No, I'm good, thanks." I said, turning back to the metal railing. The closer we sailed towards it the more visible the island became.

"We could've stayed in Fiji, it's a lovely place." Brandon said "But I wanted you all to myself, where your attention wouldn't be divided." He purred, pulling me closer to him. I let out a breathy chuckle

"In other words, where you'd be able to nail me all day, everywhere." I said; "I never said that." He intercepted, feigning innocence. I rolled my eyes "Oh please, I know you're just itching to have me on my back that moment we get on that island." I said and his low laugh made my toes curl and my spine tingle with heated anticipation. When it came to making love to me, Brandon was primitive, virile yet tender and patient. He held nothing back. His love, his need, his desire, he let me feel it, all of it. In a lot of ways he says in bed what he cannot say in many words.

Nüali was uncomprehendingly beautiful, when the yacht came to a stop on the wooden deck and we got off, I was awestruck. It looked like one of those tropical paradises and it had white sandy beach that seemed to stretch on forever.

There was a sizable cabana in the clearing; it looked slightly modern while keeping its earthy look. It was slightly on hill so we walked up the crafted steps into the entrance. The interior of the cabana kept the theme it projected on the exterior, except it looked bigger than it seemed on the outside.

The captain of the yacht said his goodbyes after helping with our luggage and he left us.

I open the wooden balcony doors, and I looked out in time to see *Janie's Heart* sail off again. The balcony provided a breathtaking view of the beach at a fair distance. I walked back into the spacious bedroom "What do you think?"

Brandon asked and I grinned at him. "Its amazing, I'm going to love it here." I said and he smiled. His grey eyes suddenly darkened as they swept over my body; with that look I knew he just undressed me with his eyes.

"Now." He drawled "What is it you said about me having you on your back?" he added and I inhaled sharply, desire surging through me.

I gave him a smile that said 'catch me if you can' then I turned running to the door, his predatory growl let me now he intended to chase me down.

CHAPTER 22

After throwing up I closed the toilet seat with a grimace, puking always left me in a slight daze. I brushed my teeth grateful that my early bird was nowhere near me right now. Or else he would've hovered over me endlessly for the rest of the morning.

I wrapped my robe around me and I opened the balcony doors and welcomed the breeze that met me. It helped calm my nausea.

I smiled as I looked towards the beach and found Brandon taking a leisurely stroll. I rested my forearms on the railing and scrutinized him more closely. He almost looked like a real angel with the backdrop of the rising morning sun and calm waves crashing on the shore.

He was shirtless, only wearing loose fitting white pants, which were folded on the ankles, displaying his bare feet. His now slightly longer blonde locks blew against the ocean breeze.

He looked deep in thought as he gazed at the blue scenery in front of him, but he also looked serene, peaceful...happy.

I wondered what was on his mind right then and if he were thinking of me or not. Knowing that he probably was turned my smile into a grin. He seemed blissfully unaware of me watching his every move but I knew that wasn't the case. There was always a feeling that passed between us whenever one of us looked at the other. He was probably giving me a chance to check him out and with good reason; he's a sight to behold.

I chuckled to myself, remembering the first time I laid eyes on him in art class almost ten years ago. If someone would've told me that gorgeous troublemaker was going to be my husband and the father of my unborn child I would've called them crazy.

Finally he stopped and looked towards me, we stared at each other for a while and I suddenly hated the considerable distance between us. He started walking towards the cabana and I smiled, thinking maybe he can read my thoughts after all.

* * *

The sound of muffled giggles woke me up, my eyes fluttered open to see two pairs of grey eyes watching me excitedly. Brandon sat on the edge of the bed holding my two year-old son; Mason Ian Carter. I chuckled when Mason held up a small wrapped box and Brandon started humming the birthday song. I sat up and kissed Mason's forehead before taking it.

I held it up to my ear and gently shook the box, which made him giggle. I glanced at Brandon, who grinned, "Open it." He said. I was turning thirty today and despite my protests for him to not get me anything, I had a present I was obliged to open now. I did so and my brows furrowed a bit when I pulled out a set of keys. All three of them looked identical.

Why would Brandon give me keys...? My eyes widened and they lifted to his when I realized what they were for.

"And she finally gets it." He said to Mason, who made a cooing sound. "Oh my God, Eddie. I thought it wasn't for sale." I breathed. Talking about a seaside house

on the outskirts of Manhattan. The moment I saw it, I fell in love with it but the real estate agency said it wasn't up for sale. Yet here I 'am holding up its keys. Brandon shrugged "Turns out they made a mistake." He said and I chuckled.

"Mistake my foot." I said and he laughed. I was certain there were some strings he had to pull and possibly even tear to get this house.

I loved his penthouse, but it didn't seem appropriate for raising a family. The house we now apparently own does and so much more. "Thank you." I said; my voice thick with emotion and Brandon gave me his megawatt smile. I leaned forward and kissed him, longer than necessary but Mason tugged on a strand of my hair. I pulled back with a chuckle and took him from Brandon, settling him onto my lap.

I kissed his soft blonde hair "You couldn't even warn me daddy was planning a surprise." I whispered and Brandon chuckled. "He would never rat out his dad." He said, stroking his chin. "Am I right, Mason?" he asked and Mason's small hands took hold of his thumb and I chuckled at the gesture.

I slightly rested my chin on top of his head, eyeing Brandon "Did you sell the penthouse?" I asked and he shook his head. "No." he said, as though it was obvious he wouldn't. My eyebrows shot up; in actual fact calling that beautiful piece of property a house was a serious understatement. And considering its quiet location, it didn't come cheap. So I figured the penthouse would go, I suddenly remembered that he owned the building, *one of a few* he once said. "I love you." I said, at times I couldn't believe he was real and all mine. He grinned, "I know princess." He murmured, staring at me for a while. "Get up, you have an appointment with Magdalene Plum at noon." He said and my eyes widened. "What?" I squealed, "She's not even in the country." I added; Magdalene Plum was one of the best interior designers in the country.

When Brandon and I first got a look at the house I'd expressed that working with her on the house would be a dream. Last I heard of her whereabouts she was in Greece.

"She decided to vacation in New York for the summer." He said and I laughed with incredulity. "You're unbelievable." I exclaimed and he chuckled, "Happy birthday." He said; taking Mason out of my arms then cocked his head in the direction of the bathroom.

I paused on the door of the bathroom, looking back at Brandon who was lying on the bed, holding up Mason in the air. I smiled to myself thinking, I'm one lucky girl.

The end.



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