



L. R  
WARDS

*Out of  
the Ashes*

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CHAPTER ONE

“Get in the car.”

*Nathan.*

The deep familiar voice barely penetrated her thoughts. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she did hear it beyond the haze of her own grief. In fact, out of all of the people there, his was probably the only one that she would hear.

*It's going to rain,* Kate thought tilting her head up and looking at the dark clouds forming overhead. It seemed fitting for a funeral; almost symbolic. If it was a reflection of her sorrow, it should have been a torrential downpour.

A slight fall breeze picked up and brushed over her upturned face causing her bangs to be pushed to one side of her forehead. How she wished this was just a dream, even a nightmare would be welcome about now. At least that would be something she could wake up from then everything would return to normal.

*Normal.* Kate hadn't known normal since her parents died years ago. Now this.

When she didn't respond to the masculine command she felt a large strong hand squeeze her shoulder gently followed by his concerned voice again, “Get in the car honey. I'll take care of the rest.”

Kate heard the deep vibrating compassion in his voice and she was too upset to argue. Guiding her eyes up to him like she was in a trance, she slowly nodded. Then like a zombie she let him lead her through the throng of people dressed in black. She could feel their sympathetic looks and purposely avoided their gazes. It was much better for her to focus on other things, like the scenery.

Absently she stepped across the manicured grass and around headstones toward the sleek black stretched limousine with the gentle guidance of his hand against the small of her back. Oddly she found herself thinking of the weirdest things. Like, why do people wear black when they mourn? It's just more depressing.

The Chauffer dutifully opened the door for her severing her thoughts, and with assistance by a strong hand, she climbed into its luxurious interior not paying attention to the lush surroundings but instead choosing to look out the window over the variant combination of headstones, statues and crypts that scattered through the cemetery.

She heard him say he'd be a few minutes and she nodded but didn't say anything. Tears slipped from her emerald eyes and tided down her alabaster cheeks. Now she had no one. Her brother, the last of her family was killed overseas in a senseless war! He had been paying to put her through school, but all of that seemed menial in the face of this tragedy. Eric was dead. Everything that Eric had insisted that she do had ground to a halt. The house their parents left them had mortgage payments and Eric was taking care of all of it. It wasn't a great asset, because they never had much money, so it was small, but it was theirs. *I need to get a job*, she thought inattentively. Already she knew she wasn't thinking with a full deck, but she was in shock. Usually she was well grounded and responsible, but this, all of this, completely threw her world into chaos.

When her parents died, she remembered the funeral then and at twelve years old didn't understand why someone had to stand among a bunch of strangers and friends and cry. She wanted so bad to be alone with her grief, not weep in front of people. It was a horrible experience back then. Now that she was older, it was even worse. She was alone, horribly alone. Everyone kept looking at her like she was a pity case and because of it, she couldn't let go and cry like she wanted to. It was almost if everything was a dream, a ghastly dream that she couldn't wake up from.

There were more people here this time. Eric was well liked and everyone knew him. Like then the looks of pity were too much for her to bear. Except Nathan, his expression was unreadable and although she knew he shared her grief, you wouldn't know it from the steeled expression he wore. As odd as it seemed, she found that comforting.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened and Nathan slid in across from her in the large interior placing the American flag on the leather seat beside him. She was actually holding it graveside when it was given to her. She must've dropped it numbly forgotten she even had it. Obviously he noticed and that's why he told her to go to the car. He didn't say anything else to her except lean forward and hand her his handkerchief. She mumbled a thank you but kept her gaze averted feeling his vibrant blue eyes on her as he rapped on the glass divider over his shoulder indicating to the driver to go. Shortly after she heard the engine start and the car began to move.

Nathan was her brother's best friend. They had gone to school and college together and when her parents had died in a tragic car accident, Eric quit college and took a job at the local hardware store while Nathan went on and became his father's prodigy son taking over the family empire and prospering while she and Eric struggled from pay check to pay check.

Yet through it all they somehow remained close, and although Kate never understood the connection between them, it was obviously quite strong. Nathan came from money and Eric didn't, nevertheless he never acted as though he was better than either one of them.

He looked it.

Every bit of him looked as though he was worth a million dollars when he was actually worth more, much more. Even in her grief, there was no mistaking the expensive crisp cut of his suit and the way he carried himself with utter and unbelievable confidence. However, she knew that underneath all of that was a man who was grieving and she was possibly the only one on the planet that knew that. Nathan didn't let many people close to him but he did with her and Eric. He loved Eric like a brother, and they'd known each other for almost twenty years. They had gone through school together.

It was odd really, because Nathan's family was very wealthy and yet he went to a public school. She overheard him explaining it to Eric that his mother was raised in a middle class family and thought that Nathan needed to understand that side

of life. She didn't believe in boarding schools or any other private school. She wanted her son to be normal. Apparently his father was so much in love with his wife that he would have granted her anything so Nathan went to public school as she wished.

Unfortunately his wonderful beautiful mother died and when his father remarried, she'd heard that this woman was nothing like her. It was then that Nathan and Eric became inseparable. Obviously his step mother wasn't as loving as his biological one. Apparently she wanted Nathan to quit hanging around with the lower class and start acting like a wealthy snob. She would throw lavish parties and expect him to play the part of a loving step son. One thing Nathan wasn't, was dishonest. He couldn't be asked to betray his own morals so he ignored her requests, didn't show up, or didn't act like the lovable dotting step son when he did. She was furious but for some reason his father let him be. Maybe it had something to do with his first wife's wishes.

On the other hand, Eric had no social restrictions so Nathan could be more of himself when he was with him.

It was Eric that insisted she go to college as he struggled to make ends meet. When she turned eighteen she finally relented and decided on a degree in business administration. He joined the military when she left for college telling her he could make more money and when he was done they'd pay for his degree. He had it all planned out, but six months shy of graduating she got a phone call.

*Killed overseas*, is what the man on the other end said. That was all she heard before hung up the phone and did the only thing she knew and phoned Nathan. She had other friends, but Nathan was the only other person she would consider family and he was strong emotionally which she needed. Besides being Eric's best friend, he was reliable to the teeth and no other number came into her head at that devastating time. She dialed him without even remembering until she heard his voice.

She was already sobbing when he answered the phone only after two rings. Before she even said anything, he knew it was her.

“Kate?” he said then he paused “What happened?” He must’ve heard her crying.

“Eric’s been killed. There was a bomb and....oh God, he’s *dead* Nathan!”

There was a slight pause before he spoke again, “I’m on my way.” His deep voice cracked slightly.

Now that she reflected on that conversation she noticed that his voice didn’t raise one iota. *Calm as always*, she thought, even under great stress. Then she heard a muffled conversation as if he was covering the mouthpiece before he spoke to her again, “I’ll be there in a few hours. I’m just closing a meeting down at the moment.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued, “Kate?”

“I’m here.” She heard herself say. Her voice sounded hollow and oddly distant.

He didn’t miss it, “Honey, is there anyone who could stay with you until I get there?”

“I...well...”

“*Anyone?*” he repeated with a slight edge of concern that only she could detect.

“There’s Mrs. Herman...she lives a few doors down. She’s elderly and alone, so I’ve been checking on her for her son who’s...” she was rambling without knowing it.

“What’s her number?” he said bringing her back to focus.

Kate remembered that it was on the fridge and turned to read it off. She was clutching the headset of the phone with two hands like it was her only lifeline. From the pause on his end she figured that he must’ve been writing down the number she told him. “Nathan—“

“I’m still here,” he answered quickly, “Don’t worry okay? I’ll phone her, and in the meantime put some tea on. She’ll be over in a few minutes. My jet is being warmed up as we speak honey, so I won’t be long.”

*Tea.* It was funny that he didn't even consider that Mrs. Herman would refuse him, but not many women did no matter how old they were. "Okay Nathan." She hung up, and true to his word five minutes later Mrs. Herman was knocking at her door.

Sitting there in his car now, she realized that he'd answered his cell phone in the middle of a meeting and knew it was her. He must have her number programmed in his phone. Just hearing his voice and the reassurance in it made her feel better. It always did. Also she recalled the slight crack in his voice when he responded to her news. Yet, here he was now, sitting across from her with all the composure she remembered about him. It was if nothing had happened at all, but then again she knew Nathan a little better.

She broke her arm falling out of a tree at fourteen when a neighbor kid, Jimmy Connors dared her to climb it. He was always daring her to do silly things, and now that she looked back on it, like a fool she did. This particular oak tree must've been a hundred years old and reached over their little house like an old man's hand. The neighbor kids seemed to think it was a challenge, not just because of its height, but because of the creepy feeling it gave you to look at it. Now, it didn't look so creepy. It was just the thrill that went around kids her age at that time to be frightened of something and to use it to dare other kids. One of the rumors was that the previous owner of the house buried his dead Doberman at the base of the tree and on the full moon it would dig its way out of the roots and look for kids that were walking home late. Kate almost laughed at that story now. It did seem silly.

Jimmy gave her a boost to the first branch which was about eight feet off the ground. When she hesitated he goaded her which caused her to get angry and make it to the third branch which was about fifteen feet up. It was when she reached for the next one that she lost her footing.

Nathan was home for the weekend from college and visiting Eric when he must've heard her scream because he was the first one at her side. Jimmy Connors was long gone.

He bent down and soothed her in the same voice that he used with her now while picking her up and taking her in the house. Along with Eric, he even accompanied her to the Emergency room and was the first to sign her cast. Eric told her years later that Nathan went to Jimmy's parents and threatened them if Jimmy came near her again. It made sense to her then, because Jimmy wouldn't even look at her in school anymore and she could never figure out why.

On the other hand, Eric seemed to think she needed to learn a lesson of not listening to dares. Although he was the second one to sign her cast and told her he loved her anyway, even if she was foolish. Nathan never called her foolish, in fact she remembered him telling her that Jimmy only got her to climb the tree because he was too scared to do it himself, so she was braver than a boy. It wasn't the words that made her feel better as much as his handsome smile at that time.

Again Nathan was there to save her from herself at her brother's funeral.

Within hours he was back in their hometown. He made all of the funeral arrangements without batting an eye and paid for everything that the military didn't cover, no matter how much she protested or begged him to take what little money she had. But she was in shock and combined with the grief she allowed him to take over. He stayed in Eric's room in the house over the next two days while her brother's body was shipped home, not wanting to leave her alone. She seemed to move through those days in a fog. He made her eat even though she didn't want to, but she didn't cry again, not until now. Still it wasn't much. It was only enough to release some overflow of grief she was dealing with.

Nathan had always intimidated her a little. He came from money, old money, but he had a genuine friendship with her brother and their lack of money never seemed to bother him. Yet, it wasn't the money, it was his presence that unsettled her.

She thought he was perfect, and as long as she could remember, she knew she was utterly in love with him. She also knew that he was way out of her league, especially with his track

record of dating rich and famous women, mostly models or heiresses. Although she knew he cared about her because of their shared affection for Eric, she was no model and definitely not an heiress.

Nathan had no brothers of his own, but he did have an indulged half sister, Zoe, that she actually adored. Zoe was six years younger than her and may have been spoiled but she loved Nathan and was always kind to Kate. Like Nathan, Zoe never acted as if she was privileged even though he made sure she never wanted for nothing. When his father remarried, Zoe was the product. She was a very pretty and vibrant sixteen year old, and from what Eric had told her, lived with Nathan because their parents were busy jet setting around the globe. It was more stable for her, Eric said. It was obvious that he adored his baby sister. Kate always thought his affection toward her was more along that line, but if she didn't have Eric, he probably wouldn't notice her from a hole in the ground.

“Have you given any thought what you are going to do Kitten?”

His deep calm voice jarred her out of her thoughts. She settled her red rimmed gaze on him and shook her head. She hadn't heard that nickname in years. She never knew why he called her that and never had the nerve to ask him. He always seemed so untouchable. Masculine to the bone and drop dead gorgeous is what her friends used to say and she never disagreed. He was that, in spades. The man stood over six feet and carried an undeniable air of virile masculinity and charisma. He ran his father's fortune five hundred company with an unyielding sculpted discipline and was known for his cut throat methods that crushed competition beneath an iron fist. Yet, he sat across from her as calm and concerned as she had ever seen only moments after they buried her brother. However, she knew that Nathan was just as grief-stricken as she was, especially after that incident she witnessed a few nights ago.

The night before last she was walking by Eric's room and saw him. He was sitting on the side of her brother's bed hunched over with his elbows on his knees and his head bent with his face

in one of his hands and a photo of the three of them in the other. It was profound because up until then you'd think composure was his middle name. He never showed anyone that side of him except maybe Eric. Maybe that was why they were so close. Usually he was the epitome of self control, but this, this had her awestruck and after that left, she felt devastated for him. Her eyes flicked to the photo.

She remembered that day they all went fishing together. It was an amazing amount of fun and although they didn't catch anything, it was as if they were as close as a family could get. They laughed and acted as if nothing in the world could affect them. Nathan managed to toss her in the creek soaking her completely. She pinched her eyes shut to erase the memory and stop the tears and then focused them on Nathan's back again.

He wasn't weeping, but he was definitely distraught. It pained her to realize that the man had lost someone special to him also and she was so devastated that she never thought he might be hurting too. Yet all along he'd been a textbook measure of support making sure his focus was on her and her grief. It was how she knew him so she didn't even consider his feelings.

She felt selfish at that moment, seeing that tall seemingly indestructible man grieving over someone he loved, alone, just to avoid her further anguish. Her heart clenched in pain for him and knowing he wouldn't like her to see him like this, she crept back to her room. It was obvious he had thought that she had gone to bed already, and if the door wasn't ajar, she wouldn't have known it hit him as hard as it did. It was one of the hardest things she ever had to do, walking away from that scene. She wanted so much to go in there and wrap her arms around him, but she knew Nathan.

He was raised differently from them and outward appearances were essential to his class. Publically he wasn't used to sympathy or expression of emotion that was beyond socially acceptable. Most times his expression looked to be chiseled in stone, except for the obvious intelligence in those stunning blue eyes of his. With her and Eric, he was a little more expressive,

though not much. He did joke and laugh, but it wasn't often. Yet around Eric, he seemed much more relaxed.

As for the concern, it was a rare characteristic for him. Somehow she knew it was a side of him that he only trusted with very few people like her and it was genuine. It made her think of all the articles printed about him over the years and how they seemed like lies, except for the women. That was to be expected. The man was a magnet for her sex.

After a moment of silence he spoke, "I'd like for you to go back to college." His azure gaze searched her face with an easy seriousness so like him.

College? How the man could think so rationally on such a day was beyond her. He may have seemed emotionally collected, but she knew how close he was to her brother. "I can't Nathan, there's no money." *Didn't he realize that?* What he said next made her know that he did.

"I'll pay for it." He added without hesitation.

She gaped at him, "I can't possibly accept that. You've already done so much."

He held up a hand, "Kate, I promised Eric I would look after you when he left. I haven't done a very good job."

"You've done more than anyone could expect." She said with exasperated honesty. It was the truth. Even with his cramped schedule and Zoe, his little sister, there was virtually no free time. He would phone her several times a month to see how she was, but the conversation was always short and sweet and she would always tell him she was fine. What other person would ever do such a thing? Not only that, if things weren't fine, he'd be there in a heartbeat to help and they both knew that. Eric's death proved it. He was the CEO of his own company and didn't micromanage, so every minute was essential in his world, and he'd already spent several days with her to arrange things. "I won't accept any more money from you and before you argue, Eric wouldn't like charity either."

"It's not charity and it's money I won't even miss." He countered with a pointed stare.

“I won’t accept it either way.” Of course he was right about not missing the money. She was sure he had more than he could possibly spend in this lifetime, but that wasn’t the point. She didn’t want to be supported out of pity.

He let out a frustrated breath of air and looked away for a moment.

She studied his handsome profile and the firm set of his strong jaw. His nose was straight—perfect, just like the rest of him. *Here it comes*, she thought when he fixed his determined stare on her again, *the cooperate debater* and she was right.

“Kate, go back to college, finish your degree then you could come work for me to pay off what you owe me if it makes you feel better.”

“W—what?” she stared at him, stunned. That was unexpected. All kinds of things were going through her mind, but that. She started shaking her head but he continued.

“It would work. You can come and stay with us, so you won’t have to worry about rent in the dorms. There’s a spare room in the penthouse. You can transfer your courses to the degree program in the city. The college is not far from my apartment. Before you argue, I’ve already looked into it.”

Of course he did, but when did he have the time, and why? “But Nathan, I...”

He held up his hand, “What is six months? You need a job. I have need of a PA. I’ll leave the position open until you are done. I’ll fill it with a temp.”

“I can’t take much more pity.” She sighed out loud seeing his perfectly sculpted cheek bones color slightly. Obviously that angered him a little.

“It’s not pity Kate. You know me better than that. I don’t pity anyone, least of all you.” He added with a much firmer tone.

*Least of all me? What did that mean?*

“I also need help with Zoe. She trusts you. That way whatever guilt you feel about staying with us rent free is justified.”

The mention of his sister's name had her worried, "What's wrong with Zoe?" She added with alarm. He lifted a shoulder of indifference and glanced out at the passing scenery.

"Nathan?" she prompted letting her worry rise.

Raising his hand to quell her concern, he gave her a solemn look, "Don't worry, its teenage things."

She almost laughed and he must've sensed it because he gave her an uneasy smile. God he was even more appealing when he did that. For a man in such a position as he was, it made her laugh that he couldn't handle one girl when he was an experience male in a field of women.

"See? I know nothing about teenage girls. When she's not screeching at me for something she wants, she dissolves into a fit of tears. I'm no good with that."

He actually did sound helpless.

"Now she has interest in this boy at school." His features darkened, "Some typical testosterone filled boy...a jock of all things"

*Like he was at that age*, she thought. This time she couldn't help but giggle despite the tragedy of the day, "I supposed you threatened him?"

"Not yet." He stared at her pointedly and inclined his head slightly, "Yet." He added.

"Nathan. Don't you know by doing that, you'll just push her further away? She'll rebel and then she'll do what you don't want her to." She knew all too well what that was like, and it was Nathan that saved her then also.

He waved a hand with a slight smile as if he made his point, "See. I told you, I need you."

How wonderful that sounded! However she just wished it was in a different context, that he needed her for her, not to help with Zoe. She studied his striking face as questions coursed through her mind, "I love Zoe, and you know that. However, I can't help but think that you are just doing this out of respect for my brother."

His brows went up, "Is that what you think?"

She nodded.

“You’re wrong kitten. Yes, I made a promise, but I have reasons for my offer.”

*Oh boy, the nickname again.* Somehow he always made it seem like a caress and it ended up making her insides melt. Still, she wondered how long he worked out the reasoning for his requests. The man *never* did anything spontaneously. He’d pay for her college degree and she’d work for him, he’d give her a free room to stay in and she would help out with his little sister. The man was too smart of his own good. It was like he’d already worked out all of her protests in his mind and found a way to eliminate them. Now that only left his reasons. “What reasons?” Something odd flashed in his expression.

“I do need you. Zoe, so help me God, needs you to. I can arrange it that you can stay with us in my penthouse in the city, so you would be there for her, and you can transfer to the local college which is only about twenty minutes by car.” He lifted his chin slightly, “Do you have a boyfriend? Is that why you don’t want to...”

“What? No. When do I have the time?” Oddly enough, she seen something akin to relief cross his handsome profile before it was gone. Did she imagine it? “It’s not that. I mean you...” she waved a hand in his direction, “Are a media’s dream most days. I--I don’t know if I can handle it. People will—”

He scoffed, “What? Talk? Obviously I’m no stranger to gossip and I give my word that I’ll fire anyone in my employ that dares say a word about you.”

“Not just your employees.” She released a frustrated breath, “You may be used to publicity, but I’m not. What about the classmates I’ll have? They don’t know the friendship we share. I don’t think I could handle being harassed about living with a playboy billionaire.” He actually chuckled with that statement. And what about his girlfriends? Could she handle him parading those women back and forth in front of her constantly? Definitely not. Then what he said next answered all of those questions.

He studied her for a long moment, “We could dispel with the gossip if you married me.”

It was such a shock to her that she swore her heart stopped beating for a whole ten seconds. When she did regain her composure, her voice was so low, she barely heard herself speak, “W—What did you just say?” You could have heard a pin drop. It felt like someone just dumped a bucket of warm water over her head, and she was left completely speechless. For her, the offer was earth shaking. Nathan Thornburg just asked her to marry him. One of the country’s richest, most sought after bachelors just proposed to her. Yes! She wanted to scream, yes...yes...yes! It felt like she’d been in love with him forever, but she didn’t think he even thought she existed except for the pesky little sister that used to follow Eric everywhere. Although he never treated her as pesky, and in fact if anything, treated her more with indifference except when she fell out of the tree, and now. Then there was that one time with that boy she dated in high school. She shuddered at the memory. Regardless, she couldn’t marry him for the wrong reasons to protect her reputation. As much as she wanted to, it seemed wrong.

Nathan leaned forward placing his forearms on his knees, and his blue eyes met her green gaze, “Think about it. Your financial troubles would be at an end, there would be no gossip, Zoe would have a woman to look up to, and I wouldn’t have to worry about courting another woman who would most likely be after my money and treat Zoe like a pest.”

Did he not realize that wasn’t the only thing he had to offer? My God the man was a walking sex symbol and would be the catch of the century to any woman. In fact, he could have any woman he wanted, yet he asked her. She probably would be filled with unrestrained joy if he didn’t make it sound like a business proposition.

“I’m thirty four Kate. It’s about time I settled down. I can trust you with Zoe and I’ve known you practically all of your life. It is a good match.” He continued.

A good match? It sounded so blasé. What could she possibly offer him? Would he expect sex? Children? Would he have extramarital affairs? After all, the man dated supermodels. She couldn’t possibly measure up. In all, she knew he was doing

this out of a loyalty to her brother. Why would he make an offer today of all days? It was true that she had been in love with him since she was fourteen, but he'd never given any indication that he even had an inkling of affection for her. If he cared about her more than that he would have said something, wouldn't he?

Also, he never touched her affectionately, ever. Even when she dated a boy in high school, he got angry over the situation with reason, but still, he never let on that he cared about her more than Eric's little sister. She remembered that day as clear as yesterday and although she felt completely ashamed at her actions.

Eric had to go out of town one weekend and she'd snuck out to a party with a twenty-two year old boy when she was seventeen. Apparently Eric had asked Nathan to keep an eye on her. Not only did he shock her by showing up to the party, he was angry. Something she'd never seen before. It was a good thing too, because the boy she'd gone with had cornered her in one of the upstairs bedrooms and ripped her blouse. By the time Nathan had found her, she had been crying and fending him off. He was an older boy and Nathan took his time beating the stuffing out of him. Then he turned and dragged her out of there practically by the scruff of her neck. She was so humiliated of her behavior that Eric couldn't even bring himself to chastise her when he saw her face the next day. There was no mention of the incident again and the whole thing had stuck with her through college. She just didn't trust the opposite sex. That boy had seemed so sincere and friendly, but Nathan knew. She never found out how he knew, because she was too embarrassed to ask.

"Kate?"

She took a deep breath, "Could we talk about this another day? I can't deal with this right now." he studied her expression for a moment. Then she saw something in his eyes resembling guilt.

"Of course." He leaned back in his seat, "I apologize for bringing it up so soon. Did you want me to take you home?"

Oh no, she didn't think about that. Could she possibly go back to that house after putting her brother in the ground? There

were childhood memories and...she started to cry again. Instantly, Nathan was beside her gathering her tightly into his embrace. It was the only time he held her except when she fell out of the tree.

“I’ll take you home with me so I—Zoe and I—can look after you—no argument.” Then he added when he felt her stiffen. “You can take the next few days to decide what you need to do. Sorry kitten, I seem to be saying all the wrong things. However, I think we both need each other right now, and I don’t think you should be alone.”

He was being supportive as best he knew how, even lying, because Nathan never needed anyone. Despite that she appreciated his comfort. She shook her head, “No, you’ve been so kind...” that was all she could get out before she started to sob again.

They went back to her house so she could pack. He didn’t mention his offer of marriage again probably because his phone rang and even through the four hour ride into the city he’d barely gotten five minutes between calls, although she did get frequent sympathetic glances, which she shook off with an understanding expression. Regardless, she wasn’t the least bit upset at his lack of attention; she was still reeling from what he’d asked her so it gave her time to reflect and she also knew that he had a corporation to run. She couldn’t possibly expect him to put his life on hold for her more than he already did. He’d already given her several days of undivided attention.

When they got back in the car, he sat beside her with his arm across the back of the seat behind her. It gave her a certain degree of solace to know that he was close. In any case, she still kept her head in the crook of his shoulder not able to pull herself away from him. Her eyes were closed and she absently dabbed her tears with his handkerchief hoping he didn’t notice. They still leaked out despite her efforts to contain them. Although she had every excuse to cry, she still felt vulnerable and didn’t like the feeling at all. If it was any other day and she clutched to him like she was now, she would have found it very uncomfortable because of how she felt about him. Reluctantly she admitted that

she needed the closeness of another human body right now even if it was Nathan.

## CHAPTER TWO

Nathan just didn't own the penthouse, he owned the whole building. It was one of many of his assets throughout the city and it was barely two years old. The entire top floor was his, over eight thousand square feet, and she'd been there only once before when it was being built to his specifications. At that time it was just being framed. Either way, she wasn't prepared for how immaculate it was. She knew that Nathan was worth a small country but never put it into reality until she saw where he lived. It was incredibly spacious and expensively decorated. She looked down at her feet to see the polished cream marble-veined floors and felt totally out of her league. Their small house had old shag carpet and Nathan had been in it a thousand times, but never even indicated that it bothered him. She looked all around the entrance she stood in and knew that their house could easily fit in it. Her eyes drifted upward, the walls alone must be twenty feet high. *Oh my*, she thought taking in the intricate design of the sculpted ceilings

Nathan tugged on her arm while giving her a look that told her not to worry about it. The look of awe on her face was a dead giveaway and he knew how they lived. She took a deep breath and nodded. He knew she felt completely out of sorts standing in a penthouse that was worth more than their hometown.

"Don't let it bother you Kate." He said.

"It's incredible."

"It's just a place I hang my hat like everywhere else."

That was easy for him to say. However, from the look on his face, he was completely serious.

"It's all cosmetic, for appearances. I'd much rather have what you and Eric had."

So would she as a matter of fact. She nodded, "Yes, I agree." Feeling fresh tears she averted her gaze.

He reached over and cupped her jaw to tilt her head up so she would meet his gaze.

There was something distinctly profound in his eyes at that moment. Something that was completely out of place with the Nathan she knew. Somewhere inside her body there was a stirring of heat over it.

“Kate I—“

At that moment they were interrupted. Nathan immediately dropped his arm and his expression masked.

A chubby woman with short dark hair interlaced with grey streaks and ruddy cheeks bustled from around the corner to greet them drawing her attention. Kate figured that she had to be in her mid-fifties. She had kind brown eyes that were edged with deep laugh lines and a genuine smile to confirm her thoughts that she was a warm person.

“Kate, this is Miss Muller, my housekeeper slash, cook.” He introduced with a smile of appreciation.

“Oh you poor dear!” The woman grabbed a surprised Kate in an exuberantly tight hug practically making her eyes bug out of her head. She was a lot stronger than she looked, “Mr. Thornburg has told me about your brother’s passing. I’m so sorry.”

Kate mumbled her thank you. She had spoken to the woman a few times when she would call to speak to Zoe, but never met her. She looked as kind as she sounded.

“I have the spare room prepared for you next to Mr. Thornburg.” She carried on, “Zoe’s not home from school yet, but she was excited to know that you were coming...” Miss Muller looked past Kate’s shoulder to Nathan, flushed and fell silent, “I’d better get dinner on.” She continued quickly before hurrying from the room.

Kate turned around knowing he had silenced the housekeeper slash, cook with some gesture, but she also never missed what she had just said. “How did she know I was coming?” she said shooting him an accusing look while crossing her arms under her breasts. “And don’t tell me you called her, I was with you every minute since we left the cemetery and none of

those phone calls were from home after I agreed to come here.” With Miss Muller’s guilty look Kate realized that he’d always intended to have her stay with them, but he’d presented it to her in such a way that made it seem to be her choice.

He was good. Really good. How could he have planned all of this in such a short time without her knowledge and make it seem like a sudden decision?

“Kate, you couldn’t possibly want to be alone—“ He started to explain until she interrupted.

“—Nathan,” she said exasperated, “I *have* been alone for a long time. I don’t like my life dictated to me.” His expression didn’t betray his guilt in the least but she knew he was guilty of preparing for her arrival even before she agreed to it. Nathan had a soft spot for her because of her brother, and he also knew how independent she was.

“You had the option not to come. I didn’t quite force you.” He added softly.

Placing the palm of her hand on her forehead she expelled a breath of frustration. Somehow she didn’t think she did have a choice. Everything he put forth today seemed like a spur of the moment suggestion. Yet she knew nothing Nathan did was spur of the moment, but this was still a complete surprise. He had everything planned down to her staying with them. When in all the years had she known him that he did something spontaneously? He strategized, looked for weaknesses, and conquered. She had known him too long and he hadn’t counted on that.

Bringing her eyes back to his, she noticed that he was studying her silently and his handsome gaze still gave nothing away. Again she knew his intelligent mind was strategizing her responses and how to countermand them. “Your proposal. How long have you wanted to ask me? Before you deny it, remember how long we’ve known each other. I know it’s out of respect for Eric that you don’t want me to be alone, but you should at least be honest with me.” He stood straight and thrust his hands into the pockets of his slacks while staring down at her with those striking blue eyes. *Taking back control*, she thought. She

wouldn't have expected anything less. If she was watching the power play with him and someone else, she would be no less than impressed at how easily he was able to take command of the situation. However, she still had some tricks herself. Like she said, she knew him.

"Eric's been gone for almost two years in the service, you *have* been alone."

Not surprising, he didn't answer her question, but the mention of 'two years' nearly had her speechless. It couldn't be possible that he'd been considering this for two years, could it? He couldn't have. If he had been, he would have approached her sooner, instead she couldn't walk by a newsstand without seeing his face plastered all over the front covers of the tabloids with some gorgeous woman on his arm, "I do have friends." She said narrowing her gaze on him and continued, "Nathan, what is really going on? What is with all of these offers all of a sudden? College? Zoe? And marriage?"

"Your friends can't give you the stability I can." He said firmly ignoring her questions.

Again, he didn't answer her, "Stability? God, Nathan....nothing in my life has been stable! Hadn't you noticed?"

"Yes." He said simply.

*Well, score one for me*, she thought. "And I'm twenty-two years old." She continued exasperated that he seemed to still think she was a teenager. "I'm old enough to be on my own."

He shook his head, "You're still too young Kate. You need someone in your life. You may be twenty two, but you are very trusting and naïve of things around you. I know your life hasn't been easy, and Eric has done his best considering the circumstances, but I have a responsibility...."

"A responsibility! Is that how you see me?" she said hearing her own voice rise. He denied it on the ride to the city, but now he brought it up, so she could help but think this was all out of pity.

"No." he corrected quickly not raising his voice one fraction to counter hers. He was a master negotiator and it came

in handy more than once outside of business. “I meant I made promises to your brother.”

Is that what all this was about? She refused to be a crutch for his guilt toward a promise that was unreasonable. Eric should have never done that to him or her for that matter. “I won’t hold you to them!” she shot back and turned around with the intention to leave when he grabbed her arm.

“Kate give me two minutes to explain. Don’t leave, please.”

She spun around to face him and opened her mouth to speak but his eyes held a pleading she hadn’t seen before. The image of him sitting on her brother’s bed grieving popped in her mind and she had to remember that he was human and capable of compassion. Again she forgot that he was having difficulty dealing with Eric’s death too. Still, if he didn’t seem so in control all of the time maybe it would be easier for her to notice.

Remembering that he still held her arm she looked down to see his hand on her. It was odd to have him touch her beyond those few incidents over the past decade like that fateful night when she was assaulted by that older boy. However, he’d touched her more today than he’d done in all the time they’d known each other and every time he did, it sent a wave of uneasiness through her. Not a fearful uneasiness, but an uncomfortable one, because she wanted him to touch her. God did she ever.

Guiding her eyes back up to his, she couldn’t forget that he was there for her through all of this. He comforted her, held her when she wept and now offered her a way out of all of her pressing problems. He was right, none of her other friends could have done this for her even though they meant well. Nathan was completely unselfish with her and she knew not another could brag about this, except Zoe. She owed him more than she could repay, so she definitely could give him a few more moments of her time. Although she wanted more time to ponder his motives behind the proposal, she couldn’t help but ask, “So why now after all of this time do you throw an offer like marriage on the table?”

“I told you.”

Yet something told her there was more, “Yes, Zoe, stability, companionship, a job, but what about children? What if I want children?” She thought saw a brush of color rise to his cheeks as she herself felt it rise to hers. It was an intimate conversation, one she thought she’d never have with her brother’s best friend, but it had to be broached.

“Do you?” he said softly.

Something in his gaze flickered, but before she could catch it, it was gone, “No...Yes, of course.” She admitted shyly.

He swallowed, and agreed, “Of course you do. So do I.”

“So if I said yes to your proposal,” she paused gathering courage to continue feeling her heart beginning to thunder in her chest, “You and I would have to be intimate at some point.”

“I suppose.”

God he isn’t making this easy. She felt as if every inch of her skin was on fire with embarrassment to bring up such a subject with her brother’s best friend. She was doing all of the talking and he was letting her. Finally he spoke after a moment of intense unnerving silence between them and seeming to understand how awkward she was feeling.

He looked past her, over her head for a moment, “Discussing this in the foyer isn’t appropriate.” Without hesitation he reached over and took her hand and led her to a large sitting room.

It didn’t even occur to her to protest. Nathan had never touched her without reason before. His hand was warm and practically engulfed hers. She didn’t miss the heated tingling sensation his touch gave her either. However, she was much too nervous to pay it any more heed than beyond noticing. He led her to a taupe sofa and after she seated, he sat facing her with his arm across the back while propping his ankle on the knee of his other leg. To Kate he looked as relaxed as if he was watching television when she was a bundle of nerves. So much for her thinking he was just as uncomfortable. However the pose he struck certainly made her uncomfortable. Could he possibly look anymore handsome?

“First, you’re right. I have done a great deal of thinking on all of this. In fact, more than a year’s worth. You may not think so Kate, but you’d be a perfect model wife for me. You are honest, easy to get along with...”

*Like a puppy*, she thought as he continued.

“...And I was serious when I said I need that in my life. I don’t have time to court a woman or worry if I can trust her or not. I won’t lie and say that this would be a whirlwind romance, because I don’t have time for it. My work schedule doesn’t allow for it. As my Personal Assistant, and my wife, I can spend time with you and I won’t have to worry about not trusting you in both aspects.”

“The intimacy...” she cleared her throat. The subject was more than uncomfortable, but she had to bring it up again. He tilted his head at her ever so slightly and his eyes flashed something odd while he studied her as if looking for something in her expression. Kate however, thought he was completely, utterly irresistible. The man had an uncanny sense on how to look gorgeous without even trying.

In a gesture that completely surprised her, his hand came up and brushed her jaw causing her eyelids to flutter. This wasn’t a touch of comfort or compassion. It was a blatant caress. All her senses suddenly burst to life with that touch. Her heart pounded in her chest like a freight train, her lips parted, and her skin began to prickle with Goosebumps under his fingertips. All the while his eyes remained on her face, studying her response. Then he spoke in a deep sensual voice that she’d never heard before. It saturated her soul and caused a warm sensation to wash through her.

“As uncomfortable as that subject is, we are no longer children and I personally won’t have a problem with it.” Her eyes flew wide, “However,” he added at her expression, “I won’t pressure you in that department. Like you, I would like children, but you are still young, and I don’t mind waiting until you are ready.”

Oh God, she couldn’t possibly address that subject. So instead she redirected, “Nathan, it sounds like you are offering

me nothing beyond friendship, companionship and a bed mate. It sounds like a business proposition.” She was glad she was sitting down at his confession, because she doubted that her legs could hold her. Not that he wouldn’t have a problem with intimacy, because she was sure he was a legend in that field, but she thought he may with her because she was Eric’s little sister. Yet he just confessed that he wouldn’t practically causing her heart to leap into her throat. One thing was for sure, she certainly *would* have a problem with it. She’d never been to bed with a man in her life. Of course she always thought of him, and sized up men according to him, which narrowed her dating field tremendously. In turn, she couldn’t bring herself to sleep with another man, because they never gave her that wow factor. Just sitting next to him made her skin tingle.

“I can’t offer you anything else at this point, but it’s a good start, don’t you think?” He said honestly. “Also at the risk of sending you flying out of here, I’m going to be blunt and say that I’m pretty sure that sex between us would be a hell of a lot better than your term of ‘bed mate’.” He grinned when she flushed at his choice of words.

Okay, maybe *he* didn’t have difficulty with the intimacy part, but she sure as hell did. *I want more*, she thought. *I want you to tell me you at least care about me more than the little sister of a dear friend*. She looked down at her hands that were neatly folded on her lap. Then she recalled his confession, “You said you’d been thinking about this for more than a year?”

He shrugged a shoulder, “Around there.”

“But Eric was still alive.”

He stiffened as insulted. “I told you that had nothing to do with it. I gave my reasons Kate. Quit making this out to be a pity request or a business proposition. It’s far from it. Sooner or later Eric would have come to terms with my wishes because I would have let him know.”

If her Jaw wasn’t attached to the rest of her face it definitely would have toppled to the floor and rolled around her feet at that confession. “You were really going to ask me even if

Eric was still alive?” It may have taken her a moment but his words finally got through her thick skull.

“Yes, I was.” He admitted softly.

She paled in disbelief. Just when she thought she knew him, she really didn’t. To even think that Nathan had his sights on her completely blew her away. He could, and probably has, had every woman a man could dream of having. His last girlfriend was a movie star for crying out loud and the one before that was some Austrian princess or something like that. There was no way she could compete with that kind of fame or experience. Quite frankly it scared the hell out of her. He would most definitely be disappointed when he learned her secret.

Leaning forward, he took her hand in his again noticing the change of color in her face, “Kate, are you all right?”

“I’m sorry; I just find this all overwhelming. I mean you didn’t even seem to notice me when I was growing up.” She saw that odd look in his eyes again then he turned his head away as if hiding it. When he focused on her again it was gone like before.

“Eric was my best friend. You were his little sister. I couldn’t touch you then. You were too young.” He added the last sentence with some strain in his voice.

Now she was really confused. He made her an offer of marriage for companionship and stability, but spoke of the past as if he actually wanted her? However it was brief and when he released her, the warmth in his eyes clouded over. It was then she realized that he was using her affections against her. He knew exactly which buttons to push. *The man could probably convince God to change religion*, she thought. He was so darn good at manipulation. He certainly wasn’t a wealthy because of his looks, although, if that were possible, she wouldn’t doubt he could be. Yet, his willingness to comfort her was real. She was sure of it. And combined with the grief she had seen at her house when he thought she was in bed, she knew he had affection for her and her brother. Again, she couldn’t help shake the feeling that he was protecting her out of respect for Eric. His motives were admirable, but she needed something more.

“Can you give me a few days to think about this?”

“Of course.” He said without hesitation as if he expected her to say just that.

To her, he said it like he just told the waitress he’d like cream in his coffee. The affection was gone as quick as it came. *Always the businessman*, she sighed inwardly. Then she heard him say her name and felt his fingers under her chin as he lifted her head to meet his gaze. That simple touch sent another warm wave of pleasure through her.

“I know this is a big decision and I sprang it on you when you are vulnerable, but some resolutions need to be made in regards to your future.”

*Carefully calculating to move in for the kill*, she thought almost smiling. He was good. Very good. And the way he spoke, with such a deep drawl of concern nearly made her fall at his feet and beg him to marry her on the spot, but she still had some pride and restraint, though little as it was around him. “I understand.” She added, surprised the tremor that she felt at his touch didn’t make it into her voice. “Are there any more surprises?” She added causing him to set back then allow a sensual smile to grace his handsome face.

“You do know me well.”

“Fess up.” She made a mock face of anger causing him to chuckle and lighten the mood somewhat.

“Later.” He said with amusement while standing up causing her to do the same, “First, I’ll show you your room and you can get settled. Maybe you should lay down for a nap because you look exhausted,” he traced a thumb under her eye over the dark circle not seeming to notice her slight tremble at the caress. “I’ll wake you for supper and Zoe should be home by then after her dance class.”

A nap? That sounded wonderful. Again she didn’t like him telling her what to do, but in this case she would accept. “That sounds fine.”

“Come then.” He held out his hand and she took it with some slight hesitation remembering that Nathan had never touched her as much as he did that day and quite frankly, she admitted to herself that she was starting to really like it.

He led her to the second floor and down the hall explaining that the penthouse had five bedrooms in total. Three up on the second floor and two for the servants off the kitchen. He made it clear that their rooms had an adjoining door then started explaining the other features in the room like the door was a small pittance. Then he left her alone and she did exactly what he asked and lay down for a nap. With the horror of burying her brother today fresh in her mind she doubted she'd nap at all. It seemed like she had just closed her eyes when she heard his deep voice.

“Kate.”

She thought she heard her name and slowly reality started entering her consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open and the image before her was heart-stopping. Nathan was seated on her bed beside her. She could feel his hand on her hip as his other brushed down her cheek.

“Ah, she wakens,” he mused, arching his brows.

His voice had a teasing tone to it. She cracked open her eyelids and first saw his handsome face staring down at her. She could get used to waking up to him. It slipped into her thoughts before she could stop it. Near gasping at her own slip she quickly sat up, “What time is it?” she said brushing back a few strands that escaped her tightly bound hair.

“Dinner time.” He answered while his eyes followed the innocent gesture, “Zoe’s practically vibrating around the dinner table waiting for you. I wouldn’t let her come up here and disturb you.”

“She probably would have leapt on the bed and startled the pants off of me.” She offered while smiling and noting his brow furrow for a moment if he was almost contemplating the image. Then he suddenly turned away and stood up.

“Freshen up and I’ll meet you downstairs.” He added before leaving.

His moods were definitely strange. One minute she felt his warmth before he would pull into himself again. There was no doubt that the caresses he’d been giving her since the funeral

were real, because there was no way on God's green planet that she would react to him like that unless they were.

She changed into jeans and a simple pale green t-shirt and made her way downstairs. Zoe flew into her arms when she saw her causing her to really laugh for the first time in days.

"Oh Kate! I've missed you so much. Nathan says you're going stay with us for a few days." She released her and took both of her hands, "I'm so excited I can barely contain myself!"

"I can see that." Kate added while laughing.

"I'm sorry about Eric, but you have us as a family too. We love you so much!" She hugged her again.

Family? The impact of that word and the meaning of it was completely overwhelming. Kate couldn't help herself and started to weep at that selfless statement. Soon it turned into wretched sobs.

Even when she had Eric, they never seemed to be a family because of their struggle to survive and here was this young girl offering hers and what made the impact worse, is had just occurred to her that she had always thought of Nathan and Zoe as her family. Zoe hadn't meant to upset her, but for some reason she felt overwhelming relief in her words and that unselfish statement opened the floodgates of her pent up anguish.

"Zoe, move aside."

Kate barely heard Nathan's soft assuring voice as she clung to his sister while tears poured out of her. Obviously the poor girl looked helpless over her sudden sobbing, but she still couldn't stop. Seconds later, there was a stronger embrace and Zoe was gone. She buried her face in Nathan's thick chest and continued to cry. Numbly she heard a conversation through her sobs.

"Nathan, Kate...I'm sorry." Zoe said

"It's not you honey," Nathan confirmed. "She just lost Eric, she hasn't properly grieved. He was all she had." All the while he tightened his hold on her as if he let her go she'd slip to the floor.

Kate was too upset to respond. He was right. Eric was everything to her. He was her brother and she loved him. He

looked after her, and made so many sacrifices for her. With his death went her last ties to her childhood memories. The happy ones they made together even after the death of her parents as he had attempted to make a life for them. Now she felt so alone, so horribly alone. She let out a wretched sob. Then she felt herself being lifted off her feet into strong arms. She clung tightly to him burying her face in his shoulder and wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Tell Miss Muller, to send some tea up to Kate’s room.” He said softly.

“Okay.” Came the solemn reply.

Nathan bent his head, “Just cry honey, I’m here.” He soothed as he carried her up the stairs.

Her fingers scrunched the collar of his suit and she nodded as she tried to pull herself closer to him. Later she realized that he didn’t falter at all carrying her up all of those stairs. It was as if she weighed no more than a feather. She knew he kept in shape, but she didn’t realized how strong he really was.

Soon she felt herself being put back on her bed, but when he tried to leave she tightened her hold. “I won’t leave, if you don’t want me to.”

“Please don’t.” she managed between sobs.

And he didn’t. He held her close as he sat on the bed while adjusting the pillows before he sat back against the headboard with her across his lap. She felt the coverlet being tossed over her shoulders. She didn’t even have to say anything. He knew what she wanted and she couldn’t have been more thankful because she couldn’t find the words to ask him to stay.

She felt safe and protected in his strong arms. This was something she never experienced before, and it was sorely needed. Losing her parents at a young age robbed her of their affections and Eric tried but he had to work to support both of them so he wasn’t always around. If she skinned her knee, she had to get up on her own and carry on. Somehow, over the years, she’d learned to cope inwardly. It was very rare that she let her emotions show as an adult, but it burst like a damn when he touched her.

However, this wasn't like Nathan, not at all. He was always cordial to her, but not affectionate. This went way beyond just comforting for Nathan, he was almost cherishing her. The way he spoke in a soothing voice, the way his hands smoothed over her back as held her on his lap in close proximity to his body. She didn't want it to end.

Her mind coasted to odd things again while she wept. Like wrinkling his silk shirt in her fists and feeling bad about ruining the expensive material with her tears. She was even sure she mumbled an apology between sobs causing him to murmur that it wasn't important and was she warm enough, did she need to see a doctor? She told him yes she was warm and she didn't want a doctor, or any pills to help her get over her grief quicker than she wanted to. Then Miss Muller brought the tea and some sandwiches. He encouraged her to take a few bites then drink down a cup of tea using the sweetest endearments as possible to encourage her. Soon she was asleep again.

She awoke sometime in the night to find that he was still beside her. Stretched out to his full length on the bed and she felt tremendous reassurance in it. He didn't leave her. Raising her head she looked down the length of his sleeping form until it disappeared under the blankets at his waist. The same blankets she was under

*He really didn't leave*, she thought with complete awe. Then she realized why it had meant so much to her. Everyone had left her. Her parents and her brother, but not Nathan. She'd asked him to stay and he did. In fact, Nathan was always there, maybe in the background, but she always knew she could count on him. That's why she phoned him first.

The truth was she never lacked for friends. She was popular in high school too and still maintained those friendships, but Nathan was the only one besides Eric that made her feel safe.

Her eyes studied him in the pale light of the moon. He was definitely asleep from the slow steady breathing he was doing. She didn't realize how long his lashes were but now she could see them shutter the slit in his eyes completely. They were

a darker shade of blonde than his hair and it was a very attractive contrast to his eyes.

He had discarded his tie and jacket and the top half of his shirt was unbuttoned revealing a mat of dark blonde hair. She couldn't imagine how he removed part of his clothing without disturbing her. His chest rose and fell in even breaths while he slept and soon she realized that he hadn't relinquished his grip on her. His one arm was underneath her shoulder and his hand rested on the small of her back. He couldn't be too comfortable still wearing the clothes from the funeral, but he did it for her, she knew he did so as not to leave her like she asked. Not even to change his clothes. She felt her stomach twinge. This couldn't possibly be pity, could it?

She studied his peaceful expression thinking he looked so beautiful under the dim light that crept in between the curtains and silhouetted his profile. His straight autocratic nose and sensual masculine mouth were easy to see. She allowed her eyes to linger there for a moment wondering what they felt like against hers. Biting her bottom lip to try and distract herself from the image, her eyes went to the window, dark outside, then to the clock. It was two o'clock in the morning. She had slept for six hours undisturbed with him next to her. It was the first time in months since Eric had gone overseas that she had slept so well. In the silence of the room she heard his breathing alter. Darting her eyes back to his she met his blue gaze. Suddenly all her senses became hotwired as she realized that her body was pressed against his hard form and she heard her own breathing pattern change. "It's all right." She heard him whisper and his hand came up and brushed a stray lock of hair off her face that escaped her chignon and tenderly tuck it behind her ear, "Lay down Kate." He added while circling his hand around to the back of her head to urge her to do so.

"You aren't going to leave are you?" she heard herself say as she tucked her head back down on his shoulder. Her free hand splayed across his expansive chest. It didn't escape her how well formed he was, but she did her best to ignore the close proximity and her reaction to it. His other hand stayed on her

cheek with his fingers spread on either side of her ear. She didn't ask him to remove it and he didn't offer. His thumb gently massaged her temple soothing her.

"No." came the answer, "I'll stay as long as you want."

"I feel foolish...poor Zoe."

"Zoe understands." He said softly.

"It's just...well...what she said about family."

"I know."

She sniffed, "I never thought she felt that way."

"We both do."

She couldn't respond to that. Did he? Laying there next to him made her realize a whole multitude of things. One, his body was perfect, hard and warm, and it became suddenly clear to her that she wanted him, more than just a companion, more than what he offered her. She wanted him like this, next to her forever. Two, he was very considerate over her feelings and she wondered if other women had seen this side of him. Three, she felt safe and secure for the first time since she could remember. Lastly, she was hopelessly in love with him even after all of these years and the affection combined with the tenderness he'd displayed over the past few days made her heart swell even more than she thought possible.

Over the following few minutes she found herself desperately trying to ignore the warm body pressed next to hers and God—he smelled *amazing*. There was a distinct faint odor of expensive cologne mixed with his own scent and it just added to her attraction toward him. Did he feel the same way? She wondered. If he did, he didn't show it or say anything to that affect. Only what he told her earlier about not having problems getting along in bed with her. Wow, was he right on that count. She could stay there next to him for the rest of her life. Problem was she wanted more. She wanted her hand, the one that was still on his chest, to start roving so she could explore his body, feel every contour, every sinewy muscle that he had under his clothing. Oh God! She had to quit thinking like that. Her body began to ache and it was such a surprising feeling because she'd never responded to a man in such a way. Then again there

weren't many men made the sinful way he was. Her stomach tightened, and most surprising, her breasts seemed to swell against him.

If she thought she affected him the same way, it was eliminated when the familiar rhythm of breathing started again. He'd fallen asleep. Yet, she really couldn't blame him. From the moment he'd arrived at her house to take care of everything and her, he hadn't slowed for the next thirty six hours. It was dreadful to think that he did all of that for her and Eric without sleep and she didn't realize it until now. She felt guilty. Not once did he complain or break from that famous steeled composure except when he held her, or spoke softly to her, did she notice something different. It was a tenderness she never thought he was capable of.

Even when she was a teenager, he'd always kept a distance from her, never touching her, ever. Although he said it was because of Eric, she wondered if that was true. Was all of this for comfort sake or was it something more? She weighed her memories in her mind. When he'd found her with that young man, he'd touched her, but only to haul her out of the house, after that, he never laid a hand on her and she wept just as much in shame that day as she did in grief today. Something changed in him when Eric died. Did he actually feel responsible for her or was it something more? Even though he said it wasn't, she still had her doubts. On top of that, she certainly couldn't run around and brag about this tenderness, because it was nothing to write home about. Not that she had any experience, but she'd read books about passion and sex, and what he displayed besides that brief caress earlier that day didn't lend anything to that type of attraction. If she didn't know him better, and if she didn't see him that night in Eric's room, or the way he adored Zoe, she wouldn't have known he was capable of love.

"I love you." She murmured softly and shamefully at the sleeping man beside her while closing her eyes. It was a coward's way to say it, especially when he was asleep, but just the same, she managed it and that's what mattered.

### CHAPTER THREE

When she awoke the next morning, he was gone. There was an indent of his head in the pillow to remind her that he was there. Lifting herself up, she leaned over and inhaled his scent causing heat to well up in the pit of her stomach. Unreal, how he could affect her when he wasn't even in the room. Crawling out of bed, she made her way to the bathroom to shower. Even though it was Saturday, she was sure it was a workday for him. Sure enough, he was dressed in a tailored dove grey suit and dark tie when she came down to breakfast. His hair was still slightly damp letting her know that he had a shower too. He looked absolutely wonderful in every possible sinfully delicious way. She took a deep breath and approached the dining table while he was reading a folded newspaper and sipping coffee. He glanced up. Her chest tightened when he gave her a generous grin showing his straight white even teeth.

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

Why did she think things had changed between them just because she spent the night being held by him? He returned his gaze to the newspaper without waiting for her to answer squashing her eagerness. “I slept fine, thank you.” She returned in the same even tone he gave her not wanting to show him how much his presence affected her and how disappointed she was that he didn't seem even the least bit excited as she was to see him.

Miss Muller appeared at that moment asking her what she'd like. When she told her, she looked indignant, “Toast and tea? No wonder you're so thin.” She sputtered with disapproval before leaving.

“She's right Kate. You do look thin.”

She spun around to see that she took precedent over his newspaper again. “I know.” She answered truthfully, “The past few months have been hard on me.”

“Understandable.” Setting down the paper and his coffee, he stood up and pulled out the chair next to him, “Come and sit

down. I have to leave for work in a few minutes, but I want to talk to you first.”

It was a far cry from the tenderness he'd shown her last night. She sighed; he was back to his cool, calm and collected self, talking to her as if they were discussing the weather, whereas she wanted to crawl into his lap. “Sure.” She took the seat folded her hands on her lap, and gave him her full attention. Actually it took a great deal of courage to look at him after they'd shared the same bed last night, but she couldn't let him know that it had left her so shaken.

“I just want to know what you intend to do about the house?” he asked

She was surprised at the question. “I never thought about it.” she should have known that Nathan had, he always was good at seeing everything despite tragedy. He didn't get where he was by having tunnel vision.

He reached over and took her hand, “There's something you should know.” He paused studying her expression for a moment, “Eric gave me power of attorney over his estate.”

She snatched her hand back and shot to her feet, “He what?” she shook her head, “He wouldn't! Why—what possessed him?”

Nathan stood up, “He was concerned about you Kate. He did it when he left overseas.”

She fell her face in her hands, “This doesn't make any sense.” He moved toward her and she lifted her head and took a step back. Although she admitted that she loved the way Nathan has been comforting her over the past few days, she didn't want to be touched at that moment. She was too angry. Eric was still treating her like she was too young and irresponsible to look after herself, and he was dead. “How could he? I'm not an invalid!”

“We both knew that.” Nathan added softly.

She *was* angry. For once in her life it bothered her that Eric seemed fit to make a decision without her knowledge. It was true that he did his best on raising her, but she was an adult and to think that she couldn't look after herself at her age was an insult. “I'm not a child.”

“No,” he said, “You aren’t. Kate, this wasn’t an easy decision for him. He was concerned for your future if something were to happen—“

“My God, he didn’t even discuss this with me!” she blurted out, trying to ignore the tears that threatened to fall.

“He thought that you might find it disturbing to discuss the possibility that he may die—“

Tears started rolling down her cheeks, “That’s horrible Nathan. I’m not some unstable waif. I have a right to know about my future.”

“I’m trying to explain that to you.” He offered, “I agree and believe it or not, Eric took this into consideration. It wasn’t an easy decision for him.”

“If it wasn’t so easy, he should have talked to me.” She accused stabbing a finger at her chest.

“Kate stop.” He said abruptly and held up his hand, “You knew Eric as well as I did. He loved you and you should take that into account. As always he was worried about his baby sister.”

“Stop defending him!” she shouted, “He left me! They all did!”

His face softened at that display and despite her protests and her struggles he embraced her. “Hush kitten, I won’t leave you.”

“You will.” She sobbed giving up her struggles, “Everyone does.”

“Not this man.” He kissed the top of her head just as his phone rang. He swore and ignored it, “Look, I’ll sign everything back over to you if that’s what you want.”

She lifted her tear flushed face and looked up at him, “You would do that?”

“If it’s what you want, I will.” He said with a slight smile.

“You mean it.” She couldn’t believe it. She must look like a crazy woman while declaring that she was perfectly sound. Truthfully she felt completely overwhelmed and she reacted very sensitively to something that didn’t warrant it. She was obviously dealing with a lot more than she realized.

“Honestly I do.” He said smiling wider just as his phone rang again causing it to disappear.

“You’d better answer that.” His tight embrace began to make her tremble and she didn’t want him to know it was because of his close proximity.

He nodded and released her, “Give me a moment.” He said as he pulled his mobile out of his pocket and flipped it open. After answering the voice on the other end he turned to her, “Will you be okay for a minute?”

She nodded already feeling better from what he’d told her about signing everything back over to her. He gave her a reassuring smile causing her to inhale deeply at the sincerity present in it. Overall his words of not leaving her left her feeling more secure than she had in months. Did he really mean all of what he’d been saying to her over the past few days? It’s not like he was after her for her money, because she didn’t have any. Sighing she watched him as he conversed on the phone and even doing something as simple as that made him look so undeniably handsome. It was a side of him she always admired. He could so easily take control and handle it as though he was born into it.

“I need to go to work Kate.” He said after he flipped his phone closed and turning to her.

“Of course.” She started feeling embarrassed, “I don’t think I’ve ever cried so much before in my life than I did these past few days.”

He nodded, “For you, I agree, but you have valid reasons. Zoe cries whenever I try and tell her no.” he added with a sheepish smile.

She almost laughed at that. Zoe was amazingly smart. Apparently it ran in the family, but she could manipulate as good as Nathan could.

“I feel as though you shouldn’t be alone though.” He admitted hesitantly.

She knew why he hesitated. He was probably concerned that she’d burst into tears again. “I’m not as fragile as you think Nathan.” She said hoping her expression didn’t reveal her lie. Of

course she was. She just lost the closest person to her, the last of her family.

“I never thought you were before,” he explained, “but you are now with what’s happened.”

*Gee thanks*, she thought feeling more like a fool for being so vulnerable in front of him. He was the last person she wanted to know she had weaknesses yet, he made her feel so safe when she did breakdown.

He settled his gaze on her, “Last night had me thinking.”

“About?” Her stomach clenched. Did he want to rescind his offer of marriage? Was she too demanding with his affections? That was something she could never brag about with another man. She admitted to herself in the shower this morning that she really needed him. Oh, she wanted him too, but only Nathan seemed to be able to make her feel strong enough to overcome this tragedy. Now she was worried that she’d been taxing him too much. Dread started to crawl through her.

“I think it’s best for both of us if we do get married. Right now you need someone to look after you.”

She could have shouted for joy at the first few words, but then he indicated that she still couldn’t look after herself. Well, he was probably right, but it certainly didn’t do any good for her self esteem. “I’m a grown woman Nathan, not a child.”

“There’s no doubt.” he said pausing for a moment and dropping his gaze to her mouth, “But like I said, you’re quite vulnerable right now and I don’t want some man waltzing in your life and giving you empty promises. Hell, you’ll probably be like this for the rest of your life, and I’ll be worried about you all the time.” He took her hands with his, “I don’t mean to sound condescending, I’m just trying to convince you why it’s a good match. You wouldn’t have to worry about money and we’d have Zoe.”

Pull the Zoe card. God, besides Zoe needing her, he made her sound like an invalid that couldn’t do anything for herself. Again she couldn’t help think it was pity and a debt he seemed to think he owed her dead brother despite his protests. Maybe she was fragile right now, and maybe she was too damn foolish about

men, but that wasn't a reason at all. As for the money, she'd make do, she always did. She lifted her chin and tried to hold her gaze to his without bursting in tears. "Anything else?" She didn't mean for her voice to crack, but it did.

"Oh Christ," he swore breaking that controlled demeanor he was famous for, and he looked concerned again, "I did it again, didn't I?"

"If you call telling me that I'm some naïve, poor, emotionally distraught woman, an insult? Yes I would agree." She added feeling another tear slip down her cheek almost to prove his point. At that moment while feeling the streak of wetness, maybe he wasn't too far off and he could see something in her that she couldn't. After all, he was extremely observant at seeing things others couldn't and she *was* naïve, but she never considered herself vulnerable except where he was concerned.

He looked away for a bit before focusing on her again, "I'm sorry. It wasn't meant that way. Maybe I'm fishing for reasons why you should marry me. Honestly Kate, I'm not so stupid around your sex, but for some reason I always seem to fumble for words around you. Here sit down." He pulled a chair out for her and guided her into it. Then he crouched in front of her and reached up to brush the tear off her cheek while searching her eyes with his, "Would it help if I told you I was attracted to you?"

*It was a lie to make me feel better*, she thought, but just the same, it worked and that tenderness that she had glimpsed over the past few days was back if only for a moment. Still, she couldn't help think that he was attracted to women, all women. "A bit." She said honestly.

He smiled and gave her hand a squeeze as his eyes met hers, "Even though you were quite upset last night, I enjoyed sharing that bed with you." He added with some hesitation.

She tilted her head at him searching his eyes as something suddenly dawned on her. She didn't miss the pause in his voice or the look in his eyes. Abruptly as a thunderclap, she realized that maybe he wasn't lying about the pity thing, "You're lonely, aren't you?"

Releasing her hands he stood straight and shook his head slowly while looking at her, "I told you, you knew me better than anyone. That's important to me in a wife. Someone I don't have to explain my moods to."

Good lord, trying to figure him out practically exhausted her! They could give college courses on how to figure out Nathan Thornburg and everyone would likely fail, including her. "You have access to hundreds of beautiful women..."

"That's not the same thing." He interrupted, "They possess a few qualities that I find appealing, and soon the attraction wears off. It's not what I want. I need a woman who has intelligence and depth, humility, and compassion that can also accept Zoe...like you." He smiled lazily. "We're a package deal. My sister comes first and foremost and the women I date couldn't give her the attention she needs, but you will."

Of course she would. Zoe was a gem. "You don't think I'll wear off?" she said shakily trying to ignore his compliments. If she lingered on them she knew she would throw herself at him because Nathan never gave compliments lightly. He actually meant them.

"No, I've known you half my life and I'm still not tired of you." He gave her a rakish grin, "I'm pretty sure the next twenty will be the same."

That's what he thought. She wasn't the least bit glamorous, famous or gorgeous like the women he was used to and just as much as admitted that it was complacency that he wanted. She was steady and trustworthy, like a Rottweiler. Could she accept that and maybe, just maybe, it could grow into something more? Already she knew the answer to that. Nathan wanted to get married and have children and she knew that if she didn't say yes, he would start looking elsewhere and she would lose him—and Zoe. Was her pride so big that she needed to hear those three words? After consideration, she knew she would have to set aside her pride and hope that he would grow to love her. It was almost gut wrenching to even consider that he would marry someone else because she missed the opportunity.

“Nathan, I’ll marry you.” She didn’t know where the words came from, but there they were. The fact that they shared a mutual loneliness made all the difference in the world to her. It meant he just didn’t pity her. Coupled with the state of contentment over the closeness they shared last night, not to mention the desire he aroused in her, she didn’t want to let him go. And she wasn’t expecting the brilliant smile he gave her.

“Wonderful!” leaned over and kissed her on the forehead just as Miss Muller came into the room and set a plate of toast in front of her and her tea.

“What’s wonderful?”

“It seems I’m getting married.” He put both of his hands on Kate’s shoulders.

“Well that is wonderful.” The woman added with an excited grin.

Kate watched the older woman’s face light up like a Christmas tree while hers pinked up in a blush. She offered them her congratulations and hugged Kate with the same enthusiasm as she did the day before squishing the breath out of her.

“I’ve got to go. Kate, see me to the door?” he said as Mrs. Muller bustled off again.

“Of course.” She followed him.

He opened the door and turned to look at her.

Something in his gaze made her smile. It was almost if someone removed that blanket of reserve that he carried if only for a moment and for the life of her she couldn’t take her eyes off of his handsome face. “What?”

He grinned, “It’s nothing. I’ll see you later.” With that he was gone.

She turned around and went back into the kitchen where Miss Muller was.

“I’m happy for you dear.” She said as she collected several plates.

Kate smiled, “Thank you.”

“That boy needs a little love in his life.” She gave her a knowing look, “And you love him plenty.”

“I—I—” she flushed

“Don’t deny it Miss Kate, it’s written all over your face.”

“Oh dear.” She sat down in defeat, “That obvious huh?”

“As the day is bright.” She stopped, and looked down at her, “I can’t say I blame him for asking you, you are more beautiful than I thought you’d be.”

Kate stood up, “Okay, that’s enough.” She smiled sheepishly, “I need to get some things done, I’ll see you later tonight.”

Hanna laughed as she watched Kate leave. Although she embarrassed the girl, she meant every word she said and if she couldn’t see the way Mr. Thornburg looked at her, she needed to discover that on her own because Hanna wasn’t going to tell her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Several hours later, Kate adjusted herself on the bus seat. She had managed to catch a bus back home to get her and Eric’s house in order. She left a note for Nathan, because she didn’t want to phone him at work and disturb him. Not only that, the bus ride gave her time to think. Everything that Nathan had done for her over the past few days was unsurpassable. Mrs. Muller was right, she definitely was in love with him, but how did he really feel about her? He admitted to being attracted to her, but the more she thought about it, the more she wished he had said something a little more profound. Yet this was Nathan, he didn’t advertise his feelings to his family let alone the public.

The bus turned into the depot and she reached down and grabbed her overnight bag. When she sat up she saw Marnie’s convertible in the parking lot. She had phoned her friend ahead of time to let her know she was coming home.

“Kate!” she ran up and hugged her when she stepped off the bus, “We’re all so concerned about you. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Sorry, I should have called when I left yesterday, but I wasn’t thinking clearly.” Now that she looked back on it, she wasn’t in the right frame of mind at all. It was almost as if she was teetering on the edge, and when Zoe made that statement

about family it pushed her into an emotional abyss. She still didn't feel herself, like there was some fog in her mind, but maybe that had a lot to do with Nathan's proposal.

"You shouldn't have taken the bus either, I could have easily come and got you. I just can't believe that Nathan took you in. Wow, lucky you. I'd give anything for that tall drink of sex to take me home."

How right she was about Nathan being a tall drink. Lying next to him last night confirmed it. She thought about his hard warm body all the way home on the bus wondering how it looked like with his clothes off. Was it like that all over? Kate turned her head away so she couldn't see her blush as she got in the car, "He's been very kind."

"Kind? Kate, that man has always showed you favoritism. I never wanted to be Eric's little sister so much in my life when he's around. Poor or not." She laughed.

"Don't be silly." She countered smiling at Marnie. She was always so positive. Her family was well off, not filthy rich but wealthy enough in her small town. Her father was the bank manager so she always had the best of everything. Despite that she was genuinely a good friend.

Marnie gave her a sideways glance as she slid the car into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. She made a purring sound and giggled, "That's all I can say. Just tell me—please and relieve me from this agony. Did you sleep with him?"

Kate's eyes shot wide open, "No, of course not!" *Well not really*, she thought. Or not in the way Marnie was thinking. Even if she did, she certainly wouldn't tell anyone about it. She always thought that was very personal. She knew her friends talked about their sex lives and she always thought that was something that was better left in the bedroom. First of all, she knew nothing about being with a man. Secondly she wasn't going to start talking about something that she knew nothing about and she always found it very degrading. She certainly wouldn't want someone talking about her and how she was performance wise.

“Okay, why, and are you insane!” She said with a grin not taking her eyes off the road, “God, I don’t think I could possibly live in the same house as him and not rip all his clothes—“

“I quit.” Kate threw back her head and laughed. It was then that she decided to keep their engagement a secret because Marnie would want all of the juicy details and would probably insist that she slept with him. In all, it would make her uncomfortable so she never said anything. She never discussed intimacy with her friends, or even joked about it. Talking with Nathan the day before was the closest she’d ever come to it. Not that she wasn’t curious, she was especially after spending the night next to him. It was the first time she was interested in what a man looked like naked. She’d seen pictures, but quite frankly, those sort of frightened her.

Four hours later Kate was almost done sifting through her brother’s personal things trying her best not to weep. At that time she was thankful that Marnie offered to stay and help. She was proud of herself because she didn’t give in and fall into a sobbing fit. Maybe Nathan gave her strength, whatever it was, she finally decided that she was beginning to feel better.

The only thing she didn’t pack in a box was the photo that Nathan had held in his hand when he came to help her. Carefully she removed it from the frame and placed it in her handbag as Marnie taped up the last box and sat back on her heels looking around at the half dozen boxes that scattered the living room floor.

“Well at least being poor has its benefits, you guys didn’t own much.”

Kate looked at her, “True.” She knew Marnie didn’t mean to insult her, she was trying her best at a joke and any other day Kate probably would have laughed. She stood up and dusted off her jeans with her hands, “

“Sorry.” She said, “Kate—“

“Its fine Marnie, I’m still dealing with all of this.” She walked over and looked around Eric’s room, “I miss him, even though he was gone for a year before he died. At least I knew my big brother was always in the background.”

Marnie stood up and held her hand out to Kate, “Come on.”

“Where?” she said turning to her.

“Kate, I’m going to buy you a drink, because I really need one and I know for a fact, that you could certainly use one.”

This time Kate did smile. A drink didn’t sound like such a bad idea.

Around eight o’clock that evening Nathan removed his suit jacket and slung it over a chair just to hear Miss Muller cluck and pick it up. He looked around the sitting room then went into the dining room. It was empty. He was about to go up the stairs and check Kate’s room when Mrs. Muller interrupted him just as he reached the bottom stairs.

“She’s not here Mr. Thornburg.” Said Hanna from the hall while she put his coat in the closet.

He turned around and went back to his housekeeper, “Where is she?”

She shrugged, “I don’t know. I was in the laundry. I thought she went to lie down, but when I went and checked her bed was untouched.”

Nathan paused to run scenarios through his head. Where would she go? Did she know anyone in the city? No, he didn’t think so. Maybe she was visiting her friends. Yet, she should have at least let someone know after all, she did know how concerned he was for her. Didn’t she?

“Mr Thornburg?”

“Hell, she shouldn’t just leave without telling anyone.” He turned on his heel and walked away as he pulled his mobile out of his pocket.

“Just call her on her mobile.” Hanna offered seeing the concern on his face.

“She doesn’t have one.” He called over his shoulder while dialing a number, but he would remedy that first thing tomorrow. The first number just got him Kate and Eric’s answering machine. Swearing, he dialed another.

‘Oh.’ *Everyone had a cell phone*, thought Hanna as she watched his obvious worry over their new houseguest. *Well at least most people did.*

“Jim,” Nathan said as a familiar voice answered, “Can you get my plane warmed up? I need to make a quick trip to Devon. No, the Gulfstream, it’s a small airport. Yeah, thanks.” He hung up and took the stairs two at a time. He was hoping that’s where she was. Knowing Kate she decided to take the day to go back and start sorting through Eric’s things. Just in case he would be spending the night, he needed to pack some things. When he went into his room that’s where he noticed Kate’s note. He breathed a sigh of relief as he read it. She did go home. Why the hell didn’t she call him? She had his personal number. She used it to tell him about Eric. Didn’t she know he cared for her? Yet if she was at the house, why didn’t she answer the phone? Was she out with friends? He had this image of her sitting in the house alone devastated. “Damn.” He said as he set down the note and grabbed his overnight bag with his worry increasing.

He could have sworn it was the longest forty minute flight ever. When the plane landed he was relieved that the taxi was already there to pick him up. Grabbing his bag he rushed out of the plane and told the driver Kate’s address. Now that he was on the ground he tried phoning the house again. Still no answer. Glancing at his watch he thought of someone else who might know where she went. It was only ten pm, maybe Mrs. Herman was still awake. Luckily she was.

After speaking to her he felt some relief for the first time in two hours. She had left with Marnie Vanbrugh several hours ago. It took him another five minutes to get off the phone after hearing how bad her arthritis was. Nathan spent a few minutes listening because she had given him some relief. He owed her something.

“Wait here.” He said to the driver and got out of the car in front of her place.

“Yes sir.” The Taxi cab driver certainly wasn’t going to argue especially after the fifty the man slipped him. He wasn’t

used to such generosity in this small town and by the look of the man's clothes, he could afford it.

He retrieved the spare key from under pot with the flowers long since dead from lack of attention and opened the door.

It certainly looked as though she was busy. Boxes were everywhere. Placing his hands on his hips, he stared at the interior and sighed, this must have been very hard for her and maybe Marnie took her out somewhere to make her feel better. But where? Remembering that she kept certain numbers on the fridge he wandered into the kitchen and thought he struck gold when Marnie's cell phone was listed.

"I wonder who that could be?" Marnie started digging in her purse at the familiar ring tone from her phone.

"What?" the music in the club was deafening and Kate could barely hear anything, and what she could hear certainly didn't make any sense. It didn't help that she'd been accepting all of the drinks Marnie kept buying her, then when four men joined them Marnie told her that she'd quit paying an hour ago. Normally that would bother Kate, but after the fourth drink her concern evaporated. She was actually enjoying the company.

"Kate!" Marnie said, "Is there anyone staying at your house?"

"My house? No."

Marnie held her phone so Kate could see the display and her brows went up, "I don't know who that is."

"Well, let's find out." She shrugged and answered it while plugging her other ear with her finger to hear the caller.

Kate watched with interest as Marnie's expression suddenly hazed over then a wide smile spread across her face. "Who is it?"

She put her finger to her lips to silence her.

"Yes, of course Nathan, I'll bring her home right now." She winked.

"Nathan?"

"No I've only had one drink. I can drive." She said.

“What does he want?” she said with the look of someone who was inebriated and confused.

“Of course, Kate has had quite a few and—“ her face fell after a long pause while she listened to the man on the other end, “No, I didn’t know that.” Her eyes went to Kate’s far from sober expression. *Oh-oh*, she thought eyeing up Kate’s condition.

“Let me talk to him.”

“I don’t think that’s wise.” She covered the mouthpiece, “He doesn’t sound happy.”

“I’ll make him happy!” she shouted.

“Oh God, he’s going to *kill* me.” Marnie said looking at the inebriated condition her friend was in, then uncovered the mouthpiece, “We’ll be home in five minutes. She flipped it closed. “Come on guys I need help getting her in the car.” She stood as did the other four men. “And don’t cop a feel either, I’ll be watching.” She warned causing a few of them to laugh.

Nathan was pacing on the front porch when Marnie’s convertible pulled up. He practically jogged down the stairs to see a partially conscious Kate in the passenger seat. “Jesus Marnie, she’s snowed!”

“Only a little.” She said slightly embarrassed as she got out of the car, “She needed to cut loose for a night.”

He opened the door.

“Nathan,” Kate’s eyes opened at the sound of his voice and she grinned wide. “Hi darling.” She said in a slurred voice.

“Ah hell.” He placed his hands on his hips and stared down at her. She was definitely drunk. Even if she didn’t talk, the glassy look in her eyes was a dead giveaway.

“I didn’t mean to get her loaded, but she was upset.” Marnie came around to stand beside him, “She never mentioned your engagement either. I’m really surprised I mean she’s—“ she stopped before she told him that Kate’s been in love with him forever.

“She’s what?” He asked finally taking his eyes off of his inebriated fiancé and looked at her.

“It’s nothing.” She changed the subject, “Do you need help?”

“I can manage, just get the door.” He bent down and scooped her up in his arms like she weighed nothing.

Marnie sighed dreamily at the man’s broad back as he carried Kate toward the house. How more perfect could a man be? She quickly rushed ahead of him and opened the door.

“Bedroom.” He said as he entered the house, and Marnie got his meaning and hurried down the hall to open that door also.

He gently laid her down on the bed and realized that she was sound asleep again. Then he tenderly removed her shoes setting them on the floor.

Marnie watched as she continued to loosen the belt on her dress and tuck her under the covers. Jealousy and envy raged through her. She always had a huge crush on Nathan, but she wasn’t pretty enough to get noticed by him. Although Kate was dirt poor, she was unfairly beautiful and surprisingly sweet. It was no wonder why the man who had everything would fall for her and by the looks of it, he fell hard. Just to watch that tall gorgeous billionaire dote on her friend was enough to make her completely envious for the rest of her living days. “You really care about her, don’t you Nathan?”

He finished tucking the blanket around her shoulders, “I do.” Then he stood while looking down at her, “I’m not happy about this whole thing.” He gestured a hand toward his sleeping fiancé. “I was worried sick.”

“I didn’t know honestly. Like I said she didn’t mention anything.” Marnie held up her hands in defense. When that handsome man straightened himself, shoved his hands in his slacks and looked at her in such a way she nearly lied just to get away from that accusing look. “I swear.” She added in exasperation.

“Regardless Marnie, you know she’s not a drinker. I mean, look at her, she’s smashed.”

“I’m sorry.” She said, “Gosh though, she really did need to loosen up though. She had to pack away all of Nathan’s things, it wasn’t easy.”

He relaxed slightly knowing that it must’ve been horrible for her. “I know and had I realized she came here, I would have come with her.” Just then Kate moaned and rolled over. Nathan turned and looked down at her. This wasn’t going to happen again, he would see to it. Running a hand through his hair in frustration he returned his gaze to Marnie, “I shouldn’t be taking this out on you Marnie, you were only being a friend.”

She straightened her shoulders, “I was.” Then he gave her a bit of a smile and she swore her heart just melted into a blob in her chest, “but I guess I should have been more careful. After all, I do know that she’s not used to drinking.”

“At least she’s safe. I think I aged ten years.” He said absently glancing back at Kate.

Marnie felt that Jealousy again. He was sincere over his feelings for Kate. “Are you staying the night?” she asked without trying to sound curious.

“Yes.” He answered without hesitation. “We’ll stay tonight until she sobers up and we’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

Marnie stared up at him, “I’m sorry about your loss too. Kate said you were upset.”

He closed up. Only Kate would know that. How she knew that he didn’t know because he was certain that he kept his emotions right as rain. He just nodded, “I’ll show you to the door.”

After he showed Marnie out, he went back to her room and while looking down at her with an unreadable expression, loosened his tie and undid the first few buttons of his shirt before he crawled into bed beside her. Even in her sleep she was still completely irresistible and turned toward him. Wrapping his arms around and pulling her close, he rested his chin on top of her head and fell asleep soon after.

Kate awoke to the loudest possible highway traffic she’d ever experienced in all the years that she lived in the house. Slowly she sat up and planted her feet on the ground while

bringing her hand to her forehead. The noise was pulsing along with her pounding headache and she groaned. Then she realized it wasn't traffic noise, it was her blender. She looked down and realized that she was still wearing the same clothes as last night. What the hell happened? Vaguely several images started flooding into her mind and somewhere she was sure she saw Nathan.

“Good morning.”

She screeched and looked up to see the object of her thoughts standing in front of her with a glass of green liquid in his hand.

“Sorry,” he grinned, shoving the glass in her direction, “here drink this.”

“What is it?” she took the glass of green opaque liquid and sniffed it causing her face to wrinkle in disgust. It smelled like pond slew. Worse of all, it looked like it.

“A hangover cure all.”

“Is that what this is? A hangover?” she brought her free hand to her throbbing forehead, “It's horrible. How do alcoholics handle it? Just dealing with this once will stop me from ever drinking again.”

“They don't, that's why they're alcoholics. Now drink up.”

She took a sip and coughed at the bitter taste.

“Plug your nose, then you won't taste it.”

“Is this behavioral therapy.” She looked up at him, “I get drunk and you torture me with this slew so it won't happen again?” This time he laughed.

“No, it does work. You can attribute its fame to my frat days in college.” He leaned against the door frame, “What do you think is worse Kate, the hangover or the taste of that drink?”

“It's a tough call.” She winced as she plugged her nose and swallowed the contents of the glass. When she was done she handed the glass back to his offered hand while grimacing. “*That* was disgusting.”

“Serves you right.”

“Yes I know. I never was much of a partier.”

“Much? Never is more like it.” Then he sighed, “Kate you should have called me.”

“I know.” Her eyes went to his, “I thought about it, but then I wasn’t sure if you were in an important meeting. I hate being a bother.” She also remembered how he looked in Eric’s room that night, and didn’t want to put him through that again by bringing him back here. He’d stayed strong for her and she’d already asked enough of him.

“My future wife should be able to call me at any time and not think she’s a bother.”

“I left you a note.” She returned while relishing the thrill that went through her at the sound of those words, *future wife*.

“Which I found only after I was as frantic with worry.”

“You were frantic?” she almost smiled. It must’ve been a sight. This handsome, tall man that could take over a company with the steel composure of a practiced diplomat was *frantic*? Unfortunately he could see the amusement in her eyes.

“You think this is funny?” He narrowed his eyes in mock anger while she pursed her lips and shook her head quickly but he saw the slight smile, “Well darling, I’m letting you know right now that I’m not letting you come here without me again.”

“I guess I kinda deserve that.”

“You deserve a shower too.” He reached down and hauled her to her feet, kissed her briefly on the cheek and wrinkled his nose, “Probably right away.”

“Well don’t you know how to make a lady feel sexy.” She laughed liking the play between them. It seemed like spending that night together knocked down some of that uneasiness she had around him.

“Kate, honey, nothing could take that away from you even if you were dressed in a sack.” He said seriously.

That statement was no less than shocking. Never had he complimented her looks before. As surprising as it was she managed to keep her teasing voice and expression. “After what I did you still compliment me.” She smiled up at him.

“After what you did I’m still crazy about you.” He added with a devious grin.

Her smile faded at his confession. Did he really mean it? She would never know because he just told her to shower again, patted her hip, and left her standing there. Again and again, he seemed to start to say something remotely intimate, then he'd suddenly drop it. Anyway, she need a shower and decided to put more thought into it after she cleaned up. One thing was for sure, she was so relieved that he was here with her.

After his plane landed, Nathan took her hand and helped her down the steps and they were met by Alfredo, his bodyguard at the Limousine who handed Nathan a package and in exchange took his bag to put it in the trunk of the car.

Once inside he sat next to her and tore open the package dumping the contents into his hand and held it toward Kate.

“What is this?”

“Your phone.” He answered with an edge of authority.

She laughed hearing the tone in his voice, “you really were concerned. This isn't necessary.”

“It is.” He held it toward her, “Take it Kate, it makes me feel better to know that I can check on you.”

“You are serious.” Her smile faded. She honestly thought he was kidding about the phone.

“Very.” He answered keeping his expression steeled.

Slowly she reached over and took the phone, “Nathan this is a side of you I haven't seen before.” He seemed almost possessive.

“If you mean that I'm concerned for the well being of my fiancé who just lost her brother and ran away from me—”

“I didn't run away.” She said exasperated.

“A note isn't appropriate.”

“I already told you that I didn't want to disturb you.”

“What if something happened to you? Where the hell would that leave us?” he actually let his voice rise and instantly regretted it when her lips parted in surprise, “Listen Kate,” he softened his tone, “Don't you realize how much you mean to me?”

“No, I don’t.” she said in astonishment, “I can’t read your mind. Just when I think you’re about to say something, you change the subject or leave.”

It was his turn to look surprised, “Jesus Kate, I’ve known you forever. You’re the only woman I’ve allowed to know me more than Zoe.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know that?”

“No.” she shook her head in bafflement. “I just thought you thought of me much as the little sister of a friend. For companionship.”

He took her hands in his, “Then you’ll have to forgive my possessiveness, because I think of you much more than that. I know what a jewel I have, and sometimes I act like an only child and don’t want to share.”

She was about to respond when his phone rang.

“I need to get this.” He said as he pulled it out and looked at the number on the display.

What poor timing! Just when she thought he would say something profound they were interrupted. “I understand.” Again, he probably put his whole corporation on hold to come after her and knew he had a lot to manage. That alone should have told her that he cared about her. Who else could brag about such a thing? Could his past girlfriends? She still wasn’t sure about all of his past and the women that she needed to compete with and that alone crushed her hopes again. Not only that, she was sure he was the aggressor in any relationship, not that it really bothered her, but she would like some say in her well being.

“What are you thinking about?” he said when he hung up. The whole time he was on the phone, he was studying her and saw the play of emotions over her face.

She shrugged, “I just wonder if you treat all of your girlfriends like this.”

“Like what?” he gave her an odd look.

She held up the cell phone, “Well—you do seem a little possessive.”

He threw back his head and laughed.

“Nathan, what is so funny?” she said exasperated. Why didn’t the man react like normal people? And why did that sound so wonderful to her ears?

“Kitten, you really don’t have to be concerned about my past girlfriends.”

“I wasn’t.” she mumbled.

He chuckled, “First of all, no, I’m not possessive of women, just you. Second, the cell phone doesn’t have anything to do with possessiveness. I worry about you.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” He admitted, “When I came home to an empty apartment and I couldn’t find you, It felt terrible.”

Her delicate brows rose, “You felt terrible?”

“That’s the best way I could put it.” He sighed, “Kitten, I wasn’t raised with love, or much affection, and I’m not the best at expressing my feelings very well.”

“Nathan that’s the closest you’ve come to mentioning any kind of affection.” She said with awe.

He shook his head and looked down at her, “maybe I’ve been conditioned over the years in such a way and I can’t change that, but with you, I’m different. I just assumed you knew.”

“How so?”

He shrugged a thick shoulder, “I won’t lie to you. I’ve had a lot of women in my life,” he smiled when she rolled her eyes.

“A lot, is an understatement for you.” She grumbled.

“You should never be concerned about that. I’ll tell you why. I have never been worried when I couldn’t get a hold of them. I’ve never fired up the jet and searched them out when they didn’t answer the phone.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t care about them Kate. I mean, I completely steeled myself up to a cooperate world, and I treated the women much the same. But you, you’re different. You’re the only one I *needed* to have around me. You’re real, and you’re beauty is real.” His eyes lowered to her cheeks that were flushing crimson,

“And that’s one of the reasons that you’re beautiful.” His hand came up and caressed one.

Her lashes fluttered at the caress. It was much the same as the first time he did that yesterday and a warmth ebbed inside her over it. “So,” she swallowed, “Are you telling me that you care about me?”

He nodded but his eyes never left hers.

“And that you haven’t felt this way before? I find that hard to believe. I’ve seen the tabloids and—“

“Kate, ignore the tabloids. I’m *telling* you that I need you in my life. Those other women can’t touch you or how much you mean to me. So leave it alone.”

Was it affection like a little sister though? She wondered. She grew up around Nathan. Isn’t it just expected that he treat her so. Maybe it wasn’t pity for Eric, but more of taking care of her because he cared about her, and the only way was to marry her. But he mentioned intimacy, so there must be something more than just that. Her eyes searched his and she was surprised to see the warmth remained in them. Usually it was hidden by now. Again she would like some concrete clarification, but she also didn’t want to sound like some immature clingy woman either. It was only because her heart was being served to him on a platter that she felt so insecure about his feelings.

“Take the phone Kate. At least it’ll make me feel better. And promise me you won’t take off again without calling me. Nothing is so important that you can’t interrupt it. I would prefer if you did. My numbers are already programmed in.”

She looked down at the cell phone and nodded, “All right. But if for some reason I don’t, do not get upset. I’m not used to being asked to let someone know of my constant whereabouts.”

“Still, don’t forget.” He said again firmly.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The next day she slept in after a restless night and before she knew it she had pulled on her clothes quickly and rushed down the stairs hoping to catch him before he left for work. As

luck would have it, she caught him as he was pulling on his overcoat. When he saw her a sinful smile brightened his expression.

“You were just leaving.” She said almost breathless.

“I didn’t want to wake you.” His eyes flicked to the rise and fall of her chest then back to her own eyes. It pleased him to know that she rushed down to see him off.

“I—I didn’t sleep well last night.” She admitted.

“Bad dreams honey?”

*Honey?* God that sounded wonderful! “I think so.” Yet when he was next to her, she slept like a babe.

His intelligent eyes studied her for a moment, “Come see me today for lunch.”

“Really?”

“Yes. There’s a bistro down the street from my building, they have a great seafood salad.”

“My favorite.” She grinned still a little breathless.

“I know.” He mused while his eyes glittered.

Suddenly she had the incredible urge to hug him, but still held back. Thankfully he didn’t. He placed two fingers under her chin, tilted her face up and placed a lingering kiss on her cheek just barely off the side of her mouth.

“I’ll see you later kitten.” He said deeply locking his eyes on hers, “Okay?”

She nodded too enamored to say a word.

“I’ll send the car.” He said before he left.

She stood there for a moment wishing like crazy that he’d made some more affectionate move toward her. Of course she loved that small show of affection, but she wanted more. If all of those things he said to her yesterday meant anything, wouldn’t he? Except for that gorgeous smile it seemed as if nothing had changed and that confession about how much he meant to her was now vaporized. Feeling slightly crestfallen, she turned and went back to the dining room.

Zoe was at the table yawning by the time she made it back there to eat her cold toast. She was already dressed and ready for school. Jumping up when she saw Kate, she made her way

around the table, “Kate...I’m sorry about the day before yesterday.” She grabbed her and hugged her.

“Oh sweetie, it wasn’t you. Never think that.” She hugged her back. Nathan was right, I’m very upset over my loss, and you said the most wonderful thing to me yesterday.”

By the time they had gotten back to the penthouse, Zoe was in dance class and Kate was still fighting a hangover so she went to bed early. She never even thought that poor Zoe would still be worried about how she reacted when she called her family. It just showed Kate that she had a lot of learning to do about family. She needed to be more aware of Zoe’s feelings. If she was, then she would have relieved her worry.

She pulled back and looked at her, “Really, you’re not upset with me.”

Kate smoothed the younger girls auburn curls back over her shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile, “No, never.”

“Oh, did you tell her?” Miss Muller said with modest excitement as she bustled back in the room and set a plate for Zoe.

Tell me what?” Zoe looked back and forth between the two.

Kate did her best to dispel the worry that Zoe wouldn’t approve, “Your brother asked me to marry him. I said yes.”

Zoe screeched and hugged her again, “I was wondering when he’d spring that on you. I’ll have a big sister Kate. This is so great! We’ll be a true family.”

She was wondering? Did that mean that he’d discussed this with his sister? Nathan was right, part of this was for Zoe. “Are you really happy?” she said apprehensively.

She stared at her wide-eyed, “Have you ever met any of those socialites he dates? They’re all snobs. I hate them.”

“They can’t be all bad.” She offered, not wanting to disagree.

“Oh, they’re nice to my face when Nathan’s around if they think it’ll win them brownie points, but when he’s not looking they stare down their noses at me.”

“That’s rude.” She smiled.

Zoe laughed, “But you Kate, you’d never pretend you’re something you’re not. That’s why he loves you.”

Kate stilled, loves me?

Zoe seemed not to notice, “Wait ‘til I tell Roger that I’ll have a big sister! Oh Kate, you have to talk to Nathan so he can come over, he’s such a brute where my boyfriends are concerned and I want him so much to like him.”

“What?” She was still reeling from what Zoe had said. However, what did a sixteen year old know about love? Nathan had affection for her, he said he did. Did he confess something to his sister about her? She doubted it. Nathan was too protective of his emotions. Like he said, she’d known him for twenty years and not once had she seen that calm demeanor break except that one night she went to the party, that night she discovered him holding the photo, and then a few minutes ago, when he actually crossed the boundary and kissed her with more than just acquaintance affection. It may have been a brief kiss on the cheek, but it was the way he presented it.

“Kate?”

“Oh yes, of course. I’ll speak to him today.” She answered finally recalling what Zoe had asked.

“Oh thank you! I knew I could count on you.” She grabbed a piece of toast and her book bag and ran to the door. “See you after school!” she hollered. Then she was gone.

Kate sat down and began to eat her cold toast and drink her lukewarm tea. What a hectic beginning to a day. After a moment she beamed, but it was fantastic and she wouldn’t have it any other way. Zoe was such a breath of fresh air and being around people she loved really made her feel like she wasn’t alone. Just then Miss Mueller came back in and handed her a slip of paper.

“What’s this?”

“Mr. Thornburg, told me to give this to you after he left.” She winked and walked away back to the kitchen.

It was an appointment for a salon, and a fashion boutique. He scrawled a note in his perfect handwriting, saying that the car would pick her up at nine and underneath it said

‘enjoy’, but it was just signed Nathan, not ‘love’ Nathan. She sighed and couldn’t deny that it was sweet. This must’ve been the surprise that he wouldn’t admit to the day before. When the heck did he make these arrangements? The man was amazing. She laughed out loud, got up and ran upstairs. The car would be here in less than twenty minutes.

For twenty minutes Kate sat in a chair across from an elderly secretary. She clutched her purse nervously and looked at her watch. He said to come to meet her for lunch, but now it was after noon, and the woman with the grey hair, eagle eyes and pointed nose sitting across from her told her she had to wait and wouldn’t give her any information. It was obvious she was used to Nathan’s women for she couldn’t withhold her look of annoyance. Kate couldn’t really blame her even when she lowered the thick glasses down her pointed nose to scrutinize her. When she announced she was here to have Lunch with Nathan, it didn’t sway her in the least. The woman didn’t even let him know she was here. Restless, she crossed and uncrossed her legs several times. She gave her another patronizing glance before answering the ringing phone.

Not only did that make her uncomfortable, but she’d spent two hours in the salon and the boutique and ended up with a complete makeover. Nathan outdid himself and she wasn’t used to drawing attention like when she left the salon and even walking through his building. She felt like she had something nasty on the end of her nose from all the stares she was getting.

Normally she would have disputed his gift, but after she’d been pampered, she realized that she really needed it. Now she felt vulnerable sitting there in a summery green and white dress with a flared skirt and two inch matching heels. The lady at the boutique told her it would bring out her eyes and her legs. This caused Kate to look down at them. She never considered that she had nice legs, but with the heels, she had to admit, they didn’t look to bad.

“Hi.”

The man's voice startled her. She brought her gaze up to a handsome brown haired blue-eyed man in a navy pinstriped suit, who had stopped directly in front of her.

"Have you been helped?"

"She's waiting for Mr. Thornburg." Came the secretary's voice behind him.

He nodded at her, "It seems you may be waiting for a bit, he has been held up in a meeting." He flashed her a handsome grin, "Of course I don't mind entertaining a friend of his for a minute while he's busy, Miss..."

"Shaw." Smiling, she stood and took his offered hand, "Kate Shaw."

"My name's Bob Mattson, I'm head of finance."

Was that supposed to impress her? Despite her thinking that the man was handsome and charming, she remembered Nathan telling her that she was too trusting. Not only that, he didn't hold a candle to Nathan. Also, the man hadn't released her hand yet.

"Are you here for a job interview?" He said hopefully.

"Not quite." She already had the job after she finished her degree according to Nathan. Then added innocently, "I'm here for lunch."

"With Mr. Thornburg?"

She nodded.

"Oh, I see," he said raising his eyebrows and not seeming deterred, "Well if Mr. Thornburg doesn't come by in the next few minutes, I may feel obliged to take his place."

Did he? Then a familiar masculine voice got her attention. Her eyes guided to the man with the entourage walking down the hall toward her. Nathan was with at least half a dozen well dressed men in tow, but she only saw him. He was the image of power, by his height, and most importantly his walk alone. His stride said he was in charge and set off an air of self confidence that the men around him seemed no more than mice in comparison. It was one of a man who knew himself and knew his importance. Another man handed him a file and he began to write in it. When he was done he handed it back, glanced at his

expensive wristwatch, and dismissed them with a wave of his hand and they scattered like ants. He seemed so out of her league at that moment and she felt completely insignificant. Then what he did next just clarified that. He didn't even stop and talk to her. He went right by her and Bob to his secretary and spoke to her. She was crestfallen that he didn't even acknowledge her. However, she did overhear something along the lines of 'waiting for a drop dead gorgeous strawberry blond.' She was stunned. Did he double book a date?

"She's right behind you sir." Said the hawk lady pointing at her with the pen she had in her hand.

*Me?* She thought completely dumbstruck.

Kate watched as he turned and finally laid his eyes on her. Then she realized that Bob was probably blocking his view of her a few seconds ago.

Turning to look at her, his expression changed from indifference to surprise, but then warmth flooded into his eyes along with one of the most sexiest grins she'd ever seen as his eyes roved over her body. Next his gaze went to the man who still held her hand, "Bob, let go of my fiancé." Bob let go as if burned. Kate thought she could fall back into the chair with that tone in his voice. She may have been naïve, but Nathan never used that tone. It was possessiveness; there was no doubt about it this time. She felt a thrill go through her. Never in her life had she heard that tone come from him.

"Fiancé?" Bob said in disbelief looking at her with his brows raised in surprise, Then he followed with a series of apologies, then congratulations, smiled at Kate and quickly excused himself and left. Nathan took the hand that Bob held pressing a kiss on the palm making her blush, "My God, I didn't even recognize you. You're ravishing."

"shush." She whispered blushing, causing him to laugh.

"Come kitten, I have forty five minutes to spend with you." He led her to the elevator leaving the hawk lady gawking at them. Oddly enough they were alone in it for the first few floors.

"If you're busy, we can do this another day." She offered.

He looked incredulous, “Not on your life. Look at you. After all the trouble you went through, I want to show you off.” Then he smiled, “Only you would think of someone else’s inconvenience.”

She laughed, “Really. So I clean up nice.”

“Kitten you were always nice, now you’re polished.” He added huskily while meeting her gaze. “In fact *gorgeous*.”

She blinked at him and her lips parted in surprise at that compliment, “You’ve changed.” In all of her past moments with him, she couldn’t ever remember a flattering comment about her looks. Even the one yesterday didn’t even touch the way he said this.

He grinned down at her, “I’m engaged. I know what a good catch I have and I’m not afraid to pay my future wife a compliment that she justly deserves.”

*Engaged. Wife?* How wonderful that sounded. He seemed to think so too, for his tone had a hint of pride in it and her knees weakened over that look he gave her. Without thinking, she threaded her arm through his more for support, but he quickly covered her hand with his as if it was the most natural thing in the world at that moment. The elevator stopped through a series of floors and people got on or off, but neither one of them seemed to notice because they suddenly couldn’t take their eyes from one another.

The elevator opened then and he led her out of the building and down the street three blocks to the bistro.

Once they got their salads and coffee, he made apologies for having her wait.

“I understand you’re busy.” She conceded, “but that hawk lady of yours was tempted to bite my hand.”

He looked perplexed, “Hawk lady?”

Flushing she continued a little sheepishly, “Your secretary.”

He burst into a deep throaty string of laughter, “I’ll explain things to her.” He said with some difficulty finally able to bring his laugh to a chuckle, “She’s used to some of my other

acquaintances, and had to deal with the unfortunate episodes of women scorned.”

“Oh.” She immediately understood. She doubted she would take rejection from Nathan very well either.

“I keep my personal life away from business as much as I can, but some women don’t take well to rejection.”

Looking at him sitting across from her made her understand why. Even sitting there casually he was unmistakably charismatic. He was leaning back comfortably in his chair with his legs crossed as if the world revolved around him. Most likely it did. “I take it this has happened a lot.” She said with a frown.

“More than you think.” He stated honestly. Then he studied her worried expression, “Kate, that’s in the past. I’m marrying you. Did I tell you how beautiful you look? You could stop traffic with that dress.” In fact there wasn’t one pair of male eyes that weren’t on her just walking down the street. Maybe he went too far with the gift because she was ravishing. He certainly didn’t like the feelings of jealousy raging through him. Never in his life did he want to break the teeth of another man ogling his companion.

It was a marriage of convenience and he knew it, but she’d take the compliment anyway and still couldn’t help blushing profusely. “Thank you.” She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice. Did he really mean to give up all of his women for her? They never really discussed sex at all except for that brief moment in his penthouse. Just the thought of the subject made her blush. Thankfully he thought it was because of his compliment. Time to change the subject.

“Zoe wants to bring her Beau over for...”

“No.” He said curtly not even letting her finish.

She stared at him in exasperation, “Nathan, don’t refuse this for her.”

“I will end up thumping him.” He said as his expression darkened.

“No you won’t. You have to let her grow up sometime.”

“Like you did?”

She froze. The reminder of the indiscretion in her past that he had to rescue her from was beyond shameful to her. It was true that she was just about the same age as Zoe when it happened and because of it, she never dated again.

He swore seeing her expression, “Kate, I’m sorry. I should have never brought that up. It’s in the past.”

She swallowed hard and continued, pretending he didn’t say anything. “She’s more responsible than you give her credit for.”

“Kate...”

“Nathan, please leave it alone.” She said beseechingly, “Let’s stay on subject of Zoe, please.” He finally nodded in resignation and she continued. “Now she didn’t have my upbringing, she at least had other people in her life that influenced her and she would know better than...well...”

“You mean, about sex?” he queried, “I can’t talk to her about those things, but you can, can’t you Kate?”

Oh *God*, Zoe could probably tell her more than she knew. However, here again they were back to sex, “I can try.” She felt her cheeks get hot. *Could this subject get any more awkward?*

“Aren’t women better at explaining the birds and bees than men?”

How the hell would she know? “I expect so.” How that man could sit there and discuss intimacy so casually was beyond her. Maybe she was blatantly naïve and times had changed so much that people did such things or that he had it more often than a cup of coffee and it was completely normal for him. She didn’t doubt that for a moment. Even with a quick glance around the bistro she didn’t miss that every pair of female eyes were drawn to him. Who could blame them? He was so disgustingly sinful looking. His whole demeanor, even the way he sat lazily in the chair, gave off an air of sexual perfection. Yet, he didn’t let on that he even noticed the attention. It was probably because he was used to the interest from the opposite sex.

“I would Kate, but I’m her brother.” He continued, “Big brothers don’t talk to their little sisters about sex, birth control...”

He frowned and his eyes darkened, “She’d better not be...I’ll kill...”

“Okay, I’ll do it.” She interrupted trying to calm him, “Can we have Roger over for dinner this weekend? I told her I would ask you.”

He leaned back in his seat and set his intense gaze on her, yet there was the slight twitching of amusement of his lips, “I see. This is the way it’s going to be now that there are going to be two Thornburg women in the house.”

She smiled trying to ignore the tremor that went through her over the implication that she would soon be a Thornburg, “Even with half a dozen, we still have a formidable opponent.”

He chuckled, “Glad to hear it kitten.” He glanced at his watch, “I’ve got to go. Walk me back.” She nodded grabbed her purse and got up. Nathan paid the bill and took her hand to walk her back to his building. The car was waiting in front and he opened the door for her, “I’ll be late tonight.”

“Nathan, you never answered my request for Zoe.”

“Because I don’t want that boy in my home.” He said with obvious distaste. “I did hear you.”

“For Zoe.” She added causing him to release an angry breath and look over her head considering it. Then he brought his light blue gaze back to her.

“For you.” He leaned down and kissed her gently on the forehead, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t read him the riot act.”

She grinned, “Fine with me.” Actually she’d write the act and hand it to him to dictate to Roger because she felt as equally as protective about Zoe, but she was also practical and remembered what it was like at her age.

He chucked her under the chin and with a devastating smile, he helped her into the limo. Without a backward glance went back into his building with that perfect gaited stride of confidence. Kate watched him go wondering how he could switch back and forth so easily. Then again the way he spoke to Bob caught her completely off guard. However, the man was filthy rich, had women by the armloads and probably never had to compete for attention in his life. Seeing his future wife

holding the hand of another man probably threw him off. She smiled. It was kind of nice to see that he had that human trait. Closing her eyes, she leaned back in the leather seat as the car slid away from the curb remembering that the man did spend the night with her because she was distraught refusing to leave. He also took over her brother's arrangements when she couldn't find her wits enough to write her name. He took care of her. Never in her life had that ever happened. Eric tried, but he had to work to support her and wasn't able to give her that parental affection on top of everything else, so she was still lonely. But, Nathan seemed to fill that loneliness, and give her a sister as a bonus. He may not love her, but he was trying to make her feel special. She was sure he'd never allowed a woman so close before like he said and that is why he had difficulty with it. First he could be so warm, then that cool drape would come between them. It seemed the only time that he would let down the curtain is when they were touching. So, she decided with a slight smile, she'd make sure she touched him more.

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It was late when Nathan came home. In fact it was just past eleven in the evening when she heard the door open. Kate had changed into pink and white pyjama bottoms with a pink tank top and curled up on the sofa with a glass of wine after everyone else had gone to bed. She managed to find his stereo and his collection of classical music. Bach, she loved Bach. Then she turned on the gas fireplace sat down and relaxed. It was a wonderful soothing atmosphere and she could definitely get used to it.

"That looks delicious."

She spun around at the sound of his deep sensual voice, "What?" just to see him toss his suit jacket over a chair and loosen his tie. It was so damn appealing she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

"The wine."

"Oh. I'll get you a glass." She said shaken by his words and took the opportunity to tear her eyes from him. Did he really mean the wine? Part of her was hoping not. She set down hers

and got up and went to the kitchen. She poured him a glass, paused while looking at the half empty bottle, shrugged and took the it back with her. He was already sitting on the sofa next to where she was with his feet up on the coffee table and his arm slung across the back. She hesitated for a moment until he patted the cushion beside him. Smiling, she handed him his glass and sat down.

“Thank you.” He took a drink. Then looked at her, “I never knew your hair was this long.” His lean fingers closed over a lock and rolled it between them, “You always wore it up. Even when we were in bed together that night you had it twisted up.”

He was so close to her, she was at a loss for words. To top it all off he said the words ‘bed together’ like it was something more. It was undeniable the ache that started in her for him. That same ache that began when he lay next to her the night before. “It was always this long.” She almost whispered.

“When you were younger,” he added bringing his eyes back to hers, “But I wasn’t sure if you had cut it. You should wear it down around me. I like it.” He released it and settled back against the sofa with a sigh closing his eyes, “Long day.” He murmured.

Again when she felt like she was making some headway with him he switched subjects. “Hectic?”

“No. Just long. I’m overdue for a vacation.” He opened his eyes and looked at her, “When we get married, we’ll take a few weeks and see Europe. Just you and I. Would you like that?”

“Would I ever!” She said unable to keep the excitement out of her voice causing him to chuckle.

“That’s what I like about you Kate, you’re just plain honest.”

*Like.* How come that word seemed so dreadful coming from him.

“Come here.” He put his hand on her shoulder and drew her against him, “That’s better.” He closed his eyes again. “Did you tell my sister that you had me wrapped around your finger?”

“That’s untrue.”

Again he chuckled, "Is it? You know that she and Miss Muller had been trying to get me to agree to meet this young man for over a month."

"No she didn't." she said incredulously.

"Then you come along, make one suggestion and have me bending to your will." He snapped his fingers. "Like that."

"I hardly think that is how you would put it." She laughed.

He cracked an eye, "No? Kitten you have a lot to learn, because the way Bob was fawning all over you today, made me want to fire him. You don't know your own potency."

Her mouth fell open, but before she could answer he quickly changed the subject.

"By the way, I told my secretary that on no uncertain terms were you to be kept waiting like that again."

"Your secretary?" She was still trying to recover from his earlier comment.

"the hawk lady."

Now she really did laugh.

"God it's good to hear that from you again." He finished his wine in several gulps. "I've got to get to bed. He stood up, "I'll see you in the morning. Don't stay up to late; I like it when you sit with me at breakfast." With that he left the room grabbing his jacket on the way out.

If she didn't know better he seemed uncomfortable about what he was saying to her, but this was Nathan, the man would be comfortable at a guillotine. She found herself feeling disappointed that he didn't even kiss her goodnight. Although sitting there with him holding her was very very pleasant.

Unknown to her Nathan paused at the top of the stairs and turned to look at her. She was fingering a lock of her hair like he was only moments ago. Touching her was beginning to be a problem with him and he had to leave before the evidence of how much of a problem was going to show. Kate was precious to him, she always was, and he knew he had to take his time with her or he'd frighten her away. There was no other like her in the world as far as he was concerned and he really didn't want to lose her. He'd gotten her to agree to his proposal, but he knew that

rushing her would chase her away. That's why he was holding back.

People may have thought he had everything he ever wanted because of his wealth and his looks, but there was one thing he always thought was just a hair's breath out of his reach.

Kate.

She was his best friend's baby sister and had his eye when she started growing into a woman. Eric was due home in a few weeks from his tour overseas and Nathan had every intention of talking to him about Kate. Only he'd been killed. Inside he was a mess over the incident. Eric and he were as close as brothers, but he needed to be strong for Kate. He wanted her to need him and so far it seemed to be working.

After she called him and that gut wrenching feeling hit him from the news, he'd started putting his plan into action. It was wrong to manipulate her in such a vulnerable state, but she didn't seem to see how he looked at her. How he always looked at her.

Prior to that he wasn't sure if she was interested in him. She was confident and independent and used to coping with things on her own, so when she reached out to him, he used it.

It was odd that Eric never noticed how he looked at Kate. Maybe he was a master at hiding his feelings that he even fooled his best friend. Who could blame him? After his mother died, his father went a little crazy with publicized affairs and when he remarried, Zoe came along and he needed to be strong for her because her mother had no interest in being a mother, so he'd spent most of his life hiding his emotions.

Kate took a swallow of her wine and Nathan thought even that slight gesture was incredibly alluring. Everything about this woman was downright sensual and attractive.

Amazingly enough, she had no idea on how beautiful she was to the opposite sex, but he knew, and like hell he was going to share. He actually considered firing Bob after only touching her, one of his most trustworthy employees. Then he weighed the consequences. This was something he had to get used to. Kate

was gorgeous and that body she possessed was what men could only dream about. And she didn't have a clue.

When she was assaulted by that boy years ago he wanted to cut his hands off for touching her because by then he'd she'd started to catch his eye and she was only sixteen!

Shaking his head he finally turned away and went to his room. Christ he wanted her! He had a permanent ache for that woman for years. Oh he tried to dispel it by being with other women, but nothing worked. It was a hard conclusion to come to for a confirmed bachelor, but she was going to be his.

He stripped off his clothes after washing up and got into bed stacking his hands behind his head still deep in thought about this whole situation. It may have seemed like he had her where he wanted her, but there was still a chance that she would run. Truth of the matter was, he was insanely possessive of her even though he didn't show it like he wanted. Until he got that ring on her finger and she said 'I do', he wasn't taking it for granted that she said yes to his proposal. Kate was different from other women. She wasn't dependant on a man to make her happy. She was vibrant and outgoing and filled with humility.

He admired her.

He loved her.

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She was suffocating. Reaching out she realized she was in a confined space and it was dark, black dark. She struggled for breath, but there was no air. Then she heard screaming, panicked, horrified screaming. Turning her head a dim light suddenly shone and there was Eric staring back at her with dead eyes. Then a voice.

"Kate! Kate! Wake up, you're having a nightmare." It was Nathan.

Her eyes shot open seeing him hovering above her. She released a sob and immediately threw her arms around his neck and clung to him.

"Shh, it's all right baby, you're safe." He soothed tightening his arms around her. "You're trembling, poor kitten." He buried his face in her hair and breathed deeply. She smelled

like lavender and citrus. It was an amazing scent for a woman. It was amazing for her. "It was just a dream honey." He added feeling her tremble again.

"It was horrible." She choked out. "I was in Eric's coffin." She shut her eyes and buried her face in his neck.

"Is she all right Nathan?"

"She's fine Zoe, go back to bed...wait, get her a glass of water first all right?"

"Sure."

Kate vaguely heard footsteps recede down the hall. "I'm sorry. You will never get a decent night's sleep." She murmured against his skin now wet with her tears.

"It doesn't matter. You should quit worrying about everyone else. Things like this don't go away just because you want them to, and it's too soon to let go. Did you want me to stay?"

She didn't hesitate and nodded against him. Whenever he spoke, she could feel the vibration from him to her body. As for his words, he probably knew that well. He'd lost his mother before her and Eric lost their parents. Nathan wasn't a stranger to grief either.

"Okay. But I need to go put some clothes on, I'm in my underwear. Are you going to be okay for a moment?"

Suddenly she released him as his words sunk in and she immediately became aware of the warmth from his naked upper half that soaked through her thin tank top, "Oh God, I'm sorry." She was sure she blushed clear to her toes.

He smoothed the hair out of her face, smiling, "It's all right Kate, we'll be sleeping together soon, I'm sure you can handle me in my shorts. I'll be right back." He got up and left the room, not the slightest bit bashful at his near nakedness.

Sleeping together? Oh my God that sounded so wonderful. A thrill shot through her. She tried not to look, but she couldn't help herself. His powerful torso was a sight to behold. He wore jockey shorts not briefs and they encircled his thighs like a second skin. She bit her lip to keep from groaning at

the sight, then Zoe entered with a glass of water. She was thankful for the quick distraction.

“Here sis,” she said endearingly near making her weep again, “I got you some Tylenol too.”

Kate reached out and touched her cheek, “You are a real sweetheart. How did I get along without you?” Zoe gave her a brilliant smile. She took the Tylenol and followed it with a drink of water.

“It was a bad dream wasn’t it?”

Kate took another swallow, “It was horrible.” She turned on her side and set the glass on her bedside table. She didn’t want to tell her what it was about. It was something that you didn’t relay to a teenager.

“Are you going to be okay Kate?”

The concern in her voice was years beyond the young girl’s age and Kate gave her a reassuring smile and cupped her cheek, “You are a gem. Now that I’m here, I can’t believe how much I’ve missed you.”

Zoe actually blushed.

“Out imp.” Came Nathan’s deep voice, “You have school in the morning.”

“Nathan, just because you get to marry her doesn’t mean I can’t pamper her too.” She said defensively.

He was wearing a dark pair of pajama bottoms and a white undershirt but Kate still couldn’t get the image of his half naked form out of her head. Ruffling his sister’s hair he inclined his head toward the door causing her to sigh overdramatically. Mumbling her disagreement, she gave Kate a brief hug and left, shutting the door behind her.

He waited until the door shut, “Are you sure about this?”

She moved over in the bed. God was she ever. “Yes.”

The bed shifted with his weight and within seconds he had her pulled next to him. “It must’ve been a horrible nightmare, you’re still trembling.”

“It’s fading.” If only he knew that she’d quit shaking from the dream when she saw him in his underwear. It was him she was trembling over now.

His large hand rubbed her shoulder and silence fell between them. She thought he was almost asleep when he spoke again, "We're going to have to get married soon, because I don't think I could sleep next to you anymore without resisting the urge to put my hands all over you."

"What?" she lifted her head to stare down at him, just to find he was looking at her and unmistakably his eyes were smoldering.

"Surely you know the affect you have on a man?" he adjusted his head to look at her better. Then he read her confused expression, "Wow, you really don't, do you?"

She shook her head with more enthusiasm than she meant causing him to smile then it changed to a frown.

"I didn't like Bob touching you. I would have certainly fired him on the spot if he wasn't so good at his job. If he touches you again I probably won't hesitate."

"Nathan? This isn't like you."

"No, I know it isn't. I've been watching you since you were a teenager, waiting for you to grow up. And boy did you grow up."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Eric was like a brother to me. I could never touch you when he was alive out of respect, but I wanted to. Badly." His hand moved to her hair gently threading his fingers down their silken locks. "Of course I eventually would have asked him if I could marry you, but not for a few years yet."

"You never said anything." Her mouth fell open.

"I couldn't. You were too young, but I knew I wanted you. I was willing to wait." He said. "You were so beautiful back then, now as a woman, you are startling."

"Oh my God." She whispered. All these years, she thought it was just her that felt that way. "I never knew. You always seemed so indifferent."

"Is that what you thought? Christ, I thought I was an open book. I followed you around like a love-sick teenager. How the hell do you think I knew which party you'd be at that night with that boy?"

“I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“I followed you when I heard through one of your friends that you were going out on a date with him. That little bastard had been saying things about you.” He tightened his embrace, “And he touched you. My *God*, I wanted to kill him.”

“I was so ashamed that you found me like that.”

“Not once did I blame you kitten, even though I took it out on you. Back then I considered you mine. It was then I realized that I had to let you grow up and experience life. So I backed off. It wasn’t easy.”

“I was never the same, not because of you, but because of my experience that night. I wasn’t very trustworthy of men. I was so grateful that you saved me, but ashamed of my actions. I didn’t think you cared.”

“I was so worried that you wouldn’t accept my proposal. I was even willing to resort to using Zoe as an edge, because I know you love her. Jesus kitten, I have to beat women off with a stick, but I couldn’t get close to you. The one woman I ever wanted.” He confessed unsteadily.

“I don’t just love her Nathan,” she paused, “I love you too. I always have.”

It was his turn to look surprised, “Love? As in brotherly love?”

“No.” she swallowed, “I mean madly, deeply, I ache for your touch love. I want to have your children love.”

His legendary composure ruptured, “Oh God Kate!” He snaked his hand through the hair at the back of her head, pulled it down to his and kissed her before she could take another breath. His other hand wrapped around her waist and pulled her directly on top of him.

She was on fire. When his lips touched hers she burned with white hot flames and that ache turned into a voracious craving.

“God you taste good.” He groaned against her mouth. Then he rolled her onto her back all the while slanting his mouth expertly over hers, bringing his hard body on top of her softness, “Open your mouth for me.” He murmured and she did. He

thrust his tongue between her lips and caressed hers. She gasped at the erotic feeling, tangled her fingers through his hair and forced his mouth closer to hers. His hands found the edge of her tank top and worked it up over her breasts so he could caress them without barriers. “You’re beautiful everywhere. More than I ever fantasized about.”

“So are you.” She answered breathlessly arching toward him before he covered her mouth with his again.

“I want you.” He added thickly, “In every way possible.”

“y—yes.” She agreed to far gone to notice that he’d worked her top over her head and was circling the waistband of her bottoms with his fingers.

Within seconds she was naked and he left her for a moment so he could remove his own clothing before coming down on her again. He kissed every inch of her, exploring the contours of her body with his hands. When his mouth circled over one of her nipples she cried out and arched toward him. She could feel the length of his arousal pressed firmly against her belly and it excited her. Never in her life did she think that she could feel so alive, so responsive to a man as she did with Nathan. When, he gripped her hips and lifted her slightly as he probed for entrance, she enticed him by wrapping her legs around his hips. Only when he gave a powerful thrust did he stop cold. It wasn’t the barrier of her innocence, although he felt that instantly, it was the cry of pain that she released. It was so profound that it ripped his heart out when he knew he hurt her. “Sweet Jesus! Kate!” He lifted himself up on his arms placed on either side of her head, “Why didn’t you tell me! Oh, God, baby, I can’t stop now—Christ—I’m dying—” He bowed his head and tried like hell not to move, but she felt so damn tight and warm that he was ready to explode.

She saw the look of restraint, “It’s okay,” she whispered, “Don’t stop please. I’ll be okay.”

He shook his head unable to answer her.

To get her meaning across she moved under him causing him to groan and sink deep in her even though it hurt. She

pinched her eyes shut. She wanted him close to her like this. The pain would only happen once. At least she hoped it did.

Slowly he began to move within her watching her responses carefully despite the pleasure he was getting from it he was still trying to control his passion, “Kate open your eyes and look at me.”

She did

“You’re so tight....Christ!” He moved again, to get deeper this time, and her expression suddenly changed. Nathan felt relief knowing that the discomfort was starting to pass.

Only when she released an awed gasp did he change his pattern and increase the force and depth of his rhythm.

“Nathan!” she cried out as a kaleidoscope of pleasure coursed through her. Through the haze of his motions she could hear herself making strangled noises desire. Then waves of undiscovered ecstasy ebbed low where they joined and began to careen upwards through her. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders, threw her head back and called his name as it pushed over the brink.

“Let it go.” She heard him say in broken rasps, “Come on, fly with me.” He gripped her hips and finished it with another firm thrust and a deep masculine groan of finality as she shuddered beneath him. Then she felt his mouth on hers again as his arms circled around her back and he rolled to the side, “don’t move.” He murmured, “I want to stay in you as long as I can.” He kissed her again. “My beautiful Kate.” He set his head back to look at her, “You should have said something. I wouldn’t have been such a brute.”

She gave him a weak smile, “Would it have made a difference?”

“I might have waited until we were legally wed.” he paused, looking at her for a moment, “Hell, I doubt it.”

She laughed.

“This was better than I could have imagined.”

“Really?” she lifted her brows

“You’re so perfect and tonight I made you completely mine.” He said possessively followed with a tightening of his embrace.

“No argument.” She confessed with a sigh.

His hand came up and caressed her cheek, brushing stray locks of hair off her skin while studying her face, “Did I hurt you?”

“Did it sound like it?” she flushed, “I might have woken the household again.”

He shook his head, “Zoe doesn’t wake for anything, except for your screams, but your door was open at the time. The walls in this place are thick. No one heard you, except me...what a turn on. Those sexy little noises you make when I moved within you. God, Kate, I couldn’t possibly expect anything more amazing than this.” He kissed her nose. “I’m marrying you next week at the latest. I can’t morally touch you like this again without that ring on your finger. You had me so excited I didn’t use protection and there’s no point asking you if you were on the pill.”

Her fingers absently traced his jaw line, “Would it be so bad, if I got pregnant?”

He flashed her a devilish grin, “Do you feel that? Just thinking about making a baby with you has me hard again.”

She shifted her hips causing him to groan and her to smile.

“Okay,” he rolled her onto her back again, “After tonight, I won’t touch you again until we’re married.” She laughed but it was cut off by his mouth.

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When she awoke the next day the space beside her was empty. Glancing at the clock she realized it was still early enough and he was probably down at breakfast. He probably got up earlier as not to embarrass her with the other members of the household. Achingly she got out of bed to have a quick shower, throw on a green summery dress that came above the knees, plait her hair and rush downstairs like an eager kid on Christmas.

As usual, he was sitting at the table reading the paper and drinking coffee, but this time he set down his cup and the paper and stood up. "Good morning kitten." He grinned. She started toward him when Miss Muller came into the room causing her to stop dead. The woman laid out platters of eggs, toast and bacon, singing to herself sparing only a short look back and forth at either of them before she smiled and toddled out. They didn't pay her any heed, instead smiling at each other with a new knowledge glittering in their eyes as blue met green across the table.

"Sleep well." He said.

"You know the answer to that."

"Come here." He held out his arms and she rushed into his embrace.

"Oh yuck you two." Said Zoe with a grin coming into the dining room yawning sleepily and plopping in a seat, "Marry her Nathan, so you two can get all mushy legally." She started scooping some breakfast on her plate. "By the way." She said without looking up, "Can I invite Roger over this coming Saturday for dinner?"

Nathan released Kate and frowned down at the top of his sister's head. Kate nudged him and gave him a look that told him to behave. He sighed, "I suppose."

Zoe looked up at him as he pulled out a chair for Kate, "Thanks big bro." she grinned, "I'm so glad you're here." She added looking at Kate.

Nathan sat down to finish his coffee, "Quit sucking up. She won't always be on your side."

"Yes she will." Zoe said confidently while shoveling some eggs in her mouth. "Besides, I know now that she can convince you that the sky is purple and the grass is blue."

He leaned back in his chair, still frowning, but there was a glint of amusement in his eyes, "You'll be late for school."

She looked at her watch, "Fine. Get rid of me, but what I said is true and you know it." She jumped up and rushed around the table and kissed his cheek, "Thanks Nathan." She beamed at him before rushing out of the room.

He waited until she was gone before turning his frown on Kate who was trying to suppress a grin, “See? What do you say to that?” he said gesturing toward the door his sister just ran through.

Mustering up the most serious expression she could she answered, “The sky is really purple Nathan.”

He burst into laughter. “Get your ass over here.”

Grinning, she got up and immediately sat on his lap allowing him to kiss her.

After a moment he lifted his head, and his eyes searched hers, “I just can’t get enough of you.” His hand came up and brushed her long hair back over his shoulder, then continued to caress her cheek, “I could make love to you all day, and still not get enough.”

She blushed.

“Maybe you and I should fly to Vegas this weekend and get married.”

Her breath caught in her throat, “Nathan I—”

“—Did you want a big wedding?” he interrupted sensing her hesitation.

“And invite who?” she smiled. “I just wanted—”

“No.” he put his finger on her lips to silence her, “Do not back out. I can’t let you go Kate, don’t ask me to. Not only that, we have to consider the fact that you may be pregnant after last night.” His eyes darkened with desire, “I hope.” He added.

She felt a thrill go through her, “Really?”

“More than I can say.” He said with conviction, “A beautiful little girl that looks like you would be a Godsend.”

Smiling she kissed his finger, “I wasn’t going to protest and I would like a boy that looks like you.” she wanted to tell him how much she loved him again. He must’ve seen it in her eyes for he pulled her mouth towards his and kissed her until she thought she was a pile of mush.

“As much as I hate leaving you, I have an important meeting that I know I’m going to be late for.”

Reluctantly she got off his lap and he stood up. "I'll try to be home earlier tonight. Then we'll discuss more of our future together. There's plans to be made."

"Okay Nathan."

He kissed her once more pushing her up against the table edge and sliding his hand down her backside. "Hell I'd love to take you right here on this table."

"Oh lord." She murmured against his mouth.

"I've got to go." He said reluctantly giving her another scorching, toe curling kiss.

"Sure you do." She smiled against his sensuous mouth.

Groaning in disappointment, he reluctantly released her and was gone after a prolonged stare. Leaving her totally aroused.

Pushing herself away from the table she went back into the sitting room unable to shake the images of them together last night. Her hands rubbed down her flat stomach to her thighs and she kept thinking on how much she loved him. She almost laughed out loud. These thoughts would consume her day if she didn't find something else to do that was distracting. Kate took time to phone her friend Marnie and ask her to go over and check on the house. She wondered if Marnie was upset with her over her engagement. Marnie was one of the ones that followed him around like a love-sick puppy when he came to the house to see Eric, so she wasn't quite sure how well she'd taken the news.

Nathan was right, she had a few things to decide about her future. There was the house for instance. Did she put it up for sale? Unfortunately the thought made her sad. She and Eric grew up in that house and it held memories for her. However, when she returned to college next week, she would be able to afford the tuition for her last semester. She knew that Nathan told her he would pay for it, but even if he were to be her future husband she couldn't bring herself to rely on him for everything.. Later when he came home, she would run the idea by him. She hung up the phone after an hour long conversation then near jumped as it rang again. It was Nathan.

“I thought you had a meeting?” She said trying to keep the excitement out of her voice at hearing his.

“I stepped out for a moment to answer an important call and thought I would see how you’re doing. I don’t like leaving you alone during the day.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you Kate? Did you want to come see me at lunch again? I could order out. I’ll have Marlene—hawk lady, as you call her,” he chuckled, “get us something.”

She didn’t know what to say. He seemed to sense her hesitation.

“I miss you already.” He added.

“How could I refuse you after that?” She sighed causing him to chuckle again. There was another voice in the background on his end of the phone. A feminine voice.

“Who’s that?”

“My PA....sorry kitten, got to go. See you in a bit.”

“Bye.” She replied and they hung up. That was quick for him to get a Personal Assistant so fast. Well, she guessed it wouldn’t be hard with a temp agency. It surprised her the feelings of worry that developed. The woman sounded young. What if she was pretty too? Keeping that in mind she took time making herself look as pretty as she possibly could. She chose a lovely form fitting white dress with black piping and a scoop neckline. It was very flattering to her figure without being too revealing. As Nathan had asked her, she left her hair down, pulled on two inch black strappy heels and accessorized with an ebony purse. Looking at herself in the mirror, she decided that was the best she could get.

The ride in the elevator seemed endless and she became more nervous than she was in the car ride across town. Maybe the PA was an older woman like his secretary but had a young voice. Although she thought it, she certainly didn’t believe it and she was correct in her assumption when his secretary hopped up and opened the door for her without hesitation and she got a look at her.

The woman, Marlene, had done an about face overnight. She even gave her a warm smile, that Kate couldn't help but return until she seen the gorgeous red-head leaning over Nathan at his desk. Neither one of them seem to notice that she was standing in the doorway. He smile fell. Marlene noticed it.

"Go on dear," said the secretary, "She has nothing on you. Hold your head up."

Kate looked at the older woman and nodded, "I was wrong about you." She admitted sheepishly.

"That makes two of us. Now go on." She gave her arm a pat.

"Kate!" Nathan finally noticed and quickly stood, walked around his desk and unashamedly kissed her on the mouth leaving his assistant gaping. Then he looked over his shoulder, "Natalie, I'll see you after lunch. I want some time alone with my fiancé."

"Of course Mr. Thornburg." The woman made a point of giving Kate a once over before she gathered some files and left his office with an exaggerated sway of her hips shutting the door behind her.

"God you just keep getting more gorgeous each passing hour." He said to her acting as if the other woman didn't exist.

Instantly she felt relief flood through her and she decided not to mention it to Nathan. She didn't want him to think she was some jealous nag even though she didn't miss the look the woman gave her.

"I love this dress." His hands went to her hips to pull her up against him while his head bent to place warm kisses along her neck.

"you bought it." She said breathlessly tilting her head to allow him better access.

"How quick do you think I can get you out of it?"

She pulled back giving him a look of mock surprise, "don't even think it."

He grinned, "I can lock the door."

"Nathan!"

"I can't help it. You're so damn sexy."

“You said you wouldn’t touch me until after the wedding,” she reminded him with a teasing lilt.

“Hell with that. Call me a liar, but if you’re going to parade around me like this, I’m not going to make it.” To show his meaning his hands started to gather the material of the skirt pulling it up her thighs, “Technically, I don’t even have to unzip it.” Then he released a groan, “No pantyhose and you’re wearing a bloody thong!” His hands smoothed over her bottom. “Oh honey, I’m totally screwed here.”

Before she could protest, not that she even had it in her to do so, his hot mouth was on hers and his tongue thrust hungrily through her parted lips. His fingers found the edge of her panties and pulled them down her thighs. Seconds later the lacy material was on the floor of his office, and he had her lifted up against him with her legs wrapped around his hips while cupping her bottom and backing toward the sofa. Impatiently his mouth devoured hers and she was a willing participant.

Her arms shot around his neck and he pulled her tight against him as he sat on the sofa. Vaguely she could hear the zipper of his slacks, the rustle of material, and a moment later he’d gripped her hips and settled her on his erection. She moaned as she sank on him. Somehow she expected pain like the night before, but it was only a slight discomfort this time before that familiar pleasurable heat started again.

He began murmuring things in her ear. Things he wanted to do to her while his hands guided her hips into a rhythm. It was wild, and Kate thought she was dying as ripples of pleasure washed through her. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore she shuddered and her cry of release was captured by his mouth as he forced himself as deep as he possibly could within her and moaned his own. She collapsed against him burying her face in his neck. Both of them were breathing like they had just run a marathon.

“Unbelievable.” He breathed.

Kate sighed and smiled against his skin which he must’ve felt from the brief chuckle he emitted.

“Hey.” He said softly pulling her back to look at him. “I honestly didn’t call you here to have sex with you.”

“Hmmm?” was all she could say.

He grinned, noting her dazed expression, “Jesus, you are one hot woman, and I have to admit, you can instill an instant erection in me, but this is no way to take a lady. Christ I feel like a lusty teenager. I didn’t even get my damn clothes off.”

Smiling, she kissed him.

He groaned, tightened his embrace and kissed her back. Then he seemed to come to his senses and pulled away, “Kate honey, straighten up. Marlene will be in here any time with our lunch—and in my eagerness, I didn’t lock the door.”

That seemed to snap her out of it. Blushing she hopped up, pulled on her underwear and straightened her dress. When she was done and he’d finished doing up his slacks and tucking in his shirt giving her a rakish grin during the whole procedure, he gathered her into his arms. “This weekend, tomorrow night, we are going to Vegas. There won’t be any more waiting. I can’t take this. I feel so guilty taking you again without that ring on your finger.” Eric would most likely be rolling over in his grave at the way he was disrespecting her.

She stared up at him, “Ring or no ring Nathan, I’m yours. I always will be.”

Marlene came in at that moment with a tray of coffee and sandwiches and even though Kate knew of the public image that Nathan kept, he still didn’t release her. If anything he tilted her head up and kissed her again. Kate dimly heard the door to his office shut as Marlene left.

Lunch was over as quick as it had begun and Nathan walked her out of the building to the car. As before he gave her a light kiss and helped her in the limo. Then he was gone.

When she got home Miss Muller met her at the door with a worried look on her face.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Thornburg is here.”

Kate tilted her head in confusion, “Mr—”

“—Nathan’s father.” She whispered, “Now listen carefully Miss Shaw. I moved your things into Nathan’s room. They only gave me an hour’s notice that they were coming—don’t look at me like that—you can’t convince me that Nathan’s been able to keep his hands off of you, why look at you! Any man in his right mind would be all over you and Mr. Thornburg is a man in his prime, so don’t try and tell me you haven’t been together.”

Kate was sure she blushed to the bone.

“This is the modern age anyway, and you two are getting married. Now you will thank me for the move when you meet them. It seems Nathan has already told them of your engagement and they came home to meet you. It certainly wasn’t to see Zoe. Why those two couldn’t care—” a voice from the other room cut her off.

“Hanna? If that’s Nathan’s intended, bring her in.” said a masculine voice.

Miss Muller called over her shoulder, “Yes sir, just getting her coat off.” Then she turned her attention back to Kate, “Remember what I said.”

Kate nodded as the woman rushed off. She made her way into the sitting room. Lester Thornburg was an older version of Nathan. He looked to be in his mid to late sixties with a full head of grey hair and piercing blue eyes like his son. He was still a handsome man for his age. He was shorter than Nathan but it was obvious that Nathan’s air of self assurance was inherited by the way the man stood and walked toward her. He seemed to be in reasonably good shape but not as muscular as his son. His wife Valerie was at least twenty years younger than he was and had the same auburn hair and green eyes as Zoe. She was still a beautiful woman with a nice shape. Unlike Zoe, the woman’s eyes did not hold an ounce of warmth in them.

“You must be Kate.” Said Lester as he easily embraced her.

Kate waited for the man to let go and he didn’t. Silence stretched for a moment and she began to get increasingly uncomfortable.

“Let her go Lester.” Said Valerie, “Let me see what Nathan has chosen for a wife.”

*What?* It made her sound like an object. When Lester released her she saw a smile on the woman’s face that never reached her eyes. It was then she realized why Nathan was so attached to her and Eric. These were the two coldest people she’d ever met. A barely compressed shiver ran up her spine.

Lester still kept his hands on her shoulders while his eyes roved up and down her body. Good God, she wanted to run and hide or at least go change into some clothes that covered all of her skin. “I’m sorry to hear about your brother.” He offered, “I’ve met him a few times. He was a good friend to my son.”

“It was a pity.” Added Valerie, “He was very handsome.”

Kate watched Lester shoot Valerie a look of contempt and he finally released her.

“So tell us Kate,” Said Valerie, “How did you manage to get Nathan to ask you to marry him.”

My God, the woman sounded completely condescending. Badly, she wanted to say something to set her back on her heels, but these were Nathan’s parents, and she had to get along with them, “I didn’t expect it to be honest.”

“but you certainly didn’t hesitate.” She persisted.

“Actually...”

“Quit verbally attacking the woman,” Lester intervened and began rubbing a hand up and down her spine. “She’s been through a lot these past few days.”

Kate wanted to step away from that caress like she’d been burned, but she remained where she was, completely speechless. She wished she wasn’t wearing the dress that she’d put on to get Nathan’s attention because his father kept peering down the low neckline.

“Of course Lester.” She let her gaze move over her much like her husband’s but disdain.

Just then Miss Muller entered with a bottle of wine and some glasses.

“I thought we’d celebrate.” Said Lester, “My only son is getting married.”

“We should wait for Nathan.” Kate heard herself say.

“Nonsense.” He began to pour the wine and handed Kate a glass before his own wife.

Miss Muller shot her a sympathetic glance as she walked by her out of the room.

For the next two hours she ground her teeth and put up with their company. Nathan’s father’s inappropriate touching and Valerie’s constant cynicism. Finally to her relief Zoe came home from school. Kate was surprised when the girl’s normally bubbly attitude cut cold when she saw her parents and she literally dropped her packsack on the floor in surprise at seeing them. “Mom—Dad?” She shot a concerned gaze to Kate who subtly shook her head.

“Darling!” Exclaimed Valerie as she kissed Zoe rather coolly on each cheek without even touching her.

“Mother.” She said casually.

Kate noticed that Lester’s eyes warmed somewhat to his daughter and gave her a hug, “Missed you much baby girl.”

“You to dad.” Zoe added with a partial smile.

So that was it. Valerie was mother, and Lester was dad. At least one parent had the decency to have affection for his child. *Poor Zoe*, thought Kate. No wonder Nathan was raising her. Lester released Zoe quickly and Kate realized that he’d hung on to her longer than his own daughter. She ground her teeth knowing that he was using his status as Nathan’s father to constantly touch her. Zoe quickly mumbled and excuse about homework, grabbed her packsack, and ran up the stairs. Kate tried her best to talk about how proud they were of her, but Valerie would rather talk about herself.

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Zoe shut the door to her room and breathed deeply. Lester and Valerie alone with Kate wasn’t something she wanted to see. She quickly pulled out her mobile phone and called Nathan’s private number.

“You’re in Jail.” Came the deep reply after he answered his phone.

“You are not funny.” Said Zoe.

“You ran out of money?” he added with more humor in his tone.

“Quit teasing me. This is serious. Lester and Valerie are here, and—”

“God—where’s Kate.” His voice changed from teasing to complete seriousness.

“She’s alone in the sitting room with them. She’s as white as a ghost.”

“I’m clearing my schedule as we speak—”

Zoe heard him mumble something to someone else before he came back on the phone.

“Get down there and protect her Zoe. I’m on my way home. I’ll be there in a half an hour. Hopefully no damage is done. Christ! I didn’t expect them to come here.” He hung up.

Zoe tossed her phone on the bed and stared at her closed door. Her parents were a preverbal nightmare. Her mother could have been an unfeeling robot for the amount of attention she gave her. And her father was too busy trying to sleep with everything from Zoe’s age to her mother’s age. Only she did know her father cared about her, but Nathan loved her and so did Kate. She didn’t want to lose Kate. She was the closest thing she ever had to having a mother figure, even if she was only a few years older. *Be brave*, she told herself as she got up and went back downstairs.

Poor Kate was on the couch with her father sitting way to close to her and rubbing his fingers over one of her crossed thighs while telling her how lucky Nathan was. Her mother was pacing behind the sofa casually drinking a glass of wine. *Probably her fourth*, thought Zoe. She was impatient and Zoe knew why. Nathan would be coming home soon. Valerie had been chasing her half brother for years. The thought made her sick to her stomach. Then Kate shot Zoe a complete look of helplessness and Zoe wandered over and shoved herself in between her and her father pretending to be completely unaware of the intimacy while beginning to tell her father all about herself. Surprisingly enough, he actually seemed interested. It was still the longest half an hour of her life and when she heard

the front door open, she could have leapt for joy. Especially when Nathan came strolling in scrutinizing the scene with intelligent eyes.

He'd barely got a word out when Valerie practically ran over to him and threw herself at him causing Kate's eyes to widen in shock. Then when she kissed him—on the mouth! She wanted to scratch the woman's eyes out. To her relief, it was Nathan who pulled back nodded politely to her and shook his father's outstretched hand. "You planning on staying long dad?"

"A few days I think." He shot his gaze to Kate who was doing her best not to make eye contact with him.

Nathan inwardly cringed. The old man had sights on Kate and her discomfort was as obvious as a slap in the face. Instinctively he reached for her and drew her against him.

"She's beautiful Nathan. You chose well." Said Lester.

"Yes. I think so too." He planted a genuinely affection kiss on her cheek causing her to smile for the first time in hours.

"I'm going to take us all out for dinner to celebrate."

"That's generous of you." Nathan offered with less affection than usual.

He seemed not to notice. "Come darling." He held his hand to Valerie, "Let's go get changed and unpack."

She shot Kate a look of disdain before following her husband.

When they disappeared up the stairs Nathan instantly cupped Kate's face in his hands and searched her eyes, "God kitten, are you all right?" he said in a low whisper.

"I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me. They are both vultures and I know it."

She released a rush of air in relief.

He kissed her possessively, "I won't let them be alone with you again. I promise." He claimed her mouth again. "I'm so sorry you had to deal with this. Usually they pop in every five years and phone at least once a month to talk to Zoe."

Valerie's eyes narrowed at the scene down below. Although she couldn't hear what they were saying, it was the affection that Nathan was giving the young beautiful woman that

bothered her. As far as she was concerned, Nathan was hers. One night, eighteen years ago, he came home drunk and she was waiting for him. Lester was out with one of his whores, so Valarie was going to get him back and sleep with his son. Of course she never did get that far before he'd stopped her. She was surprised actually; any other sixteen year old would have let her have him, but not Nathan. He had unusual integrity. At least she got to play with him a little and never forgot that night. She knew he was a legend between the sheets now. Things like that travelled in her gossip circles. Yet that one night, she got to touch him, and knew exactly what talent he had between those powerful thighs of his when she went down on him. Her tongue flicked out and licked her dry lips. He was almost passed out when she undid his pants and took him in her mouth. He wasn't hard to begin with, but that quickly changed with her expertise. He seemed to come around and shove her off him before he finished. She didn't care that he stood over her staring at her accusingly or called her a few choice words before he staggered off to bed and locked his door behind him. She knew he locked it, because she checked. Ever since then she was determined to have him completely. Now it wasn't a matter of getting back at her husband, it was a matter of complete lust. Nathan had grown into a fine specimen of masculine flesh with mouth-watering sex appeal and she wanted him. It was him that kept her having sex with his father, because they looked alike. She would close her eyes and pretend that Lester was Nathan, thankfully she never called him that, but there were a few close calls. Now, Nathan was kissing that gorgeous young filly like she was the last woman on earth and her jealousy and anger flared. Never before had she felt such hatred for one of Nathan's women, but this woman was different. Not only was she beautiful, she was sweet...sickly sweet. Even Zoe was crazy about her. Yes, she didn't miss the adoring looks her daughter gave the woman. Her gaze narrowed as Nathan's hand slipped over the woman's bottom and pulled her hips to his. Unfortunately she still couldn't hear what he was saying to her, but by the way she clung to him, she could only imagine the words being whispered huskily in her ear with that

sensual deep voice of his. Cursing to herself and turning away from that scene she went to seek out Lester. Now she was sexually worked up and needed release. She found him in the shower, quickly undressed and got in, went down on her knees and began to suck and tease him before he knew what was happening.

Lester couldn't have been more pleased as his wife went down on him. He shoved his fingers in his wife's hair and pushed himself to the back of her throat while groaning. She may have been a cold bitch, but she could certainly suck a man's cock like no other woman he'd ever had. Lester released her hair and grabbed the taps to steady himself as she constantly guided back and forth on his member nicking her teeth every now and then on his flesh, purposely teasing him. His groaning began to heighten as he felt himself building for a climax. She knew it and increased her movements and friction, pulling him deeper into her mouth until he bellowed and poured into her. Yet she still didn't stop until he was almost on his knees, shuddering release after release. Finally he stood up and took her arm bringing her up with him, "What brought that on?" he said grinning down at her.

Valerie stared up at her husband who Nathan was a spitting image of. There was no doubt that he was a handsome man, even though he was twenty years her senior, but there were times that he was so cold to her and she knew that he didn't have it in him to love her. His children had all of his love and so did his dead wife. Even though she knew she was marrying him for his money at the time she became pregnant with Zoe, she thought she didn't need affection in her life. She wanted prestige and wealth, but over time she started to feel lonely and when he kept seeing other woman, she got bitter and angry. There were many times he'd go on trips abroad and not take her leaving her with the kids. Nathan started to fill out as a man and she began to desire him. She still did knowing that Lester couldn't look at her the way she just witnessed Nathan look at his fiancé. She shrugged in answer to his response, "I like doing it."

“You like having me on my knees, you mean.” He corrected in a dispassionate tone while turning away from her to finish washing.

“Why do you do that? Make everything sound so impersonal.”

“Honey,” he said over his shoulder, “If you weren’t so obvious with the way you drool over my son, maybe I wouldn’t be.”

That was the first time he ever mentioned that he knew about her lusting after Nathan. After the shock wore off she became angry, “You son of a bitch.” She seethed, “You’re one to talk.”

“At least I didn’t screw your sister.” He answered coolly. “Though I could have, but sleeping with someone in your family is repulsive.”

She gritted her teeth knowing exactly what he meant by that. She wasn’t sure if he knew what she tried to do all those years ago, but he obviously suspected something. Without saying another word she got out of the shower.

“Val.” He said as she started toweling off.

“What?” she answered abruptly.

He turned off the taps and opened the shower door, “Go get in bed. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes. We’ll end this tiff properly with some rough sex.”

Did he really mean that? It had been weeks since he’d touched her.

“I meant it.” He said as if reading her mind. He knew he wasn’t nice to her and maybe he created that cold heart she had, but she was still dynamite in the sack. Truth of it was, he hadn’t cheated on her for over a year, but he hadn’t touched her much either and there was reasons for that, but those were his secrets.

Slowly she smiled, and then nodded, “Okay.”

He watched her leave and glanced down at his erection. It pleased him that he was able to get aroused with her. As for Nathan’s fiancé, and the inappropriate way he was toward her, was to see if she was serious about him. She seemed to be. He would have to apologize to her soon for his outrageous

behavior. His son was angry with him too and he would let him know why he did what he did in the morning. There were other women that Nathan dated that he was able to get in bed because of his wealth that Nathan didn't know about. He was only protecting him even if it seemed extreme. He didn't want him to end up with a woman like Val. He wanted him to end up with a woman as devoted as his mother was. She was the only person that he ever loved to the point of wanting to give his life for her. Only as much as he wanted to, nothing could have saved her. Every day he grieved for her. She would have loved to have seen what a handsome man her son turned into.

At dinner Kate ended sitting between her future father in law and Nathan. Unfortunately she was still reeling from the discomfort of earlier and could barely look at him when he talked to her. Nathan saw her expression and whispered his concern. She shook her head and did her best to try and enjoy the evening with him and Zoe. However, Valerie seemed to have made it her sole purpose to openly glare at her. Was she the only one that noticed?

That night she shoved Nathan up against the closed door to his room and demanded that he make love to her in every way possible while undoing the belt to his slacks. She needed to get the memory of that man off her. After an initial look of shock he instantly obliged her. They made love on the floor half dressed. He was shirtless with his slacks open at the front and halfway down his ass and her dress was pushed up her hips and the bodice wide open. Then in the bed naked, then after a short rest while he openly discussed various forms of making love. When she asked him to show her one, he bent her over the foot board and slid into her from behind while cupping her full breasts in his hands. Kate released a gasp of pleasure not expecting him to be so deep inside her and without thinking started to move against him. He let her take charge, sitting back on his heels as she gripped the footboard and continued to rise and fall on him. One of his hands reached down and began to tease her where they joined and she shouted his name. Then he'd lost it, grabbed her hips and rammed into her until he exploded into a million

pieces biting her shoulder to stifle a yell. Her gorgeous ass pressed against him so intimately near had him come too soon. Christ, she may have been a virgin, but she was a fast learner. He embraced her from behind, “Kate.” he groaned, “you drive me completely wild.”

After a moment she found her own voice, “I didn’t think that was possible. Even when you described it to me.” She took a moment to catch her breath, “But *wow*.”

He chuckled and eased her back into bed with him. Pulling the covers over both of them he stared down at her, “Want to tell me what this was all about?” she shook her head rapidly. “I’m pretty sure I know, but I need you to be honest with me.”

After a brief pause she reluctantly told him just to see his face tighten in anger. “I didn’t think he’d be that stupid...” followed by a string of epithets.

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

His eyes darted to hers, “Of course you should have.” His hand cupped her cheek, “You’re mine Kate, no one else’s. I’ve waited years for you.” He leaned down and kissed her affectionately, “Every day was worth it from what I have now.” Managing a smile despite his internal rage, he continued, “You are so damn hot in bed. I’ve never made love to a woman three times in one night before in my life—and half dressed.” He added with a chuckle.

Her eyes widened, “Really?”

He lifted one of his legs to show her the sock he was wearing. “I somehow forgot that one.”

She burst into laughter.

He chuckled, “I’m not a machine. But god woman, you get me so worked up.” Then his eyes darkened in anger again, “I’m going to speak to my father tomorrow, first thing.”

“Nathan...”

He but his fingers on her mouth to stop her protest, “No arguments. You have no idea how angry it makes me to know that he’s been touching you. My own *father* Kate. This is not your problem. It’s between him and I.”

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Unfortunately the next morning he wasn't at the breakfast table, but after wandering around the vast Penthouse she heard his voice coming from the study, and headed toward the half open door just to find herself stopping outside. He was talking to Valerie. She recognized her voice. It was practically cooing. At least Nathan sounded annoyed. It made her feel better.

"She's a passing fancy Nathan. I know what you like."

"Don't touch me Valerie."

Obviously this was a private conversation and Kate felt like she was spying.

"you let me touch you all those years ago."

Kate froze. She meant to turn and leave, but the woman's voice stopped her cold.

"I was drunk."

"I never forgot how well endowed you are." She cooed.

Feeling bile rise in her throat Kate tore out of there like she was of fire. She made it to the hall bathroom before she vomited.

Meanwhile Nathan peeled Valerie's hands off his chest and gave her a gentle shove backwards, "I was drunk, nearly passed out and you took advantage of a teenager. It was sick Valerie. Sober, you wouldn't have even got my pants undone. I'm not attracted to you." His expression darkened, "I could have charged you with statutory rape." He warned, "Be thankful that Zoe was born then. I couldn't live with the idea that I put her mother behind bars."

She blinked twice. Nathan had never spoken to her like that. He was cordial to her, but distant, and she secretly thought that he had enjoyed it as much as she did.

"I love Kate. I always have. As far as I'm concerned there is no woman in the world that can measure up to her. You included."

She cringed at that last statement. "Are you just upset because I took your virginity?"

He actually laughed at that but his tone was anything but humorous, “Is that what you think? I was no more a virgin at sixteen than you were.”

“What?”

“I had just come from a football party Valarie. One of many. There was never a shortage of cheerleaders or other girls. Why the hell do you think I joined the football team? Christ. I lost my virginity when I was fourteen.” He stepped toward her, “Do *you* think I would actually find you attractive? Look at that young hot woman I’m going to marry. You can’t hold a candle to her.” The words were cruel, but he loved finally saying them to her. For Zoe’s pain at missing out on a decent mother, Kate’s discomfort, and her constant come ons. He’d had it.

“I’m better than her in bed.” She protested, “Do you think that young thing has the experience I have.”

“That young thing had me so turned on she kept me up half the night.” He threw at her.

Valerie paled.

If his other statements didn’t hit home this one did. He never talked about his sex life with anyone, but Valerie had to know that he wasn’t the least bit attracted to her.

“Am I interrupting?” Lester’s voice cut in causing them both to turn to him. He was standing in the doorway with his eyes on his wife.

Valerie thought she paled before. Did he hear? He must’ve, because his startling blue eyes were set on her thick with accusation. It felt like ice water was running through her veins now.

“She’s just leaving.” Said Nathan regaining his legendary composure and shoving his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

“yes she is.” He nodded toward the door while looking at his wife.

Valerie released a sob and ran by the both of them.

After she was gone Lester focused his eyes on his son, “I didn’t know. I mean—I should say, I suspected.”

Nathan shrugged.

“I knew what she was like when I married her Nathan, but after your mother died, I went a little crazy. I couldn’t seem to bed enough women, and well, Valerie was really good in bed. Then came Zoe...do you mind?” He pointed to the bottle of brandy.

“Help yourself.” He knew it was early morning, but this was an exception. He knew his father well enough that his outward calm was just masking the rage he felt inside.

Lester poured himself a generous drink and continued, “I apologize for offending you with Kate. I honestly didn’t think you were serious about her. Now I know better. I haven’t treated Valerie well. I’ve cheated on her constantly and unfortunately I might be responsible for some of her behavior.”

“I doubt that.”

Lester smiled at his son. “I’m glad you have Zoe. I was a less than adequate father when your mother was alive, I doubt very much I’d be a good one now.”

“You did all right by me until you made a move toward my fiancé.” Nathan said with unsuppressed anger.

“I really am sorry son. It won’t happen again.” He swallowed the contents of his glass, but his eyes remained on Nathan. “We’ll leave today. I don’t want to make that precious little thing more frightened of me. I heard what you said about loving her.”

“I do.” He answered without hesitation.

“I envy that. There was only one true love in my life, and she died.” He sighed, “I hope in time you can forgive me. In all my selfishness I overlooked your happiness.”

Nathan only nodded as his father turned to leave. Then his posture relaxed somewhat, “Dad?”

Lester turned back to him with a hopeful expression. Nathan hadn’t called him ‘Dad’ since he was a teenager. “Yes.”

“Maybe you should phone Zoe more often.”

“Okay.” With a small smile of appreciation he was gone.

Kate had spent a lot of time in the bathroom trying to recover from what she overheard and the sickness. She’d never been sick in her life like that. Even when she had the stomach flu

it never made her throw up like that. She was sure there was nothing left in her gut.

She took a moment to splash some water on her face and run a wet cloth over her forehead. Obviously that news really upset her. She wasn't used to such dysfunction. It was no wonder Nathan thought that Zoe needed her. Now she understood why that was.

When Kate came out of the bathroom Valerie was waiting for her. It looked as if she was crying.

"Hot young thing my ass."

"W—what?"

"Did Nathan tell you that he let me go down on him?"

Kate's mouth fell open and she grabbed the doorframe of the bathroom, "Are you mentally ill?" That familiar feeling of bile rising into her throat was starting again.

Valerie lifted her chin, "I can see that he didn't. If you had, you'd understand how much he moaned when I did it to him."

"God! Just stop!"

"He's built just right isn't he Kate. All hard muscle...all over."

"you are sick...really sick..." *People like this didn't exist*, thought Kate.

"His father and he are alike in that way." She made a crude gesture with her hands. "I wonder if he thinks of me when he's with you. Did he tell you that I was his first? That's a hard level to measure up to." She lied boldly.

Kate didn't say another word and pushed past her, rushing up the stairs to her room. Nathan wouldn't let a woman like that near him. There was no way. She was his father's wife, his stepmother. She leaned against the closed door and laid her face in her hand. She remembered him saying he was drunk. How drunk? Men do such stupid things when they were drunk.

"Kate." Came a voice on the other side of the door followed by a soft knock.

*Nathan.* She released a breath and pulled the door open.

He saw her face, "What did she say?"

She shook her head. “Your step mother needs help.”

“Yes, she does.” He stepped in the room and shut the door while looking at her, “She told you didn’t she?”

“Is it true?”

“I was sixteen Kate.”

“she said—I mean, that I couldn’t measure up, that she was your first.”

He shook his head, “That’s not true, but it doesn’t surprise me that she lied. However, something did happen.”

It wasn’t any of her business what had happened in the past, but this was just so wrong. “Nathan—”

“Hear me out first before you make a judgment.” He winced at the look on her face, “I was sixteen. I came home from a football party. We had just won the championships. I wasn’t just drunk, I was passed out on the couch.” He splayed his hands in front of him in helplessness, “When I woke up...” he paused, not wanting to finish, “She was, well...I pushed her off me and went to my room.”

“She took complete advantage of you.” Kate said. The look on his face was one of great relief and he nodded.

“I was so disgusted with myself. I hated her, hated myself. I never slept with her Kate. I swear to God.”

“Nathan, that’s assault.” She said with wide eyes finally understanding what he was talking about.

He shrugged, “I wouldn’t press charges against my sister’s mother no matter how angry I was. Zoe would be devastated. Besides, she didn’t get far despite what she thinks because it certainly wasn’t memorable.”

Kate could see his expression turn guilty over the mentioning of Zoe, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I don’t know if I enticed her or not. I don’t remember much. Ever since then she seems to want to finish where she left off.”

“That’s so messed up.” She said in disbelief. “I find it hard to understand that there are people like that out there.”

He arched his brows, “Now you know why I spent most of my young years with you and Eric. And why I’m so insistent that you stay with me. You are naive.”

She only nodded her head at how crazy this all was, “What does your father think about that? Does he know?”

“He knows exactly what she’s like, but again, she’s Zoe’s mother. Out of that commitment he stays with her.” He took a step toward her, “I hope this doesn’t affect our relationship.” He said sincerely. “I meant it when I said it wasn’t memorable. It obviously hasn’t had any long term affects on me. I never had a problem with intimacy—“

“—Okay.” She said with a smile holding up her hand, “I don’t need all of your history.”

He chuckled.

“And as for the other question about our relationship, absolutely not.” she said quickly. “I—it was just the way she told me. I can’t, no, shouldn’t, be concerned about things that happened in your past, but I guess I’m a little possessive.” Kate just didn’t want to scratch the woman’s eyes out after that confession, she actually wanted her beheaded. How could anyone take advantage of a teenager like that?

It was interesting how she thought that people with money the likes of what his family had meant that he had a normal family life, well, she knew there was some dysfunction there, but not to that extent.

He chuckled, “you?” He then stepped up to her and pulled her into his embrace, “I was going to fire the best financial officer in the city over touching you.”

Wrapping her arms around his waist she laid her head against his chest, “I’m in so much trouble of losing myself completely in you.” She sighed.

His hand came up and caressed the nape of her neck as he lowered his head on the top of hers, “You and me both love.”

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The next night, Nathan didn’t get home until after midnight. He went to his room and saw that Kate had stayed there much to his delight. He stopped and stared at her while

loosening his tie. She was sound asleep and didn't even stir at the sound of the door opening. Nathan thought she was possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and even more so with the peaceful expression she wore while sleeping. His eyes guided down to her breasts clearly outlined by the sheet that still covered her. She must've kicked off the other blankets, which suited him just fine because he liked looking at her and he liked touching her even more.

Grinning, he turned and went to his bathroom to wash up thinking he was the luckiest man alive.

Twenty minutes later, he returned and climbed in bed next to his future wife who had turned toward his side of the bed while he was in the bathroom. He reached over and ran a hand down her side to the narrow curve of her waist causing her to release a sexy little moan and open her eyes.

"Hey." She murmured.

"Hey yourself."

"What time is it?"

"Around one in the morning."

"Oh, you poor man. Nathan you work too much." She said lifting her hand to his cheek.

"Yes, but look what I get to come home to." He grinned.

"You are completely insatiable." She said with wide eyes catching his meaning.

"I am?" he said pushing her onto her back, "Here I come home and find this unbelievable—"he chuckled,—"naked woman in my bed." His body slid on top of hers causing her to moan. "Honey, that's like dangling a rabbit in front of a hungry lion."

She laughed but it was cut off by his mouth in a crushing passionate kiss.

The next morning when she woke up, he was gone. She glanced at the clock and saw that she'd actually slept in. Who could blame her? The man was a machine—and didn't he sleep? Lord, who came home at midnight, make love to a woman for several hours and then get up early to go back to work? There was no way she could even function right now, and she had several hours more of sleep.

Groaning she dragged herself out of bed and into his washroom. She stopped when she saw his expensive clothing on the floor next to the hamper. She smiled bending over to pick it up. He was used to being looked after obviously, and she really liked the idea of doing it. Lifting the lid she went to toss it in the hamper when something caught her eye. There was a streak on the collar of his shirt. She ran her thumb over the crimson stain and it rubbed around. Lipstick?

After a moment, she shook her head. There was no way that Nathan could have energy for another woman. There must be a decent explanation and she would ask him about it. She tossed the clothing in the hamper quickly almost as if it would erase the memory, but it didn't. As the day wore on, she started to stew about it. He was incredibly sexy and could have anyone he wanted, yet he asked her to marry him. Why was that?

When he came home that evening, she handed him his shirt and stood there with her hands on her hips waiting for a reply. He just started at her in question.

“What is this for?”

“There's lipstick on the collar.” The puzzled look on his face was a great relief. There was no guilt, and no denial.

“Lipstick?” he lowered his eyes to her mouth, “You don't wear lipstick.” He answered matter-of-factly as if there was no other explanation.

“Oh Nathan, am I being a fool?” she said rubbing her forehead with her hand, “I saw the lipstick and thought maybe—“

He laughed cutting off her explanation, tossed the shirt aside and gathered her into his arms, “Natalie tripped on those outrageous three inch heels she wears to work, I caught her from falling. I think that's how it happened.” He tilted her face up to his, “You should never worry about such a thing Kate—hell, I can't even get enough energy to write my own name after a night with you. How the hell am I going to have an affair?”

“I'm an idiot.”

He gave her a sexy irresistible grin, “No, you're incredibly naïve in relationships, and that's just fine with me. I love that

you get jealous, but I'll never cheat on you Kate. You have my promise."

## CHAPTER SIX

Over the next few days Kate found herself in complete bliss. She was so happy despite the tragedy of losing her brother. Nathan and Zoe did their best to make her feel like she was part of the family and she truly felt like she was.

Then there were the scorching nights with the man she loved. Not once did they take a break and it always ended with the both of them covered in perspiration thoroughly sated and exhausted.

Nathan had promised to take her to Vegas next weekend and show her the time of her life after he married her. Again the quick wedding was delayed because he had some emergency he had to deal with in Italy. However, if she was disappointed it was immediately eliminated when he presented her with the most beautiful engagement ring she'd ever seen. She actually cried as he got down on one knee and gave her an exceptional proposal.

The next morning after a particularly hot night in which he told her that he was going to make memorable so she would miss him more than usual, he gave her a long kiss, took his luggage and left.

Four days later her world shattered.

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Nathan entered his penthouse dragging his luggage with barely containable elation to be home, "Kate!" he called while stripping off his coat. He missed her more than he would miss breathing. He was sure of it. Her beautiful flushed naked body was burned in his mind the whole time he was away.

Hanna came bustling down the hall, "She's not here." She answered taking his coat.

"No?" He was surprised. He'd phoned her yesterday morning and told him when he'd be home, "Where is she?" he said looking over Hanna's head to the long corridor. When she

didn't answer he brought his eyes back to his housekeeper and saw the fatigue registering on her face, "Hanna?"

"Oh, Mr. Thornburg, she took off—I think."

"You think?" the alarm he felt was instantaneous.

"We got up this morning, Zoe went to school—I went to see what was keeping her and—Oh lord, she must've left in the middle of the night. It doesn't look like your bed was slept in. I tried calling your hotel, but they said you'd checked out already."

"Kate's gone?" he said as if he didn't hear that "The hell you say!" he ran by her and up to his room just to search her dresser. Her clothes were gone—everything of hers was gone. Then his eyes focused on the top of the dresser and the object sitting there. Her ring. Her diamond engagement ring. He picked it up and stared at it.

"Mr. Thornburg?" Hanna's voice came from behind him, "I called the police but they said I had to wait twenty-four hours."

"Thank you Hanna." Despite his outward calm, Nathan tried his best to squash his panic but it was pretty much impossible. He palmed the ring and turned toward the older woman, "Did she get a phone call? A visitor, anything like that while I was gone?" He pulled out his phone as Hanna answered him.

"No sir. She called her friend a couple of times. But that was it."

"Something happened while I was gone." He scanned the room and saw an envelope on a chair by the window. He strode over to it and picked it up. It was empty. There was no return address but it was addressed to Kate. Something was in it. Something that sent Kate running.

He flipped his phone open and dialed a familiar number while worry and dread swirled around in his mind.

Where the hell was she? Was she okay?

\*\*\*

Several hours later, Nathan was sitting at his desk in his study staring out over the skyline of the city. His head rested in his hand and he was still feeling the riveting affects of panic over

and over again. Kate. Something horrible must've come in that envelope. Something that made her run from him.

He'd already filed a missing persons report but he knew the outcome of that. So he had a detective agency looking into her disappearance and the envelope was sent to a forensics lab thanks to a friend of his in the FBI. The only problem there, was they had a cartload of cases, and his friend told him he'd try his best but it may be months before he finds anything out.

He sat back and ran his hand through his hair in frustration and fear. What if she was kidnapped—or worse? His poor precious Kate.

It was the not knowing that was tearing him apart. He tried her cell phone a half a dozen times and left messages until her voice box was full and he couldn't leave any more. At least she took that with her. He was hoping the agency could run a trace on it, if she turns it on. For now, he was pretty sure she had it off.

*What the hell was in the envelope?*

Marnie knew nothing. He'd already talked to her. She said that Kate had put the house up for sale the day before, but didn't let on that anything was wrong, but she remembered that she sounded like she was crying. When she asked her about it, she told her she was only coming down with a cold.

Nathan's concern expounded over that piece of information. Crying? Over what? Didn't she know that he would do anything within his power to help her? He loved her—Oh God, did he love her!

He released an anguished noise and fell his face in his hand. *What the hell happened Kate? Where are you?*

\*\*\*

Zoe cried for two days, but not in front of her brother. She wanted to know what was going on but he seemed so withdrawn and utterly miserable. The only thing he told her was that she had left them and he was trying his best to find out why.

She could only fathom that it was something horrible that chased her away, but to her, Nathan was perfect and crazy in love with Kate, so what could possibly be that bad?

\*\*\*

It had been six weeks and Kate had a job and a small apartment. She hadn't contacted Marnie but stopped in at the internet café regularly to email her real-estate agent. Her house hadn't sold yet. She didn't want to call because it was Nathan that gave her the cell phone and if she turned it on she suspected that he was able to track her.

Her heart was having a hard time mending.

She cast a glance at the photos that came in the mail. She was shocked when she pulled them out of the envelope, but even more shocked at how beautiful the Italian model was. There were many times that she thought about confronting him since she left, but what was the point? She was a nobody and by the looks of that fashion model, she wouldn't be any competition. She should have known better than to think that a gorgeous well sought after man could settle for someone as ordinary as her. The pictures showed draped all over him followed by an intimate kiss.

When he went to Italy she trusted him. Then the envelope came with clippings from a newspaper about him and his Italian model mistress that he kept over there. The pictures showed them kissing. The photo was clipped out of the paper with the date attached obviously in case she doubted it. It was dated several days prior. She tried to think of every excuse in the book that could explain that picture, but nothing came to mind. The envelope came with no return address and there weren't many people that knew she was living with him.

It was something that couldn't have been talked out of. Yet, she would probably believe whatever he said to her. He had a silver tongue. He'd convinced her to move in with him, pay for her education and marry him in less than a day. So she had to get out of there.

She wasn't sure if he did love her. He never said he did, and in her absence away from him, she began to think that he just told her all of those things so she would be dissuaded from thinking that it was because she felt beholden to Eric.

It didn't help that she was still grieving over the death of her brother, and she was vulnerable. He knew exactly how to work her. Then she started thinking about the way his personal assistant looked at her, then the lipstick. Was he having an affair with her?

She wasn't so naïve to know that many marriages got broken up when a boss worked long hours with his secretary or Personal assistant.

However her heart hurt. So much that she cried herself to sleep just about every night. It didn't help that she had raging hormones either. The pregnancy test came back positive. At first she was devastated. Not because of the baby, but because she felt like she was being unfair to Nathan in not letting him know about the baby or how he would grow up not knowing his father. Oh how she wished Eric was still alive. He'd know exactly what to do.

Actually she knew what he'd say. He'd tell her to let Nathan know. She just couldn't. She couldn't get that picture out of her head of him kissing that other woman.

\*\*\*

Nathan sat in a cab across the street when Kate emerged from her apartment building. It was a dive to say the least and even though he didn't show it, it really bothered him. Kate was loaded with class and here she was living in a poorhouse just to get away from him. There was a man passed out next to the stairs wearing ratty clothes. Of course Kate bent down and felt his skin to see if he was alive. She had a caring heart.

He leaned his elbow on the door ledge and rested his chin on his fist. It was hard not to exit the taxi and march across the street to drag her home, but something made her leave and he needed to find out what or he'd lose her forever. He knew Kate. She was stubborn, strong willed, and he loved that about her. If it took him months to find out what the hell was going on, he'd do it even though it was tearing him apart not to touch her. He was a patient man, except when it came to her.

Ever since she turned sixteen his eyes have been on her. She started to blossom after that and by eighteen she was sight to

behold. Eric hadn't seemed to notice the way he looked at her and he was thankful. Knowing Eric and how protective he was of her, he would have ended their lifelong friendship. Then when he went overseas he called him and asked him to watch her and protect her no matter what it took. He made him promise. Though it wasn't hard because he had selfish motives where she was concerned, so he agreed instantly. He was actually waiting for Eric to come back from his tour so he could ask him for his sister's hand in marriage.

"Follow her." He said to the cab driver without taking his eyes off of her.

"Yes sir."

Normally he'd have his own driver, and own car but it would have defeated the purpose of watching her without her knowing. A silver stretched limousine stood out in a neighborhood like this. Hell, a station wagon would it was such a desolate place.

It really wasn't that hard to find her. She wasn't used to being traced or having a powerful man hunt her down. It took him four weeks which near killed him wondering if she was still alive. She had contacted her real-estate broker which he'd paid a lot of money to let him know when she did. He traced the e-mails to an internet café several blocks from her place of work. When she showed up he started following her. It took a space of hours to discover where she lived and worked.

He clenched his jaw thinking about that. She was working as a cashier in a grocery store.

He tightened his other fist that lay on the seat of the car while she went into her place of work. Well, at least this will give him time to search her apartment.

"Back to that building we saw her come out of."

The taxi driver turned around and headed back in the direction they came smiling to himself. His fare was wealthy so he was anticipating a large tip. Right now he'd bark like a dog if he wanted him too.

"Wait here." Nathan said getting out of the car.

"No problem." Came the response.

Nathan shut the door and went in the building. The super wasn't hard to find and access to her apartment only cost him fifty bucks.

He took his time going through her things and felt his heart breaking at her meager belongings. Then he saw the photo.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me." He said to himself as he picked it up off her coffee table and looked at it. Yes, this was his mistress, actually ex-mistress. He wasn't truthful with Kate because he knew she wouldn't understand. This would have to be straightened out as soon as he figured out how.

However it didn't elude him that this photo wasn't easy to come by. These usually stayed in the papers overseas. He wasn't a high profile pursuit for the media so to find this in a local paper was impossible. He flipped it over and saw the Italian print on the back. Obviously someone went through some trouble to get this just to make him look like a cheating bastard. His stepmother came to mind, but he was certain he'd gotten his point across when she was last at his house. Not only that, he was certain she wouldn't go through so much trouble to discredit him to his fiancé without risking his father's anger.

There was no writing on the newsprint at all except the date in the upper right corner, but he was certain there'd be finger prints. He searched around for an envelope or bag to put it in. He was sure that his FBI friend wouldn't have a problem pulling prints off of this. They hadn't found any on the original envelope but he was told that it had passed through a lot of hands and some of them were too smeared to identify.

It was a dead end.

He was staring at it when his phone rang. "Ah hell." It had startled him. He pulled it out and cocked a brow seeing the number.

"Hi Marnie."

"Hi—I um—I just wanted to tell you that Kate's house sold today." It took her a moment to catch her breath. The man even sounded drop dead sexy over the phone with that deep baritone

he possessed. Also he always sounded like he was in complete control of everything.

It was interesting that the real estate agent hadn't contacted him over it.

"I had lunch with the agent today. We went to school together."

*That explains it.* He thought. "Thanks Marnie."

"Is there any luck on your end?"

"Yes." He said truthfully, "But if she calls you, don't tell her I've found her okay? It seems I have some explaining to do."

"Oh?" Marnie didn't know what to do if Kate asked her about Nathan. She didn't think she could lie to her best friend.

Nathan sensed her hesitation, "Everything will turn out for the best. I still intend to marry her Marnie. I love her."

It was those words that made Marnie promise him. It was the way he said them. They were very genuine. Although she lusted after Nathan for years, Kate was probably the only one that deserved him. She was as about as sweet and honest as they come and Marnie knew she was lucky to have her as a friend. "Okay Nathan."

"Thanks." He hung up and continued his examination of her apartment. It was small, but neat. The few meager things she had broke his heart. Then he saw the photo of the three of them. Kate, Eric and him. It was laying on the table next to her bed. It was the same photo he held in his hand at her and Eric's house when he was distraught over losing someone very close to him. Out of all the pictures, why did she keep this one? He loved that particular photo. They were all smiling and laughing in it. It was a great day.

His phone rang again. He glanced at the number before answering it. He actually hesitated because it was Valarie.

"Yes."

"Nathan—please don't hang up. I don't know what else to do."

The fear in her voice made him listen, "What's wrong?"

"It's your father. He's in the hospital. Oh god, I'm so scared!"

“What for?”

“The doctor said it was cancer. He’d had it for almost a year and didn’t tell me! He didn’t tell anyone.”

“Tell me which hospital, and where you are right now.” He said calmly. Inside he felt that same panic that day Kate phoned him with the news of Eric. It seemed as though he was just made a breakthrough with his father and now this happened and from the sounds of Val’s voice, this was serious.

After she told him, he hung up and called his pilot to warm up the plane. With one final glance around the apartment he left. Unfortunately he’d have to deal with Kate later. It sounded as if his father needed him right now.

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Natalie Windmeyer , Nathan’s personal assistant was arranging the flowers on the long sleek glossy top of his board room table when Bob strolled in looking as handsome as usual in a dove grey suit that set off his blue eyes and dark brown hair.

However, he didn’t hold a candle next to Nathan. Nathan’s hair was blonde and his eyes were more pale which made them seem more intelligent and authoritative.

Not only was the man disgustingly rich and had a fantastic body, he was also gorgeous. She had been busy for months trying to get him to notice her. She wore tight clothes, high heels and went out of her way time and time again to do things that weren’t in her job description.

This was a temp job, and she wasn’t sure how long she’d have it. Rumor was, that Nathan was keeping it open for his future wife. She narrowed her gaze remembering how stunning the woman was. She also seemed genuinely in love with Nathan. Then again, what woman wouldn’t be? She swore that she herself was. Yet he never indicated that he even noticed her no matter how dolled up she got. After she saw Kate Shaw, she knew why. However, she had a few cards up her sleeve on how to deal with her and hoped that she could play the consoling PA when Kate dumped him.

Yet no one there knew anything about Nathan’s personal life when he suddenly disappeared and left Bob in charge. Bob

was a loyal employee, just like the rest of them that were close to Nathan, so he never said a word.

Normally Bob flirted outrageously with her and she'd often thought about sleeping with him because she was sure he was good in bed from the confidence he oozed, but then Nathan would walk in and spoil everything. Him, she was sure, was a god between the sheets and it was what she was aiming for. However, she'd been considering Bob more often to see if he would be prone to some pillow talk. Maybe today she'd take him up on his offer for dinner.

Nathan had been absent for about three weeks now and Bob, his VP of finance was running the show. She knew he checked in with her constantly because she was in the room several times when he called. Bob always asked her to leave when he did.

Now he called a board meeting with Nathan's executives and her curiosity peaked. It was also one of those meetings that she got to attend just in case Bob needed anything.

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She had just finished setting out water and snacks when the first of the twelve of Nathan's board members walked in the room. Most of them were older than him, except Bob who took Nathan's seat at the head of the table. What came next made her understand why Nathan was absent.

Bob cleared his throat and handed Natalie a stack of leather bound reports to which she immediately distributed. "This is the financial plan of Nathan's father's empire. We constructed it over the last two days."

One of the older board members raised his arm, "Bob, does his mean what I think it means?"

"Yes. Lester Thornburg passed away three days ago. Nathan is going to be busy for the next few days with the funeral."

"I didn't even know the old man was sick." Came the response, "I've known him for twenty years."

“Apparently no one knew. He kept that to himself to save his family from grieving. He left the bulk of his fortune to Nathan, which is what you are looking at now.”

Natalie didn't expect that. She expected that he was taking some time because his fiancé had jilted him, but not this. Suddenly she felt bad for him and what she had done.

“The next order of business is who is in charge. I am.” He cast a glance to Natalie who had taken a seat against the wall. “All major decisions will be made through me, which I will take to the board until the return of our CEO.”

Natalie was used to seeing Bob in a different manner. This side of him was unexpected. He was dead serious. Usually he was joking and flirting. She'd never expected this from him and it actually looked quite attractive to her.

Bob left the floor open for questions and the meeting went on for another hour.

When they began to filter out he called Natalie aside.

She gave him a generous grin deciding to take his offer of dinner this time. Instead she ended up having the shock of her life.

“Nathan will be back next week. You have two hours to clean out your desk.”

Her mouth fell open.

“To interfere in a relationship is a shitty thing to do Natalie. To interfere in someone who can crush you financially and reputably is just plain stupid.”

“But I—“

“We are all fingerprinted when we got hired if you have forgotten. Yours showed up on a photo that Kate possessed. A photo that should have never even left Italy.”

She couldn't deny it. It was her.

“Unfortunately, for you, Nathan found out. You're career is over.”

She reached out and touched the lapel of his expensive suit, “Oh Bob, please. Can you help? I never meant for it to go so far.”

He removed her hand like it disgusted him, “I might have screwed you Natalie, but I’d never let you persuade me. I never got where I was by being born yesterday. Now I’m sparing you the embarrassment of being fired in front of the board members and that’s about the entire leniency I possess, so I’d take advantage of that.” He turned and walked out of the room.

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Zoe clung to her older brother as they lowered her father’s casket in the ground. Nathan as always was a statue of self control, but at least she knew that he was grieving too. Especially after losing his best friend and losing Kate in less than a month.

Her mother stood on the other side of her. Nathan was cordial to her, but he didn’t touch her at all. She really couldn’t blame him because of the way she acted toward him, but it was obvious to her that her mother was grieving for the loss of her father too. It made her realize that Kate must’ve gone through hell. At least she had a brother and a mother no matter how much of an absentee parent she was, at least she knew that she’d come and help if she was desperate. Kate had no one.

Nathan held her close to her side and when people started to leave he actually reached over and took his step mother’s elbow. Just because he disliked her, didn’t mean he didn’t understand what she was going through. The tears in her eyes were genuine. Also, he was a gentleman, and it showed in that moment. She couldn’t even imagine how Kate felt at losing her older brother, considering that she adored and loved hers so much. It was unfathomable.

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For Nathan, the next few days were spent on the phone wrapping up his father’s affairs. Then there came the reading of the will. His father left everything to him except for a stipend for Valarie so she could live comfortably. It was surprising actually because he already had more money than he knew what to do with, but he’d make sure that it was handled properly. He had intentions of setting up charities in his father’s and Eric’s names.

Then there came the phone call from his buddy in the FBI over whose prints were on the photograph. His next phone call was to Bob, to fire Natalie with prejudice. She was lucky that's all he had intentions of doing because he was too busy consumed with trying to get Kate back. He would make sure that she never worked in the industry again. The only job she'd be getting was at a fast food joint.

He had hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair when his sister walked in.

"Hi girl." He said forcing a smile. He certainly didn't feel like smiling, but his sister needed his support. At least he had sixteen good years with his father. When Zoë was born she was pretty much handed over to him when he was done university. She never had the same opportunities of their father cheering on the sidelines for her at her dance recitals like he did at his football games.

She plopped down in the wing backed chair on the other side of his desk and stared at him.

"What?"

"Where's Kate?" she said softly.

He nodded, "you miss her huh?"

"I do." She admitted, "But you do to Nathan."

"That's true." He gave her a smile without emotion this time. It hurt to think about her, but he couldn't set these other issues on the back burner.

"Are you going to bring her home?"

"I'm going to try."

She took a deep breath showing her relief.

"I know you miss her Zoe, I do too, but I have other priorities that can't be ignored. I know where she is and I have someone watching her to make sure that she's safe."

Another breath of relief.

"Do you feel better?" he raised his brows. Zoe was always his number one priority and seeing her hurt, hurt him. He would do just about anything for her to keep her happy. Kate made her happy. Kate made him happy also. Very happy.

“I do.” She admitted. Nathan never talked about his love life or business for that matter. But she knew he loved Kate just from the way he talked about her and the way he looked at her. “so, when are you going to bring her home?”

“As soon as I can commit a solid amount of time to doing so. I need to convince her Zoe. As much as I want to toss that woman over my shoulder and haul her home, she’s stubborn and it won’t go over well. Unfortunately we were both betrayed and I need to do my best to get her to trust me again.”

This time she grinned, “Nathan, you have women falling in love with you just from just looking at them. Go get my sister in law please.”

He returned her smile, “Okay honey, I will. One more phone call.”

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Kate punched out, gathered her handbag and left the store. Her feet were beginning to swell. It became more noticeable at the end of the shift in the last week. It was odd really because she was by her estimate, about two months pregnant. The extra weight wasn’t noticeable at all yet except for the slight change in her abdomen.

She stopped at a nearby newsstand to buy a paper and the front cover made her drop her bag on the ground.

“You okay miss?”

*Billionaire Tycoon Dies, Leaves All to Son*, was in bold large print on the cover with a picture of Lester Thornburg underneath. Her heart felt like it weighed a thousand pounds at that moment. Nathan was there for her through the death of her brother and she wasn’t for him. Even though the events that led her to flee from him, she still was family and should have been there. Poor Zoe!

She started to weep.

“Are you okay miss?” He repeated a little awkwardly. Pretty women crying in front of his newsstand was not a common occurrence and quite frankly, he didn’t know what to do.

“I’m fine.” She said and quickly walked away heading for home. She at least had to call Zoe.

However when she got to the front steps of her building she stopped at the sight that waited for her.

Nathan.

He was wearing Jeans, a black leather jacket and was sitting on the front steps looking gorgeous as usual. His silver Limo was parked across the street and was drawing a lot of attention.

He stood when he saw her and thrust his hands into his jeans pockets. “hi.”

He looked so boyishly innocent with an unsure smile tugging at his nice masculine lips causing a dimple to form to the left of his mouth. Gosh was he always so handsome? Already she knew the answer to that. She couldn’t possibly be angry with him. Her heart hurt for the pain he must’ve gone through in the past few days. “Your father died.” It was a stupid thing to say but she had mixed emotions running through her right now. Part of her wanted to leap on him and weep. The other half wanted to rip him apart for betraying her trust. However, the death of his father made her try and choose a neutral ground.

“He did.” He stated softly.

“Is Zoe—“

He held up his hand, “—she’s being brave and trying to cope as best as she knows. I think she’s trying to be strong like some other woman we know.”

She looked down at her feet for a moment. It was hard to look at him. She needed to recoup her defenses. The man was to intoxicating. “When’s the funeral?”

“Come and gone. His wishes.”

Her eyes darted back up to his with fresh tears forming in them “Oh Nathan, how awful. I should have been there—“

“I’m a grown man. I’ll be fine.”

“Like you were when Eric died—I saw you in his room.” She confessed suddenly.

He erected himself and cocked his head slightly, “Interesting that you never said anything then.”

“I knew you were doing your best by me. If you wanted me to know you would have said something.”

“Perhaps.” He said running his eyes over her face.

“I should phone Zoe.” She changed the subject. Him standing there was affecting her too much. It didn’t help that her hormones were all out of whack and she wept at the stupidest things.

“You should.” He said softly and took a few steps toward her.

She took one step back, “Nathan don’t—please.”

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and withdrew the photo, “I haven’t slept with this woman in almost two years.”

Her eyes darted to the picture, “How did you get that?”

“Kitten are you listening?”

Her eyes went back to his they were loaded with suspicion, “That was in my apartment.” Didn’t he get this at all? You don’t just go waltzing into someone’s place and take their property.

“Yes it was. I took it.”

All along she thought she’d lost it. It went missing about two weeks ago, “You’ve known for awhile that I was here.” She said narrowing her eyes at him, “And you were in my apartment.”

“That is no way for you to live.”

“Nathan, you can’t do those things.” She rubbed her forehead.

“I can and I did. I can buy the whole building if I want. And as for you hiding, don’t you know the resources available to me?” He said finally losing some patience. It had been a long few weeks without her besides stressful over the sudden illness and death of his father.

“No I don’t know that. I don’t hardly know what you can do and the advantages you have being so wealthy. I only know you. As for running away, I knew you’d convince me beyond a reasonable doubt that there was nothing wrong with that photo.” She pointed at it, “You could convince anyone of anything.”

“I could never lie to you dove.” He said softening his voice. “It would kill me.”

She looked away for a moment trying to get her senses straightened out. When he said that, she felt her heart contract in

her chest painfully. It just proved her point. She did believe him and it only took one phrase.

It was then that he saw the paleness of her skin and the dark circles under her eyes, “Are you ill?”

She snapped her head up and looked at him, “No.”

“Kate, you look ill.” He felt panic course through him.

“I’m fine.” She said walking by him fully intending to just get away from him before he discovered her condition.

He reached out and grabbed her arm, “Kate what is wrong?”

“Please let go of me.”

He looked over her head and nodded.

She turned to see the driver get in the car and pull it around in the middle of the road. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you home.”

She paused. That tone was new. For some reason she was sure it was the same one he used to deal with a corporate takeover. It was finite and loaded with self confidence. Still she wouldn’t let it change her mind. “I’m not going. You have your pick of women and I—“

“There hasn’t been anyone but you for almost a year Kate. That woman was someone I was involved with several years ago.”

She set her accusing gaze on him, “Oh? Then how come you were kissing her?”

“first of all, *I* didn’t kiss anyone. She kissed me. I was at a restaurant that she happened to be at with another man. She came over and planted one on me.” He shook the photo. “this was taken at that exact time. I have been completely monogamous and you need to realize that the media specialize in making things look worse than they really are.”

She stared up at him in disbelief over him saying the monogamous word. “What did you say?”

He shook his head smiling, “Kitten, I fell in love with my best friends little sister and I could never break her heart.”

“Love?”

“Deeply.” He said searching her eyes for some indicator that she still cared, “Hopelessly.” He added, then he saw them water again. “women meant nothing to me until I found you.”

She knew Nathan. She knew him. She could tell if he meant what he said. In fact she felt it all the way through her. A sob burst from her and he instantly gathered her into his arms lowering his head on hers. “I’m so stupid!” she sobbed into his jacket.

“No baby, you trust to easily and your naïve. That’s not shameful. I would never have an affair, I told you before that after a night with you I can barely write my own name. That trip to Italy was a legitimate business trip. If it wasn’t I would have taken you with me. If you need further proof, I’ll have her call you. She has nothing to lose by telling you the truth. She’s with some big shipping heir now.”

She released another sob.

“Kitten, you need to understand that there are a lot of vindictive people out there and I can guarantee this won’t be the last time you receive something like this.”

She loosened her grip and looked up at him, “It just looked so real.”

“It was far from it.” He moved his arm around her waist, “Let’s go home.”

“My stuff.” She said looking at the front doors of her building.

“We’ll come back another day. I promise.” First he was getting her to a physician. She didn’t look well, she actually look a little thin around the face.

\*\*\*

Nathan had to sit down as the doctor pushed the lab results across the desk at him. He felt himself pale slightly, *A baby?*

He’d phone his physician while he was in the car. Kate had tried to stop him but he ignored her. It was obvious to him now that she was ill. Now he knew why. He glanced at Kate for her reaction. It was apparent that she already knew what was going on with her body by the guilty posturing she was emitting.

Kate never said a word but kept her head bowed while staring down at her hands fidgeting on her lap. She tried protesting but he wouldn't hear it. She'd never seen him so pushy where she was concerned. Usually he persuaded, not insisted. However, he probably hadn't seen her in a few weeks and she must've looked different from the way he reacted. Part of her was relieved to hear that she was too thin but otherwise healthy. After all, she was living for two now.

"Say that again." He said giving his head a shake.

"Yes Mr. Thornburg. According to your—" He paused looking at Kate not knowing what to call her. He knew that his client wasn't married, but was famous for his women and he didn't want to insult the future mother of his child.

"Fiancé." Nathan interjected with some displeasure after seeing the physician pause.

"Pardon me." He apologized, "I meant no insult." He shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat.

"Of course you didn't." Nathan said in the same tone, "Now give me the name of a good obstetrician—the best."

For the next hour they were with the obstetrician. He set up an appointment for an ultrasound and besides a physical exam, he gave her several prescriptions. He was actually booked up for several weeks, but Nathan insisted and as usual, got his way. He was concerned because of Kate's appearance. The whole time she never said anything but just sat there.

"She's healthy Mr. Thornburg," the obstetrician assured him, "She's just very tired and needs rest."

Nathan was visibly relieved. In fact he was ecstatic.

It wasn't until they were in the car when she felt his fingers under her chin to lift her gaze to his. "If you think I'm angry Kitten, I'm not."

"You have every right to be."

He shook his head with a slight smile, "No, you have given me something precious. How could I possibly be angry? Besides, I have you back."

she felt herself smiling for the first time in months. "I never said—"

“We’re getting married in Vegas tomorrow night.” He said waving his hand, cutting off her words, “No argument. Once were married, you can argue with me all you want—legally.” He added with that slight cock of his head that she loved so much.

She burst into laughter. His expression was dead pan serious but he was teasing her.

He grinned, “Vegas then?” He said sliding beside her and putting his arm around her shoulders.

“Just this once.” She offered back.

“Honey, that’s all I ask.” He bent his head and kissed her.

\*\*\*

“Zoe, it’s your brother.” Said Miss Muller handing her the phone.

“Nathan!” she said snatching it from her, “Where are you. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for two hours—what! Oh-my-God!”

“What is it?” Hannah said hearing the excitement in Zoe’s voice.

She covered the mouthpiece, “Nathan and Kate just got married! He’s on his way home now.”

Hannah grinned widely, “It’s about time.”

Zoe talked for another minute before she hung up. “Oh Gosh!” she said hitting the sofa cushion she was sitting on.

“What?”

“I was going to ask him if I could go out with Roger to a movie tonight, but I was so excited I forgot. He’s on his way over.”

Hannah laughed, “Just go hun, I’ll cover for you.”

She jumped up and hugged the older woman, “I love you Hannah.”

“Yeah, well you make sure he has you back by eleven, or I may not have a job.”

She released her and headed for the stairs, “Nathan will never fire you, and you’re part of the family.” She skipped up to her room.

\*\*\*

It was after Midnight when Nathan and Kate made it home. She was trying to hide it, but he could tell from the dark circles under her eyes that she was completely exhausted, “Why Mrs. Thornburg, I’ve tuckered you out.” He said huskily while helping her out of her coat.

She smiled up at him, “I’m pooped.”

“Does this mean I don’t get to consummate my marriage to the most beautiful woman on the planet?”

She flushed slightly, then raised her eyes to his and widened her smile, “I’ll meet you in our room in twenty minutes.” She cast a look over her shoulder before she went upstairs.

“Oh lord.” He murmured at the seductive pose that just entailed. Already he felt himself harden. It had been two months without her and they literally lit up the sheets when they were together. Yet, he felt selfish in wanting her despite how tired he was.

That lasted a whole thirty seconds before he emitted a growl and strolled toward the stairs. “Fuck the twenty minutes.” He rushed up the stairs like his feet were on fire.

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Kate opened her eyes to stare at the illuminated green lights of the alarm clock. Four in the morning. Yet something didn’t feel right.

She was sprawled naked across Nathan’s hard body and suddenly felt as though she was being stared at. She lifted her head and looked at him. His even steady breathing told her he was still sleeping and his eyes were closed.

She turned and looked over her shoulder just to see a tall shadow silhouetted by the window and screamed.

Nathan shot awake and reached for the lamp while Kate was shaking him. “What the hell—“

“There’s someone here!” she screeched.

He flicked on the light and sat up looking around the room. It was empty. “Kate?”

“There was.” She said frantically pointing to the window, “I—oh god, I’m going crazy.”

He held her, “Hush babe, you’re just over tired and it didn’t help that I kept you up for several more hours.” He didn’t like these reoccurring nightmares she was still having and knew it had something to do with Eric’s death. “Did you have these often when you left me?”

“Sometimes.” She muffled into his neck. “But it seemed so real this time.”

“Maybe we should look at getting you help Kate.”

She pulled back and looked at him, “You think I’m nuts.”

“Absolutely not.” He said firmly, “I believe you suffered trauma with your brother dying, the pregnancy and the enormous amount of stress you’ve been dealing with lately. Anyone would have repercussions because of that.”

She took a deep breath and he reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Do you think so?”

“Listen.” He said softly, “When you left me, I didn’t sleep for weeks and that’s only one issue I had to deal with. I can’t imagine how you’re coping.”

“I was so stupid.” She said guiltily. “I should have waited and talked to you.”

He kissed her, “No you’re not. Did you want a glass of water?”

She chuckled, “If I keep dehydrating myself by crying all the time, I’ll need it.”

“Personally, I love your vulnerability. It makes me feel needed. I’ll be right back. I’m just going to go and get you a glass of water.”

Needed? Every woman needed a man like this or dreamt that they existed. After a moment she finally nodded. She started feeling silly. These stupid nightmares had her all worked up.

“I’ll leave the light on.”

“Okay.” She started to breathe normally now feeling a little safer.

Nathan got up and threw on his robe. Then he went around the bed and gave her an adoring kiss on the cheek before he left the room.

Once downstairs, he seriously thought about using those sleeping pills the doctor prescribed, but somehow drugging his wife seemed a little callous.

He went into the kitchen and retrieved a glass to fill it with water.

“My *sister* Nathan?”

The glass fell from his hand and hit the sink with a loud clamor. He’d know Eric’s voice anywhere. Slowly he turned around to see a tall angry man in his kitchen.

It took a lot to surprise Nathan, but this took the cake. He’d buried this man barely two months ago. Yet here he was standing in his kitchen like he never left. There were some changes on him which made Nathan know that he wasn’t seeing things. There was a few scars on his face that were faded to a darker pink than the surrounding skin letting him know that he’d sustained injuries. He didn’t know whether to hug him or punch him.

“Surprised?”

“Surprised is when you get a windfall on your tax return.” He finally said finding his voice.

“True enough.” Eric said and shifted his stance slightly. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Nathan looked down the length of him. He was still in good shape but something about the way he was standing made him pause, “You have a leg injury?” he nodded toward his right leg.

He smiled, “Several—now before we go further, explain yourself.”

“Ah, Kate.”

“I told you to watch her, not sleep with her.” He said angrily.

“We’re married.” He explained, “as of yesterday actually.”

“Jesus, you took this beholden to a friend thing literally.” Eric said arching his ebony brows all trace of his anger disappeared.

“No, I do love her. I have for a while.” He confessed easily.

“You?” Eric somehow found that difficult to believe because of Nathan’s past history with woman, but if he had to form an opinion, Kate was special.

He shrugged, “Me.”

“Well I think I need to hear this story.” His expression softened and he took a deep breath, “But first I’ve got to sit down. My leg is still killing me.” He limped over to the table, “Did I freak her out?”

“She’s been having nightmares about you forever.”

“Poor Kate.” He said taking a seat. “I would have stayed at the house, but apparently it’s not ours anymore.”

“No, she couldn’t go back there. It was too hard on her.”

He dug in his pocket and pulled out Nathan’s key card placing it on the table. “I still had this. I went in your room to tell you I was still alive and found you with my sister—I thought about killing you.”

He smirked, “I don’t blame you, but my intentions with her have always been honorable.”

“Thank god for you.” He said with a sharp look.

He turned back to the sink, picked up the glass and rinsed it out to fill it with cool water, “I’ve got to get this to her.”

“I’ll wait.”

“No, go to bed. The spare room is empty. I’ve got to get back to Kate before she comes looking for me, and you give her a heart attack. She’s still grieving over losing you and I won’t have her any more upset. This conversation can be finished in the morning.” He turned back to him, “You have some explaining to do to.”

Eric nodded. Normally he would argue, but really if the two were married, he couldn’t be happier that Kate was safe. Also if Nathan was telling the truth, and he was sure he wasn’t responsible for her anymore. Not only that, he was tired and he felt it to the bone. After he recovered from his injuries, it took him a week to catch a ride home, and that was on several stopovers and catching rides on several army planes, one was a Hercules. In all, he’d been awake for more than two days trying to get back to his sister. “I guess.”

He walked to the entrance of the kitchen, "I'll see you first thing in the morning—" he paused, "—I'm glad you're okay."

"You and me both buddy." He grinned as Nathan left.

\*\*\*

Nathan made his way back to his room while the gears in his mind were going a hundred miles a second on how to present this to his wife. Her brother wasn't dead. Did that mean that she wouldn't want him, his protection? He shook his head, no that wasn't possible. She'd told him that she loved him the first night they made love. She had given herself to him. There was no way she would do that unless she meant every word.

He paused at the stop of the stairs as a warm feeling flushed through him. She was going to make him a father and nothing in his life could measure up to that euphoric feeling. Smiling, he made his way to his room.

When he opened the door she was still in his bed sitting up, light on, with the sheet pulled up to cover her breasts. She tilted her head slightly at seeing him and her hair was in astray about her shoulders. He paused again.

"What is it?"

"You're breathtaking." He murmured while shutting the door behind him without taking his eyes off of her. He doubted he could ever get used to that glorious flush she developed with his compliments.

"Quit it Nathan." She said shyly.

He sat on the bed and gave her the glass, "do you feel better?"

"I always feel better when I know you're near."

He reached up and caressed her cheek with two fingers, "I think I have a way to make those nightmares stop."

She looked at him with confusion then widened her eyes, "Nathan—I can't possibly."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Lord Kate, I'm not a machine." He continued laughing.

"You certainly could have fooled me." She said keeping her eyes wide.

He grinned and ran his eyes over her, then settled them back on her. They were smoldering, “Well, now that you brought it up—“

She giggled and held up her hand, “Oh, no you don’t—I’ll end up having twins if you don’t—“ Her muffled squeal cut off her own words as he practically leapt on her covering her mouth with his.

\*\*\*

The next morning Nathan was coming down the stairs when the sound of shattering dishes reached his ears. “Oh hell.” He broke into a run forgetting about Hannah. Eric was probably in the kitchen looking for food. He had an appetite that bested his own and that wasn’t easy.

When he got there Hannah was standing with a shocked look on her face, with several broken plates at her feet. Eric was at the other end with his hands splayed on in front looking as though he was trying to explain.

“It was a mix up.” Nathan said to Hannah, “Every thing is fine.”

Her eyes darted back and forth, then her gaping mouth snapped shut and she suddenly placed her hands on her hips, “Well for god’s sake, that was a very stupid mix up.”

Eric stood up straight looking relieved, “Christ woman, you scared the hell out of me.”

“How do you think I feel? A dead handsome man in my kitchen making coffee. I didn’t know if it was Christmas or if I was in hell.”

He cocked his head, “Hell, not heaven?”

“Don’t push your luck.” She said with a smirk and knelt down to clean up the shards.

“I can see you haven’t changed one bit.” He scoffed before adding a gregarious grin. Her answer was an indignant huff.

“did someone say coffee?” Nathan interjected making Eric chuckle.

He nodded “On it’s way. Where’s sis?”

“She’s been quite tired lately. She’ll probably sleep for another hour or so.”

“Tired? How so?” he cast him a suspicious look as he was retrieving mugs out of the cupboard.

“She’s pregnant.”

Eric froze in mid-retrieval and turned his head toward Nathan, “The hell you say?”

“We’re not sure how far along she is, but I have a suspicion that—“

He narrowed his eyes. “Stop talking Nathan, this subject is bordering close on me busting out your nice expensive even teeth. Remember you told me that you just got married the day before.”

He grinned, “All right, all right. Anyway, you are going to be an uncle.”

“Now that’s how you tell someone,” he said returning the grin. He turned around and shook Nathan’s hand, “Congratulations.”

“Now comes the next thing. How do we tell Kate?”

“Leave that to me.” Eric said, “I owe her from all the pain I’ve put her through.”

“Fair enough. Now to finish off our conversation from last night. Please explain why you are still breathing.”

\*\*\*

It was almost noon when Kate awoke and stretched her sore muscles. She glance at the clock and shook her head, “wow, that man can certainly put someone to sleep.” She laughed to herself.

She sat up on the edge of the bed and looked down while simultaneously covering her abdomen with her hand. This baby was going to be her savior. Hopefully the nightmares and the impact of missing Eric will subside with the occupation of being a mother. Nathan was helping her too. His constant attention and reassurance was finally making her feel better.

She stood up and walked to the shower. Hopefully he was still here so she could see him. Somehow she knew he would be even though he was a workaholic. They had spent too long apart, and she had a feeling that he wanted to spend time with her as much as she did with him.

She took her time carefully making herself look nice. It was her second day as Mrs. Thornburg and she promised to make sure that she would do her best to live everyday fully with him. Eric's death showed her that life was too precious and short.

\*\*\*

Nathan was waiting for her when she came down the stairs. He had an odd look on his face. One she hadn't seen before. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you for a moment."

She started feeling a wave of panic wash through her.

"No, no, don't worry. It's nothing terrible." He smiled down at her. "Like I said, I think I have a way to stop the nightmares." He put his arm around her and led her to the sofa. He was worried that she wouldn't take this well standing.

Zoe had come down a half an hour ago and near fainted at seeing Eric so a quick explanation had to take place. Nathan had asked her to give them some privacy so they could tell Kate alone. She would be embarrassed if she had broken down again like she did that day when Zoe offered to be her family.

Another thing he worried about was the stress on the baby. Who knew who she would take the news.

"So?" she said smiling up at him while he sat next to her, "What is your big plan?"

"Hey sis."

Her eyes slowly averted to the doorway.

"Don't pass out Kate. He's real. I swear."

"Eric?"

He went over, limping slightly, and sat across from her in a big comfortable chair leaning forward and placing his forearms on his knees. "there was a misunderstanding."

"is that what you call it." She felt herself grow angry, "A misunderstanding! God, Eric, I thought you died!"

"I was in a coma. There was such a mess at the sight—"

"They gave me your dog tags."

"Yeah well, for some reason mine got caught on my uniform and so I pulled them off for a moment to readjust—"

“God hates me—“ she sobbed, falling her face in her hands. “All these weeks, I’ve been so devastated—“

“No.” he went to her, and knelt down at her feet, “Kate, look at me.” He took her hands, “It was a stupid coincidence that’s all. I’m fine, well, I’ve been better. Once they figured out who I was, they tried to get a hold of you. However, you disappeared. Once I came to, I was on a plane less than three days later.” He winced at the position he took in front of her.

“Gosh, you are really hurt.”

“I’m mending.” He said with a pinched smile.

She reached out and cupped his face, “Oh God Eric, I must sound horrible.”

“Well, considering that you’re pregnant, I think your emotions are all over the place.”

She turned and looked at Nathan.

“It was him in our room last night, but before you tear my head off, he didn’t know you were with me, and you were too upset to bring him back in.”

She probably was. Still, “You two need to let me grow up.”

“Sweetheart.” Nathan said tipping his head knowledgeably, “I’m pretty sure I did.”

“Jesus.” Eric said getting to his feet and staring down at him, “What did I tell you about your teeth?”

Kate burst into laughter.

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” Nathan said embracing her.

## EPILOGUE

“God, I’m so fat.” Kate said as Nathan helped her into the chair after he excused the host.

“You’re perfect.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek before he took the seat opposite of her.

She flushed slightly.

“I’ll never get tired of that.” He grinned taking her hand.

“You could cause a marble statue to blush Nathan.”

He chuckled, "Maybe we should try it."

She made a startled face.

"What is it?"

"Your son moved."

"Son?"

"A mother knows." She giggled covering her abdomen with her hand feeling another kick. "A few more weeks will prove me right."

He kissed her knuckles. "Of course you are."

"Eric's already bought him a bike."

"Of course he has. He'll end up buying him a car next week and our child isn't born yet."

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"I can't believe he went back to the service." She shook her head.

"As a consultant. I had his word." Nathan confirmed. At her worried expression he gave her a smile, "He'll be fine. He won't go into combat again."

"It's just hard knowing that he was alone over there after the accident."

"He's a tough man Kate."

"He had to be." She answered then bit her lip for a moment. Being tough reminded him of someone else and what she'd agreed to do.

"I know that look. What does Zoe want?"

She rolled her eyes and he chuckled.

"Well, that just got me thinking. Zoe wanted me to ask you if she could go to this party coming up this weekend."

"Are you insane?" he said lifting his brows, "That boyfriend of hers will get her in bed—"

"He won't. Zoe's promised me. I believe her." She stared at him seriously, "She's been with him for almost a year and nothing's happened—"

"How do you know that?"

"She told me. Nathan she's not even on the pill so—"

"Oh hell." He said turning his head away in exasperation, "I can't believe we're talking about my baby sister."

“You asked me to talk to her.” Actually she didn’t have to. Zoe was very confident as a teenager, and had no problem discussing anything with her.

“And there’s a reason why. I can discuss sex easily with you, but certainly not her. I’ll tell you what.” He said leaning forward and giving her a sexy smirk, “you tell her that she can go to that party as long as you don’t bring this up with me ever again.”

She smiled, “Well, she is a smart cookie.”

“What does that mean?” he said sitting erect.

“She told me to say that and then you’d drop it.”

He threw back his head and laughed, “I’m outnumbered. It’s a conspiracy.”

“Good evening, what can I get you to drink?”

Nathan lifted his head slowly and let a smile draw across his handsome face to the waitress, “Hello Natalie.”

The woman glanced at him and let her jaw drop. How could she have missed him? He was still a sight to behold. Dressed in an expensive dark navy suite, pale blue shirt and matching tie it looked as though he didn’t have a worry in the world—as usual.

“Waitressing now?” he said blandly as if it was no concern what she was doing.

Kate glanced back and forth between them with a confused expression.

“Y—yes Mr. Thornburg.” She said uneasily, “Please don’t say anything. It took me six months to get this job.”

“Is that right?” he said with an unemotional smile.

“Nathan?” Kate said with confusion.

He turned and looked at his wife, “Honey you remember Natalie, my personal assistant.”

That’s where she remembered her from. She looked different. She certainly wasn’t as pretty and sophisticated as she remembered her. Maybe it had something to do with the stylish uniform she had to wear in comparison to the fashionable office attire. A black skirt, white shirt and red tie which was not the least bit flattering to her figure.

Nathan's demeanor was actually frightening. He was cold, ice cold to the woman and she had no idea why.

"Mr. Thornburg, I'm begging you." Natalie said again.

He turned back to her, "Well, if you apologize to my wife, and sound convincing. I might not say anything."

Nodding abruptly she directed her attention to Kate, "Mrs. Thornburg I'm so sorry I sent you that photo. I was stupid. I'll never do such a horrible thing again. I learned my lesson I couldn't get a job as anyone's PA after that and this was the first one I had since I was fired. You were so pretty, and I thought there was no way to get you out of his life unless I did something like that. Please forgive me, I was so wrong."

Kate didn't know what to say, she was too stunned. Nathan never told her who sent the photograph, but knowing the extremes that he dealt with it made her swell with love for him.

"I think that's sufficient, Don't you Kate?"

She only nodded while turning her attention back on Nathan. Her eyes were wide with wonder.

He winked at her and gave Natalie their order.

After she left Kate spoke again, "You really meant it—I mean how you felt."

"Of course I did. I only had eyes for you Kitten. I know I can be emotionally detached sometimes but nothing ever dissuaded how I felt about you." He squeezed her hand, "She wasn't a very good PA anyway."

She laughed, "Can you please just stop making her suffer?"

"Since you asked, your wish is my command." He answered. "I take her off the black ball list."

"I love you." She gave him a ravishing grin.

"Baby, that's all I ask." He kissed her knuckles again.



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