

Chapter 51

Ethan locks eyes with me as he slams his arms into his sides and wiggles out of bed. He remains stiff as I try to grab and put him back on his mattress, giggling manically when I struggle.

He's starting to get heavy.

"I'm a worm." He blurts, convulsing in what can only be described as the worst worm impression known to man.

I sigh, standing as I stare down at the young, wiggly boy. He's going to give me grays before I'm thirty-five.

"You're something," I respond, hooking my hands underneath his waist before rolling him back into his bed. "It's already way past your bedtime, Eth, and dad's going to be upset if he gets home and you're still up."

He ignores me, rolling around on his sheets like a fucking cement truck. It's cute, and if it weren't so late I'd probably be laughing along with him, but right now I'm ready to curl up on his transformer sheets and go to sleep myself.

"I want to wait for dad." Ethan whines, returning to our earlier argument.

He already spoke on the phone with Nate forty minutes ago when he was first supposed to go to bed, feigning innocence as he promised he'd be good and listen to me for the rest of the night.

If there's anything I've learned tonight, it's that Ethan's a liar.

A big, hyperactive, wormy liar.

"Nate will come up and let you know when he's home. Remember when he promised that? I'll send him right up the second her steps foot in that door." I state, shooting him a pointed glare when he tries to slither out of bed again.

I'm not surprised Nate's staying so late at work tonight. He's had to blow off a few mornings in a row now, and I'm sure his work's started to get pretty backed up. Still, with each passing minute I try to get Ethan to settle down and stay in bed, I'm thankful for the consistency he has when it comes to being home for dinner and owning nighttime duties.

"What have we talked about?" I gently remind the wiggly boy.

Ethan scrunches his nose.

"Me not being a-," He starts, holding eye contact as he flops out of bed. "-menace."

He lands flat on his face, a loud cry slipping from his lips before he snaps out of it and lifts his butt into the air. I cock my head to the side, confused, when he starts to inchworm his way toward the door.

I have to cover my mouth with my hand, not wanting him to encourage him with my laughter.

Maybe I should just let him fall asleep in the living room. It'll be easier than trying to manage whatever this weird attitude is. If I'm lucky he'll pass out quickly and I can carry him up before Nate gets home, giving me the opportunity to pretend I was able to get him into bed with no issues.

The sound of the front door slamming shut fills me with relief, and I step back as Ethan scrambles to his feet and rushes downstairs. He moves so fast he almost trips on the stairs, giving me a mini heart attack until he catches himself and continues flying down them.

I hear a loud screech before a pained grunt, and remain rooted in his bedroom until I spot them coming back upstairs a minute later. Nate carries a giggling Ethan over his shoulder, the man's eyes exhausted as he walks inside and drops the boy in his bed.

"I thought you want to bed already?" He sighs, planting a grin on his face.

It doesn't reach his eyes, but I know it's for Ethan's benefit, not mine.

"He's a worm tonight." I state, running a hand down the front of my face.

Nate gasps, turning to Ethan with a shocked expression.

"A worm!?" He breathes, his dramatic reaction causing Ethan to launch into another fit of giggles.

I turn and leave the room when Ethan slides out of bed to show him his moves, leaving him to deal with the wild boy. He made it, he puts it to bed.

My feet drag me to the couch before I collapse face-first on it, absolutely exhausted. I love Ethan, but he can be a handful sometimes. Make that most of the time.

At least he seems to be doing better in class. I stayed behind to chat with his teacher today, and am glad to hear his attitude has improved significantly these past few weeks. He's still having a bit of trouble falling asleep in class, but for the most part he's able to stay awake the entire day.

It'd probably help if I could get him into bed at a reasonable time.

Maybe I should start seeing where I can cut back on our morning routine. I usually get him up about forty-five minutes before we leave, but I'm sure there are some things I can do to speed up our process and let him sleep in a bit more.

He's a growing boy, after all. Sleep's pretty crucial for his growth and all that fun stuff.

Nate comes down twenty minutes later in his pajamas, and I sit up on the couch so he has room to join.

"You look tired." I state as he plops down at the opposite end.

He turns to face me, blinking, before dropping his head in my lap. I freeze at the action before lowering my hands to his hair and rubbing his scalp. He shuts his eyes and breathes, enjoying the touch for a moment before reaching for the remote.

We don't speak as he gets our show on, neither of us having much to stay.

I'm still feeling some sort of way after watching him and Sophie together, and he looks about ready to fall asleep in my lap.

I continue to run my fingers through his hair, lightly scratching his scalp with my nails, before moving to his jaw and tracing the skin. He opens his eyes to watch me, staring as I take my time touching him. I like when he's sleepy, the man prone to let me do whatever I want with him.

I could shove blueberries up his nose and he'd just lay there letting me.

"That feels nice." He whispers, kissing my fingers when I trail them over his lips.

I smile, moving to his neck before pushing down his shirt to see the spot I left on him the other day. The purple bruise is faint, but I still trace my fingers over it with a grin.

"Are you ready to tell me what you were really upset about this morning?" He asks, capturing my wrist with his hand.

He refuses to let me pull back as I clench my jaw and look away, not wanting to talk about it.

"It's nothing."

"It's not nothing to me. I want this to work, Brooke, and it's not going to if you're harboring resentment toward me and my situation." He argues, removing his head from my lap so he can sit up and face me properly.

I blink, embarrassed by the way my eyes fill with tears. I don't want to be the person that's jealous about things neither of us can control, and I know the way I feel about Sophie and her condition is awful and unfair.

Nate doesn't so much as bat an eye as I say that to him, his patience unwavering as he urges me to tell him what precisely I'm upset about.

I suck in a deep breath, knowing he's right and hating him for it.

We wipes away my tears as I explain that I peeked into her room after Sara left and saw him holding Sophie's hand and fixing her hair. I rush to assure him that I know it's fucked up and understand he can't help it, but he stops me with a shake of his head.

"I get why you're upset, Brooke." He admits, inching closer so he can plant a kiss on my lips. "I want you to understand that when I look at Sophie, I don't see my wife. I don't see a woman I'm in love with and secretly pining for. I did that for a long time. I used to sit up there begging her to wake up and be okay, but the fact of the matter is that it's not going to happen." Nate continues, dropping to his knees so he can kneel between my legs and bring his face closer to mine.

"I've come to accept that, and I go up there to hold her hand and fix her hair because it's my duty. She's dead, but her body's still here and I feel a responsibility to be kind to it." He assures, staring into my eyes so I see his truth. "I look forward to coming home and spending time with you and Ethan every day, even when he's worming and you're mad at me. That's what I want, and that's what makes me happy. Not sitting by her bed thinking about what once was."

I wipe my cheeks, still embarrassed over my jealousy but feeling a lot better after hearing him speak about his emotions regarding her.

Nate leans forward and plants his lips on mine, kissing me until my tears have dried and I'm gasping for breath. He stares at me for a bit longer, trying to see if I'm really okay, before deciding that I am and crawling back onto the couch so he can rest his head on my lap again.

I return to my prior actions, running my hand through the hair and scratching his scalp.

The air feels lighter now that everything's been put out there, and even though I know there's something he should be telling me, I don't let it get me down. Sara would inform me if it was huge, or at least warn me that I should talk to Nate, and Nate doesn't seem like the type of person to keep a secret without good reason.

"Do you think you could carve out some time to do something special with Ethan this weekend? He's been a bit insecure about his place in your life since he found out we're together." I ask, accidentally tugging a few strands of his hair when he throws his head back to look at me.

"What's he been saying?" He probes.

I run my finger down his wrinkled forehead, pushing at the skin until he relaxes and it falls back into place. Always so full of worry.

"Just little things. He bragged that you love him more than me the other day, and keeps making comments about special things you two do together." I state. "He's trying to stake his claim, and I think it'd be good for you to take him out and do something just the two of you."

Nate's lips purse, and I pinch them before shaking my head and letting go. That's an odd thing to do. He raises a brow, his lips curling into a smile as I feel my face heat up. He snatches my hand and moves my fingers to his mouth, playfully biting the tips of them.

"Thanks for telling me." He says after a minute. "I'll plan something fun for us to do this weekend."

I grin, bending to kiss his chin. "It doesn't have to be anything crazy. I think he'd love it if you two made a fort in the living room and binge-watched movies. I can make myself scarce."

Nate nods, grinning as he tries to sneak his hand up my shorts. I smack his shoulder but he ignores it, continuing upward until I knock his head with the inside of my thigh.

"Ouch!" He gasps, but I know it didn't hurt. "You give a woman your affection, let her bully you around, pay for her audio porn, and she thanks you by inflicting physical pain on your skull. Fifteen-year-old me would be very disappointed." He teases, pulling back his hand.

I snort, watching as he rolls onto his side and curls up on the couch. I like this soft, relaxed side of him, and can't hold back my grin as he shoves his hands underneath my thighs the same way I always do to him.

Chapter 52

"Oh my god," I gasp, sitting up with a huff as Ethan crawls onto my bed with a wide grin. He's uncoordinated in his attack, hands and knees seeming to find every sensitive part of my body and dig in.

He screeches the happy birthday song as he plants himself next to my head, the loose tooth in his mouth bloody from him messing with it too much this morning.

I rub at my eyes, waiting for him to finish before grabbing his chin and prying his mouth open. He catches on quickly, opening wide as I stick my finger inside and wiggle the tooth. It's hanging on by a thread, and I'll be surprised if it doesn't pop out sometime in the next few days.

"For my birthday, can I pull it out?" I ask, laughing when Ethan rears back and scrambles away, covering his mouth protectively.

He stares at me with eyes full of betrayal, fully convinced I'm trying to pull a fast one over on him and rip it out when he's not ready. I'd never do that, but it's fun teasing him about it.

"Stop bullying my son." Nate scolds from the doorway.

I look up, watching as he steps inside my room and leans against the wall. He's got a few wrapped presents in his hands, and holds one out for Ethan before returning to his spot against the wall.

Ethan accepts it with a jump, scrambling off the bed to grab it before climbing back and moving to me. He keeps a safe distance this time, still concerned about his tooth, and cranes his face away from me as he holds the present out.

It takes everything in me not to laugh at his reaction, finding the action endearing. I avoid looking at his mouth area as I reach out to take the gift, hoping my disinterest will settle his fears. It's too early for a riled-up Ethan.

"Is this from you?" I ask.

Ethan nods, bouncing as Nate joins and sits on the edge of the bed. He sets the remaining presents next to his leg, opening up his lap for the young boy who hurries to scramble into it.

It's impossible not to grin as I hold the gift in my hand and scan it, admiring the wrapping. It looks like Ethan grabbed a giant roll of gift wrap and rolled the present up in it, which is what I've seen him try to do for Nate's birthday, before folding the ends and taping it all together.

A massive waste of paper, but so cute.

The young man can barely hold in his excitement as I rip open the wrapping and pull out the handmade gift. My lips purse as I look at it, holding in tears as I realize what it is. I used to make these for my parents all the time, and can't believe Ethan took the time to create one for me.

"It's a coupon book." Ethan explains, pointing to the writing on the front.

"Did you do this by yourself?" I gasp, clearing my throat when it comes out a bit croaky.

Ethan nods, and I take a moment to flip through all the pages. He used full-size sheets and drew giant pictures on them before writing what that particular coupon is for in large letters across the bottom. Most are for help around the house, little things he likes to help with like the dishes and folding blankets.

I spot Nate's handwriting on a few of the ones that are hard to read, and feel my chin dimple at the thought of them sitting at the table working on it together. They probably did it over the past weekend when I was gone, out all day and night so they could have some alone time together.

"I love it." I smile, sitting up and pulling Ethan into a hug.

He wraps his arms around my neck and squeezes, choking me before letting go and gesturing for Nate to give him another present. Nate raises a brow, staring at Ethan until the younger man drops his head and mumbles a please.

Nate sucks in his cheeks as he hands the next present over, eventually placing a hand over his lips when I shoot him a questioning look. He shrugs, pretending to be confused, before gesturing for me to open the present.

He's being weird about this one.

Either way, I'm excited. Ethan watches intently as I open the wrapping, careful not to make a mess as I crumple it up and set it aside. I can tell immediately what it is, and let out a chuckle as I open the box and pull out the perfume bottle.

Ethan leans in further as I hold it up to my nose and smell, his face practically touching mine as he tries to get a whiff too.

"It smells amazing," I compliment, knowing these are his favorites to give.

In a strange way I feel giddy that he finds me important enough to get a perfume for, the man picky about who he feels is deserving of a gift requiring his scent of smell.

"Thank you," He breathes, grabbing my hand to hold the bottle steady so he can get another whiff. "I would've gotten you the bigger bottle if you weren't adult kissing my dad."

"Ethan!" Nate scolds.

Ethan doesn't look guilty, an unapologetic frown spreading over his lips as he turns to his dad with a huff. Nate urges him to apologize, but I wave it away. I don't want to start my morning off with an argument between the two.

Instead, I grab my coupon book and flip until I find the get-out-of-jail-free page I saw earlier. Ethan looks confused as I search for it, his hands fiddling with the perfume box until I turn the book around to show him the page.

"I'd like to use this one." I state, pointing to the stick figure drawing of me behind bars.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting from him, but it's not for him to lunge forward and pull me into a hug. I return it happily, making eye contact with a smiling Nate as I rub Ethan's back and give him a tight squeeze.

"No more mean comments about me kissing your dad?" I ask, pulling back to look him in the eye.

Ethan scrunches up his lips, thinking, before giving a jerky nod.

"Oh, good." Nate blurts, practically squishing Ethan as he throws his upper body on mine and smashes our lips together.

Ethan screams out a gross and tries to break us apart, fake gagging noises slipping from his lips as Nate cups my cheeks and starts to pepper kisses all over my face. He makes loud smooching sounds with each one, playing it up to annoy Ethan.

When he finally pulls away I'm breathless from my laughter, pleasantly surprised by how nice this morning is going.

"There's one more present for you." Nate states, moving to grab the last gift. "This one's from me."

"And me." Ethan chimes in.

Nate turns to Ethan and tousles his hair, reluctantly letting him take part ownership in the gift.

My pulse races as Nate hands it over, a bit nervous for this one. The wrapping's clearly been done by him, and despite Ethan's claim, I know this one's all from Nate. He imitates his son, bouncing a bit on the bed as he watches me open his present.

I go slow just to piss him off, smirking when he lets out a giant tuft of air and rubs Ethan's back.

Tiny hands latch onto my shin over the blanket, fingers curling around the muscle as both men inch closer for a better look. I hold in a joke about it, not wanting them to feel bad about their excitement.

"Do you like it?" Nate blurts the moment I get the wrapping off.

I flip the package, reading the back before looking up at him with a grin. He got me a kindle.

"I know you like to read." He explains, moving next to me so he can look at it too.

My head cocks to the side, unsure what he's talking about. I've never read in front of him, and usually only do it late at night in bed. Even then, it's usually some smutty romance.

I shut my eyes, sucking in a slow breath when Nate pats my hand and laughs. Fuck those in-app purchases. I'm a sucker for the two-dollar ones available in the books app, and tend to buy them on the fly.

Has Nate gotten the notifications every time I bought one? Most are pretty embarrassing. I pause, thinking over all the ones I've read in the past few weeks. No. All of them are embarrassing.

"I went ahead and downloaded some books for you already, but I'd recommend checking a bit later." Nate snickers, jerking his head toward Ethan.

The young man frowns, feeling left out of the loop, but forgets it quickly when Nate asks what I want for breakfast.

"Hot dogs." Ethan answers for me.

I freeze, thinking it over, before turning to Nate with a shrug. Hot dogs honestly don't sound half bad right now, and there's a really good stand in Central Park I enjoy going to.

Ethan rushes out of the room to get dressed when I tell Nate that, giddy knowing he's going to get to play at the park while we're there. It's one of his favorites, always full of other kids he can rope into playing a game of tag with.

When he's gone I turn to Nate, grabbing his shoulder and pulling myself on his lap. We don't have much time before Ethan comes back, and I want a real kiss.

He holds my hips as I straddle him, happily connecting his lips to mine. He tastes like toothpaste, and I only have a second to worry about my morning breath when he lowly groans and wraps his arms around my waist to hold me against him.

"Happy birthday, Brooke." He whispers when I pull back.

I grin. I've been dreading turning thirty for a long time now, agonizing over the new number, but Nate's making it not so bad.

"We don't have to get hot dogs if you don't want them. We're happy to go wherever you want." He urges.

I peck his lips again, squeezing his cheeks with my palms before rolling off the bed to get dressed.

"I love hot dogs." I argue, turning to look at him out of the corner of my eye. "It's you who seems to have the problem with them."

Nate gasps, holding up his hands in innocence. I hesitate by my dresser before realizing he's not going to leave, and shut and lock my door before wiggling out of my clothing. His eyes never leave my form as I move around my room naked, bending more than necessary as I dig around in the bottom of my drawer looking for a pair of pants.

I pretend to be shocked when Nate comes up behind me, his hand finding its way between my legs with no issue. He toys with my clit before sinking a finger into me, moaning quietly in my ear as I straighten back up and rub my butt against his hardened length.

"Hot dogs, Nate." I remind him, pulling away with a quiet laugh.

He groans, sitting back on my bed before grabbing and squeezing his cock over his jeans. The fabric strains the front of his pants, tenting the material. I eye it with a dry throat, wanting nothing more than to feel it inside me.

Instead I put my hand over his, stroking, and bring my lips to his ear.

"Tonight I'm going to tie you up." I promise, enjoying the way his breath hitches. "And if you're lucky, I just might spank you too."

He's speechless when I pull away and hurry into the bathroom to get changed, staring at me with an open jaw as I wink and slam the door shut in his face.

Point one for Brooke, zero for Nate.

Chapter 53

Nate pulls me onto his lap when I try to sit down, rejecting my attempt to plop on the couch next to him. I'm wearing the perfume Ethan got me, and grin as Nate buries his face in my neck to smell it.

He hums, mumbling a quiet compliment into my skin.

"Ethan did well." I laugh, pushing his face away.

Nate grins, agreeing as he shifts so we're spooning on the couch with him curled around me.

"I helped pick it out." He claims, kissing my shoulder. "Did you have a good birthday?" He breathes, trailing his hand down my belly.

I nod, spinning in his arms so I can see his face. His eyes light up as I lean forward to connect my mouth with his, eager for some contact after the long day we've had. He and Ethan went above and beyond to make my birthday special, taking me to all my favorite kid-friendly places in the city before treating me to a fancy dinner.

The two even went as far as to run me a bath when we got home.

I don't even want to know what Nate had to bribe Ethan with to get the young man to leave me alone for a whole hour I was in there, the boy only heard loitering outside my bedroom door a few times in that time frame.

"Today was amazing, thank you." I murmur, burying my head in my chest and letting my eyes slip shut.

If this is what birthdays are like with Nate, I could most definitely get used to it.

Nate hums, his chest vibrating against my cheek as he wraps his arms around my waist and holds me against him. It's comforting, and I let myself enjoy it as I listen to the sounds of the television behind me.

"You know, I've been thinking all day about what you said to me this morning." He mumbles after a minute of silence.

I frown, wracking my brain to try and remember what I said as I pull back and look up at him. Nate avoids eye contact, his cheeks turning pink as he stares at the top of my head. I find the slight flush cute, and resist the urge to tease him about it as I tangle our legs together.

"Can you remind me what I said?" I ask, embarrassed to admit I don't remember.

Nate clears his throat.

"You might have mentioned something about tying me up." He mumbles.

He continues to avoid eye contact as I suck in a sharp breath, not knowing that's something he's interested in. I've never done anything like that before and was saying it as a joke, but I'm open to trying.

Nate's throat bobs as he gulps, and I run my finger over his Adam's apple with a grin before craning my neck and pressing my lips to the skin. It's grown a bit prickly since his shave this morning, and I brush my mouth across it before cupping his chin and urging him to look down to meet my eye.

"Do you think you deserve it?" I tease.

Nate breathes, his eyes wide as he stares at me. I can tell by the way his hips shift that he's turned on, and try not to let my shock show. I didn't realize he'd be into me talking to him like that, and feel a familiar heat coiling between my thighs at the fact.

I tighten my grip on his chin, softly squeezing the hard bone as I wait for a response.

"Yes." He eventually whispers, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. "Please, Brooke." He adds as an afterthought.

I tap my fingers against his cheek, excited to do this as I wiggle out from his arms and stand. He's quick to follow my lead, his cock already hard as he grabs my hand and pulls me upstairs.

"I asked Mary to make up the bed on the third floor while we were out today." He explains when I move toward his bedroom. "We still can't be loud or anything, but it might be nice to have some distance between us and Eth."

He doesn't wait for my response as he pulls me the rest of the way up the stairs. When we reach the top level, we move opposite Sophie's room, heading toward a space I haven't ever been in before.

The door's always been closed, and I never thought to ask what's up here. I know Nate doesn't stay in the master room, his shared bathroom with Ethan and small closet a clear indicator, and figured he moved out of the master when Sophie was hurt.

My footsteps slow when he pushes open the door and ushers me inside, the old, outdated furniture a sharp contrast from the decor he prefers everywhere else in the house.

I pause as I take it in, my eyes wide as I scan the room. Everything in here screams late 90s, which is surprising considering how modern the rest of the house is.

"It's a long story that involves my grandparents moving in many years ago and claiming the master bedroom as their own, and me not having the energy to move back in when my parents and I put them in a home last year." He blurts, chuckling at my disbelief.

"You're telling me this room's been up for grabs the whole time? Shit, I would've moved in here if I knew." I grumble, peering around. "Would've made it real pretty for myself while Ethan was busy at school."

Nate laughs, grabbing my wrists and pulling me into his chest.

"That's exactly why I didn't tell you. I'm going to move back in here eventually. It's just going to be a lot of work to clean up and Ethan seemed to really enjoy having me nearby." He admits.

I scoff, shaking my head.

"Don't blame your laziness on your son." I scold.

Nate pouts, his goofy attitude disappearing as I spin us around and push him on the bed. I'm happy to note that the sheets are new and clean, and I spot some items from Nate's room that he must've brought up earlier.

He must've been genuine in his claim to have been thinking about this all day.

A handful of his nice silk ties are folded in the top corner of the bed, and I sit on his hips before reaching for them.

"I haven't done this before, and thought you could use those to tie me up." He explains, craning his neck to see what I'm doing with them. "I'll buy some actual restraints for next time."

I grin, running my fingers along the soft fabric. He chose the ones he wears most often, and I hold back a smirk at the knowledge that he'll forever think of me when he puts them on. Good.

He ruins the memory of my underwear, and I ruin his ties.

The ache between my thighs grows as I unfold and lay them down. I feel a bit nervous, but push that feeling aside as I grab the hem of his shirt and pull it over his head. He sits up to help, and works on undoing his pants while I get up to turn off the overhead light and switch on the lamp.

I'm trying to look good, and this lighting just isn't doing it for me.

He's naked by the time I return to bed, his cock hard and thick where it lays on his belly. I can't help but shiver as I take in the sight of him, my skin burning up with need.

It should be illegal how good he looks, his body long and full of hard muscle. I'm sure he could pull just about anybody he wants to, and feel lucky that he's mine. I'm the only one who gets to tie him up and hear him beg.

Nate's mouth drops open as I take my time stripping, hoping I look sexy as I pull my shirt over my head and shimmy out of my bottoms. His cock twitches as I climb back on the bed and sit on his belly, my bare pussy barely grazing over his shaft.

He squeezes his eyes shut with a quiet curse, hips jerking up before he's able to force them back down.

"I like you like this," I admit, grabbing his wrists and pushing them together. "All submissive and needy."

Nate bites back a moan, holding still as I tie up his hands and press them against the pillow above his head.

"Leave them here." I order, hurrying to the foot of the bed so I can tie each of his ankles to the posts. I make sure these ones are tight, not wanting him to be able to wiggle too much.

I stand back to admire him once I've finished, enjoying the look on his face as he waits to see what I'm about to do next.

"So pretty," I murmur, holding eye contact as I get on the bed and straddle his chest.

I move slowly in case he has any objections to what I'm doing, but all I'm met with is a giddy smile. He opens his mouth as I hover over it, neck-craning as he struggles to lick my clit.

"Come on, Nate. Show me how much you want to taste me." I urge, lowering just enough that he can reach me.

His lips close around my clit in a heartbeat, the man not at all concerned about the strain in his neck as he moans and flicks his tongue over the swollen nub. I hold onto the headboard for stability, squeezing the wood in my hands as he pleasures me with his mouth.

When his hand fly to my belly to try and pull me down further I hiss, lifting back up to grab and shove them back against the pillow.

"No," I snap, blindly reaching behind me for another tie. "Keep them here."

I snatch one with a grin, loving the way he looks at me as I bring it to his eyes. He lifts his head so I can wrap it around and cut off his vision. His lips are wet as he strains his neck and waits for me to return, his warm breath brushing over my clit as I slowly sit back down.

My jaw clenches as I hold back a moan, rocking softly against the tongue that licks me as I untie his hands and redo it so each wrist is connected to a corner of the headboard. His biceps flex as he lets me move him how I want, his groans vibrating against my sex in the best way.

The distance between us and Ethan allows him to be a bit louder, and the sound of his low moans has me soaking.

I grab the headboard for stability once I'm done tying him up, using it to help hold me up as I sit still and let him lick me. It feels incredible, and I enjoy it for another minute before lifting and moving back down his body.

His face is covered in me, and I stare at his wet jaw before darting forward and pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. He laughs as I avoid my slick, the noise ending in a choked grunt when I grab his cock and line it up with my entrance.

I don't waste any time sinking on him, loving the stretch as I get comfortable and take him all the way.

"Fuck," I pant, rolling my hips before reaching down to rub my clit.

Nate licks his lips as he tilts his head, trying to see through the slit underneath the tie around his eyes. I push it up to his forehead, uncovering his eyes before leaning back and circling my fingers over myself.

I don't bother riding him properly as I continue rocking my hips, moving just enough to feel him inside of me as I pleasure myself with my fingers.

"Move, baby." Nate gasps, hips flexing underneath me.

My head shakes, a wide grin spreading over my lips as I reject his request.

"No. This feels good for me." I state, pointedly slowing my gentle grinding as I speed up my movements with my fingers.

Nate curses as he watches me touch myself, the ties coming to good use when he tries to reach down and touch me. I can't help but giggle at the attempt, loving the way his neck and chest turn red as his body warms beneath me.

I let my eyes slip shut as the pleasure in my abdomen grows, my movements growing jerky as my orgasm nears. Nate looks to be in pain as I tease him, his face pinched as he continues to twitch underneath me. I can tell he's fighting the urge to thrust up into me, forcing his cock deeper into my body, and enjoy the power I have over him as he resists.

He's going to hate me in a moment.

"I'm going to cum." I warn, my words shaky as I circle my clit with more speed.

Nate moans. "Cum for me. I want to feel you come apart with me inside you like this." He urges, his arms once more stopped by the ties as I shiver and still on top of him.

He continues whispering his dirty wants as I cum, my thighs squeezing his hips as I clench around his cock.

I can feel my wetness seeping out all around the base of his cock, and try to hide my smile as I lean over him and begin to ride him slowly. I lift until just the tip of him remains in me, pausing there for a moment before sinking back down.

"I want you to cum like this." I state, unable to refrain from grinning at the angry breath he releases.

It's obvious he wants more, but I refuse to give it to him as I continue my slow fucking. His abs tense as I plant my hands on them for more leverage, letting my fingers feel him as I rock at my teasing pace.

"So fucking desperate you'll cum from anything." I tease.

Nate nods, panting as I take pity on him and speed up just a tiny bit.

His eyes screw shut as he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip to hold back a cry, his hips twitching upwards just a bit to meet each of my thrusts.

"Beg me to cum." I order.

Nate's eyes spring open, the light brown practically invisible as his pupils expand. He blinks a few times to clear his vision, and clears his throat when I speed up even more, finally starting to ride him at a reasonable pace.

"Please, Brooke. Please, baby, let me cum. I'm so close." He moans.

His jaw clenches shut as he fights it, his expression desperate as I lean in and bring my lips to his ear and tell him to cum.

He practically yells my name as he slams his hips up and buries himself deep into me, the action almost knocking me entirely off his lap. I push against his chest to stabilize, loving the feel of his cock twitching as he cums inside.

I remain still for a minute, giving him time to come down, before climbing off his lap and rushing to the bathroom. He yells something about me leaving him exposed as I sit on the toilet and clean myself, but is full of smiles when I come back out a minute later to untie him.

"Did you like that?" I ask, wincing at the redness on his wrists.

It's not too bad, and will probably be fine in an hour or so, but the sight still makes me frown. We should get something made for this if we're going to do it again.

"I loved it." Nate admits, wrapping his arm around my waist once I've finished removing the last ties. I screech as I splat on his chest.

"Stay the night with me?" He asks. "I hate when you get up in the morning and rush back to your room, and want to wake up with you."

His words have me falling silent, my pulse racing in excitement. I like the thought of that, and quickly agree before throwing on my clothing and following him back to his room.

Chapter 54

For a moment I forget I'm in Nate's bed when I wake up, but am painfully reminded the second the heat hits me. I'm covered in sweat where my body presses against his, the skin sticky and the air beneath the covers damp.

Sleeping next to him feels like being trapped in a sauna, and I subtly push his arm away before rolling over the top of him and smacking at his phone. The alarm continues to blare despite my attempt, and Nate groans as he snatches it off the bedside table to do it himself.

I glare up at him before turning to peer out the window. It's still dark outside.

"What time is it?" I huff.

Nate clears his throat, squinting as he tries to read the time on his phone. The light coming from the device is blinding, and I squeeze my own shut when it makes my eyes burn. He should be put in jail for this.

"Early. These are my long run days so it's set to go off an hour and a half earlier than usual." He admits, fiddling with the screen for a moment before setting the phone down. "Go back to sleep."

He doesn't have to tell me twice.

His fingers bury into the hair at the base of my neck and scratch at my scalp, the calming action lulling me to sleep. I have half a mind to ask if he's planning to get up and leave for his run once I'm out, but can't find the energy to ask.

I don't care as long as he doesn't wake me when he moves.

It feels good laying with him like this, not having to worry about sneaking into my room before Ethan gets up, and I let out a content sigh as I sink further into the mattress. Despite the rocky start, the young boy is taking our relationship in stride, and is in a noticeably better headspace after his day alone with Nate.

Anybody who sees the two men together, or even hears Nate speak about Ethan, can clearly see how much love he has for his son, and I'm glad Ethan seems to be realizing it too. Who knew all it would take to convince him was one day of undivided attention from his dad.

Nate continues to scratch at my scalp while I slump against his chest, my mouth slightly open as I probably drool all over him. If he cares he doesn't say anything about it, and when my alarm goes off an hour later I'm happy to discover he's still underneath me.

I scramble and flop around as I hunt for and shut off my phone. Nate follows me, his body curling around mine before pinning me against the mattress. I giggle and shift, trying to get him off, before breaking out in full-blown laughter when his chubby fingers find their way to my armpits.

He snorts as I writhe underneath him, choking on my breath as I try to escape his tickling.

"Nathan!" I shout, throwing my elbow back.

It misses, and Nate pins my limb with his forearm before returning to his annoying actions. It's too early in the day for this, and I haven't had nearly enough coffee. He doesn't let up until I manage to get hold of his thigh and pinch the skin as hard as possible.

With a yelp Nate finally retreats, rolling off and flopping on his back to my left.

He grunts when I spin and launch an attack of my own. I try to tickle him just as he did to me, but he easily fights off my attempts with halfhearted swats of his hand.

"A good try, my sweet." He jokes when I give up.

I feel my face warming, and clear my throat to try and hide it. The pet names are new, and turn me into a red mess every time. Nate's most definitely picked up on that, though, and seems to be throwing them into all his sentences just to trip me up.

I hate it as much as I love it.

"My sweet? That's a new one." I comment.

Nate tilts his head to look down at me, a dangerous glint in his eye despite them still being half-shut with sleep. I find the sight adorable, and press a kiss to his chin before planting

another one on his lips as I push back the covers. They're tangled around my legs and torso from our roughhousing, and it takes me a moment to break free and crawl off the bed.

"I like it." He states, scanning my figure. "My sweet, sexy girlfriend. I quite enjoy the sound of that."

I roll my eyes and shoot him a glare, my lips twitching when he cracks and breaks out in a cheesy grin. He stretches and kicks the sheets off his legs before finding the energy to crawl out of bed.

Even in the morning he looks good, and I watch with envy as he scratches his hip and saunters over to me. My pulse races at an embarrassing speed as he cups my cheeks to give me a proper kiss, his tongue teasingly darting over my lips before he pulls away and shoots me a wink.

"Beautiful." He murmurs. "I'll get the coffee started while you wake the goblin."

With a hard pat on my butt he's disappearing into his closet, the warm mood vanishing with it. Ethan was a fucking demon to put to bed last night, pouting and trying to sneak out of his room, and I don't even want to think about how grumpy he's about to be this morning.

The man thrives off routines, but also seems to love ruining his own.

"What's your day look like?" I ask instead, prolonging the inevitable.

Nate pops his head out of the closet, his eyebrow quirking at my question. I never ask him about his day, most of them always the same. He throws back some coffee and shoves as much food as he can down his throat before leaving for work, and stays there all day before coming home and entertaining Ethan.

"Same as usual." He responds, confirming my thoughts. "Sara's coming to check on Sophie over lunch so I'll be stopping by the house around then to speak to her, but other than that, I should be home around six."

I try to hide my surprise. Sara doesn't usually visit today, the woman coming every Thursday like clockwork. I've noticed Sophie's gotten a new caretaker recently, too, but haven't thought much about it. I don't interact much with them beyond the occasional greeting when they stop by to change tubing and keep her clean.

"Did Sara adjust the day she comes over?" I ask, hoping my prying is subtle.

Nate hesitates, his lips pursing, before he shakes his head.

"No, but she thinks it would be best to start coming twice a week." He explains.

Why? The question is on the tip of my tongue, but Nate turns and disappears back into his closet before I can get the words out. His quick retreat is signal enough that he doesn't want to talk about it, his reluctance only furthering my anxiety.

I know it's not like she's going to wake up or anything, but can't help myself from being sensitive when it comes to her. Especially when I know there's something Nate isn't telling me.

"Is everything okay?" I blurt, peering around the corner of his closet doorway.

Nate's back is to me, and I watch as he straightens up and cups the top of his head with both hands. The body language alone tells me he's annoyed, but the quiet sigh he releases before he shakes his head and turns around cements it.

He looks shocked when he spins to see me looking at him, clearly having thought he was alone in his closet.

"I don't want to talk about this with you." He snaps, losing his patience.

I stiffen.

"Okay."

He calls my name as I spin and leave, but I ignore it and head into Ethan's room. I'm not going to sit here and beg him to share the information with me. If he wants to be all secretive and weird about it, that's on him.

I'm glad he doesn't try to follow me, remaining in his room and leaving me alone as I bend and wake the groggy boy up. He groans and tries to yank the covers above his head, blocking me out, and with a snort I grab his wrists and gently pull them back down.

"Time to get up. It's a bright new day!" I laugh.

Ethan rubs his eyes and sits up, his lips forming a dramatic frown as I move to his closet to pick out some clothing.

Nate leaves his room as I'm getting Ethan into a shirt, the floor creaking as he moves to the landing. It takes everything in me not to look out the door at him, keeping my focus on getting the boy in front of me dressed.

"You look great!" I compliment as we get the last of his clothing on.

Ethan grins, finally starting to wake up as he takes my hand and leads me downstairs. His hand is small around my own, and I grin as he tugs me directly into the kitchen like I don't know where it is.

Nate stands in front of the coffee machine with two mugs, looking guilty as he holds one out for me to take. I plaster a fake smile as I take it, not wanting to argue around Ethan. We can talk tonight when we're alone, or maybe over lunch if he has time after Sara leaves.

It's hard to anticipate how long she's going to be here when I don't even know why she's coming.

"Sit down, Brooke. I'll make breakfast." Nate offers as I move toward the fridge.

I've never seen the man cook before, and hesitate before nodding and stepping aside. Ethan seems excited at the idea of his dad cooking, rushing to climb up on the barstool and crane his neck to get the best view.

I move to join him, sipping my coffee. It's hard to be mad when Nate makes it just the way I like, and I glare silently into the mug before taking a seat next to Ethan.

"If you go get a shoe, we can work on our tying." I suggest, a genuine smile spreading over my lips as Ethan sprints in the direction of the front door.

He comes back a minute later with one of Nate's shoes, and I urge him to return to the stool as I walk him through the steps of lacing them up. He watches with wide eyes before trying himself, his tiny fingers struggling with the strings but doing a half-decent job.

Nate stops what he's doing every few seconds to watch, his constant distractions leading to most, if not all, of the pancakes he's making ending up burnt.

I don't mind much, and tease him about it in an attempt to keep Ethan from sensing that things are tense between us right now. The last thing I want is for him to start feeling weird about us being together.

Especially when he's just getting used to it.

"Can you get your backpack and shoes on while I speak to Brooke?" Nate speaks up as we finish our food.

I gulp, searching desperately for a way out of this. I don't have my thoughts together yet, and need time to formulate my words so I don't sound insensitive. I get that this issue is personal to him, but I don't feel like I'm asking for a lot here.

"I'm sorry for shutting you down earlier." Nate's quick to apologize the second Ethan's out of hearing distance.

He rounds the kitchen counter to stand in front of me, his hands landing on my shoulders before sliding down to my waist. I don't move away, but don't lean into him either.

"She's been having some health issues lately that don't look good, and Sara's coming over to monitor them. She wants to discuss timelines today and it's got me on edge." He explains. "I've known this was coming for a long time, but I'm still upset and with the concerns you've expressed lately around her, I've been hesitant to share that with you."

Guilt hits me like a sledgehammer, knocking my breath away with one swing. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I absorb that information, suddenly regretting pushing so hard earlier.

Nate doesn't wait for a response from me as he bends and kisses my cheek.

"We can speak more about it over lunch." He promises, squeezing my hips.

I nod, feeling just as uncomfortable as Nate looks. He offers another kiss before releasing me and moving away. From the kitchen I listen as he talks to Ethan, loudly complimenting the boy on his shoes before asking him to help with his own.

The interaction would have me in a puddle if I weren't still reeling.

The selfish part of me that I shove as deep down as it can go is dreading watching him and Ethan mourn her, but I knew that was eventually going to happen when I entered this relationship. Shit, I knew it was going to happen the moment I took this job.

My hand shakes as I run it through my hair and fix my shirt, hoping the action removes the stress I feel as I swallow past the lump in my throat and plant a happy smile on my face. Ethan seems none the wiser as I enter the foyer, and jumps up to show me his and Nate's shoes with his chest all puffed up.

Nate doesn't stick around, muttering something about being late before doing his usual goodbye routine and rushing out the door.

He must've been an actor in another life, and I'm about to have to be one now.

Chapter 55

"You want anything to drink before you leave?"

I turn toward Nate, watching as he and Sara walk down the stairs together. It hasn't been long, maybe only twenty minutes, since they went up, and I'm surprised to see they've finished up already.

Sara usually stays for a good forty-five minutes whenever she comes, but I suppose it makes sense that if she's coming twice a week, they will be shorter.

My lips purse as I scan both of them, curious about what happened up there. Nate sports red eyes and a puffy face, a clear sign that he shed some tears during his conversation with Sara. It kills me being on the outs, the lack of information making me draw unrealistic conclusions about her waking up and Nate kicking me to the curb in lieu of his real family.

Deep down I know it's not going to happen, but the little devil in my brain likes to wreak havoc when it senses my insecurity.

Nate hides his emotions well, and if it weren't for the physical remains of sorrow on his face I probably wouldn't be able to see past his award-winning smile and relaxed posture. He and Sara go far enough back that I doubt he needs to put on the show, but I don't blame him for feeling uncomfortable being emotional around her.

She's a wonderful, amazing doctor, but empathy isn't necessarily her strong suit. I hold back a physical wince at the image of her trying to console Nate upstairs, the sheer awkwardness of that situation painful even to think about.

I shift in my seat, looking away from them as I reach across the dining room table to grab a packet of beads.

Ethan's crafts are a mess, the boxes growing disorganized and harder to keep track of each time we pull them out. If he weren't so in tune with what's in here I'd probably just throw most of them away, but I don't trust him not to notice something's gone and freak out.

It's not worth it, and I don't really feel like being dragged from craft store to craft store to replace what I got rid of.

I throw the beads in a pile with the others before searching for a container to put them all in. I'm pretty sure they used to live in one at some point, and scan the table with a frown before I find one they'll all fit in.

This is the last time I'm doing this, and after today I expect Ethan to be in charge of keeping his bins neat. He's old enough to do it now, and while I don't mind helping, it's time he starts to take on the responsibility.

Nate and Sara make idle chit-chat as they walk to the front door. It takes everything in me to keep my focus on the task at hand and not look up as they pass by the dining room, and with genuine effort I succeed.

I want to know what they talked about up there, my nosy nature coming out full force, and struggle not to let it consume my every thought as I shove the packets of beads into the container and plop it in the larger bin full of the other organized crafts I've already put away.

The front door closes with a quiet thud, and I sniffle and speed up my actions to look busy as Nate walks into the room.

"Hey," He greets, pulling out a chair and sitting opposite me.

I gulp, setting down the items in my hands before clasping them in my lap below the table.

Nate looks tense, his back stiff and jaw clenched. I watch the muscle twitch as he works his jaw from side to side, the attempt to loosen it unsuccessful.

"Are you okay?"

He blinks, glancing down at the table, before shrugging and leaning back in the chair. His shirt's a bit wrinkled from being worn all morning, the attire seeming to match the mood between us.

Not the worst, but definitely not perfect.

"Sophie's been having seizures these past few weeks." Nate answers instead, jumping straight to the point.

I'm grateful for it, and nod my head to signal I'm listening.

"She's usually got some sort of issue going on, from blood clots in her legs to UTIs, but the seizures are new. There was one last week that was pretty bad, and now it looks like she's got bacterial meningitis." He continues, pausing to run a hand down his face. "Sara says we're lucky to get another month out of Sophie and I should start making calls to her family."

I'm unsure what the appropriate response for this should be, the situation new to me, and clear my throat before reaching out to place my hand on his.

Nate's lips twitch, which I take as a good sign, as he flips his hand to play with my fingers.

"I'm sorry," I state.

Nate doesn't respond, and the silence between us stretches uncomfortably.

"What can I do to help?" I continue, watching as he takes it upon himself to crack the knuckles just below my fingernails.

I do it so often to myself that it doesn't hurt, and offer him my other hand when he's completed all the ones on my first. He sucks his lips into his mouth as he thinks over my question, his palms growing sweaty against mine.

I'm surprised to feel it, the man typically the picture of nonchalance, and do my best not to react. I don't want him feeling like he can't talk to me about Sophie.

"There's not much either of us can do. We'll probably be seeing a lot of her family over the next few weeks, and I'll talk to Ethan's therapist to see what she says about preparing him for the death and how to tell him when it does happen." He explains.

That all makes sense. I'm glad Nate's being proactive about discussing this with Ethan, and hope the therapist has some good suggestions on how best to go about it. I know he gets that she's sick and isn't here to some extent, but I'm not sure how much he truly understands death and its permanence.

It's a conversation nobody ever wants to have with a child, especially not when it regards somebody as close as a parent.

"Would you mind if I came with you to speak to the therapist?" I ask, nervous to hear his response. "Not as your girlfriend, but as his nanny. I think it'd be helpful for me to hear what she says."

Nate doesn't answer right away. The continued quiet makes me fidgety, and just when I'm about to retract my question he meets my eye and nods. I don't comment on the water that fills his eyes, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

"That's a good idea." He states.

Once more we fall into silence, neither of us knowing what to say.

I can't imagine how hard it's got to be for him right now, his wife dying while his nanny slash new girlfriend is living in your house caring for your child. I'm sure it's only going to be made worse by the fact that Sophie's family is going to start visiting.

I've never met them in the time I've been working here, nobody ever coming to visit. Even her friends don't come, but from the stories I've heard, it sounds like she had a lot. As awful as it is, I understand why the friends stopped visiting after a while, the image of comatose Sophie hard to face, but the family has frustrated me at times.

They live out of state so I know I can't get too mad, but you'd think they'd have come at least once to see her and Nate. Even if it is hard to see Sophie, they have a whole grandchild that misses them.

Ethan's a fantastic kid, and they're missing out on some of the most pivotal years of his life.

They only live a few hours away, and I'm sure Nate would be more than happy to organize Ethan to be driven up to visit them over a long weekend. The young boy would probably love that too.

"Do you want to pretend like we aren't dating when her family's here?" I ask.

I sure as fuck won't be happy about it if he says yes, but want to clarify before I jump to any conclusions. There are many things I'm willing to put up with, but I'm not comfortable being treated like some dirty secret. Especially when I haven't done anything wrong.

Nate recoils, looking shocked by my question.

"Of course not. I don't want to go overboard with the PDA out of respect for them, but I have no intentions to lie about our relationship." He's quick to assure. "Besides, Ethan would never stand for that. That boy loves to gossip more than anything. Probably even more than dancing."

I snort. That's the truth if I've ever heard it.

"There's nothing Eth loves more than dancing." I joke.

Nate visibly relaxes as he offers me his first genuine smile since this morning. I love the sight of it, and feel my cheeks warming as he bends and presses his lips to my palm. The touch feels intimate, and I let myself soak it up before gently pulling my hands from his and standing.

He doesn't move as I round the table and pause by his side, but I don't mind as I cup his cheeks and bring my lips to his.

Things are going to be okay, and I'm here for Nate if he ever needs me. Ethan, too.

"I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't talk to me." I apologize, wanting to clear the air.

Nate lightly presses his forehead against mine, his warm breath hitting my cheek at the movement. I stare into his eyes, hoping he can see how genuine I am, and don't look away even as he shuts his and sucks in a deep breath.

"You didn't. Not really." He admits. "I've just been avoiding dealing with it, and used our recent conversations as an excuse to continue putting the conversation off. I knew I needed to tell you before her family since you're living here in the house and are so close to Ethan, and was

avoiding it for that exact reason. You're the only thing that stands in the way of her family, and I'm especially not excited to speak to them."

I frown, happy at least that he's being honest.

"When are you going to tell them?" I ask.

Nate sighs, pulling away so he can run a hand through his hair. The poor strands look like they've taken a beating today, and I shoo his hand away before fixing them for him. He shouldn't be going to work looking so messy.

If I were a client meeting with a man whose hair looks like it was stuck through a vortex tunnel, it'd be all I remembered of him.

His lips twitch as I mess with his hair, his knees bending a bit so I can better reach the top of his head.

"Better?"

I nod, dropping my hands back to my sides.

"Yes."

It's not perfect, but looks much more tamed.

"I suppose I should tell them sooner rather than later. I'll probably do the rounds this weekend, and assume it will take them a week to come up." Nate explains, his nose scrunching as he mentions their arrival.

I'm getting the sense that he doesn't exactly like her parents very much, the way he speaks of them a bit distant and cold. He's never said anything negative about them, and from the few stories I've heard they seem like ordinary people, but Nate's not the type of person to speak poorly about anybody so it's hard to tell.

"And they'll stay here?" I continue.

There are enough rooms in this house, and I imagine they'll want to be close to Sophie.

Nate sucks on his teeth before nodding.

"Probably," He grunts, moving to run his hand through his hair but stopping when he takes notice of my pointed stare. "Fuck. They can be a bit much, but I suppose I should offer for them to stay."

Much to his disappointment, I agree, and offer a small pat on the shoulder as he pouts and comments that he needs to get back to work. No words are said about the mess I've made of the dining room table, but I catch him giving it a few glances as I walk him to the door.

He's probably afraid I'm planning another elaborate craft to do with Ethan tonight that he will get dragged into. I appreciate that he doesn't voice any complaints about it, though.

Not like it would change anything if I were planning something.

"What do you want for dinner? I'll pick up something after work." Nate asks as he tugs on his shoes.

He seems in noticeably better spirits now that we're off the topic of his wife and her family, but it's hard to tell how much of that is genuine versus him putting on a strong front. I know damn well this is affecting him more than he's letting on, but don't know how much I should push.

I'm not trying to be overbearing.

I tell him to bring home something with hummus before ushering him outside, the wide smile I've got plastered on my lips falling the second the door's shut behind him.

What the fuck have I gotten myself into?