

HILARY GROSSMAN



No
Funny
Business

no funny business

hilary grossman

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Edited by Christina Boyd

Cover Design by Hilary Grossman

Published by Hilary Grossman

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We choose not randomly each other. We meet only those who already exists in our subconscious.

— Sigmund Freud

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one

. . .

“IF I WANTED to be ignored, I could have stayed home with my kids,” my sister said with a huff.

“Sorry,” I muttered, my eyes still glued to the couple at the end of the bar.

My half-hearted apology must have been sufficient because Mia continued speaking. A few minutes later, she threw a peanut at me and said in a sing-song voice, “Earth to Kara.” When it ricocheted off my forehead and landed on my lap, I faced her.

“Did you even hear a word I said?” she demanded.

Nope.

Not one.

But I could recite every single word the striking woman said to her companion.

“I’m sick and tired of this crap! You have no respect for anyone except yourself! I sat here like a fool, waiting here for almost an hour... For you! And did you so much as shoot me a text? Nope! I hate to break it to you, but you’re not the only person in the world with responsibilities, you know.”

“Of course I did.” I lied.

My sister had only three topics she discussed. Her elementary school kids and the drama at their school, her husband, and...

Deciding to go with the most likely scenario, especially for a Friday evening, I said, “You were telling me about your trainer, *Jacques*.” Ever since graduating from college, Mia has been a gym rat. But after moving back to Forest River, the suburban New York town where we both grew up, where she’s raising her family, she’s taken her obsession with staying in

shape to a new level. Sometimes it feels like her world revolves around her fitness routine and her trainer, Jack, who uses Jacques as his “show name” to impress the shallow suburban women. If I weren’t friends with him and his husband for years, I’d think some funny business was going on with him and my sister.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Lucky guess.”

I smirked. “What can I say? I can’t help it that you are extremely predictable.”

“Whatever. But seriously, sis, what is so fascinating about that couple? You’ve been staring at them ever since he entered the bar.”

Was I that obvious? I hope he didn’t notice.

I took a sip of my Cabernet. “I have?”

“Yes, you have. Don’t you dare try to play innocent with me, missy. I know you have a nosey side, but usually, you cover it up pretty well. Tonight, you’ve been out of control.”

“Ugh. Probably because my interest is beyond idle curiosity. The guy’s no random stranger. I know him.”

“Really? How?”

Before I could reply, Mia leaned over the bar and slowly turned to get a better look.

I smacked her not so gently on the back of the head. “Stop it. Can you be any more obvious?”

“Now you’re worried about attracting attention.” She giggled. “That’s rich. Don’t worry. It’s not like he noticed me. He’s too focused on being ditched by his date to care if I’m checking him out.”

“Oh my god.” I gasped. I felt my eyes grow wide as I took in the scene. “Do you think she’s going to throw her martini in his face?”

“It sure looks that way.” My sister glanced at her watch. “I hope the show is as exciting as this. Broadway’s got nothing on a good domestic brawl.”

“Mmm hmm...”

Mia’s husband had surprised her this morning with tickets to an impossible musical she had been dying to see. Since it had been a while since we spent quality time together, she came to the city early to have a quick drink with me before meeting Michael for the show and dinner.

“Look!” I said as loud as I dared.

The angry woman downed the rest of her drink in one gulp and placed the glass on the bar with so much force it was a miracle it didn’t shatter into

smithereens.

“I’m out of here,” she hissed. Then, loud and clear, “I’ve wasted enough time with you. Have a nice life, asshole!”

“Guess I was wrong about the tossed drink,” Mia said. “You never answered my question. Who is he?”

“My boss.”

two

. . .

MY BOSS.

Jonathan Cuttinham.

The president and CEO of Capital Drinks, the alcoholic beverage distribution company where I worked for the past two years as a junior marketing manager.

Unfortunately, the manager part of my title was a stretch at best. I managed no one and nothing unless you count keeping the copy machine filled with paper.

My days consisted of lots of grunt work, like scheduling all social media posts for a few of our spirits brands. I had high hopes I would have the opportunity to work closely with the charismatic man who interviewed me. Instead, no matter how hard I worked and tried to move up the ranks, I was always in the shadow of my direct manager. I felt completely invisible to Jonathan. Now and then, I swear I'd catch him eyeing me, and I'd think he finally noticed me. And every single time, I was wrong. After being disappointed more times than I could count, I had to admit the glances were nothing more than my overactive imagination.

At twenty-seven, I was ready for more responsibility and challenges, like creating campaigns. If I wanted to boost my career, I'd have to move on. The only problem was that would require me to actually work on my resume instead of watching Netflix or going shoe shopping every weekend. Worse than that, I would never have the opportunity to get to know Jonathan better.

I knew some public facts, like how he had been expected to take over the family business. In every interview I've read or press release I've proofread,

Jonathan always joked about how the company had been built on bad decisions. Formed almost immediately after prohibition ended, his bootlegger great-grandfather's calculated motivations for starting the company yielded excellent results. Although much has changed since the thirties, Jonathan's methodology has increased revenue by more than tenfold.

While Jonathan was smart, successful, and hot as hell, he was always respectful and never cocky. He hides it well, but I could tell he worried a lot. When you spend so much of your workday as I do sneaking glances at your boss, you notice things. Like how he clasps his hands together, raising and lowering his fingers repeatedly when stressed.

Like he just did!

How weird I would find his vulnerability sexy.

"He's your boss?" Mia asked, wide-eyed. "Interesting. Whenever you've spoken about him, you never once described his appearance. Based on his accomplishments and how you sang his praises, I always pictured him more buttoned up, older, and definitely not this easy on the eyes. Although, now that I've seen the man himself, I'm no longer surprised why your eyes always light up when you mention his name."

"They do?" I tilted my head, glimpsing Jonathan as he stretched his arms in front of him. He wore a collared shirt that showed off his biceps. I loved the look. I tried to remember what I might have said about him over the years and came up blank.

"Yup. And don't seem so shocked, sister dear. From day one, I'm sure you've noticed that a hottie signs your paychecks."

"I don't know if I'd go that far." So what if he was six-foot-two, with a body that left no doubt he spent hours dedicated to the gym? Or had chiseled features, bright blue eyes, and dark hair with a sprinkling of grays?

Mia cleared her throat. "You are such a liar."

I couldn't help but blush.

My sister dramatically raised her left wrist. "Oh, my goodness. Will you look at the time? I should get going. I don't want to keep Michael waiting."

"You just got here. If you hop on the subway, you'll get to him in ten minutes."

"Subway? Blah. Don't you know me better than that? Why would I want to be crammed in a tin can with all those people when I can *walk* to midtown *and* burn off the calories I'm sure I'll consume later."

"Um, maybe I thought spending time with your favorite and only sister

would trump the few extra steps? Your cardio regimen is already off the charts.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Nice, but I already got a good dose of you, even though you’ve only been half-present with me.”

She had a point. “But I didn’t even finish my wine,” I said, failing to keep the whine out of my voice.

Mia placed her bag on her shoulder. “And you should. You don’t need to rush because I’m heading out. You’re a big girl. Stay as long as you like.”

“You’re right,” I said as a smile spread across my face.

Decision made. Instead of sitting here eavesdropping, I’m going to put on my big girl panties and say a proper hello to the boss man.

three

. . .

WITH A FORTIFYING GULP OF WINE, I stood slowly. Why was I so nervous? What could it hurt to say hello? Not like I don't know the man.

"Hi, Jonathan."

He studied my face. "Um, hello?"

Wonderful.

I'm even more invisible than I thought I was at work. He passes my desk several times every day. Sometimes he even gives me a half-smile or a tight nod. Occasionally I think I catch him watching me, although it's probably my imagination. And now he doesn't recognize me? I should have listened to my inner voice and left the bar with Mia.

I placed my hand on my chest. "Sorry. I'm Kara Watson. I work for you. In marketing."

He grinned. "Of course, I know who you are. How could I not? I'm sorry. I was surprised to see you here. And—"

"Yeah." I waved my hand in the air in a circular motion. "I saw everything if that was what you were about to say."

He closed his eyes. "Outstanding."

I couldn't help but laugh. "It wasn't so bad."

He rolled his eyes. "Join me," he said rather than asking and gestured at the empty stool next to him.

"Sure." I nibbled my lower lip, contemplating what to say next. Since updating my resume was on my to-do list, I decided I had nothing to lose by speaking my mind. "Her little show was pretty entertaining."

“You were watching.”

“I couldn’t take my eyes off...you.” I felt my face heat at the honesty of my comment. “However, in my defense, I was having a drink with my sister, and she was droning on about some drama with two PTA mothers at her kids’ school. While I love my niece and nephew, petty parental politics isn’t exactly stimulating conversation, if you know what I mean.”

“Not really. Fortunately, I’ve never had to endure that torture, but I’ll take your word for it. Since you found it impossible for you to focus, I’m glad I could offer some entertainment value. That’s one good thing about Samantha. She always manages to keep things lively.”

Samantha? “How long have you two been together?”

“Aren’t you the inquisitive one?”

Indeed, here I come.

I shrugged and pushed my long blonde hair away from my face. “I’m simply making conversation.”

“If you say so.”

I placed my hand over my chest. “Why would I lie?”

“No reason. Samantha and I were together for about ten months two years ago.”

“Oh.” Two years ago was right around the time I started working for him. I never heard anyone mention a word about his personal life—or relationships. Why should I be surprised? I knew nothing about him other than curated, published information. “You guys remained friends?”

“No. After we broke up, Samantha moved to California. She recently returned to the city and reached out to me. Since we were both single, we figured we’d try to give it another shot. It’s only been a few weeks, but it is crystal clear neither one of us has changed.”

“So, I guess you aren’t going to chase after her?”

“Um. No. The thought never crossed my mind. Unless you think I should.” His navy eyes pierced mine.

“No. Yes. Oh, jeez.” I put my hand over my face, trying to hide my blush.

Is he flirting with me?

“It’s okay, Kara. I’m teasing you. To answer your question, no. I have no intentions of pursuing Samantha again.”

I was more relieved than I should be.

“And based upon her actions tonight, I think she is equally finished with me. Which is fine because my focus really needs to be on work. Speaking of

which, that wine you're drinking... It better be one of ours."

"I'm actually not sure," I said, looking down at my near-empty glass. *Fuck.* No wonder I was still in the same entry-level role since I started. I didn't even take enough initiative to know the full product line and support the company when I went out. I bet my manager did.

Jonathan waved the bartender over. "Let's fix that. Jeff, please bring her a glass of Silver Leaf."

"Thank you."

"Do you and your sister get together often?"

"No. It's hard to schedule time together. Our lives are so different."

"Work always gets in the way."

Was he talking about him or me?

"Marketing, huh? Do you like it?" he asked.

"Yes. I love it, although I wish I were more involved, had more responsibility."

Looking more serious, like he always did in the office—but maybe with a hint of regret—he said, "Responsibility isn't always what it's cracked up to be."

"Perhaps. But..." The bartender placed a fresh glass of wine in front of me. "Thanks," I said to him.

Before I could continue my thought, Jonathan lifted his glass of scotch. "Cheers."

I clinked my glass against his.

"What made you go into marketing, Kara?"

"Cliché, perhaps, but I followed my father's footsteps. He's a marketing director. And—"

"You're a daddy's girl, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. Totally."

He laughed. "Bet you have him wrapped around your little finger."

"I wouldn't go that far."

He arched an eyebrow. "Can't blame him for wanting to spoil you rotten."

"Hey." I punched him playfully on the arm.

Yup. The muscles feel stronger than I imagined.

"You shouldn't talk, mister. Aren't you the golden child who followed in *your* grandfather's footsteps and took over a mini-empire?"

He traced the top of his glass with his index finger as he stared into space.

“I did. Except in my case, I never felt as if I had a choice.”

“Really? I thought you lived and breathed Capital Brands.”

“I do. But I was raised to do what my father refused to do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“My dad’s a cardiologist and never wanted anything to do with the booze business, or any business for that matter, which nearly broke my grandfather’s heart. Grandpa wanted nothing more than to keep his father’s company and all the real estate holdings in the family. So, as soon as I was old enough to recite my *ABCs*, he started to prepare me to take over. As an adult, I realized my parents would have supported any path I chose. But as a kid, I didn’t see it that way. I was only interested in keeping the old man happy. I loved spending time with him. He had the best stories and knew so many interesting people.”

“I can only imagine.”

“And it was pretty cool to be the only child in my elementary school who could name all the wine regions in Europe.”

I grinned, picturing a pint-sized version of him. “Little Jonathan must have been quite the hit at the playground.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say, like the wine you’re drinking, I improved with age.”

“Okay, so maybe you didn’t impress the captain of the peewee soccer team but look at you now. Your training paid off. I helped prepare the press release when you were named one of *Forbes*’ ‘Forty Under Forty’ last year.”

“True. Except, I made it right under the wire, with only a few weeks to spare.”

I waved my hand in the air. “Mere technicality. You still made it.”

So, he’s forty-one. Only fourteen years older than me.

“My turn to ask you a question. What would you have done if you didn’t take over Capital Brands?”

“I’d be a pilot.”

“A pilot? Really?” I was surprised how quickly he answered.

“I got my license a few years ago. So far, I’ve only gone short distances, like from the city to the Hamptons. I’m the happiest when I’m up in the air.”

“That’s so cool. I’ve always wanted to fly in a private plane.”

“Maybe one day you will.” He winked at me, causing my stomach to flutter. “Do you like the Hamptons?”

“Beaches, wineries, amazing restaurants, and cool boutiques. Who

doesn't?"

"You'd be surprised." He grimaced.

Oh... Samantha wasn't a fan.

"I have a place in Amagansett. It's the perfect escape."

"I'm sure."

He glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry. I have a call with a supplier in New Zealand in a half-hour. It was great chatting with you, Kara."

Oh my god, I love how he said my name. "It was."

He locked eyes with me and placed his hand over mine for a second, sending tingles to places that shouldn't be tingling. "I guess I'll see you in the office on Monday."

For the first time in a long while, I wished tomorrow were a workday.

four

. . .

“HOW MANY TIMES do I have to say the same thing for you to start listening to me?” Mia challenged over the phone on Monday afternoon. When I didn’t reply, she added, “I said the same thing all weekend, and I’ll say it again now. I don’t believe for a second the boss man actually had a call Friday night.”

I looked around Washington Square Park, where I was finishing my lunch. Usually, I ate my yogurt at my desk, but even though it was a cold and gloomy day in late March, I needed some fresh air.

“What’s the big deal—”

“Seriously, Kara. How naive are you? I know it’s hard, but for once, think. Do you honestly think the man would plan a date with his ex-girlfriend, who clearly is super jealous of his devotion to his work, if he knew he had an *important* call to make less than two hours later?”

Why does she always have to burst my bubble? “Maybe that’s why they broke up. I only thought—”

“Thought what? That he’d have spent the entire evening chatting with you if not for his business getting in the way? That there was something brewing between you two that wasn’t?”

There was no point in trying to lie to her. She’d see right through me—she always did. “Maybe. He was so different than he is at work. He was playful and fun.”

“And *flirty*. Yes, you said. Come on, wake up. He’s your *boss*. He’s gotta stay inside the lines of professional conduct at all times. Especially these days with so much sexual harassment in the news. One false move and—”

“I know. It’s just that when he passed my workstation today, I caught him looking at me. I expected him to say something, anything. But he didn’t even say hi. Instead, he picked up his pace and marched into my manager’s office like he was invading a hostile nation, handed Cathy a stack of papers, and then loudly reminded her about a meeting this afternoon as he walked away.”

“So, he acted the same way he has every other day since you started working there?”

Except for the lingering looks.

I rubbed the back of my neck. The truth hurt. “Kinda.”

“So, you should have nothing to complain about then. You should be used to being invisible in that place of business of yours.”

I clenched my fists at my side. “I hate you, you know.”

“Nah, you don’t. You worship the ground I walk on. You simply like to pretend you can’t stand me.”

“Dream on, darling.”

Mia let out a laugh. “Even if you won’t admit it to yourself, it has been crystal clear to me you’ve had the hots for your boss for quite a while.”

“I have not!” I hissed into the phone. I scanned the park, wondering if anyone from my office could be in earshot and listening to my phone conversation.

“Yeah. Okay, sweetie pie. I get it. You just couldn’t stop staring at him on Friday night because of good old-fashioned curiosity. Fine, we’ll go with that story if it makes you feel better than admitting the truth.”

“It does,” I whispered. “But for argument’s sake, say you’re right, and I have an itsy-bitsy-teeny-weenie crush on my boss. What’s wrong with that?”

“Because you work for him. And you’re younger than he is. It’s time for you to finally get any fantasies about him out of your system once and for all. Besides, I want you to meet one of Michael’s colleagues. You haven’t let me fix you up in forever.”

“I know. My refusal has a little more to do with the fact that the last two guys you sent my way were *horrible*. Remember the one who refused to eat anything green or red because he got food poisoning on Christmas when he was six?”

Mia laughed. “He was pretty bad. I can’t be perfect all the time. But don’t worry, Grant is great. I met him a few times, and he seems beyond normal and quite good-looking, too. He’s also pretty funny and doesn’t have any weird dietary restrictions or fetishes that I can tell. Michael and I both think

you two will hit it off.”

“Fine. Send me a picture, and I’ll think about it.”

“Goodie! Oh, man. Sorry, I’ve got to run. Jacques is at the door for my training session.”

“Have fun and say hi to *Jack* from me. I probably should get back to work, too.”

five

. . .

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” Cathy bellowed as soon as she spotted me returning to my desk.

I slipped off my wool coat and said, “I stepped out for lunch.”

“Of all days,” she said under her breath. “I can’t believe you just breezed out of here. Today,” she said as she ran her fingers through her mane of wild—clearly dyed—bright red hair. Judging by the frizz on her head, she had reached her breaking point of anxiety and stress a while ago. Cathy was an amazing marketing director, but she was always a bundle of nervous energy, which I liked to ignore. Although most of the time, she directed her rants inward and not at me, I didn’t enjoy this frenzied attention.

“Excuse me?” I felt my back go up. “I’m entitled to a lunch break. And”—I glanced at my watch—“I wasn’t even out of the office my full hour.” *I had a full six minutes more of “me time”—thank you very much!*

“You never go out to lunch. Ever.”

“I know. Usually, I don’t. But today, I had something to take care of.”

“Well, I wish I’d known. We have a meeting with Jonathan in less than five minutes.”

My heart pounded fast in my chest.

A meeting?

Why did he want to see me? And with Cathy?

Fuck.

Did I step entirely over the line Friday night by being so forthcoming and nosey? Did they manufacture a reason to fire me?

“I...”

Stay tough, Kara. You have no reason to feel nervous. He was the one who got reamed out in public, not you.

Although I did witness it... And not only rehashed it with him, but I asked a thousand follow-up questions... Ugh... Was I the flirty one? Did I push the boundaries too far?

With more confidence than I felt, I said, "I didn't see anything on my calendar about a meeting with him today."

Cathy let out a puff of air. "Because it *just* came up. I never thought you'd hightail it out of the office in the middle of the day. I figured you'd be here like you always are."

"Well, we all know what they say about making assumptions." I folded my hands in front of me. "If I knew we had a meeting, I never would've stepped out. And if you even texted me to let me know about the meeting, I would have made it my business to be back here immediately."

"Point taken, Kara," Cathy muttered. "We can continue this conversation later. Right now, we should get going."

"Okay. Let me grab a notebook."

Call me old school, but I preferred a pen and paper to my laptop any day. I could write faster than I could type, and if a meeting ended up being a snooze fest, I could doodle. Although, I was never bored in a meeting if Jonathan was present.

Cathy knocked against the thick doorframe of our boss's office. He looked up from his computer and gestured for us to come in.

The space was as impressive as he was. His desk was ultra-modern. There were floor-to-ceiling windows. Not only could I see the New York City skyline, but I could easily see what people in nearby offices were doing. If this were my office, I would never be able to get anything done here.

Eek. I guess I really am nosier than I thought if staring at a stranger making photocopies is what I'm thinking about at this moment.

Or maybe I'm just nervous.

"Ladies, please have a seat," Jonathan said, gesturing to a leather sofa on the wall.

I was glad I chose to wear a form-fitting, dark gray pencil skirt that showed off how many squats I do each week, a low-cut silky cream blouse that didn't leave much to the imagination, and my prized red high heel shoes that set me back two weeks' pay. I knew I looked phenomenal, and based on how his eyes studied me, I'd say he agreed.

Jonathan sat down in a leather chair opposite us. “I appreciate you both meeting with me today on short notice.”

“Of course,” Cathy said, and I remained silent, trying to figure out the protocol for this situation, especially since I had no idea why we were meeting.

I couldn't go wrong with quiet and reserved. Could I?

His face was unreadable as he cleared his throat; his gaze turned from me and focused on my supervisor. “Cathy has been reviewing your performance with me, and....”

As he paused, my stomach sank, even though I knew I didn't have anything to be concerned about. I didn't make any recent mistakes or fail to meet deadlines.

“And the performance of the rest of the marketing team. Cathy and I have discussed the company's goals for the next twelve months. We are adding a lot of exciting brands to our portfolio, practically all at the same time. And while the current process has served us well, it's not sustainable for Capital Brand's anticipated aggressive long-term growth.”

I did my best to mirror his poker face.

“As a result, instead of Cathy planning and overseeing the creation of each campaign, junior marketing managers will be assigned product lines to manage.”

Go, Kara! Go, Kara! I like the direction this conversation is going.

“Okay,” I said, willing my face to obey my brain and hide my excitement.

“This is going to be a pilot program. You are the first junior marketing manager we've selected to participate. Assuming your performance is up to our expectations and that the process works as designed, by the end of the month, we will add two more members to join the team.”

“Super.” I smiled brightly, giving up on trying to play it cool.

“Great,” Cathy said, her voice clipped.

I doubt she thought any of this was great. She was a total control freak.

“You'll manage two new product lines. One will be hot and spicy tequilas and the other botanical flavored vodkas,” Jonathan explained. “Dora will email you all details. But here are a few things you should know.”

For the next forty-five minutes, I jotted down notes. Between the speed of my scribble and the fact that I struggled to keep my eyes off my hot boss as he spoke, it would be a minor miracle if I could decipher my normally neat handwriting when I returned to my desk.

“So, I think that about explains it all. Do you have any questions, Kara?”

Yes! So many...

What would it be like to kiss you?

Would your lips feel as soft as they look? And your chest as firm?

Will I be getting a promotion and a raise?

Why did you choose me?

Can you say my name again? Was there a better sound than my name on his lips?

And how long was this project in the works—was it before or after Friday night?

Knowing I couldn't ask any of them, I said, “No. You've done an excellent job of covering everything. I'm sure I'll have a million questions after a little time to digest and look over the materials your assistant sends me.”

“Very good.” He stood, and Cathy and I followed suit.

“Thank you, Jonathan,” Cathy said as she exited his office.

I made a split-second decision not to follow my supervisor out. Instead, I stopped in front of Jonathan's massive desk.

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. . .

“I WANTED to thank you again for this opportunity. I’ve been hoping to have a chance to do more important work here for a while.”

He removed his hand from his mouse and turned away from his computer monitor. His eyes met mine. “I know.”

“You do?”

He grinned. And the dimple in his left cheek I adored made a rare appearance.

“I gathered you weren’t one hundred percent satisfied with your position on Friday.”

My heart pounded in my chest.

Fuck. What did I say?

He laughed. There was the dimple again. “Don’t look so worried, Kara. You didn’t say anything bad.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

He pointed at me. “It was more how you looked when you spoke. Your face gives your feelings away.”

I frowned, trying to push the thought of him taking me right there on his desk out of my mind. “I know. I should sign up for poker lessons or something.”

“Only if you start handling negotiations. Otherwise, I don’t see any reason for you to change anything.”

“Good, I have a funny feeling I’ll be very busy at work, and poker class may cramp my style.”

He chuckled at my lame joke. I probably should have just walked out and

let him get back to his day. But I wanted to prolong the conversation, and since we were talking, I did have questions.

“What made you realize I wanted more on Friday?” *Oh god, Kara. You wanted more? Choose your words better.*

If Jonathan had any clue about my crush, he didn’t let it show. “It wasn’t what you said. It was how you said it.”

Curious, I wrinkled my forehead.

“When you spoke about your dad and why you chose a career in marketing”—his eyes bore into mine—“you were very passionate.”

His steady look made me anxious. I couldn’t decide if it was because I was having this conversation with my boss. Or because I was having *this* conversation with the man I wanted to screw senseless?

“Yes, I am passionate.”

God, you have no idea how passionate.

As far as I could tell from re-reading my handbook this weekend, there wasn’t a “no fraternization policy” here. However, a “relationship with the company owner” section was nowhere in the two-hundred-page document.

“I’ve been at”—he waved his hands around his office—“this long enough to realize that enthusiasm, like yours, doesn’t last forever if it isn’t cultivated. Sometimes it withers away slowly as the day-to-day monotony sets in. But more often than not, someone with talent and drive, like you, if you’re not challenged, you’ll move on. And the last thing I would want would be to lose you.”

I beamed. “Good. Because I don’t want to go anywhere else. Thanks. I should let you get back to work.”

“Hey, Kara,” he said as I reached the doorway. I turned around slowly to face him. He was smiling. “It was very nice bumping into you the other night. You mentioned you meet your sister often, right?”

“No, I said—”

“You meet her most Friday nights, isn’t that correct?” His eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Oh, yes.” *Sure, I’ll play along with whatever you have on your mind, Mr. Cuttinham.* “I’m meeting her for drinks at Stella’s in Soho.”

seven

. . .

“SO WHERE IS the fake me meeting the real you tonight?” Mia asked.

For the last month, in conversation, Jonathan somehow found a way to ask when and where I was meeting my sister. And without fail, he’d either be there waiting or arrive soon after I did. Then we’d hang out together for a few hours, *waiting for my sister*, who never showed. I was starting to get that hopeful feeling about us...because except for the one time with his ex he never seemed to have plans with other women, no one at work ever talked about him going on dates...he never mentioned anyone... But hope was a dangerous thing.

It was the beginning of May, and I had stopped at my apartment after work to change into a pale pink sundress, which I thought was the perfect combination of sexy and fun. Since I had about a half-hour to kill before I had to make my way to my destination, I called my sister.

I sat on my terrace, sipping a glass of sparking grapefruit water and watching the traffic below. “Trader Jax’s in the Village.”

“Nice. Much better than having to go to a Forest River PTA penny auction, where, unfortunately, the real me will be. Sure, the items up for bid are always amazing, but the thought of listening to another speech by the *mom boss* makes me twitchy. I’d so much rather be hanging out in the city with you tonight.”

Not me.

“You know,” she continued, “since you started playing this little game of yours, we haven’t gotten together once. I’m missing you, sis.”

I laughed. “I know. Same. But I’ll be in the burbs on Sunday night for Melissa’s birthday dinner.”

“Oh, yeah! I almost forgot about the adult shindig. I’m so stressed with planning the birthday party for Melissa’s friends. Life was simpler when we were little—an ice cream cake, some streamers, and a couple of basic games. Now, every celebration has to be an extravaganza of gigantic proportions lasting a full weekend. I now know what the Queen must have felt when Kate and William tied the knot.”

I snorted because while she complained, I knew my sister loved to try to one-up the other mothers, especially the head of the PTA.

“You need to come to the house early, Kara, because we need time to have a proper conversation.”

“What now?” I groaned, feeling a scolding coming on.

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

You will, regardless of how I reply.

“You are making a fool of yourself.”

“Not this again, Mia.”

For the last few weeks, my sister has been a broken record. I knew what she was going to say next. I mouthed the words along with her in perfect unison. “I know you enjoy his company. But you want and deserve more.”

I swallowed hard.

“You know, at first, I was skeptical about this arrangement. And then started to think it was kinda cute that he was asking you out without asking you out. But it’s been over a month, and nothing has progressed. Zero! He is your boss, you are his employee, and he knows there can be nothing more between you two, no matter how much you wish.”

“How can you say that?” I asked as I replayed the conversations he and I had. Yes, sure, sometimes we discussed work, especially the campaigns I handled. But mostly, we chatted about everything else. I knew about his childhood, hobbies, hopes, worries, goals, and...

“Because it’s true. Okay, fine. I won’t dispute that you are *friends*. Does that make you feel any better? Having him as a friend?”

I didn’t reply.

“Your silence speaks volumes. Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with having a friend. There *is* a problem if the only friendship you desire is one with benefits and the other person doesn’t. It’s a recipe for disaster. I don’t need to ask you what type of friendship you want, do I?”

“No. I think you can figure it out on your own,” I admitted. The more time I spent with Jonathan, the more I wanted. Sometimes, I thought he felt the same way. But those moments—when I felt like he let his guard down and looked at me like a woman instead of an employee—were fleeting. And they were always followed by a hasty exit to address some matter of “utmost importance.” But if he just wanted to be friends, I couldn’t help wondering why he continued with this ruse of meeting up with my sister week after week.

“Well, it is time you start hanging out with your other friends again because no funny business is ever happening between you and your boss. And when you think with your head instead of your lady parts, you know I am right.”

Damn her.

“Yes. I do.”

“Good. Finally, you’ve come to your senses.”

I’m glad one of us is happy.

“So here is what you will do. Have fun tonight, and if he doesn’t make a move, give me your permission to pass along your contact information to Michael’s friend I told you about. You know, Grant? The one you thought his photo was cute.”

eight

. . .

THE CONVERSATION with Mia played on an endless loop as I made my way to the Village. While I hated to admit it, I knew my sister was right. I was playing a stupid, dangerous game with my boss. And I knew if I continued this way, I'd end up hurt.

End up hurt?

Who was I fooling? I already was feeling the stabbing pain of rejection. The more time I spent with him outside the office, the more I genuinely cared about him. Did he just want my friendship?

And what about my job?

Until I bumped into Jonathan over a month ago, I was like an invisible drone, doing one monotonous task after another. Then, five seconds later, I was handed a golden opportunity on a silver platter, one I was crushing, by the way. Even critical Cathy praised my performance. Would the challenging work disappear if I stopped meeting with him on Friday nights?

Why did I let myself get into this position in the first place? I should have stuck with my original plan of sprucing up my resume, searching for greener pastures. Good thing I still can... Too bad I can't imagine not seeing him every workday.

"Hey." Jonathan waved as soon as I entered the crowded restaurant.

Despite the brutal reality check I was in the middle of giving myself, one look at him—looking all delicious dressed in a light blue button-down shirt rolled up at the sleeves—and I didn't want to be any place else. *Stupid heart and girly bits!*

I made my way to where he stood near the bar. "Hi," I said softly as I

gently squeezed his forearm. It was a weird move, I know. But a handshake felt too cold, too much like something that should happen at the office. And a hug felt too personal, too risky. Although, I always hug my hairdresser goodbye.

Stop it, Kara. Relax.

Jonathan held my gaze longer than necessary, which I liked. What I would do to know what he was thinking...

He tilted his head towards the back of the restaurant. "This place is a zoo tonight. I got us a table on the rooftop. Does that work for you?"

"Sure. It is a beautiful night."

His eyes traveled leisurely from my head to my toes. "Yes. Quite beautiful." Then he unexpectedly placed his hand on the small of my back, sending shivers down my spine as he guided me toward a hidden staircase.

Three flights of steps later, and slightly winded, I said. "I didn't know there was an upstairs."

"Most people don't. I just happen to know the owner."

"Why am I not surprised?" I teased. Even though I selected every place we met, many times, he ended up knowing someone there who treated us like royalty. I couldn't even imagine how amazing a night with him would be if he were in charge of making plans.

Jonathan opened the thick door and held it open for me.

My breath hitched as I took in my surroundings. Cobblestones covered the entire perimeter, and tall, potted plants filled the rooftop with colorful flowers. Old-fashioned street lights lit the space, giving the feeling you were dining in a small park. There were only four tables. Beautiful. Intimate. Romantic.

"Wow."

"I'm glad you approve."

"How could I not?"

He pulled a chair out for me. "Up here, they only do a chef's tasting menu and wine pairing. I know you like wine." He winked. "But the food can be a bit unusual. Are you a picky eater?"

"Not in the slightest. I'll try anything once. And the only food I refuse to eat is grape jelly, because yuck."

"Grape jelly, huh? Interesting. I guess I shouldn't tell you when I was a kid, I'd only eat eggs if my mom scrambled them and put grape jelly on top."

"Ew. Really?"

“Yup. I don’t think I’d be able to swallow it now, but I swear, when I was six, it was the bomb.”

“I’m glad young Jonathan’s palette has improved with age.”

“Well, since you only have one banned item from your diet, I think you’ll be safe here, which is good because I’m starving.”

Yeah, me too. But not for food.

After a lot of laughs, flirty conversation, and an incredible meal, I glanced at my watch.

Eleven-thirty?

We’ve been here over three hours? It feels like I just got here.

I leaned towards him. “Should I be worried about the future of Capital Brands?”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. “Do you know something I don’t?”

I smirked. “I probably know a lot that you don’t.”

His eyes met mine. “No doubt.”

I forced myself to glance away. I could feel danger staring into those stormy eyes. “It’s just that this is the first time we, err... *Bumped* into each other where you didn’t have to dash off to make a pressing phone call overseas or something equally as important.”

He smiled. “I know. I made sure to clear my calendar.”

Can you give me something else, buddy? Like why?

He put his index finger beneath my chin. “Wow, I can see the wheels spinning in there.”

“You know me... Always thinking.”

Of him pulling me close. His fingertips exploring my body while his lips brushed against the base of my neck before he—

He cleared his throat. “I hope you’re not thinking about work.”

“How could I not be? My boss is very captivating and impressive.”

He snorted. “Yes, I know Cathy is terrific, and we’re lucky to have her.”

Jonathan.”

Kara. You are exceptional in your own right, too.”

I gave him a half-hearted smile, disappointed in the direction of the conversation. Although he did say I was exceptional. I tried to think of a witty reply, but he signaled for the check before I could. “It’s getting late, and I have an early flight to Brussels tomorrow.”

“You are going out of town?”

“Unfortunately, I’ll be out most of the week.”

“Oh,” I said as I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “But what about—”

After a second, he replied, “The presentation on Wednesday? Don’t worry. We’ll do it via zoom.”

Trust me. The presentation was not what I was thinking about.

I reached into my bag for my phone to call an Uber. He held up a hand. “No. My driver’s outside. We’ll take you home.”

I was surprised he didn’t ask me for my address. I was even more shocked his driver knew the exact direction to go. Like every move he makes at work, bringing me home had been considered beforehand.

About twenty blocks from my building, the driver swerved to avoid being hit by a speeding yellow cab, and I rolled into Jonathan.

Damn, his chest was even more muscular than I imagined. And he smelled good—a combination of citrus and ocean. I knew I should pull away, sit back, or something, but I couldn’t budge. I didn’t want to. I nuzzled in a bit closer and felt his body relax against mine. After a few moments, I peeked at him, hoping to catch him staring at me with stars in his eyes. Instead, they were closed. Did he fall asleep?

When the car came to a stop, I straightened up, and so did he. “Well, this is me,” I said as I glanced at my apartment building.

“Max, I’m going to walk Kara up,” Jonathan said as he reached for my hand and opened the car door.

After helping me out of the car, he let go of my hand. When we reached the top of the stairs to the entrance of the building, I faced him.

“Thank you, Jonathan. Tonight was nice.”

His eyes searched mine before trailing down to my lips.

Finally, he was going to make a move and kiss me.

“I agree,” he said softly; his eyes looked hungry. He reached for me.

My heart raced in my chest.

But instead of pulling me close and kissing me senseless, he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and ran his hand gently down the side of my face.

What the hell was that?

“Have a good week, Kara. I’ll see you Friday morning.”

nine

. . .

KARA: Fine. You win.
I'll go out with Grant

I **KNEW** if I didn't act immediately, I wouldn't act at all. Enough was enough. I had to take control of my life and stop playing pretend games. I needed something else to focus on rather than spending all night trying to decipher Jonathan's many mixed messages.

Mia: Sorry, sweetie
I know you hoped for a different outcome
I won't say I told you so
But...

KARA: You can sure be a bitch
Go ahead
Know your fingers are itching
I'll give you a free pass this one time

MIA: TOLD YOU SO!
Ah... that feels better

SO...MUCH...BETTER

KARA: – Glad I can help you out

**MIA: Had a hunch you'd be making this call
So I got a head start**

**WEAR SOMETHING EXTRA PRETTY,
and sexy Sunday to Melissa's birthday party.**

**I INVITED Grant
Almost like a test drive
No pressure
Unless there are sparks
Then press away**

WHO IS BETTER THAN ME?



APPARENTLY, no one.

Unlike Mia's other matchups that ended in disaster, I instantly liked Grant. He looked even better in real life than in the pictures. He was charming, easy to talk with, and awesome with my niece and nephew. He was observant and had me in stitches when he imitated my sister's PTA pals.

I planned on sleeping over at Mia's house after dinner and taking the train to work in the morning. Instead, I shared an Uber with Grant on Sunday

night. Unlike Jonathan, Grant didn't hesitate to kiss me goodbye. Or make actual plans for Tuesday night.

Although, sparks were flying between Grant and me, I caved like a house of cards on Thursday morning when Jonathan asked me over the phone from Brussels what my sister and I were up to on Friday night.

"Hey you," I said, as I made my way over to where Jonathan sat at the bar, nursing a scotch. "Have you been here long?"

His eyes twinkled. "Just long enough to get the owner to want to order four cases of your hot and spicy tequila."

I liked how he referred to the liquor as mine.

"Excellent. My work is done."

"Every time I see Ralph, he wants the inside scoop on our new stuff. So I tried your pitch on him. Operations will have a purchase order first thing Monday morning. I wouldn't be surprised if he slipped into his office and logged on to our site. He was that excited."

"Are you exaggerating?"

"Never. Ralph ran out to his other restaurant, but I'll introduce you when he comes back." He handed me the owner's business card. "You should email him copies of the recipe cards you created as your formal intro to the account."

"Wow. Our first order. I can't believe it!" I let out a low whistle. The first batch of production was just finishing up in Mexico. The goods wouldn't reach the warehouse for at least another three weeks "I'm even better than I thought."

I beamed as the bartender placed a glass of white wine in front of me.

"You're not better than I thought. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes." He swallowed hard. "I missed you this week, Kara."

I felt the heat in my cheeks.

He missed me?

In what way?

Like how I missed him?

Was this the moment he'd finally make a move?

Play it cool, Kara!

"Same," my eyes bore into his. "I don't like it when you're gone for a full week. I thought you were going to be back in the office this morning."

He grimaced. "That was my plan, but—"

"Kara!"

The statement came out as a question. My heart pulsed like a jackhammer, and a bead of sweat rolled down my spine when I looked up to see Grant. “What are you doing here?”

He leaned down and gave me a lingering kiss on my lips. “I’m rescuing you.”

“Excuse me?” I asked. I looked at Jonathan; he looked angry.

“I had lunch with Michael today. Mia called him while we were eating to say she had to cancel on you tonight because she forgot she committed to bringing Melissa and a bunch of her friends to the movies. I asked her not to call you. I figured I’d take her place and surprise you. Surprise!” Grant looked at Jonathan and wrinkled his brow.

My manipulative, controlling, opinionated sister. Just happened to mention... Happened to mention, my foot! I should have never told her I was meeting Jonathan tonight. I’m going to kill her.

Grant draped his arm around my shoulder, his hand leaning on my breast. “I hope I’m not too much of a consolation prize.”

“Um... No...” I stammered as I glanced at Jonathan once more.

“Hi. I’m Jonathan Cuttinham, and you are?”

Grant shook Jonathan’s hand reflexively. “Oh,” he said as his eyes darted from Jonathan to me. “Shit. Am I interrupting something?”

“No, of course not. Kara and I work together, and she just finished updating me on a situation.” Jonathan glanced at his watch. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get out of here. I hope you two have a wonderful night. Have a drink on me.” He threw a hundred-dollar bill on the bar and stood.

“Jonathan, wait.” I stood, but he didn’t stop or turn away. He walked briskly to the door.

Should I run after him?

“Fuck.” I downed the contents of my wineglass.

“What happened here? Are you two? Shit. I shouldn’t have assumed you weren’t... It’s just... Mia said—”

“Yeah, Mia says a lot of things.” I ran my hands through my hair. “I’m sorry, Grant. There’s nothing going on between him and me. He’s my boss, but I...”

“Yeah.” He gave me a sad smile. “I can tell.”

“I like you, too.”

“I know.” He nodded. “What’s not to like? I’m all for taking everything slow and seeing how things go.”

I reached over and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s good to know, but right now, I can’t stay.”

ten

. . .

BY MONDAY MORNING, any sense of calm, cool, or collected in me had disappeared. I had a huge fight with my sister. She tried to explain her reasoning, but I was too angry to listen. We've had knock-down-drag-out fights before, but this was different. I think the soonest I'll be able to speak to her will be on a non-existent day like November 31.

Unlike manipulative Mia, who at least let me take all my anger and frustrations out on her, despite desperately trying, I could not reach Jonathan. If I couldn't clear this misunderstanding up, I didn't know how I could continue working there, seeing him every day. I couldn't keep torturing myself.

"I need to see him. Now!" I demanded Jonathan's assistant, Dora.

The prim and proper sixty-something-year-old woman did a double-take. She placed her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Again, I'm sorry. I've explained this to you already. Jonathan has an important meeting in fifteen minutes, and he asked not to be disturbed while he prepared."

"And again, *Dora*, I don't give a rat's ass about any meetings or lame excuses. I need to see him. *And* I am going to speak with him right now."

"I can't let you do that," she said calmly. I expected the loyal lady to try to tackle me as I made my way toward his door, but instead, she stepped to the side. I was probably delirious, but I could have sworn I saw amusement in her eyes.

I threw open his door, and when his eyes met mine, I felt sick seeing pure disgust. "What the hell?"

Or was it hatred? Wait, could it be hurt? "I need to speak with you."

He stepped toward me, folding his arms across his broad chest.

Dora stood next to me and cleared her throat. “Will you be okay, Jonathan, or do you need me to call security?”

“I think I can handle her. Thanks. That’ll be all.” He closed the door and let out a slow breath. “What is wrong with you? Have you lost your mind? You can’t barge into my office.”

I swallowed hard and clenched my fists. My pulse thrummed so loudly that I swear I could hear it in my ears.

Before I could reply, he continued. “This is a place of business, for god’s sake, Kara. You’re being completely unprofessional.”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“What do you want?”

Crap. Coming here was a mistake. What was I thinking? I should go...

But I couldn’t chicken out. Again.

My voice wavered. “I need to speak with you.” I stepped back and leaned against the wall for support. “I tried to email, text, and call you all weekend, but you didn’t reply. Tell me why you won’t talk to me. Why are you so mad?”

“Because he—”

“Because he what?” I waved my hand between us. “Do you *we* have something that allows *you* to think he shouldn’t have kissed me?”

“You can kiss anyone you like.”

“Then why didn’t you return my calls?”

“Most people would take my non-responsiveness as a hint.”

I bit my quivering lip. “Well, I’m not most people.”

His voice softened slightly. “As I’m quite aware.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little at that. “You ran out of the restaurant so fast. I wanted to explain—”

“There is no need to explain anything. I saw how *Grant* looked at you. How he kissed you. I didn’t accomplish everything I have because I’m an idiot. I understand the situation fully.”

“No, Jonathan. I don’t think you do.”

“Don’t worry. It’s okay. You don’t have to continue wasting time out of your weekends to meet up with me.”

My eyes bulged. “Wasting my time?”

“You don’t have to continue this”—he gestured wildly around the office—“*charade* of ours. You have nothing to worry about. Nothing will change

here. You've already proven your capabilities. I—we—the entire management team are well aware of your talents and contributions. You have a bright future at Capital Brands by your own merits, if you wish."

I cringed. This is what he thought? "Good, because I want to work here. But you have everything all wrong."

He snorted. "Do I? Really? Level with me, then. Are you seeing that guy or not?"

I bit my lip. Counting the birthday dinner? "I went out with him twice."

"Oh, so it's a new relationship. Awesome."

"Again, it's not a relationship."

"Please. I saw how he *looked* at you and how he *kissed* you. You can label it however you like. It doesn't matter."

"Trust me. You're not as observant as you think, Jonathan."

"This conversation is pointless. What you do on your own time is your own business. And now, if you will excuse me, I have a meeting with Dick Angellini in a few minutes. You know how important his business is to us."

"So, you're just dismissing me? As if nothing happened between us?"

He held up a hand. "Nothing happened between us."

"Except for spending hours and hours together talking. We shared histories and confidences, hopes, our biggest fears. I've told you things I haven't told another living soul. I felt something growing between us. And you can deny it all you want, but I know you felt the same."

He stood still like a statue, but the twitch in his clenched jaw made me think I'd hit a nerve.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. I should have known better, but I kept thinking...hoping...." My eyes filled with tears, and I reached for the door handle. My voice cracked. "I'm sorry. Never mind. I need to go. You have a meeting."

He placed his arm next to me to hold the door shut. "Wait. I need you to finish your sentence."

"But your meeting?"

"It doesn't matter. I want to hear what you have to say."

I shrugged.

"Kara."

"It doesn't matter." I repeated his words back to him. A tear rolled down my cheek, and he brushed it away with his thumb.

His voice warm and gentle, he said, "I think this does."

I didn't know what to say. It was bad enough I was crying. I couldn't allow myself to be more vulnerable.

"I'm an ass."

I nodded, and he showed me that panty-melting dimple that I couldn't resist. He moved closer to me, his face now inches away from mine. He glanced at my lips and then gazed into my tear-filled eyes. "Fuck. I can't do this anymore. I don't give a crap if you sue me for sexual harassment, and I lose this entire company."

"What?"

Instead of replying, he pulled me to his chest and kissed me, slow and careful at first. The pressure of his soft lips made me dizzy, and just then, he lifted me off my feet. When his warm tongue caressed mine, our first kiss deepened with an intensity I'd only dreamt about.

"I've been dying to do that for years," he murmured in my ear as he locked his office door.

I could only nod again as he settled me on the center of his desk, just as I'd always fantasized.

I snaked my arms around him and tugged his shirt from his trousers. My fingers traveled his muscular back as he leaned down, his body pressed against me, kissing my neck, jaw, and lips while he ran his hands up my legs. He was so hard, and my entire body pulsed with need.

Then there was a knock. "Jonathan. Richard Angellini is in the conference room for your meeting."

"Fuck." He pulled away.

"You really had a meeting?" I asked as I struggled to catch my breath.

He tucked his shirt in. "Unfortunately, yes."

I eyed the bulge in his trousers. "You can't go like that. Here," I reached for a manilla folder on his desk. "Take the *Dick* file."

He laughed and ran his hand down the side of my face. "I'm going to get rid of him as fast as possible. Go home and pack a bag."

"What?"

"You heard me. Bring enough for two days. I'll be by your place as soon as I can. Max will drive us to Teterboro, and then I'm going to fly you to the Hamptons."

Oh, my god!

"What about work?"

He winked at me. "Let me worry about that."

eleven

. . .

“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE OKAY?” Jonathan checked the instruments and flipped switches on and off in the cockpit.

“Just a little nervous,” I reluctantly admitted. “I’ve traveled a lot, but this plane is really small.”

He placed his hand on my inner thigh, sending tingles all over my body. “If you’re uncomfortable, we can scrap this idea and drive out instead.”

“No way!” “I remember when you first told me you flew. You have no idea how badly I hoped one day to do this.”

He winked at me. “I think I may have a slight idea. So, are you trying to say you’re more excited than nervous?”

“Hell, yes!”

“Good.” He put a headset on me and then placed his own on his head. I thought he looked strong and sexy in the office. Behind the cockpit, he was sexy as fuck.

He looked away from me and pressed a bunch of buttons, and we started to roll forward. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

The moment we were airborne was probably the most exciting moment of my life. I couldn’t decide where to look—Jonathan’s handsome face as he focused on navigating the plane or the view outside the windows. I was used to seeing the land below from the sides. But seeing the world disappear right in front of me was surreal.

The flight lasted forty minutes, and we didn’t speak as we traveled, which was fine by me. I was content lost in my thoughts.

“That was amazing,” I said after Jonathan landed the plane and was

taxing down the runway.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. I hope this will be the first of many trips.”
This was really happening!



“WE’RE HOME,” Jonathan said as he pulled into the circular driveway of a small modern white stucco home. *Home? Not “we’re here?” I like that...*

The drive in his little red convertible was practically as long as the flight but equally enjoyable.

“Wow,” I said as I took in the surroundings. I had expected something bigger and grander. I was so happy I was wrong.

He popped the trunk and took out our bags as I breathed in the scent of the ocean.

“Come.” He took my hand, and we walked to the front door.

“Wow,” I said again as we stepped inside the open floor plan house. The back wall was all windows—allowing a beach view from all angles.

“You like?”

“Very much.”

“I was thinking we could go for a walk on the beach and then head into town for dinner and—”

I put my finger on his lips. “No.”

“No?”

I shook my head slowly. “No. I have a much better idea.”

“You do, do you?” He drew me into his arms. “What do you want to do instead?”

“I think we have some unfinished business.” I ran my hand down his face. I slipped my hands under his polo shirt. He was even more muscular than I imagined. I couldn’t stand another second. I needed to touch, feel, and taste every part of him.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him. Unlike earlier, when we were cautious, there was only hunger in our kiss. “Oh, Jon,” I moaned, gasping for breath. “I need you.”

He must have liked my declaration because he scooped me into his arms and started to walk toward the staircase. I don’t know how we made it to his

bedroom, but he placed me in the center of his bed. I lifted my t-shirt, dropping it on the floor. I started to unbutton my shorts, but he put his hand over mine. “No, Kara. Stop.”

Stop?

“What?” My heart dropped to my stomach.

“I don’t want to fuck.”

You could have fooled me.

Heat rose to my face. Why did I toss my shirt without regard for where it would land? Self-conscious, I sat on the bed and pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. I stared out the window at the ocean to avoid looking at his face. “Oh, okay.”

He laughed. *He’s laughing?* Glad he thought this was funny. I’d never been so humiliated in my life.

Then he reached for a strand of my hair and twirled it around his finger. “You misunderstood. I don’t want our first time to be frantic or rushed. I want us to take our time.” He gently pushed me down on the bed. He hovered over me and traced the lace of my bra with his fingertips while he kissed my jaw. Then, with his eyes locked on mine, he said, “I don’t want to have sex with you, Kara, because I want to make *love* to you.”



“I NEVER WANT TO FUCK AGAIN,” I said, struggling to catch my breath.

I curled against Jonathan, and he wrapped his arms around me. The setting sun over the ocean lit the room in a pinkish-orange glow. “Too bad”—he kissed my head—“I’ve had high hopes of having you on my desk.”

“Oh.” I laughed, tracing his chest muscles with my fingers. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Good. Because I’ve been dying to do that for years.”

I propped myself up on my elbow to face him. “For years? Really?”

He pulled me to him and dragged his five o’clock shadow across my cheek, pressing his lips behind my ear. “Years...”

“Wow,” I whispered. “You’re not the only one.”

He pressed his forehead to mine and said in a low, rough voice. “No funny business?”

I shook my head leisurely. “I had a crush on you since my interview. I thought it would fade as we worked together, but it didn’t. Your strength and passion for your work...what a turn-on. And then I got to see the real you, the man behind the corporate cloak and wanted you even more. But I was afraid to say.”

“Damn. I could have made a move a long time ago?” He ran his hand up my thigh and stopped between my legs, making me throb with need. Again.

“Oh, yeah.” I moaned.

He increased the pressure. “All this time wasted. Worried about staying professional, not getting sued.”

I kissed the side of his neck, then his jaw. I slipped my hands under the sheets, reaching for him. Finding the reaction I wanted, I said, “You have no worries. And I have such great ideas of how we can better spend our time away from work.”

He rolled over, his entire body taut against mine, proving his lust matched mine. “I have a few ideas, too.” He leaned down and kissed me. “Although, I have a funny feeling that you’re gonna be even more invested in the company.”

“What do you mean?”

“All those Fridays we spent together... What we have started long before now. I may have been foolish not to act on my feelings then, but...”

“So, how do we keep this a secret?”

“We don’t. I want to shout from the rooftops you’re finally mine. And if anyone at the office doesn’t approve, they’re free to leave.”

“Oh, Jon.” Tears of happiness filled my eyes.

“Kara.” He ran his hand over my face. “I’m already beyond in love with you. And I want nothing more than to have a future with you.”

“Good. Because I love you, too.”

go on girl

Catch up with Kara and Jon...

Chapter One

Whoever had the idiotic idea to invent text messages? If I could, I'd strangle them. Back in the day, when people had to rely on the telephone, they were forced to hold back their every insecurity and issue, even if only a bit. But now, with the ease of a few keystrokes, everyone was able to share their thoughts and opinions at breakneck speed, without any consideration for their reputations. Not to mention how it made other people feel.

"They're all freaking crazy!" Disgusted, I tossed my new iPhone with a bit too much force. It landed right on the edge of the kitchen table and dangled precariously, narrowly escaping a sudden death.

My husband, Craig, rescued the device and turned it face down in front of him. It beeped in frantic succession, alerting me to at least three new incoming texts. He picked up his coffee cup and calmly took a sip, completely unaware that during his five-mile run this morning my phone hadn't stopped beeping for one single second.

My pulse raced with every alert. "At this rate, I'm going to have to change my text tone, again." A few months back, after my phone had exploded from a similar incessant group text, I switched the sound because every time I heard the chime, it stressed me out.

Last week, I was in the supermarket, and the woman in front of me at the deli counter had the same melody on her phone I used to. When she'd received a text, I'd instantly had palpitations. It was like some technologically provoked post-traumatic stress disorder. "What's it this

time?” my husband asked as he coated his pumpernickel bagel with jalapeño cream cheese.

“A major calamity, apparently.” I rolled my eyes. “I never realized organizing a carpool could be so cutthroat. But that’s what I’m dealing with.”

Craig scratched the dark stubble on his chin before he frowned in sympathy. He’d heard different versions of this same story a hundred times during the last term. But he knew I needed to vent, and he would let me. The mothers of my daughter’s classmates were catty and juvenile, constantly at each other’s throats over petty situations. I missed out on most of their meltdowns because I wasn’t part of the clique, thanks to my full-time job as CFO of a food importer. But sometimes, like now, I couldn’t avoid the aftermath of an argument, because the turmoil trickled down to my day-to-day life and impacted my daughter and me.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong with people.” I stood up and refilled my coffee cup. Before I returned to the table, I gazed out the back window. I stared at a cardinal that was perched on top of Amanda’s swing set and imagined how wonderful it would feel to be able to fly away. “We’re supposed to be adults, but everyone’s acting like petulant children.” I pointed at our six-year-old daughter, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the den. Her dark pig-tailed head was bowed, and she was deep in concentration. She intently colored, despite being surrounded by fifteen Barbie dolls, most of which were naked. “She has more maturity in her little pinky than most of the mothers of her classmates.”

“She does take after me, you know.” Craig beamed. He was five years my senior, and often acted far older than his forty-one years. He was very rational and levelheaded, perfect for his chosen profession, corporate law, which was how we’d met thirteen years before.

When the company I worked for had undergone their first merger, they had hired Craig’s law firm to represent them. They’d assigned him to the case, and he and I had to work closely. I’d managed the finance side of the transaction, and the workload was intense. Craig and I had a bit of a bumpy start. I wasn’t in the best state of mind since I was petrified about how the corporate change would affect my day-to-day job. But once the deal was signed, our relationship was sealed as well.

Craig’s reasonable side suited me perfectly since I tended to get easily upset over insignificant events. My patience level was low for two reasons. First, I was always stretched so thin. I had more commitments and

obligations than I could comfortably juggle, so I hated to waste one second. Also, I was a bit of a control freak who feared change. When situations, regardless of their magnitude, were out of my hands, I felt overwhelmed.

It took everything for me not to throw my spoon at him, and by the smirk on his face, I could tell he knew I was contemplating violence. I wasn't usually this angry and upset on a Sunday morning in the summer, but today my blood was boiling. My next-door neighbor, Suzanne, had warned me about this inevitable drama, but I didn't believe her. I figured she had to be exaggerating. I should have trusted her, though. While her kids were now in college, she did raise three of them in this superficial town where social status, appearances, and wealth meant more than morals, compassion, or real friendship.

"Come on, Sydney," Craig mumbled as he chewed his bagel. "Are you going to tell me what's eating at you?"

Before I could say a word, my phone exploded once again. "Ugh! Can these mothers stop it for five seconds? What would they do if they had a real issue?"

Craig picked up my phone and waved it in front of my face. "Don't you want to check what they said?"

I opened my mouth to reply but shook my head.

"Very well." He did what I should have done an hour ago. He silenced my phone and placed it face down on the table.

I took a deep breath. "School starts in only two weeks. Right before kindergarten ended a bunch of the moms organized a carpool schedule, which was no easy feat, mind you. *Apparently*, it is almost impossible to juggle long-standing manicure appointments, personal trainers, and yoga classes." I pointed at my chest. "I work, and I was the most flexible woman in the bunch! Eventually, even though it took about three weeks and probably numerous refills of Xanax, we managed to sort everything out. But now the plan's gone up in smoke because two of the moms, Donna and Jackie, got into a huge fight last week at a Pilates class."

"What does one thing have to do with another?" Craig tilted his head.

"It shouldn't. But after they had this knock-down screaming match, Jackie went home and called the other moms in the carpool and invited them over for lunch." I took a sip of coffee. I was so frustrated. I thought by agreeing to participate in a carpool this year, I would be able to eliminate some stress from my life. I couldn't have been more wrong. The entire

experience had been nothing but aggravating.

I'd yank Amanda out of the schedule right now except I knew my little social butterfly was excited to ride back and forth to school with her classmates, and I didn't want her to miss out.

"Did you go?"

"Um, no. Unlike the other moms, I work for a living, remember?" I felt a small smile creep on my face as I thought about our babysitter, Sally. "I'm shocked Jackie didn't call Sally and invite her to the rant session. That way at least someone from the Clayton household could have represented."

"Sally would have enjoyed it." Craig smiled.

We both knew our babysitter was quite the gossip. Craig and I never worried about missing out on anything that happened in the neighborhood when Sally was around. She had the inside scoop on everyone and everything. In her mid-sixties, Sally spent the better part of her life devoted to caring for children living in this town. Although she'd never married or had kids of her own, she had no shortage of family. She was an instrumental part of so many homes in Forest River; the woman probably received more holiday invitations than the mayor.

"I know. So, anyway, Jackie filled them all in on the fight. She told them she wanted nothing more to do with Donna unless she apologized. She rallied the moms with macaroons from La Petite Boulangerie and Ace of Spades champagne. Of course, they all caved like a house of cards."

"What did Donna do anyway?"

I waved my hand in the air. "Believe me, you don't even want to know." I rolled my eyes. "It's all so petty and stupid." I hated that I was so invested in the drama, but I worried about my daughter. She was such an outgoing child, one who loved spending time with her friends. I didn't want to compromise her happiness in any way, especially since I knew firsthand how difficult life was when you didn't fit in as a kid.

"I know I'll regret this but tell me what happened."

I'd won the husband jackpot. Most men wouldn't have the patience for this type of nonsense, but Craig was different. He was a natural problem solver and loved to try to rectify a situation. He also knew it was in his best interest to let me babble right away about what bothered me than hear me harp about it later.

"Donna jumped on the bad-mouthing bandwagon. She and Jackie both have daughters who are entering the fifth grade, and they're part of a tight-

knit clique. Right before the school year ended, Jackie's daughter got into a fight with one of the other girls in the group. Instead of letting the battle blow over, this girl's mother decided to make sure the girls weren't in the same class come September."

"How did she plan on managing that?" Craig asked with a mouthful of cookie.

"She apparently called the school psychologist and told him the girls were having issues and requested they be separated."

"That's not so terrible."

"No, it's not. She didn't stop there, though. This woman then called all the other mothers and offered to take their children on an expense-free Caribbean cruise. It's a blatant, conniving attempt to convince them to contact the school's psychologist as well and tell him their girls couldn't get along with Jackie's child either. The other mothers made the calls as quickly as they packed their kids' Louis Vuitton bags. This mother's manipulative tactics guaranteed her daughter was placed in the class with all her friends while Jackie's daughter was left out, alone."

"Nice way to treat a friend. No wonder she's upset."

"Yeah, I get it. I would be hurt too if the roles were reversed. But I'd be able to put things into perspective and move on. There would be no way I'd cause even more drama."

He cocked his head to the side and stared at me with unblinking eyes. "Really?"

I felt my face flush. "Well, I certainly wouldn't refuse to participate in a carpool because Donna's daughter was in it, which is what Jackie did. And of course, her posse is supporting her."

"They're all grown women. I'm sure they had reasons."

"Yeah, right, Craig." I stood up and kissed the top of his wavy jet-black hair. "Bless your heart. For someone who has such book smarts, you're naïve sometimes. I'd be shocked if half the women in Jackie's fan club would even be able to decide what to eat for lunch if their fearless leader wasn't there to direct them. I've seen these women in action. They all idolize her."

"Maybe they have reason to?"

I clenched my teeth.

"I'm simply saying, Syd, I think you're blowing this all out of proportion. It'll take some work, but you ladies will sort out the schedule once again."

Craig seemed ready to end the conversation. He'd rather be outside

playing Frisbee with our daughter.

I put my elbows on the table and rested my head in my hands. “What do I do about Julia? Amanda’s best friend.” I sighed.

“I really couldn’t care less if Julia’s mom is,” I made air quotes, “‘out of the carpool,’ but I do feel sorry for Julia. She didn’t do anything wrong, and now she’s going to have to pay the price because of her mother’s actions. If the moms aren’t accepting Julia into their cars because of this fight, will they invite the girl over for play dates, birthday parties, or sleepovers?” I got up and started to pace around the kitchen. “She and Amanda are in the same first-grade class. I know Amanda is going to want to pal around with her. Do we have to worry these other kids are going to shun her because of their mothers, who are clearly as mature as a toddler? What is wrong with people?”

“You’ve got me.” He raised his arms over his head and stretched. “Unfortunately, I think things are only going to get worse.”

“I know.” I sat back down and took a bite of my cookie. “This town is so superficial. The people here don’t share the same values as us. I worry about how it will effect Amanda growing up here.”

“She doesn’t have to.”

“What do you mean?” My breath hitched in my throat, and I looked around our newly remodeled kitchen. “This is where we live. This is our home.”

Craig pushed his plate away. “It doesn’t have to be forever.”

I blinked. “What are you talking about?”

He leaned in. “Maybe we should consider making a change, Syd.”

I swallowed hard. “What kind of change?”

“A move.”

“A move?” I felt my eyes bulge. “Why on earth would we move? We love our house and look at all the work we did. It’s finally perfect.”

Craig and I were renovation junkies. We’d spent years improving this house and did a lot of the work ourselves.

“I know.” I followed his gaze as his green eyes scanned the room. “Our house is wonderful. But let’s face it; we don’t love this town anymore. Honestly, I’m not sure we ever really did.”

Craig and I had decided to settle in Forest River ten years ago, right after we’d gotten married. One of the paralegals in his office grew up here and recommended we visit the community once she’d learned we were in the

market to buy a home. We immediately fell in love with all the unique stores and restaurants located in the heart of town. Both Craig and I were lovers of water, so living so close to a lazy river was quite appealing to us.

I instantly regretted eating the cookie, which now sat like a lead weight in the pit of my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Syd. We never were part of this community. We’ve kept to ourselves, and it was wonderful until Amanda started school. You know as well as I do that the people here are not like us. We don’t belong.” He folded his arms across his chest. “You carried on all last year about how obnoxious and phony the mothers were. You kept fretting about how you were afraid Amanda would become spoiled by having to keep up with her classmates. This school year hasn’t even started yet, and the drama is already in full force. Do we really want to raise our daughter in this type of environment?”

I shifted in my chair. Although he had some valid points, this was my home. “I don’t know.”

“Consider your commute for a minute. How many hours a week do you spend in your car?”

“Way too many.” I frowned. One of the worst days of my career was when my boss announced he was moving our office. I’d even contemplated resigning as a result.

“If we moved closer to your office, you’d be able to spend more time with Amanda.”

“That would be nice.” I imagined my life without a two-and-a-half-hour daily ride in bumper-to-bumper traffic. My friend, Waverly from work, recently moved from the city to the town where our office is. She said less time traveling was a game-changer.

“You know what else would be nice?” Craig continued. “If we lived closer to your family.”

Unlike Craig’s siblings who’d dispersed across the country when his parents had retired and moved to Florida, my sister, Bethany, and I remained in New York. In fact, Bethany lived close to where we grew up, near the town where my parents still resided.

“Yes, it would be. I’d love to be able to pop over and visit them rather than always having to plan an excursion, especially now that Dad hasn’t been well.” My father had had a heart attack a few months before and needed a double bypass. While he was recovering nicely from surgery, it was a wake-up call for my sister and me about our parents’ mortality. I stayed with my

mom while he underwent the procedure, but it was difficult for me to return home afterward. I did wish I lived closer to them like my sister.

I picked at my cuticle. “But Craig, I love it here.”

His eyes narrowed. “Do you really?”

I looked around the room once more. “Of course I do. Where is all this coming from anyway? We’ve lived here for ten years. Since when have you thought about moving?”

He bit his lip. “I really haven’t. Last week I received an email from a local real estate agent. She has someone who’s very interested in buying a house in this neighborhood. She asked if we’d consider showing ours. I didn’t reply, but it’s been gnawing at me ever since.” He rubbed his forehead. “This town is very hot right now. People want to live here, and not many houses go up for sale. When they do go on the market, they sell pretty much instantly and usually for more than the asking price.”

“I know. It’s crazy.” A family who’d lived down the street from us had put their house on the market a year ago, and after only a week they found themselves in a bidding war between two prospective buyers.

“Maybe we should consider it, Syd. We can probably get top dollar for this place. Then, we could move into an even bigger house in a more relaxed kind of town.”

I picked up my phone. “Crap,” I muttered as I scanned the twenty-five text messages I had missed. So much for the ladies sorting anything out. Relaxed they were not. Would I be able to survive a drama-filled term? Would we be better off living someplace else?

Chapter Two

“Mom, I’ve got to go.” I almost dropped my phone as I shoved a basket of stuffed animals and dolls, which had been scattered all over our den floor moments ago, into the hall closet. “Yes, we’ll try to come over this weekend. Give Daddy my love.”

It was late Wednesday afternoon, and a week after the new school year had started. Craig and I had both come home early from work, although I arrived later than I’d planned. Now I had no time to change out of my work clothes or see Amanda before Sally, our babysitter, took her to the park. Turning to face my husband, I asked, “Tell me again why we’re doing this?”

“Why not?” His eyes sparkled as he neatly folded the afghan his grandmother had made us when we’d gotten engaged.

“That’s not a good answer, you know.” I smoothed my beige pencil skirt and tucked my crisp white blouse back in.

“I mean we have nothing to lose here, Sydney. We’re not doing anything. We’re only exploring our options.” He gently poked me in the ribs. “I think, especially given everything we did around this place, it would be interesting to see what it’s worth, don’t you?”

“I suppose.” I fiddled with my thin, gold necklace that Amanda, meaning Craig, had bought me for Mother’s Day last year. “What if she hates the place?”

He shrugged. “Who cares? It won’t matter. It’s not like we actually want to sell and move, right?”

I closed my eyes. “Right.” I felt queasy. I couldn’t decide what worried me more: some stranger finding fault with the home we’d built or her falling in love with it. Craig’s enthusiasm didn’t help calm my nerves, either.

From the moment I’d reluctantly agreed to let him have the real estate agent come to view the house with her client, he’d become completely preoccupied with making sure our home was in tip-top shape. I knew I shouldn’t complain too much—he had been a cleaning machine. He’d even fixed the creaky basement step that I had been nagging him about for months. And while he wouldn’t admit it, I was petrified he had already made up his mind about where he wanted us to spend our future.

“Come here,” Craig said and held out his arms.

I was only in his embrace for a second or two when I heard a car pull into our driveway. I glanced at my watch and exhaled slowly. “They’re early.”

“Relax.” He kissed the top of my head. “Nothing’s going on here.” As we heard a second car approach our driveway, he added, “I’ll go and answer the door.”

I nibbled at a cuticle and examined the two women who were now standing on our front porch. It was clear who was whom. The real estate agent was in her early sixties. She was short, barely five feet tall. She had dark blond hair, which was cut in a bob and wore a gray pinstriped power suit. She was holding a clipboard and talking a mile a minute to the other woman, who towered above her. The younger lady, who appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, had a long, clearly dyed, brassy blond ponytail. She wore the uniform of the neighborhood: black Lululemon pants, a fitted white tee shirt, and designer sneakers. She nodded her head furiously as she frantically typed on her mobile phone. Thankfully she had the good

graces to slip the device into her Prada purse when Craig approached the doorway.

“Hi. Come on in,” he said and held open the door for the women.

“Craig?” the broker questioned, her right hand extended. My husband nodded.

“Hi.” She turned on the charm and flashed him a killer watt smile. “I’m Rosemary Sanders. We spoke on the phone.” Gesturing to the woman beside her, she said, “This is my client, Kara.” Her voice was very nasal and high-pitched. “It’s nice to finally meet you both.”

“This is my wife, Sydney.”

I smiled and also shook the women’s hands. I was impressed by Kara’s strong grip.

“Unfortunately,” Rosemary turned to her client, “I don’t know much about this house since I’ve never been in it before. So I suggest we take a look around.”

Kara nodded. Her eyes scanned the room as quickly as her fingers had typed on her phone.

Craig placed his hand on Rosemary’s shoulder. “I know it’s not conventional, but I’d be happy to show you the house, and answer any questions you have since we know this place inside and out.” Indicating me, he said, “We’ve lived here for ten years. And we’ve put a lot of love into this home. We bought the house right after we were married. I’d be kind if I described it in a state of disrepair.” Craig waved his hands as he spoke. “When we first bought the house, there were a lot of little rooms on this floor. We removed as many walls as we could; we wanted an open floor plan.”

Kara’s eyes lit up. Apparently, she was a fan of open and airy. She hung on Craig’s every word. I expected her eyes to have glazed over when he mentioned the house’s mechanics, but instead she seemed mesmerized. When we entered the kitchen, she gravitated to our six-burner BlueStar range, which faced the big window. “Wow, I guess you guys like to cook?”

I felt a slight sense of calm come over me and remembered the first meal we’d cooked in the house, chicken Francese with sautéed spinach. “Yes, we actually spend a lot of time in this kitchen, as a family.”

Kara turned on two burners. “Oh, you don’t mind, do you?”

I folded my arms across my chest and smiled tightly. “No. Go right ahead.”

With a gleam in her eyes, she said, “My husband, Jonathan, and I love to

cook too. We're so not the norm in this town, huh?"

"You can say that again. Some of our daughter's classmates' mothers store sweaters in their stoves."

Rosemary scratched her forehead as Kara giggled. "Good to know not much has changed around here since I was little."

"You grew up here?" I asked.

"Yep. Three blocks away, actually, on Forest. My older sister is in town too. She lives closer to the high school, though. And while her house is amazing, I like this part of town much better, especially this block." She paused. "Growing up, my best friend lived on the corner." Her eyes clouded over. "I spent most of my childhood in her house. Her mother was like a second mom to me."

My mind skimmed through everyone on my street. "Jane Wilson?"

Kara nodded.

"Oh, she still lives here."

"I know." She gave me a closed mouth smile. "I'm going to stop over and visit with her for a bit when we finish up here." She sniffed. "I remained close with Jane over the years. After her daughter passed away in the car accident, our bond deepened. Caroline was Jane's only child, you know."

I nodded. I couldn't imagine a worse fate, especially since I too only had one kid. The accident took place two years before. Jane's daughter, who lived in Michigan, was home to celebrate Thanksgiving with her family. She went out to pick up bagels for breakfast on Black Friday and was hit by a drunk driver. She died upon impact.

"Obviously, losing Caroline at such a young age was devastating. I've tried very hard to be there for her. I would love nothing more than to live within walking distance of her house."

I raised my hand to my lips as my mouth went dry. "Um, Kara," butterflies filled my stomach, "you're not going to mention to Jane why you were here, are you?"

Mrs. Wilson was born and raised in this town. She put Sally's knowledge of the local gossip to shame. Our mail woman even had tea with her every Tuesday.

"No, no. Of course not." She touched my arm for emphasis, and I prayed I could trust her.

The last thing I wanted was the word we were considering moving to spread among the other mommies. I feared they wouldn't want their kids to

waste time playing with Amanda if she'd soon be leaving town.

“Rosemary stressed you wanted to keep my visit on the down low. Don't worry. I won't say a peep. I'll tell her I'm meeting my sister for dinner and I got to town earlier than expected.”

Craig led the group upstairs toward the bedrooms. “Who's your sister, anyway?” I asked as I bent down to pick up Amanda's stray sock.

“Mia. Mia Montgomery. Do you know her?”

I squinted and did a mental inventory of all the mothers I had met over the past two years. While the name sounded familiar, I couldn't place it. “Does she have kids who go to Forest River Elementary?”

“Her youngest is in fifth, and her other is in middle school.”

No wonder the name didn't ring any bells. While I did know my fair share of mommies in this town, pretty much all of them had a first grader in their house.

“We have four bedrooms in total.” Craig pointed down the hallway. “Right now, we have three set up as bedrooms and the fourth as an office. Like downstairs, all the bathrooms were all recently renovated.” A satisfied smile spread across his face. “Oh, and we have two more full bathrooms up here, as well.”

Rosemary jotted this tidbit down on her clipboard, where she had been scribbling ever since she'd set foot in the door. She'd barely uttered a word during the entire tour, allowing Craig to do all the talking. I never expected my husband would take such an active role in tonight's festivities. But he appeared to be having the time of his life bragging about our home, so who was I to complain?

“We have this set up as a spare bedroom.” Craig slowly opened the first door. Except for when my husband's parents made their annual pilgrimage from Boca Raton, the room usually remained empty. When we'd first moved in, I'd imagined we'd have more than one child and a lot of overnight guests. Sadly, neither came to fruition. I had a few miscarriages after Amanda was born. And when Craig's siblings came to town, occasionally they'd sleep over, although usually they opted to stay at a hotel instead.

Craig then opened the door to my office. “Pardon the mess.” He cleared his throat. “Sydney is quite the slob.”

“Yeah, I can see.” Kara giggled. Her eyes grew wide as she studied the immaculate room. “Sydney, I need to take organization lessons from you.”

I grinned. “Well, clutter drives me bonkers, and this is the only room I

have complete control over. I refuse to let Craig work in here because then it would look like a bomb exploded at a convenience store.”

“So, Kara, what makes you want to move back to town, now?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s the right time.” She checked herself out in the bathroom mirror before returning her attention to me. “I had the best childhood in this town. I promised myself when I grew up and started a family, I would come back here to raise my kids.” She placed her hand on her flat stomach. “And it’s time.” She beamed. “We’re due in April.”

“How wonderful. Congratulations!” I sucked in my stomach. How many hours daily must she spend at the gym to have a killer body like that, especially being over three months pregnant? No more excuses. I would start my diet this week. I knew I should probably lose the extra twenty pounds I had been carrying since Amanda was born. I was comfortable with my weight and appearance for the most part. It was only when I was with the school moms that I felt insecure and self-conscious. Then I felt like I was judged for both working full-time and not being a size two.

“This is our daughter’s room,” Craig announced.

Kara let out a small yelp when she entered the haven we’d created for Amanda. The room had pale pink walls and a mulberry wool shag carpet. There was a crystal chandelier over our daughter’s queen size bed. There was a window bench, also covered in a plush mulberry fabric, in front of the big bay window that faced the backyard. The seat was covered with dolls and stuffed animals. Shelving surrounded the room and contained more toys, dolls, and books.

“It’s something special, isn’t it?” He put his arm around my waist and squeezed me tightly. “My wife put her heart and soul into designing this room. She painted the mural herself.”

Kara walked over and studied the carnival scene that took me over a year to sketch out and paint. Gently she ran her hand over it. “It’s beautiful, Sydney.”

“Thanks. Our daughter is the envy of Forest River Elementary School, because of these digs.”

"Yes, I know."

My stomach did a somersault. What could she possibly know about Amanda and why? Were there any Forest River family facts not broadcast through the mommy rumor mill?

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about the author

Hilary Grossman is a recovering corporate executive. She spends her mornings and weekends hanging out with her "characters." She has an unhealthy addiction to denim and high heel shoes. She's been known to walk into walls and fall up stairs. She only eats spicy foods and is obsessed with her cat, Lucy.

She loves to find humor in everyday life. She likens life to a game of dodge ball - she tries to keep many balls in the air before they smack her in the face.

If you haven't already signed up to join Hilary's [newsletter](#), please do so... Some really exciting projects are coming up!



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