



Guidance

DANIELLE ALLEN

GUIDANCE

A RAW BACK TO SCHOOL SHORT

DANIELLE ALLEN

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A RAW Short Story

Danielle Allen

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Editor/Proofreader: Virginia Carey

GUIDANCE

When you're a mental health professional, your job is to take care of everyone else.

But who takes care of you?

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to YOU getting your needs met

“I’m just really busy. The festival is next weekend and I just have so much to do. And—”

“Cam,” Ebony interrupted. “Breathe.”

I inhaled and exhaled. “I’m breathing.”

“You take care of everyone and everything. It’s time for you to be taken care of.”

My best friend was right. I opened my mouth to tell her that, but my office phone rang loudly, interrupting our conversation.

“Eb, let me call you when I get off. This thing has been ringing off the hook all morning.”

“Go, go, go! But think about taking a vacation. Fuck the end of the school year.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Girl, bye!”

I tossed my cell phone down and quickly answered the phone on my desk. A teacher needed help with something that had nothing to do with my actual job. But I helped her because she needed it. When I hung up, I couldn’t stop thinking about what Ebony said.

It is time for me to be taken care of.

But because there was so much to do in preparation for the festival in addition to my other job duties, I didn’t have time to figure out what that meant. And when my phone rang again, I decided to ignore it.

I mean, damn! This is the Mondayest Thursday.

“Mute,” I muttered, stopping the phone from ringing.

Deciding to let the call go to voicemail, I clicked through the list of names each teacher submitted. Cross referencing each submission with the coordinating student file, I organized my spreadsheet with relevant details. I was up to my eyeballs in work and the constant calls and meetings were getting in the way of one of the highlights of the school year. The Richard Alexander Woodson School of Performing Arts Festival of Art was a showcase of visual and performing arts by the students and I was spearheading the event.

I was just about to pull on the sweater I kept draped across the back of my chair when the heavy knock against my office door caught me off guard. My door was solid oak so I couldn't see who it was, but I knew I didn't have a meeting scheduled until the end of the day. With a sigh, I rolled the chair back from my desk. Slipping my feet out of the furry slippers, I stepped into the black heels that complemented my black and white polka dot dress. I crossed the room as the second round of knocks rained down.

"Yes?" I said, swinging the door open and hiding my annoyance behind a smile.

"Uh, hi..." he greeted me slowly. "I'm looking for Dr. Branch."

The deep voice and chiseled jawline of the man in front of me rooted me in place. I had never seen a man so fine in my life—especially not while at work. He sounded as good as he looked, and I wasn't prepared for that.

A strikingly handsome man with a close-cut Caesar and the creamiest mocha complexion stood in front of me. His juicy lips were surrounded by a luxuriously thick black beard with a hint of salt and pepper dancing in it. His brown eyes were expressive, and I was instantly sucked into the slight panic that lived in them.

I had no idea who he was, but I wanted to.

His laid-back outfit of jeans and t-shirt fit his tall, muscular frame well and gave him a youthful look. His casual style made it clear he wasn't a teacher or staff member. His lack of a uniform led me to believe he wasn't delivering anything. I didn't have any parent meetings scheduled for the day so he couldn't have been a father. So, for a few silent seconds, the mystery man and I stared at one another.

My panties seemed too snug all of a sudden as they dampened and clung to me. The satin in my bra seemed too cold and smooth as my nipples

tightened. But I wasn't just physically and sexually attracted to him. There was something in his eyes that tugged at my racing heart.

My lips parted but words didn't immediately form.

"Yes?" I repeated myself softly. The word came out as a faint exhale.

He looked just as confused as I felt. Checking out the nameplate beside my door and then back to me, he said, "I'm sorry. Are *you* Dr. Branch?"

"I am."

His soft brown eyes widened. "Oh wow. I uh I'm sorry to barge in on you like this. My daughter brought home a note and I wanted to talk to you about it. I tried calling, but no one was at the front desk and—"

"Everything okay, Cam?" Ms. Diane, the counseling office administrator, asked as she toddled through the front door with a fresh cup of coffee in her hands. She peered over her tortoiseshell glasses, looking between me and the man in front of me.

"I just need fifteen minutes of your time, Dr. Branch," he pleaded with me in his deep, gravely tone.

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Everything is fine," I answered her with a smile. Taking a step back, I gestured for the man to enter the office. "Come in. Have a seat."

"Thank you," he said as he brushed by me.

The scent of mahogany infiltrated my nostrils as he passed. I inhaled deeply and ignored the little smirk on Ms. Diane's face.

"You're in a meeting now?" she called out.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Mm hmm."

Giving her a look, I closed the door and then made my way to my desk.

"What's your name?" I asked as I took my seat behind my desk.

"Oh, my bad." He shook his head and rose to his feet. "I'm Kian Long," he introduced himself, extending his large hand toward me.

I slipped my hand into his and shook it. "Camilla Branch."

"Thank you for meeting with me, Dr. Branch." He smiled as he sat back down in the chair across from me. "This is my first weekday off this month, so I'm sorry for the delay." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to touch base with you about a letter you sent home with my daughter. I called a couple times this morning, but I thought it would be best if I came to talk to you face to face. Usually, my mother comes during school hours, but I needed to be here for this."

Curiosity got the best of me as I took in his chiseled features and casual style. I had no idea who he was, or which child belonged to him.

“I’ve only been with the school for a year, so please bear with me. What’s your daughter’s name?” I asked, my fingers poised above the keyboard ready to type.

“Kennedy Long,” he answered.

My fingers danced over the keys and then stopped as I realized who he was and the letter he was referencing. I shifted my gaze to him.

Oh!

“Mr. Long—”

“Kian,” he interrupted. “Call me Kian.”

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth and nodded. “Kian.” I folded my hands and placed them on the desk carefully. “I apologize for not connecting the dots sooner.”

Holding up his hands, he shook his head. “I dropped by your office unannounced. I didn’t expect you to know who I was without a proper introduction. I just appreciate you taking the time to meet.”

“Of course. Let me get your daughter’s information.” I got up and went to the file cabinet. Thumbing through the files, I pulled the folder with Kennedy Long’s name typed across the tab. Opening it quickly, I scanned to verify the name of the parent.

Dr. Kian Long. Anesthesiologist.

I turned around and caught him staring at me. My stomach fluttered as I clutched the folder to my chest.

Quickly averting his eyes, he studied the diplomas on the wall behind my desk.

“Here we are,” I announced, making my way to my chair. When I sat down, I looked at the copy of the letter sent and the drawings that were clipped to it. “My notes say that Kennedy’s teacher talked to a Ms. Evelyn Long after receiving the submission.”

He nodded. “That’s my mother. Because of my work schedule, she’s the one who typically picks up and drops Kenni off.”

“I’ve probably met her during the afternoon pickup.”

He smirked. “Probably so. She has a big personality and makes herself known—much like Kenni.”

“One of my favorite things about Kennedy is her big personality. She is a very well-adjusted child. Very kind, very confident, very uniquely herself.

From what I've seen, she's been a talented artist for a long time. Her skill is impeccable." I pulled out the copies of the art project she prepared to submit. "So, when her art teacher, Ms. Green, sent this to me, I wanted to touch base with the family." I handed him the photocopies. "Kennedy says she isn't finished, but she's going to title it 'Goodnight.'"

I watched his face as he stared at each of the three sheets of paper. He blinked and his long lashes seemed to brush his cheeks as he looked downward. Outside of the papers rustling as he studied the artwork, the silence cloaked us.

He cleared his throat. "Wh-what was the assignment?"

"The assignment was to tell a story in three pictures."

I sat in the quietness with him as he eyed the pictures of a woman in a coffin, a woman in the clouds, and a woman on the beach with a girl. He returned to the picture of the woman on the beach with the little girl next to her.

When he looked up at me, I could see a flood of emotions in his eyes. "What was the story?"

"She wouldn't say. She said she'd explain it when it was done."

"Okay." He chewed on his bottom lip as he sat back in his seat. "Should I be worried?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." I laced my fingers and rested them on my desk. "Do these look worrisome to you?"

He looked flabbergasted. "I don't... I don't know." He stared at the intricate detail in the drawings. "I don't think so, but she hasn't done this in a long time. She... I thought she was in a good place. I don't..."

His voice trailed off. I watched the concern pull down on his lips.

"I don't know if it's anything to worry about, but I felt it was necessary to bring to your attention in case she wants to talk."

"We talk. I have my schedule set up the way it is so that I'm home with her every night. We talk." He emphasized each word.

"I'm not at all suggesting you and your daughter don't talk, Dr.—"

"Kian."

"Kian, I'm not suggesting that you and your daughter don't talk," I reiterated gently. "I just meant talk to her about this specifically." I pointed at the art still in his hands. "Ms. Davis has been working with Kennedy since the first grade and she said she hadn't painted pictures like these since the second grade."

He nodded. “Right after her mother died.”

“I’ve worked with this school for a couple years, but I came on full-time a year ago. So I don’t know the whole story, but I know healing isn’t always linear.”

“Kenni’s mother had a heart attack during what should’ve been a routine surgery. At thirty.”

I was trained not to react, but I was shocked. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He shook his head. “Thank you, but I’m fine. My focus is on Kennedy. It’s always about Kennedy.”

“Death of a parent can be a lot for a child to process. Death of a parent at any age can be a lot to process. But when I talk to Kennedy, she’s very well-adjusted and self-aware. She communicates very openly and clearly. And since she hasn’t drawn anything like this since second grade, I just wanted you to be aware that some stuff could be coming up,” I explained. “And while you shouldn’t necessarily be worried, you should be aware.”

“I wish she didn’t lose her so young.”

“There’s no worst age to lose a parent. As long as the child has a strong support system to help them process the grief, they can still develop a secure attachment style and thrive. And Kennedy seems to be thriving.” I leaned forward and held his gaze. “You’re doing a great job with her.”

His eyes searched mine. “Thank you.”

“Kennedy has been a talented artist for her entire time here and now that she’s in the fifth grade, she’s getting to a more expressive age. She’s heading into her pre-teen era. And so many kids use art as therapy.” I pointed at the work. “This isn’t necessarily a concern. But she’s drawn this for a reason. It’s on her mind. And I wanted to let you know that we’re here for her—and you. If there are any resources I can offer, this is what I do. This is why I’m here.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I apologize if my letter alarmed you. That was not my intention. I only wanted to ensure that you knew where she is emotionally and provide additional support if needed.”

“I do appreciate you bringing this to my attention. Your attention to any changes in Kenni. Your letter letting me know you had some concerns. Your offer of support. All of it.”

My cheeks warmed under his appreciativeness. I put my hand to my chest. "Of course."

His brown eyes bore into mine. "I can see why she loves this place so much."

I swallowed hard and shifted my gaze to the papers in his hand so I could compose myself. "And we love having her here."

"Do you need these back?" he wondered.

I nodded. "No. I made these for this purpose so you can keep them if you'd like. But if I could offer you a suggestion..."

"Yes. Anything."

"Kennedy is an artist. And she wouldn't talk about the project because she isn't done yet. If you approach her about her unfinished work, she may focus on the fact that it isn't done and not on the topic at hand. I would suggest asking her how she's feeling, if she's been thinking about her mother, what questions she may have about her mother... things to get her talking. If she isn't forthcoming, then present the photos and ask about them directly. But understand if there's a little pushback, it could be because she's an artist and not because she's in distress."

He nodded. "Understood. Thank you."

"And if you have any additional questions or if you need more resources, please don't hesitate to call." I handed him my card.

He examined both sides of it and then nodded. "Thank you."

I wanted him to ask me for my phone number. But I knew it wasn't an appropriate time. I also knew he was focused on his daughter.

As he should be.

I tried to put the thought out of my head because it would be inappropriate anyway.

"You're welcome," I responded graciously. "We care about the overall development of our students here at RAW."

"I see that. And you're good at what you do."

"Thank you."

With a slight head nod, he gestured behind me. "They taught you well at Hamilton University, I see."

"They did. I'm a proud HU alum."

"So am I."

My eyebrows flew up. "You went to Hamilton?"

He nodded. "For undergrad and grad school."

I smiled. "That's what's up. When were you there?"

"I graduated ten years ago. From grad school. You?"

"It's been eight years since grad school."

He grinned. "Do you remember The Smokehouse?"

"The best burgers and fries I've ever had," I replied excitedly. "Why did they close down?"

"I don't know but since I moved here, I found one burger spot that hits like The Smokehouse did."

"Really? Where?"

"Wellington."

"I need to check out Wellington." I grabbed a pen and scribbled the name down on a sticky note. "Did you ever go to brunch at Sundays?"

His eyes widened and his face lit up. "Yoooooo!"

We went down a rabbit hole of HU memories. Twenty minutes passed as we reminisced, reflected, and relayed information to one another. We shared our experiences and favorite college moments and also the regrets we had while there.

"If I had it to do all over again, I would've joined more clubs and been involved in more activities," I admitted. "I think it would've broken me out of my shyness sooner. I didn't really come out of my shell until my senior year and since my classes had become more intense, I still didn't do as much as I wanted. I was scared to put myself out there..." I lifted my shoulders and let my sentence trail off, unsure as to why I was getting so vulnerable with him.

His eyes bore into mine, forcing me to keep contact. "What were you scared of?"

"Rejection," I admitted softly.

He nodded slowly. "I get that."

I opened my mouth to change the subject, but he started speaking first.

"My first priority was school and with my part-time job, I didn't have as much time to do all the things I wanted to do," he divulged, leaning forward but never breaking eye contact. "I went to big events and enjoyed as much as I could, but I never really got the opportunity to do something I was passionate about."

"Like what?"

"I sing and play the piano a little bit. I would've liked to do something with that. I used to be fast, and I could've done some damage on the track

team. Hell, I would've joined the chess team if I felt like I had more time. But I never felt like there was enough time to do the things I was passionate about." He shook his head. "Sometimes I still don't. But that's why it was important for me to get Kenni in this school. I want her to have every opportunity and I want her to enjoy every ounce of life."

Hearing him speak with such conviction was moving. "Do you enjoy every ounce of life?"

He smirked. "Are you psychoanalyzing me?"

I shook my head slowly. "No. I just want to know if you make time for what you want now."

With his eyes still pinned on me, he licked his lips.

I didn't think he intended it to be as sexy as it was. But I still had to squeeze my thighs together to dull the ache he triggered within me.

"I'm ready to devote time to my passions," he answered.

Maybe it was me reading into everything he was saying with that deep voice of his, but the ache became a throb, and I shifted in my seat.

"That's good," I whispered. Clearing my throat, I started again, louder. "That's good that you are making time for that."

"I agree." He sat back in his chair and tugged on his jeans before sitting up straight. Breaking eye contact first, he stared at my framed degrees. "I can't believe you went to HU," he murmured aloud.

"Almost at the same time," I added.

He locked eyes with me and flashed his pearly whites. "I was just a couple years ahead of you." He ran his hand over his beard. "Don't let the grey hairs fool you."

"I wasn't fooled."

He held my gaze. "I was."

My face scrunched in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know why, but I thought Dr. Cam Branch was the big guy with the mustache. I met him at the beginning of the school year, and I don't know... I thought that was who I was coming to see. I wasn't expecting"—the corners of his mouth quirked—"you."

My belly fluttered. "You're thinking of Dr. Theo Brown. He's the guidance counselor."

He pulled out my card and read it. "And you are the school psychologist."

My lips curled upward. "That's right."

“I would’ve remembered you if I’d ever seen you before.” His eyes dipped to my lips and then locked back with mine. “You are memorable.”

“I would’ve remembered you as well.”

His brown eyes seemed to dance as his tongue ran from one corner of his mouth to the other. “How can I repay you for your kindness? You let me preoccupy your afternoon.”

I waved off his suggestion. “You don’t owe me anything. There’s nothing to repay.”

“I took up your time and I understand how valuable time is.”

I glanced at the clock and saw that we’d been talking for an hour. I was surprised at how much time had passed because it didn’t feel like that long at all.

“...allow me to say thank you,” he continued.

“I—”

“Please.” I didn’t immediately protest so he held my card up. “Presumably your office hours correspond with the school day, correct?”

“Yes.”

He rose to his feet. “So, if I wanted to reach out to you after I got off of work, you’d already be gone for the day?”

Standing, I reached over to pluck the business card from his fingers. I scribbled my cell phone number on the back of the card and then handed it back. “If you need to reach me, here’s my number.”

He tucked his phone and my business card in his pocket. “I appreciate your time, your insight, and your conversation.”

“I appreciated the conversation as well. It was really nice to talk to you.” Hearing how I sounded in my head, I quickly followed up. “You’re doing a great job with Kennedy. She is a special kid.”

“Yes, she is. Thank you.”

He reached out to shake my hand and the moment my skin brushed against his, sparks flew. I felt it immediately. And based on the way his pupils dilated, I was sure he felt it too. His eyes burned into me, causing heat to rise up my neck and flush my cheeks. I’d hoped my chocolate complexion hid my blushing, but the soft smile that played on his lips made me feel like he knew the effect he was having on me.

“It was very nice to meet you,” he uttered, letting his thumb skate across my knuckles.

“It was nice to meet you as well.”

He squeezed gently and then his hand slid from mine. I still felt the lingering pressure of his touch as he made his way to the door. My eyes swept up and down his body.

He put his hand on the door handle but didn't open it. Instead, he turned around and looked at me. "Camilla?"

"Yes?" My voice faltered slightly.

"I look forward to showing you my appreciation," he professed before he opened the door and walked out.

Slack-jawed, discombobulated, and wet, I stared at the space he had just occupied.

His exit was just as overwhelming as his entrance.

“Cam!” Ms. Diane exclaimed as soon as I answered the phone.

The urgency in how she said my name made me drop my pen. I knew I was distracted. It had been twenty-four hours since I’d met Kian and I’d been in a daze since then. So, hearing the counseling office administrator yell my name brought me back to planet Earth.

“What’s wrong?” I replied in a rush.

“Come out here. Now!”

“Okay, okay! I’m coming!” I hung up the phone without waiting for her response.

I scrambled to kick off my slippers and step into the heels that I had under my desk. Silently cursing myself as I hit my hip on the corner of my desk as I rushed to the door. Swinging it open, I barged out of my office unsure of what to expect.

“Look!” Ms. Diane cried out with her arms opened wide. The fifty-year-old woman was grinning from ear to ear and gesturing to the bouquet that sat on the ledge.

About three dozen white roses in a glass vase caught my eye. A bulky man in a white uniform and with a toothy grin held a digital clipboard. “Are you Camilla Branch?”

My eyebrows flew up. “Yes.”

“I need you to sign here, please.”

I signed on the dotted line, but still couldn’t understand what was going on. “Are these... for me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave me a quick head nod. “Have a good day.”

“Those are nice,” Dr. Theo Brown remarked from behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder and then back at the flowers.

“White roses are an interesting choice,” Ms. Diane acknowledged, inspecting the long-stemmed bouquet. “And expensive, too. Are congratulations in order?”

“No. Not that I know of.” Still rooted in place, I just stared at the flowers, shaking my head. “I have no clue.”

“Who are they from?” She plucked a small white card from the bouquet. “Because they’re from someone. And here’s the card.”

“White flowers mean bereavement, don’t they?” Theo wondered. “Is... everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I felt a pit in my stomach. “I think so.”

“You scared of flowers or something?” Ms. Diane joked. “Why are you way back there? Come get this!”

“I’m just surprised!” I moved forward, taking the card and then the roses. “These are beautiful,” I murmured, inhaling the scent.

“Open the card!”

I clutched it to my chest. “I’ll open it in my office.”

The phone started ringing and Ms. Diane glanced at it and then back at me. I could tell she was thinking about ignoring the call, but finally, she sighed and made her way to her desk.

“Theo tell her to open the card.”

“Now you know I can’t tell you or Cam what to do,” he chuckled. “I’m out of it.”

“I’m opening it in my office,” I reiterated with a huge smile.

Ms. Diane had one hand on her hip and one on the phone receiver. “You’re no fun,” she complained before answering on the third ring.

Dr. Brown stroked his mustache before nodding her way. “She’s going to keep asking you until you tell her,” he warned, letting out a light chuckle.

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly. “I know, Theo. I know.”

Entering my office, I closed the door behind me with my hip and then sat the flowers on the windowsill. I took a step back and stared at how elegant and beautiful they were. With shaky fingers, I carefully tore into the envelope.

“I hope these flowers do for you and your day what you did for me and mine,” I read softly.

My heart thumped in my chest as I reread the note. Even though it wasn't signed, I knew exactly who it was from. Butterflies rippled through me as I stared at the roses. I hadn't been on a real date in a couple of months, and he wasn't the 'buy flowers' kind of guy. Even though we'd lost consistency once the school year started, my sneaky link didn't know where I worked, so he couldn't have sent flowers if he wanted to.

It could only be Kian.

Kian Long said he wanted to thank me and then the next day flowers appeared. I'd had parents gift me flowers, gift cards, and gift baskets at random during my time working with students, but the accompanying note would express gratitude. The note in my hand expressed something completely different. As I read the line again, I felt heady. My mind worked overtime creating a romance between me and Kian. Minutes passed and I just stared out the window in a romantic fog.

The phone on my desk rung loudly, bringing me back from my thoughts. I needed the reprieve from thoughts of Kian. He had crossed my mind every hour on the hour like clockwork. No matter what I was focused on, the interaction I had with him kept flashing in my mind and stealing my attention. Partially because he alluded to wanting my number, but then didn't call.

"Hello?" I answered as I sat down in my leather chair. "This is Dr. Branch."

"Hello, Dr. Branch. It's Kian. Kian Long." The deep, rich voice on the line washed over me like warm water. "Is it still okay if I call you Camilla?"

My hand tightened around the receiver. "Yes. Of course! Hi," I replied, hoping he didn't hear the little nervous tremble in my voice. "How are you?"

"It's been a busy morning, but I'm well. How are you?"

I looked at the card in my hand and bit down on my bottom lip. "I'm feeling good."

"That's good. I was just able to check my phone and I saw the confirmation email from the flower shop."

"So, they *were* from you," I said, trying to play it cool. "You didn't sign the card."

"I know. There's a reason for that." He let out a light chuckle. "I didn't know if they were going to put the card in an envelope and your office

administrator seemed to be a little..."

"Nosy?"

"I was going to say curious," he laughed. "So I felt like my best bet was to stay lowkey just in case."

"Well, the flowers are beautiful, Kian. Thank you. You did not have to do all this! But I appreciate it nonetheless." I stared wistfully at the flowers in the window. "I love them."

"Good, good. I was hoping so. I spoke to Kenni last night about her drawings and how she was feeling and, long story short, we're going to be okay."

It was heartwarming to hear that my guidance helped. Depending on how open a family was to receiving help, an update didn't always happen.

"That's wonderful!" I beamed. "I'm so glad to hear that!"

"She suggested white flowers."

I froze. "Kennedy suggested?"

My words came out muffled as my hand flew to my mouth.

"Yes," he confirmed. "I asked her what color flowers I should get as a thank you and she said white. She likes you and she said she thought you'd like them."

Oh.

I truly was happy that everything went well with their talk, and I thought it was incredibly sweet that she thought I'd like them. But I couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed that I thought the flowers meant more than just thank you.

I lightly cleared my throat. "Please tell her that I said thank you and that I love them. She has great taste," I said, staring over at the bouquet. "But again, she really didn't have to get me anything. I was just doing my job and I'm happy to help."

"I understand and I appreciate that. But for what you did for us, you can get anything you want from me. And you deserve to be thanked."

My entire body reacted. *Anything?*

I glanced down at the note that I'd placed on my desk. "Well, thank you. For thanking me."

"The flowers were from me and Kenni to thank you for your concern. But..." His pause was heavy. "I still need to do something to thank you for your time."

The air left my lungs in a rush. “Okay,” I replied breathily. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well... will you be at the Festival of Arts next weekend?”

My brows furrowed. *Not where I thought the conversation was going, but okay.*

“Of course,” I told him. “I’m spearheading the event.”

“Okay good. So that means I’ll get a chance to see you again.”

You could see me anytime you wanted to, I responded internally.

But I choked back the words I wanted to say. Letting my head fall back, I held the receiver tight, so I didn’t throw it across the room. Every time I thought we were on the same page, we were not.

The man was killing me.

With a bitter smile, I collected myself. “Yes. I’ll be there. And if you—or Kennedy—need anything, you know how to reach me.”

He hesitated for a second. “Yes. I do. Thank you.”

Feeling the swirl of emotion in my stomach, I took a shaky breath. “I have a meeting soon, so I should get going. But thank you for calling. And for the flowers.”

“Oh, okay, yes. Don’t let me hold you. I hope you have a good rest of your day.”

“Thank you, Dr. Long.”

He paused again. “Thank you, Dr. Branch.”

We were both quiet.

I closed my eyes and listened to him breathe.

“Camilla,” he whispered.

“Yes?” I murmured back.

“I wanted to sign the card.”

I swallowed hard. “I would’ve liked that.”

Another stretch of silence passed between us.

“Have a good day, Cam.”

“You too, Kian.”

The phone clicked as he ended the call and I exhaled. It took me a couple of seconds to hang up. Once I did, I realized how fast my heart was beating.

I looked down at the note and reread what it said.

There was something between us.

But even if his energy felt like he was interested, his words felt like he wanted to maintain professional boundaries. And that was what I needed to do as well. I'd already went out on a limb and gave him my personal cell phone number and he hadn't used it.

Granted, it's only been twenty-four hours. But still.

It was not a good idea to get involved with a parent of a student at the school. With as much of a spark I felt with Kian, I had to be smart. I'd only started working with the school full-time a year ago. The Richard Alexander Woodson School of Performing Arts was such a gift. The curriculum, the funding, the atmosphere, everything about RAW was a great fit for me and my career. I didn't want to railroad myself by getting into a complicated mess just because Kian Long set my insides on fire. Just because I'd never felt an attraction so strong, didn't mean I needed to pursue it. And besides, it wasn't like he was pursuing me.

Because if he was, why would he call my office phone instead of my cell? Why would he ask me if I'm going to be at the festival instead of asking me on a date? Why would he say the flowers were from him and Kennedy instead of admitting that he wanted to get me flowers?

It was as if we both felt the pull, but we were denying the attraction. Taking a deep, calming breath, I concluded that he was interested in me but not interested enough to pursue me.

"It's for the best," I murmured as I moved my mouse to engage my computer screen.

I jumped into work and tried to block out the intrusive thoughts. It had only been a couple of hours and I'd made a huge dent in my to-do list. As it turned out, if I stopped obsessing over a man I was never going to have, I was able to get a lot of work done.

My cell phone vibrated against my desk. I waited until I finished typing the email I was in the middle of before I checked the text message.

Knots in my belly formed as soon as I saw the text message from an unknown number. I knew who it was before I clicked to open it.

KIAN LONG: This is Kian. I want you to have my number. Call me anytime.

MY LIPS CURVED into a small smile as I read it again.

CAMILLA BRANCH: Anytime?

KIAN LONG: Anytime.

SMILING, I sat my cell phone down and answered my office phone.

“Dr. Branch,” Ms. Diane greeted me. “You have Mr. and Mrs. Powell here to see you.”

I moved the Powell’s son’s file to the middle of my desk. “Thank you.”

Standing, I smoothed my dress down and crossed the room. With rejuvenated energy, I opened the door with a smile. “Mr. and Mrs. Powell?” As soon as the couple stood, I continued, “Hi, I’m Dr. Cam Branch. Please, come on in...”

Work flew by. And as I drove away from the school for the weekend, I glanced at the roses in the passenger seat. Chewing my bottom lip, I navigated traffic while letting the romantic in me squeal. No matter what ended up happening with Kian, I just wanted to relish in the fact that he’d sent me three dozen roses.

My phone rang through the car speakers as I pulled up into my driveway.

“Finally!” I exclaimed as I pressed the button to answer the call. “Ebony!”

“Hey Cam, what’s up?” my best friend asked slightly out of breath.

My brows furrowed. “Everything okay over there?”

“Yeah. Well, yes and no. Yes, I’m okay. No, I’m not okay.”

I looked around as if I were being pranked. “What the fuck?”

She laughed. “I’m okay as in nothing is wrong. But I’m not okay because I just spent three hundred dollars at the grocery store.”

My jaw dropped. “How? You live alone!”

“I don’t know,” she whined loudly. “But I need a distraction to take the pain away.”

“Okay so remember how I told you about that fine ass man that came into my office unexpectedly?”

“Yes...” She dragged the word out. “Because it happened yesterday.”

I laughed. “Shut up! It’s relevant to the story.”

“Sorry,” she giggled.

“So, he sent me three dozen white roses today. And—”

“He did what?!” She yelled so loud I had to turn the volume down in my car.

I was giddy. “I know!”

“Okay, first things first, I have never heard you talk about some random man with so much—I don’t know, passion! Well, except for Corey during your first year in grad school. But you knew him a little bit. I’ve never heard you talk about a stranger like this! And then for him to reciprocate the energy with roses. I love it!”

“I know! Me too! But listen—”

“Wait... How did we get here? You said you spontaneously wrote your number on the back of your business card and that he never called. You made it seem like you were just shooting your shot from half court at the DILF. But bitch, it sounds like it was a layup!”

“Ebony!” I cackled. “Let me tell you the story!”

“Okay, okay, sorry! Continue.”

I told her everything that took place and how I wasn’t sure what was going on.

“...because on one hand, he texted me to give me his number. But on the other hand, he never explicitly said anything about wanting to get to know me better or dating me or fucking me,” I concluded. “And if I’m honest, for him, I’m open to it all.”

“I know that’s right!”

“But because he’s never explicitly said anything, I don’t know if any of it is on the table.”

“That’s true... everything was implied,” she agreed.

“Right?”

“But... you didn’t explicitly express interest either.”

My eyes widened. “What? I did! I gave him my number! I literally took the card from his hand and wrote my number on it for him. I pulled a you!”

“And while I’m extremely proud of you for doing that, you didn’t really tell him you were interested either. Hear me out... he had just pointed out

that his work hours didn't mesh with your office hours, and you gave him another way to contact you."

"I never give out my cell number to parents!"

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that. And he could be afraid to make a move without an explicit go-ahead from you in case you report him, and his daughter gets kicked out of that fancy ass magnet school."

I considered what she said. "That's true," I sighed. "Well damn. Giving him my number *was* my one bold move. I can't do anything else. I guess I just have to wait for an organic opportunity to arise and hope he says something. Because if I do what I want to do and he isn't interested, I could be looking at an HR and a PR nightmare."

"Sexy school psychologist wants to treat hot DILF on her couch," Ebony said in a mock newscaster voice. "School board reactions live at six!"

"I can't stand you," I howled in amusement.

"PTA is now Parent-Teacher Assclapping. Details at eleven!"

The two of us were laughing so hard my stomach hurt. Wiping the tears from the corners of my eyes, I let the remaining amusement come out in loud breaths as I listened to her doing the same. When we'd gotten ourselves together, my head was against the headrest, and I was staring at my front door.

"I just have to resist him," I told her. "I don't know anything about this man. He could just be a flirt. And while I'm thinking he's single, he could have a whole girlfriend and I'm over here pining for him." I exhaled. "But if he's single, and I think he is, I have to just...be patient."

"It'll be fine," Ebony assured me. "If you and DILF are supposed to get together, it'll happen. And if the connection is as strong as you described it, I don't see it not happening. But you'll have to have patience because if you say something to him before the time is right, you'll be known as the Parent Trap."

I burst out laughing. "That doesn't even make sense!"

"It means keep your coochie away from the DILF unless he makes a very clear and explicit move, or you'll be known as the doctor who formally works at RAW."

"Ebony," I groaned, shaking my head.

"Am I wrong?"

"No, you're right. You're absolutely right."

“Okay, I just got home, and I need to get these three hundred dollars’ worth of groceries into the house and then I have to get ready for my date.”

“Aw yes! Enjoy your date night with Pierre. Get dick for the both of us!”

“And will!”

We said our goodbyes and I grabbed my flowers and ran into my house.

I didn’t have any Friday night plans outside of relaxing. So, I cooked dinner, found a movie to stream on my TV, and relaxed. When it started getting late, I made my way upstairs to prepare for bed. After a quick shower, I climbed under my covers.

KIAN LONG: Are you going to HU’s homecoming this year?

IT WASN’T LATE. It wasn’t even nine o’clock yet. But Kian’s text message caught me off guard. Homecoming wasn’t until October, and it was May. Clearly, he just wanted to start a conversation with me. I had butterflies but I knew I had to play it cool.

CAMILLA BRANCH: I probably will. I’ve gone the last couple of years. What about you?

KIAN LONG: I haven’t been able to go in a long time. But this year I’ll have the weekend off and I think Kenni will be okay with my mom for the weekend.

Is HE... reaching out to make sure he’s making the right decision about leaving Kenni?

Perplexed, I stared at his message for a couple extra minutes before I constructed a proper reply.

CAMILLA BRANCH: Kennedy seems to be in a good space. If nothing changes, I don't think you have to worry about being away from her for the weekend.

A FEW MINUTES passed before he responded.

KIAN LONG: Thanks. I appreciate your perspective.

CAMILLA BRANCH: You're welcome.

FOR TEN MINUTES, neither of us said anything. I was just about to put my phone on the charger when it vibrated again.

KIAN LONG: I apologize for reaching out so late. I hope I didn't interrupt your night.

CAMILLA BRANCH: You're fine. I just got in bed to watch a movie, so you're not interrupting anything.

KIAN LONG: I did have another question for you.

CAMILLA BRANCH: And what's that?

KIAN LONG: Did you leave the flowers in your office, or did you bring them home?

CAMILLA BRANCH: I brought them home. They're too pretty to leave unattended over the weekend.

KIAN LONG: Your man didn't trip over it, did he?

CAMILLA BRANCH: I don't have a man.

KIAN LONG: Do you want one?

CAMILLA BRANCH: It depends on who's asking...

I STARED at my phone waiting for a text back, but instead the entire screen lit up with Kian's name as the incoming call rang out.

"Hello?" I answered.

"I'm asking." His deep voice carried his reply beyond my ears and into every nook and cranny of my body. "Because I would like to take you out and get to know you better—outside of the context in which we met."

Grinning, I kicked my feet against my mattress in pure excitement. Subduing my reaction, I replied, "I'd like that, too."

"Good." The smile in his voice was evident. "Now tell me what movie you're about to watch..."

Kian and I talked for three hours and twenty-four minutes during that first phone conversation. It was so easy and comfortable talking to him. It proved that what happened in my office wasn't a fluke. We moved from topic to topic without missing a beat. There weren't any uncomfortable silences, only thoughtful pauses. I'd thought maybe it wouldn't happen like that again, but I was mistaken.

For the next five nights, we spent two hours on the phone. We both complained of being tired and swore we'd limit our conversation to just one hour. But the second hour snuck up on us. Even though my sleep total went from seven hours of sleep a night to five, I enjoyed every minute of it. But on Thursday night, I put my foot down.

"I set my alarm to go off in an hour," I told him as soon as he answered my call.

"Good because I can't have you keeping me up all night," he retorted.

"Nah, that's you," I giggled, snuggling under my covers as I propped the phone on the pillow next to me. Because he was on speakerphone, I closed my eyes and pretended he was next to me. "I haven't been on the phone like this since..." I opened my eyes as the realization hit me. "I haven't been on the phone like this since probably high school!"

"I don't think I've ever been on the phone like this. But I'm not gonna lie... it's become one of my favorite parts of the day."

Grinning, I closed my eyes tight. "That's sweet."

"That's the truth."

“Well, my truth is that even though it’s been cutting in on my beauty rest, I like talking to you.”

“I like talking to you, too. And I’m more than a little excited to see you on Saturday. I damn near volunteered to help set up on Friday so I could see you sooner.”

I giggled. “We could use the help so feel free to reconsider volunteering.”

“Say the word and I’m there.”

“We should be done by the time you’re off, but I like that energy.”

“Speaking of energy... I know you will be tired on Sunday so you might sleep in. But if you’re up for it, I’d love to take you out for the day. My cousin is having a birthday party for her son and all the kids will be there. My mom agreed to take Kenni so I will have a day to do whatever I want.”

“And what is it you want to do?”

“I want to spend some real time with you.”

“I’d like that. A lot.”

“Good. We’ll start with lunch and then...see where the day takes us.”

Hopefully back to your place.

“Camilla?” Kian’s deep voice beckoned to me.

“Mm hmm,” I replied with my bottom lip between my teeth.

“You sure?” he asked softly. “What’s on your mind?”

Rolling onto my back, I contemplated telling him what was on my mind. “Well...”

“Talk to me. If you’re not ready for a date—”

“No, it’s not that at all,” I interrupted before a pause. “The opposite actually. I’m just thinking about how good it’ll feel to be around you.”

“Oh really...?” He stretched the words out curiously.

“Really.”

“I’ve been thinking about being next to you since I left your office,” he admitted. “I even have my phone situated next to me and it feels like you’re in the room with me.”

Something about the way he said it sent a chill down my spine. “I wish I was in the room with you now, Kian...”

“Come on, Camilla...” He let out a low, rolling groan. “You can’t say my name like that.”

“Like what, Kian?”

He groaned. "Like *that*. You know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

"You're putting ideas in my head and you're making it hard for me to think about anything else."

I licked my lips. "I like that I'm making it hard."

"Camilla..." He said my name like a warning that went straight to my core. "You know what you're doing."

"What?" I feigned innocence. "You said I'm inspiring ideas... I like being your inspiration."

"Stop playing with me."

"All I want to do is play with you."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Come on, Cam," he begged hoarsely. "I'm trying to be a gentleman."

"You don't have to be."

He let out a light, sexy chuckle. "You have no idea what you're asking for."

My heart thumped with the promise of what he meant by that. "Then tell me..."

I heard the rustling of sheets as he shifted in bed. "When you say my name like that, I imagine you in bed with me. And then the thought of you in bed with me makes my dick hard. And then I start thinking about what I would do if I had you here. I start imagining how you would look, how you would sound, how you would feel, how you would taste."

The throbbing between my legs was so intense, I had to close my eyes. "Now I really wish I was there."

"I really wish you were here, too."

"What would you do if I was there?"

"I'd kiss you," he answered without hesitation. "Your lips looked so soft and then you did this little thing where you'd bite your bottom lip. Mm!" he grunted his approval. "That would be the first thing. The second thing I would do is strip you out of your clothes and kiss every square inch of your body."

"I'd like that."

"What are you wearing?"

I brushed my hand over my smooth skin. The lust in his question tightened my nipples instantly. "Nothing."

“Shit...” He exhaled. “Just imagining you naked has my dick rock hard.”

I clenched at his words, the desire, and the thought of his dick hard from the thought of me. “Are you naked?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Mmm... if you were next to me, I’d be touching you right now.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes...” I ran my hands up my belly and over my breasts before pinching my nipples. “I want to put my hands all over you.”

“I’m cool with that.” His voice was lower, sexier. “As long as I can put my tongue all over you.”

My entire lower body clenched. “Yes, please.”

“Oh, you’d like that?”

“Yes,” I exhaled. My sensitive nipples begged for his mouth. “I’d like that. I want that.”

“What else do you want, Camilla?”

“I want you to hold me down and kiss me,” I told him.

“Are you on your back?”

“Yes.”

“I’d pin your arms to the bed and start kissing you. Then I’d make my way down your neck until I get your left nipple in my mouth.”

I started kneading my left breast, using my other hand to brush against my nipple. “That feels good.”

“You like it when I flick my tongue over it?”

I was breathing heavily. “Yes.”

“I’ll move over and do the same thing to the right one.”

I moved my hand and did the same action. The whole time, I imagined it was his mouth, his tongue, his hands that were stimulating me.

“My nipples are so hard,” I whispered.

“So is my dick,” he admitted.

I let out a shuddering sigh. “Kian.”

“Is that how you’re going to say my name when I’m kissing down your stomach?”

“Yes.”

“Good because I want to hear you when I spread your legs open wide and start kissing your inner thighs. Can you feel me getting closer to your pussy?”

“Yes,” I murmured as I immediately parted my legs and rested a hand between them.

“My face is so close that I can feel your heat. I can see how wet you are for me. Your lips are slick, and your clit is right there waiting for me. I’m still kissing your soft thighs, but I want to taste you, Camilla. Can I taste you?”

“Yeah,” I panted, slowly rubbing my clit as I listened to him.

“I’m licking up and down your slit... I’m sticking my tongue into that sweet spot. I’m tasting your juices and then I’m going to lick and suck that clit until you can’t take anymore.”

“Yes, Kian...yes,” I whispered as I used my wetness to enhance the sensation. I imagined my fingers were his tongue and moaned.

“Are you touching yourself?” His voice was thick with want. “Are you playing with your pretty pussy, Camilla?”

“Yes.”

“Is your finger on your clit?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my tongue. My tongue is right there.”

“Yessssssssss,” I moaned, hearing the yearning in his voice only heightened the intensity for me.

“Does my tongue feel good, baby?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” My words came out in short bursts as I started losing myself in the fantasy.

“Yeah, that’s it. Let me taste it. Cum on my tongue so I can taste it, baby.”

My hips rocked with unbridled desire. “Kian,” I gasped, my fingers moving frantically over my clit.

“You want to wet my beard, don’t you, Camilla? You want to cum on my face,” he growled before sucking in a sharp breath. “Fuck.”

“I’m getting close,” I breathed.

“Yeah, that’s it. I want you to cum for me.”

“I want you to cum *with* me,” I told him wantonly. “I want to cum on your dick. After I cum on your face, will you let me cum on your dick? Please...”

“Fuck,” he swore.

“Are you stroking your dick?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you stroking it thinking about your tongue in my pussy?”

“Fuck yeah,” he said in a low groan.

I was panting.

“Well, I want you to cum thinking about your dick in my wet pussy,” I told him, feeling myself approaching the edge. “Slide inside me.”

“How bad do you want it?” He groaned.

“I want it so bad,” I whispered, feeling my body start to take on a mind of its own. “Can you hear how wet I am for you?”

“Yeah, I hear that wet pussy calling for me.” He groaned. “I’m sliding in and stretching that pretty pussy out.”

My entire body started tingling. “Yes... yes, Kian. Please fuck me,” I begged.

“You want to cum on my dick?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Will you let me play with your clit while I’m fucking you?”

I shuddered, my hips lifting off the bed. “You’re about to make me cum...”

“Good. I want to feel you cum while I’m buried inside you.” His breaths were coming in rough bursts. “Cum on my dick, Camilla.”

My head tipped back, and I could almost feel how good his mouth, his hands, his dick would be.

I hit the point of no return just as a quiet, strangled groan rumbled out of him. He sounded like he was on edge and that pushed me to my limit.

“Is this my pussy?” he asked, his voice indicating that he was losing control.

“Yes, Kian... Kian...” Breathless moans rang out of me like a siren, and fireworks went off inside my body. “Yesssss.”

“Since it’s mine, are you going to let me cum deep inside you?” he uttered as my entire body quivered to the sound of his voice. “Since your juices are all over me, can I nut deep inside you? Can I—oh shit!”

“Kian!”

My knees came together, trapping my hand between my thighs. Hearing him lose control caused me to shake as pleasure emanated from my core. Heavy breaths punctuated the quietness that had fallen between us.

“Kian?” I murmured, my heart still thumping in my chest.

“I’m here,” he responded.

Rolling over, I looked at the phone as if it was him. “That felt good.”

“Yeah, it did. And when you moan like that for me, when you moan my name...” He let out a low whistle. “Damn.”

Butterflies moved through my satiated body. “I’ve never gotten off from phone sex before.”

“Me either. I’ve never wanted anyone as bad as I want you,” he replied.

A smile tugged at my lips. “Oh really?”

“Yes. And it’s not just because you’re sexy as hell and I’ve been attracted to you since I laid eyes on you.” He paused. “You’re the whole package. And I want to explore all of you. I want all of you.”

“And I’m ready to give you all of me,” I admitted softly. “I wish you were here.”

“I wish I was too. I need you next to me.”

There was a flutter in my chest cavity. “It’s going to be hard to think about anything else but seeing you until I see you.”

“It’s going to be hard to not want to grab you and kiss you when I see you on Saturday.”

With my eyebrows raised, I paused. “That’s true. We’re going to have to keep our hands to ourselves during the festival.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize your job,” he assured me. “But do me a favor... don’t wear a dress. I don’t want to imagine lifting it up and touching you every time I see you.”

I giggled, rolling toward the phone. “I’m really looking forward to this weekend with you.”

“We just have to get through tomorrow...”

Friday was extremely busy as we prepared for the Festival of Art on Saturday. I had so much to do, I didn't have time to think about or fixate on Kian Long. But after setting up the auditorium to look like a Broadway stage, decorating the cafeteria and gymnasium to look like art galleries, and helping students set up their stations, I was exhausted at the end of the day. By the time I got home, it was a little after seven o'clock and I was no good.

KIAN LONG: Just checking on you. You still at the school?

CAMILLA BRANCH: Just got home. I'm about to soak in the bath for a minute and then crash. I have to be back there by nine o'clock.

KIAN LONG: Did you at least grab something to eat so you don't have to cook?

CAMILLA BRANCH: No, I didn't have the energy to stop. I'm going to call you when I get out the bath.

KIAN LONG: Okay, that's cool. How long do your baths usually take?

CAMILLA BRANCH: About thirty minutes.

FURROWING MY BROWS, I placed the phone on my nightstand and shook my head. We'd been telling each other everything, but bath times felt random.

"Kian Long," I murmured in amusement as I stripped.

I ran hot water into the tub, sprinkled in my bath beads and lavender oil, and then spent the first ten minutes just soaking. It was a productive day, but I hadn't done that much manual labor at work in a long time. I made the mistake of wearing ballet flats instead of sneakers and my feet were paying for it. After washing my body, I turned on the shower and rinsed myself off. I wrapped myself in a towel and plodded back to my room.

After moisturizing and slipping into an oversized t-shirt, I grabbed my phone and headed downstairs to get a bottle of water. I'd barely hit the bottom step when the doorbell rang.

I stopped in my tracks and stared at the door for a second.

I had no clue who it could be, but I had no intention of answering it. Turning, I headed toward the kitchen when my phone vibrated.

KIAN LONG: Open the door.

MY STOMACH DROPPED and I immediately felt dizzy. I wanted to see him—I wanted to see him badly. But I wasn't prepared to see him. I looked down at the shirt and felt my coiled hair pushed into a quick and easy puff on the top of my head. I knew I didn't look bad, but it wasn't how I wanted to see the man I was interested in. But as I heard a car door slam, I realized that none of that mattered, and I wanted nothing more than to feel his arms around me.

Rushing to the door, I flung it open as a little white car peeled off.

"What?" I huffed, confused.

And then I looked down and gasped.

CAMILLA BRANCH: Where are you?

KIAN LONG: In the living room with Kenni.

I STARED at the bag and then surveyed my neighborhood.

CAMILLA BRANCH: Why did you tell me to open the door?

KIAN LONG: Because I have something for you.

BENDING MY KNEES, I scooped up the bag and searched for the receipt. When I located it, my heart thumped in my chest.

Burger and fries from Wellington.

Bringing the bag inside, I carried it to the kitchen. Emptying the contents onto the counter, the delicious aroma made my stomach rumble.

I called Kian.

“Hey,” he answered on the first ring.

“Did you order me food?” I asked.

“Yes. You had a long day and you needed to eat.”

I got butterflies. “Kian...”

“Have you tasted it yet?”

I stared at the burger and fries, blinking back tears. “No, not yet.”

“Take a bite. I selected extra for a quick delivery so it could be ready and still hot by the time you got out of the bath.”

I put my hand to my chest. “Thank you.”

“Taste it.”

“I’m taking a bite now. Let me wash my hands.” I put the call on speakerphone and then walked to the sink. “It smells really good. What did you have for dinner?”

“Pizza. I let Kenni pick since she has her big show tomorrow.”

Drying my hands, I heard Kennedy talking in the background about the family members who would be coming to see her art. When Kian spoke back to her, I smiled at the loving but firm way he redirected her. He was a good father and that made me like him even more.

Grabbing the burger, I took a big bite. “Oh my God,” I mumbled with my mouth full. The flavors danced in my mouth as I chewed. “Oh my God!”

“Good, right?”

“It’s so good. Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome.”

I took another bite. “Keep this up and you’re going to spoil me.”

“I plan to spoil you.”

Swooning, my cheeks heated. I didn’t know what to say so I finished chewing.

“Now, I know you’re tired,” he continued. “So, eat and then get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I swallowed. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see you either. Sleep well, baby.”

My insides were mush as we said goodbye. I could barely eat because I was grinning so hard. But still, somehow, I crushed my food in record time.

The bath, the food, and the swooning made sleep come fast and easy. And when my alarm went off the next morning, I felt rejuvenated—and more than a little excited.

“Good morning, Dr. Branch,” a voice called out as I was just about to enter the counseling suite.

I turned around and waved. “Good morning, Dr. Brown.” It was odd seeing him in jeans and a t-shirt. I hadn’t ever seen him in casual wear before.

“Hold the door for me please,” he called out.

“Of course.” I held it open and waited a few seconds for him to catch up. “What do you have in there?”

He had a box in his arms as he entered. “Thank you. I got wrangled into helping with the recital,” he grumbled.

“You know it’s all hands on deck!”

“Yes, but I volunteered to help with the music department. I’m pretty sure they have me working with the dancers.” He placed the box down on a chair before pulling the keys to his office out of his pocket. “Do I look like a dancer?”

“I don’t know if you have moves or not,” I laughed, heading into my office. “But today is definitely going to be a long one.”

“And you and the rest of the squad are going to be all over the place.”

I grabbed the extra stack of lists from my desk. “Yeah,” I called out. “I might have to take Monday off!”

The morning wasn’t a lot of work because of everything we’d gotten done on Friday. But reviewing all the checklists to make sure everything was set up correctly took time. With last minute changes and unexpected hiccups, I needed to circle back around to make sure everything was in order for each part of the festival.

“Do you know where Jasper is? Jasper Mills?” I asked Madalee Stevenson as I passed her in the hall.

The kindergarten teacher shook her head. “I haven’t seen him in a while. Did you check the auditorium?”

“Heading there now. Thanks!” I yelled over my shoulder as I hustled to the auditorium to drop off the paperwork.

I didn’t find him, but I found Tiberius Vesey. And since they were working together, I was able to give him the checklist they needed. He seemed confident in everything coming together smoothly and that was all I needed to hear. Rushing off, I’d barely finished my rounds before I heard the doors open and students and their families fill the halls.

I took a deep breath and plastered a smile on my face. “Welcome!” I greeted people as they entered.

With a relaxed stride, I headed toward the gymnasium.

“Funny running into you here,” a deep voice reached out to me as I entered the part of the gym where the fifth graders were having their art displayed.

Turning slowly, I tried to contain my smile. “Hello, Dr. Long.”

My heart felt like it was swelling inside of me as my hand slid into his. There was more than a spark. The energy between us was electric. Just the subtleness of his look, his touch, his voice gave me goosebumps.

“Hello, Dr. Branch,” he returned, before leaning to my ear. “I see you decided on a dress anyway.”

I closed my eyes and inhaled his cologne. “You like?”

“I love.”

The green wrap dress contrasted with my skin and accentuated my curves. It wasn’t revealing and it wasn’t too tight, but it managed to be sexy without being too sexy. It was a little dressy for work, so I’d never worn it to the school. But it wasn’t sexy enough for a first date, so I wouldn’t have worn it on Sunday. The gym-turned-art gallery was the perfect place to debut the knee-length garment.

“Well, thank you,” I told him, taking a step back.

His gaze swept up and down my body. “No... thank you.”

I giggled and turned away—only to find Ms. Diane staring right at me.

“Shit—shoot!” I swore quietly, taking another step back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s coming. Be cool.”

He made a face. “Be cool? What is this? A seventies—”

“Hey, Ms. Diane,” I greeted the office administrator, interrupting Kian. “How’s everything looking in here so far?”

“So far, so good,” she answered, looking between us. “I’m more interested in how things are looking over here.” Turning her body toward Kian, she cocked her head to the side. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr...?”

“Long. Kian Long,” he replied, extending his hand to her. “It’s nice to see you again, Ms. Diane.”

Her eyes narrowed as she shook his hand. “You’re the young man that came for the unannounced office visit. And now you’re here at the festival?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She looked between the two of us. “So, this is a date?”

“Diane, that’s enough,” I cut her off, putting my hands on my hips.

She opened her arms. “What? I just—”

“Daddy!” Kennedy exclaimed, bounding up to her father.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Kian beamed, wrapping his arms around the cute little girl. “Am I allowed to see your work now?”

“Yes!” She grinned up at him and grabbed his hand. When she looked over at us, she seemed surprised. “Dr. Branch, Ms. Hall, hi!”

“Hi, young lady,” Ms. Diane chirped. Her eyes bounced between father and daughter.

“Hi, Kennedy,” I responded. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too!” Her big brown eyes widened. “Did you like the flowers?”

“I did.” I bent down a little. “Thank you so much! You have great taste.”

“You had on white when you came to talk to me, so I thought you’d like white,” she explained.

“You made a good choice,” I assured her.

“Thank you!” Looking up at her father, she tugged his hand. “Daddy, can you come see?”

“Absolutely.” Kian looked at me first and then Ms. Diane. “It was nice seeing you both again. I’m sure I will be seeing you around.” He glanced back at me. “I’ll be here all day.”

As soon as they were out of earshot, Ms. Diane’s hands were on her hips and her vision was fixated on me. “The flowers were from him!”

“The flowers were a thank you for checking in on the daughter. And you heard her, she picked them out.”

“But it was the father who went to the most expensive florist in the city.”

“Or maybe it happened to be the closest one to his job.”

She lowered her voice. “Or maybe a student’s father is pursuing you.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but I realized that if I wanted any chance of something real with Kian, I wasn’t going to lie about it.

“Maybe. Maybe not. As long as it’s not a messy situation…” I let the sentence trail off and lifted my shoulders.

She gave me a knowing look. “The school year is almost over, and the student is in fifth grade. One more month and then there’s no issue one way or another.”

“That’s true, too,” I agreed.

I didn’t have much time to ponder Ms. Diane’s point because I was being beckoned across the room.

I talked to parents and helped students before being thrust into the next thing I needed to do. As I was returning from redirecting a family looking for where the younger elementary students were displaying their artwork, I felt eyes on me. Looking to my left, Kian was standing to the side in conversation with a group of people.

But his eyes were on me.

My stomach flipped under his gaze.

Exchanging small smiles, we didn't look away from one another until I walked behind the makeshift partition. I shivered and continued my way to the other side of the gym. The same thing happened four more times as I circled the gym.

As I moved from one area to the next, I made sure everything ran smoothly in the other parts of the festival. There was so much going on and time got away from me. At least a couple hours had passed since I'd last seen Kian. But a technical difficulty in the auditorium kept me a lot longer than I'd hoped. Once the performances began in there, everything was running smoothly.

"I'm going to take a little bit of a breather," I told Vice Principal Graham who had just returned from a break.

He nodded. "Yes, yes, go! I'll take over." He held up his tablet. "I got the checklist and all the information."

"Thanks!"

Spinning on my heel, I wasted no time rushing to my office. I wanted to put on my slippers and eat some food. I pulled out my cell phone and checked my messages as I entered the quiet confines of my workspace.

KIAN LONG: I see all the hard work you put into this. You should be proud. Kenni and her friends are having a good time.

KIAN LONG: You're absolutely beautiful. I can't take my eyes off you.

KIAN LONG: Kenni is showing her grandma around so I'm looking for you.

CAMILLA BRANCH: I just got to my office to take a little break. Is Kennedy still with her grandma?

KIAN LONG: Yes, she is. I'm heading your way. Do you need anything?

CAMILLA BRANCH: Just to get off my feet for a little bit. And to see you would be nice.

KIAN LONG: The door's locked.

I DIDN'T BOTHER TAKING my slippers off as I headed to the main door to the counseling suite. The closer I got, the more the knots tightened in my belly. Taking a deep breath, I swung the door open.

With a big smile and the most expressive eyes, Kian said, "Hi."

"Hi."

He stepped inside and when the door closed behind him, he swept the room. "No one else is here?"

"No one else is here," I confirmed.

"Good." His big hands cupped my face and held my head steady. "I've been wanting to do this since I laid eyes on you," he uttered, bringing his lips to mine.

The spark between us became full blown fireworks as his juicy lips moved over mine. Soft, sexy kisses filled with the promise of tomorrow and the urgency of right now were exchanged. His touch was steady even if his kiss was teasing. He felt safe and at the same time, a little reckless. Knowing that he wanted me as much as I wanted him only heightened the sensation. My hands fisted his shirt as I tried to bring us closer. But the only thing that managed to do was press me against his erection.

My panties were soaked.

"Camilla," he growled as he pulled out of the kiss. "I have to calm down."

I moved my body, feeling him grow as I stared up at him. "Same here."

He tried to create some space between us, but I didn't let that happen. Chuckling, he pulled me into a bear hug. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too," I murmured back as I buried my face in his chest.

“You okay?”

I nodded, before lifting my head to look him in his eyes. “Yeah. My feet hurt but I’m mostly just tired. I’ve been here since nine and I didn’t know how much I needed this hug.”

“No wonder you’re tired.” Turning me around in his arms, he ushered me into my office. “Let’s go sit down.”

Closing the door behind us, he didn’t let me go until we were a few steps from my desk. Turning me around, he backed me up until my ass hit the front of my desk.

I looked up at him with furrowed brows. “What—?”

“Sit on your desk,” he commanded softly. Reaching around me, he moved my keyboard and cup of pens to the side to make additional space for me. “Sit.”

A chill ran down my spine.

Holding his gaze, I allowed him to help me climb up. He turned and grabbed the chair, placing it in front of me.

With a grin, I watched him sit and then scoot his chair closer to me. I placed my hands behind me and sat back a little. “What are you doing?”

“Just making sure you’re good,” he answered, grabbing my ankle. He slid the slipper off my right foot and dropped it beside him. “What do you need to get through the rest of the event?”

“I don’t—oh!” My sentence dissolved into a moan as his thumbs pressed into the heel of my foot. “Kian...”

“How does that feel?”

“Really good.”

He switched feet. “You need more pressure?”

“No...” My lashes fluttered closed. “This is perfect.”

“I want to make sure you feel good,” he uttered softly.

My pulse quickened and I clenched. “You don’t have to do—”

“Sit back and let me do this for you.”

Running his hand up and down each foot, he made sure he massaged every inch of them. I gasped as he applied firm pressure into my arch.

“Yes,” I moaned quietly.

My head dropped back as he rubbed, grabbed, and kneaded my feet.

“I already knew it was sexy hearing you. But watching you... your face when I hit this spot is everything,” he uttered.

I moaned louder. “Kian...”

“It feels good?”

“Yesssss!” My legs widened a bit as I shifted on the desk.

“Right here?”

“Yes. Mm. That’s good.”

“What about right here?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me another spot you need it.”

“Mmmm…”

“Let me help you.”

I didn’t initially realize I was rotating my hips, trying to grind myself against the hard surface of the desk until he said that. Opening my eyes, I found his lust-filled gaze on me.

I stopped moving my hips.

His eyes never left mine as his hands still worked their way over my feet. “Do you need help?”

My stomach quivered and goosebumps spread across my skin. Nodding slowly, I widened my legs. “Yes,” I whispered.

His hands moved to my ankles, massaging the bone and area surrounding it. I whimpered a bit because it felt so good.

“I’ll massage you”—his hands moved to my calves— “anywhere you need it, baby.” His hands moved under my dress, pushing the hem up, exposing my thighs. “Anywhere and with anything.”

“Kian,” I breathed nervously.

I didn’t have any self-restraint and the way he was looking at me let me know he was feeling the same way.

My skirt was bunched at my waist and his hands were sliding back down my legs toward my feet. He started massaging my toes. “How can I help you relax, Camilla?”

I wanted to tell him that I needed him to get me off. I wanted to feel his tongue. I wanted to feel his hands. I wanted to feel his dick. I just wanted him.

But there isn’t enough time.

Licking my lips, I exhaled slowly. “I don’t think there’s enough time for what I want to do.”

He slid his fingers up my legs and when he got to the back of my knees, he slowly pushed my legs apart. It forced me to lean back a little more. His eyes broke from mine and landed at the apex of my thighs.

His hands kneaded my thigh meat as he pushed my legs further apart. “If there was enough time, would you want me to take care of this wet spot?”

My lips parted but no words came out. I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“Would you like that?” he whispered, pulling me to the edge of the desk.

A folder fell to the ground, but I ignored it, fixated on the man in front of me.

“Lift up for me,” he demanded.

I lifted my ass up and he hooked his fingers into the lace material. Tugging it down, he dropped it to the floor and hoisted my knees to his shoulders in one swoop.

“Camilla…” Kissing my inner thigh, he looked up at me. “Can I take care of you?”

My heart pounded in my chest as I nodded.

He dragged his lips further up my thigh. “I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” I murmured.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, please take care of me—oh shit!”

His tongue slid across my sensitive flesh, lapping at my swollen clit. Latching on, he flicked and swirled in such a methodical fashion that I felt myself on the edge of an orgasm.

“Kian,” I panted.

He groaned into my pussy and started applying more pressure.

“Oh my God!”

One of my hands slipped as I violently bucked against his tongue. Panting, my ass lifted higher, grinding on his face. The tension that had been building released from deep within my core and spread deliciously through the rest of my body. I didn’t stop shaking because he never let up. He never stopped eating me.

The quickness and the intensity of the orgasm immobilized me. My body sagged and he gently lowered me back to the desk. I opened my eyes to find him staring at me. Licking his lips, his chest heaved in time with mine.

“You taste so fucking good,” he whispered.

I pushed myself upright. “Kian,” I sighed with a giddy smile. Noticing his hand gripping a large bulge, my eyes fixated on his lap. “Pull it out.”

Wordlessly, he unzipped his pants and pulled out a thick, veiny dick. And as impressed as I was by the girth, the length caused me to quiver.

“You don’t understand how bad I want to slide inside you,” he told me. “After tasting how sweet and”—he closed his eyes for a moment— “how wet your pussy is, I just want to feel it wrapped around my dick.” He ran his fist up and down his dick as he watched me open my legs wider. “Don’t tease me like that.”

I brought my fingers to my wet slit and started playing with myself in front of him to tease him more. “I have to get back to the auditorium in five minutes.”

“There’s not a lot we can get done in five minutes,” he pointed out, stroking himself harder.

“I can at least feel it.”

“You want to feel it, baby?”

I nodded. “I want to sit on it,” I admitted breathily, spreading my wetness around.

“I want you to sit on it.”

“I don’t have a condom though.”

He continued running his hand over himself, focusing on the head before running back down the shaft. I watched him smear precum over the tip before resuming his strokes.

“I don’t have a condom with me either,” he uttered.

“So,” I continued, scooting off the desk. “I’m only going to sit for a minute.”

His eyes widened. Letting go of his dick, he placed his hands on my hips. “Yeah, just for a minute.” His fingers flexed against my skin. “Yeah.”

I bunched my dress up at my waist and straddled his lap. I reached down and lined him up right against my pussy. When I met his gaze, I could see how bad he wanted me. I had one hand on his shoulder and the other holding my dress up. His chest rose and fell quickly and from the way he cupped my ass, I could tell his restraint was wavering.

“I’ve wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you,” he admitted just as I sank down on his swollen dick.

I gasped—from his words and from each inch, he filled me. The sheer pleasure of being stretched forced my eyes closed.

“Nah, look at me,” he grunted.

The sound of his voice caused desire to consume me. I struggled to open my eyes as I squeezed him deep inside of me.

“Fuck, Camilla.” He let out a rough breath and he held me in my position, preventing me from being able to move. His fingers flexed against my ass. “You’re so fucking tight.”

I exhaled shakily and began lifting myself up and down in his lap. “Yes.”

He grunted from deep inside his chest as I rode him. I felt every ridge and vein as I took every inch I could. My heart raced, and my entire body felt like electricity was running through it. When I started to pick up the pace, he let out a noise from deep in his chest.

It was feral and my pussy reacted immediately.

Our mouths crashed into each other, and we kissed recklessly. Grinding on his dick while our tongues touched overwhelmed me. The connection we shared intensified. Allowing the rhythm to build, I felt sexy and wanted.

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” I whispered against his lips.

He pulled out of the kiss. “That’s it, baby. Let me feel that wet pussy. That’s it, Cam,” he groaned.

His words made me ride him harder.

“Kian, Kian, Kian,” I moaned his name repeatedly.

My head fell back as I felt pleasure radiating from my core.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he rasped. “Are you ready to come for me?”

“Kian,” I murmured, my nails digging into his shoulders.

He leaned forward and bit my hard nipple through my dress. The shock of it caused me to clench which caused him to growl against me. Using my ass for leverage, he thrust upward and clapped my cheeks against him.

“Fuck,” he growled.

“Oh my God,” I cried out.

His breathing was ragged as he continuously hit a spot deep inside of me. I felt my second orgasm coming on.

“Yes, yes, yesssssss,” I panted.

“Come for me. Come on my dick, Camilla. Let me feel you.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “Let me feel—fuck!”

My body succumbed to him just as my desk phone started ringing. I knew I needed to answer it, but I couldn’t stop. My pulsating body arched

forcefully. Gasping, I tightened and convulsed around him. My orgasm spread throughout my body as I writhed in his lap.

“I’m about to come.” His thrusts and his breathing were erratic. “You’re going to have to get up,” he panted.

I heard what he said, but I felt another orgasm coming.

“If you don’t get up, I’m going to come in your pussy,” he warned breathlessly. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” I whimpered. “Yes, I want it.”

He held me tighter as I felt him losing control.

“Camilla, fuck...” Deep guttural groans ricocheted throughout my office as he exploded inside of me.

His orgasm triggered mine as I unexpectedly started to spasm.

I didn’t get to relish in the bliss my body was feeling for long because my office phone started to ring again. Glancing at the clock, I inhaled sharply.

“Oh no no no no no,” I whispered, lifting myself off Kian’s lap.

Still holding my dress up, I grabbed the phone. “Hello?”

“Dr. Branch?” Vice Principal Graham greeted me. “You okay? You sound out of breath?”

I looked around frantically. “I’m just coming back into the office, and I ran when I heard the phone. I see the time though and I’m heading back down there now.”

“Okay, we have a full house,” he reminded me. “How was your break?”

Trying to keep the smile out of my voice, I squeezed my legs together to keep the cum from dripping out. “It was good.”

“Did you get some food? Did you get some rest?”

Opening my legs as Kian took a handful of napkins to clean me, I bit my bottom lip. “Yeah. I was taken care of.”

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Love Discovered in New York
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Back to December

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