

THE  
HOW TO  
SERIES

HOW  *to*  
ONE-NIGHT  
STAND

Mallory Black



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## HOW TO ONE-NIGHT STAND

Written by Mallory Black

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Cover Design by: Rachel Connolly

Edited by: G. G. Royale and Shayla Black

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## ABOUT HOW TO ONE-NIGHT STAND

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*It's a bad idea...but it's a proposition I can't refuse.*

*Kiera*

Casual sex? I'd rather not...but every man I meet just wants to hook up. After another date who's more interested in a side piece than a steady girlfriend, I'm done hoping for white lace and promises. I'm going to find the perfect guy to teach me how to hit it and quit it. It's a great idea...until I accidentally email my proposition to the sexiest manwhore I know. My boss.

---

*Jonathan*

Dating? No. At the end of my broken engagement, I swore off relationships. I'm enjoying singledom and a different woman every night—until I receive a shocking come-on from my gorgeous new assistant, Kiera. It's not smart...but I can't resist teaching the little brunette all about no-strings sex.

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Except...when I touch her, I'm shaken. When I take her to bed, the pleasure addicts me. Our pillow talk proves she's funny, sweet, and honest. Suddenly, I'm falling hard and reconsidering my romance ban. But is it too late to convince her to give love another try now that I've taught her how to one-night stand?

# Dedication

*To my book family who have cheered me on from the time I was a teen. Y'all are amazing human beings, and this is only the beginning.*

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*To my parents, who supported me, helped me, and overall put up with my shit. I don't know where I'd be without you two. I love you Mom and Dad!*

---

*To my boyfriend, who has been so patient with me. I don't know how you can handle my crazy ass, but I'm so grateful to have you in my life. You are my everything.*

---

*And to the little me who had big dreams. Guess what? We did it! So be proud.*

# Chapter One

*Friday, May 6*

*Dallas*

**Kiera**

---

“Maybe I could suddenly develop a case of leprosy?” I mutter to myself as I exit my little Honda and head toward the upscale Italian restaurant.

I wish. It’s a Friday night, and I promised my bestie I’d go on this blind date she arranged. I know exactly one fact about this guy. His name is Chris.

I’d rather be cozying up to a bottle of wine and watching a movie or two in my pajamas with my best friend and roommate, Kami. But no. I’m going out with a stranger where I’ll probably pass up booze so I can keep a clear head while resisting the urge to pull at my shape wear.

Ugh, why did I agree to this?

“Because you’re a sucker,” I mutter as I push my way inside the low-lit restaurant.

But that’s not true. I’m just a hopeless romantic. I should have outgrown that by now. I’m twenty-five, but I want to find my Prince Charming. Every day I don’t is another day I lose more hope.

Since I was a little girl, I’ve fantasized about happily ever after with my own real-life hero, like the swoon-worthy guy in movies. Where’s my Jake Ryan, just waiting to sweep me away from my crazy life in his hot red sports car? Why can’t I find my own Patrick Verona, a bad boy willing to make a fool of himself to apologize for being an asshole? Or Westley, who only ever said *As you wish*, which really meant *I love you*? Have all the Mr. Darcys disappeared, men unafraid to profess their undying devotion?

In the real world, I've only ever dated cowards, douches, and players.

Not for the first time, I seriously consider canceling on Chris because I know what's likely to happen. It's pretty much what goes down on every date. Either the guy stares at some other girl, ditches me in the middle of the evening, or hits me up for meaningless sex.

*If it doesn't work out, at least you tried. And hey, maybe you'll get a free dinner,* Kami rationalized when she talked me into this nonsense. My reason for coming was less about a complimentary meal and more about not sitting home alone with my cats.

Most of all, I have to stop fantasizing about my boss, the eminently hot and sadly all-business Jonathan Knight.

Once inside the restaurant Chris chose, I see I'm the first to arrive. As a hostess shows me to our table, I'm relieved I have more quiet time to mentally prepare.

The place looks both charming and nice, with crisp linen tablecloths and fancy plates. This is definitely an improvement over the last guy I went out with, who thought Taco Bell was an expensive dinner.

*Maybe Chris will be different. Maybe he'll be a good start to a bad stream of horrible dates.*

It's possible...but I won't get my hopes up. Besides, first dates don't seem to be a gateway to relationships anymore, but more like a free-trial-or-your-money-back kind of thing.

A few minutes later, a guy with dark, slicked-back hair and a gray suit walks in. He's average height with a slight build. As he approaches, he smiles, hand outstretched. "You must be Kiera. I'm Chris. My friend Adam met your friend Kami a few nights ago. Wow, you look great."

I stand to shake his hand. He clasps my fingers and kisses the top. As gestures go, it's romantic...if a little flustering.

"Thanks." I smile back. "Nice to meet you. I'm so glad you're obviously not a jock."



Damn, that came out wrong. I try not to wince.

He doesn't seem to hear me. He's too busy scanning my body from the top of my chocolate brown hair, down the blue, knee-length dress that clings to my waist, to the black kitten heels on my feet. His stare lingers longer than necessary. I squirm in my seat.

He sits across from me at the small, round table. Appetizers are quick to arrive, and we begin talking.

"I almost didn't make it tonight. My job consumes my life. I expected that, being the right hand to one of the top commercial real estate brokers in the country, but I've become so integral to his business that he almost can't function without me." His laugh is meant to be self-deprecating, but it sounds fake. He obviously wants me to think he's important.

His behavior is off-putting, but it's possible he's nervous or a little awkward. I get that. I'm sometimes tongue-tied around strangers, so I give him the benefit of the doubt and ask questions. After we order, he opens up about his job, his friends, and his family, as well as his likes and dislikes. But by the time our food arrives, I realize Chris can't stop talking about...Chris. I'm a little bothered, but I hope a nudge will take our conversation in a different direction.

A few minutes later, I push mushroom ravioli across my plate. I still haven't said a word about myself. He hasn't given me a chance.

Is Chris anxious...or self-absorbed?

My attention wanes until he mentions that he loves cats. Finally, something we have in common.

"Oh, I'm a total cat lady," I assure him. "I have two now. But when I was a kid—"

"That's great. I find a genuine connection with cats. And they gravitate to me. Of course, most everyone gets attached to me, human or animal." There's that plastic laugh again. "I must be an awesome guy."

*Did he seriously just say that?*

I'm starting to think he's more egotistical than insecure. And trying to manipulate me into validating that he's interesting. In response, I merely smile.

"I'm enjoying myself tonight. It's refreshing to find someone who's such a good listener." He clears his throat. "I'd like to continue getting to know you."

What am I supposed to say to that? Somehow, I maintain my politeness. "I look forward to you getting to know me."

*Let's hope you can focus on other people besides yourself.*

He takes a big gulp of his cab. "Perfect. Maybe you'd like to..."

Walk around the park? Get ice cream? Go on another date? I'm not expecting the moon or anything, but I'd like to figure out if this evening has been a waste and I should write him off, or if there could be anything between us if I dug a little deeper. "What?"

"Take this party elsewhere. Maybe to my place?"

His question doesn't register at first. Then I realize what he's actually saying.

"I'm not really the type of girl who has sex on the first date."

In fact, I've never understood the hookup culture. Why do people who refuse to open themselves up to anyone emotionally have no problem rubbing body parts with a stranger? Honestly, only valuing other people because they're good in bed sounds cheap and empty. Lonely. How can "relationships" like that satisfy anyone? I've always imagined casual sex as the ultimate way to run from feelings, but no one can escape their emotions forever.

Can they?

"This isn't a date." His brows furrow in confusion. "If Adam didn't tell Kami that, I'm sorry. But I'm not interested in dating. I thought you knew that."

"Then what is this?"

“Us getting to know a bit about each other before we... spend time together.” He leans in. “You’re a beautiful woman, Kiera. We could have a lot of no-strings fun.” He licks his lips and caresses my hand, making circles across my knuckles with his fingers. “I’m glad I’ve got your number so I can call you whenever...you know”—he winks—“I have an itch to scratch.”

*Eww. I need a shower.*

“You’re saying you want to be friends with benefits?”

His smile widens. “You’re beautiful and smart. It’s my lucky night.”

Is he serious? I expected something a lot different, like more getting to know each other as people and maybe seeing if we could forge any sort of emotional connection. Despite the fact Chris and I have known each other for less than an hour, he wants to skip all that and get straight to the sex.

*The balls on this guy.*

I took time out of my life to go out with him, and I gave him my attention. And all he wants is a booty call?

No. This nondate is officially over. “I’m afraid I’m going to pass. I’m looking for a serious relationship.”

He rears back in shock, glaring as if he’s never heard those words come out of a woman’s mouth. “Why? Dating is like marriage; it’s oppressive. We’re young. We should be having fun. And I promise, you’ll have lots of fun with me.” He skims his fingertips across my hand, wearing a come-on of a smile. “Women always do.”

I withdraw my hand and try hard not to laugh. “Then you shouldn’t have trouble finding someone else. But I’m looking for a man to become a part of my life. I want him to care about me, not just for what I have to offer physically. I’m looking for marriage and children and—”

“God, no. Every woman I’ve gone out with has been happy with a strictly sexual relationship. If you’re not, you’re too uptight for me,” he says as if he were scrolling Tinder, decisively swiping left. “We’re done here.”

I should get up and walk out, but I feel compelled to give him my two cents. “Oh, we totally are. I refuse to be a man’s plaything. I’m worth way more than that, and I have self-respect. Why are you even mad at me? So we don’t want the same thing. Fine. No harm, no foul. We’ll go our separate ways.”

He tosses his napkin on the table. “Right now.”

What a douche. “If tonight wasn’t a date and all you wanted was sex, why did you invite me to dinner here?”

“Most women like this fancy shit and are happy to reward me in bed after I put in the effort and outlay the cash. It’s only fair. Speaking of...” He calls the waiter over. “We’re ready for the check. Give it to her. The bitch will be paying.”

*What an immature, entitled little shit.*

The waiter slants me an uncomfortable stare. I whirl back to Chris with a glare. “You know what? You invited me here. Pay it yourself, asshole.”

When I pluck up my purse and begin to walk out, Chris grabs my arm. “Hey, you can’t just leave. Since I’m not getting any, I’m not paying the bill.”

*You ask for no-strings sex, call me an uptight bitch for saying no, then think I’m going to buy your dinner?*

I raise a brow at him. “That’s a you problem.”

After wrenching from his grasp, I stomp out of the restaurant and march straight to my compact. It’s one thing to be rejected, but it’s another to be seen as an easy lay, then disrespected after refusing to be a stranger’s fuck buddy.

After peeling out of the parking lot, I drive a few blocks to a nearby ice cream shop. Once I’ve parked, I text Kami to tell her the date ended early and ask if she can meet me. Thankfully, my bestie has my back and says she’s on her way.

With a dejected sigh, I sit at the nearest patio table. The Texas spring night encompasses me, a combination of wind and humidity wrapping around me like a light blanket.

I don't know whether to feel angry over the crap Chris said to me or just be annoyed at how immature and entitled he was.

*Where did the gentlemen, along with chivalry, go?*

Inside the cute, quaint shop, I ask for a large peach ice cream. While I wait, I reflect on my dating choices. Is it just me or is every man I meet merely sex hungry? It's like they completely forget there's a human being in front of them and focus only on *their* sexual needs.

Then again, could I be the problem? I know I'm not unlovable. I have too much family and too many friends for that. But am I so set on having a fairy-tale ending that I don't realize I'm asking for the impossible?

"Hey, girl." Kami breezes inside, her long, dirty-blond curls bouncing as she walks toward me with a wave. Despite her Anglo looks, she's one feisty Latina—and the most loyal friend I've ever had.

"Hey." I try to muster a smile in return as the teenager behind the counter hands me my ice cream.

"That's a long face." She wraps her arm around my shoulders, her expression filled with concern and sympathy. "I don't know what happened, but fuck Chris."

"No, thanks. I already turned down that exact proposition."

"Why don't I get some ice cream, and you can tell me everything?" she offers with a smile.

"Sounds good." I drift back out to the surprisingly empty patio.

A few minutes later, she's procured her own cone and joins me outside. "Mint 'n chip!"

I roll my eyes. "What else is new?"

"Hey, you can always count on me." Kami laughs and plops beside me. "Talk to me, girl."

I explain what happened on my "date."

She glowers. “He’s an asshole, and so is Adam for not being honest about Chris. You were right to put him in his place. You deserve better. If I had known who he really was...”

“It wasn’t your fault. It’s called a blind date for a reason, right?”

“I’ll make it up to you this weekend. What do you want to do? Mani-pedis? Shopping spree? Get drunk at Joe T. Garcia’s?”

I chuckle at her last suggestion. As massive lovers of Mexican cuisine, Kami and I often stuff our faces with good food and great margaritas. I can always trust her to make our time together fun. She’s been there for me since high school. In fact, she was there when I experienced the most heartbreaking moment of my life. She helped me heal and move on. I don’t think I’d be the person I am today without her.

“Seriously, we can do whatever you want. My treat.” She palms my back in comfort.

“I want...” I sigh, palming my face with my free hand. “I don’t know.”

My emotions are all over the place. I can’t think straight. I’m not upset about the shitty exchange with Chris, per se. But I feel more and more hopeless after every date that goes wrong.

“What’s in your head?”

It’s hard to put my insecurities into words. “Boys suck.”

She laughs. “Amen. Most only pretend to be men, and Chris sounds like a tool. Seriously, you’re not the asshole in this scenario. Hell, I’m shocked you didn’t dump your drink on his head.”

I probably should have. “This is the last straw, Kami. Everyone else seems fine with turning off their emotions to get naked for a few lousy minutes with someone they don’t know and never will. I don’t want that, but I’m so tired of trying to

find love, only to hit a brick wall over and over. Why do guys have such an aversion to commitment?”

“Hon, you’re asking for logic from the opposite sex when there isn’t any. They prefer to think with the head down south, rather than the one between their ears. And you know once the little head gets involved, logic goes out the window. Honestly, you trying to find it can only drive you *loca*.”

“How doesn’t it drive *you* crazy?”

“Because I try not to expect anything more than they’re capable of giving. I know what guys want, and I’ve accepted that they’re really only good for one thing. So I take pleasure from them, and I give them the same in return. I go in without any expectations except having a good time. Think of it as having a flesh-and-blood vibrator that will occasionally go down on you.”

Despite being upset, I laugh. Leave it to Kami to be blunt. “That’s horrible.”

“But true. Friendship, understanding, comfort, and acceptance? Girl, that’s what the other people in your life are for. Your family and friends, your coworkers...and even that hot-as-hell boss of yours all care more about you than any guy you fuck. Don’t think of it as turning off your emotions but fulfilling your base needs. That way, you’ll never be disappointed.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. Someone touching you is awfully personal. Shouldn’t they be close? Someone you like and trust?”

“That’s for the movies. This is the real world.” She sighs. “I know how you’re feeling, but maybe it’s time to give up on this fairy tale. It’s doing you more harm than good. Try a sexcation instead.”

“A what?”

“Sexcation. It’s a vacation of sex.”

“You mean from sex?”

“No, *with* sex. Think lots and lots of dick.”

“Oh, I doubt I could do that.” If I could, I wouldn’t be in this position.

“How do you know? You haven’t tried.”

Maybe she’s right. Maybe my expectations are too high. Maybe I should try a different tactic. “I guess some time away from finding Mr. Right might be good. Enjoy the sun, so to speak.”

“Now you’re talking. How long has it been?”

“Since what?”

“The last time you had a screaming O that wasn’t induced by your battery-operated boyfriend?”

God, this is embarrassing...and exactly why I don’t talk about my sex life, even with my bestie. “That doesn’t matter.”

“It does. Call me crazy, but maybe screaming O’s from a real-life rooster or two—”

“Rooster?”

She rolls her eyes. “Cock, girl. Keep up. Maybe having real cock is more important right now than finding a boyfriend. Getting endorphins from great dick might put you in a better mindset.”

I seriously consider her point. I haven’t slept with a guy since college, and it wasn’t great. Having sex on a twin mattress covered in sheets that hadn’t been washed in weeks was just as unromantic as it sounds. Come to think of it, I’m not sure I know what it’s like to reach a climax that didn’t come from a vibrator.

“Maybe. But isn’t an orgasm an orgasm? Is it really important to have one from a man?”

Kami freezes, her stare incredulous. “Um, are you breathing oxygen? Of course, they’re important. Obviously, you’re O deprived. Trust me, getting properly laid will help you put things into perspective. Maybe getting out of your comfort zone will help expand your horizons.”



Could sex be as pleasurable as Kami says? I watch movies and read books with sex scenes and wonder if it all feels as good as they imply. Even if it is, I cringe at the idea of a guy I barely know touching me anywhere and everywhere... How is that not hollow and impersonal?

“Having sex with a total stranger icks me out. Besides, what if he’s terrible? What if he has diseases? What if he’s psycho? And what if I suck at the whole sex thing? The last thing I want to do is come off as slutty and desperate.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would say the less you know a guy, the better. But I won’t throw you to the wolves before you know how to tame them. Until you get comfortable with the concept of casual sex, you should probably be friendly with whoever you’re fucking. That’s it.” She snaps. “You need a friend with benefits—one you trust—to show you the ropes. He should be experienced and able to explain how guys really work.”

Maybe. But definitely not Chris.

“You’re saying I need someone to teach me how to sleep around?”

Kami shrugs. “That’s one way to put it, but yeah.”

I turn her words over in my head. “It sounds somewhere between crazy and cringy...but I get what you’re saying.”

And I do. I don’t know the first thing about having casual sex, and the idea of getting someone to teach me the right things to say and do might help me overcome some of my innate shyness and ease some of my anxiety.

“Really? You really think you could do something like that?” Kami gapes at me. “Who are you, and what have you done with Kiera Young?”

I laugh. “I’m just as shocked as you are.”

Believe me, I never thought I’d be backpedaling from wanting a committed relationship to finding temporary gratification. On the one hand, I could be creating a total life crisis. My instinct is to abandon this ship before it hits the

iceberg. But if I don't follow through, won't I forever be wondering *what if?*

"You have to choose someone you know and trust to get the job done without making a mess of it," Kami muses. "Someone who won't catch feelings for you and vice versa."

"Maybe you could teach me. You know a lot about men."

Since eighth grade, Kami has gone out with tons of different boys. All through high school, rumors spread that she was easy. In reality, she liked hanging out with guys. They're more straightforward and less emotional. To this day, Kami hates being stuck in a room with a bunch of girls. She's convinced drama is bound to happen.

Unfortunately, at least at our school, she was right.

"Not as much as you need to know. Besides, I love you—but not like that. You know strictly I'm pro-penis." She chuckles. "What you need is a very hetero guy willing to give you the full experience. He has to be hot enough for you to want him, skilled enough to satisfy you in bed, and detached enough not to cling to you like a vine."

Tall order. Quickly, I contemplate the men I know. The list isn't long, and it's filled with fukbois I'm acquainted with, though thankfully never dated. An image of my super-hot boss, Jonathan Knight, rolls through my head. I shove it away with a sigh. "I can't think of anyone."

"Neither can I." Kami makes a thinking face. "I'll tell you what. We'll hold off on finding the guy for now. In the meantime, let's focus on your message, on how you'd ask someone to help you out. This isn't something you should improv. You have to phrase this favor in a way that isn't weird or embarrassing."

She's got a point, but I'm curdling inside just considering it. "I don't know. The more I think about this, the crazier it sounds. It's probably a horrible idea."

"What? No. Just imagine it, getting tons of screaming O's while learning how to have no-strings fun. He gets laid. You come away with a smile—and useful, real-world knowledge. I

don't see a downside." Anxiety must show on my face because Kami slants me a patient glance. "But you don't need to make a decision right this second. Take a day or two—but not too long or you'll psych yourself out."

I spend the rest of the night thinking about her suggestion. Could I actually go through with it? I don't know; this idea is so out there.

I still believe in love, but maybe Chris was the universe's way of telling me I need to try something new. Maybe focusing on my sex life, not my heart, will ultimately make me happier.

At this point, what do I have to lose?



## **Jonathan**

"I am so ready for a drink." My best friend and business partner, Jake Hall, says entering the crowded bar.

"That makes two of us," I agree.

On any given Saturday night, I would be just as relieved and eager to have fun. But tonight is different. Tonight, I need a distraction from this day. It's a bitter reminder of the life I almost had. A life I thought I wanted. A life I realize now would have caused me utter misery.

Tonight's goal—besides getting drunk and having meaningless sex—is to forget the past, live in the moment, and not feel anything but pleasure. At least for a few hours.

"To a great fucking night," Jake yells over the loud music.

We clank our glasses together. I swig my scotch in one swallow. I intend to get drunk and stay drunk.

After asking the bartender for more, Jake and I scour the bar for an attractive females to flirt with.

"See anyone you like?" He smirks.

"Not yet, but the night is still young."

“True that.”

Since college, Jake and I have been each other’s wing men. He’s also been the best business partner any guy could ask for. He’s my ride or die. With my marketing and financial skills and his tech brain, we’ve been very lucky to become one of the most desired tech startups in the country.

“Hey, I didn’t want to bring this up since it’s that day—”

“Then don’t,” I warn.

“But I think you should know. It might make you feel better about everything.”

Based on Jake’s apprehension, I can only imagine he’s referring to my very own Voldemort. “Lay it on me.”

“I saw Amber out with her friends last night.”

Amber. A name I haven’t heard in a long time. A name that I wish I’d never heard. A name which will live in infamy.

I shrug. “That’s not new. So what?”

“She was dancing with some random dude...but word on the street is she’s engaged to another guy.”

I chuckle. “Funny you should mention that.”

“Why?”

“I got an invitation to her wedding today.”

“Today?” His eyes are wide with shock. “Of all days?”

“Yep.”

“Bitch. That’s some nerve...”

Do I think it’s a coincidence that I received this invitation on what would have been our anniversary? No. Do I care? Fuck no. Not anymore.

“Yeah, I got one, too,” he says skeptically. “You planning on going?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Not in a million years would I voluntarily lay eyes on that snake. I wish I *never* had.

He laughs. “I can somewhat understand why she invited me, since we were once friends, but why do you think she invited *you*? Because she wants to see if you’ve moved on. That’s my guess.”

Whether she invited me out of curiosity, pity, or pettiness is irrelevant. Even when we dated, she loved to create drama. She thrived on the chaos of it all. If this is another one of her ways of showing me what I’m supposedly missing out on, I’m not interested. And I’m not going to give her the satisfaction of knowing I’m still single.

“You’re probably right, but I just don’t give a fuck. She can think whatever she wants.”

“Maybe you could take someone as your plus-one and pretend you’re an item,” he suggests.

“Why the hell would I want to stoop to that level?”

“Because one of us needs to attend.”

“Why? I can’t see any compelling reason either of us needs to be there.”

“Because I’ll bet Maya Thompson will be.”

Maya Thompson, another name I haven’t heard in such a long time. When I was still with Amber, she introduced me to Maya—the top PR guru and fixer in Texas—as a college friend.

Not long after that, the entrepreneur came to me with a business proposition that would have benefited her long list of who’s who clients with amazing social media stats and KH Industries with massive revenue. The collaboration would have skyrocketed both our companies’ influence and reputations. At the time, the deal was critical to getting more eyes on our platform and a leg up on our competition.

But in the middle of the negotiations, Amber and I broke up. Maya exited talks with little explanation. Losing the game-changing opportunity and the woman I thought I loved in the same week devastated me. In hindsight, that potential deal is the only part of my relationship with Amber I still miss.

“I’ll go if you need me to, buddy...” Jake winces. “But that’s the weekend of my parents thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. I said I’d be at their party in Austin. Besides, you made the initial contact with Maya. She’ll be more likely to talk business with you than me.”

Fuck. My pal has a point.

But if I’m going to this ridiculous wedding, I can’t go alone. It would be too humiliating.

“You go spend that weekend with your folks. I’ll figure it out,” I say finally. “I just feel sorry for the poor schmuck who thinks she’s wife material.”

“He’ll find out soon enough.”

“No doubt. So what’s tonight’s goal, my friend?”

Jake grins. “Finding Miss Right-Now.”

“Ding, ding, ding. We have a winner.”

Forget Amber. Being involved with her had always been more about buying her expensive shit than any mutually loving partnership. Looking back, I’m betting the first time she met me, she saw dollar signs.

In fact, the trouble with women I’ve found is they all want whatever expensive thing I can buy them with my green. Sure, my dick may be on her list of things to do, but the amount of money in my wallet is always a consideration. If dating means being with women like Amber—cold, impersonal gold-diggers—I have no interest repeating the emotional turmoil. I can get pussy without either of us pretending to care about the other.

Not long after Amber, I figured out that if I don’t want women clinging like leeches, I should keep who I am to myself and spend no more than a night with them. At least those women only want me for a good time. But a long-term relationship will never again be a card in my deck.

We turn around to the crowd behind us, surveying every female. I’m on the lookout for one who wants no-strings fun. Added bonus if she’s super hot.

Jake turns to me. “I just had an idea. Since you need to take a date to Amber’s wedding, what if you went with that woman you just hired? What’s her name?”

Without Jake, I don’t know how I would have climbed out of my deep depression following my breakup. We’ve been friends forever. But when he brings up the new assistant I hired on the spot—the kind of impulsive thing I almost never do—I know he’s desperate to help me find someone, probably so he doesn’t have to feel guilty for skipping out. Hell, I’m desperate, too.

“Her name is Kiera. And no, she’s my assistant. No way in hell am I touching her.”

And that’s a shame. I won’t lie. She is one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. The thought of putting my hands on every curve of her body tempts me.

“Dude. The fact that you even remembered her name...”

“Of course I did. She’s my assistant. What kind of working relationship can we have if I don’t?” At least that’s what I keep telling myself.

“I’m just saying, J. She’s very much your type. And had you not hired her...”

I would be fucking her. My best friend is right. From the top of her brunette head, down her slender but curvy frame, she’s fucking gorgeous—and one-hundred-percent my type. I sweat a little every time she stares up at me with those hazel eyes. The subtle sway of her hips with every step has me staring longer than is strictly professional. And her rosy mouth tempts me with every syllable that comes out of it.

Still... “I couldn’t not hire her. I needed a replacement, and she was completely qualified. But she’s my assistant, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

Dorothy, my last assistant, retired earlier than expected after her second grandchild was born prematurely. I’m happy for her and her growing family, but her exit put me in a rush to find a replacement. Kiera Young fit the bill best.

“Yeah. That’s good. I’m just saying, take her to the wedding. I’m not suggesting you should take her to bed or anything. In fact, you shouldn’t. It’s not against the rules, but it’s a recipe for disaster—and not just because of the lawsuits.”

“What does that mean?” Is he saying I’m a relationship trainwreck?

“Dude, you’re a billionaire. I know you didn’t forget Amber...”

Never. And as appealing as it would be to get up close and personal with Kiera, my sense is that she’s in touch with her feelings. And I don’t do emotions. Getting involved with her, even to pretend a relationship for a night, might blur the lines between us.

I shake my head. “It’s a bad idea to involve my employee in this shit.”

“How do you figure that? This is about business. Kiera seems nice and professional. I’m sure she’d understand.”

Jake is right. My assistant, besides being too attractive, is seemingly kind, polite, and socially adept. And for the record, she looks too innocent to be a gold-digger.

Then again, I know all too well that looks can be deceiving...

“Look, I’m paying her to work for me, so basically, I’m her piggy bank. Giving her any chance to exploit me for everything I have is a headache I can’t afford. Neither can KH Industries.”

“I get it. It’s smart to be cautious. But this is just one wedding. And not all women are Amber.”

“Ultimately everyone shows their true colors.”

“You are one cynical son of a bitch.” He shakes his head. Whether out of astonishment or defeat, I don’t know. Probably both.

“No, I’m a realist,” I say, brushing off his reply as I lock stares with a pretty, smiling blonde. The conversation—not to mention the memories—has me annoyed and agitated. Time to



numb my feelings with some temporary pussy. As I rise from my barstool, I clap Jake on the back. “Happy hunting. I’ll see you in the office on Monday, buddy.”

# Chapter Two

*Monday, May 9*

**Kiera**

---

“Shit, I’m so late.” I mutter to myself as I hustle across the parking lot, key card in hand, wincing at the sound of my heels clacking across the concrete. “I shouldn’t have pushed the snooze button twice.”

I’ve only been working at KH Industries for a few weeks, and the last thing I need is for my boss to think I don’t take my job seriously.

Before becoming Jonathan Knight’s assistant, I expected to be working for someone married with children. Jonathan Knight is the exact opposite. He’s an incredibly handsome bachelor in his midthirties whom I secretly wish wasn’t off-limits. And I’m not the only one. Office gossip says he’s a major manwhore, but he refuses to hook up with anyone on KH Industries’ payroll. Though I admire his moral compass, it sucks ogling him from afar.

The other women in the office can’t stop eyeing him, either. I don’t blame them. And when he smiles...I sigh. No, I absolutely do not remember the way his blue eyes gleam under the thick fringe of black lashes or the flash of his white teeth in his sun-bronzed face. I can’t.

During one of my lunch breaks last week, I heard an intern approach him and ask for his number. Though he declined, she seemed even more dazzled by him after his very kind rejection. Since I’ve been on the receiving end of one of those intense, seemingly personal stares, I get it. One look, and I turn warm and tingly, even though he’d never look twice at me like *that*.

I’m convinced the universe is laughing at me. It created this beautiful man...and then made him my dedicated, ethical

boss so he could never be mine. I feel like the punch line of a joke.

With a shake of my head, I turn my thoughts to business.

Since I joined the company, the focus has been an amazing new platform-wide product that's nearly ready to introduce. I don't know much because the project is pretty hush-hush, but time is clearly of the essence. I sympathize for everyone working on this program, including Mr. Knight. They all put in so many late hours. More often than not, Mr. Knight and his siblings, Mia and Nathan, have been burning the midnight oil to make this new rollout perfect.

A few steps later, I rush through the lobby doors, coffee and phone in hand, my purse hanging from my shoulder.

I make it to the elevator when my phone rings.

I answer my best friend. "Morning!"

"The staff meeting is about to start. Where are you?" Kami whispers.

Every Monday, the Knights and Mr. Hall hold team-wide staff meetings with the employees to touch base on the company's agenda, our progress, and their questions or issues.

Even though Kami and I work in the same building, we're in different departments. She reports to Jonathan's younger brother, Nathan, on the marketing team as a social media specialist.

Because KH Industries is a somewhat small—but rapidly growing—team, the bosses can usually hear everyone's concerns and dispense feedback in an hour or less.

"I just got into the building. Don't tell me they've started already."

"Not yet, but people are pooling into the conference room. I think you have about five minutes."

"Thank God." I sigh in relief as I press the button to call the elevator. "I'll be there in three."

Ending the call, I quickly climb in and push the button to close the doors repeatedly in the hopes this contraption will move faster. I'd take the stairs, but there's no way in hell it's quicker to climb four flights of stairs in kitten heels. Instead, I tap my foot with impatience as the elevator slowly ascends to the top floor.

After what feels like a century, the doors open. I all but sprint to my desk that's adjacent to my boss's office. His closed double doors tell me he hasn't yet left his desk.

After settling my purse in one of the drawers, I hastily reapply my lipstick, then power walk to the conference room, checking my watch. I'm here with two minutes to spare. Perfect. I feel like I've run a marathon, but it's totally worth it. I just hope my feet stop screaming in protest.

Standing just outside, Kami waves me down. "Glad you're here. I didn't want to go in by myself."

"Thanks for waiting." I head inside with her.

I scan the conference room. Beyond the crowded room of twenty people, Jonathan's usual chair at the end of the table sits vacant. Thank god. I still have time to pull myself together and not look like a sweaty mess.

"Slept in again?" Kami murmurs.

I groan. "Is it that obvious?"

She laughs. "I get it. Mondays are the hardest."

"Not for you, Ms. Early Bird," I tease.

Despite the fact we live together, my bestie and I are polar opposites. She likes wearing bling; I keep it simple. She wears crop tops and short-shorts while I'm perfectly happy in sweats. She likes to workout at five a.m. every day. I'd rather sleep in as long as possible. That means she's been here at least an hour while I'm still trying to pull myself together.

"At least tell me you got coffee before you left."

I hold up my paper cup. "There was no way I could function today without caffeine."

“Good. How’s that draft going?” she whispers.

“What draft?”

She sends me an incredulous stare. “You’ve been sitting on it for two days. Don’t tell me you haven’t finished even a rough outline yet.”

Of my proposition to the nameless guy who’s going to teach me how to engage in no-strings sex. *Shit.*

“Okay, then I won’t tell you.”

“Kiera...” She scolds.

“I didn’t entirely forget. I’ve just been preoccupied.”

“With your latest romance novel obsession? C’mon, Kiera. Forget book boyfriends and remember why you wanted to do this.”

“I’m on it,” I insist. “I just...don’t know how to get started.”

“Anywhere. It doesn’t matter. Just get some words down and go from there.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

She places her hand on my shoulder. “I’ll tell you what. Write it up and send it to me. I’ll give you my honest feedback.”

She won’t let this go until I do. “Okay.”

Pitching it for real can be a future-me problem.

I wasn’t completely lying when I said I’ve been busy with work. But I wasn’t exactly rushing to finish a draft, either. A few days after my “date” with Chris, I stared at a blank screen, fingers hovering over my keyboard, but I couldn’t find the right words—or the will—to start without cringing. And the more I thought about it, the worse I felt. I mean, it’s not normal to ask a guy to sleep with you for “educational purposes.” It sounds like a scene out of a bad porn film.

*Hey, um...can you, like, teach me how to fuck?*

Kami finds a chair in the corner of the office while I stand beside the throne at the head of the enormous conference table where Jonathan Knight presides over every meeting.

Moments later, he enters the room, dressed in a sharp gray suit that conforms to his wide shoulders. The white-white of his dress shirt underscores the fact his face is loved by the sun and proves he's no standard desk jockey. The waves of his brown hair just a shade too dark to be dirty blond, his strong jaw, and his tall, well-muscled physique all turn heads.

I can't take my eyes off him. As usual, my breath catches. My heart skips a beat. It sounds cliché, but something about this man—no, everything—commands my attention.

As he makes his way to the head of the table, the room falls silent. Everyone stares. But it's his eyes that won't let me look away. They're a blue so rich and vivid I can't think. I could lose myself in them for days.

As I watch him, I barely manage to hold in a lovesick sigh. One glance at him, and I feel hot all over. Hell, I have the irrational urge to jump on him.

He greets everyone with nods or handshakes until he reaches his seat. As he pulls his chair out, he pauses. Our eyes meet. My thoughts evaporate from my brain.

Oh, god. I'm going to melt.

"Good morning, Ms. Young."

Even his voice, deep and rich and like something out of a fantasy, has the butterflies in my stomach fluttering furiously.

I give him my most professional smile. "Good morning, Mr. Knight."

He returns the gesture, then turns his back to me. "Let's get to work, shall we?"

Once he takes his seat, I head to my designated chair in the corner with my notepad, not far from Kami. Around the large, contemporary conference room, everyone else settles into their seats, intent on every word my boss utters. On his

left sits his siblings, Nathan and Mia Knight. On his right, the company's cofounder and chief technology officer, Jake Hall.

Being Jonathan Knight's assistant, I expected to learn more about him personally. Unfortunately, the only personal thing I know about him is his daily schedule and how much coffee he drinks. In fact, anyone who isn't in his immediate circle sees him as an enigma.

Shortly after I started working at KH Industries, I heard through the office gossip that Jonathan was engaged to be married a couple of years ago. No one knows why it ended—or if they do, they aren't spilling.

I don't know much beyond that except that Jonathan comes from old Southern money, his father has impressive entrepreneurial skills and influence, and he built KH Industries from the ground up with his buddy, Jake Hall, without a shred of help from his dad. His siblings joined not long after. It's a mystery why their father isn't involved.

Though I'm fascinated, his personal life is none of my business. I need to remember that.

“Thank you all for taking time out of your busy morning. Jake and I truly appreciate it. Let me assure you, the more involved everyone is in these meetings, the faster we resolve our collective issues, then the more we”—he gestures to his siblings and Jake— “are able to make the tough decisions that help us progress. But everyone has a role to play in our success. The more effort you put in, the better the outcome for us all. Your actions today and in the future can either help or hurt KH Industries. If anyone has any individual concerns regarding their work, let my assistant, Ms. Young, know. We can arrange a private discussion.”

His statement is supportive yet firm. Clearly, Jonathan knows how to run this company. He is reasonable, honest, and flexible with his employees. He simply asks for everyone to do their part. It's only fair since he more than does his own. I understand how important it is for KH Industries to uphold their reputation as a fast-growing start-up.

After forty minutes of interoffice problem solving, everyone disperses. Walking out with the crowd, Kami finds me, firmly grabbing my forearm and whispering in my ear. “He’s so hot.”

“Who?” I pretend I don’t know, but in my estimation, she can only mean one man.

She sends me a reproving glance. “You know exactly who. Your single, supposedly great-in-the-sack boss.”

I shrug, acting as if he’s barely crossed my mind. “No denying he’s easy on the eyes.”

*Understatement of the century.*

Kami snorts. “Oh, please. He’s more than that.”

I quickly realize where she’s going with this conversation. “You’re not suggesting that I—”

“Oh, I am.” She smirks. “It’s just my opinion, but he’s the kind of guy who could get the job done, if you know what I mean. Besides, I know you think he’s hot. It’s all on your face.”

I’m afraid she’s right. Worse, I can feel myself blushing. But I have to power through, or she’ll never give up this silly idea. “I love you, but you’re delusional. He’s an admittedly attractive guy. You’re forgetting that he’s my boss, so there’s no way in hell I’m risking my job for the sake of my... sexcursions.”

“Sexcations,” she corrects.

“Whatever. The answer is no.”

“Okay, I get how that might be inappropriate. But make no mistake, he would make sure you scream in utter ecstasy.”

As I shush her, worried that someone might overhear, I flash hot. Worse, I’m pretty sure she’s right.

Kami giggles. “I’ll see you at lunch. Don’t forget about that email you’re sending me. And don’t back out because you’re scared. Think of it as an adventure into your sexuality.



Rediscover yourself,” she says before slipping her arm free and heading to the elevator.

Unfortunately, she has a point. Despite the time that’s passed since my disastrous date with Chris, my feelings haven’t changed. I need to chart unfamiliar sexual territory. Honestly, with the right person—not Jonathan Knight—what could go wrong?



Back at my desk, I open a blank email. During lunch, I’ll launch my personal address and send Kami a draft of my inappropriate come-on from there, but I can flail and sound ridiculous here just as easily.

How does one proposition a guy in writing? Should I be formal? Or blunt? Flirty? To the point? Ugh, I don’t want to beat around the bush, but I don’t want to come off as impatient or demanding, either. I’m already going to sound desperate; that’s a given.

Seriously, how am I supposed to ask someone via email to teach me how to boink without emotion? This isn’t as simple as inviting someone out for a cup of coffee or trying to get their phone number. This is asking someone I barely know to rub body parts with me while I learn not to care.

No, that’s not awkward at all.

I feel dumb. Other women don’t have to write down this kind of request. Kami would never stoop to something this absurd. If she wanted to get horizontal with a guy, she would just walk right up to him, wink, and lead him to the nearest flat surface, where she would rock his world and leave him with a loopy smile.

Me? My tongue ties in ten knots, and I lose all semblance of intelligent conversation. Then the minute the clothes come off, I start picturing white lace and promises.

Maybe I *am* better off typing this out.

---

Subject: A Dirty AF Proposition

Dear [guy I have selected],

I've always believed in commitment and ultimately marriage. But recent events have forced me to change my thinking. So I have a proposition. I would like your help learning how to hookup without feelings. (Yes, I know that sounds crazy.) In exchange, I'll be your easy booty call until I get things right. Of course, you can say no. (You probably will.) But on the offchance I haven't put you to sleep or weirded you out yet, be assured I don't expect—or want—anything except your help. If you're batshit enough to say yes, let's discuss the terms and conditions of getting sweaty and frisky. Thanks bunches!

---

Okay, that's clearly too flippant, but I feel ridiculous.

Suddenly, a deep, dark voice calls my name. “Ms. Young?”

Startled, I look up and find my very sexy boss staring at me impatiently. How long has he been standing there? When did he sneak up? What is he thinking? I can't tell. He's so hard to read.

Though he can't see my screen, I still minimize my email and smile professionally. “Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Knight?”

He doesn't speak right away, just stares. Somehow, his blue eyes make me feel naked. I repress a shiver. My heart is fluttering. Is there any chance at all he's into me?

I tell myself to stop being starry-eyed.

“You didn't hear me? I need this morning's meeting minutes.”

See? All he wants is a recap of this morning's touch base, not happily ever after.

*Way to go, Kiera... This is exactly why you need to find Professor Boinkfest.*

“Of course.” I paste on a smile. But seriously, I could stare into his eyes all day...

I'm more than half expecting he'll turn away and resume his undoubtedly busy day, but he's still watching me like he

has something on his mind. OMG, did he somehow see my screen after all?

It's not possible, but I still feel a blush creeping up my face, and I look away. "Do you need anything else?"

"That should do it. Thank you."

Then he's gone. I watch him retreat to his office and close the doors behind him. What was the long, searching glance about? Was it me? Do I have something on my face? Was he somehow reading my monitor?

With a shake of my head, I call up my seriously horrible email. Obviously, I'm not sending this to anyone...though Kami would probably get a giggle out of it. I'll shoot it her way as soon as I'm done with the meeting minutes.

Twenty minutes later, as I finish typing, I hear someone clearing their throat. I look up to see one of the coders who works a few floors below.

"What can I do for you, Dan?"

He gives a half smile, his bald head glistening under the fluorescent lights. He holds a large cup of coffee, his fingers fidgeting like it's hot. Or like he's nervous.

"I need to see Mr. Knight this afternoon. Can I get on his calendar?"

"Unfortunately, today is packed. Let me see if he has any availability tomorrow."

I launch the online calendar. Dan somehow loses his grip on the Styrofoam cup, dumping the hot liquid all over my desk.

"Shit! I am *so* sorry. Let me find you some napkins or tissues or..." He looks around helplessly.

"It's okay," I assure him, even though the hot java spilled close to my laptop. I quickly set it aside and grab a box of tissues from a drawer.

"That's not going to be enough," he observes.

He's right. "Go into the men's room and grab some paper towels."

"On it."

As Dan dashes away, I clean off the desk as best I can.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jonathan poke his head out from the doors. "Ms. Young, I need those meeting minutes sooner rather than later."

"Yes, sir."

I use my last tissue to wipe the coffee dripping from my fingers, then turn back to my laptop. Quickly, I type in his email address. His pops up first, so I hit send. There. That's one less thing to worry about.

Just then, Dan jogs back—with toilet paper. "The paper towel dispenser was empty."

I swallow a groan and accept the wad of papery tissue. "It's fine. I appreciate you trying."

Thankfully, he brought me enough to wipe up the last of the hot liquid. Then I look at Tuesday's schedule.

"Mr. Knight has an opening for 2:30 p.m. tomorrow, if you'd like it."

"That's great. Thank you!" Regret crosses his face. "Sorry about the coffee."

As Dan retreats, I close the calendar and glance at the clock. It's lunch time and I'm oddly in the mood for pizza, so I put my laptop to sleep before grabbing my purse and leaving my desk.

At the bank of elevators, I press the button to descend when I feel a boulder in the pit of my stomach. Something isn't right. But what? I mentally sift through the possibilities, but I can't pinpoint a problem. I didn't leave any urgent task unfinished.

But the longer I stand there waiting for the elevator, the stronger my anxiety grows. I'm probably borrowing stress, and I need to let it go. Maybe I made a mistake on the meeting

minutes? If I did, I'll send a second email with the corrections. It should be fine.

Giving up on the slow elevator, I dash back to my desk and open my laptop again. The first thing that appears is the meeting minutes.

I frown. "Huh, that's weird. I already sent you out."

Maybe it's a glitch? Whatever. After looking over the document, I send the meeting minutes to Jonathan again, just in case.

But I'm confused. "I could have sworn I already sent those."

Then the most horrible possibility in the world hits me. Where is my draft of that horribly inappropriate hookup email? I toggle from window to window.

Holy shit, I can't find it.

A panic so painful I can't breathe fills my entire body. If I just sent Mr. Knight the meeting minutes...I'm terrified to ask what I sent him earlier.

My stomach lurches. "No, no, no, no. *No.*"

But I didn't send Kami—or anyone else—any emails in the last few minutes, just Mr. Knight. And my draft is gone.

I pray my theory about what happened is wrong. If it's not, I might as well jump from the roof now.

Fingers shaking, I click on my SENT folder. My gaze zips straight to the top. And I slap a hand over my mouth to hold in my screams of horror. Holy shit!

There, in black-and-white, is the draft of my stupid sexual come-on sent not to Kami Hernandez—but to Jonathan Knight.

Oh, god. I just propositioned my super-hot boss.

*It's official. I'm fired.*

A wave of embarrassment and shame washes over me like a tidal wave, consuming me. What the hell did I do? The

one time I'm frazzled and I send a career-ending come-on to my freaking boss.

"Oh, god," I mutter, looking to Mr. Knight's office doors. Maybe he hasn't seen the email. He doesn't always read his inbox right away. If I could distract him just long enough, I might be able to delete it off his computer when he isn't looking.

It's a stretch, but I have to try. I mentally prepare like it's *Mission Impossible*. Maybe if I pretend I have no idea what he's talking about, he won't say anything. God, this is a nightmare.

"Don't panic, Kiera. Panicking will only make it worse."

When I open the doors, he looks up from his computer. His stare zeroes in on me, unblinking, dissecting. Burning.

*Shit, he's already read the email. Kill me now.*

My stomach plummets to my toes. A long moment of silence stretches between us. What should I say? What *can* I? I want to crawl into a dark hole and never come out.

"T-that email wasn't meant for you," I stammer. "I'm so terribly sorry, sir. It was unprofessional and inappropriate."

One thing I have learned in the corporate world is the value of a poker face. I don't have one. Jonathan could clearly teach the master class.

"It was just a joke. A bad one," I babble as he stands and regards me with more of his unwavering stare. "If there's anything I can do or say to keep my job, I'll—"

"I'll do it."

# Chapter Three

## Jonathan

---

After I remind Kiera to send me the meeting minutes, I march back into my office and shut the door, shaking my head. I'm not actually in a rush for the report. I just wanted to steal another glance. I can't seem to play it cool when I'm around her.

*Goddamn it.* I could have made small talk and acted like this is any other Monday. But no. I stared like an idiot who doesn't know the first thing about women.

"You can charm the pants off most any female—literally. But you can't talk to this one? Jesus, J..." I criticize under my breath.

I plop back in my chair and tell myself to focus on business. Maybe getting some work done will take my mind off her.

As I launch my email, my inbox appears. Predictably, it's full of messages. Business is growing fast. It's everything I wanted since deciding to walk out of my father's shadow and cofound KH Industries. I need to keep my eye on the prize.

Instead, I ignore the slew of emails and move my cursor to the newest from Kiera, despite the fact it's probably just the meeting minutes. I'll skim them and file them. If she asks why they were critical...I'll make something up.

Before I click on the message, I notice the subject line: A Dirty AF Proposition.

Weird, I've never thought of meeting minutes as a proposition, let alone a dirty one. I chuckle. Is she trying to be cheeky or something?

But when I open the email and read it, I almost don't believe the words on my screen. It takes a lot to shock me, yet

Kiera Young has managed to do that in a single paragraph. Surely, I read that wrong...

But the second time through, the words don't change.

Kiera is joking, right? She must be. As her boss, I obviously can't accept. But as a man? I'm intrigued by her proposal. And so fucking tempted. It's hard not to imagine all the blissfully filthy things I could do to her in a night. But her email starts with *Dear [guy I have selected]*. Why? Her request is deeply personal, but her approach isn't. It doesn't make sense.

"Why wouldn't she use my name?" I wonder aloud.

Unless this message wasn't meant for me. If that's true, was she planning to send it to another guy? Has she already sent it? That possibility makes me want to crush whoever her first choice was to a pulp.

Honestly, why in the hell would she send this to anyone? As beautiful as she is, there's no way her dating life sucks this bad.

Still, I feel as if I've learned more about my brunette bombshell of an assistant in the last few minutes than I have in the few weeks since I hired her. My curiosity about her is growing as fast as my list of questions—and the inches behind my zipper.

What changed her mind about romance? What has her so discouraged? What the hell is going on?

Suddenly, my office door bursts open. I tear my gaze from my screen and find a panicked Kiera panting in the opening, her hazel eyes widening with each silent second that passes between us.

*Oh, so this message wasn't for me? Damn.*

How do I know that whomever she plans to send this to will treat her well?

*You don't.*

Fuck.



*Not your problem. Not your concern.*

But I can't let her get into a potentially dangerous situation.

*You also shouldn't be rationalizing reasons to get her into your bed.*

True. I should let her off the hook gently and go on with my life. Then I remember Amber's wedding...and Jake suggesting last weekend that I take Kiera as my date.

At the time, I thought his idea was ludicrous. But now? Now that this beautiful woman is standing in front of me, wanting something I would kill to give her, could I possibly agree to this proposition? If I make contact with Maya again and resume negotiations, Kiera's presence at my side will have benefited the company. Being with me could almost be described as an extension of her job. From that perspective, it makes sense to take my assistant as my plus-one.

*That's a huge stretch, pal.*

I ignore my inner cynic and think about the merits of flashing a younger, far more beautiful woman to my bitch of an ex while taking advantage of the distinct possibility that Maya will attend the wedding *while* I have Kiera under me, teaching her the finer points of hooking up without holding on. I'll get her out of my system, and we'll go back to our simple boss-assistant relationship. No one will get hurt, and everyone will get what they want.

*If you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you.*

The likelihood is that everyone gets hurt and this scheme blows up in my face.

"T-That email wasn't meant for you," she stammers. "I'm so terribly sorry, sir. It was unprofessional and inappropriate."

As she continues to vomit more word salad, I stop listening and focus on those lush lips I want under mine so badly. I don't care what will go wrong or how much I'll regret it.

I want her.

“I’ll do it.”

“Y-you will?”

“If you want, yes.”

She blinks. “Why?”

*Because you’re gorgeous, and I can’t stay away from you.*

I clear my throat. “Close the door.”

Quickly, she complies with shaking hands, then turns to face me. “I don’t understand. Why would you...”

Want to fuck her? She has to ask? “Who did you intend to send this to?”

Kiera bites her lip like she’s horribly embarrassed. “I-I didn’t have anyone in mind. I couldn’t think of anyone. I was supposed to send it to my friend Kami to look over. Truthfully, it was kind of a joke, one that went wrong.”

I stare, turning her answer over in my head and trying not to celebrate the fact she seemingly has no man in her life or notice how adorable she looks when she’s unsure.

“So you don’t want to learn how to have good, noncommittal sex?” If she says she doesn’t, it’s going to be a huge letdown—way bigger than it should be. Mentally, I’ve already kissed her rosy bow of a mouth, stripped her lithe curves, and pleased her until she screamed.

She blushes ten shades of red. “This conversation really is inappropriate.”

“Accident or not, we passed inappropriate when you sent me this email. Why don’t you try answering me? What do you have to lose?”

“My job.”

I wave her away. “No matter what happens, it won’t affect your employment here. If you feel you can’t work with me afterward, I’ll find you a comparable role elsewhere in the organization.”

“I appreciate that. And if you can’t work with me, I’ll understand if you send me to another department. But what about my dignity?”

“Do you want to know the things you outlined in your email?”

The awareness in her hazel eyes melts me. Somewhere under her self-consciousness, she feels desire. I see it all over her face. For sex in general? Or for me specifically?

She hasn’t laughed at me for offering to help. In fact, she’s lingering in my office when her head probably tells her she shouldn’t. She hasn’t said no. And the way she’s looking at me...

I think she wants me.

How intriguing. How did I never notice?

*Because you’ve been trying hard not to look at her for fear you’d jump her somewhere between her desk and yours.*

The silence between us stretches on. Her head is obviously racing, and she’s struggling to breathe. She’s absolutely torn. And she looks so goddamn beautiful.

“Kiera?” I prompt softly, closing half the distance between us. This is the first time I’ve spoken her name like a friend would. Like a lover would.

The walls of my office seem to close in until there’s only the two of us in a tight space filled with my rough breaths and her racing heart. It feels thick and intimate. It’s all I can do to keep my hands off her.

But I need to hear her say yes to me.

She wrings her hands. “Mr. Knight...”

“Jonathan,” I correct. “If I’m potentially going to touch you, it won’t be as your boss. Do you want me to teach you, yes or no?”

“Why would you agree?”

I grapple for anything logical. “There are a lot of dangerous people out there. I wouldn’t want you to fall prey to

one.”

That part is true. I’d hate for Kiera to ask someone else and end up hurt—or worse. But even if I lie to her, I can’t lie to myself. The thought of her in the arms of another man makes my stomach knot.

Her gaze falls to the floor. “I didn’t think about that.”

“I’m willing to help you, Kiera. In fact, we can help each other.” I close the last of the distance between us, fighting the urge to lift her chin and make her meet my stare.

But she’s a fever in my blood. If I touch her now, I may not be able to stop.

“How?”

“I have a bit of a dilemma myself. You see, my ex is getting married in six weeks. She invited me to attend, and I need a date.”

That surprises her. “Why me? You can find a date anywhere.”

The horizontal kind, sure. But I’m looking for more. “I need someone to help me navigate a potential business opportunity. Who better than my assistant?”

Slowly, she nods. “But why would your ex invite you to her wedding?”

“Isn’t that a great question?” *Because she wants to rub my face in her marriage? Or to see if I’m downtrodden and miserably single? With Amber, either is possible.*

“And why would you go?” Kiera frowns. “Unless you still have feelings for her?”

“Oh, god, no. I dodged a bullet with that one. I’m only going for the potentially lucrative business contact I need to make.”

“Right. So you have to deal with the ex, and you don’t want to go alone.”

“Exactly.” I’m glad Kiera is catching on. “Let me help you learn how to have sex without emotion. In exchange, you

pretend to be my girlfriend for the wedding.”

“Then...after the wedding it’s back to business as usual?”

I shrug. “That sounds reasonable. If you’re able to pick someone else up at the reception and sleep with him without getting attached, I’ll consider our agreement fulfilled. What do you say?”

I am taking a huge risk and giving Kiera a lot of power. If I piss her off or our deal turns sour, she could retaliate and destroy my reputation, as well as the company’s. I could lose everything I’ve achieved because of one irresponsible decision.

But my gut tells me she won’t, and I haven’t gotten where I’m at by ignoring my instinct.

I’m right in front of her, but her gaze is all over the place. She’s scared. Clearly, she wasn’t prepared for me to say yes, let alone counter with my own proposition. But who would be? Both offers are a little crazy.

“If this is too overwhelming, just say so and I can pretend this email never existed.”

“No. I just need some time to think.”

Not what I wanted to hear, but I get it. “That’s fine. Take the rest of the day to think it over. If you want to proceed, meet me at the Brick at four. It’s a bar around the corner. If you don’t show, I’ll understand and forget this whole thing ever happened.”

Her soft gaze finally lifts to me. “You’d do that?”

“Yes.”

“And you won’t fire me?”

“Of course not. You have the power over what happens next. The last thing I want is to be the reason you don’t work here anymore. We both have something valuable to gain by helping each other. But if you say no, you can consider this conversation and that email forgotten.”

“Okay.” Her voice shakes. “Thank you.”

I nod and back off. The ball is in Kiera's court now that I've said my piece. As on board as I am about our potential agreement, I have to be patient. But everything about her makes me want to break all the rules.



## **Kiera**

“Wait, you did what?” Kami whispers furiously across the table from me at lunch after I explain what happened.

“Believe me, I can't make this shit up.” I press my fingers to my aching temples.

“Who could? OMG, I still can't believe you sent that email to him. But I'm fucking shocked he propositioned you back.”

“Right?”

She shakes her head, bewildered. “I didn't see that coming.”

“Me, either. I thought I was going to have to start job hunting.”

On some level, I hoped he'd say no, and I could go back to life as usual. Sure, I'd feel embarrassed for a few days, but it would've been forgotten by next week. But this gorgeous specimen of a man, who's beyond my wildest dreams, stood before me and offered his help in exchange for mine.

He caught me off guard.

I don't know how I feel about having a hit-it-and-quit-it tutor now that it might be happening. I'm flustered and a bit sick to my stomach. And hot at the thought of him touching me all over. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to send that damn email to Kami, then pretend it didn't exist for a month or two. But no. Shit had to hit the fan. And I had to hit the wrong button.

“You've worked here longer than I have. What do you know about his ex?”

“Almost nothing. They broke up before I started working at Knight. I heard a rumor that she’s rich, bitchy, and blonde, but...” Kami shrugs.

“So you don’t know why they split up?”

She shakes her head. “Sorry. Does it matter if all you’re going to do is boff him?”

“Probably not.” But somehow it feels important. “Ugh, my life is suddenly like something out of *Stranger Things*, only without the monster.”

Kami laughs. “I’m sorry, but it’s funny.”

“How is accidentally revealing my sex life, or lack thereof, to my boss funny?”

“Oh c’mon. It’s a little bit funny. Look on the bright side. You still have a job, and if you say yes, you’re going to get laid—and probably really damn well, too. Win-win!”

“That’s easy for you to say. How am I supposed to work with this man during the day and get busy with him at night, then act like nothing’s happening between us?”

Kami waves off my concerns. “Pull up your big-girl thong. Wait! Never mind. Take it off. It’s going to be fine.”

“How? I don’t know what to do. Should I really say yes? It’s crazy.”

“Maybe, but you need to stop overthinking everything. If you let him, he’ll show you exactly what to do. I have no doubt he knows.” She winks.

I stick my tongue out at her. “I mean it. This is serious.”

“That’s the problem. You take every relationship too seriously. When do you have to give him an answer?”

“By four o’clock.”

“Today?” Kami gapes.

“Yeah. He said it was okay if I decide not to. That we can pretend it never happened.”

“He gave you an out. I respect that.”

I sigh. “This can’t be happening. Jonathan Knight was never supposed to see that email. I fucked up so bad, Kami.”

“Not necessarily.”

I give her a puzzled frown. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe you just inadvertently bagged the perfect man for the job. He’s tall, handsome, gifted as hell in bed according to the grapevine, and he’s a pro with one-and-done. What else could you want?”

It does take the stress off finding some other guy, and I wouldn’t have to settle for some rando. But still...

“You have a point, except you’re leaving out the part where he’s my boss.”

“Learn to separate and be thankful you’ll be fucking a god whose dick was made by the devil.”

“Why don’t you sleep with him, then?”

“And steal your orgasms? What kind of friend would that make me? This is all you, girl. Every inch. But be prepared to spill the tea when you’re done. I want details.”

“Of course you do.” I roll my eyes.

“Can you look at me and seriously tell me he doesn’t turn you on?”

“No.” Every time he walks in the room, I get hot all over. My girl parts scream *hell, yes*.

“So what’s the problem? You have everything on a silver platter, and you’re still hesitating. Girl, stop thinking. Just do it. Like I said, he’ll take care of the rest.”

What if it sucks? What if I ruin it? On the flip side, what if it’s great and I get attached? There are so many ways for this to go wrong.

“Just because he fits the requirements, doesn’t make him the perfect candidate.”

Kami scoffs. “Bitch, please. He fits as good as a glass slipper. I heard a rumor that an intern went out last weekend



and saw him pick up a blonde.”

And that scares me even more. What if I’m too inexperienced for him? What if I slip up and tell him I fantasize about him? I’d die of embarrassment.

“So you better get your ass on that train before it leaves the station for good.”

“But is it the right one?”

“You won’t know until he conducts his way through your tunnel.”

“Seriously?” But the thought of letting him do just that not only piques my curiosity, it turns me on. Kami might be right; I could do a whole lot worse than Jonathan. At least he’s not a stranger. But there’s so much on the line for both of us. Is it worth the risk?

Kami squeezes my hand. “Seriously, I think you should go for it, but it’s your call.”

Am I brave enough to step out of my comfort zone? Maybe? If I don’t do this, will I regret it for the rest of my life? Probably. If I ever want a hot, sweaty, explosive sex life, even temporarily, I need to ditch my hopeless romantic fantasies, and hope it doesn’t bite me in the ass.

I can’t lose sight of my goal or let my expectations rule my world any longer.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a blur. I barely see Jonathan again, but maybe that’s because I hide a lot in the copier room. At ten minutes to four, I walk around the corner to the bar and stand in front of the door. I take a deep breath and try to calm my nervous stomach.

“This is a really bad idea,” I mutter to myself.

But if I’m going to change, I have to start somewhere.

With a country song about a higher power taking the wheel blaring through my brain, I shove the door open and step inside.

# Chapter Four

**Jonathan**

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“Hey, Knight! What’s up?” Ian, the owner of the Brick, greets me with a welcoming smile. His boisterous demeanor is contagious. With his surfer-boy looks, no one would guess he’s on the downhill slide to forty.

“Not bad for a Monday.” I shake his hand.

Ian Brown has been a good friend since Jake and I stumbled into his bar five years ago after a long day at work. It’s been our hangout ever since.

“Where’s your buddy? He coming?”

I shake my head. “He’s still at the office. I’m actually meeting someone else here.”

“Oh, like a date?”

“It’s business.”

“Well, the night is young. After the shop talk, you’ll get lucky. You always do.”

*With Kiera? I hope.* And it’s time to change the subject because I don’t want anyone to know I’m even thinking about screwing my assistant. The fewer people who know, the more likely we stay under the radar. Neither of us need the drama or the hit to our reputations.

“We’ll see. You good, man?” I change the subject.

“I’m doing okay.” Ian smiles. “What can I get you?”

My drink depends on my mood. If my day is shitty, I knock back scotch on the rocks. If it’s halfway decent, I’ll sip vodka. But today, Kiera and I both need to keep a clear head.

“How about two Stellas and a couple of waters?” I slide onto one of the barstools.

“You got it, man.” Ian pulls the bottles from the fridge behind him and twists off the caps before setting down a couple of glasses of cold *agua*.

It’s presumptuous of me to buy Kiera a drink, but my gut tells me she’ll be here. She wrote that email for a reason. And she’ll pursue this proposition until she has a reason not to.

“Thanks.” I fork over my credit card.

He holds up his hand to stay me. “First round is on the house.”

“Thanks.” I raise my bottle to him and take a swallow.

“Anytime,” he calls over his shoulder as he makes his way to the back of the bar.

Thankfully, the place is nearly empty at this hour, so I take my phone from my pocket and reread Kiera’s email, studying the facts at hand. I realize that, aside from her lack of a sex life—which I still find hard to believe—I don’t know nearly enough about her. I’m hoping to change that today.

According to what she’s written, she’s ready to trade commitment for one-night stands. What, or who, made her believe she should? She’s vague, which leaves me wondering what her endgame is. Yes, she wants to learn how to have no-strings fun, but people eventually grow tired of that shit. Or so I’ve heard. Her decision is surprising because she’s got an innocence that clings to her. She doesn’t seem like the fuck-around type.

“Does she just want to try something new?”

I continue wracking my brain for answers when the front door opens. As I whip around, I see Kiera scanning the bar until her stare lands on me. Then she gives me a hesitant smile and a shy wave. I nod back, indicating the stool beside me.

As she walks in my direction, I notice she’s exchanged her usual heels for flats. Her long, black pants accentuate her sleek thighs and lush hips. Her fitted pink blouse cinches her small waist with a feminine bow and clings to the breasts I’ve tried—and failed—not to salivate over. Her fair skin glows under the sun slanting through the windows. Her long, dark

hair, once in an office-appropriate bun, now spills over her shoulders, the front half secured away from her face. Even though I can tell she's nervous, she looks sexy as hell.

*Don't lose your head over this girl—or your cool.*

“Hi. I hope I'm not late.” Anxiety edges her quiet voice.

“No, not at all. Please, have a seat.”

“Thanks.” She complies, setting her purse on the bar.

“How are you?”

Kiera settles a lock of hair behind her shoulder self-consciously. “I'm...okay.”

“I'm glad you came.” With a friendly smile, I gesture to the drinks in front of us. “Beer? Water?”

“Thank you.” She wraps her fingers around the cold brew, looking pleasantly surprised. “You bought me a drink? What if I didn't show?”

“Call it a gut instinct.”

“You've got a good gut.” She takes a swig. “Thank you. You know, I've never had a guy buy me a drink before.”

*Wait. What?* I stare at her, baffled. “Seriously? No man has ever bought you a drink?”

“Nope. Maybe this will be one of many firsts.” She clinks her bottle with mine.

If she's that sheltered, then I've got a lot of educating to do. And I'm not bullshitting myself. If she says yes, this will be damn interesting... “I'm glad you're considering my offer.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “I'm glad you didn't laugh in my face about mine.”

“Why would I? You were being honest. I respect that.”

She nods. “Thanks for taking me seriously, but are you sure?”

I shouldn't be. Not only does she work for me, but I'm very aware of the decade age gap between us...not to mention the billion reasons I have not to get involved with her. Frankly,

I doubt my third-degree burns from Amber will ever heal. It's the main reason I'm never getting emotionally entangled again. But Kiera asking questions shows me she's trying to be considerate, especially when I wasn't precisely her first choice. I can appreciate that.

“Will it bother you that I'm your boss? We don't forbid interoffice relationships in the employee handbook, so...” Maybe we should, but that's another topic for another day.

She blinks up at me. “It won't bother me unless it bothers you.”

It should...but it's kind of hot. “Will bother you that I'm older?”

“No. That's actually a relief. You know...things.”

I laugh. “Yes, I know things.”

“Good. That's good.”

“Then to answer your question, sweetheart, I'm sure. When I've set my mind to something, I rarely change it.”

“I just don't want this to get awkward for either of us.”

“The best way to keep that from happening is to communicate openly. And I'll do everything I can to put you at ease.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Of course. Tell me what convinced you to meet me today?”

“Mostly? Necessity.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighs and fidgets. “You might have guessed from the email that my dating life is a mess and I want—no, I need—to make a change.”

I do my best to suppress a smile. “I did get that impression.”

As great as it is for someone to push themselves to shake things up when it's warranted, does she understand that, at

some point, for me to “help” her, we’ll be getting naked and having sex?

“To be clear, I don’t expect anything from you other than your instruction,” she rushes to clarify. “No emotions. No forevers.”

“Then we’re on the same page. But if we’re going to do this, we need firm rules.”

“Like what?” She frowns. “You’re going to teach me not to get clingy.”

“I understand, but we need to maintain strict secrecy around the office. When it comes to spending time together, no sharing on any social media, no telling coworkers, and no spilling to family or friends.”

“Um, about that...” She shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

*Shit, she already told someone?*

I sigh. “Who knows?”

“My friend Kami. She works for your brother as a social media specialist. Since she was supposed to get my email...”

“You mentioned that, but you didn’t say why. I take it your message wasn’t strictly a joke?”

“No.” She can’t quite meet my gaze. “But she’s the one who talked me into finding a man to teach me how to...you know. Do it without feelings.”

So it wasn’t entirely Kiera’s idea? What made her agree?

“Is Kami the only one who knows?”

She nods. “She can keep a secret, I swear. And I promise to kill her if she blabs to a single soul. But since she’s my roommate and I know where she sleeps, she won’t.”

Having someone in the office be aware of our arrangement isn’t ideal. The last thing I need is for this to get out and destroy everything I’ve built for myself and KH Industries. But if Kami is discreet, I can work with that.

“Thanks for being honest. Just make sure she keeps her mouth shut.”

“I will. Look, I understand we’re both taking a big risk, but I won’t do anything to jeopardize your professional reputation or mine. Not now, during, or after we part ways.”

She sounds sincere, but actions speak louder than words. I’ve learned the hard way that women will sometimes say one thing, then do the exact opposite, especially when extortion and money are involved. But my gut says that’s not her game.

“Same. Rule number two, you can’t treat me differently at the office. No long, lingering glances. No inappropriate conversation. No flirting. No flashing. No quickies.” *No matter how much I might want one...* “In short, nothing less than professional behavior unless we’re away from work. Even if we don’t have specific policies against all of that, it doesn’t look good.”

She nods. “Yes. Absolutely. I’m with you. I’ve never been one for those sorts of things, anyway.”

I still don’t understand why. “Can you be clear, concise, and honest about your needs?”

“What do you mean?”

“In bed. If we’re going to do this, I’m going to make it feel damn good, even if we’re just temporary.”

She swallows. “Yes, I-I think so.”

I’m not convinced, but she might pleasantly surprise me like she did with her competent professionalism during our interview. Besides, I’m good at asking questions. “Then I think we can make this work.”

She takes a sip of beer. “When do we start?”

“Right now. We’re going to sit here, drink our beers, and talk. You’re going to tell me what I need to know.”

“Like what?”

*Everything.* “Have you ever had a one-night stand?”

Her blank stare tells me the answer. “Um...”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“But I understand the concept. I know it’s nothing like dating.”

“They’re night and day.” I murmur, leaning close to her. So close, I can smell a faint hint of perfume combined with her sweet, feminine musk. I need all my restraint to keep myself from pulling her into my arms and kissing her senseless. “It’s just sex. You spend a sweaty night together. The next day, you separate and go about your lives as usual.”

“But if I’m learning to have sex without getting attached, why bother getting to know each other?”

“Because I want to understand how you think. And if I’m going to help you up your game, I need to know the way you flirt, how you approach guys, the type you’re attracted to, and what led you to believe they were your forever.”

“Wow, you need to know *all* that?”

“Well, before any one-night stand, there’s flirtation, conversation, and some brief getting to know you. You have to have spontaneity. Show him you’re a noncommittal, go-with-the-flow type of girl. That’s one way to stop the cycle of committing too fast.”

“I know how to talk to guys, but if all I’m looking for is sex, why do we have to talk at all?”

“That’s a valid question. Even though sex is meaningless, you don’t want to come across as easy. Who you choose may be attractive across the room, but he might be dangerous when you get up close and personal. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Fair point.” She stays silent for a few moments. “I’ve got a bunch to learn, huh?”

“It’s not so hard once you get the hang of it.”

“You’ve done this a lot, haven’t you?”

“My fair share.” And then some.

She frowns. “If all you want from a woman is sex, why do you care if she gives good conversation?”



I shrug. “Who doesn’t want to spend the night with someone interesting?”

“I guess.” But Kiera doesn’t seem convinced. No, she looks as if that never occurred to her. “The truth is, I know how to talk to guys, but I don’t do it well. It always ends up awkward.”

“We can work on that with some role-play. It’s probably not as bad as you think. You’re talking to me. This isn’t too awkward...is it?”

“You’re different. I know you, and I’m not trying to impress you, just get information.”

“Exactly. You don’t need to impress anyone. You just need to be yourself.”

She sighs in relief. “I can do that.”

Though Kiera seems anxious to learn, I worry she’s getting in over her head, that she’s doing something she thinks she should, not something she actually wants.

I study her. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“To go from wanting ’til-death-do-us-part to no-strings sex is a dramatic change in mindset. Why?”

She fidgets with the bottle in her hand. “I’m not happy being lonely.”

“If you want companionship, get a pet before you go asking strangers to bang you.”

“I have a cat. Two, actually. I want *human* companionship, but I’m struggling to find that long-term. I figure I’ll settle for short-term if I can’t have what I want.”

She thinks casual sex is going to solve her loneliness? Kiera’s reasoning is completely irrational, and a nice guy would point that out and turn her away. But I’ve fantasized all afternoon about getting her under me. And I stopped being a nice guy a long time ago. Besides, I’ve already given her my word.

*Shitty excuse.*

I ignore the voice in my head. Does it really matter what motivates her to want sex?

Yes, damn it. It does. Kiera seems kind. She's sweet. And she fucking works for me. I'd like to keep it that way.

"Any chance you've been dating the wrong kind of guy?"

She rolls her eyes. "If I wasn't, I'd be married by now."

"So you want to have sex without emotion because dating the wrong kind of guy isn't making you happy?"

"Dating in general hasn't made me happy. I just know that Kami has a busy sex life, and she's always happy. I want that."

It's not my job to talk Kiera out of this crazy idea. The selfish part of me doesn't want to. But the part of me with scruples I haven't yet managed to snuff out hates to teach her something I'm worried will make her miserable.

"I think you need to sleep on this and decide if it's really something you want to pursue."

"What?" She frowns, her spine stiffening. "No, I already know. I do."

"Really? If we continue, we're going to have sex. I'm not going to hold anything back. You'll have to turn off your emotions. You'll have to focus purely on the physical. The next night, I'll probably fuck someone else. You should, too." Even if the mere thought of that pisses me off. "And you shouldn't care who or what I do after you. Are you sure that's what you want? Can you handle that?"

"Once you show me how."

"Sweetheart, I can't teach you how to shut off your emotions. All I can do is make you feel good, encourage you to ask for what you need, and help you focus on the pleasure. Sex between us will mean nothing to me. For this to work, it needs to mean nothing to you, too."

“I know, and I can do it.” But we haven’t done it yet, and she already sounds sad.

Raking a hand through my hair, I tamp down the guilt I shouldn’t be feeling. It has no place between us. But I can’t. Apparently, I’m an idiot...and a nicer guy than I thought.

With a sigh, I take her hands. “Kiera, go home, sleep on this for a night or two. Think long and hard about your reasoning and apply that to who you really are emotionally. I can’t make your decisions for you. But I want you to be very sure about this. The sex will be good.” Hell, I suspect it will be fucking amazing. “But if that alone doesn’t make you happy... I don’t want to be the reason you’re sad.”

“But you said you wanted to do this.” Tears fill her eyes. She glances at me, conflicted and bewildered, as though I rejected her kiss at the end of a date. Then she tears her gaze away.

Fuck, that expression hurts, but it’s proof positive Kiera thinks more with her heart than her head.

“Oh, I do. Make no mistake. But only once I’m convinced you won’t regret me.” I set my beer on the counter, relieved that Ian looks far too busy to notice me. Then I lean in and kiss Kiera on the forehead. “Good night.”



## **Kiera**

“I tell Jonathan I’m all in, and he tells me to go sleep on it?” I rant to myself as I try to decompress in my hot bath.

Usually, I find a steaming-hot soak relaxing, but after the day I’ve had, nothing I do seems to turn off my brain.

Who does this guy think he is? Well, besides my boss. But he agrees to help me on the condition that I help him, and then doubts that I know my own mind? It sounds sexist.

*But is there a chance he’s right?*

Since I’m a hopeless romantic, maybe.

Ugh. How can I prove to him this is right for me if he won't give me a chance? Better yet, how can I prove it to myself? And what if I can't help getting emotionally attached?

The more I think about this arrangement, the more tangled it feels. I have never done anything bold or reckless in my life—and it shows. Jonathan must see me as a little girl in way over her head. Maybe I still am, but how can I grow up if he won't let me?

Should I go back to the drawing board? Did my fumble fingers pick the wrong guy? I mean, just because I'm attracted to him and he's a manwhore doesn't mean he's automatically the best candidate.

*Who else do you know who's even half as hot and half as experienced?*

No one.

Say I call Jonathan off. Will anything in my life change? Nope. I'll keep waiting for Prince Charming like a fool. Besides, I'll never get another chance with Jonathan Knight. And no other man excites me the way he does.

Since he only sees me as his assistant, I might as well make the most of this opportunity. Yes, he's handsome and hot as sin. That's obvious. But that's as far as my crush needs to go. If there's anything that work gossip has told me, it's that he's heartbreak on two legs. Of course, I wouldn't be foolish to even think this could turn into anything long-term.

I drain the tub and wrap myself in a robe when I hear a knock on the door of my adjoining bedroom.

"It's open."

"Knock, knock." Kami opens the door. My cats, Jalapeño and Sriracha, scamper in with her, meowing for attention. Concern lines my best friend's face as she sinks onto my bed and absently scratches Jalapeño behind the ears. "Oh, hon. You're home early, and you've been crying. Your date with Jonathan Knight didn't go well?"

I sit beside her and pet a mewling Sriracha. "It did and it didn't. And it wasn't a date. It was a meetup."

While we cater to my felines' demands for love, I tell her about my time with him.

After I finish, both cats pass out on my comforter, and she nods. "I understand his reasoning."

I gape at her. "You're seriously siding with him?"

"Cool your heels, hon. Let me explain. For as long as I've known you, you've been like Sandy from *Grease* about love, hopelessly devoted to it. So for you to let a man like him inside your body and try to act like it's not a big deal is a tall order. Because I care about you, I'm worried you might get hurt. I respect him for worrying about the same thing."

"But you're the one who helped me come up with this. Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"Because I never dreamed you'd proposition your boss. I thought you'd find some nice guy at the library or the grocery store. Instead, you picked up the equivalent of a tiger at a strip club."

"It was an accident," I groan.

But Kami and Jonathan might be right. My inexperience with one-night stands could betray me. I could get hurt. I could wind up with regrets I don't know how to live with.

"I know," she commiserates. "It is what it is. So...what is Jonathan Knight like outside of work?"

"He's...kind of different."

"How?"

"Definitely more laid back than office Jonathan. He's still straightforward and sharp and all that stuff, but more relaxed. But just like the boss we've come to know, he's very blunt yet approachable. Mature, insightful, and interesting, too. I'm pretty sure any other guy who accepted my proposition would have taken me straight to bed. He didn't. Instead, he put my emotional well-being first." And as upset as I've been, I kind of respect him for that.

"A manwhore with morals. I'm liking this guy more and more."

“I want to do this. I really do, but how can I convince him I’ll be okay if he won’t give me a chance?”

“Keep your focus and your interactions on what you need from him.”

“Right. Screaming O’s.”

“Yes. He’s a playboy, not marriage material. Don’t forget that. Men like him are not built to be loving boyfriends or husbands. And for god’s sake, remember there’s a difference between making love and sex. You can fall in love with the fucking, but don’t fall for the man giving it to you. If you go in remembering all that, you’ll be okay.”

Maybe she’s right. I just have to prioritize having mind-blowing sex over the guys I meet and separate the feelings in my heart from those in my hoo-ha.

*You mean treat them like a human sex toy, the very thing you despise?*

Frowning at the voice in my head, I sigh. I shouldn’t make any decisions tonight. I’ll do what Jonathan suggested and sleep on it. In the morning, with a fresh mind, I might see the world—and my situation—differently.

I take her hand in mine. “Thanks, Kami.”

“You betcha. Chinese takeout’s in the kitchen.”

“Sounds good.”

“I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine an evening of *The Bachelor* without my bestie.” She winks.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, either. I’ll be out in a few.”

Kami closes the door and I start to dress in a clean tank top and pajama shorts when I hear my phone ring. Fishing the device from my purse, I stare with wide eyes at the caller ID. My crappy blind date, Chris.

*Of all the people in the world...*

I contemplate whether I should answer. Maybe he’s had a change of heart. Maybe he’s sorry.

*Or maybe he's still a jackass.*

Admittedly, I'm curious about what he could possibly have to say after calling me an uptight bitch.

"Hello?" I answer cautiously.

"Hey, Katie. It's Chris. I'm so glad you answered."

*That's not my name, dipshit.* "You are?"

"Yeah. What are you doing right now?"

Is this a joke? Just a few nights ago he insulted me, and now he's calling to chat? I think I know where this is going, but I'll play along. Maybe, by some miracle, I'm wrong.

"Not much. What's up with you?"

"Well, it's *up* for you, if you catch my drift."

His sly laugh grates on my nerves. Yep, this is exactly what I thought—a booty call.

"Even after last weekend?" I remind him.

"Sure. You've had time to realize you passed on a golden opportunity. And I can't stop thinking about you."

Gee, what are the odds he's delivered that line to other girls tonight? Wait, I'd rather not know. This conversation already makes me want to gag.

"I thought you said I was a bitch."

"Don't be fixated on the past. We got off on the wrong foot, but I'm willing to forgive you."

*Willing to forgive me? What the actual fuck?*

Obviously, he's telling me what he thinks I want to hear for one reason. Emphasis on the word *think*.

"You are, huh?"

"What do you say? Let's hang out tonight."

I hold back an annoyed groan. Of course, he's going to pretend we're pals and that we've never shared a moment of strife. Anything to get laid, right? The fact that he called me

probably means all his other options turned him down. No surprise there.

Kami's words last weekend echo through my head. *Friendship, understanding, comfort, and acceptance? Girl, that's what the other people in your life are for. Your family and friends, your coworkers...and even that hot-as-hell boss of yours all care more about you than any guy you fuck. Don't think of it as turning off your emotions but fulfilling your base needs. That way, you'll never be disappointed.*

Maybe that's the real reason to continue my agreement with Jonathan. Could marriage these days be the exception and not the rule? Do I even need a relationship to be happy? If I can find emotional gratification from the people I actually love—who love me back—why should I regret a healthy sex life?

Maybe it's time I grew out of fairy tales and accepted what relationships these days really are.

If I don't, I'll never know screaming O's. More importantly, I'll be stuck in this place in life forever, wanting something that doesn't exist.

On the other hand, I have standards, and the asshole on the other end of the line is beneath mine. I don't have to let just any guy touch me, especially not one who disrespects me and can't be bothered to remember my name.

“Chris, I want you to listen closely.” There are many things I'd like to say, but I'd rather end the call and be done with him. He isn't worth my time. “Don't call me again.”

I hang up the phone with a smile. Damn, that felt good.



***Tuesday, May 10***

**Jonathan**

“The destination is on your left,” the GPS on my car indicates as I drive up to an unfamiliar Mexican restaurant. The parking lot is crowded with people and cars.



A few hours prior, Kiera had emailed, saying she'd like to talk over lunch. On one hand, her response has me hoping she took my advice. On the other, I worry I pushed her into calling off our agreement. If she changes her mind, life would return to normal...but I'd always wonder what could've been. If she says yes...

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. One step at a time. She has to tell me what's on her mind.

I walk into the small, crowded restaurant, scanning the room for my beautiful brunette.

She's not yours, dipshit.

It's possible she will be for six weeks. That will be more than enough.

"Jonathan."

At the sound of Kiera's familiar, feminine voice calling me, I turn to the corner of the restaurant and make my way past the tables and booths to her.

Today, she styled her hair into a large, loose braid that hangs over one slender shoulder. Small strands have broken free to caress the side of her face, making my fingers itch to brush them away. Her luscious pink lips are curled into a smile. Compared to other women in the room, she glows. What wouldn't I give to grab her face in my hands and claim her sexy mouth or tug her elegant braid free while sliding balls deep inside her.

God, the selfish bastard in me hopes she says yes.

I sit across from her at a table for two.

"Thanks for meeting me. I thought talking here would be more private," she murmurs.

"Good idea."

Kiera pops a chip covered in salsa into her mouth. Her eyes close as she softly moans. My dick hardens. She looks gorgeous. What would it be like to wake up in the morning and her face is the first thing I see?

It's never going to happen.

If she says yes, it might—at least once. Maybe that will be enough.

“Do you always moan when you eat?” I ask.

Her eyes flare wide, and her face turns red. “I’m sorry. I just love their chips and salsa.”

“Clearly.” I find it kind of adorable. “I take it you like Mexican food?”

She nods. “We’ve had a lifelong love affair.”

I laugh. Kiera is unexpectedly cute, sexy, and funny. She’s also more at ease today. I’m glad. The way she can be so modest and quiet in the office, yet able to crack jokes away from her nine-to-five is intriguing. I like this carefree side of her. I’d love to see more.

“You seem well rested,” I point out.

“I am. You were right; I needed more time to think everything through.”

“I didn’t want you to rush.”

“I understand that now. The time helped me put things into perspective.”

“And?” The anticipation is killing me.

She pauses. “Yesterday, you asked me why I wanted to do this. Initially, I said it was to find happiness. I know now that isn’t true.”

“Then what is?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m one of the few women left who still believed in—and wanted—my Prince Charming. Because of that, I lost sight of the reality in front of me. Friends? Family? That’s the love I truly need. Coupled with my ambition and my self-worth, I’ll be fulfilled emotionally. Men? They won’t make me happy. They’re not supposed to. All I need from them to be fulfilled physically are their penises. No offense.”

“None taken.”

Her rationale is logical.

*Yeah, and cynical.*

“Yesterday, you asked me if I could handle this without regret. I really believe I can hop between the sheets with a hookup and leave my heart at home. I just need practice. Give me a chance?”

“So you still want me to teach you how to one-night stand?”

“Yes. I’m convinced that’s what I need to move forward.”

I mentally toss a fist bump in the air but pause when I realize what this means for Kiera. Her decision is a win for my dick...but it’s an admission of defeat for her. She’s given up on finding true love in favor of living in the single status quo.

I shift in my seat and try to dismiss an unwelcome stab of guilt. The pragmatic side of me argues that Kiera’s conclusion is sad, but it’s better than her pining for storybook endings that will never come true.

The marshmallowy core in my ribcage that I ignore every chance I get doesn’t agree.

“The terms and conditions we agreed on yesterday still apply,” I remind her, sliding back into a comfortable business mode.

She nods. “Of course.”

“All right, then let’s continue talking about you. When you talk to guys, how’s that?”

“Honestly?” She winces. “Like an ostrich trying to fly.”

I laugh. “It can’t be that bad. When was the last time you flirted with someone?”

“Genuinely? Too long ago to remember.”

“What about disingenuously?”

“Nope, that didn’t go well, either. He did all the talking—and it was all about him.”

“So he’s a douche?” I swipe a chip and pop it in my mouth.

“Yeah. When I met him, I tried complimenting him. It just...fell out of my mouth awkwardly.”

“What did you say?”

“I took one look at him and said, ‘I’m glad you’re obviously not a jock.’ I meant it as a compliment since they’re so often all pumped up and full of themselves. I assumed that because he looked more intellectual, he’d think with the head up top a bit more.”

I recoil as if she was singing very off key. “Way to tell a guy he doesn’t look manly.”

“I know. It was stupid. I was trying to get him to like me, but I was nervous, and I opened my mouth...and something thoughtless came out.”

If she’s able to talk to me casually like this, then talking to guys shouldn’t be the problem. It’s the fact that she gets in her head and psychs herself out. If I could get her out of her own way and living in the moment, she might feel less anxious and stop overanalyzing.

“You meant well, and you had the right idea. We just need to work on your delivery.”

“How do we do that?”

“A lot of it has to do with confidence. Men like confident women. For most, it can be quite attention grabbing. Confidence in yourself amps up men’s curiosity and encourages them to come talk to you.”

“Are you saying I have no confidence?”

“I’m simply saying the more you worry about trying to impress someone, the more anxious you’ll feel and the more likely you’ll choke. What do you normally do at bars or clubs?”

She shrugs. “Hang out with Kami and some friends.”

“Do you not like clubs?”

She pops another chip into her mouth and wrinkles her nose. “I just feel out of place. I’m a shy person. I like people watching and listening in on conversations more than actually being a part of them.”

Flirting would be different if Kiera was an extrovert. But being such an introvert must make it harder to talk to someone without getting overwhelmed.

“What would you do if a guy came up to you?”

“Probably freeze. Guys don’t usually approach me.”

Either something is wrong with the male species or she’s so shy that she’s coming off to guys as indifferent.

“Why?”

“I’m not that attractive. I mean”—she laughs awkwardly to herself—“look at me.”

“Kiera.” I take her hand in mine, staring intently, and try to ignore the strong tug I feel toward her. “You are a very beautiful woman.”

“You don’t need to patronize me.” She jerks her hand away.

Has her past dating experience been so terrible, she’s convinced herself that she’s undesirable?

“I’m not. Other guys may not take you seriously.”

“They don’t.”

Clearly, our arrangement can’t just be about teaching Kiera how to have sex without emotion. I have to help her learn to love herself.

I take her hand again. “I do.”

Our server approaches our table, killing the moment, and I release her. Maybe it’s for the best. After she takes drink and appetizer orders, the waitress leaves.

“I’m sorry for snapping,” Kiera apologizes. “I’ve heard so many lines from other guys, it’s hard to tell what’s real and what isn’t.”

“It’s okay. I’m serious, though. Those guys are the idiots, not you.”

She hesitates. “Thank you.”

“I know this is an uncomfortable question, but I have to ask. What has your sex life been like?”

She stiffens and takes a deep breath. Her eyes dart in every other direction but mine. “I-it’s fine.”

I send her a reproachful stare. “Bullshit. Your email said otherwise. Open and honest communication. Remember?”

“It...sucks,” she admits hanging her head.

I suspected as much. Why have so many guys overlooked this beautiful woman? Yes, she’s shy, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t approachable.

“Are you a virgin?” I have to ask.

“No.”

If she doesn’t engage in hookup culture, then chances are she’s only slept with guys she was dating. The last time she dated someone long term will likely tell me the last time she had sex.

“How long has it been?”

“College. Three years ago.”

“And he’s the last guy you were sexually active with?”

“Yes.”

Wow. I can’t fathom going three years without sex. Kiera’s vibrator must get one hell of a workout.

“Why did you breakup?”

“I realized a few months in that he liked sex more than he liked me. When I told him no one night, he got pissed, called me a prude, and dumped me.”

What a dumbass.

“Were the times you had sex enjoyable for you?”

She frowns. “Enjoyable?”

Is she really that naïve? “Did you orgasm?”

“I don’t think that’s super important.” She stiffens.

“In my book, it’s the only thing that’s important.”

She sits in silence for a few long moments. If it’s taking her this long to come up with a reply, the answer is probably a no.

“I think so.”

I try not to scoff. “If you’re not sure, you didn’t.”

She remains silent and looks away.

Trying to grapple with what she’s inadvertently telling me, I keep pressing for information—and trying to stifle the urge to be the first man to give her true pleasure. “How much sex, if any, did you have before the guy in college?”

Kiera shifts uncomfortably. “Do we need to be this honest?”

“It’s important for me to understand your sexual experience so there’s no misunderstanding and no one gets hurt.”

“I did it a handful of times in high school,” she mumbles. “That’s it.”

I give her an incredulous stare. “So what’s your number? Approximately?”

She scoffs. “I don’t have to approximate. Two.”

There’s a long moment of silence between us as I stare at her with wide eyes. “Wait, you’re telling me you’ve only had sex with two men in your entire life?”

“Yes, Chad in high school and Brian in college. That’s it. Why are you looking at me like it’s a big deal?”

Because it’s a huge fucking deal.

“And neither of them ever made you orgasm?”

Distraught, she looks away. “You must think I’m some kind of freak.”

“That’s not what I think at all. Pleasure goes both ways. It’s not your fault if the guys you were with didn’t take the time to give you pleasure.”

The stare she turns back on me looks stunned. “You think it’s them and not me?”

“I know it’s them.”

Every woman should enjoy sex, and it’s on her partner to make sure that happens. Now I’m more determined than ever to give her not just the best sex she’s ever had, but pleasure that blows her mind.

“Jonathan, is that you?”

I glance over my shoulder to see a tall, slender woman standing just beside me, her short black hair styled with a hint of sassy that matches her brightly colored sunglasses. Her business attire says anything but basic black, thanks to hot pink pumps.

“Maya Thompson?”

She smiles. “OMG, how are you?”

“I’m doing well. And yourself?” I smile back, both at her and serendipity. For two years, I’ve worried my opportunity to make a meaningful professional connection with her was over, and now she’s standing right in front of me. The last time I saw her, I felt as if I had it all—until my world collapsed under me. How is it that she’s here and seemingly happy to see me now?

“Rather well, thank you. And I thought I was the only one who came here.”

“This is my first time.”

“Really? You’re in for a treat. The food is so good, it’ll knock your socks off.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“I’m actually glad I ran into you. It’s been a while since we last talked. I’m sorry about your split with Amber.”

“It was for the best.”



Somewhere in my train of thought, I remember who I'm with and look over to Kiera. Confusion and curiosity lurk all over her face.

"I'm glad you have a positive outlook on it now. It must have been so hard for you. You and Amber seemed so in love." She looks at me as if I'm an abandoned puppy she found in a cardboard box on the side of the road in the rain.

Though I'm slightly miffed by her unneeded pity, I maintain a professional poker face. "I think Amber and I are both in better places now."

"It seems. I received her wedding invitation the other day. Did you know she was getting married?"

"I did." And I'm so thrilled she'll be some other schmuck's problem. "She invited me as well."

Surprise flashes across her face before she fixes her expression to something more neutral. "Well, in that case, I hope to see you there. Are you...bringing anyone?"

Is she, like Amber, imagining that I'm a miserable, lonely bastard?

"I'll be attending with him," Kiera interjects as she stands and holds out her hand. "I'm Jonathan's girlfriend, Kiera."

Despite the fact we agreed to this arrangement, I haven't fulfilled my end of our bargain yet, so she would have been totally justified in letting me flail on my own. But she didn't. She saved me.

Maya looks Kiera up and down, then shakes her hand. If her smile is any indication, she approves. "How wonderful. You two look fabulous together."

"Thank you." Kiera slips her hand in mine. "We're really happy."

Maya turns to me with an even wider smile. "Congrats! I didn't know you were dating again. It seems I've been misinformed about a few things since we last saw each other. I look forward to seeing you both at the wedding, then. In fact,

Jonathan, I'd like to speak with you about a possible business opportunity."

Holy fuck, is this happening? What was once an opportunity lost forever has now opened its doors to me again. Could my dream of a second chance be coming true? "I can call you later this week and bump calendars."

She shakes her head. "I'll be out of the country for a month. Overseas deal. It can't wait. The reception really is my next available appointment."

It's not optimal, but I'll make it work. "Then I'll look forward to talking shop during the reception."

"Fantastic." Maya turns to smile at Kiera. "It was a pleasure meeting you. Enjoy your lunch."

"Thanks. Lovely meeting you."

With a nod, Maya leaves. In slow motion, I sink back to my seat in utter astonishment. When I lost the opportunity with Maya two years ago, I thought nothing like that would ever come around again. But today, everything has changed. A plan that seemed like a faraway dream might now become a reality.

"That's the Maya you wanted to talk to at your ex's wedding, right?" Kiera asks. "I put two and two together and..."

"Yes. It's a fucking miracle."

Maybe this time I can come out victorious, and I can finally put the past where it belongs—irrelevantly behind me.

"I take it Amber is your ex who's getting married?"

"That's her."

"How does she know Maya?"

"They were friends in college. But it seems she's logical enough not to let friendship dictate business after all."

"So...looks like I'm your date for the wedding and our plan is official."

“Absofuckinglutely.” That means it’s imperative we look and act like a couple in public. “Are you available Friday night?”

“Kami is visiting her family this weekend, so yes. Why?”

“You should come hang out with me.”

Kiera bites her lip as if she’s wondering whether I’m plotting to nail her that night. I wouldn’t be opposed, but now I’ve got other priorities, too.

“All right. Where should I meet you?”

“I’ll come pick you up. Tell me where you live.”

After exchanging numbers, she sends me the address to her apartment. “What should I wear?”

“A dress. Something you’d wear to a club.”

She wrinkles her nose but nods. “It’s a date.”

“It’s not. It’s an arrangement for our mutual convenience,” I counter.

“Right.” She pastes on a smile to cover her crestfallen expression.

“Listen, that’s not a bad thing. I’m not rejecting you; I’m stating a fact. We’re not together romantically, and you shouldn’t bring feelings other than your libido into this.”

I don’t want to hurt her, but being blunt is for the best. Kiera has to learn how not to pin her romantic hopes on a man, especially a losing proposition like me.

I just hate feeling kind of like a heel.

“You’re right.” She fakes a smile. “Old habits die hard.”

We eat a silent lunch, sparse with conversation about the food. It’s good...but I’m not as hungry as I was. I’m worried about Kiera.

Suddenly, she sets her napkin and a couple of bills on the table, then rises.

I shove her money back at her. “Lunch is on me.”

She refuses to pick it up. “I insist. Like you said, this isn’t a date. Thanks again for your patience. It was weird to spill my guts to you, but I’ll try to get used to it. I’ll see you back at the office.”

I watch her walk to her car and drive away, cursing under my breath. Running into Maya was a stroke of luck, and I’m thrilled she seems open to talking business again. That’s all falling into place in a way that feels almost too good to be true. I get to take the girl—temporarily—to my bed and hopefully arrange the collaboration that will take our startup from emerging player to superstar. Why do I suddenly feel like everything is going wrong?

# Chapter Five

*Friday, May 13*

**Kiera**

---

I reward myself for surviving the interesting turn of events this week with pizza, popcorn, a glass of wine, and a cuddlefest with Jalapeño and Sriracha.

Despite indulging in my favorites, my mind is still on my talk with Jonathan on Tuesday at the Mexican restaurant. Thankfully, he didn't look at me like an idiot because of my inexperience. He was honest, straightforward, and understanding. When I'm with him, I feel at ease and more like myself. Usually when I'm around people I don't know, I clam up. But Jonathan makes it comfortable to be myself around him, which is something I haven't experienced in a long time. He brings out my best.

And what were the odds of us running into the very person he'd hoped to speak to at his ex's wedding? I was happy to bail him out and end Maya's assumption that Jonathan had no date. It was such a small way to help, and if it made him happy, I'm happy, too.

I finish eating and cleaning up the kitchen when I hear the knock at the door I've been waiting for. Jonathan. My belly tightens. My heart starts racing.

Girl, you haven't even seen him yet. You better get it together before you make a fool out of yourself. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement, not a date. He said so himself...

"I'll be right there," I call through the front door.

I'm so nervous about tonight. It's one thing to go out with your friends. But hitting the clubs with a man as gorgeous as Jonathan is like living out a forbidden fantasy. What will

tonight bring? Will we dance? Drink? Kiss? Just have conversation? Or actually have sex?

It doesn't matter. He's taking you out so you can get experience, not to romance you.

Right. I can't let my imagination run away from me. Sex is what I need from a man, nothing more.

After straightening the hem of my knee-length black dress, I take a deep breath and open the door. "Hi."

I smile...but I can't stop staring. With a glance, he makes me weak in the knees. He's styled his hair into a barely controlled wave that makes me want to run my fingers through it. His forest-green shirt accentuates his golden skin and draws attention to his eyes. And his jeans? They cling to all the right things in all the right places. How am I going to manage speaking coherent sentences to him tonight?

Jonathan looks me up and down with a frown. "What is that?"

I glance down at myself. "What's what?"

"Where do you think we're going tonight, a club or to church?"

What kind of question is that? "Of course we're not going to church."

"Then why do you look like you are?"

"I don't."

"You absolutely do. And what's with the tight bun?"

I rear back defensively. "You told me to dress nice, so I did."

"I told you to look your best."

"This is my best."

"For church, sure. But we're going to a club." He gestures to me. "This won't work."

I cross my arms over my chest. "What exactly do you think I should be wearing?"

“Something that’s not an erection killer. When was the last time you went out with your friends?”

I shrug. “A few months ago, I guess.”

“Did you pay attention to what other women were wearing?”

“I could never dress like that.” I shake my head. “It’s not my style.”

He sighs. “Can I come in?”

So he can disparage my dress some more? “Why?”

“I need to see your closet. You must have something less appropriate to wear.”

“But this is cute.”

“Cute is for little kids and kittens. It doesn’t incite lust, and no one wants to fuck it.”

I gesture him in, frowning as I close the door behind him. “That’s your opinion. And it’s rude.”

“I’m a single guy—your target audience—and I’m being honest. Where’s your room?”

With a roll of my eyes, I point. “Down the hall, last door on your right.”

He darts past me. I follow, trying my best to keep up with his long strides.

When he enters my room, he yanks open my closet doors and scans my clothes. I watch from the foot of my bed. It’s not every day your boss rifles through your closet to dress you for a night out.

“Seriously, I thought cute was good.”

“Sweetheart, you want to attract a guy, not encourage him to pat you on the head before he finds someone who makes his dick stand up and salute her.”

I gape at him. “Pat me on the head...like I’m a child?”

“In case it’s escaped your notice, men are very visual beings. If you want to attract one, you have to dress with

cleavage and sex appeal in mind. Your goal is to walk into a room and have all eyes on you.”

“I don’t need to dress like a stripper to get male attention.”

“I never said you should look like a stripper, but if you show some skin, you’re way more likely to get laid.”

He continues going through my closet until he groans in exasperation. “Don’t you have anything more revealing than jeans, yoga pants, T-shirts, or work-appropriate attire?”

“No. Like I said, low-cut shirts and clingy dresses are not —”

“Your style. But it needs to be tonight.” Suddenly, he snaps his fingers. “You said Kami Hernandez is your roommate, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Would she have anything in her closet you could borrow?”

I laugh. “Away from the office, super-short skirts and backless dresses are her wardrobe.”

“Because she understands men. That’s why, according to you, she’s happy. Would she be okay with us raiding her closet?”

“Are you kidding? She’s been begging me to do that since we moved in together.”

“Thank God.” He grabs my hand, pulling me into Kami’s room across the hall. He opens her closet, skims the contents, then smirks. “Now we’re talking.”

From dresses that look more like scarves, to crop tops, short-shorts, and miniskirts, Kami has a wardrobe any girl, besides me, would die to have. She says her skimpy clothes are totally comfortable, but I don’t see the appeal of wearing something that emphasizes my chest and barely covers my lady bits.



I watch him pull a handful of garments from her closet and lay them across her bed. Everything he's chosen is eye-poppingly tight and short.

“Choose your outfit.”

Gaping down at the options, I cringe. How will any of these cover the essentials?

I pick up a slinky scrap of a dress. “Are you sure this isn't a mosquito net?”

“If it is, maybe you'll catch something in it.” He laughs.

I shake my head, putting down the garment, and lift a white dress that's so tiny, it looks like it was made for a Barbie doll.

How does Kami fit her ass in this thing?

“There's no way this is a complete dress. Are you wanting me to go out half naked?”

“It would be an improvement,” he quips, taking the garment from me and stretching it between his big, solid hands. “See? It'll be fine. A lot of women wear something similar to this.”

I cast it a dubious stare. “I don't think it will fit.”

“You're wrong. These styles are one-size-fits-all.”

What if I'm the exception? The possibility makes me cringe.

But I take it from him with a sigh. “All right. If this thing is see-through, it's a hell no.”

Marching back to my room, I close the door behind me and stare at the tiny tangle of fabric. “How do I even get into this thing?”

“Step into it, sweetheart. One foot after the other,” he says on the far side of the door.

“That's easy for you to say. Your ass isn't being squeezed in a garment half the size of a tissue.”

As he laughs, I grab the bottom of the dress and step in, shimmying it up my thighs and over my hips. The more I work it up my body, the more it stretches. I'm shocked when it fits over my large bust with ease and still manages to cover the rest of my essentials, the hem ending at mid-thigh.

As I study myself in the full-length mirror next to my bed, I gasp. It's gorgeous. The dress hugs every curve of my body. A keyhole in the middle of my chest shows off a healthy amount of cleavage but conceals everything important. The garment makes my waist look tiny and clings to the swells of my hips, showing off my hourglass figure.

"OMG, I look hot." And I'm shocked.

Jonathan knocks. "Care to share?"

"Uh, yeah. Hold on a second." I try my best to pull down the hem a bit farther, but it's no use.

Sighing, I tug the door open. Jonathan stands in the doorway, elbow braced against the jamb. His eyes widen like saucers when he sees me. The burn of his stare has me blushing.

"Does it look okay?" I fidget self-consciously.

"You look...wow. Holy...wow."

"You're sure? It's so short, I don't think I can bend over without showing everyone everything."

"Then it's perfect for tonight."

I glance in the mirror again, unable to look away. "Now I see what you're talking about. Even though I feel kind of exposed in this thing, I feel strangely like my confidence just went up, too." I strike a pose. "I feel...sexy."

"You are. You have a beautiful body, Kiera. You should flaunt it more often."

The way he compliments me has me blushing even more. I don't think anyone has ever flattered me like that in my life.

After a quick dash back to Kami's closet, he hands me a pair of insanely gorgeous black Prada slingbacks that always

make my bestie's legs look a mile long. "Put these on."

Despite the fact we wear the same size shoe, I'm always afraid to borrow my roomie's crazy expensive heels. But I do as he asks, then stare at my reflection. My legs look long and slender. I feel even sexier now. No wonder Kami wears stuff like this and spends a small fortune on her footwear.

"What do you think?"

"You're right. I look better. Just for that, I'll forget that you insulted my best dress," I tease.

"I'd be happier if you just burned it."

I stick out my tongue at him. "Truthfully, I've always had a thing for beautiful shoes like these, but I've never let myself get attached. They're so expensive. Now that I'm wearing these and they're so gorgeous, though... I'm totally in love, and I'm going to need some. Sparkly. And black." I sigh out, admiring what they do for me in the mirror. "I'll scrounge together the money somehow. Too bad I'll never find a guy who realizes that the way to my heart is through my feet and buy them for me."

Nope. Sadly, I'll probably have to get five raises and give up eating to afford them.

Jonathan meets my stare in the mirror, his eyes suddenly taking on a hard edge before he returns wordlessly to Kami's room and shoves her things back in her closet.

What's up with him? Was it something I said?

I rush to help him, stumbling to figure out what I said or did to upset him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

His tone warns me that he's not.

Wrapping a concerned hand around his shoulder, I send a searching gaze his way. "Jonathan?"

"We need to do something with your hair." He points at my bun.

Doing my best to ignore the abrupt change of subject, I nod and begin to unwind the updo.

My sexy-as-sin boss moves in behind me and replaces my fingers with his. "Allow me."

I feel his gentle tugs against my scalp, and I start to imagine his fingers deep in my hair as he's kissing me senseless. I should figure out what upset him, not drift into fantasy, but the longer he touches me, the more I fight the urge to close my eyes and lean back against him. His body heat radiates against my back. His masculine scent wraps around me. What will it feel like when there's no longer any clothing between us?

After a few moments of silence, I feel my bun loosen and my hair fall down my back.

I open my eyes to find him staring again, his expression filled with heat. "Thank you."

He clasps my shoulders, stilling me. "You're welcome."

The warmth of his palms makes me shiver. My hair at the back of my neck stands on end. My breathing accelerates, just like my heart rate. It would be too easy to turn into his arms and get carried away. Too easy to pull his arms around me and hope he embraces me. Too easy to fall back into my old habits.

I can't break the rules of our agreement.

Instead, I clear my throat and pull free. The loss of his body heat feels abrupt and overwhelming.

I toss my hair around a few times, making it look artfully tousled. "Better?"

He nods. "Has that freshly fucked look. Sexy..." He pauses, again staring at me with those hypnotic eyes, flashing me an enigmatic expression. "How about fake eyelashes?"

"I'm wearing mascara, but I have them."

"Great. Can you put those on? They'll make your eyes pop. They're one of your biggest assets."

"Are you trying to say my eyes are pretty?"

He raises a brow. "I'm just saying your eyes will be one of the first things, besides your tits, guys look at."

"You're such a romantic," I toss over my shoulder acerbically as I head into my bathroom and grab a set of falsies. A few minutes later, I turn back to him, batting my long, artificial lashes. "How do I look?"

"Good, but there's still something missing." He studies my face. "Do you have any red lipstick? Put that on."

"Why red?"

"It's eye-catching. Think of it as a way to say 'fuck me' without actually asking out loud."

I frown. "Red lips are an indication that I want to sleep with someone?"

"Like a cape to a bull."

Of course. "Are you planning to tell me how to apply my makeup from now on?"

"God, no. I just know what guys focus on. If it's not your eyes or your tits, it's your mouth so he can imagine it wrapped around his cock."

"That's objectifying and sexist."

"That's honest."

Shaking my head, I grab a red lipstick and paint the color across my lips. When I'm finished, I step back, shocked at how I now look. My eyes look bigger, and my lips look fierce. I look sultry. Seductive. Sexy as fuck. *Me!*

Who would have ever thought that possible?

He looks beyond pleased as he takes in my handiwork in the bathroom mirror. "Sweetheart, there is no doubt in my mind you'll be breaking necks tonight."

But not hearts. Then again, that's not the goal.

"Thanks." I laugh awkwardly.

He looks down at his watch. "Time to go."

I grab a white, over-the-shoulder purse, then drop my phone, wallet, lipstick, and keys inside before heading out and locking the door behind us.

I live on the third floor, and I sometimes find it hard to walk in heels down the stairs, especially since they're steep. Holding onto the railing for dear life, I take one slow side-step at a time.

"You okay?" he asks behind me.

"I think so."

He stops me with a hand on my shoulder. "Let me help you."

Before I can take another unsteady step down, he wraps his strong arms around my waist and lifts me against his chest. The smell of sandalwood fills my head.

If I were still looking for Prince Charming, I'd want to be swept off my feet like this. In fact, I would relish it. The man is gorgeous, after all. But he's my boss, this isn't a date, he's not interested in me romantically, and I'm too heavy for him to carry.

"Jonathan..."

"Wrap your arms around my neck. I'll be fine."

"I don't want you to hurt yourself."

He scoffs. "The way you're struggling in those shoes, you're the one way more likely to get hurt."

Unfortunately, he's not wrong. I give in and wrap an arm around his neck. He lifts me against his chest and holds me with ease all the way to the bottom of the stairs.

I've never been held by a man like this before. Sure, I've read about it in books and seen it in movies, but experiencing it for real makes my heart swoon. I feel so safe and secure because of his unwavering strength. I shouldn't. He's simply trying to hasten our outing along without a trip to the ER. But still, I can't help feeling giddy and excited.

He's a manwhore. He's probably done this, and more, to other women to make them feel special, I tell myself. He doesn't mean it.

That doesn't stop me from wishing he did.

On the ground floor, he sets me down gently. "There you go. In one piece, too."

"Thank you," I say softly.

"I'm always happy to help a woman whose tits look great," he quips, then pulls me to his car.

I let him, reminding myself that I'm no more special than the last woman he took to bed. I can't go looking for meaning in his seemingly gallant and romantic gestures because there is none.



We arrive at the club close to eleven. The two-story place is packed with people. The music blares so loud, I can feel the beat reverberate in my chest.

"Stay close to me. Don't let go of my hand. And exaggerate the sway of your hips. You know, roll them when you walk," Jonathan yells over the loud music.

Did he say what I think he said? "Why?"

"It makes you look confident and shows off your great ass. Guys like both."

"Fine. I'll try." And hope I don't trip in Kami's crazy, sky-high heels.

I sigh and let him grab my hand. We start across the crowded dance floor, illuminated by flashing lights. Jonathan uses his body to clear the path toward the bar. My grip on his fingers tightens while I add drama to my walk and lift my chin like the confident woman I'm not.

Immediately, I feel the stares. Male stares. Lots of them.

To my left, a drop-dead gorgeous blonde glowers. Why the heck is she scanning me up and down? Wait, she actually

sees me as competition?

I'm still reeling from that realization when a group of frat boys to my right all stare at me like a pack of dogs salivating over one juicy bone. I can almost hear their thoughts, and I can't help it. I feel myself blush.

Jonathan edges closer, wrapping his arm around me and guiding me away from the matriculating fukbois and through the thick of the crowd, stopping at the bar. "What's your poison?"

Is there a right answer? "Um...vodka cranberry."

He conveys our order. After a few minutes, the bartender returns with two filled glasses. Jonathan hands me one.

"Thanks." I take a sip, and the tart liquid slides down my throat. The alcohol is strong, too. Good. I'll need the liquid courage tonight.

Suddenly, he takes my hand again and leads me up some crowded stairs to a VIP lounge. More lustful stares from guys come at me from every direction. More of those perfectly made-up and scantily clad women who usually look right through me scowl. For the first time at a club, I don't feel invisible. It's odd. It's heady. I'm not sure what to do next.

The upstairs lounge has a sleek feel, all lit up with contemporary chandeliers and mirrors. Strategically placed greenery and floor-to-ceiling black drapes save the space from looking cold. Up here, club goes laze on tufted black leather sofas while even more scantily clad waitstaff serves them another round.

After flashing the bouncers some cash, Jonathan leads me across the chic loft and through a door. Then we're in what feels like an indoor patio that overlooks the dance floor. Jonathan shuts the door behind us and leads me past a decorative drape tied off on one side. I'm surprised to find the area empty. In front of us are nothing but twinkling fairy lights and thumping music. Below, bodies sway. Being above the action is interesting and surprisingly private...but I'm anxious. What's next?



When he ushers me to a seat, I study his profile as I slide down beside him. “I’m glad we’re up here alone. Thanks for getting me away from the other girls. They don’t like me.”

He smiles. “Of course they don’t. You have what they want.”

*Me?* “What’s that?”

“Head-turning beauty.”

I frown. “None of them were exactly trolls.”

“But you stole all the attention—and the air—from the room. Congratulations. How do you feel?”

“Having that much attention is surreal...but I didn’t hate it. It seemed like the second we walked through the door, I was the woman every guy wanted and every girl wished she was. It was a crazy confidence booster. But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You’re welcome. Get used to it.”

“So what’s the plan? Sit here and drink while we people watch?”

He slants me a chastising stare. “That’s what the old you would have done. We have a different agenda. Remember when I said confidence has a lot to do with flirting?”

“Yeah.”

“Tonight, we’re going to apply that.”

I stiffen. “I don’t know if I’m ready to approach a stranger, especially for sex.”

“Oh, you’re not ready for that, not by a long shot. You look the part, but actually being ready for it will take time. And we’ve got a little over five weeks, so relax. Tonight, you’ll just pretend to proposition me.”

Heat flares in my cheeks. “I kind of already did. It was in writing and inadvertent—”

“And not very smooth.” He laughs. “We’ll work on your delivery.”

“So...role-play, right. Okay. Um, I’ve never picked up anyone before.”

“Just say and do what feels right.”

I nod. “Do you come here a lot?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Really? I help you get all dolled up, and that’s the line you’re going to roll out?”

Laughing, I grimace at myself. What must he be thinking. “No, I wasn’t pretending to strike up a conversation or anything. I just wondered if this was your usual haunt.”

“No. I’ve been a couple of times with friends.” Jonathan smirks. “Thank god you weren’t trying to get laid with that line. If you were, I’d have to teach you the fine art of seduction using alphabet blocks and pictures drawn in crayon.”

I tsk at him. “Stop.”

“Fine. Why don’t I go first so you have some reference about how it’s done?”

“An example to follow would be great.”

I expect him to smile, turn on the charm, and start delivering smooth lines. Instead, he stands and leaves our cozy indoor balcony without explanation. What the hell?

Then I remember this is role-play. If I were truly here on my own trolling for company for the night, I wouldn’t be expecting him. I need to play cool and nonchalant.

After letting out a nervous breath, I sip my drink and watch club goers below me. From both the dance floor and the loft, I feel more stares on me. They like what they see. I can feel it. They want me. I’m desirable.

It’s crazy.

Realistically, it’s what I’m wearing, not me. But in the moment, the attention makes me feel good. Almost confident, even.

Suddenly, someone taps on my shoulder. “Is this seat taken?”

I turn to find Jonathan staring down at me. My heart skips a beat. In the past, he's regarded me with politeness and the utmost professionalism. Now he's looking at me like I'm a woman. His voice sounds velvety, his stare intense. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he wants me.

"N-no, not at all," I stammer.

I suck in a breath. This is purely role-play. My head knows that. But why does it feel so real?

*If only it was...*

Honestly, I don't think I'd know what to do with myself—let alone know what to do with him—if he was serious. I've always felt too awkward to make the first move and hardly confident enough to accept a guy's come-on...but now? This could be the vodka talking. Or the dress giving me false confidence. But what could it hurt to try flirting back? Isn't that the point?

He sits beside me. "I saw you and thought, what's a beautiful girl like you doing here alone?"

I'm not exactly sure how to respond. Do I laugh? Do I tease? Do I play hard to get? The more I think, the more I panic. I try to stop my thoughts from whirling. All I have to do is give him a casual but fun response. Kami always tells me I overthink. If I'm going to learn, I need to stop that and simply enjoy the moment. After all, I'm here for screaming O's, not 'til-death-do-us-part.

"Who says I'm alone?" I scan him up and down. "You're here, aren't you?"

He smirks. "True, but we're strangers."

"Then let's not be. What's your name?"

*Who are you, and what have you done with Kiera?* I remain calm, but I'm shocked at the coy responses coming out of my mouth.

He takes my hand, his palm sliding against mine, somehow making the action so seductive I nearly melt. "I'm Jonathan."

“Kiera.” I manage to smile in return.

“That’s a beautiful name,” he says, sinking into the seat beside me, his eyes gleaming as he wraps an arm around the back of the sofa and leans closer. His bright smile could charm the pants off a mannequin.

“Thank you.” He’s doing such a good job pretending he’s interested in me that I blush.

“What’s your drink of choice tonight, Kiera?”

“Vodka cranberry.” I lightly shake my half-full drink.

“Is vodka your favorite poison?”

“Mainly. But I like the occasional margarita, too, especially with Mexican food.”

“So you like your liquor...hard?”

The sexual innuendo in his question makes me giggle. “You could say that...”

He grins in return. “Besides being gorgeous, what do you do? For a living, I mean?”

“You think I’m gorgeous?” I coquettishly tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I think you’re the hottest woman in this club.” He scans my body unabashedly.

When I suddenly realize how little space there is between us, I swallow hard. There are a scant few inches between his lips and mine. Heat rises within me, along with a need to pull him closer. But I refrain.

“I’m an assistant to the CEO of a social media tech company,” I murmur.

“What a coincidence. I happen to be the CEO of a social media tech company.”

“Small world.” I play along with the faux irony.

“Very.” His already deep voice lowers an octave, full of seduction. “I’m surprised your boyfriend isn’t beside you, keeping guys like me at bay.”

“I don’t have one.”

He brushes his knuckles along my cheek, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. “What a shame...”

My breath catches. For a long minute, we just stare at each other. His blue eyes have a hold on me. I can’t look away.

Then he lets out a choppy exhalation. I’m drawn to his perfect lips, wide and sculpted and so manly. So close...but so far away.

I squirm in my seat, more aroused than I should be after exchanging a handful of words and lingering glances.

“You want to go somewhere more private, Kiera?”

It’s ironic. For most of my adult life, I’ve been trying to avoid this very question from guys. I’ve scoffed. I’ve refused. I’ve run away. For the first time in my life, I’m really, really tempted to say yes. I know this isn’t real. This isn’t even a date, nor is it a promise to see each other tomorrow. There are no expectations beyond the moment.

Right now, given the way I want Jonathan, that’s enough.

“Yes.”

As quickly as it came, his seductive demeanor melts away. “That was a good start.”

I sigh and paste on a smile. It was nice while it lasted. “Really? It wasn’t awkward?”

“It’s only awkward if you make it awkward.”

I slowly nod, trying to understand. “How do I not make it awkward?”

“Keep the conversation light and fun.”

“What if I don’t know what to say?”

“Sometimes letting the other person break the ice first is easier.”

“And what if no one wants to talk to me?”

He sends me a dubious stare. “Half the guys here haven’t taken their eyes off you since we arrived.”

“But just say that no one does...”

“Then pursue someone you want. If the guy is too reticent to approach you, you can either say something to him or move on. Regardless, don’t be afraid to get creative.”

I grimace. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

A man approaching me is one thing, but for me to approach him is a whole other challenge—one I’m not convinced I have the courage for.

“Go at your own pace. What matters is that you have control over what happens. At the end of the day, it’s your choice whether you want to sleep with a guy or not.”

“What if someone approaches me, but I’m not interested?”

“End the conversation.” He shrugs.

I know what it’s like to be rejected, to try talking to someone when the attraction is one-sided. I hate that feeling. Why should I do the same to someone else?

“Won’t that hurt his feelings?”

“Not if you’re polite but firm. Your rejection may bruise his ego for a moment, but he’ll move on because there are tons of fish in the sea. Besides, this is about your needs.”

“I just don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

He raises a brow at me. “Would you really spend the night with someone you weren’t interested in to preserve their fragile ego?”

“Of course not.”

“Then there’s your answer.”

My thoughts whirl. “So I just focus on me?”

“Yep. Your feelings, your desires, your everything.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now you try to pick me up.”

Even the thought has my anxiety rising. My grip on my drink tightens. Nerves grip my throat until it threatens to close up. Am I ready for this?

He must notice my hesitation because he sends me a reassuring smile. “Whatever you did earlier when I started talking to you? Just strike up a conversation the exact same way. Stay calm and remember this is about fun.”

“Right. Fun.”

I take a deep breath and rise from my seat. As I leave the patio and drift into the loft, I wrack my brain for the best line. God, he made striking up an engaging conversation with a total stranger look so easy.

*He’s super hot. Of course it was easy for him.*

All he has to do is smile and women drop to their knees. I’m convinced I’m going to trip over my tongue and fall flat on my face.

No. I can do this. I’m not stupid. I’m not meek. And if tonight is any indication, I’m not a total wallflower. In fact, the thought of men anxiously waiting for me to acknowledge them makes me feel sexually powerful, like Jonathan figured out how to lay the whole world at my feet and all I have to do now is seize it.

*Let’s do this.*

I turn back to the indoor balcony, and I watch Jonathan peruse the venue as he lounges on the couch like a big cat waiting for its prey to walk by.

Dragging in a calming breath, I strut my way through the crowd, my hips rolling sensually from side to side as I approach Jonathan, bending to place a hand on his shoulder and murmur in his ear. “Hi.”

Is that sultry voice mine?

“Hey there.” He smirks as he turns toward me.

There’s his velvet voice again. It nearly trips me up. I push anxiety down.

“I’m Kiera.” I extend my hand in his direction. “What’s your name?”

“Jonathan. Nice to meet you.” He rises from his seat. “Would you care to sit with me?”

I play coy. “You sure? You seemed awfully cozy with that girl sitting next to you earlier.” I refer to myself.

“Her? Oh, we’re just friends.”

I smirk. “Then she won’t mind me stealing you away?”

“Not at all.”

I sit beside him on the couch, legs crossed as he drapes his arm over my shoulders. I try to ignore my jumpy heart rate. “So, Jonathan...I saw you across the room and thought you looked intriguing.”

“Yeah? What about me intrigues you?”

*What doesn’t?*

“You’re hot, for starters. You’re charming. You seem funny. I could go on.” I settle my hand over his free one, my skin erupting in goose bumps as we touch. Though this scenario isn’t real, what I’m saying to him is. “What do you find interesting about me?”

“How do you know I’m interested at all?”

“You haven’t left,” I point out.

He chuckles. “You got me there. You’re sexy, and I like how forward you are.”

*If only the things he’s saying were real.*

I shrug. “I had to snatch you up somehow.”

“Mission accomplished. Now what did you have in mind?”

“What are you thinking?” I send him a sultry smile.

And just like that, he seems totally hooked. Even better, our conversation was natural and easy. Why did it take me this long to figure out how to talk to a guy? I don’t know how Jonathan managed, but he somehow got me out of my head.



Because he's developed skills as an eternal bachelor? Or because I'm on the edge of being dangerously enamored with him?

Long moments pass as we stare into each other's eyes. He pulls me closer. I press my hand to his chest, my fingers touching skin that feels hot even through his shirt. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. He eases in. I lean toward him. His mouth hovers over mine. I lose my train of thought.

All I know in this moment is that I'm listening to my body. And my body wants more of him.

I don't want to get carried away...but it's hard not to. The closeness we're sharing, where I'd swear nothing but unwanted clothes separates us, feels amazing. God, I want to kiss him right now. If I leaned in and pressed my lips to his, would he push me away?

His hand wraps around my waist, bringing heat with it that flares across my skin. All sound except my chugging heart falls away. It's just us. In that moment, only he and I exist—at least in my mind.

Is this still role-play? Since it seems I've successfully picked him up, should I end this and break away?

I don't. Because I don't want this moment to end.

Would it be so wrong to stay here a little longer and hope he's feeling the pull I am?

*Yes, horrible. You needed a come-on coach to learn how to not get emotionally attached. And what are you doing on your very first outing as a student?*

I quiet my chastising inner voice. As far as I'm concerned, there's no other man in the world right now except Jonathan Knight. What is *he* feeling? I'm guessing he agreed to this deal, at least in part, because he's happy getting easy sex. For him, spending a few instructional hours with me is a no-brainer since it comes with a night of pleasure. Wait, does that mean when he takes me to bed it will merely be a pity fuck?

That makes me cringe, but why should I care if it is? Sex with him is about me letting go of my emotions and focusing on the physical. All we share is an exchange of information for orgasms, right? Or are these feelings real, and is there something deeper going on?

# Chapter Six

**Jonathan**

---

*If you shift your head and lean closer, your mouth will be on hers.*

I try to block out that voice in my head. It's right...but oh so wrong. I'm supposed to be teaching her...but I'd rather just seduce her. Pleasure her. Corrupt her.

At the thought, my heart races. I start to sweat. There's some reason I'm not supposed to want her, but when I look at her, I barely remember why. I can't think of anything but Kiera. Merely seeing her in that dress has my dick stirring. But having her panting so near me, her soft scent enveloping me, has me uncomfortably hard. What I wouldn't give to tell her that every inch is for her.

My fingers tighten around the curve of her slender waist as if it was formed for me to hold. Even that tease of a touch is like fire, and all I want to do is dive into her flames.

The longer I stare, the more she flushes rosy. Because she's attracted to me? And aroused? My guess is yes. It's wreaking havoc on my self-control.

What is it about her that has me so off-kilter?

My common sense screams at me to pull back. Push her away. Tell her she's doing a great job and play this weakness off as a teachable moment that's part of the learning process. Something.

Instead, I stare, unmoving.

As I drove to pick Kiera up, I was confident I could charm her like any other woman. I intended to have her eating out of my hand and be in complete control. Instead, I find myself at her mercy.

*You can't lose it. Not here. Not now. Not with her.*

I'm teaching her how to sleep around. That's it. There's nothing between us. I'm not even her boss right now. I'm just the guy who can give her the education she wants. Other than a paycheck, I don't matter to her at all.

Finally, I lean away. "You did great."

She blinks, her hazy stare focusing on me. "Oh. I did?"

"If I were a stranger who'd just met you, I'd ask to take you home."

"Really? I was so nervous at first."

"I didn't notice."

She smiles. "I must be getting the hang of this, then."

*More than you know.*

I clear my throat. "Can I get you another drink?"

"I'm okay. So what's the next step?"

The smart thing would be to leave here, drop her off at her door, and say a platonic goodnight. Yes, we're supposed to have sex eventually, but my head isn't screwed on straight at the moment. Even if my dick protests my logic, it would be smarter to wait.

"Normally we'd kiss, but I'm not going to suggest something you're not ready for."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "What makes you think I'm not ready for kissing?"

I'm taking a risk, but a masochistic part of me is curious to know what she'll do if I dare her. I'm also dying to kiss her. "You think you can learn to run before you walk? That you can kiss me without emotion?"

"Of course I can."

She's lying—either to me or to herself. I should exercise caution...but something—my ego? My desire?—demands I prove her wrong.

I stand, then saunter to the entrance and untie the drape. As the curtain falls and shields us from the outside world, I turn. For a moment, I see hesitation in her eyes, like she realizes we're alone. That nothing and no one can stop what happens except her.

Is Kiera having second thoughts? She should.

But she lowers her stare to my lips. Breathless anticipation overtakes her expression.

Her excitement spurs something dangerous in me.

"Can you now?" I goad as I drop to the sofa beside her.

Before I'm even settled, before I see it coming, she grabs my shirt, tugs me closer, and presses her lips against mine.

For an instant, I'm caught off guard. My heart rate spikes. Then instinct kicks in, and I take control.

After wrapping my arm around her waist, I pull her on top of me, thrust my fingers in her hair, and nudge her lips apart. I shouldn't deepen the kiss, but I can't let go until I've thoroughly tasted her fuck-me mouth.

*Her mouth isn't the only thing you want to taste.*

I surge inside to sample her with my tongue. She moans, opening to grant me complete access as her hard, little nipples sear my chest.

I groan. God, she feels too good. Every inch of my skin is alive. My desire soars. Impulse control slips away.

In the last two years, I've kissed countless women in bars like this with only one thing going through my mind: the no-strings fun we were going to share that night. Kissing Kiera feels different. More intense. More consuming. More... everything.

Without even thinking, I grip her hips and guide her onto my erection. Then I slide my hands down to her pert ass and roll up under her. She rocks against me. The rhythms of our mouths and bodies sync up. Our electric friction strips away more of my control. I feel her everywhere, in every moment, in every breath. I'm drowning in her, yet I want to be deeper. I

need to feel every part of her. I'm dying to caress, bite, and lick every inch of her creamy skin.

Why is my efficient little assistant driving me so crazy with lust?

Suddenly, the deejay whoops, encouraging everyone to party the night away and jolts me back to reality. Where we are and who we are sets in. I jerk back, gasping and trying to slow my heart while the sounds of her hot, heavy breaths resound over the thumping beats of the electronica tune.

Holy shit, that got fucking hot fucking fast. I feel like I just played chicken with a truck.

"See?" She shrugs. "Doesn't mean anything."

What? Is Kiera saying she felt nothing? That is *not* possible. Her pupils are dilated. Her mouth is swollen. Her nipples are beyond erect. If I reached my hand under that dress, I'm sure I'd find her wet and ready. Hell, everything about her says she's eager to be fucked.

*How about you rectify that sooner rather than later?*

Damn it, I can't. Well, I shouldn't. Making out is one thing. But sex? It's a bad idea for so many reasons. I'd love to. God, I really would. And if I asked, I have a feeling she'd say yes.

It's so tempting...and so dangerous. All I want to do is satisfy my need to take her in every way known to man, then invent a few more and try those, too.

But if I do, what happens?

"Yeah, nothing at all," I lie right back as I sit up.

Awkwardly, Kiera stands and adjusts the hem of her dress with a laugh. "Um, red isn't your color."

"What?"

"I got lipstick on your face." She hands me a cocktail napkin. "Sorry."

After wiping my mouth free of her vivid red shade, I laugh, mostly to find normalcy. "It's all good."

“So...” She sucks in a shaky inhalation and wrings her hands. “Since we successfully picked each other up, is this the part where you take me home and take me to bed? You know, so I can practice not caring some more.”

My heart stops. “Only if you’re comfortable. If it’s too soon, if you’re not ready, that’s totally understandable and—”

“Your place or mine?”

Is this really happening? “Are you sure?”

She shrugs like she’s got everything under control. “If I could kiss you without emotion getting in the way, I’m pretty confident I can sleep with you without getting attached.”

I start to call bullshit. Then I realize all her reactions were merely byproducts of lust. Our kiss made me *feel* something—a reaction I haven’t had to a woman in years. Am I projecting my feelings onto her?

Damn, I can’t let that slide. And I can’t repeat my mistake.

“If you say so.” I play it cool. “For future reference, you’ll always want to have sex at your place. It’s safer.”

“Why?”

“Your home is what you’re familiar with. Consider it home-court advantage. Also, no walk of shame.”

“Oh, makes sense.”

Deep down, I think she deserves better. She deserves a man who will give her everything she wants both physically and emotionally. A man devoted to her. But that’s not the future she’s chosen.

She chose me to settle for less.

That thought irks me as we leave the club and I drive back to Kiera’s apartment. Most of the silent trip, she stares out the window. What is going on in that head of hers? Her quiet unsettles me. She shouldn’t be this pensive if we’re about to have sex.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She turns in my direction. “What? Oh, yeah. I’m fine.”

“You seem awfully quiet.”

“Lost in thought.”

“Something specific on your mind? Are you sure you want to do this?”

She hesitates, then nods. “The thing is, I haven’t had sex...for some time. And I’m not sure what to expect with you.”

“I get that, since sex hasn’t been great for you in the past.”

“It’s been...meh at best.”

Translation, it sucked. “Did you talk with either of those guys before getting busy?”

“About sex?” Her brows furrow. “Why would I do that?”

“Neither of you communicated what you wanted in bed?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

Those guys were so focused on their own dicks, they didn’t bother to ask what she wanted? “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t know that I should. I thought expressing what I wanted in bed would be imposing.”

Which is probably why the sex sucked. It’s impossible to be with someone and have them know your body the way you do without some form of communication. I need her to realize that.

“No. Telling someone what you need is not imposing. It’s being honest. It creates a better experience for both you and your partner.”

She shrugs. “I just figured whatever did it for him would do it for me.”

Is she fucking kidding? She should have a man who asks her what she needs and works tirelessly to give it to her. She



deserves a man she can rely on to make her feel good all the time, every time.

“Their satisfaction isn’t the same as yours. It isn’t more important, either. It’s your sex life, too. What do you want during sex?”

The way she blinks at my question tells me I caught her off guard.

“I’ve never given it much thought.”

Seriously? She doesn’t have fantasies? I assumed the fact she’d never orgasmed during sex was purely because her previous partners were selfish. But it’s more complicated than that.

“Now is your chance. If you’re worried about being embarrassed, don’t be. This is a judgement-free zone.” I change tactics. “What was it like the first time you had sex?”

“Awkward and clumsy. We were each other’s first. He lasted for, maybe, eleven seconds. He kept saying he had a great time. For me, it was painful and disappointing, but I told him I liked it, too.”

Sad but common. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Listen, I don’t have much expectation for tonight other than to feel good and to have an orgasm.”

“An orgasm. One? That’s all you want?”

“Yes.”

*Sweetheart, I’ll give you a heap of them.*

“What are some things you like? Any specific foreplay or positions?”

“As long as I get an orgasm, I don’t think it matters.”

“Trust me, it does.”

“One thing at a time, okay?”

Since she seems reticent to tell me her deepest, darkest fantasies, I downshift. “Sure. We can play it that way.”

I'm going to have to watch her carefully, pay attention to her body's cues, if I want to give her a satisfying experience. I'm cool with that. In fact, I like the idea of being the man who finally gives her the satisfaction she craves. It also gives me a chance to get closer to her. To see her unravel. To coax her to show me the real her. To earn her trust.

"Thank you for understanding."

"Of course."

Tonight needs to be special. If I can persuade her to focus on her own pleasure and take her to the heights she's aching to go, maybe then she'll see sex as something amazing, not mediocre.

After turning into the parking lot of her apartment complex, I pull my car into a space, then escort Kiera upstairs.

Our unexpectedly in-sync moments are something I haven't really experienced with anyone, especially since my split with Amber. Tonight is one of the few times I've been myself around a woman. It's more comfortable than it should be. It's...nice.

After unlocking the door, Kiera enters, setting her purse in the kitchen. When I step inside, I see two cats scamper away just before I close the door behind us and turn the lock. The sound seems too loud in the quiet. Kiera faces me in the shadowy room. Our eyes meet. We're alone. Even feet apart, I feel the heat between us. My heart starts chugging.

*Calm down. It's sex. Just sex. You've been doing this for years.*

Why does being with Kiera feel like more?

I approach her, closing the distance. Quickly, she lowers her gaze, her cheeks turning pink.

I hook a finger under her chin. "Look at me. We can take this as slowly as you like. But I need to know how you feel, whether it's good or uncomfortable or whatever."

"O-okay."

This is it. I finally have her all to myself. Normally, I'd have a woman horizontal in seconds, but I've promised Kiera more. She deserves that. She doesn't just need to get laid. She needs to be seduced.

Kiera glances my way with big eyes, looking unsure but anticipating what will happen next. Then she slowly slides her hands up my arms, fingers curling around my biceps. I feel my way from her waist to her hips and hold in a groan as she wraps her arms around my neck. I swoop down to take her mouth.

One taste of her sweetness, and all the desire I managed to push aside during the drive lurches forward. Hunger overwhelms me. I need more of Kiera. I need her closer. I need her needing me. I need her now. The way I'm determined to make her open herself to me and scream my name is fucked up. It won't lead anywhere good.

I can't stop it.

Bending, I grip her thighs and lift her against the adjacent wall. She wraps her legs around my hips. A soft moan escapes her as I drive my aching erection against her pussy. The sweetness of her skin is just waiting for me, so I kiss across her jaw and down her neck, delving toward her breasts as she pulls at the back of my shirt.

She's right; it has to go.

Reluctantly I set her on her feet, tear off my shirt, and throw it to the side, not caring where it lands. Her greedy stare eats me up as I lay my palms against the wall on either side of her head and pin her in place, towering over her. She palms her way across my chest, then glides her fingers down my abs. Every touch is like velvet lightning. I can't keep my groan in, especially when she uses my belt loops to pull me even closer and stands on her tiptoes, her mouth slanted just under mine in invitation. It's impossible not to give in to the tug between us.

As I dive deep into her kiss, I grope under her skirt and beneath her damp panties to circle her sweetly swollen clit.

A gasp escapes her lips, quickly replaced with soft kitten moans. “What are you doing to me?”

“Giving you what you want. What you need and deserve.”

I continue to swirl slow, torturous circles around her bud, watching her eyes slide shut and her breathing pick up. Her moans grow louder. She’s getting close, and she’ll go over the edge if I don’t stop. I don’t want her to have this orgasm in the kitchen, mainly because I’m worried we’ll never make it to the bedroom. Kiera needs more than an against-the-wall quickie. I want to take my time with her.

Gritting my teeth, I pull my hand away. Her eyes pop open. Confusion and frustration morph across her face. She lets out an impatient little whine.

“Patience, sweetheart,” I murmur. “All in good time.”

I take her hand and guide her to her bedroom, but I want more of her. My greedy lips seize hers. My palms roam her body, encouraged by her groans. Slowly, we bump and grind down the hall. It takes forever to reach her bedroom, and the anticipation is excruciating.

Finally, we make it to the foot of the bed where she ends our kiss, panting. “Jonathan...”

I freeze. “Second thoughts?”

If she was having them, she’d be smart...

“No.”

“Then you’re overdressed.”

“You want me to take my clothes off?”

The teasing note in her question surprises me. Given how shy and inexperienced she is, I expected to coax her out of her shell, but she’s showing so much confidence. Because she’s truly in the moment? Or because she’s putting on a brave face? Regardless, I know she wants this. I see it in the way her skin is turning rosier with arousal, in the way her smile communicates without saying a word.

I fucking can't wait to make her mine.

For the night, of course.

I grab the hem of her dress before tugging the garment up her body and over her head, finally tossing it aside as she kicks off the stilettos. Suddenly, she's wearing only a white lace demi-bra I swear I can see through and a matching thong that's even more transparent.

My heart jumps into my throat. "You look...beautiful."

"You look nice yourself." She sinks down to the mattress, then splays herself across the bed. Moonlight slants in through the window, shining over her in a silvery shimmer. She looks angelic...but she's one-hundred-percent temptation.

I can't resist.

After I follow her to the bed, I slide between her legs and lean over her, brushing my lips over hers. I don't mean to linger. But after one taste, it's not enough. There's something about her... She sucks me in. I can't seem to get enough of her.

I caress her curves as I skim my lips over the fine silk of her throat. Her scent incites my olfactory senses and screws with my brain. Desire flares even hotter, the flames threatening to torch my self-control, and I haven't even gotten her naked. What is this woman doing to me?

I swipe one last kiss across her soft lips before I explore my way to the plump swells of her breasts that spill over her bra. The lace obstruction has to go.

After working my hand beneath her, I feel my way to the clasp. She arches, easing my access. A few seconds and a pinch of my fingers later, I toss her bra across the room and stare down at her tight berry nipples.

I'm speechless.

I cup her breasts in awe. They fit perfectly in my hands. They're everything I imagined when I salivated over them. They're everything I fantasized about as I pleased myself last night. And I can't wait to get them in my mouth.

Dipping my head, I suck and lick at her left nipple, my tongue laving her softness as I gently knead her breasts with both hands. A little gasp escapes her when I nip at her sensitive crest. Then she arches up, inviting me to do it again.

Greedily, I accept.

For long minutes, I lavish that nipple with all my attention, drinking her in, alternating between suction and soft swipes of my tongue until her distended tip is sensitive to my every touch. Then, as I shift my focus to the other crest, I glance at Kiera's face. Her eyes are closed. She's lost in utter bliss and completely open to me in every way.

Her honesty and trust are breathtakingly beautiful.

During sex, I usually don't even take the time to appreciate a woman's face. I focus on her tits, on her pussy or ass, on pleasure in general. I listen to her sounds. I gauge her arousal by the desperation of her touch. I get her to orgasm quickly so I can follow and get the hell out. But this—watching desire spill across Kiera's soft features—doesn't merely stiffen my cock; it hits me somewhere in the chest. I'm doing that to her. I'm making her feel good. I'm giving her something she wants and needs.

That makes me feel amazing.

In rapt fascination, I watch Kiera writhe as I lower my head and kiss, lick, pinch, and caress her other nipple, lavishing the attention on it that I gave the first. Her face is a revelation.

*That's just the beginning, sweetheart.*

That's what I silently promise her as I kiss my way down her sternum and past her belly button, heading straight for the holy grail in her teeny-tiny panties.

"You still good?" I ask.

"Yes," she whines. "Don't stop. Please."

"I won't." I glide my palms up her thighs until I find the elastic of her underwear clinging to her hips and pull the little

white garment down, tossing it aside. The second they're gone, her feminine musk hits my nostrils.

"How do you feel?" I ask as I lay beside her again.

"Amazing." She looks up at me with welcoming eyes. "I want more."

"With pleasure," I promise as I work two fingers inside her.

Gasping, Kiera tightens on my digits, clamping down and crushing me. I can't wait to get inside of her, to feel her surround and grip me. To be as close to her as a man can be.

Curbing my impatience, I curl my fingers inside her, then press my thumb against her clit, making small, slow circles. Her moans turn louder, breathier, more urgent. Her hands fist into balls as she grips the sheet. Her eyes are shut tight as she loses herself in the sensation. She's getting close to that orgasm. And watching her unravel for me is everything.

"Please, please," she implores. "It's right there. I can feel... Oh, god."

"I like it when you beg." I whisper.

"Jonathan..." Her breathing accelerates, and her hips lift. "Oh. Oh. *Oh!*"

With that, she comes completely undone, back arched, her mouth shaped in a shocked little O. Her eyes squeeze shut as her whole body bucks and her sweet nectar coats my fingers.

Watching her orgasm might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. It's satisfying to know I've given her pleasure, but it's thrilling as fuck to know I'm the first man. The only man.

I have this suspicion that once I taste her...there will be no going back. But that's a later-me problem. Or am I getting carried away? Yeah. I probably need to downshift. Be cool. Treat this like any other one-night stand. How else can she learn?

But when I look at her again—now wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked, eyes misty and full of wonder—all I care about is making her feel good again.

Slowly, I pull my fingers free and slip them into my mouth, closing my eyes as I savor her sweet juice. “You taste amazing, Kiera.”

She gives me a lazy smile. “That felt...wow.”

If she liked that, I’m going to blow her mind next...

Kneeling on the floor at the foot of the bed, I circle her hips with my hands and pull her close before bending to kiss her inner thighs. Slowly, so slowly, I make my way up to where she’s still pouting and ripe. Settling her legs over my shoulders, I dip my head between her thighs and breathe onto her clit. Instantly, she gasps, her body trembling.

So sensitive. So perfect.

Closing my eyes, I lap my tongue over her swollen folds. The taste of her from my fingers was merely an appetizer. This is the full meal, and her flavor hits my taste buds like the most delicious sweet cream. I grip her thighs and bury my face in her. In response, she tugs on my scalp and lifts to me, offering even more of herself.

I can feel the trust she’s putting in my hands in the way she gives herself over to me. It makes my heart thrash in my chest. Every cell in my body strains closer to her as I make circles around her sensitive clit before sucking it into my mouth.

“Oh, my god, yes!” Her cries of pleasure ring in my ears as her breathing turns heavy and choppy.

I amp up my pace against her turgid nub, keeping at her until her body turns taut and she keens out my name again in a long wrenching cry, her nails scratching at my scalp.

Slowly, she comes down from her peak. I drink her in like she’s the only water supply left in this world until she starts twitching each time I hit a sensitive spot. Reluctantly, I pull away, kissing a trail up to her lips. She wraps her arms around me with a welcoming sigh as I settle between her legs. Her



face, which I've seen for weeks in meetings, over professional correspondence, and always efficiently pulled together, now looks damp and rosy. She stares at me like I'm a god. Like I'm her everything.

It goes straight to my chest.

Holy fuck.

"Thank you," she breathes. "That was...beyond."

"We're not done yet, sweetheart." I have to be inside her.

I climb off the bed, removing my pants and underwear along the way. My cock springs free. I look up to find Kiera's hazy stare on me, her eyes wide.

"I-I've never been with anyone that big before."

"Don't worry, I'll ease in slow." I grab a condom from my pants pocket and rip open the package, rolling the latex down my shaft.

I'm surprised and thrilled when I climb on top of her again and she automatically opens to me, spreading her legs without hesitation. She genuinely wants me, and she's not trying to hide it or act like this doesn't matter. It's different. It's heady.

I settle into the cradle of her thighs, my mouth hovering over hers. "Kiera?"

"I want this. Don't stop now."

As I position myself at her entrance, I hesitate. "I'm not going anywhere. We're doing this together."

Her gaze locks on mine as I start nudging my way into her small passage. I have a hard time breathing. I feel myself shaking. My heart rattles out of control.

What the hell?

I inch in a bit more. She's so damn tight. Beads of sweat form on my temple. Sensation flares across my skin and zips up my spine, like someone hooked me up to a light socket.

Maybe this is a rip-off-the-bandage moment. I just need to ease back, take a breath, then plunge deep. Then we'll get this thing going.

But when I do, plunging to the hilt, heat instantly razes my system. It consumes me.

Kiera's eyes flare wide. We gasp together.

I'm fully inside her. Jesus, her pussy feels so good, I could stay burrowed inside her forever. Merely being with her sets me on fire.

Supposedly, I'm showing her how to fuck for a night... but I have a feeling I'm the one about to be fucked. Even so, it's too late to stop. I want her too much. Consequences be damned.

She grips my shoulders tight. Then her head slides back, and her lips part. Pleasure suffuses her face. Whatever discomfort she felt is gone.

I stay inside her unmoving for a few more moments, letting her adjust. But her pussy clenches me, a squeeze-squeeze-squeeze that's already diving me to the edge of my control.

"Sweetheart?" If she tells me it's too much and to stop now, I'm going to die.

"More," she pants out.

*Thank fuck.*

Slowly, I pull out halfway, then push in again. Kiera moves with me each time until I establish a steady, strong cadence to the rhythm of our heartbeats. Until our breaths are in sync.

Sex with her is so much different than I imagined. The motions are familiar—but nothing about the way she makes me feel is. I keep watching her face. The surprise, the wonder, the pleasure... They all make me see sex through her less-than-jaded lens for the marvel this is. We're two people not just sharing a few hours, a bed, and a little sweat. We're sharing bodies, bliss, and breaths. We're not just making

friction. We're making something that feels dangerously like more than sex I'll forget ten minutes after it's over.

Kiera licks her lips. Her breathing turns rough. Her eyes slide shut—and I hate that. I don't want to just look at her face. I need to see inside her thoughts. I can't stand the thought of her shutting me out of a moment we spend together.

Where is this coming from? What the hell is going on with me?

I don't know. I can't stop to think. I just know I have to have all of her.

“Look at me,” I growl, pinning her wrists to the mattress above her head with one hand, then lifting her hips to me with the other so I can hit her G-spot. “Open your eyes.”

She shakes her head. “It's too much.”

Too intimate? Because she thinks she's giving too much of herself to me?

“It's never going to be enough. Look at me. Know who's fucking you, sweetheart,” I demand, now increasing my speed with each thrust.

The growing pleasure makes me feel light-headed and wasted. It floods my body, bends my spine, and does something to my brain that makes me believe Kiera could be mine. If I'm not careful, I'll become addicted to her.

*What if you already are?*

That terrifies me.

“Kiera?” I grind out, pushing my way inside her again and again, driven on by the roughening sounds of her breaths and the slam of her feminine padded headboard banging against the wall. I'm going out of my mind. “I need you to fucking look at me.”

Desperation wrenches the words from my throat. Thankfully, she complies, her lashes lifting to expose her big hazel eyes. Yeah, and they're filled with softness and pleading. They're clinging like I'm the answer to all her prayers.

They're telling me that she's ripe for my taking, not just sexually but forever.

That should scare the absolute hell out of me. Instead, it spurs me to plunge deeper, down into her as far as she'll let me while I hold her closer. Hell, I don't even want to blink.

Her cries of rising bliss reverberate throughout the room. Slowly, her lips form an O. Blush stains her cheeks. Her eyes burst wide. "Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god!"

I do my best to hold myself together as I watch her quickly unravel with what could be the most devastating orgasm of the night.

Determined to give it to her, I fill her with one stroke after the other. But I'm losing myself to the ecstasy threatening to dismantle me. I can't hold on much longer.

*Keep steady. Not until she's there.*

Kiera suddenly screams, clamping down on me so tight, I can hardly move. She's at orgasm, and her muscles threaten to push me from the heaven of her pussy, but I fight my way back in, keeping cadence until I can't hold back anymore. Breaths and heartbeats roar between my ears, blending with the sounds of her pleasure as I moan loudly, letting myself explode inside her.

A long moment of silence passes as we listen to each other's breathing. When mine finally normalizes and I can somewhat feel my legs again, I nuzzle my face into her neck. I focus on her scent, her skin.

"Wow." She pants. "That's what it's supposed to feel like?"

I don't know what the hell to say. I don't even know what that was. Sex...but more. I can't lie and tell her that's the kind of connection she should expect with every guy she fucks. I don't want to think about the fact I'm supposed to be teaching her how to fuck me and forget me so she can move onto someone else.

I don't say anything at all. I need space. I need air. I need sanity.

Forcing myself to pull free from her, I find her adjoining bathroom and dump the used condom in the trash. But when I return to Kiera's room, she's still laid flat across her mussed bed, eyes half closed. The air caresses her nipples. She's wearing a half smile. She looks like a wet dream.

I'm so tempted to dig for another condom, crawl between her legs again, and spend the rest of the night there. The thought has my dick standing at attention. Physically, I could do it, but emotionally?

*Don't do it, buddy. She already got to you. It's called a one-night stand for a reason.*

And she specifically asked me to teach her how to do just that. That means she wanted the full experience. If I'm going to give it to her—and get my head together—I can't linger.

“You good?” I ask, grabbing my pants and underwear from the floor and putting them back on.

When I sit on the edge of the bed to don my shoes, she sits up and half crawls in my lap, pressing her chest to mine. “That was amazing. Thank you.”

“I'm just glad you've had the chance to feel real pleasure.”

“I did.” Her brows furrow. “Why are you leaving so soon?”

The sad little note in her voice tugs at me. I resist. Logically, I know what I'm doing is right. I should go. But everything inside me says otherwise. Some part of me is worried that leaving is a big mistake.

*Yeah, your dick. She wants you to stay because she wants more of that. She's not really into you.*

I try my best to shove down my rising emotions. I have to get the fuck out of here.

“After the sex, usually the guy—me—would leave, and you'd never see me again.”

She withdraws to the bed next to me, taking all her warmth with her and using the sheet to cover up every exposed

inch she can. “Right. Because it doesn’t mean anything. Got it.”

A pang of guilt hits me like a semi as I stand. This is for the best. I have nothing to feel bad about. I gave her what she asked for. But that all seems like excuses. She sounds gutted, and there’s nothing I want more than to spend the night beside her. Hell, inside her.

“That’s the way it works.” I turn to her and paste on a fake smile.

“I’ll get used to that with practice.”

Why doesn’t she just fucking stab me? “You will.”

She nods and looks away. We really have nothing left to say. The preplanned speech I was going to give her about showering me off the minute I left and not rubbing two thoughts about me together again? I can’t say it. I can’t bring myself to. I should. It would be wise...

Instead, I stand. Stare. Why is it so difficult for me to leave? It’s not like I’ll never see her again.

“I guess I’ll see you on Monday?” she murmurs.

I force a half smile. “Yeah. Monday. Sleep well.” I hesitate, fighting with myself one last time. Stay or go? Finally, I clear my throat. “Be sure to lock the door behind me.”

“I will.”

Clenching my fists, I leave her bedroom, refusing to look back. I find my shirt on the kitchen floor and slam my way out the door. As I drive through the dark, I can’t help but replay that whole night in my mind. The things I did. The things I wished I did. The things I want to do to her again...and again. The regret that I didn’t. And the fear that, if I keep thinking like this, I’ll never be able to let her go when the time comes.

# Chapter Seven

*Monday, May 16*

**Kiera**

---

“**Y**ou did it, didn’t you?” Kami almost squeals as she walks into the kitchen with a knowing smile across her face.

“What do you mean?” I play coy as I sit at the table eating my cereal.

“Girl, I may have just gotten back late last night, but you can’t fool me. You’re in a happy mood, your skin is glowing, and you’ve got that grin on your face. You totally fucked him.”

I try not to, but I feel myself blush. “Is it that obvious?”

After three sexless years, Jonathan was exactly what I needed. The utter toe-curling bliss was like nothing I’ve ever felt before and everything I imagined. Memories of Friday night left me giddy. The rest of the weekend, I felt so relaxed, like all my tension had melted away. But as Monday approached, I started wondering what it would be like once I saw him again.

*Don’t make it awkward. He said it would only be awkward if you made it that way...*

“Only because I know you. I’m so happy you finally got that screaming O.”

“More like screaming O’s, plural.”

“That’s my girl!” She hugs me in excitement. “We need to celebrate.”

I slant her a glance that suggests she get serious. “Because I had sex?”

“Because your dry spell is broken! How did it feel? I want every juicy detail.”

As her friend, I want to share. But as a woman, especially a shy one, I want to keep the details all mine because they’re so special.

I expected sex between Jonathan and me to seem like just sex. Good sex. But I didn’t anticipate it to be so personal. I didn’t think I’d feel so connected to him. Not only was I more than willing to give myself to him, it was as if we were each other’s lifeline. I tried not to have any preconceived notions or expect anything more than he was willing to give. And I tried so hard not to let my emotions get involved. But between all his kisses, caresses, seemingly possessive glances, and yes, the spine-melting orgasms, my walls slowly dissolved, leaving me wide-open and vulnerable.

That man left no part of me untouched. He took his time, heaping the kind of pleasure on me I’d never felt from a man. That didn’t shock me. After all, I’d come to him, at least in part, because of my severe orgasm deficit. But Jonathan went even beyond that. One orgasm after the next, he fulfilled my wildest fantasies. When we collapsed together, all I could think about was doing it again.

“Let’s just say he put my vibrator to shame.”

That’s something I didn’t see coming.

Over and over, I’ve replayed Friday night in my head. Jonathan kept his promise; he didn’t disappoint. The way my toes curled when he kissed me... The way I gripped the sheets when he touched me... The way my back arched when he licked me as the ecstasy broke over me until I could no longer hold it in... Those orgasms seemed to go on forever. I wanted them to. I felt so alive. Having him inside me packed me full, left me insatiable, and had me feeling so close to him.

Which is exactly what I wasn’t supposed to feel. But I’m finding that loving the sex—rather than the man giving it to me—is easier said than done.



And I can't help but wonder if he realized that. Is that why he ran out so quickly afterward? Sure, he said it was because that's the expectation of a one-night stand, but I'm not sure that's true. Kami sometimes lets guys stay all night.

*It didn't mean anything to him. He fucked you. That's it.*

And I promised Jonathan he would be nothing more to me. So whatever feelings I have? I need to bury them.

Kami claps. "I knew it! I knew he'd get the job done."

"Oh, he did." And then some. Every time I think about it, I tingle.

"You're thinking about sex with him right now, aren't you?" Kami smirks.

"Of course not."

"Liar! You're blushing." She laughs. "It's okay to admit it, especially since the sex was good."

"Yeah, I'm just trying not to make a big deal out of it. You know. Things between us at the office can't be weird. And remember, you cannot tell a soul."

"My lips are sealed, but only if I get more details."

"Fine. I'll tell you more tonight." Kami won't leave me in peace until I do. Besides, Friday night would never have happened without her little shove.

"Ugh. The anticipation. How dare you make me wait for such juicy tea."

"It's good for you. Builds character." I laugh.

She sticks out her tongue and waves as she leaves for the office. I'm only a few minutes behind her, putting on my shoes and grabbing a light sweater to fend off the surprisingly chilly morning.

Twenty minutes later, I walk into the conference room for our weekly Monday meeting. I can't deny that I feel apprehensive. It's one thing to tell myself that last Friday night with Jonathan wasn't emotional and nothing has changed between us, but will I believe that once he and I are in same

room? The man was inside me, making me shiver with delight and shaking me to the very core barely more than forty-eight hours ago. I fear the line between lust and love is blurring.

*It has to be lust. He gave you the best sex you've ever had.*

Right, that makes more sense. Once I fulfill my end of the bargain and give him a suitable date for his ex's wedding and I've slept with someone else, I'm free to do as I please with my newfound sexual knowledge.

At the head of the long table, Jonathan sits, reading a piece of paper in his capable hands. He looks deep in concentration. I let out a nervous breath. If he's cool and collected, then maybe I can follow his lead and it'll all be okay.

As I approach to find my seat behind him, he looks up. Our stares lock. His face sharpens. Damn it, his blue eyes have me entranced again, only it's different now. I know his kiss. I know his touch. I know his body.

And he knows me, too. Does it show? He used to look at me professionally. This stare burns. I feel singed from head to toe, just as alive staring right now as I was writhing under him in ecstasy. My ache is so deep that my knees feel weak. I can hardly breathe.

I need to blink. Look away. Something. I can't appear enamored. I can't let my feelings show. I'm terrified someone can see right through my facade.

As I come closer, his stare never wavers. "Good morning, Ms. Young."

I jolt at the sound of his voice. It's not as smooth as usual. Is he...nervous?

"Good morning, Mr. Knight." Stiffly, I smile and wrench my gaze free, then sit quietly behind him, praying I disappear into the background.

Mia and Nathan Knight, along with Mr. Hall, greet everyone as they enter, then take their seats around the table.

Jonathan buries his head in his paper, saying nothing to anyone. Avoiding me?

I only have a few minutes to worry about that before he stands. “Now that everyone is here, we’ll get started.”

Almost immediately, he turns things over to his brother. Though nothing out of the ordinary happens, I have a hard time paying attention to the meeting. I’m so close to Jonathan I can smell his cologne. I try to focus on Nathan speaking. Jake follows. I try not to stare a hole into the back of Jonathan’s head, but I can’t seem to help myself. It’s like I have a terrible eighth-grade crush again, and I’m silently screaming at the boy I like to turn around and look at me.

It’s ridiculous. I need to stop.

After more discussion, Jake turns the proceedings back over to Jonathan, who stands. “T-thanks, team, for your input. I’ll, um...take all this information under advisement for, you know, when I make my final decisions. As usual, you all have been very, um...thorough in your reports. Your questions are well thought-out and... So, um...thanks. For that, obviously.”

“Mr. Knight, can you walk us again through the changes to the reporting structure in Engineering?” asks one of the newer employees.

“Sure.” But he doesn’t. And when he approaches the whiteboard and uncaps the waiting pen, sweat beads at his temples. “The top of the structure hasn’t changed. You still, um...report to Jake and I...um, don’t anticipate the changes affecting everyone, so...yeah.”

“But you said last week they would, that we would all have new bosses and groups. Is that not true?”

Jonathan swallows and turns. Frantically, he scans the room. He looks anxious, and I know he’s not worried about this reshuffling to people. It doesn’t even involve him.

Plucking up the stack of papers on the table, he scans each. Is he looking for his notes? The proposed org chart? I would have had it ready if I’d thought he needed it. He talked

about this shuffle last week off the top of his head and nothing has changed. What has him so rattled?

Suddenly, he slams the papers down. And his stare falls on me like a thousand-pound weight. It feels like an accusation.

Since I came to work at KH Industries, Jonathan has always been cool under pressure—until now. What is going on? Did I miss something?

“Are you okay?” I mouth silently.

He doesn’t answer, just jerks his stare to the front of the room, hands fidgeting at his sides.

It’s all I can do not to go to him, help him, when he’s obviously struggling.

“Jonathan?” Mia prompts, her expression concerned.

“Yeah. We should...um, focus on... What were we talking about?” Before anyone can answer, he clears his throat and takes another glance at me. “Never mind. I’m sorry.”

After that growl, Jonathan marches out of the conference room, pushing his way out the door like he can’t escape fast enough.

I stare after him as his siblings and best friend try to hide their confusion and calm the employees. Quickly, they rise and excuse everyone. Jake promises to get back to the new guy who asked the question. Then he, Mia, and Nathan all exit the room before the masses, no doubt to look for Jonathan.

I remain seated, gaping and shocked, trying to sort through my thoughts. But I come back to the same conclusion. Jonathan Knight rushed out of his own staff meeting without an explanation, and I have no idea why.

“What’s with him?” Kami approaches me as the last few people exit.

“I have no idea.”

Kami looks over her shoulder, scanning the room to ensure it’s empty.

“I think it has something to do with you.”

My belly flips as I turn my gaze to her. “Me? I barely said a word to him.”

“You didn’t have to, especially if you rocked his world just as much as he rocked yours.”

“I highly doubt I’m the cause. It was just sex. He said that himself.”

“Uh-huh. Guys say a lot of things. But I saw the way he was looking at you.”

“You’re delusional. That can’t be. There’s no way.” I stand and leave the conference room with her. “He’s not into me. He made that very clear.”

“You keep telling yourself that, but I saw what I saw,” she whispers.

Is it possible she’s right? I cover my gaping mouth with my hand. Even if she is, what difference would it make? Jonathan and I had made a promise to each other to hit it, quit it, and forget it. It’s a promise I have to keep.



Nearly two hours have passed since Jonathan walked out of this morning’s meeting and shut himself in his office. The only contact I’ve had from him since was a terse email instructing me to cancel all his appointments and ensure he’s undisturbed for the rest of the day. What’s going on? What should I do? I have questions, yet I worry I already know the answers. Did I somehow cause his distress?

I don’t know what else to think. As far as I know, nothing is wrong in the organization. But I’ve never seen him so agitated and discombobulated before. Based on Jake’s and his siblings’ reactions, neither have they.

I’m deep in my train of thought, staring blankly at Jonathan’s office doors and willing them to open, when my phone rings. The caller ID tells me it’s Kami.

“Hey.”

“Hey, girl. Anything new yet? Do you know what happened?”

Quickly, I scan the hallway to see if anyone is lurking or listening, but the coast is clear. “No, he’s still in his office.”

“You haven’t talked to him?”

“Other than one email from him, no.”

“Hang in there. Maybe he’s just having an off Monday. It’ll be okay.” She assures. “Anyway, I’m heading out to lunch in about thirty. Want to meet up at that seafood place?”

“Sure thing. I just have to finish up the meeting minutes”—with what little business talk I retained—“then I’ll be on my way.”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

“See you.” I hang up.

My stare immediately drifts to Jonathan’s office door again. I’m so torn. Maybe he needs a shoulder. Or an ear. Despite his edict insisting he be left alone, shouldn’t someone at least check on him, ensure he’s all right? After all, what if he needs some lunch or water or a hug?

Yes, I’m rationalizing, but I can’t stand it. I hate not knowing if he’s okay. And if I might be the cause of his distress, shouldn’t I be the one to find out?

But when I tiptoe to his doors and try to pull them open, they’re locked.

With a sigh, I trudge back to my desk. I do my best with the meeting minutes before quickly emailing them off to Jonathan, along with a message that I’m leaving for lunch shortly and to let me know if he needs anything.

As soon as I hit the `SEND` button, I sense someone in front of my desk. Could it be Jonathan? Does he want to talk?

Quickly, I glance up excitedly. Instead, I find Dan. His face is blotchy, and he looks stressed.

“Hi, Dan. Can I help you with something?” I give him my professional smile.

“I need to speak to Mr. Knight immediately. It’s urgent.”

“Unfortunately, he’s requested focus time and isn’t to be disturbed for the rest of the day.” I scan his calendar for something later in the week. “I can schedule you for Wednesday morning, if you’d like.”

Dan glowers. “No, I wouldn’t like that. I’m sure the boss has a lot on his plate, but what I’m working on is time sensitive, Ms. Young. You need to tell him it’s critical that I see him today.”

“I’m sorry, Dan. Really. Mr. Knight’s orders were very clear. He’s not to be disturbed today. He’s already booked up tomorrow. Wednesday morning is his first available. That’s all I can do right now. Do you want it?”

“All you can do? I don’t have time for ‘all you can do.’ I need you to march in there and persuade him to see me before my project and the months of effort that went into it fall apart.”

“I understand your frustration. I’m sorry. Unfortunately, as I said, Mr. Knight isn’t to be disturbed, period.”

Dan’s jaw twitches, and it’s obvious he’s grinding his teeth. “Why do you suck at your job? You never seem able to make shit happen when I need it. This project is for *his* benefit. He’s the one who assigned it to me and designated it a top priority. And now that it’s all coming together, he’s holed up, and you don’t have the sway to even mention to him that this might all go down the toilet?” He sighs, then mutters under his breath, “Worthless cunt.”

I gape at him. Granted, he didn’t direct his words *at* me, but he said them about me. “Excuse me? What did you just call me?”

“Oh, don’t think you’re going to turn your ineptitude on me. I’m entitled to my opinion, goddamn it!” He slams his fists on my desk.

The bang of his temper spikes my adrenaline, seizes my heart, and sends the pictures of my family and friends clattering across my desk before my favorite, one of me with

my parents at my college graduation, tumbles to the floor. Vaguely, I hear glass shatter, and I'm angry. That frame was a gift from my older sister, Alyson. But I can't deal with that now. I don't dare look away with Dan snarling in my face. I've never worried about him before, but now I'm seriously anxious that he intends to come across my desk to...do something. Would he physically hurt me?



## **Jonathan**

“You okay, man?” Jake asks over the phone. “You seemed pretty shaken this morning.”

Damn it, I knew this question was coming. I canceled my appointments for the rest of the day so this situation would have time to blow over while I came up with a cover story. And, of course, tried not to freak out.

But it's too late for that, isn't it?

Son of a bitch. I came in this morning fully confident that Friday night was a fluke and I had enough distance to be totally cool and professional with Kiera. But the moment she walked in and I set eyes on her, my train of thought—along with my verbal skills—dissolved. Sure, I've got them back now that she isn't brain-scramblingly close. But I fucking hope no one guesses that my assistant rocking my world is the reason for this morning's outburst.

“I've got a lot going on.” That's true; I do. I just hope my best friend buys this until I can think of a better excuse.

“About what? If you've got too much on your plate, I can pitch in.”

It's a hell of an offer, especially since I know Jake is incredibly busy, too. My immediate instinct is to thank him and promise I'll get everything under control. But I hesitate. At some point, I have to say something to Jake about Kiera. I feel like shit that I haven't. After all, he suggested I take her to the wedding, not take her to bed. Never owning up to the truth would make me a liar and a traitor. I'm neither.



On the other hand, I should protect Kiera, too. She'd be so embarrassed if anyone found out about her sex life. And I don't want her future at KH Industries to be adversely impacted because I didn't keep my mouth shut.

But half this company belongs to Jake, and my agreement with her is a potential liability, so he deserves to know. I doubt Kiera would sue me for giving her the orgasms she asked for, especially since I have the email to prove it. Still, I can't guarantee that.

Ugh. Because I'm not sure what to say yet or how to say it, now isn't the best time to let the cat out of the bag. But I can set Jake at ease. Besides, he's kind of given me the perfect opening. I can give him a good chunk of the truth.

That's better than nothing, right?

"I appreciate that, but I need to fix this. That's why I intended to wait and say something when the deal was more official. I didn't want to get your hopes up only to dash them again, like last time, but...I ran into Maya Thompson the other day. She wants to talk business."

"Holy shit, dude. Are you serious? Really?"

"Yeah. Funny thing... I thought about your suggestion. You know, finding a date for Amber's wedding in the hopes of running into Maya. So I took your advice, and I discussed it with Ms. Young over lunch last Tuesday. I explained the situation and asked if she would be my plus-one. You were right. She completely understood and agreed to pitch in. Not even a minute later, Maya saw us and approached me at our table."

It's not a lie...it's just not the whole truth. I will confess all—minus the juicy details—but not until I've made up for it by bringing this business back to KH Industries, where it belongs. Since I somehow bungled it the first time, it seems only right that I make it happen now.

"Did you have any idea Maya would be there?"

"No, it was pure coincidence, man. The universe was looking out for me that day."

“No shit. That’s incredible. And the fact that Kiera had agreed only minutes before...”

“Right? Just in case Maya planned to attend Amber’s big day, Kiera introduced herself as my girlfriend.”

“Initiating the cover story early. That’s perfect. She’s smart.”

He’s eating up my words. *It’s for the greater good, Jake. You’ll thank me one day.*

“It’s definitely a step in the right direction.”

“So where did you two leave things?”

“After some small talk, Maya told me she’d be at the wedding, and she hoped that I would make some time to chat with her during the reception. It’s not an optimal place to do business, but...”

“Hey, we’ll take what we can get. And if getting comfortable with you on a social level opens the door to a professional conversation, even better.”

“Exactly,” I murmur.

“Wow. Talk about fortuitous. It’s crazy to think that after two years, we might still reel in this big fish.”

“Right?”

“Holy fuck, I could kiss you. Wait, never mind. You’re not my type.”

I laugh. “You’re not mine, either. But thanks for the enthusiasm.”

“So did you save the old pitch or are you thinking something fresher?”

“Go big or go home, right?”

“You’re not thinking...”

“Oh, yeah... Why not suggest our next rollout benefit her high-profile clients first?”

What better way to kick off our secret project than with Maya’s lucrative list of influencers and celebs?

“Seriously? Are you sure?”

“Think about it. Maya will have high expectations, so we have to offer her something better than last time. Project X will ensure her clients get incredible visibility, and we’ll get tons of new users and traffic. What could be better?”

“You’re right. It’s almost ready, man. Just a few more test runs and a few bug fixes. Then we’re good to go.

“I’ll just need to update the pitch to play up the exclusive features and attributes her clients will receive, and we’re golden. It’s a deal she won’t get anywhere else.”

Jake laughs. “Jonathan Knight, I think you’ve done it this time.”

“I don’t want to count our chickens, but...”

As Jake sings my praises and makes me feel guilty as hell, I hear sudden yelling just outside my office doors.

“All you can do? I don’t have time for ‘all you can do.’ I need you to march in there and persuade him to see me before my project and the months of effort that went into it fall apart.”

What the hell?

I vault out of my office chair. “Hey, man. Something’s up. I need to call you back.”

“Sure. We’ll talk later, buddy.” He hangs up just before I do.

After pocketing my phone, I press my ear against my door and listen. I need to figure out if the guy I’m hearing is from a video someone is playing too loudly on their lunch break or a jerk who’s way out of line berating Kiera.

“I understand your frustration. I’m sorry. Unfortunately, as I said, Mr. Knight isn’t to be disturbed, period.” That’s Kiera, all right. And she sounds rattled.

I’m not okay with that.

“Why do you suck at your job? You never seem able to make shit happen when I need it. This project is for *his*

benefit. He's the one who assigned it to me and designated it a top priority. And now that it's all coming together, he's holed up, and you don't have the sway to even mention to him that this might all go down the toilet?" Rising anger is evident in his tone.

"Is that Dan?" I mutter to myself. I've always known him to be the stress-ball type, but what the fuck? He has no right to give Kiera shit.

"Excuse me?" she asks sharply. "What did you just call me?"

The fucker is calling her names? I unlock my door and yank on the handle. I've got to stop this.

"Oh, don't think you're going to turn your ineptitude on me," Dan sneers. "I'm entitled to my opinion, goddamn it!"

As I shove open my door, a loud slam reverberates. I hear glass shattering, followed by a feminine gasp. I look over at Kiera's desk to find a stout man practically leaning over her desk and her flinching back in her chair, her eyes wide and filling with tears. Then I see the broken glass from her picture frame all over the floor.

The instant, violent urge to pound him into oblivion is strong. I'm not normally the punch-first-and-ask-questions-later type, but the way he's treating my girl has me seeing red.

*She's not your girl, moron.*

"Mr. Wishnewsy," I snap. "What's the problem?"

It takes everything I have not to grab him by the shirt, pin him against the wall, and get right in his face. I can't cause or threaten bodily harm, but I can sure as hell make him wet his pants.

Dan whirls to face me. "Mr. Knight. I-I didn't know you were here."

"These are thin walls. What is so concerning that you have to interrupt valuable work time to berate Ms. Young?"

Dan's stance turns cautious. "I-I needed to schedule a meeting with you today regarding the status of my project. It's

close to the deadline. I need your stamp of approval, but she said you're not available. Sir, this deadline is incredibly important. You said it yourself when you assigned the project to me."

"Just because I'm busy right now doesn't mean I've decided the project isn't important. And it definitely doesn't give you the right to yell at my assistant because things don't go your way. How old are you, four?"

As Dan looks chastened, I glance past him and see tears falling down Kiera's face. My hands ball into fists. Dan is lucky I don't want to go to jail.

"No, sir. I just—"

"There's no 'just' about it. Your behavior is unprofessional, and I will not tolerate it. Are we clear?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I-it was a lapse in judgement. I'm really invested in this project and—"

"I appreciate your passion for your work, but bullying isn't acceptable. And I'm not the person you should be apologizing to." I point to Kiera, who's furiously wiping away her tears.

"You're right, sir." Dan turns back to her, his shoulders drooping as if he's been properly chastened. "I'm deeply sorry for yelling at you and saying unkind things, Ms. Young. You were following Mr. Knight's orders, and I was out of line. I promise it'll never happen again."

"Thank you," Kiera says stiffly.

I have no illusions. She won't feel comfortable around Dan anytime soon, if ever. I intend to keep him as far from her as possible. "The next time you have an issue with me, you talk with me. No one else. You don't take out your frustration on any employee here at KH Industries but especially not my assistant. I'll let you off with a warning, which will be noted in your HR file. But if this ever happens again, I will not be lenient. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good. Tomorrow, when you have a cooler head, you will email me about scheduling our meeting. I will personally pencil it in. Then we will calmly walk through the project and work things out, yes?”

“Absolutely, sir. Thank you. I really am sorry.” Dan nods Kiera’s way before rushing off like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Once he’s out of sight, I approach her. She’s still shaken and shell-shocked. My anger softens to concern.

I slip her hand in mine and squeeze. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Thank you.” But her breaths are still choppy, like she’s struggling to get her emotions under control. Or like she just had the shit scared out of her. “I don’t know what he would have done if you hadn’t come...”

“Shh, don’t think about that.” I crouch so we’re at eye level and take hold of her other hand so I’m grasping both in mine. “Deep breaths. In.” I demonstrate. “And out. You’re okay.”

She nods, and together, we inhale and exhale slowly for long minutes until her breathing finally becomes even.

“Better?” I prompt.

“Yes.” She snuffles. “Thank you, Mr. Knight.”

*Formalities. Right. Damn.*

I scan the industrial carpet around her desk chair. Shards of glass are everywhere.

“I-I’ll clean it up.” Kiera pulls free and starts to rise from her chair.

Gently, I grab her shoulders and ease her back down. Images of her handling broken glass flash through my head. Nope.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this. Go to lunch. Take an extra hour if you need it.”

She needs a break and some mental space. Besides, I’m not handling myself well when I’m around her. I may look like

a concerned boss to her now, but if I stay this close to her for much longer, I'm worried I'll coax her into getting horizontal on my desk.

I need to get my shit together.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I'll be eating a sandwich at my desk and catching up on emails, so there's no reason for you to rush back.”

“Thank you.” She bites her lip I'm so desperate to kiss. “I appreciate you stepping in and—”

“Of course.”

There's a long moment of silence between us as we stare at each other.

Five minutes ago, all I could think about was avoiding Kiera. Now, I don't want to leave her side. And I never want to see her cry again. But she's my employee. I can't just disregard all rules of professional conduct in the office.

I clear my throat, plastering on what I hope is an appropriate smile. “I know you've only been here a few weeks, but I promise KH Industries doesn't allow Dan's sort of behavior. Like every employee, you deserve to be treated with respect.” I bend and pick up the half-cracked picture at her feet, brushing the glass away and studying the image. “Your family?”

“Yeah. My mom, dad, and sisters.”

They appear happy and close-knit. Must be nice. “Looks like you're going to need another picture frame.”

“Yeah.” She snuffles again as she grabs her purse. “I'll buy a new one this weekend.”

I nod. “Have a good lunch.”

She sends me a glance full of gratitude and something else soft and sweet that makes me want to kiss her. “I will. Bye.”

Slowly, she brushes past me. She snuffles again. And god, I can smell her. Her scent wafts through my brain, and suddenly my thoughts are back in her darkened bedroom where she cried out my name. It's all I can do not to grab her and haul her into my office and calm her, hold her, pleasure her—whatever she'll let me do.

I don't. I watch her until she makes the corner to the elevator. The distant ding tells me she's gone.

And I feel so bereft without her, it terrifies me.



## **Kiera**

Keeping my emotions under wraps has never been one of my strong suits. And the one time in my life I really try not to care about a man, he makes it almost impossible. After he just defended and soothed me, how can I not catch feelings for Jonathan Knight?

*You're reading too much into his gestures. He would have defended any employee being verbally attacked.*

True, but the way he stayed with me and seemed so concerned made me feel important, like more than merely his assistant.

But I can't break our cardinal rule.

I'm not. I won't. I'm just rattled after Dan's shit and mistaking gratitude for something more. Of course, Jonathan interceded with Dan. The man was acting somewhere between irrational and violent. And it's no surprise that my concerned boss agreed to clean up the broken glass. He doesn't want me getting hurt and potentially filing some kind of workers' comp claim. His consideration doesn't mean anything, except that he doesn't want to be without an assistant again.

After a yummy lunch and calming bestie hugs from Kami—along with gentle warnings not to read too much into Jonathan's protectiveness—I head back to the office. An hour-plus away was just what I needed. I feel almost like myself



again. And I'm feeling much better about my grip on my emotions.

Until I step off the elevator and round the corner to my desk, only to find my family photo nestled in a brand-new frame, occupying the same corner of honor on my desk it once did. In front of it sits a sticky note that reads:

I replaced your broken frame so  
you would always have your family  
nearby. Hope you like it.

J

Instantly, tears sting my eyes. Jonathan replaced what I lost. Because he feels guilty that Dan all but attacked me? Because he feels sorry for me? Or because he cares about me?

I tell myself to stop the wild speculation. He's being nice. End of story. Move on. Get to work. Don't obsess. Thank him, then do your job.

But when I peek my head in his office, he's not there. Half a sandwich sits in a plastic container uneaten, along with what I'm sure is a cold cup of coffee.

Stifling my disappointment, I take my seat and resolve to dive into work and stay busy. I send Jonathan a quick but heartfelt email of thanks, then try to focus on some companywide correspondence due out any day about April's month end. Still, I find myself glancing up at that picture frame he so thoughtfully bought me and smiling.

Ten minutes later, he returns with a fresh cup of coffee from the bakery across the street in one hand and a cold bottle of my favorite soda in the other. He smiles as he sees me and sets the fizzy drink at my elbow. "That's for you. You're back early. Feeling better?"

"Thank you. Yes. A little girl time with Kami was exactly what I needed."

"Good. I've made sure Dan's HR file notes today's incident, and I've spoken to Jake so he's aware of the

situation. I'm sure he'll counsel Dan, too. So hopefully, that's the end of that. Can I get you anything else? Is there something you need?"

"No. I-I'm fine. Really. Thank you." The new metallic picture frame catches the overhead light and sparkles. "And thank you for the new frame. That was really thoughtful. You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to. Do you like it?"

"Yes." The more I look at it, the more it seems so...me. It's shiny and a little whimsical, but still practical. "It's perfect."

If I'm being honest, I like it better than the frame my sister picked out for me. Alyson has known me all my life. How is it possible that in a few short weeks and an hour between the sheets, Jonathan understands me at least as well as my older sister?

"Good. If you need anything else—anything at all—my door is open. I'm here for you." He smiles, and he looks really reluctant to leave me as he heads for his office.

My heart catches. What is he doing? Is he breaking the cardinal rule, too. Is he catching feelings?

*Don't be silly. He's not flirting with you; he's just checking on you. Geez...*

But his concern seems so personal. Should I talk to him about it? Then again, why would I? It's not like I want him to stop. Even if I did say something, he'd probably deny it, call me crazy, or worse—end our whole agreement. Besides, this is Jonathan. He's a manwhore through and through. I can't forget that.

Normally, if a guy was putting in this much effort with me, I'd assume he was interested. But Jonathan is only ever focused on a woman long enough to get her naked and get off. The soda and the frame? They aren't romantic gestures. He's just making sure I'm happy in my job.

I need to stop reading more into every little thing he does, and I have to keep my promise. My feelings for him will pass.

*They have to. They're not real. They can't be.*

He checks on me another ten times over the final three hours of the day. By the end, I feel hot, flustered, and confused as hell.

When it's finally quitting time, I let out a sigh of relief and dash away from the office with a quick wave. After a too-slow ride down the elevator, I finally let out a breath and tell myself to stop with all the fluttery, starry-eyed nonsense. Honestly, I'm hoping the farther I get from him, the better I'll feel.

Once the elevator doors slide open, I hustle across the office lobby and into the five-o'clock air. The wind feels warm, yet the sky is overcast.

I sigh. "Exactly what I'm feeling—clouded."

Inside the parking structure, I spot two figures next to a black SUV. Instantly, I recognize Mia Knight and Jake Hall. Their conversation is indistinctive, but their gestures make it look heated.

Discreetly, I continue to walk by...but I can't help trying to eavesdrop. Whatever they're talking so animatedly about probably has something to do with Jonathan's unusual behavior in this morning's meeting. Maybe they know something I don't.

Finally, I'm close enough to hear them. I tuck myself behind the SUV and shamelessly listen.

"Tell me the truth," Mia demands. "What the hell is going on with my brother? First, I hear through the grapevine that, last week, Maya Thompson met Jonathan's 'girlfriend,' who just happens to have the same name as his assistant. Then over the weekend, I call him to get his opinion about a project I'm starting, but he asks me—of all people—for advice because he's dating a woman he refuses to name. Then today, he stares at Ms. Young so long it's uncomfortable, before he nearly loses it in front of every one of KH Industries' employees. You going to tell me that's all a coincidence?"

I bite back a gasp. They're talking about *me*. OMG, did everyone notice him staring? Did he really ask his sister for advice on how to date me?

"I'm sure there's nothing going on, baby girl." Jake tries to smooth things over.

"Don't 'baby girl' me. Something is up with my brother. You're the closest person to him. He tells you way more than he tells me or Nathan. So spill. What do you know?"

"Nothing more than you. We're friends, but I can't read his mind. He could have been upset about...puppet sex for all I know. But I doubt whatever it is has anything to do with Kiera."

"Don't joke about this," she snaps. "You know what people are starting to say."

"Unlike you, Mia, I don't care what people think."

"Someone has to for the sake of this company, especially when the gossip is that my brother is hot for his assistant."

I press a hand to my chest and try not to freak out. Do people think I'm sleeping with the boss, too?

*Aren't you?*

Okay, I am, but do educational purposes really count?

"She's pretty, and he's human. That doesn't mean they're involved or that she's his girlfriend."

"But is she?"

"Fuck if I know. There's no proof he's pursuing Kiera. Frankly, I hope he's dating someone or at least considering it. And if he is, after the Amber debacle, you should be happy for him."

Mia sighs. "Why will you never give me a straight answer? This is bullsh—"

"Language." Jake's voice lowers an octave.

"Don't give me that shit. You don't own me."

I risk a peek around the side of the car to find Jake pressing Mia against the vehicle, his hands bracketing her head and caging her in. His face hovers inches above hers. I can practically feel the tension sparking between them.

Wait. Are they...into each other?

“What did I say about language?” Jake growls.

“I can say whatever the fuck I want to say.”

As if they’re the only two people on the planet, they share a long moment of silence. Their exchange is so intense, I can’t tell if it’s an argument...or foreplay. Whatever the case, he isn’t backing down—and neither is she.

Eventually, Jake’s face softens. “How long have we known each other?”

She pushes at his chest. “Long enough for you to get on my nerves. Look, you and Jonathan own equal percentages of this company. If he gets caught in some...legal altercation, he’ll be taking you down with him.” Her brows furrow. “Why aren’t you more concerned?”

“J has everything under control.”

Mia gives an exasperated sigh. “That’s not an answer. If you’re not going to help me, I’ll find the truth myself.”

She starts to shoulder her way past him when Jake grabs hold of her arm and, with a gentle tug, hauls her back to his side. “Leave it alone. Everything is fine. He’s working on something that could really help KH Industries explode. Kiera is pitching in. But what’s happening is coming fast, and he’s been under a lot of stress. I’ll be helping out and doing what I can to help squash some of the rumors. I can’t say more, but I need you to trust me, okay?”

“Why would I ever do that? I know you too well. If you’re both hiding something, I have to get some answers and start doing some damage control before the sharks start circling.”

I close my eyes. I had no idea introducing myself as my boss’s girlfriend to someone as influential as Maya would

throw Jonathan's entire inner circle of friends and family into an uproar.

"God, do you have such daddy issues that you refuse to trust anyone with a penis? That you'll happily throw all the men in your life under the bus to save yourself?"

"Don't turn this on me. It's not just me I'm trying to save."

Jake throws up his hands in surrender. "You keep telling yourself that. In the meantime, don't do anything rash. And try not to be so stressed out."

"I'm not stressed." She crosses her arms over her chest, wearing her sass like armor.

"You're totally stressed. You know, baby girl..." He saunters close again until he backs her against the car once more. "I'd be happy to relieve that for you."

"Not interested." But the shudder of her body suggests she absolutely is.

"Liar." His voice turns to velvet. "I could make you feel *so* good."

She scoffs. "As tempting as you think that might sound to me, I refuse to get involved with the likes of you."

"The likes of me?"

"Yeah. You're...trouble."

With a grin, he bends his head. Their faces are so close, their lips nearly touch. "I could teach you to love trouble, you know?"

"Oh, I will not be needing any kind of service from you, Mr. Hall. Never going to happen."

"Never say never. I'll make you eat those words." He winks before climbing into his SUV and exiting the parking structure.

And that's my cue to stop listening.

“Goddamn it, he’s so infuriating,” Mia mutters to herself...and I can’t help but overhear.

I need to get out of here before she sees me. Now that I know Jonathan’s sister is on the prowl for information, she’ll try to track me down before long. The less she knows, the better.

Trying to dash away on my tiptoes so she can’t hear my kitten heels clicking on the concrete, I head to my car at the end of the row and fish for my keys. But I’m not fast enough.

“Ms. Young, got a minute?” Mia asks.

I whip around to face the woman. Her smile is friendly, but I already know she has an agenda.

What the hell am I going to say?

“Ms. Knight. What a surprise.”

“Heading home?”

“Um...yes. I’ve got an appointment—”

“Then I’ll get to the point. How’s my brother been today? He must have been really busy to cancel most of his day?”

Yep, she’s fishing.

“Mr. Knight is always busy.”

“Or is he seeing someone romantically?”

“I really don’t know. His personal life is none of my business.”

“It’s okay for you to tell me, you know.” She leans in and whispers, “It will be our secret.”

My heart starts pounding. “Tell you what?”

“The truth.”

“Ms. Knight, if you think your brother is seeing someone and want to know more about it, I suggest you ask him. I really don’t know what he does outside of the office.”

“Cut the act. Are you fucking my brother?”

Wow, she just went for my jugular—hard. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a simple question. Yes or no will do.”

“This is hardly appropriate.”

“Neither is sleeping with the boss.”

*Touché.*

I promised Jonathan I wouldn’t tell anyone else about our agreement, especially anyone at work. I intend to honor my word.

“I’m not dignifying your question with an answer.”

“So you admit you’re fucking him.”

I shake my head. “I’m simply saying that I don’t owe you or anyone else I work with details about my sex life.”

Her face softens. “If you’re sleeping with him, I’m not mad. I just want the truth.”

I don’t believe her for an instant. “There’s nothing to tell. Have a good evening, Ms. Knight.”

Before she can start another line of questioning, I yank my car keys from my purse, climb inside my little sedan, and drive away. My hands are shaking.

The Mia I know won’t let this go. She’ll be back, either to question me...or her brother. I should probably warn him. In fact, I’ll have to. Because I may have survived that interrogation, but I worry how I’d fare in another. And there’s a voice in my head that warns the truth can’t be hidden forever.



# Chapter Eight

*Saturday, May 21*

**Jonathan**

---

We need to talk.

Kiera's unexpected text message is waiting on my phone after my workout. I frown. If she's reaching out on a Saturday morning, that's concerning. Is she still upset about last Monday? Or the fact I impulsively took vacation the rest of the week? Did Dan track her down and give her a hard time while I sat at home and did my best to avoid her? I hope like hell she's not thinking about quitting.

You okay?

I'm good. Thank you.

Was the rest of the week okay at the office?

Fine. We just need to talk.

She doesn't seem upset or overwhelmed. That's a relief.

I head for the shower, thumbs poised over my phone once more. Then I pause. Sure, I could call her and find out what's up...or I can admit I've missed her this week and give into my itch to see her, away from the office and without our boss-employee constraints. Besides, Amber's wedding is in a few weeks. We need to get our stories straight so fellow guests will believe we're a couple.

Okay. How about lunch? I'm getting hungry.

I tap out the name of a local Chinese place and suggest I pick her up at noon.

She quickly agrees and sends back a thumbs-up emoji. Saturday may be overcast, but suddenly my day is looking a whole lot brighter.

*Slow your roll, J. You have to stop fixating on this woman. You don't want a repeat of last Monday's meeting...*

Right. Cool and casual. We're simply scratching each other's backs. I'm teaching her the ins and outs—pun intended—of casual sex, and she's providing me the perfect date for Amber's wedding. I can't make more out of our time together away from the office than that. It's a bonus that Kiera is sexy and that I like her. It's nice that I enjoy talking to her. If I'm a bit protective, I'm not apologizing for it. Bullies like Dan who can't control their tempers have no business coming after women half their size. And if I'm fixated on our chemistry or our explosive night after the club, well...who doesn't like great sex? Besides, I'm only hung up on her because she's the last woman I took to bed, and it was unexpectedly amazing. The next one I nail will flip my switch just as much.

Shrugging off the nagging worry that I'm BSing myself, I climb into the shower. But after I've put myself together, time seems to drag. I leave fifteen minutes earlier than I need to. Thankfully, when I reach Kiera's place, she's ready.

As I help her into my car, I try to get a read on her mood. She doesn't seem upset, but she's quiet. She definitely has something on her mind.

"You look great," I tell her.

She turns to me with a distracted smile. "Thanks."

Suddenly, I have this horrible thought. What if she doesn't need me to be her one-night stand tutor anymore? What if she kicked off her weekend by hitting the bars and finding some other guy...

Cold sweat breaks out across my chest. I swallow down something that feels like panic.

"So...what did you do last night?" I try to sound casual.

She hesitates. "It was probably boring compared to whatever you did. I washed my hair, watched one of my favorite Jane Austen movies, and ate ice cream."

The sigh I breathe is so full of relief, it's nearly audible. "Did you enjoy it?"

“Loved it.” She wrings her hands in her lap and sends me another smile, this one awkward.

She’s not asking what I did last night. Because she doesn’t care? Or because she’s afraid to ask?

“I, um...played basketball with Jake, Nathan, and a few other guys. Then we all hung out at Ian’s bar for a few beers.” I laugh. “Until some dude who’d just turned twenty-one and was absolutely shitfaced puked all over my brother. Nathan ended up throwing away his shirt in the bathroom, and I had to take him home. Thankfully, we came in his car.”

Kiera turns to me with another smile, this one more genuine. Is that relief I see on her face? “Poor Nathan. What a horrible way to end a night.”

“Yeah. Before that, I think he was going to get lucky. Or he thought he was. But after the pukefest...” I shake my head. “Not so much.”

In the silence, I realize what I’ve told her. What I’ve confessed. That I spent last night alone. Hell, it didn’t just slip out. I wanted her to know.

*That’s dangerous, J. You’ve gotta stop...*

“Apparently not,” she jokes, then bites her lip. “Have you talked to your sister in the last few days?”

That question seems out of left field. Has Mia done something to upset her? “About business. Should I have talked to her about something else?”

Kiera swallows. “She’s suspicious about us. She confronted me in the parking lot after work on Monday.”

“What?” I jerk on the wheel and sling my car into the first parking space in the restaurant’s lot. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. She seems determined to figure out what’s going on. She was also asking Jake all kinds of questions about you and me. He was deflecting, telling her not to read too much into it. But I don’t think she’s going to give up.”

“She never does.” Fuck. And Jake, bless him, must have fended off my sister’s courtroom-style interrogation without

telling her about Maya and the potential development there. Like me, he wants to keep that under wraps until the deal is done. “What did you tell her?”

“That my sex life was none of her business.”

I wince. “I’m sorry about my sister. I’ll put a stop to that.”

Kiera sends me a self-deprecating shrug. “I’m sure she asked me instead of you because she thought I’d be the easier mark. And because she caught me eavesdropping on her confrontation with Jake. Speaking of that... Um, I think they might be attracted to each other. Did you know?”

“My best friend and my sister? No.” I scoff. “Mia has been infatuated with Jake since she was a kid, and she was never shy about it. But Jake...he flirts with anything in a skirt. He’s not actually interested in her. He just likes to yank her chain because she falls for it.”

“Ah.” She sends me another of those stilted smiles.

I’m learning to read her. Does she think I’m wrong, and she doesn’t want to tell me she disagrees?

Before I can ask, she’s out of the car and heading toward the restaurant. Quickly, I climb out, lock up, and follow her. In less than two minutes, we’re seated at our table.

“Thanks for agreeing to come here with me,” I say, smiling her way. “Was Mia what you thought we needed to talk about?”

Kiera swirls her finger around the rim of her water glass. “Yes. I would have mentioned it sooner, but you took vacation so suddenly, and you were gone. I figured work would keep her busy during the week, but I worried with the weekend here, she would have time on her hands and...”

“Dig until she came to some conclusion that fit her narrative? Or blindside me with an interrogation?”

“Either. Both.”

“Thanks for trying to save me. I appreciate it.”

Kiera nods. “You’re welcome.”

Our server takes our order, then darts away, leaving us to our conversation. I’m happy for the privacy. I enjoyed my impromptu time off this week. I needed the time away, and I’m more relaxed. But I missed talking to Kiera—way more than I should.

“Since we’re here and the wedding is in a few weeks, now would be a good opportunity to get our story straight,” I suggest. “We’ll need to know more about each other if we’re going to make our relationship look legitimate.”

“I figured we’d have to talk about this at some point. Who do you think will be there besides Maya? Who should I brace for?”

“Mostly Amber.”

“She’s your ex. I expect nothing less.” She shrugs.

“Her family, too. There’s a chance they’ll probe us out of curiosity, especially her brother. He’s a douche.”

“I’ll do my best to avoid him, then.”

She would be wise to do so. “I’m expecting a few other mutual friends will attend. They’ll probably have questions.”

“Because you’ve been such a confirmed bachelor?”

“Yeah. Not that I think any of them will grill us...but people talk. We need to be consistent.”

“So we have to have a story about how we met.”

“Exactly. Let’s say we met at a bar.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could call them back. If we tell everyone that’s where we met, it sounds more like a fling. Of course, that’s what she is, but I’d rather not have people thinking that. I’m not sure why, maybe because that’s not how she feels to me right now.

She wrinkles her nose. “That’s too common and completely unromantic. Besides, people can tell at a glance that I’m not much of a barfly. What about an art gallery?”

I would ask if she's kidding, but her expression says she's not. "It has to be believable. No one who knows me will buy that. How about something less out of a Jane Austen novel? Gas station, maybe?"

Kiera sends me a dubious stare. "That's more romantic?"

"It's realistic. Hear me out. You pulled up in front of me, and I noticed how hot you are, so I asked for your number. You were skeptical at first, but I easily won you over, so you joined me for coffee and laughs. We've been together since."

"No. I sound like the kind of woman you nailed on the first night."

I shrug. "Anyone who knows me figures that's what happened."

"Ugh. Stop thinking with your penis."

That makes me grin. "Stop making this a sappy Hallmark movie."

Suddenly, Kiera's smile disappears, along with our lighthearted banter. "Whatever you want, then."

Her response makes me feel like I won the battle but lost a war I didn't even know I was fighting. "Listen, I didn't mean to upset you—"

"It's fine."

End of conversation. Tension between us thickens.

*Shit.* "Kiera—"

"How long have we been together?" She takes a sip of her water, her eyes not quite meeting mine. "Probably not more than a few weeks."

I frown. I'm tempted to ask what I said that upset her, but her vibe tells me to back off. "Why not more like six months? That's long enough to seem serious, but not so long it implies that I'm dragging my feet in proposing."

"I've only worked for you for a few weeks."

"So?"

She gives me an exasperated sigh. “If you even start negotiating with Maya, she’ll call the office at some point. There’s every chance I’ll answer. Then what will you say?”

Kiera has a point—one I should have considered sooner. Either I have to tell Maya and her associates that I hired my girlfriend or that I’m dating my assistant. Was I really too distracted by my lust to get Kiera into bed that I didn’t see the obvious?

I grimace. “Fair point. We should keep the timeline as close to the truth as possible. Forget the gas station. For consistency, let’s say we started dating shortly after you hired on. Naturally, we both agreed to leave the office in the office and our relationship at home. We’ve only been together a couple of weeks, but so far so good.”

“That works. Since it’s new, when we ‘break up’ at the reception and I go home with another guy for ‘graduation,’ no one will be incredibly shocked.”

“Right,” I say dully. I hate everything about that plan, but I’m the one who made it up. I have no one to blame but myself. And who knows? Maybe I’ll be ready to let her go by then. “What else?”

“What was I wearing when we met?”

This I remember vividly. “A pink dress with some tone-on-tone piping, a black belt, and black slingbacks.”

She rears back. “You actually remember?”

“Yes.”

A surprised smile creeps across her lips. “Good. People will ask.”

“What you were wearing matters?”

“No. The fact you remember does. If we’re a serious couple, people—especially women—will expect you to know.

“All right. If we’re a couple, people will expect us to know at least some of our other habits and quirks. Let’s do this rapid-fire style. Early bird or night owl? Middle name? Likes and dislikes? Favorite movie?”

“I’m a night owl at heart. My middle name is Elizabeth. I like cats, hate asparagus, and I adore anything with a good plot, whether it’s books or movies. Your turn.”

“Wait, you don’t like asparagus? Why?”

“It freaks me out.”

I laugh. “What the hell? *Raisins* freak people out.”

“No, raisins are good in cookies. Your turn.”

“I’m an early bird, middle name Henry. I’m a dog person. I hate people who waste my time, and I rarely watch anything except football.”

She rolls her eyes. “We’re total opposites. I didn’t realize how much.”

Kiera is right; we couldn’t be more different. I’m enjoying this brief getting-to-know-you moment we’re having. It makes me curious to learn even more.

“What’s your love language? I mean, if we’ve been together any amount of time, we should know each other’s way of saying ‘I love you.’”

Kiera raises a brow. “We’ve said ‘I love you’ already? Wow, that was fast.”

I laugh. “You know what I mean.”

“My love language, huh? I’ve never thought about it.”

“Ever? Even when you dated other guys?”

“If I had a love language, by the time I knew whoever I was dating well enough to roll it out, he was long gone, especially if I wasn’t sleeping with him.”

Our love lives have both been revolving doors, but mine is by choice. Hers is seemingly beyond her control. That’s what sent her to me so she could learn how to fuck without emotion.

Is she succeeding?

“Best guess,” I prod her. “How do you think you’d tell someone you love them without saying the words?”



She shrugs. “I like physical touch, especially holding hands. That’s a start, right?”

“Yeah.” But I’m sure that’s not all the ways she makes someone feel special. “I’m an acts of service, quality time, and physical touch kind of guy. Would that interest you?”

“Are you kidding? That would be a breath of fresh air.”

“None of the guys you’ve dated have been like that?”

“My high school boyfriend said PDA was stupid and embarrassing.” She turns somber.

“He sounds like a fidiot.”

“He was.” Suddenly, she studies the faux woodgrain of the table, her face solemn.

That gloomy expression bothers me. “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

She whips her stare up to me again. “What? Oh, sorry. I’m good.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no. You’re fine. I just...haven’t thought of him in such a long time.”

“That bad?”

“It wasn’t good.”

I don’t expect her to share the details about her past relationships, but I also don’t like seeing her down. I reach across the table and take her hand. “Sounds like he was an asshole.”

“Yeah. He seemed sweet, honest, and understanding...at first.”

I think I know where her story is going. “Until he wasn’t?”

She nods. “High school guys can be such jerks. Chad seemed different, more sensitive. Every day, he had kind words for me. He asked how my day was. He gave me his

umbrella when it rained and mine broke. Just...nice. And when we started dating, he called me his princess.”

I squeeze her fingers. “We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“It doesn’t really bother me anymore. But it taught me a valuable lesson about men. Of course, being young and dumb, I played into this fantasy he helped to create. Being with him made me feel like I was on cloud nine. But leading up to our one-year anniversary, he started pressuring me to have sex. Each time I said no, he got angry.”

“Why didn’t you break up with him?”

“He was my first boyfriend. I thought I was in love. I made excuses for his behavior. But I didn’t think I was ready. Looking back, I know I wasn’t.”

“Did he force you?” Because if he did, I’m going to be hard-pressed not to kill a fucker.

“Not physically, no. On our anniversary, he convinced me that, because we’d been together for so long, we should celebrate. I so badly wanted him to be happy, and I didn’t want another argument. So...I gave in.”

“The asshole coerced you. Did he hurt you?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“Not in the moment. The sex wasn’t great, but I romanticized it. After all, I was his princess. We were each other’s forever. But afterward...Chad ghosted me. He wouldn’t return my phone calls, wouldn’t talk to me at school. But I knew right away that he’d told all his friends that he’d nailed me. Every time I walked past them, they leered like they knew what I looked like naked. It was humiliating.”

“What a bastard.” Granted, I haven’t always been great at considering the feelings of the women I left behind, but at least I didn’t brag to my friends. My mom drilled into me that a gentleman never kisses and tells.

“Eventually, I found out he told the whole school. It was the worst feeling of my life.” Her eyes well with tears. She

tries to blink them away and force a smile. “But it was a long time ago.”

“Do you know why he did it?”

She shrugs. “It’s irrelevant now. Thankfully, I had Kami to help me through the torment and shame. She defended me when I couldn’t and taught me to hold my head high.”

“I’m glad you have a true friend like her.”

“She’s the best.”

“So did you punch him out? Or find some other way to get your revenge?”

“Believe me, I wanted to. Eventually, I realize the best revenge was just to move on and show him that he didn’t matter anymore.”

Since that was her first experience with romance, it’s shocking she ever gave love another chance. I didn’t get my heart ripped out until the ripe age of thirty-two. In one confrontation with my ex, I went from pissed-off groom to dedicated manwhore, numbing my hurt with easy lay after easy lay. Not Kiera. Despite being kicked, she kept believing in love for years, only choosing a more cynical path when no one out there would be real with her.

“Then there was the guy in college?”

“Yes. I thought I could start fresh where no one knew me. But that didn’t work out, either. He wanted to party. I wanted to plan a future. You know the rest.”

I do. Suddenly, I understand Kiera so much better—the choices she’s made, her determination to find her storybook ending and live happily ever after, her refusal to waste her time on selfish players. Until now, men have been nothing to her but huge disappointments. No wonder that, before me, her personal number was a measly two.

“Since I can’t go back and beat up your exes—though it would be a pleasure—I hope our time together has at least made up for the mediocre sex you had with them.”

“You were amazing. That night surpassed all my expectations.”

Mine, too. It’s gratifying to know I can right those two wrongs in one night. If life were simple, I’d right every wrong she’s ever been dealt.

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“I trust you,” she says without hesitation.

Her three words slam through me like a wrecking ball. The truth shines in her eyes. It’s stunning. It’s humbling. It’s something I’d hate to lose.

I clear my throat. “Favorite sport?”

“Football.”

“Good answer.” I smile.

“Um, favorite time of year?”

“Winter. You?”

She shudders. “I’m allergic to the cold. But since I sunburn easily, summer isn’t my favorite, either. Autumn, specifically October, is perfect.”

“So you’re not into beaches?”

She scoffs. “You try wearing tubes of sunblock only to end up crispy.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Unless you have a gigantic umbrella, I’m staying indoors.”

That beautiful porcelain skin of hers clearly comes at a price. “Fair enough.”

The server returns with our food, refills our drinks, and leaves us with a smile.

We dig into our food. Kiera picks up lo mein with chopsticks. “What about you? Who broke your heart and made you an eternal bachelor?”

“I’ve always preferred it this way. I’m pretty much a loner.” And of course the contentious relationship between my parents hardly painted a rosy picture of marriage.

“Amber was the exception?”

She was the one time I foolishly let myself believe in love. “She was a mistake.”

“But if you were engaged, you must have wanted to spend your life with her.”

Oh, I did...until I found out the hard way that her vision of our shared tomorrows and mine were very different. “We just didn’t work out.”

Kiera squeezes my hand. “She hurt you?”

“I’m over it.” I shift in my seat and pull my sweating palm free, wishing she’d stop asking uncomfortable questions.

“Come on, Jonathan. Open, honest communication, remember?” Kiera reminds softly. “I’ve told you everything in my past.”

“This isn’t a quid-pro-quo situation.”

“What happened?”

I don’t even want to think about what ended my relationship with Amber. I want to talk about it even less. Only Jake and my siblings know the truth. Telling Kiera would be too humiliating. But I have to say something. People at the wedding are likely to bring it up. She has to be prepared to talk about it...

“Two years ago, Amber and I agreed mutually to call it quits. Unfortunately, we came to that conclusion about fifteen minutes before our wedding ceremony.”

“You split up on your wedding day?” Kiera covers her gaping mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

I try to shrug it off. “We realized we weren’t cut out to be spouses.”

“That must have been incredibly difficult. But it was so brave of you to admit that *before* you exchanged vows.”

I know her sympathy is coming from a place of caring, but it twists me up. So does the lie I'm telling her. But I don't want to relive the humiliation of that horrible day. "Forget it. It's in the past."

"That must have been really hard for both of you. All that planning and—"

"It was for the best. Can we just...not talk about it anymore?"

Thankfully, she nods. "After that experience, are you completely against getting married someday or is that something you still want?"

It doesn't matter what I want. Since I'll never know if someone is going to love me for me—not my bank account or connections—love is off the table.

And it's time to wrap up this conversation. I can't stand to see the pity on Kiera's face. I would rather do anything—shoving razor blades under my fingernails comes to mind—than rehash my past.

"No telling what the future holds, right?" I shrug noncommittally and redirect the conversation to something I know will distract her. "If you're not busy this afternoon, now would be a good time for another lesson."

"Are you sure?" She frowns, brows furrowed in confusion. "Are you really okay?"

I shouldn't be surprised she sees through my misdirection.

"I'm perfectly fine. Is that a yes?"

With a nibble on her lip, she nods. "Yes."

Inside, I'm having a party. "Great. Are you done eating?"

Kiera gives her mouth a ladylike pat with her napkin, then sets it aside. "Sure."

"Let's go." After throwing some money on the table to cover the bill, I stand and help her to her feet, then lean in and

cup her chin. “You still have a lot to learn. Luckily for you, I’m a great teacher.”

Just in case she means to probe me with another well-meaning question, I kiss her. At first, she stiffens in surprise. But slowly, she melts into my arms. Her pillowy lips on mine are heaven, just like the first time. I sink into her, my thoughts drowning as my desire multiplies.

*You want her too much. This time needs to be the last time.*

The voice in my head is right. I’m getting too emotionally invested in Kiera. It’s affecting my work and clouding my judgement. I’ll have her once more, then lock up my heart for good.

As I ease away, she whimpers. The sensual softness of her face nearly undoes my resolve.

“Your place or mine?” I don’t care whose place as long as I have her under me and begging.

“Whichever is closer,” she whispers breathlessly.

*Fuck, yes.*

Quickly, I take her hand, pulling her behind me as we exit the restaurant.

The ten-minute car ride feels like an eternity. I do my best to keep my eyes on the road and my hands on the wheel while she sits beside me with her head on my shoulder...and her slender fingers caressing my thigh.

I swallow hard. I need this. I need her. I hate to admit how much.

After whipping into my reserved parking space under the overhang in front of my condo, I lead Kiera to the elevator. The minute the doors close, I pin her against the wall and devour her sweet mouth. I let my hands roam her curves, determined to make my fingers memorize each dip and flare.

It’s not enough.

With a groan, I grip her ass and lift her off the floor and against my body. She clutches my shoulders and wraps her legs around my waist, locking her ankles behind me. While she rakes her fingers through my hair, I press my straining erection against her hot pussy. Our needy moans merge, resounding over the whine of the elevator.

Why can't this damn thing go any faster? I don't just want her in my bed so I can have her bare and begging, I *need* her.

Finally, the elevator doors open to my floor.

Still carrying her, I hurry down the hallway. When she kisses her way up my neck, I sincerely wonder if we're going to make it to my bedroom.

I growl out a curse, fighting for control, as I pause in front of my unit and fumble to find the key. As soon as I manage to unlock the door, I push inside and kick it closed, then drop my keys on the nearby table.

"Lose your shoes," I demand as I kick my own off.

A pair of thuds tells me she complies. Then together, we make our way to the bedroom. I ease Kiera onto the bed, and I look down at her. She meets my stare, cheeks flushed, her eyes shimmering with a reverence that knocks my world off its axis. No woman has ever looked at me the way she is—not even the woman I was fifteen minutes from marrying. Her expression says I hung the moon and stars. Like what's inside my heart is more important than whatever I can buy her. Like I'm her everything.

For a moment, I can't breathe.

I realize Kiera has never asked me for anything other than my time. Sure, she made that off-handed comment about wanting designer shoes. I braced for her to wheedle and whine at me until I bought them for her, but she didn't. Not a peep. Also unlike Amber, she genuinely listens to the things I say. She sees me as a person with feelings. She acts as if I'm someone capable of giving love and being loved, not a fucking credit card with connections and a talented cock.



Since this will be the last time I'll have her naked for me, I silently vow to imprint myself so deeply inside her, mark her so indelibly that when Kiera thinks of me, she'll remember every touch, every kiss, every thrust, and every moment we shared all the way to our last quaking orgasm until the end of time.

I drop to my knees in front of her, then slide her up the mattress while I wedge myself between her legs. Slowly, I take her mouth, our lips tangling as I press her closer. Like last time we shared hours and bodies, it's not enough. I'm not sure I'll ever get enough. How the hell will I ever let her go?

*That's not your problem right now. Focus on the moment.*

She slides her soft fingertips down my back as I deepen our kiss, curling my tongue around hers and claiming more of her mouth. When her seeking hands wander beneath my shirt, I ease back just enough to yank my shirt over my head and toss it aside. She stares in awe at me, like I'm a fucking god.

*No. She's looking at you like you're hot dick. You don't mean anything to her.*

I don't; I know it, but that expression...I'd swear I mean everything to her.

For once, I don't fight it. I give in and cup her cheek, bringing her in for a long kiss. With my free hand, I lift the hem of her shirt until I have to give up the sweetness of her mouth to peel off the garment and drop it to the floor. Her breasts, which always have me drooling, are covered by a tan bra.

She blinks up at me, looking pristine in the sunlight. "I want you."

"You have me."

"I want more of you." She curls her fingers into my belt loops and pulls me closer to her.

I'm not sure what she has in mind, but so far it's a "hell, yes" from me. Then she unbuttons my pants and tugs down my zipper. With shaking hands, she shoves the rest of my

clothes down to my ankles, then drops her breathless gaze to my cock.

I hook a finger under her chin until she meets my stare. “Sweetheart?”

What is she up to?

For a moment, uncertainty crosses her face. Worry. No, self-doubt. Then she blinks it away. “I want to taste you the way you tasted me.”

Kiera wants to give me a blow job? Is she kidding?

“Yes,” I assure her, thumbing her pillowy bottom lip. “Whatever you want...”

With a shy smile, she reaches for my erection, slowly curling her fingers around my girth and stroking. Her feathery touches have desire washing hot and urgent over me, then gasping for air as she pumps me up and down like she’s learning me—where I’m hard, where I’m sensitive, and where her touch makes me lose my mind.

“Don’t stop. Oh, god, yes.” I close my eyes, tipping my head back while I grip her neck, using her as my anchor in this world of spine-melting pleasure.

I’m almost at climax when I feel something warm and moist hover over my crest and shaft. I look down and watch Kiera lower her mouth to suck me, her lips gliding down my shaft before lifting in a slow, smooth pull of her lips.

Holy. Shit. Her mouth is amazing. Watching her turns me on even more.

Slowly but surely, she slides down to the hilt until her mouth is full of me. Then she bobs up and down my cock, whimpering as she grips around my thighs.

Am I dreaming? Is she really going down on me like she’s determined to wring every ounce of ecstasy from me? When she pulls on me with her hot, silken mouth all the way to the tip, the answer seems like a clear yes. I gasp and tense as she circles my engorged crest with her tongue.

I’m going to lose my mind.

After shifting my hand from her neck to her head, I sink my fingers into the soft strands of her hair, guiding her to pick up speed and swallow more of my shaft. I'm almost there. I'm so, so close.

The fire inside me builds, towering, razing my restraint. I groan, tense, then shudder as I go over the edge and fall into the flames, releasing into her mouth as my whole body burns in an inferno of ecstasy.

As I come down, I pant and try to wrap my head around what just happened. For a woman without much sexual experience, I'm stunned that she took all of me without hesitation or reservation. And despite blowing my mind, she looks at me now like she's desperate for my approval.

"That was...amazing," I reassure her. And why shouldn't I? It's the truth.

She smiles, then dissolves into a carefree giggle. "It tastes salty."

I love the way she laughs. Despite what she just did, the innocence in her sound reminds me that she's one of the few people in my life who's not jaded. It makes me want her even more.

After dropping a soft kiss on her lips, I kneel at the foot of the bed and pull her closer to me. "My turn."

Her breath catches as I unbutton her jeans and peel them off, revealing soaked pink panties, complete with a taunting pink bow in the middle. I slide between her legs again and kiss my way up her body. Once I've torn away her bra, I lave her breasts and suck at each tempting berry nipple. Little moans escape her lips. She latches onto my hair, clutching me even closer.

After lavishing attention on one hard bud for long minutes, I move to the other, focusing there until both look hard, stiff, and pleading. Her skin flushes a pretty pink hue.

On fire for her, I kiss my way down her stomach to her cotton-clad pussy.

Her underwear has to go.

Easing my fingers inside the elastic, I pull the soft undergarment down her hips, revealing her glistening pink perfection.

I thumb her clit with small circles until she wriggles and sighs, arching and begging me with her eyes. She's perfect, but I'm not satisfied with merely touching her.

Bending, I tongue my way through her passage, lapping at all her juices. She's every bit as sweet as I remember.

"Yes. Yes. Oh, my god. Oh, my god!" Kiera grips the sheets, eyes screwed shut as I torment her. I'm ruthless, not stopping, not relenting, as I heap sensation on her.

When she's close, I back away with a smile and change tactics, slowly inserting two fingers inside her and filling her with my digits.

"Please!" she pants. "Please..."

I comply, lapping my tongue over her clit until her moans turn breathier, harder, and faster. I shift my digits, probing until I find her sweetest spot and curl my fingers against it. Her breathing becomes erratic. Her fingers twist in the sheets. Her moans turn to screams as she explodes for me.

As she comes down from her high, I grab a foil square from my pocket, rip it open, and slide the condom down my shaft. My hands are shaking. The anticipation is killing me.

Sliding back up her body, I fit my every edge against her curves, then press our lips together, reveling in her taste. She wraps her legs around me and opens herself as our kiss turns deep and seductive. Feverishly, I position myself at her small entrance and push to the hilt in one strong stroke. We both gasp at the sensations. My eyes roll to the back of my head as desire zips a line of fire down my spine.

After a few seconds of adjusting, I withdraw halfway. "Are you okay?"

"Hmm. That felt so good. Harder?"

With pleasure.

Gritting my teeth and gripping her hips, I shove back inside her with a ferocious thrust. Kiera tightens around me, conforming to every ridge as I probe even deeper with my next thrust.

I continue at a hard, fast pace. Our skin slaps together. Our stares disappear into each other's eyes. Our breaths sync up. I don't merely feel alive when I'm inside Kiera; I feel *her*. Her softness. Her kindness and caring. Her cautious nature alongside the woman inside of her who aches to be both loved and free.

Electric need pings my body. I increase my pace. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on, but I have to wait. I want to come undone with her. I need to feel her let go with me.

Slipping a hand between us, I settle my thumb over her clit and stimulate her between each rapid thrust.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes!" she screams, clinging to my shoulders, nails digging into my skin. "Oh, god. Jonathan..." she croaks out as her walls tighten around me even more.

I turn primal. She called my name during sex. While I'm inside her, she called for *me*. For some reason, that hits me hard. We're not fucking; we're making love.

That must be why, like last time, sex with Kiera feels different. It feels more personal. More loving. More beautiful.

I never want my time with her to end.

Beneath me, her face flushes to a deep rose, her mouth forms a giant O. Yes, she's there. Right there.

A deep groan rumbles from my chest as an overwhelming fire inside me ignites and burns away my self-control. I finally let go deep within her.

While I catch my breath, I stay buried in her clasp. I feel amazing, like I'm on top of the clouds—until reality crashes down around me. Guilt boils over. I took Kiera to bed and plundered her body to deflect from spilling my own emotions. I thought losing myself inside her would make me feel better. Instead, I feel worse for deflecting. For deceiving. I haven't

felt this much for a woman in years. I don't remember falling this hard ever, not even for Amber.

*What does that say about your feelings?*

The answer scares me. I pull free and fall to my back beside her, panting. She rolls to her side, curls up beside me, and falls immediately asleep. Normally I'd nudge a woman toward the door since the sex is over. I'd be more than ready to show her out.

Not Kiera. I want her to stay.

I want her again.

Throughout the night, we worship each other. We explore every dip, every curve, and every crevice of our bodies. When I've taken her more times than I can count and I'm exhausted, I somehow find the strength to do it all again. Her moans and screams become my favorite song. I want this—all the time. I want her. Every day. Every night. Everything she can give. It only makes me want to give her all of me in return.

Eventually I nod off in the middle of the night, falling into a deep sleep while spooning Kiera with my face nuzzled in her neck. For the first time in years, I spend a whole night with a woman. It's the first night in a long time I've managed to sleep soundly. It's the first night in forever that's felt right.

On Sunday morning, I wake to an empty bed, but the pillow beside me is still warm. When I lift my head, I find Kiera struggling into her pants. Where is she going?

"Hey," I call to her groggily.

She gasps, turning to me as she gropes for her bra and shrugs into it. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Is she rushing out the door? "Do you have to be somewhere?"

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to overstay."

"You're fine. There's no need to rush out."

"Thanks." She pastes on a smile. "But I'll get out of your hair, and I won't make the same mistake again."

She looks anxious. A pang of guilt pelts me hard. Shit, I taught her ducking out, not forming connections, and not hanging around to see if the hookup could be more. Clearly, she took our time together as a learning opportunity. But didn't she feel the mind-blowing pleasure—and connection—I did last night?

"It's no trouble. Stay and have some coffee," I offer.

"I should get home. Kami is probably worried. Thanks for a great night." With an awkward wave, she tugs down her shirt and starts out of my bedroom.

That's it?

"Wait." I lurch out of bed and reach for my sweatpants, all but jumping into them to follow. "I'll drive you home."

She's already at the foyer, donning her shoes and opening the front door. "No need. I called an Uber. I'll see you tomorrow at the office."

I don't want her to go, but I can't force her to stay. After all, she gave me most of yesterday. Maybe she genuinely has things to do today. Besides, there's always tomorrow and next weekend...and maybe longer, right? My determination that last night should be the last we ever spend together? No. Ridiculous. I need more of her. I don't know where this thing between us is going, but I'm not giving her up. "Okay. I'll see you then, sweetheart."

When I lean in to kiss her, she pecks my cheek and backs away. "And...thank you."

"For what?" For the mind-boggling pleasure we shared? For truly connecting, despite the fact we started sleeping together because of a silly proposition?

"For being the best hit-it-and-quit-it teacher. You're amazing." She sends me a semismile I don't really understand, then ducks out the door.

Dumbfounded, I watch her walk down the hallway and disappear inside the elevator. Then she's gone.

With numb fingers, I close the door and sag back against it. Did that just happen? Did Kiera run out of here like she couldn't ditch me fast enough?

Yeah. The moment I think there could be something real between me and a woman I'm actually developing feelings for, she reminds me that, besides being her boss, I'm merely her fuck buddy. Her hit-it-and-quit-it teacher.

I'm nothing.

Isn't irony a bitch? I'm finally falling again...only to bet my heart on a woman who's determined to give up on love.



*Friday, May 27*

**Jonathan**

“C’mon, there has to be someone you find attractive,” my best friend encourages as he looks over the crowd in Ian’s bar.

The place is hopping, and I see a lot of curls, tight dresses, and stilettos. The scenery is nice, no denying. I just don’t care. In the past week since Kiera left my apartment before dawn, I’ve felt detached about life, like a disinterested spectator rather than the person living it.

I shrug. “Tonight isn’t my night, I guess.”

Earlier, I agreed to come out with Jake, sure that a good drink and a good lay would cure me of obsessing about my assistant and what she might be doing now. But a few hours and a few drinks later, all I’ve managed to do is get buzzed and feel even more like a fool for wanting her. Last Sunday morning, I was ready to put my heart on the line. What she said completely crushed me.

*Thanks for being the best hit-it-and-quit-it teacher. You’re amazing.*

Those words roll around in my head over and over like a clip from a bad movie on repeat. My grip on my glass of scotch tightens.



God, I'm a stupid chump. I'm the one who told her not to let her emotions get involved...and then I did exactly what I warned her against. During those heady moments I had Kiera in my arms, I would have sworn what she and I had was more than a proposition. But, once again, when it comes to love, I was totally fucking wrong.

Jake scowls. "What? Every night is your night, J. Maybe you should let me pick someone for you."

*Unless she's petite, brunette, and her name is Kiera, I'm not interested.*

"Sure. Whatever..."

"All right. Let me work my magic." He scans the bar until someone catches his eye. "Oh, hot babe about five stools to the left."

I turn in that direction. A brunette with blonde highlights and bold makeup sits alone, looking down at her phone. There's no denying the girl is attractive in a white dress, all decked out in red lipstick and bling. There's nothing wrong with her at all except...

*She isn't Kiera.*

All I seem to care about—think about—is that woman. How is she doing? Is she staying in tonight...or did she go out? Could she be out looking for her very own one-night stand? Is she thinking about me at all? Does she know how much her words hurt me?

More than anything, I'm frustrated. Why can't I mentally let go of a woman who doesn't really want me?

"If you think she's hot, you go shoot your shot." Deflecting Jake will probably be more successful than pretending I'm not infatuated with my assistant.

"Dude, I've already caught my fish for the night." He indicates to the redhead under his arm with a grin. "Time for you to go, um...cast your rod."

Maybe he's right. After Amber, I moved on by diving deep into the dating pool and casting my *rod* every chance I

got. But I don't want to go home with just anyone, not anymore. On the other hand, if I don't approach this fish at the bar, Jake may get suspicious. He may start putting clues together and realize I haven't leveled with him about Kiera. I *will* tell him. I know I've got to—and soon. I'm just not up to it tonight.

After another glance down the bar, I sigh. Maybe she'll be nice to talk to, and I can ease into spending the night with her. What do I have to lose by striking up a conversation? Hell, maybe getting back into regular patterns and habits will take my mind off Kiera.

I rise and head toward the lone woman, still engrossed in her phone. *Here goes nothing.*

"Is this seat taken?" I indicate the stool next to her.

She turns, then scans me up and down. She must like what she sees because a smile breaks out across her face. "Not at all."

She's receptive, even a little flirty. Good. Maybe this won't be so bad if I just play along.

I sit and manufacture a smile. "Why is a pretty thing like you sitting by herself on a Friday night?"

"I was waiting for someone, but I'm not sure he matters. You're a much better alternative."

"Am I? I'm flattered."

"I'm Cassie."

"Jonathan." We shake hands. "It's nice to meet you, Cassie. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure. Thanks."

I motion to Ian that Cassie's next drink is on me. Then I draw a blank. I need to say something, but I'm out of words. Normally, I'd tell a girl she looks hot and chat her up until I get her horizontal. Charm and BS flows along with the booze in a place like this. But despite Cassie's cleavage, I'm not in the mood. And I don't really want to be here.

“So...are you from around here?”

“Fort Worth, yeah. But I moved to Mid-Cities to be closer to my job.”

Safe answer, but not much for me to grasp onto conversationally. “I grew up in North Dallas. What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a model.”

Given her looks, I’m not surprised. I’m also not impressed. I hate to stereotype, but I’ve met people like her. I’ve spent the night with more than a few, too. There’s often a reason they pose for a living, rather than talk. I used to be on board with their shallow conversations. They never wanted meaningful interactions before or after we fucked, and that was totally fine. Now, trying to pretend interest in the superficial feels exhausting. Weirdly, I want...more. More substance. More meaning. More that’s real.

“You must meet a lot of interesting people.” I try my best to sound like I give a shit.

She rolls her eyes. “After a while, they all seem the same, but the clothes... Honey, nothing is more exciting than a designer who knows his stuff. It’s like being on a perpetual shopping spree.” She sighs. “Unfortunately, I don’t get to keep the clothes. I’d need a sugar daddy for that. Interested?”

*Just like that, this conversation is over.*

Cassie literally couldn’t have said anything to turn me off faster. In fact, I just need to get out of here. Tonight isn’t happening. I’ll regroup and try another night.

When I shove my hand into my pocket to grab my wallet and pay the tab, I feel my phone vibrate. Who the hell is calling me this late on a Friday night? It shouldn’t be business. Jake is with me. Nathan and Mia should be out there, getting their weekend on. My mother knows better. My father...don’t get me started. He’s an asshole but unlikely to call me.

When I glance at the screen, Kiera’s name appears.

It's cliché, but my heart skips a beat. My head starts racing. Why is she calling? To tell me she's already found someone to nail because I stupidly taught her how? Is she ringing me to rub her newfound sex life in my face?

Though I'll probably regret it, I turn for the exit to find some quiet and press the screen to answer her call. "What?"

Cassie wraps her fingers around my arm and pulls me back, her long nails digging into my biceps. "Jonathan, baby, don't leave. Aren't you going to take me to your place?"

Is she kidding? I bought her one drink and half listened to her for two minutes, and she's ready to fuck? The old me would have celebrated. Tonight, I jerk from her grasp and keep heading for the door. "Give me just a minute."

I can't think of a nicer way of telling Cassie it will be forever before she sees me again—literally.

As I push out into the night air, reality hits me. I used to love prowling for a gorgeous woman and charming her into bed. It was a game, and I was damn good at it. Now, the only woman I want is one I can't have. My sudden disinterest in everything I used to do as a bona fide bachelor? It's all Kiera's fault. She's ruined me. I hate that I've become such a sap.

I hate even more that I'm fucking in love.

# Chapter Nine

*Friday, May 27*

**Kiera**

---

All day, I've been working up the nerve to call Jonathan. I don't want to start a confrontation, but it's important that we preserve our working relationship. I'm worried I'm the only one who feels that way.

On Monday, I asked him if we could meet during lunch to talk, but he claimed he was busy, despite the fact he had nothing on his calendar. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday were all repeats. Every time I tried to grab a few minutes of his time to clear the air, I either just missed him or he claimed he was too busy. What's going on?

*He could be avoiding you.*

But why? A familiar, sad fear starts creeping in. Since he's had me twice, should I be taking the hint that he wants nothing more to do with me?

Maybe...but it doesn't make sense. Both times we had sex, it was amazing. Not just the pleasure, but the sense of togetherness. We were like one.

The first time I convinced myself it was a fluke, that I was so in the moment and wrapped up in the things he made me feel, that the emotion was all in my head. The second time made me feel more of the same, only stronger. What we shared was not only passionate and intense but loving. Since then, I've wondered whether we merely had sex...or if we're both actually experiencing something more.

No, I have to be overthinking it. I must have read the moment wrong, like I always do. That's the reason I left so abruptly. I wasn't supposed to spend the night with Jonathan, let alone get emotionally attached.

With the workday behind me and the sun setting, I plop onto my bed, give a meowing Sriracha an absent pet, and try to figure out my next move. Jalapeño curls up against my ankles like he's trying to comfort me. I want answers—to understand if or why Jonathan is avoiding me—but I'm afraid of creating conflict between us.

Mustering the courage to pick up my phone, I scroll until I find his contact info and tap his number, then lift the phone to my ear. Will he pick up? How should I start this conversation?

I hear a click from the other line. Too late to turn back now...

“What?” Jonathan snaps.

*Umm...*

That's a response I didn't expect. And the background noise that nearly swallows his bark tells me he's at a bar.

I'm still deciding how I ask if we can talk when I hear a loud feminine voice terribly close to the phone. “Jonathan, baby, don't leave. Aren't you going to take me to your place?”

My heart seizes, then plummets. I turn cold all over. He's already with another woman?

*Of course, he is.*

I shouldn't be surprised. He said his habits wouldn't change despite our agreement. Even so, it's further confirmation of what I had feared. Whatever I thought might be burgeoning between us was all in my head.

“Give me just a minute.”

Is he saying that to me or the other woman? I sit, frozen. Tears threaten to fall down my face. Maybe I should give up and end the call.

But I don't. Long moments pass. The sound of my hollowly thudding heart echoes between my ears as the background music and laughter slowly fade.

“Is everything all right?” he asks finally.

“Clearly, I-I caught you at a bad time. It’s not important. We can talk later.”

“No, you called. What’s on your mind?”

“Really, I don’t want to take your night away from you —”

“I insist.” It sounds more like a demand.

This may be a major mistake, but if he’s willing to hear me out, I should take it. I may not get another chance. “Okay. I wanted to talk about last Saturday night.”

“What about it?” His voice sounds even sharper.

“You’ve just seemed...different since then. Did I say something that offended you?”

He scoffs. “What could you have possibly said to offend me?”

Is that sarcasm? “That’s why I called, to find out.”

“Well, if anything occurs to me, you’ll be the first person I reach out to, sweetheart.”

Okay, that’s definitely sarcasm. I don’t understand. “Jonathan... I mean, Mr. Knight, I’m trying to have an adult conversation so we can resume a decent working relationship, and you’re being an ass. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised. I was dumb enough to care if I upset you. But since you’re back to your same-old, same-old routine...just forget I called.” I try to keep it together. I try so, so hard. But a sob wracks me before I manage to hang up.

As I toss the phone aside, tears roll, hot and acidic, down my cheeks. I draw my legs to my chest, resting my head on my knees. What the hell is up with him? Why did he have to be so condescending?

*He’s a manwhore. He warned you. He told you flatly that none of what you did together would matter to him. He’s just being true to his word.*

Still, did he have to be so dismissive? All he had to do was communicate like an adult, yet he chose derision.

Listening to that woman's pouty, wheedling voice in the background was hard enough. But hearing an entirely different side of Jonathan is like a stab in the heart. Everything he's shown himself to be during our last few weeks together—kind, understanding, supportive, stalwart—he was the exact opposite just now. I should have hung up when I had the chance.

"Kiera?" Kami calls from outside my door.

Shit, my tears must have caught her attention.

"Don't worry," I manage to croak out.

"Screw that. What's wrong?" She opens my bedroom door and sits beside me, taking my hand in a comforting squeeze.

"I'll be fine," I insist against my thighs, head bowed.

"Bullshit. Girl, you're ugly crying. Come here." She pulls me into a hug as I dissolve into more sobs. "It's okay. Let it out."

I do. I cry hard for long minutes until I feel a headache form and I have no more tears to shed. Until I'm left with exhaustion and a feeling of utter emptiness.

"God, I'm so stupid." I pull from her embrace and swipe at my eyes.

"Why?" She hands me a tissue box from my nightstand.

"Jonathan invited me to lunch last weekend. I told him about everything in my past, even Chad. He seemed not merely understanding but ready to defend me against the asshole. Then he took me to his place, and we spent an amazing night together. He made me feel so good about myself." I shake my head as I clean up my face. "No, it was more. He made me feel special, like I was the only woman who mattered to him. And tonight, he's with someone else."

Sympathy softens her face. "I'm so sorry, honey. Don't take this the wrong way, but only you would go into an agreement to learn how to hit-it-and-quit-it and be surprised when he does."



Despite my sorrow, I have to laugh at myself. “You’re right.”

“If it’s any consolation, we’re young. We’re supposed to make mistakes.”

“I’m a quarter of a century old. I shouldn’t be letting my emotions dictate my actions anymore.”

She tsks. “We’re also human. It’s in our nature to feel. No one can help that.”

“I wish I wasn’t feeling what I’m feeling right now.”

In fact, I’m not supposed to be feeling anything at all for this man. But since day one, I’ve struggled not to.

“I worried this might happen.”

“What?”

Kami grabs me by the shoulders. “Kiera, I’m proud of you for pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. You’ve done your best to open your mind, and I think you’ve grown from that. But as shitty as his behavior was tonight, you can’t deny he did exactly what he said he’d do.”

She’s right, and I have no right to be upset. Still, I can’t help feeling devastated. “I know.”

“I think you’ve fallen for him.”

“What? No, I have not.”

“Girl, you’re crying over the man. Face it, you’re in love.

I don’t want to...but the more I think about my behavior and the way he made me feel these past few weeks, the more I fear she’s right.

“But I can’t be in love with him. I promised him I wouldn’t get emotionally attached.”

“Just because you said you wouldn’t, doesn’t mean you have control over that shit. It just happens.”

“I need to make it unhappen.”

“That’s not how it works, hon.”

“Damn it. I don’t know if I can go to this wedding if I have feelings for him. The office is one thing. We’re busy, usually involved in different projects or meetings. I only see him in passing. But in a setting where we’re supposed to be together, pretending to be in love? I’m not sure I can bear it, knowing he doesn’t feel the same.”

“Then don’t go.”

I sigh. “I have to. If I don’t, I’d potentially be screwing the company out of a game-changing deal. He’d never forgive me and probably outright fire me.”

As soul crushed as I feel right now, I can’t not fill my end of our bargain. If I bail, I could be impacting every single employee at KH Industries. That’s both irresponsible and wrong.

Besides, what kind of coward would it make me to renege?

“Then when you go to that wedding, show him that his actions don’t affect you. In fact, put your focus on the someone else you’re supposed to nail in order to ‘graduate.’”

It’s good advice. I need to take it. “What should I do until then?”

“Do what he’s doing. Act like everything is normal. Pretend that what happened last weekend wasn’t important. Two can play at that game.”

In theory, yes. But my heart hurts so much... “I don’t know if I can do that without answers. When we first started with this proposition, he was so kind and thoughtful. Suddenly, he’s condescending, and I can’t find a reason. Something happened between then and now.”

“Or he just moved on like the manwhore he is. After he got what he wanted, he showed you his true colors. Honestly, I don’t think you should waste any more of your energy on him. I get that you want to understand, but be careful... If he’s cold now, I can only imagine what he’ll say in person.”

She’s right. I have to figure out how to move on and accept that I’ll never know Jonathan’s reasons or motives.

“What would you do?”

“I can’t say. I’ve never been in a situation like this. But I see the way you look at him, like you can’t live without him.”

Is she right? Probably. It’s hard to think about walking away from Jonathan. It’s hard to imagine my life having only the most superficial, professional contact with him. I’ve had feelings for guys before...but nothing like the horrible, wrenching emotions I’m feeling now. They’re so strong and so real, I have a hard time believing it’s all in my head.

Deep down, I’m dying to believe the feeling is mutual. But I can’t hold onto that foolish hope when every sign he’s given me is that he doesn’t care about me at all. I have to deal in facts in order to survive our last night as more than boss and assistant. If I don’t, I’ll only be opening myself up to a heartbreak that could devastate me for good.



*Saturday, May 28*

**Jonathan**

“Another.” I slam my scotch glass on the bar in front of Ian.

“You sure, man? That’s your fourth—”

“I’m sure, Ian. Just pour.”

I scan the crowded bar. Pretty women are everywhere, including several eyeing me. None of them pique my interest. The truth is, if I picked one and had sex, it wouldn’t be for pleasure. I’d be using her to get Kiera off my mind. That wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

Goddamn it, I came here tonight to succeed where I failed last night. I’m determined to get laid. I never expected my emotions to betray me.

“Hold off, J. Why don’t you let me catch up?” says a familiar voice.

I whirl to find Jake standing behind me, and I groan. “How did you find me?”

“I had a little help.” He nods to Ian.

So Ian called Jake on me? Traitor.

Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised Jake has been looking for me. I’ve been avoiding his calls and texts since I left him here last night without explanation.

“What’s going on, man? You haven’t been yourself since you got that call late last night.”

“It wasn’t important,” I lie.

Jake is too smart to fall for that. “It was important enough for you to turn down a night of sex.”

“I wasn’t in the mood.”

“You, not in the mood? You’re never not in the mood.”

Why does he fucking have to throw that in my face? “I took the phone call as a sign that I needed a break.”

“From sex? Right.” Clearly, Jake doesn’t believe me.

I wouldn’t believe me, either.

Last night was a complete disaster. Instead of getting horizontal with someone perfectly acceptable, I found myself pining for the unforgettable brunette with the sweet voice. The woman who lights my body on fire. The lover who consumes my mind twenty-four seven. This past week, I’ve done everything to avoid her, yet I’ve spent every waking hour thinking about her.

She’s turned me inside out.

“And now you’re going to sit there and get shitfaced?” he demands.

“Pretty much.”

He studies me, concern all over his face. “The last time you were this self-destructive, you’d just broken up with Amber.”

I scowl, sloughing off his assertion. “People get drunk all the time.”

“Sure, but the reason matters.” He slides onto the stool next to me and gestures to Ian. “I’ll take a light beer—whatever you’ve got in a bottle—and J will have some agua.”

I shake my head. “I’m happy with my drink, thanks. Kind of on a roll.”

With a smirk, Ian hands him a pale ale and me a bottle of water. I glower at them both.

“Too bad. You’re going to hydrate and sober up,” Jake insists.

“Fuck you.”

“Love you, too, bro.” He studies me as I gulp the water, and I know he sees too much. “What’s going on, J? Really?”

The last thing I feel like doing is talk about my feelings. Instead, I swallow the cool, clear liquid and shake my head. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” He pauses. “Is this about Kiera?”

I don’t say a word. I don’t dare. I’ve owed him the truth, and I didn’t give it to him sooner. I put it off and made excuses. Now it’s going to bite me in the ass. And I deserve every bit of shit he heaps on me.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say something’s going on between the two of you,” he drawls. “And it’s serious.”

Shit, it’s like he’s reading my mind. “Jake...”

“You’ve been disappearing lately. You’ve turned down sex with other women. And you’ve stared at Ms. Young like you’re starving and she’s a buffet. I’m going to go out on a limb and guess there’s more to your relationship than two people attending a wedding for the sake of a business deal.”

I close my eyes with a sigh. “It didn’t start out complicated.”

This is good. I need to confess. I need to rip off the Band-Aid and tell him what’s up. I don’t have to spill all the details about my agreement with Kiera. There’s no reason to

embarrass her by divulging the details of her sex life, but I owe him something more than platitudes.

“I had a lapse in judgement, and I had a personal relationship with her. I should have told you sooner. It was irresponsible and wrong. I’m sorry.”

“Did you have sex with her?”

After I kept the truth from Jake, the lack of judgement in his tone shocks me. He’s a true friend. “Yeah. But it never felt like just sex. With her, it was...different, man.”

“Different how?”

“I’m not sure how to explain it. I wanted more than her body. She seemed so sweet. Kind. Caring. But funny and interesting. I relaxed around her. I could be myself with her. I didn’t mean for things to get out of hand.”

Then once I had her in my arms, the floodgates to my heart flung open. I couldn’t stop it. I couldn’t stem it. It scared the hell out of me. The fact she has the power to hurt me still does.

“In fact, last weekend I broke one of my own rules and let her spend the night. After the sex, I didn’t want her to leave. Hell, I never wanted her to go. I know I should have told you weeks ago. My only excuse is that I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t even understand what I was feeling. I still don’t.”

Jake is silent for a long time. I’m sure he’s debating whether to give me advice or smack me upside the head for engaging in less-than-professional behavior with my assistant. I would hardly blame him.

Finally, he breaks the silence. “Ethics and a potential lawsuit aside, it sounds like you’re falling for her.”

I can’t. The last time I opened up to a woman, she hurt me so badly, I wasn’t sure how I would survive. This time, I know I won’t. “Fuck. I need some air.”

I push way from my stool and haul ass out of the bar. I don’t know where I’m going. All I know is that I need to get away. But no matter where I go, Kiera is there—her scent, her

voice, her touch. She follows me. She haunts me. She consumes me. Physically, I'm running away. Emotionally, I'm still with her.

There can only be one reason why.

A rush of nausea hits my system. Jake's assertion makes everything obvious now. The lack of sleep, the loss of appetite, the absent libido for other women except her. It all fits. Son of a bitch. I was so focused on Kiera's emotions that I never took my own into account. I didn't think I needed to. I'm falling hard, and I can't seem to stop.

Memories of past conversations, kisses, and toe-curling bliss all flood my head. Every detail is seared into my brain. My thoughts are particularly stuck on our phone conversation last night and that tiny sob she let out before she hung up. Guilt that I made her cry eats at me. I've tried to stop, but the more I think about it, the shittier I feel. Am I protecting myself from heartache or am I just being an asshole?

A part of me so badly wants to call Kiera, apologize, and blurt out my emotions. But if I do, I'd just be opening myself up for more pain. And the truth is, she was never mine.

*But you want her to be.*

What I want doesn't matter.

I let out a loud groan of frustration. I'm fighting this inner turmoil. So many emotions are hitting me at once, I feel frozen. I don't know what to do. I want her, but I don't want to get hurt. I want to trust her, but I don't know how. I want to love her, but I'm worried she'll never love me back.

Where does that leave me?

I drag in deep breaths of the warm evening air when I realize Jake is behind me again. "I paid your bar tab. You're welcome."

"Thanks. I owe you." In more ways than one.

"Forget it. What are you going to do?"

Isn't that the million-dollar question? "I don't fucking know."

“The way I see it, you have two choices. Figure out how to quit falling or transfer her to someone else.”

He makes the decision sound so easy. In theory, with a swipe of my pen, I could escape Kiera. After all, if I transfer her, I’d rarely see her. But realistically? Dodging her isn’t going to save my heart. It’s too late for that.

“Letting her go would break me.”

He shakes his head. “Transferring her wouldn’t be the end of your relationship. You could officially date her, then. No conflict of interest.”

“That’s the thing. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“She’ll break my heart, like Amber did...only worse. I thought Kiera wanted me for me. But she only wants what I can provide. And like an idiot I gave it to her.”

“Money?”

“No.” The way I feel now, I’d gladly give her my wallet if she’d come back to me.

“Was she sleeping with another guy?”

“No, but I should have known she would never give a shit about me.”

“Are you sure about that? Have you two talked?”

“Why bother? There’s nothing to say.”

“Why bother?” He gapes at me, then shakes his head. “Why do you do that?”

I turn to him, scowling. “Do what?”

“Every time someone tries to get close to you, you push them away.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not doing anything. Kiera genuinely doesn’t give a shit about me.”

“I think you’re wrong. When your sister suggested something was up between you two, I started watching you both. The way Kiera looks at you... I’m convinced she has



feelings for you—deep ones. Are you so determined to stand in the way of your own happiness, you refuse to risk yourself again and give anyone a real chance?”

“She used me for sex, okay?” That’s the best way I can explain the truth to Jake without divulging Kiera’s secrets. “That’s it.”

He slants me a dubious glare. “Let’s say you’re right, that she only saw you as a great time between the sheets. What did you fucking expect? You’ve set those boundaries with every woman the last couple of years. Why are you frustrated with Kiera when you’re the one who told her not to get attached? And how do you know the sex didn’t affect her the same way it affected you?”

“Because she told me to my face.”

Jake raises a brow. “She said that you were nothing but a stiff cock and a good time?”

“Not in so many words, but that was the gist. Why does it matter to you?”

“Because I want my best friend to be happy, goddamn it. You know what I think?”

“You’re going to tell me whether or not I want to hear it.”

“Damn straight, smart ass. I think you’re running from whatever you two could have because you’re afraid of history repeating itself. Am I right?”

“Shut up.”

“I *am* right. I’m also right about the fact you don’t want to lose her, but because you’re afraid of getting hurt, you’re letting her go like a stupid assclown?”

“What the fuck is an assclown?”

“Focus. Are you hearing yourself? You either want to be with her or you don’t.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Oh, I get it completely. You’re being a coward,” he snaps. “Amber is your past. She shouldn’t have power over

you anymore, but you keep letting her win.”

“No, I don’t. This has nothing to do with her. I haven’t spoken to, much less seen, that bitch in two years.”

“Yes. You. Do. You’re letting your broken engagement with her determine all your relationships without ever giving them a chance to grow.”

His words not only resonate, they cut deep. I’m still not sure whether to choose my heart or my insecurity. I don’t want to lose Kiera. But at the very least, I owe her an apology.

“Gee, tell me how you really feel.”

He rolls his eyes as he pulls his keys from his pocket. “Ian called you an Uber. I’ll come with you tomorrow to pick up your car. Go home and really think about what you want, J. This is a second chance to be happy, maybe forever. Most people never get that. Don’t waste it.”

I think he’s being overly optimistic, but I don’t want to argue. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Get right with yourself. Because if you’re going to let one stupid bitch ruin your life, then you’re not the Jonathan Knight I thought you were.”

# Chapter Ten

*Friday, June 10*

**Kiera**

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“What do you think of this one?” Kami and I sit on the couch with white wine as we shop online. She points at her computer screen, displaying a gold and white Versace purse. It’s a little flashy for my simple yet elegant leanings, but I know Kami is salivating over it.

Jalapeño sleeps on the nearby cat tree. Sriracha yawns, then curls up into a ball in the cat bed under the coffee table.

Although my bestie and I share a healthy love for fashion, we have very different tastes. She loves bright colors—hot pinks, yellows, and reds. Besides all things comfortable, I gravitate to pale and pastel—blues, light pinks, and white. She loves Versace and Louis Vuitton. I prefer the understated styles of Dior and Kate Spade. Despite our different fashion sense, we’ve learned each other’s taste well.

“Oh, cute! That’s so you,” I tell her.

“I know, right?” She smiles before her happy expression dissolves. “Except they want seven hundred dollars.”

“Damn, that’s cruel.”

“It’s not cruel. It’s criminal.”

Our online window shopping is the perfect distraction after this past week. Not much has changed between Jonathan and me since that horrible phone call. We haven’t spoken much. We haven’t talked candidly at all. But more than once lately, I swear I’ve caught him looking at me as he passed my desk, like he’s studying me, trying to dissect me. Why?

“What’s the budget again?” Kami asks.

“After paying rent plus utilities”—I do the sum in my head—“I have four hundred dollars total for both a dress and the shoes.” It’s way more than I should spend on clothes to wear to Jonathan’s ex’s wedding, but if I’m going, I need to look my best.

“Oh, my heart.” Kami pretends to stab the middle of her chest as she continues staring at the ornate purse on the screen. “I could really use a bonus right about now.”

I laugh. “Probably not until Christmas.”

“Maybe if I sing ‘Jingle Bells,’ Santa will come early,” she teases. “Or maybe if you give a little ho-ho-ho to our boss...”

My smile falls from my face, and I feel somber all over again. “I don’t think that’s happening. We’re barely on speaking terms.”

“You haven’t talked at all?”

“About business? Yes. About more? Not a syllable.”

In the past couple of days, I’ve decided to pity him. Instead of being with someone real and honest who truly has feelings for him, he’s choosing superficial and hollow. He’s choosing unhappiness. Yes, I went to him to learn how to have meaningless flings, but I never had any intention of totally disregarding my heart if something authentic came along.

He has.

I shake my head. “It’s his loss and, beyond his ex’s wedding, I’m not going to waste any more time or tears on him.”

“That’s my girl. Never spend your energy on someone who refuses to help themselves.”

“It’s not that he won’t help himself. I think...he’s been around fake and shallow women for so long, he doesn’t remember what it’s like to be with someone sincere who truly cares about him.”

“Do you think you could be that person?”

It isn't a question of whether I could. It's a question of whether he would accept my love.

"I like to think I'm a genuine person, but if he doesn't want that..." I throw my hands in the air. "Can't do much for him."

We're scrolling down the retailer's website and finding more super cute purses when we hear a knock.

"I'll get it." I rise from the couch and open the door to find a man in a delivery uniform. "Hi."

He looks down at his clipboard in one hand. In his other hand, he clutches a pristine white box. "Are you Kiera Young?"

"That's me."

He hands me the clipboard. "Can you sign here?"

I nod and add my signature to the line he indicates. When I hand him back the clipboard, he sets the white box in my hands. The lettering on top says MANOLO BLAHNIK.

"Have a good day, ma'am." Then the delivery guy walks away with a whistle before I can lift my jaw off the floor.

"What is it?" Kami yells from across the room, jerking me back to reality.

I shut the door and return to the living room.

When Kami sees the box I'm clutching, her eyes go wide as saucers. "Is that..."

"Yeah. A pair of Manolo Blahniks."

She gapes even more. "Who are they from?"

"I have no idea."

We stare at the shoebox in awe for a long moment. I've never owned anything this extravagant in my life.

Kami glances between the box and me a couple of times, frowning. "You're going to open it, right?"

"Oh, right." My fingers aren't quite steady as I lift the lid.

Inside are the most gorgeous pair of stylish heels I've ever seen. Decorated with a dark crystal buckle, they're black-lace, almond-toe stilettos. If shoes were a god, these are precisely what I'd worship.

I lift one heel from the box as though it's the most fragile thing in the world while holding my breath.

"Oh, my god. Those are gorgeous, girl," Kami breathes. "They're *so* you."

"Totally," I breathe. "Whoever sent them knows me well."

"And you didn't buy them for yourself?"

"With what money?"

Kami's frown deepens. "Is there a card or message inside?"

I scramble through the tissue paper in the box until I come across a note tucked underneath the other shoe.

I remembered how much you  
wanted a pair of nice heels. I hope  
you enjoy these. I'm sorry if I upset  
you. I hope you can forgive me.

J

Tears sting my eyes. "They're from Jonathan."

"Oh, honey." She hugs me while scanning the message herself. "How do you feel?"

"It's bittersweet. He apologized for upsetting me. That's something. But I don't know if he actually understands why I cried." I shrug. "We may never be more than boss-assistant again, but at least he's trying to mend fences."

"It's a good step, but you seem confused?"

"I am. Why wouldn't he just say he was sorry to my face? Why apologize with twelve-hundred-dollar shoes?"

She pauses. “Do you think there’s more to his gesture than an apology?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. What do you think?”

Kami shrugs. “Any chance it’s a bribe? Like, ‘Hey, I know I’ve been an asshole. Would really gorgeous shoes make you put up with more of my shit?’”

“I’m wondering that, too. We’re barely speaking, but he sends me an extravagant gift? It’s not adding up.”

“So I’m assuming this isn’t giving the closure you want?”

“Yes and no. I’m grateful for his apology, but I still have no idea how he feels about anything. Shoes, no matter how gorgeous they are, don’t tell me anything.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know any other way to tell you he cares. Unless they’re angry or horny, guys don’t communicate very effectively about their feelings. But I will say, if he’s going to this much trouble, maybe you should give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“If he’s looking for a gesture I would value, telling me his true feelings would go a lot farther than giving me a pair of shoes.” I sigh. “As beautiful as these are, I can’t accept them. I’d rather earn something this amazing than receive them from someone who can’t be honest with me.”

I know I’ll probably never find shoes from a secondhand store as beautiful as these, but it’s for the best. A girl has to have her integrity after all.

“I hate that you’re saying goodbye to Manolo Blahniks.” Kami sighs. “But I understand.”

Regardless of what happens at the wedding, I’m going to stick to my guns. Even though I’ve learned how to one-night stand, that won’t stop me from wanting a genuine connection. I hope one day Jonathan can see that he should open himself to one, too.



*Saturday, June 18*

## **Jonathan**

The evening I've both dreaded and anticipated is here: Amber's wedding day.

I park in front of Kiera's apartment. The beads of sweat at my temples have less to do with the June weather than seeing Kiera away from the office again. When I think about having her so close, anxiety riddles me.

The last time we spoke about anything unrelated to business, I pushed her away with sarcasm instead of telling her how I felt. What if she's decided she's not coming to the wedding with me after all? What if she slams the door in my face? I should have manned up and asked her about her plans before now, maybe reminded her of her responsibility to KH Industries. No, that would have been low. And cheap. What I needed to do was tell her that being with her made me feel happy, listened to, and accepted. That I didn't want to be just her hit-it-and-quit-it teacher.

Instead, I said nothing. Now, I feel cold, guilty, and hollow.

I hoped buying her those heels would serve as an apology, that she'd see my sincerity and speak to me again. Not once did it cross my mind that she would send them back without explanation. Why did she do that? What message was she sending me?

Does it matter? She didn't forgive me.

Worse, by the end of the night, Kiera will "graduate." Sure, I should also officially open negotiations with Maya Thompson again, and that will be great for business. Right now, I almost don't care. The thought of Kiera under another man makes my blood boil, but what I feel, want, or need is irrelevant. I fucked up, and she made her choice accordingly.

Drawing in a steady breath, I knock on her front door. Seconds later, she answers. The moment she comes into view, I'm blown away by how stunning she looks.

Her hair is styled into a loose but elegant twist that reveals dangling silver earrings. Tendrils of hair softly shape



her face and delicate neck. Her skin glows under the Texas sun, her natural makeup adding a subtle flush to her cheeks that accentuates her long black lashes and the berry stain on her bow-shaped lips.

She wears a simple dress in a blushing lilac shade. The spaghetti straps cling to her slender shoulders while the A-line skirt accentuates her small waist and, with a flirty ruffle, skims the tops of her knees. With French manicured nails, she grips a sleek black clutch.

I've never seen her look so beautiful. How am I supposed to concentrate on anything but her tonight when she looks like a fucking goddess? I have to focus on getting this deal started. It hurts like hell, knowing that, other than professionally, we'll go our separate ways after tonight.

Does it really have to end like this?

She doesn't want me for me, and I have to accept that. Besides, who am I to ruin her chance at a better sex life? I care about her. I want her to be happy. If that's without me, I need to accept it.

Once more, I scan her from head to toe. Then I notice her footwear with a frown. Wait, I've never seen those black satin heels with pearls in the shape of a bow gracing her feet. They're so simple yet so her. Are they the reason she rejected my gift?

"Hi," she greets me apprehensively, her gaze everywhere except on me.

"Thanks for coming with me." I study her face for any kind of emotion. Nothing. All I see is a brick wall. She's completely closed herself off.

*That's because you did it to her first.*

As much as the truth hurts, it's for the best. There's no need to further complicate things. Even if that's true, there are so many things I want to ask. So many things I want to say. But I feel like it's too late, like I'm switching pitchers at the bottom of the ninth when I'm already down ten to nothing. Still, I should at least talk to her like a human being, right?

I clear my throat. “You look really nice.”

“Thank you,” she says stiffly. “Ready to go?”

I nod and help her into my car. Neither of us speaks the twenty minutes to the wedding venue. The silence is stifling. We should talk about something. Anything. Break the ice. We can’t walk in looking indifferent. Or worse, like we despise each other. People—especially Maya—may notice.

While stopped at a red light, I look her way. She stares out the window, watching the city pass. She shifts, crossing her legs to face the passenger door as if she can’t get far enough away from me. Is she wanting these last hours with me over that badly? Or is there any chance she’s having second thoughts, too?

I suddenly realize I don’t recognize this outfit she has on. I would have remembered if this was hanging in either her or Kami’s closets.

“Is your dress new?” I ask.

She looks down at herself. “Yeah. I found it and the shoes at a secondhand designer store online and thought they were cute. Still expensive, but worth it and in my price range.”

I understand the dress. What I don’t understand, however, is why she’d buy her own pair of used heels when I already gifted her brand-new, designer stilettos that would have matched every bit as well. I can’t think of a logical reason why she would choose secondhand shoes over untouched Manolos, but I guess it doesn’t matter.

“It suits you,” I say finally.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I grapple for something else to add to the conversation, but before I find a topic, I’m pulling into the parking lot and stopping in the first available spot. We walk the short trek to the venue’s entrance. Most everyone is already inside, I suppose, because I don’t see many people milling around out

here, except a few taking last-minute drags on their cigarettes. Not surprising since the ceremony starts in ten minutes.

Suddenly, Kiera stops short of the door. “Before we go in, I want to clear the air about something.”

She wants to talk? Thank god. I’m all for that. Whatever she wants to say, I want to hear. “Please.”

Or is she backing out? Is she going to tell me I was an ass and that she can’t spend an evening with me? I would hardly blame her if she did.

“Those shoes you sent were beautiful. Stunning. I didn’t send them back as an insult. I just couldn’t accept them.”

I frown. “Was it because they didn’t fit?”

“I don’t know. To be honest, I didn’t even try them on.”

So her reason for sending them back was personal. On the one hand, I appreciate her returning the shoes when most women would have kept them. On the other hand, even if she didn’t return them as an insult, it hurt. But I don’t want her to feel guilty for doing what she felt she had to.

“Then what made you feel like you had to send them back?”

“Growing up, I saw that the harder I worked and saved, the more buying things for myself felt like a reward. I felt proud when I could afford things for myself. Don’t get me wrong, I treasure heartfelt gifts, and I thank you for thinking of me. But I don’t want you to think you owe me anything for tonight. You’ll do great with Maya. I’m sure of it.”

Her honesty melts me. Amber would have hoarded the shoes and asked what other colors they came in. Kiera is nothing like my ex. Jake was right about that. Now that I understand her better, I respect Kiera’s desire to earn things she wants for herself.

“Thank you for explaining. I only sent them to apologize for my behavior.”

She nods. “I know. But you didn’t have to buy me anything. All I wanted was for you to talk to me.”

And I didn't.

Kiera heads for the front door. Cursing under my breath, I rush to catch up and pull it open for her. Together, we enter.

Inside, the venue is overwhelmingly pink—every wall, every surface. From the floral arrangements to the arch soaring above the altar to the runner blanketing the aisle. Other than the dark pews, there is no other color in sight.

Beside me, Kiera gasps, taking it all in with wide eyes. “Well, I know what your ex's favorite color is.”

“Yep. Amber always loved pink.”

“Love seems like an understatement. I mean, I like pink as much as the next girl, but...this looks like Barbie threw up everywhere.”

Kiera is joking with me again. I'm almost giddy. I didn't realize how much I've missed her humor and sharp wit until just now. The tug at my heart pulls me closer to her.

“Exactly. Want to know what's crazier?” I smile wryly. “This wedding gives me serious déjà vu.”

“Your wedding looked like this?”

“A lot, yes. Maybe when she was planning a pinkfest and didn't ask my opinion about our ceremony, that should have been my first clue.”

“Definitely.”

At the time, I didn't care what the wedding looked like as long as I married the love of my life, so I let her have her way.

*Look how well that turned out for you.*

An usher approaches us. “Are you here for the bride or the groom?”

*Neither?*

“Bride,” I say begrudgingly.

“If you'll follow me, please.”

He guides us to a pew in the middle of the sanctuary. Once we're seated, I scan the venue for familiar faces.

Amber's friends and family are a few rows ahead of us. I really hope they don't turn around.

I check my watch. Five minutes to five. Good. The sooner this shit show starts, the better.

"This must be weird for you," Kiera murmurs, leaning closer. "Watching your ex getting married."

I shrug. "Coming here is strictly business."

"I know, but still...it must feel strange."

"Okay, a little. But honestly, I just don't care anymore."

Kiera scans the room with its high ceilings and expansive windows as music suddenly reverberates through the church. The ceremony is about to begin. Not long after the song begins, I recognize the tune from a British crooner, about a woman looking perfect tonight.

First, the flower girl and ring bearer walk down the aisle. When they pass us, Kiera smiles as if they're the cutest kids she's ever seen. Maybe they are, but it's hard to tell when they're covered in head-to-toe pink.

After that come the bridesmaids, gliding down the aisle toward dapper groomsmen now waiting at the altar. I could swear some of Amber's friends look hungover and slightly green. I wouldn't be surprised if the bride and her friends went hard at her bachelorette party.

Right behind them comes the groom arm-in-arm with his mother. The older woman is both beaming and crying tears of joy. The groom, on the other hand...the poor guy looks like he's shaking.

Hey, at least he got to the altar. I don't know whether to congratulate him or pity the poor bastard.

"Are you really okay?" Kiera whispers beside me.

There she goes, caring again. What am I going to do when I don't have her in my life to give a shit anymore? The question grips me with panic.

I force my expression to blank. "Fine."

She frowns, clearly not buying my bullshit. And she's right not to. Everything about today is bothering me more than I thought it would. Not because Amber is marrying another man. As far as I'm concerned, I dodged a bullet with her. But I feel like I'm watching what could have been.

*Maybe you could have that with Kiera.*

No, I can't. I've done the unthinkable and turned her into a cynic like me. Why would she want to settle down after everything I've taught her? After the way things ended between us? After the way I fucked up?

Hearing a transition in the music, Kiera stands with the rest of the guests and turns her attention to the closed double doors at the back of the venue. Reluctantly, I do the same.

A few seconds later, the doors slowly open and reveal Amber. Her blond hair curls and sways around her face, softened by a transparent veil. That, I expected. What I didn't? Everything else about her bridal attire also being transparent. She's wearing...something I don't have a name for. It looks more like a negligee than a wedding dress. I don't have to strain at all to see the shape of her thighs and in between.

When I hear gasps from the other guests, I laugh to myself. Amber always did know how to make an entrance.

As she walks down the aisle to a violin cover of a popular song about climbing every mountain for someone, I watch the wedding unfold, feeling more and more bitter. How come Amber, who gave zero fucks about me and treated me horribly, gets a happy ending? I genuinely opened my heart to her, she screwed me over...and I wound up alone. How is that possible.

*Not everything is black and white.* I wish it were, but I know that's not how the world works.

When my ex reaches her fiancé, they hold hands. The guests sit as the officiant presides over the ceremony for the next twenty minutes, until the couple exchanges vows I doubt Amber is capable of keeping. Then they're pronounced

husband and wife. The bride's now-husband grabs her for a big kiss, looking overjoyed. Everyone claps and cheers.

I hope for the groom's sake that I'm wrong. That Amber truly loves him. That he never has to endure the blow she dealt me. That they truly live happily ever after.

Someone should. It's just not going to be me.

Once the wedding party has left the altar, I turn to Kiera. "Ready for the snake pit?"

"It can't be that bad, can it?"

"With Amber's family and friends, I'm preparing myself for the worst."

I know they'll ask questions. Will they believe our answers? Can we keep our story straight long enough for me to connect with Maya and get this deal rolling? Since I'm losing Kiera tonight, nothing else matters now.

As we leave the sanctuary, I take her hand and head toward the sun setting over the outdoor reception. Thankfully, she doesn't resist. I'm sure she's only letting me touch her because we're putting on a show. But her grip on my fingers feels like she's embracing my entire body. She probably doesn't mean it, but somehow her touch assures me that everything is going to be okay.

The sooner I secure this deal and bail out of this hellhole, the better. But then Kiera will be gone.

*Let's not think about that.*

Under a pink tent, the reception is beautiful, all black chairs and tables with large pink and white centerpieces. The dance floor divides the guest and family tables. In front, a table for two has a sign that proclaims it belongs to Mr. and Mrs. in elegant cursive.

"Where do you think we're sitting?" Kiera asks, bringing me back to the present.

"Probably somewhere in the back." Which suits me just fine.

Together, we scan the tables until we find our assigned seats at the back of the reception. The view to the front where the bride and groom are sitting is far but still unfortunately visible. I help Kiera into her chair before sitting beside her. Empty plates and glasses full of white wine and ice water sit in front of us.

Kiera sips the vino with a somber face. "I'm sorry you had to watch that."

I shake my head. "There's no need to be sorry. It's not a big deal."

"If it wasn't a big deal, why were you angry?"

How do I tell her that, deep down, I wish that was us without leaving myself wide open for her to laugh and reject me?

Before I can deflect, I hear a guy behind me. "Kiera?"

Who the hell would know her at my ex's wedding? It's obviously not Maya, and I haven't introduced her to anyone else yet.

I turn to the vaguely familiar voice and see Amber's brother. I'm thoroughly confused. How does he know Kiera?

I watch her for some reaction. Will she greet him with a smile? A kiss? A glower?

"Chris?" She looks as confused as I feel.

"Hey." He comes toward her with a smile. "Fancy seeing you here."

I look back and forth between the two of them, still thoroughly lost. What the fuck? She knows this douche?

Or...wait. Is this Chris, her shitty, blind-date Chris? The same Chris as my ex's brother Chris?

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"What am I doing here? What are you doing here?" He notices me beside Kiera, then frowns. "Hey, Jonathan. I didn't think you'd come. Are you guys together?"



I don't like the way he's looking at Kiera, like she's a shiny trinket he wants to collect. I wrap my arm around the back of her chair. "She's with me. I'm sorry, how do you know each other?"

"We went on a date about six weeks ago," he says, confirming my suspicions.

What a fucking small world.

Kiera glances back and forth between us. "How do you know Jonathan?"

"He's my sister's ex."

I see the moment she puts two and two together. She looks every bit as shocked as I feel, then manages to cover up with a fake smile. "What a coincidence."

"Right?" Chris grins. "I'd love to stay and chat, but you know...duty calls when your sibling gets married. Save me a dance later." He points to Kiera and struts away like his evening just got better.

The minute he's out of earshot, Kiera lets out a shocked gasp. "OMG, I went on a date with your ex's brother? I didn't see that coming."

"Yeah. All you gave me was his first name and the fact he was a douchebag. I had no idea, either."

It's definitely a small world after all, way less than six degrees of separation.

Soon, Amber's friends and family approach us; I'm sure out of curiosity more than any genuine desire to reconnect. Mentally, I review everything Kiera and I discussed when we swapped backstories. I hope she remembers, too.

Our conversations last most of the cocktail hour. Fortunately, everyone seems to be eating up our story. It helps that she doesn't squirm away from my arm around her shoulder and she never lets go of my hand. From the women smiling in adoration to the men's hearty handshakes, it's mission accomplished.

*You and Kiera make a damn good team.*

In business, yes. In love...apparently not as much as I thought.

After the deejay asks everyone to take their seats, the bride and groom make their entrance. Amber smiles from ear to ear. Her groom looks at her with the most doting expression.

My anger and bitterness rush back to the fore as the newlyweds make their way to the dance floor. Why does she get to move on and I don't? She ruined me emotionally, then invited me to her big day to...what? Pretend it didn't happen?

With kisses and smiling faces, they dance to a slow ballad. In that moment, I realize there are seven-hundred thirty days in two years' time. If she found someone else and got married in that span because she chose to, that means I could have done the same. But I didn't. I stewed in my heartbreak and lashed out at others for my loneliness.

I have no one to blame but myself.

The universe gave me chance after chance to start over. But I convinced myself I was too damaged, and it wasn't possible. That I couldn't be loved. Because of that, I had pushed every chance and everyone away. For that, I lost Kiera, a woman who believed in love so fiercely. She would have taken the leap with me once upon a time; I'm sure of that. Instead, I turned her into a cynic. I put my emotional damage on her, convincing her that meaningless hookups were the way the world worked, when it never had to be so bleak. That realization feels like a kick to the gut. Amber was never the reason I couldn't move on. It was me. It was all me.

In shock, I sit through the toasts and cheers. We've eaten the main course, and the parents have had their dances. When the deejay welcomes all guests to the dance floor, everyone but Keira and I leave our table. Two tables over, I see Maya Thompson alone, tapping her toe.

This is it. It's time for me to go kick business into high gear. And time for Kiera to "graduate" in another man's bed.

*Call it off.*

And make an ass out of myself now? No, I fucked up. She doesn't want love. Not anymore, and definitely not from me. I've ruined everything for us both.

God, I hate myself so much right now I have no idea how I'm going to function after tonight.

"Well..." I clear my throat and make to rise. "I guess this is—"

"Dance with me?" Her doe eyes plead with me.

I almost ask why, but I have the presence of mind to shut my mouth. These will be the final moments I can truly spend with her as a woman. The last time I'll feel her touch on my skin. The last time she'll be by my side. Even if she just wants to tell me I've been an asshole, I'm not passing up this chance.

I rise and extend my hand to her. "I'd love to."

As we walk onto the dance floor, I hear a Coldplay song that encourages me to look at the stars and how bright they shine for her. I wrap one arm around her waist while holding her hand with the other. Her free arm rests on my shoulder. Our bodies sway close together as we move to the music.

What is she thinking? Is she nervous about what comes next? Is she having second thoughts?

"How are you feeling?" I murmur.

"I'm okay. A little nervous but...okay"

"I get that."

There's a long silence between us as we stare into each other's eyes. She has the most expressive hazel eyes I've ever seen. I won't forget them. Her cheeks glow with that hint of pink that's echoed by her darker, luscious mouth. The desire to kiss her grows until it's almost a need.

If this is the last time I can speak openly with her, I need to do it now before it's too late. And if I make an ass out of myself...at least I tried.

"Kiera, there's something I haven't been honest with you about. Not because I didn't trust you with the truth, but

because it's painful. I didn't want you to think I was pathetic."

"You've never been pathetic to me. You're amazing in so many ways," she assures with a smile.

Just not as a human being. But Kiera would never say that. She's too kind.

"Remember when I told you about my engagement to Amber?"

"Yes."

"Remember that I told you we mutually agreed to end it on our wedding day, right?"

"Yes."

"That wasn't the whole truth." I take a deep breath. This is going to hurt like a bitch, but she deserves to know why I fucked up everything between us. "Before the ceremony, we'd plan to meet each other outside her dressing room. We promised we wouldn't physically see each other because everyone considered it bad luck, but we planned to hold hands through the crack in the door so we could talk each other through the wedding jitters. But I was so anxious to see her that Jake and I went to the bridal suite early. We were standing just outside her door when we overheard Amber say to her maid of honor that she wasn't just marrying me because she loved me. I was merely the ticket to securing her future."

Kiera gasps in shock, her expression filled with empathy. "Oh, I'm so sorry. That's horrible."

"Looking back, I can't blame Amber for everything. She wanted a bright future and thought, as my wife, I could open doors for her. At the time, all I felt was fury and heartbreak. I wanted her to love me for me, and I was crushed that she only wanted me for my wallet and my status. I confronted her about it. We exchanged some not-so-nice words that ended with me insisting that the wedding was off."

"What happened next?"

"I would have left there and then, but that would have meant letting Amber tell our friends and families her side of

the story. I knew she'd spin the truth for her own benefit. So I asked Jake to speak on our behalf and tell everyone we had mutually agreed to end our engagement because we decided we were better friends than spouses. Then I threatened Amber that if she tried to tell anyone otherwise, I would expose her for the snake she really was."

Shock and sadness fills Kiera's eyes. "Oh, Jonathan..."

Her pity hurts. "After that, I got in my car and didn't look back. And I haven't told anyone else this story...until you."

"Thank you, but why tell me?"

"Because I trust you."

She tears up almost instantly, looking on the verge of breaking into sobs.

Shit, I didn't mean to upset her. "Don't cry, sweetheart. I'm sorry if I made you sad. I just wanted you to know the truth. I thought you deserved to know why I'm no good for you."

She hesitates, scanning my face. What is she thinking? What will she say? Is she angry? Did I make a mistake in telling her?

"Thank you so much for your honesty. I know it wasn't easy for you to open up, and I'm grateful that you trusted me with your truth. It means a lot to me."

In my peripheral vision, I notice Maya still sitting by herself. Now is my chance to talk to her...but I don't want to let Kiera go.

She seems to understand my dilemma and sends me a somber smile. "It's okay. You're capable of making KH Industries all the things you ever dreamed. And it's time to go do that. No matter what happens, I'll be cheering for you." She stops dancing and steps away. "I hope that, one day, you find the person who makes you happy and that the next time love finds you...you aren't afraid to embrace it."

Then with a press of her lips to my cheek, she leaves the dance floor—and me.

That's it. She's given me the green light to finish the work I started, to cinch the deal I've been eager to cement for two years. But I know that the minute I do, Kiera will move on, too.

This doesn't feel right. None of it does.

*But this is what you wanted.*

It was, but I didn't think it'd be hard to watch Kiera leave. I had no idea it would feel like my heart was being torn from my chest. But I can't let my emotions get the better of me. Not here. Not now.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I approach Maya, doing my best to look friendly and approachable when I'm fucking dying inside.

The minute she sees me she smiles. "Jonathan. So glad you could make it."

"Good to see you. Mind if I sit?"

"Not at all. Please do. I've been wanting to talk to you..."

While we exchange pleasantries as a prelude to business, I sneak glances around the reception, looking around for Kiera. I stop short when I find her standing next to Chris, smiling and looking far more than friendly. What is she doing with him? Really? Is he seriously the guy she's going to choose tonight?

*Not your concern. None of your business.*

I force myself to look away and plaster on a professional smile. "Well, Ms. Thompson, should we talk about business?"



## **Kiera**

After pushing Jonathan in Maya's direction, I leave the dance floor. I have to walk away before I do something stupid I'll regret. The longer I stay near him, the harder it feels to breathe. Everything in me screams to hold onto him and blurt out him how I feel.

*You can't.*

Right. Who knows if he even reciprocates a tenth of my feelings? The way he's looked at me tonight, I'd swear his emotions are genuine...but is that real or my wishful heart?

I'll probably never know, mostly because he doesn't want to share himself. I can't force him. Instead, I have to look forward. Tonight is everything I've been working up to, the "graduation" I intended to reach all along. Now that the time has come, I hesitate. Am I doing the right thing by walking away from Jonathan? It's no longer a question of whether I can have sex without getting emotionally attached—probably not—but whether I should even try. After all, he's not happy. I doubt I will be, either.

On the other hand, I can't just pine for the man. He's not interested in more. He's made that clear. I need to move on. Maybe something casual will be better than being alone.

I asked him to dance with me because I wanted another sliver of time with him. It was selfish, I know. But I ached to have him close to me, to be in his arms once more. I needed the closure. Then he confessed the truth about his wedding, totally shocking me. I didn't see that coming...but it explains so much. No wonder he runs from relationships. He's been worried that every woman he dates won't see beyond the dollar signs and opportunities. The fact that I'm the only person outside his family circle he's trusted to tell this secret to after so long has me utterly shook.

What did I do to earn that trust? Is there a chance he feels more for me than mere faith as a human being?

*You've run out of time to investigate.*

But even if I had more time, what would be the point? Just because he was willing to share his past doesn't mean he's ready to pour out his soul or give me his heart. If he was, I'd swear to Jonathan that his money doesn't matter to me and never will. Then again, maybe he's figured that out since I returned the shoes to him. And knowing what I know now, I'm even more convinced I did the right thing. All I care about and all I see is the caring, funny, wonderful man I fell for.

Leaving him is killing me. Maybe I should turn back. No. I have to keep going. I have to see this through—for me. There is no relationship between Jonathan and me. That’s the way he wants it.

Once I’m off the dance floor, I skim the reception. There are lots of good-looking men here tonight. The only man I truly want is on the other side of the room, fighting for his professional life. But there are others here. It can’t be that hard to pick one and go home with him. I’m sure the first time will feel difficult, but I’ll get through it, right?

It would be easier if I had some liquid courage.

I head toward the bar when I notice Chris standing near the gigantic cake, talking to some of his buddies.

He’ll do. He’s no Jonathan, but at least I know he isn’t an axe murderer. Sure, he’s an absolute douchebag who called me a bitch, but does it matter? He’s horny enough to say yes. And he’ll be impossible to develop feelings for, so he’ll be easy to walk away from.

Changing course, I saunter in Chris’s direction, hips swaying with each step I take. The minute he notices me, he smirks.

*Eww. Gag.*

*Do it for graduation, Kiera. Do it for you. You’ve earned more than a night alone. If the sex isn’t good, picture Jonathan.*

No wait, I can’t do that. Shit. Tonight would be easier if I *was* going home with him.

*Not an option.*

I put on a super-fake, sultry smile. “Hi, Chris.”

He separates from his guy friends and heads in my direction. “Hey. How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know, just...hanging around, looking for something to do.” I sidle closer and caress his arm, just so there’s no misunderstanding about what I want. “How about you?”



He wraps his arm around my waist, looking me up and down. “Same.”

This is almost too easy. “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Hell, yeah. What about Jonathan?”

Seriously? I come onto this moron after rejecting him twice, and he chooses this moment to pull out his moral compass? Why is he suddenly thinking with the head up top, especially when I would rather not hear him speak at all?

I shrug. “Does it matter?”

Chris looks back to his buddies, who all seem to be watching intently. What is this, a high-school locker room? I barely refrain from rolling my eyes as they give him a smarmy collection of smirks, nudges, and thumbs-up.

“Guess not,” he drawls. “Your place or mine?”

It’s bad enough I’ll be fucking him. I don’t need his... anything near my sheets. I’m also not interested in going back to his place. The less personal this is, the better.

“There’s a hotel right down the road,” I suggest. I need to get away from Jonathan if I’m going to have any prayer of going through with this.

“Yeah, all right. Let’s go. I’ll spring for half the room if you’ll get the other half.”

And he’s still cheap, too. I’m not shocked at all. “Fine. Just get me out of here.”

He follows me to my table as I grab my clutch. With his hand at the small of my back, we head for the exit. As I’m walking across the floor, I can’t leave without turning back one last time to see Jonathan. He’s still sitting with Maya, which I expected. On Monday, I’ll email him my resignation, so I’ll probably never see him again. I have to commit him to memory.

But the minute I see his face, I’m stunned to find him not deep in conversation with his potential business partner. He’s staring right back at me.

# Chapter Eleven

**Jonathan**

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“This sounds like something Thompson and Company has been looking for.” Maya is eating up every bit of my pitch, which is great.

But I can’t stop staring at Kiera. She’s talking to Chris, the douchebag—and it’s looking cozy.

*Stop it. Stay focused. You almost have this.*

Secretly, I hope they stay a while, have a few drinks, maybe dance some. Anything so I can keep a close eye on her.

Instead, I see him wrap his arm around her and lead her across the room. She grabs her purse from our table, patently refusing to look at me.

“Your thoughts, Jonathan?” Maya prompts me.

“You’re right. I’m going to, um...” Where Kiera and Chris going? What is she doing? Why does it look like they’re leaving?

“Send me a proposal?” Maya finishes for me.

I try to smile. “Yeah. Exactly. Sorry. There’s just a lot happening at this reception. It’s distracting.”

It’s not a lie. People are dancing and mingling and having a good time. It’s on the loud side, especially when Amber grabs a glass of champagne and hollers for her new husband to come dance with her. But I barely notice my ex.

“It is, but I admire your dedication to getting this deal done. To be honest, my hesitation two years ago was your suddenly quitting on Amber. I worried that said something about your commitment to the job.”

“Not at all. Amber and I just weren’t suited for each other. But when it comes to business, I’ll do everything—”

Chris is leading Kiera out the door. He’s taking her toward the parking lot and into the night. To find a bed? I break out in a cold sweat.

She turns one last gaze on me. Her face looks so fucking sad.

My heart stops. In that moment, the last of my self-control evaporates. All I can think about is chasing her, telling her she’s making a big mistake, confessing everything that’s been pressing on me for over a month. Admitting to her that I’m in love with her.

“Everything...what? Are you okay?” Maya’s question brings me back to the opportunity in front of me.

The woman just admitted that she bailed on our deal two years ago because she didn’t think I could commit properly. I didn’t even get a chance to finish assuring her that I will give her one-hundred percent of my effort if she signs with KH Industries. If I get up out of this chair to chase Kiera—even to tell her she’s making a mistake—Maya Thompson will probably never even negotiate with me, much less sign on the dotted line.

“Um...” I swallow, but I don’t dare blink. I can’t dare look away from Kiera.

What should I do?

*You know what’s more important.*

I do, but at what cost? Do I choose the company or my heart? My livelihood or my sanity? Everything I’ve spent years building or the woman who has brought me back to life? Either way, I’m giving up something.

Finally, after what feels like long moments of staring at each other, Kiera drops her gaze, turns away, and disappears.

That’s it.

I leap to my feet. “I’m sorry, Ms. Thompson. I have to leave. I genuinely want to continue this discussion on Monday.

You have no idea how much. I'm going to reach out to you first thing and hope that you still want to finish this conversation because I think our businesses could be great for each other. But the truth is, if I don't go now...I could lose far more than my professional future. I can't take that risk."

I don't even wait for a response. I turn and run from the reception.

I can't let Kiera go. I can't let her be the one who got away. Can't let her choose jaded, meaningless sex and ruin her life because of my selfishness.

Dashing across the parking lot, I look for her everywhere. Where the fuck has she gone? Don't tell me she's already left.

I turn and turn until I see pale purple in my peripheral vision standing beside the open passenger's door of Chris's car, exchanging murmured words with the asswipe as he hovers, pinning her in.

I run toward her. "Kiera!"

She jerks around in shock. "Jonathan? What are you doing? Is Maya still inside?"

"Yes. I don't care. You can't go through with this."

"What do you mean? This is what we agreed on."

"Why are you up in our business?" Chris approaches, blocking her from my view. "Go away, loser. She picked me."

"Get the fuck away from my woman."

"You don't own her, man. You had your chance. Now she's choosing a real man." Chris rears back his fist and rams it at me like he thinks he's going to shove the grill of a big rig down my throat. But he's had too much booze, and he seems to move in slow motion.

I duck out of the way, making him miss. And I smile. Does he realize that he just gave me the perfect opportunity to "defend" myself? Seconds later, I haul back and ram my knuckles into this asshole's face, relishing the sound of fist meeting bone. My fingers will hurt like a bitch later, but god, that feels good.

Chris falls to the ground, grunting in pain and holding his nose in his hands, whining. “You asshole!”

“Stay away from Kiera. Don’t ever call her, talk to her, or text her. Hell, don’t even think about her. She’s way too good for a piece of shit like you.”

“Jonathan.” Kiera gasps. “What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done a long time ago. Kiera?” I hold out my hand, helping her over Chris’s prone form.

As soon as I pull her against me, Amber’s brother limps to his feet and dashes away, giving me a dirty look, which I ignore. For the moment, I have everything I could ever want in my arms.

“What is going on?” She’s guarded, almost angry.

“You don’t belong with him.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “And exactly who do I belong with in your mind?”

“Me.” I grab her shoulders. “You belong with me, sweetheart. No one else.”

She blinks like she’s having trouble comprehending my words—or believing them. “What?”

I approach her and grab her hand, pulling her out of the vehicle. “Kiera, I know you probably don’t feel the same way, but I couldn’t let you leave with him... I can’t walk away without saying I love you. You’ve been driving me crazy ever since you emailed me that insane proposition, and I never want to let you go again.”

She stands gaping and wide-eyed. “Repeat that.”

*I’m more than happy to, sweetheart.* “I have been in agony over you for weeks. I was afraid of how I felt. I’m sorry for pushing you away. I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you sooner. Hell, I wasn’t honest with myself. I never slept with that woman at the bar. I couldn’t. All I could think about was you, and that scared me. I know this may be too little, too late, but I couldn’t let you leave with Chris without telling you the truth. I’m not good at expressing my feelings, but what I am

good at is proving that I mean what I say. Give me a chance to show you how much I want and need you. You're my everything. I love you."

"Jonathan." Her voice trembles as her face softens. Tears pool, then fall down her cheeks. "Oh, my god. I love you, too. So much. I have for weeks. I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to break our agreement. I wasn't going to leave with Chris. Right before you came, I told him I'd changed my mind."

*Thank fuck.* Lifting her into my arms, I crash my lips onto hers. I drink in the touch of her skin on mine as if she's water soothing me after a long drought. I may lose the deal with Maya, and I'll have to make it up to Jake and every other employee at KH Industries, but there are more important things in life. For me, that's Kiera.

When we finally come up for air, I smile into her beautiful face. "So...I have a question. Well, I need a favor."

"Anything." She smiles like she's supremely happy.

I love knowing I put that expression on her face and that I'm going to do everything possible to make her happy for the rest of our days.

"Can you teach me how to be in a relationship?" I tease. "I've done a really horrible job at it in the past, and now I'm determined to get it right."

She tosses back her head, her laugh a sparkling siren call. "As the sexiest man I know once said to me, 'I'll do it.'"

# Epilogue

*Friday, September 2*

**Kiera**

---

I've spent a sublimely blissful summer with Jonathan. Apart from work, we've been inseparable. Despite him walking away from the deal with Maya at Amber's wedding, she decided to sign with us, and the collaboration between her company and KH Industries is official as of today. But even with the heavy workload during negotiations, Jonathan and I always found time for each other. Everything seems to be falling perfectly into place. I couldn't be happier.

Jake and Jonathan are so excited, they're throwing a party at Ian's bar tonight for all the staff involved in the project. This has been a long time coming. I'm so proud of everyone who worked so hard, but especially Jonathan.

Today, Mia invited me to leave work early and help with decorations for tonight's festivities. When I arrive, Jonathan's sister is standing at the top of a ladder, trying to hang a banner that says CONGRATULATIONS!

I drop my purse on the nearest table and rush to hold the ladder in place.

"Hey, doll. Don't worry. I got it," she assures.

Jonathan's siblings have welcomed me with open arms after we announced that we were in a relationship. Mia laughed since she suspected the whole time. Then she apologized for accosting me in the parking lot outside the office. Over the summer, she's become one of my closest friends, and she joins Kami and me for shenanigans all the time. She seems to be enjoying the girl time. I think she also does it because spending so much of her free time with us irritates Jake.

Jonathan doesn't seem to want to talk about them, but I think his best friend and business partner is more than a little sweet on his little sister.

"There." Mia finishes sticking the banner to the wall. "That ought to hold."

After I help her down the ladder, she hops to the floor and gives me a big hug. "I'm glad you're here. I swear, the struggle of being short is real."

I gesture to myself. "Um, I'm not sure how much help I'll be since I'm short, too."

She laughs. "Don't worry. The banner was only the hard part. The rest will be simple."

"Hey. I'm helping, aren't I?" Ian shouts from somewhere in the back of the bar.

"Yes...when I holler for a tall person," she teases.

We spend another hour decorating, then people from work start arriving. Within half an hour, the room is packed.

While Mia and I ponder what to drink, Kami strolls in, looking like a hot breeze in a bright orange dress and summery beige wedges. She scans the joint. "Hey, ladies. You did a fantastic job."

"I couldn't have done it without Kiera," Mia praises.

With a shake of my head, I demur. "Oh, no, Mia is the mastermind. I just did whatever she told me to do."

Kami laughs. "What are we drinking tonight?"

"We haven't started yet." Mia cocks her head. "Champagne? Wine? Tequila? What's calling your name?"

At that moment, Ian saunters into the room from the other side of the bar and lays down a napkin in front of Kami. "What can I get—"

As he looks up at her, he stops midsentence, his stare and his expression both frozen.

What's with that? Does he know her or something?



I turn to Kami, only to find her wearing an identical expression.

“Kami, this is Ian. He owns the Brick,” Mia says, seemingly unaware of the undercurrent between them.

Finally, Ian pastes on a tight smile and extends his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kami.”

Kami meets his gaze, seemingly reluctant as she gives him her hand. “It’s, um...nice to meet you, too.”

As her gaze skitters away and she tries to pull free, Ian tightens his grip. “Why do I feel like we’ve met before?”

“I guess I just have one of those faces.” Kami sounds nervous, and her smile is as fake as a three-dollar bill.

“You think that’s it?” He wraps his free hand around her elbow and draws her closer, whispering something in her ear.

Instantly, she pulls away. And I glimpse an expression on Kami’s face I never thought I’d see. She looks both captivated and terrified at once.

Seriously, what is going on? I feel like I heard the joke but missed the punchline.

I frown. “Kami, do you and Ian know each other?”

“Nope,” she replies. “Never met. Had no idea he existed until just now.”

“Yeah, it just really feels like I know you.” He smirks. “For some reason.”

Okay, something is definitely up, but before I can prod Kami, I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn.

Jonathan is finally here, all grins. I stand and smile, letting him wrap me in his arms. All day, I’ve been looking forward to this celebration, to the moment we didn’t have to be merely boss and assistant anymore. Now he can be my amazing, doting boyfriend, and I can be the woman who loves him more than anything.

But when I look up, my parents and sisters, Alyson and Sophia, are all standing in front of me, wearing enormous

smiles.

“Oh, my god! What are you all doing here?” I squeal as I wrap them in a group hug.

“We’d thought we’d surprised you. Are you surprised?” My mom winks.

“Shocked! But why come to our office party?”

“Jonathan suggested we come spend the long Labor Day weekend with you, and our flight just arrived. Do you mind if we join your celebration?”

“Of course not. OMG, I can’t believe you’re here!” I scoop them all up again. I’ve missed them so much.

Then I turn to Jonathan, who sends me a smile. He’s been so thoughtful the last few months we’ve been together. From passionate nights to cozy weekends, not to mention a few elegant dinners and even a preseason football Sunday in our pajamas, he’s always been considerate. He’s come so far with sharing his feelings with me. In return, I strive every day to give him back the love he deserves. Now that I know more about Jonathan’s childhood, I know he didn’t always have it when he needed it most.

“You tricked me.” I wag a finger at him, grinning from ear to ear.

“For a good cause. I thought you’d be happy. And that’s why I’m late, sweetheart.” He kisses me softly.

I grab his hand. “You are such an amazing man. Thank you so much for bringing my family together. This is going to be the best weekend ever.”

“I’m sure it will, but before we officially start these festivities, there’s something I need to say.”

My brows furrow in confusion. “About what?”

“Everyone, can I have your attention, please?” Jonathan yells over the crowded party. In a matter of seconds, the group falls silent and stares his way as he takes my hand, his stare fused to mine.

“W-what’s going on?” I chuckle nervously.

He focuses on me—only me—cupping my face and looking at me like I’m the most beautiful woman in the world. “Kiera, from the moment I first met you in my office, you took my breath away. The more I’ve gotten to know you over these past few months, the more I feel like myself again. Which anyone who knows me will say that’s something I haven’t felt in a long time. Sweetheart, you are the love of my life, and I can’t imagine living another minute without you.”

His words already have my heart gripping my ribs and tripping over each beat. Then he gets down on one knee. Oh, my god. Is he doing what I think he’s doing? I gasp, suddenly unable to breathe. My eyes water with happy tears. There goes my mascara...and I don’t care.

“Jonathan? Are you...”

“Solidifying my future, yes.” His smile widens as he withdraws a black velvet box from his pocket and opens it, revealing a sparkling, colorless round diamond mounted on a simple platinum band.

It looks suspiciously like the one I oohed and aahed about to Kami and Mia recently during a girls’ shopping trip.

Tears start to fall. “Jonathan...”

“Kiera Elizabeth Young, will you make me a very happy man and do me the honor of marrying me?”

I’m frozen in complete shock—and pure joy. I’m so happy that I’m completely speechless.

“Kiera?” Kami prods me in the ribs. “This is the part where you say yes.”

As if her words bring me out of my sublime joy and back to the present, I fling myself into Jonathan’s arms. “Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes!”

The second those words leave my lips, the whole bar erupts in cheers.

Jonathan picks me up in his arms, swings me around, then devours me with kisses. “You’ve made me the happiest

man in the world, happier than I ever thought I'd be.”

“No, we've made each other happy. And now we have the rest of our lives together.”

“You and me forever?” He looks at me as if he wants nothing more.

Good. Neither do I, so I nod. “Forever.”



*My one-night stand needs a fake fiancé, but she'll find out I play for keeps.*

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## About Mallory Black

Mallory Black is the author of sassy, sexy contemporary romances with happily-ever-afters.

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In middle school, Mallory discovered the joy of reading and started devouring books of all kinds. But as the only child of the New York Times and USA Today bestselling romance author Shayla Black, Mallory grew up with romance publishing. In college, she began her own love affair with the romance writing world and, with her degree in English/Writing from TCU in 2022, decided to pursue a publishing career and embrace her love of storytelling.

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Mallory currently lives in North Texas with her incredibly supportive parents and two silly, spoiled tabbies. When she's not spinning stories in her head, she enjoys reading, hanging out with her boyfriend, listening to music, and spending time with family.

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