



The No

Texting

Policy

One office. Two rulebreakers.
A romance they didn't expect.

Nicki Bell

THE NO TEXTING POLICY

A MERCHANT CITY ROMANCE

NICKI BELL

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For the girls with messy buns and yearning hearts

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ONE

Kayleigh

Sky – grey. People’s faces – grey. Buildings – grey. Why is everything in Glasgow grey? I mused from my desk right next to the second-floor window of Donnelly’s debt collectors. The loud, obnoxious wall clock on the opposite wall ticked towards 11 .a.m.

It would be 3 p.m. in Mauritius now. I should be sunbathing after a long lunch or frolicking in the ocean while my husband gazes lovingly at me from his towel on the beach. The narrow white band on my left ring finger taunted me. It was even paler than my off-white freckled skin.

The last two weeks had both dragged and flashed by. I’d spent it in the centre of a tornado trying to keep from following Dorothy and Toto up into the air.

Despite my efforts, I’d ended up in Oz, aka my childhood bedroom, anyway. Mum had converted it into a sewing room the minute I left two years ago, and I’d spent the last fourteen nights studying a cardigan pattern taped to the wall to help me drift off. My makeshift airbed was as comfortable as the conversation I’d had with the hotel when I’d told them not to expect us.

The phone on my desk rang and I chose to ignore it. After three rings it circulated to a bearded guy on the other side of the office – Jim, or something, I remembered vaguely from my first day of introductions. Jim-or-Something threw me a dirty look and began to jot something down on his notepad.

Ashley – who I’d met on my first day – winked at me from two desks away. She appeared to dislike this job as much as I did, though she’d had a choice in coming here. I hadn’t.

Why is everything in Scotland grey? I texted her. Margaret – the older woman between us – had made it clear she found our conversations extremely irritating. And we weren’t daft enough to use our business email. Ashley tended to use colourful language. So texting was the easiest way to communicate.

No one else seemed to talk. Or even look at each other very often, as if the huge beige room sucked the soul right out of you and left a mindless drone behind.

Because it’s Scotland, she wrote back.

The guy in charge of our team stepped out of his office, taking a minute to survey what we were doing. Immediately I dropped my phone into my lap and pretended to tap away on an empty Word document. So far I’d written—

Hello, oh my God, this is soooooooooo boring. I don’t care about chasing people’s debt. I only care about my debt. I wish they’d stop chasing my de—

‘Kayleigh,’ the familiar voice said above me, ‘what are you doing?’

My fingers paused as I met his brown eyes. The scar on his left cheek from when I made him fall off the see-saw was faint against his tan. ‘Work?’

He didn’t look convinced. ‘I hope so. I put my neck on the line getting you in here.’

I pursed my lips. ‘Yes, I’m aware of the part you’ve played in me ending up here.’

My sarcasm wasn't lost on him, but he'd heard much worse from me during rowdy sleepovers. 'How many times have I been over here today?'

I held my fingers up to count. 'The first time – to tell me to stop looking out the window, when that pigeon was eating a burger. Second time – to get off my phone. The third time you reminded me not to swing around in my desk chair while texting. So...' I tapped all four fingers slowly. 'Five? I've never been good at maths.'

'Hilarious. If I have to come over here again there will be consequences.'

He marched away before I could respond, square shoulders rounded out from the bony stubs they used to be. *When did he start working out?*

My phone vibrated with a text from Ashley. *What's his problem?*

I shook my head at her behind Margaret's back while I typed, *High on power. He forgets I've seen him in the bath.*

Ashley's eyebrows lifted to her hairline as she read. *What? Recently?*

God, no. When we were, like, five. He's my little brother's best friend, I typed furiously.

I kept my eye on the glass doors for Jordan's return. There was a lull in the conversation when Ashley's work phone rang and she got stuck with a customer.

A text from Mum appeared. What do you want for dinner?

Every bloody night. I'd barely had an appetite and had survived on toast and water for the last fortnight, but she still insisted on asking. Like I'd randomly decide I wanted rump steak during my mourning period. I missed my flat, where I could go home and have tinned soup for dinner on my corner couch without someone trying to feed me up. *Except it wasn't my flat, and it wasn't my couch. It was his. That's why I'm sleeping in sewing-pattern-and-cat-poster purgatory.*

Nothing, I responded and hoped she wouldn't try to lure me with something she'd bought in the butcher's. Our family's meat intake was off the charts. I'd need to have a word with them about vegetables and carbs when I felt up to it.

Ashley finally got rid of her customer. *You never told me that. So you two never...?* she wrote – followed by a bunch of devil emojis.

My fingers flew over the keypad. *NEVER!!* I selected ten red crosses after it to confirm.

Why not? He's adorable. I want to stick my tongue right in his dimple, she admitted.

The sound of his voice approached from down the hall. *Because I hate him. Also, you are disgusting.*

He laughed at someone's joke as they strode back into the room, dimple on full show. I dropped my mobile into the top drawer before he could catch me. Yeah, adorable or not, I hated him.

If it wasn't for him, I'd be married.

Jordan

There she goes again. I watched as Kayleigh lowered her head behind the computer screen. She thought she was being clever, keeping the phone in her lap. She never did follow rules. She'd cheated at hide and seek all the time. I'd spent the last two weeks trying to babysit/intimidate her into making an effort. I knew she blamed me for being here. Part of me blamed myself. But I couldn't play the martyr forever. At some point, she'd have to start putting the work in.

Her blue eyes flicked above the cubicle divider, and I turned my attention to a crack in the opposite wall. If she caught me staring, she'd make a thing of it. Unlike the outer office, I'd been allowed to paint the walls of my own a light blue. To remind me of the sky during the fleeting Scottish summer.

I kept my gaze on the crack for another few seconds until I could be sure she was looking away. Ashley smirked at

something in her hand. I'd never had to reprimand Ashley for using her phone during work hours. Until Kayleigh.

Always the renegade. In contrast, my best friend – and her little brother – Matt was a saint, almost as beige as the office. He respected authority, that there was a reason behind every rule. Unlike Kayleigh, who barrelled through the stop signs and warning lights of life. Why dip a toe in the water when you could cannonball in wearing a neon bikini?

When our friend Callum started dating her, I'd given it a week. Callum played it too safe. He'd had a bank account named 'Rainy Days' when we were fifteen and working at McDonald's.

Then the week turned into a month. Then a year, and another.

A loud snigger followed by a cough erupted from Kayleigh's desk. *And here we are.*

I fired a warning look in her direction. She picked up her ringing phone and proceeded to type. Going by the main call log, I knew her extension had received thirty-six calls. She'd answered three.

Why am I cutting her so much slack? I questioned. Anyone else would have been gone a week ago.

Leaning back in her chair, she twirled her long mahogany hair into a bun, letting it unravel then starting again. That's how her hair had been *that* morning, with a crystal-and-pearl tiara perched on top to match the earrings Callum had bought her on their first Christmas together.

When I'd left her mum's house that day, I'd found one lodged in my suit jacket. I'd assumed it had landed somewhere on the living-room couch after Kayleigh had launched it. She'd never had good aim.

'Jordan.' My boss rapped on the door and entered without an invitation. The perks of having your name on the building. 'Department-head meeting in ten minutes. I need a rundown on everyone's targets.'

‘No bother,’ I told him, feeling a knot begin to form in my intestine. In my ten years working here, Michael Donnelly had been in my office twice. Once to tell me I needed to fire four people. And now. He was built like a rugby player too, which only added to the feeling of intimidation.

His eyes scanned over everyone through the glass wall. ‘How are things down here?’

‘G-Great,’ I stammered, checking the printer had enough paper before running the reports. *Please don’t let him notice Kayleigh. Please don’t let him notice—*

He nodded to Kayleigh’s bundle of desks. ‘That the new girl?’

I paused. ‘Uh, yeah, Kayleigh Cooper. We go way back.’

He combed his moustache with one finger. ‘Maybe so, but I’m not running a charity for family and friends. If she’s not up to it then cut her loose.’

My hands shook as I stapled the reports together. ‘She’s absolutely up to it.’

‘Good, because you convinced me to hire her. So any mistake she makes is a reflection on you, understood?’ Michael grinned, but it didn’t reach his eyes. It’s what I imagined Michael Myers looked like behind the mask.

They have the same name – why am I just noticing that?

A shovel-sized hand waved in front of my eyes. ‘Jordan?’

‘Sorry, yes, understood,’ I assured him.

‘See you at the meeting,’ he said and left.

Through the glass division, I spied Kayleigh twirling in her chair again, mobile phone firmly in her hand.

She is not going to be the reason I lose my job.

TWO

Kayleigh

Mum placed a plate in front of me at the dining table while I checked my email. 'I told you I wasn't hungry.'

She tutted and continued putting out plates and utensils for my dad and brother. 'You've barely eaten since you've been here.'

'It's called the dumped diet for a reason. There's a whole process to it.'

'David, Matt,' Mum shouted through to the living room, 'dinner's out.' She took her designated seat at the head of the table. 'Dumped diet. Don't be ridiculous. You need some meat on those bones.'

The pile of brown meat staring up at me made me consider turning vegetarian. 'I don't think they mean literal meat, and why do you never make vegetables? I'm thirty-four and I don't think I've ever witnessed anything green in this kitchen.'

Mum made a start on her chips. 'Lies. We had those green curtains for a year.'

Dad padded through holding the newspaper. 'Ahh, I have missed this back and forth you two have.'

Both of us gave him identical frowns.

‘Your daughter was asking why I never make vegetables.’

Matt loped in, headphones tangled around his neck. ‘The chips are vegetables. Potatoes, right?’

That earned him a smile from both of my parents. *Forever the golden boy.*

‘How’s work, toots?’ Dad directed at me.

‘Dad, I’m not five. I’m a marrie—’ My throat constricted. ‘I mean, can we give up the weird pet name?’ I begged, twirling my fork in the brown pile on my plate.

‘You mean you don’t like “toots”?’ my brother said, laughing as he shovelled food into his mouth like he was in prison.

I eyeballed him. ‘Better than “gummy bear”.’

His mouth clamped shut.

Forks continued scraping off plates while I tried to be invisible.

‘You never answered the question,’ Dad reminded me.

‘Good.’

Three pairs of sceptical eyes drilled into me. They knew I didn’t want to be there.

‘Liar,’ Matt stage-whispered.

My trainer found his shin under the table. ‘Shut up.’

Dad gulped back a piece of mince. ‘Both of you behave.’

‘She kicked me,’ Matt whined. My little brother was a solicitor yet regressed to a ten-year-old whenever he crossed our parents’ threshold.

‘I’ll do it again,’ I warned, forcing a chip through clenched teeth.

‘So, back to the original question.’ Mum lifted her eyebrow. ‘How is work?’

I chewed. ‘If you want me to be completely honest – it’s crap.’

‘Language,’ Dad warned.

Mum leaned her elbows on the table. ‘How is it *crap*?’

My legs crossed. ‘Because it’s boring as hell, and the only way to get through the day is by checking my phone and texting, which Jordan shouts at me for doing every chance he gets.’

‘Maybe don’t do it then?’ Matt offered, always the dutiful rule follower.

‘It was good of Jordan to get you that job, Kayleigh,’ Mum reminded me. ‘He didn’t have to stick his neck out for you like that.’

My right foot began to tap. ‘Yes he did.’

Mum knew what I was thinking. ‘It wasn’t that boy’s fault, Kayleigh. Just because he was the messenger doesn’t mean you have to shoot him.’

I scowled. ‘Would make me feel better though.’

‘You know Jordan hasn’t spoken to Callum since that morning,’ Matt imparted.

My head swivelled. ‘No, why?’

Matt shrugged. ‘Didn’t like the way Callum handled the situation.’

My brother, Jordan and Callum belonged to a collective group of high-school friends. Matt had disowned him that day, which made sense given that he was my family. But as far as I could tell from social media, most of them still spoke to Callum. Though Jordan had been absent from the photo of a football game last Saturday.

Maybe that’s why?

‘He’s always been such a nice boy,’ Mum stated.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ I sulked.

Jordan

Are you going to the pub tonight? Jamie had texted me forty-five minutes ago. The canteen had served haddock for lunch and the smell had become ingrained into my skin and hair. It had taken that long to wash it off in the shower.

Nah, I typed, hands still damp from the shower. *Just chilling out till payday.*

When all other excuses failed, telling people you were skint bought you a reprieve. This night out had been planned for over a month. I knew who would be there and I didn't want to see them.

Cool, but we need a meet-up soon. You're starting to hurt our feelings lol.

Nothing personal, just work and being poor. I felt the lie running through my fingers, trying to stop it. The truth was I probably made more than most of them, and they probably knew that. But we weren't the type to have a heart-to-heart discussion, and the boys wouldn't see where I was coming from. Best to avoid the subject until time and circumstances fixed it for us.

I threw the phone on the bed along with the towel and rifled through a drawer in search of clean joggers.

Kayleigh's face that morning was always behind my eyelids, haunting me – her blue eyes sparkling under demure black lashes; blushed cheeks hinting at her excitement. One of her bridesmaids had been clipping in her veil so that it ran the full length of her slender back and down to the floor in a lace puddle.

Then she'd seen my expression, and the pearls and shine had turned to tears and despair because the veil would never meet the aisle of the church.

The phone began to ring, and I shuffled for it between the bedsheets and damp towel. *Callum*, the caller ID read.

I declined and threw it back on the bed. As I pulled on a T-shirt, it pinged with a text.

If this is him again, I'm going to lose it.

I hear things are going well with my sister, Matt joked with a wink face. She's been raving about you to our parents.

She bought me a world's greatest boss mug, I responded.

To smash you over the head with?

The image made me wince – and smile. *Probably. Are you going to the pub?*

Nope, he answered. Kayleigh convinced my parents to set up the projector and have an old-fashioned movie night.

A pang of jealousy hit my gut. What movie?

Three Men and a Baby, kill me now.

Grabbing the TV remote, I jumped into bed and began scrolling through the channels. *Be grateful it's not The Notebook.*

I'd be grateful if it was Terminator 2. We need to get girlfriends.

I thumped the pillow behind me before lying back. Girlfriends don't like Terminator 2 either. I'll think of you when I'm watching Die Hard.

Three dots flashed... Now I get why Kayleigh dislikes you. Catch you later, mate.

Instead of concentrating on Bruce Willis saving the day, that question ran through my head. Why did she dislike me? Her family moved onto our street when she was six. Matt and I being the same age and supporting the same football team solidified our friendship right away. But Kayleigh kept me at arm's length and didn't allow me to cross the threshold of her room if we were playing upstairs.

Any hopes of my teenage crush coming to fruition were obliterated at her sixteenth birthday party when she declared to a large crowd of friends that she'd never date someone younger.

I've never felt that dejected since. Until I witnessed the girl made of steel and glass crumple into a ball of white satin.

I'd do anything to rebuild her.

THREE

Kayleigh

What started as a few figures at the top of the page was beginning to melt down towards the bottom. *This can't be right.* I continued flicking through my online bank account. *And I did not spend a tenner at Starbucks last week. Oh, wait, the new caramel macchiato. Damn it.*

I scrolled further back. *When did I spend fifty quid in Ann Summers?* I cast my mind back. *The honeymoon underwear.* A sob threatened its way up my throat. All the savings I'd built for the last two years, and my excellent credit score, were gone. If only I could go back in time and prevent myself from handing in my notice at my dream job. Or slap myself out of the dream Callum had sold me about going travelling for six months after the wedding.

He'd failed to mention he'd be the one doing the travelling.

I clamped my lips shut, refusing to let the grief leave my mouth. I would not cry in this office, even if my life was a complete shambles.

'Kayleigh,' a voice boomed at my head.

I jumped a foot in the air. Jordan leaned over my desk divider, his eyes flicking between my phone and the notepad.

‘God, you’re like a cat. You need to start wearing a bell around your neck,’ I joked.

He didn’t laugh. ‘What did I tell you on Friday?’

A tear began to pool in my left eye. ‘To have a good weekend?’

He shook his head. ‘I told you there would be consequences if I caught you on your phone again when you’re supposed to be working. Gather up your stuff.’

‘Y-You’re firing me?’ I stuttered, wiping the tear before it could fall. Jordan Thomson would never see me cry again. Ever.

‘No, I’m moving you into my office to keep an eye on you. Go for lunch, and when you come back, we’ll get you situated.’

A scoff escaped my lips. ‘You’re not serious? I don’t need a babysitter.’

‘Evidently, you do,’ he retorted, giving my phone a dirty look. ‘Log off and go to lunch. Or are you even logged in?’

Um, no. ‘Of course I am,’ I drawled.

His dimple appeared and I remembered Ashley’s comment about wanting to stick her tongue into it. *I guess it’s cute if you like dimples.*

‘Sure you are.’ His blue striped shirt moulded to his right bicep as he cocked a hand towards the wall clock. ‘See you in an hour.’

My head dropped into my arms. *Now I’ve done it.*

Jordan

Now I’ve done it. I watched Kayleigh as she slammed a stapler onto the spare desk across from me. Followed by the bang of her pencil pot.

‘I had IT transfer your extension,’ I informed her, taking a knife to the tension swirling around us. ‘It’s quieter in here, so you’ll be able to get through things a lot quicker.’

The cardboard box she’d used to transfer her personal belongings was flung into the corner. ‘Fabulous.’ She pulled out each desk drawer to examine it.

‘I’m not the one who put you in here, Kayleigh.’

That got her attention. ‘You’re the one who told me to come in here, so how did you come to that conclusion?’

‘I told you to stay off your phone.’

Her full lips pursed. ‘Yeah, once or twice.’

‘Try fourteen. I recommended you for this job. I have a boss just like you do. So if you fail, I fail.’

Her face flinched. ‘So you’re guilt-tripping me now?’

My chair creaked as I rocked. ‘No more than you’ve been guilt-tripping me.’

A red blush crawled up her swan-like neck and she folded into the seat opposite. ‘That’s not fair.’

‘You’re right. It’s not fair what happened to you. But I know you’re better than this.’

‘You don’t know me at all,’ she bit back, opening her laptop.

Because you won’t let me. ‘I know enough. Matt told us all the time about his sister and her fancy design job where she worked twelve hours a day.’

Her hands shook as she typed. ‘The fancy job I don’t have anymore.’

‘But you have a job,’ I pointed out. ‘This place should be a breeze for you. If you applied yourself, you could probably be running the place in a year.’

‘Who’s going to be stealing my job in a year?’ Michael Donnelly filled the doorway.

Kayleigh swivelled and hit him with a toothpaste-ad smile. 'Me, sir.'

Michael's mouth twitched. 'I like an employee with a bit of gumption about them.'

'That's me, full of gumption,' she tittered.

If I told her she was full of gumption, she'd throw that stapler at me.

'Kayleigh's going to be sitting in with me to get some more... training.' I looked to Kayleigh for her to confirm. She was gnawing at the inside of her cheek.

'Good.' Michael slapped a folder down onto the already precarious pile on my desk. 'Can you look at these figures and write up a report for Wednesday?'

'Sure. Kayleigh can help with that.'

Oh, if looks could kill, I'd be six feet under.

'Nice meeting you,' Michael paused and I knew he was struggling to remember her name, 'Kayleigh.'

She aimed another megawatt smile his way that made the chicken sandwich I'd had for lunch flip in my stomach. 'Nice meeting you, sir.'

He nodded in acknowledgement, then loped off.

'Seems like a nice guy,' Kayleigh remarked when Michael was safely out of earshot. 'For a boss anyway.'

And I'm not? 'Yes, he is. Not all bosses are Satan, you know.'

She cocked her head, that megawatt smile aimed right at me. 'If you say so.'

I felt nauseous.

FOUR

Kayleigh

‘Okay, I’ll pick that up for you.’ Jordan rustled around his desk for a pen. Locating one, he scrawled an address on a Post-it. ‘No, it’s no problem. See you tonight.’ He dropped the pen and ran a hand over his stubble.

See you tonight? Who is he seeing? I clenched my jaw. I didn’t care about Jordan’s personal life. Never had. Never would.

He let out a throaty laugh, smooth as chocolate. It made me think of the Ann Summers underwear.

‘Okay, love you, bye.’ He dropped the phone into the cradle and resumed typing, oblivious to my gawping.

Love you? Who the hell did he love? ‘So I’m not allowed to text, but you can make personal phone calls to your girlfriend?’ My tone came out more bitter than I’d intended.

Jordan looked confused. ‘My girlfriend? I don’t have a girlfriend.’

I crossed my arms. ‘So who was it then?’ *Stop asking! You sound like you care!*

He gave a sardonic grin. ‘My gran. She needs a parcel picked up at the post office.’

All thoughts of Ann Summers underwear flew out of the window. ‘Oh, that’s... cute.’

‘Cute?’ A lock of black hair dropped down to his ear and he smoothed it back into place.

I shifted in my seat, cursing myself for saying anything. ‘Yes. Cute. Can I get back to work now? Your phone call was distracting.’

His eyes widened. ‘I distracted you? Wow, what a difference a week makes.’

‘Longest week of my life,’ I muttered, refusing to look at the dimple embedded deep in his cheek that made my tongue poke over my lower lip.

It’s bloody Ashley’s fault for putting that image in my head. Being in such close proximity for a week hadn’t helped the thought leave my head. If anything, other thoughts had invaded. When he’d reached for a file on the top shelf of the filing cabinet, my eyes had drifted down to the tanned, taut expanse of stomach where his shirt had ridden up.

Then yesterday the air-conditioning had broken, and he’d rolled up his shirt sleeves, revealing sinewy, strong forearms.

Stop staring at his arms, I’d commanded myself.

To stop myself from noticing his attractive qualities, I’d turned to working harder since my phone was now relegated to the bottom drawer unless I was on break. On Tuesday night, I’d been packing up to go when he was still glued to his chair.

‘Aren’t you going home?’ I’d asked. ‘I know you love this place, but give it a rest.’

‘Scott is going on holiday for two weeks and he needs help finishing up some stuff before he goes,’ Jordan said, pointing to a bulging lever-arch file.

I’d left him alone, hammering away on his laptop. When I’d arrived on Wednesday morning, he’d looked like hell on three hours of sleep. When I’d asked why he’d done it, he’d

replied, 'Because Scott couldn't take his annual leave until we finished it.' He'd been packing up to run to a meeting, but paused at the door. 'Not all bosses are Satan, remember?'

Yes, and some of them are hot as hell.

Jordan

Something about Kayleigh's face when I'd left for the meeting had bothered me. It was a look I'd never seen before – something like admiration glinting through her mask of not caring.

Which didn't add up, because she didn't admire me. The last week had sanded off the rough edge of her attitude towards me, but we were far from exchanging BFF bracelets.

Our head accountant was giving the room a rundown on the current quarter. I'd chosen a seat at the back, right next to the window. I found myself doing the same thing I'd chastised Kayleigh for – daydreaming instead of concentrating.

One thing that had clicked was her work ethic. Without the distraction of WhatsApp and TikTok, her work output had tripled. She spent time empathising with customers who were unable to pay their debt due to financial hardship. She'd skipped a coffee break to stay on the line with a single mother who'd been laid off and was bogged down with store-card debt. Then she'd switch to tough mode with the debtors who'd been given every leniency possible and were taking advantage of us.

'Why do you hide this side of you?' I'd asked later that day.

She hadn't looked up from her screen. 'What side?'

'The one where you show empathy to others – the kind side,' I'd replied.

She'd looked up, squinting. 'I don't have a kind side.'

'Yes, you do. I've seen it,' I'd taunted.

Her hand had reached for the ringing extension. 'Shut it.'

'That's not very kind,' I'd told her.

She'd made to smile and caught herself. 'Kayleigh Cooper, how can I help?'

Callum had never told us anything other than that she was demanding. Going by my experience, I'd assumed he was right. Now I figured she was the one who'd got off lightly.

'Jordan, do you have anything to add?' Michael asked from the front of the room, breaking through my thoughts.

'Not at the minute, no,' I announced.

Except I might be falling in love with my employee.

FIVE

Kayleigh

‘That is your fifth burger,’ I informed Matt as he continued to smother a bun in ketchup and mayonnaise.

‘So? It’ll only go to waste if I don’t eat it,’ he spat, before cramming it into his mouth. ‘Mum told us she didn’t want to throw anything away.’

Sweat trickled down his forehead onto his nose. It wasn’t often we had warm weather in Scotland. But when the mercury edged over eighteen degrees in June, we considered it barbecue time.

‘You’re not a bear about to go into hibernation,’ I commented, rubbing factor fifty into my legs. Sitting under the shade of a parasol didn’t mean my milk-white skin couldn’t still burn.

He pointed to my oil-slicked arms. ‘And you’re not a pig we’re about to roast.’

‘Easy for you to say.’ I continued rubbing sun cream onto my neck and around my shoulders. Matt inherited our dad’s ability to turn brown in 0.3 seconds, while I inherited the lobster quality from my mother.

‘Jealousy isn’t a good look on you, sis.’ He wiped a smudge of ketchup from his lip. ‘How are things with Jordan?’

I’d spent the last five hours avoiding him and Matt’s friends in our parents’ spacious garden, making small talk with the neighbours and helping Mum out in the kitchen until Ashley and three of my former bridesmaids turned up. ‘Fine, why?’

Matt balled up the napkin in his hand. ‘Really? You’ve been avoiding him since he got here.’

Do we have some psychic sibling thing I haven’t tapped into? ‘Have not.’

The last few stragglers were beginning to leave as the sun fell, which made it more difficult to dodge him.

Mum and Dad waved the last of them off before turning to us. ‘We’re going to meet up with your aunt and uncle at the pub. Can you kids clean up?’

Matt and his friends leaped out of their deckchairs. ‘Me and the boys are going to Jamie’s. I’ll do it later.’

In a blur, all of them were out the side gate, crunching down the gravel driveway and leaving me with the responsibility.

Jordan emerged from the back door and took in the garden – empty now bar the discarded paper plates and cups. ‘How long was I in there?’

‘Your friends have hightailed it to Jamie’s. We’re moving the party to the pub,’ Mum told him, slipping her flip-flops back on. ‘You’re welcome to join us. My generous daughter has agreed to clear up for a change.’

I stuck my tongue out at her back.

‘Thanks, Mrs Cooper, but I already have plans. I don’t mind helping tidy up first though?’ he directed to me.

Does he have plans with a girl?

Mum squeezed his cheeks. ‘Ugh, you are such a *nice* boy. Let’s go, David.’ She grabbed my dad’s arm and without another word, they followed my brother’s tracks out of the side gate.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ I told him. ‘I’m tempted to leave it for Matt to deal with tomorrow.’

He bent down to pick up a discarded napkin. ‘It’s fine, and we both know it would still be here next summer if it was up to Matt.’

‘Good point,’ I agreed. ‘Thanks.’

I went inside and returned with a roll of bin bags. We worked in companionable silence for thirty minutes until the garden no longer resembled a festival ground on the last day.

I sank onto the double wooden swing Dad had put up for us the summer we’d moved here.

Jordan ambled over and tugged at the rope, tilting me to the side. ‘I can’t believe you still have this thing.’

‘Yep, every year Mum threatens to cut it down to let in more sunlight, and every year we plead with her not to. I love this tree.’

Jordan released the rope and stared up at the branches. ‘I hate this tree.’

I stopped swinging. ‘How can you hate a tree?’

He lowered his gaze to mine. ‘Because you pushed me out of your treehouse when we were twelve. I broke my leg.’

My sandal dug into the grass. ‘I forgot about that.’

‘I couldn’t play football all summer,’ he reminisced.

‘Sorry.’

The swing shifted as he took a seat next to me, the weight of him tilting it so that my thigh rubbed against his. My body began to tingle, in time to the thumping in my ears.

Have I given myself sunstroke?

‘Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you don’t have that treehouse anymore, or you’d shove me out of it again.’

I elbowed him. ‘I wouldn’t do it now.’

He elbowed me back. ‘Why not? You didn’t like me then. You don’t like me now.’

‘I did like you then,’ I admitted, goosebumps lifting on my arms. ‘And I do like you now.’

Jordan

Is this where I wake up in a budget meeting and discover it’s a cruel dream? ‘Sorry, can you repeat that?’

The tip of her nose shone red. *Embarrassment or sunburn?* ‘I said I liked you then,’ she repeated.

Please don’t wake up. ‘So why did you treat me like a leper?’ Her thigh pressing against mine had pushed all logical thought out of the window.

Pink-tinted shoulders lifted. ‘Because you were my little brother’s friend. You’re meant to infuriate me, and believe me, you did when we were kids.’ She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. ‘No offence.’

I held my hands up. ‘None taken.’

She pressed on. ‘Then you grew up and got slightly less infuriating. Which was even more annoying because I didn’t *want* to like you. So I did my best to *not* like you.’

‘Classic tale of pulling my pigtails and running away,’ I surmised.

‘Are you the one with the pigtails in this scenario?’ she enquired. The thin strap of her sundress fell off her shoulder. I wanted to kiss it before fixing the strap back into place. I wanted to kiss her.

‘Seems like it,’ I agreed. The air was still as dusk fell. ‘So you like me now? As a boss you mean?’

She bit her lip. ‘You’re okay, as far as bosses go.’

The angel on my shoulder yanked me from the swing and gave me a stern lecture about boss–employee relationships. The devil pushed me to ask: ‘That’s all you see me as?’

A loose brown curl fell onto her other cheek. ‘No.’ Her cherry-red lips parted, showing a hint of pink tongue.

I threw the angel into the gutter and high-fived the devil. Wrapping an arm tight around her waist, I pulled her chin towards mine and placed my lips over hers – slowly at first, until she caught my bottom lip between her teeth. It surpassed my imagination of fireworks on Bonfire Night or a parade of pipers marching through the streets of Glasgow.

She tasted both sweet and salty; my favourite kind of popcorn. Her fingers wound into my hair as her mouth pushed harder. The swing tilted further to the left as she shifted towards me.

How have I gone my entire life without kissing her? I wanted to pull the breath from her lungs and be her only source of air. Forever.

After a few minutes of heaven, she withdrew. ‘Sure you’re not going to regret this?’

‘Very sure,’ I panted.

A second later, the ropes snapped from the weight, dropping us both to the ground in an awkward heap.

She laughed. ‘Think that’s the universe trying to tell us something?’ she asked, leaning up onto her elbow to stare down at me.

‘Probably.’ I pushed the hair back from her face. ‘But we’re not the best at taking hints, are we?’ Scooping a hand around her neck, I brought her lips back to mine.

SIX

Kayleigh

I made my way over to the booth in Soba where Ashley and the rest of the team had set up camp then slid in next to Jordan. It was one of the many bustling bars located in undercover Merchant Square – the life source of Merchant City on a Saturday night. Strands of fairy lights hung from one end to the other, making the huge space feel cosy. Self-consciously, I checked around the table to see if anyone had noticed where I'd chosen to sit. They hadn't.

The tang of the apple martini slid down my throat.

Jordan leaned into my neck. 'Hey there,' he said, his voice soft and low.

'Hi,' I replied, feeling shy, despite having had his tongue in my mouth at various points during the week.

'I was just about to get a round,' Jordan said, taking a last sip of his pint. 'You want another?' He nodded to my glass.

'Not right now, thanks,' I told him, cheeks flushed. 'Bit of a lightweight.'

'I know,' he joked and got up to make his way to the bar. He stood a good few inches taller than everyone else in the

crowd.

A leggy redhead with kohl-lined eyes sidled up next to him, so close that the glitter on her dress would shed onto his jeans. A possessive knot formed in my stomach. She reached out and touched his arm, red talons lingering longer than necessary.

Jordan glanced down at his arm and pulled it to the left. I read his lips tell her, 'Not interested,' before he gave her a quick smile.

The girl pouted and moved on to a well-known footballer on her right.

A wave of admiration washed over me. Jordan had been kind but firm. Callum would have spent the next half hour chatting to her while my drink grew hot under the bar spotlights. In fact, he wouldn't have bothered getting me a drink at all.

He is different, I conceded. Is it possible that I've found a good guy?

Jordan

Being surrounded by our work colleagues made it difficult for me to talk to Kayleigh through the night. Every so often we played musical chairs so that no one would get too suspicious that we were glued to each other.

The redhead from earlier attempted a second conversation while I was en route to the toilets. My guess was the footballer she'd moved on to had blown her off.

'Again, not interested,' I stated firmly, removing her hand from my shirt collar.

'Prude,' she'd shouted over the pulsing beat.

Since we'd kissed, I couldn't register any other female except Kayleigh. All other women had turned into shapeless, faceless blurs that elicited no emotional response.

Returning from the toilet, I'd found Kayleigh and half the table missing. Through the crowd, I spotted Ashley swinging her ponytail in the air like she was Ariana Grande.

Kayleigh stood in the middle of the team, throwing her head back and mouthing the lyrics. Her cream bodysuit and velvet skirt clung to her like a second skin, changing colours under the lights.

She needed this release. To let loose and not be a ball of tension. I couldn't blame her. She'd explained over the last week how she'd paid for most of the wedding, taking out credit cards to pay for stuff while Callum claimed he couldn't contribute because he was saving up for the six-month honeymoon.

My fist clenched under the table. *Like what he did wasn't bad enough.* I'd learned from Matt that Callum's parents had refused to help pay for anything, citing it as their son's mess, so he would have to deal with it. Not them. *Apple didn't fall far from that tree.*

She deserved to smile like that every day.

Watching her twirl and giggle under the lights woke up something inside me.

I love her.

SEVEN

Kayleigh

‘I’m just heading to the toilet. You want me to grab you another drink on my way back?’ Jordan offered. It was nearing closing time and I’d managed four drinks – a record in my book. Normally two would send me to sleep in the booth. But tonight, I was too buzzed. Things were going too perfectly. Although not being able to touch or kiss him was driving me insane.

‘Nah, my stomach might reject another drink,’ I shouted over the music.

He patted my shoulder like I was his guy friend. The best we could do in public. It still sent an electric current through me.

He took everyone else’s orders and headed to the bar, leaving me at the end of the table alone. Bored, I pulled out my phone to check the weather. Yep, the heatwave had ended as quickly as it started.

Knew I should have brought a jacket. Fingers crossed my fake tan didn’t run in the rain while we waited for a taxi.

A buzzing jolted the table. Jordan’s phone screen lit up with a familiar name. I pulled the phone towards me.

Why is Callum texting him? They don't talk anymore. Jordan didn't keep a passcode on his phone, despite my urging –but I didn't need it because

The text glared at me from the home screen. Are you going to tell Kayleigh I cheated? That's all I want to know. Phone me back!!!

The phone dropped into a puddle of spilled vodka on the table. That's why he'd called the wedding off. Not because he wasn't ready like Jordan told me.

Jordan knew the whole time.

Without saying goodbye to anyone, I left, striding into the rain, brown streaks of carefully applied tan running down my arms.

He was supposed to be different.

Jordan

Returning from the toilet and finding Kayleigh's chair empty, I assumed she was on the dance floor gyrating to Rhianna, though I couldn't see her arms waving in reckless abandon. I spotted Ashley at the bar, flirting with the footballer from before. 'Ashley, where's Kayleigh?'

She frowned at the interruption. 'Don't know. She was at the table the last time I saw her.'

I looked around again. 'What about the toilet?'

Ashley shook her head. 'Nope, I just came from there. She'll be around here somewhere.' She turned her back to continue flirting.

'Anyone seen Kayleigh?' I questioned the remaining members of the team, who were downing a round of tequila.

Jim wiped his mouth on his denim shirt. 'She left, like ten minutes ago. Left her phone as well.' He gestured to an iPhone at the edge of the table.

Kayleigh would cut off her left hand before she'd leave her phone behind. I lifted it from the sticky mess to clean it, expecting to see her home screen of My Little Pony.

The screen lit up with a message and a picture of my niece behind it when I wiped it with my sleeve. This was my phone. Turning it over I could see the blue case.

A sense of dread scaled up my back. Hitting the locked screen again brought up the most recent message. The dread wrapped around my throat.

She knows.

EIGHT

Kayleigh

Another crumpled page hit the floor. My writing was so violent that the paper was shredding under the words. Every night for three years I'd journaled. About everything I was grateful for. Then everything I'd lost. The last few pages held moments of brief happiness where I'd been able to see a roadmap to rebuilding my life.

Now they were a reminder that I was a complete and utter idiot. For believing that Callum didn't turn up that morning because he was freaked out about marriage. That he took off because he never did handle pressure well. Not because he'd cheated.

Was he cheating the whole time? Is there a secret baby somewhere?

I didn't want a turbulent Danielle Steel romance. I wanted nice and simple. A relationship cookbook where I followed the steps and ended up with the perfect dish.

My parents had been sleeping when I got home, which eliminated the ways I could act out my rage. Playing 'Caught Out There (I Hate You So Much Right Now)' by Kelis at max volume was out. Or smashing plates like a Greek. Mum had

the eardrums of a bat, so even crying above a sniffle was out, or she'd be on my bed interrogating me. The only silent thing I could do was journaling.

Page after page I marked with black ink until the words started to make no sense. In my head, I screamed as I ripped each one out and shredded it into pieces, flinging them into the air as the confetti I never had the chance to walk through.

This hurt more. So much more.

Jordan

The voicemail message began for the tenth time. 'Kayleigh, please answer the phone,' I begged.

On the eleventh time, it failed to connect. *She's blocked me.*

I was tempted to throw my phone at the wall and watch the screen splinter. Except I needed her to be able to reach me.

A TikTok notification chimed. Jim's posted a video of us in the club, everyone screeching into the camera and laughing hysterically. In the background to the left, Kayleigh and I are deep in conversation, our bodies mirroring each other. She laughs at something I've said before the video cuts out.

That's what I want.

With no hesitation, I hit Callum's name in my contact list.

'Mate, thank God. Why didn't you get back to me?'

I steeled myself. 'Because I didn't want to speak to you. I'm only phoning you out of courtesy.'

An awkward silence. 'What are you on about? Did you get my message? Are you going to tell her? 'Cause I've been thinking that maybe I was too... hasty in calling it off.'

I cut him off. 'She knows, but I didn't tell her. And it doesn't matter what you've been thinking. You don't deserve her.'

'Uh, where is this coming from? You were my best man; you're supposed to be on *my* side.'

The floorboards creaked as I paced. ‘You’re right. I was your best man, and I did your dirty work for you. But here’s the thing – I love her.’

His voice squeaked in my ear. ‘You love Kayleigh? Kayleigh Cooper?’

Yes, I do. ‘Yes I do, and I think she cares about me too.’ I smiled. ‘Sorry, *mate*, I think the best man’s won.’

NINE

Kayleigh

The machine took ten minutes to sputter to life. *They really should invest in a new coffee machine*, I mused. One of those fancy ones with the milk frother.

Although what did it matter, because I wouldn't be here to enjoy it. I'd spent all of Sunday updating my CV and applying for every job in a ten-mile radius.

I'd come in earlier to pack up my stuff in Jordan's office and move it back to my old desk. The smell of his aftershave still hung in the air. Every few seconds it would waft up my nose and remind me of kissing his chin, his neck and his lips. *And that goddamn dimple.*

The phone in the back of my jeans vibrated. Unknown number. Either Jordan had another phone, or it was someone in China calling to ask about a road accident I'd had five years ago. I turned it off and replaced it. If it was a job interview, they'd leave a voicemail.

Before moving into Jordan's office, I couldn't bear to turn my phone off even to reset anything. Here I was now, not bothered if I never looked at it again.

All those bloggers I'd believed were crazy had turned out to be right. Technology would be our downfall.

I envied my parents for growing up in the seventies. That's why older people stayed together for so long. Not because my generation just give up – because they get caught.

The coffee machine made a whirring noise before falling silent. I checked the plug and the cord then kicked the fridge. It had died on me. Just what I needed.

Then the thing I really needed walked into the break room.

'I need to tell you something.' Jordan strode towards me.

Jordan

She held a hand up to stop me. 'Not interested, Jordan.'

I stepped closer. 'You need to hear this.'

Her knees were shaking and I could hear the breath rattling in her lungs. 'No, what I needed to hear was the truth. But you lied. You told me you didn't know why it happened.'

Her voice broke on the last word and a part of me broke with it. 'I couldn't tell you. You were... devastated.'

'That day, yes. But you could have told me the next day or the day after that.'

'Kayleigh, you could barely look at me. Then Matt asked me to help you out with a job and I figured this was my way of making it up to you, of making you see *me*.'

Her hands moved to her hips. 'So you did all of this out of guilt?'

'No, I did it because I've been in love with you since I was six years old.' The words were out, and I couldn't take them back. Didn't want to take them back. 'I called Callum last night and told him if you don't believe me.'

'You don't love me,' she argued.

Only Kayleigh would argue with a declaration of love.

'Yes I do. I've loved you since we were kids. Do you think I liked playing five hours of PlayStation every night or helping

your dad and Matt build that godforsaken treehouse? No, I did it because you were there. In the hope that one day you'd see me as something more than your brother's friend.'

A smile pulled at the side of her mouth. 'You hated that treehouse, huh?'

I touched her arm, emboldened when she didn't pull away. 'I hated it as much as I love you, how's that?'

'You owe me a tree swing.'

'Deal. Just don't tell your dad how we broke the first one.'

EPILOGUE

One year later

Kayleigh

‘There’s Mrs Bigshot,’ Ashley teased as I approached her table in the break room. ‘Coming to eat with the commoners?’

‘It appears so,’ I teased back. ‘They don’t take lunch breaks in marketing. Not like you lot in customer service, skiving at every opportunity.’

Ashley bit down on her tuna roll. ‘You made me skive, with all the texting. I was employee of the month before you got here.’

I popped open my can of lemonade. ‘God can hear you lie. Anyway, how is it going down there?’

After proving myself in Jordan’s department, I’d applied for a position in the marketing division six months ago. My brain craved creativity, not figures and files.

Ashley shrugged. ‘Going okay. Boring without you, but Jordan talks about you so much it’s like you’re there.’

I punched her arm. ‘He does not.’

She nodded. ‘He said you have seven boxes of shoes to move in.’

My eyes rolled. ‘A girl needs choices, and he doesn’t use the second bedroom anyway. It’s a dumping ground for burst footballs and Batman memorabilia.’

She chuckled. ‘Bet you’re counting the days till you can move out.’

I pulled my chair in to let some of my old team walk past me to the vending machines. ‘Yep. One more month and I’ll be officially debt free. I mean I love my parents and I’m grateful they’ve let me stay there for free so I could pay everything off quicker, but dear Lord, I’ll never move back.’

‘Are you going to buy somewhere together eventually?’ Ashley rolled the tinfoil from her sandwich into a little ball.

I nodded, my mouth full of salad. ‘That’s the plan. We want to try living together first to see if we can stand each other, rather than diving into a mortgage.’

‘Sensible,’ she agreed.

‘Plus I want to have enough saved up that I can go half on everything – and have my name on the paperwork. Callum taught me a valuable lesson with that. It’s the only thing I can give him credit for.’

‘Well, that’ – she smirked – ‘and not turning up on your wedding day?’

A laugh erupted from my whole body. ‘You’re right. Thank God he jilted me.’ A snort escaped my nose which made Ashley fall apart. Everyone at the tables surrounding us looked on, bemused.

If someone had told me six months ago that I’d be laughing about that day and grateful it hadn’t ended in me being a Mrs, truth is – I may have punched them. And as much as I’d hated this place, to begin with, I’d ended up right where I was meant to be.

In an office, in Merchant City, with Jordan.

Jordan

‘How much longer is he going to drone on for?’ Stuart hissed at me. ‘I’m in IT – why do I need to watch a PowerPoint on customer service?’

‘Maybe he wants you to be nicer to the computers?’ I whispered back.

Michael Donnelly had been droning on for the last twenty minutes.

Stuart ignored my sarcasm. ‘You got anything on this weekend?’

‘Clearing out my spare room – Kayleigh’s moving in next month.’ I stuck a finger under my left eye to keep it open. The heat from the radiators combined with the darkness made my body yearn for bed. *Only four more hours till home time.*

‘Nice. Don’t let her throw your stuff away – girls do that,’ he warned.

I lifted my arms above my head to stretch. ‘Too late, my friend.’

‘Aw, you must love her. Any girl touches my limited-edition lightsaber and it’s over.’ The Stormtroopers T-shirt he wore confirmed that he probably would dump someone for that offence.

‘I do.’ I swallowed back a yawn when Michael looked in my direction.

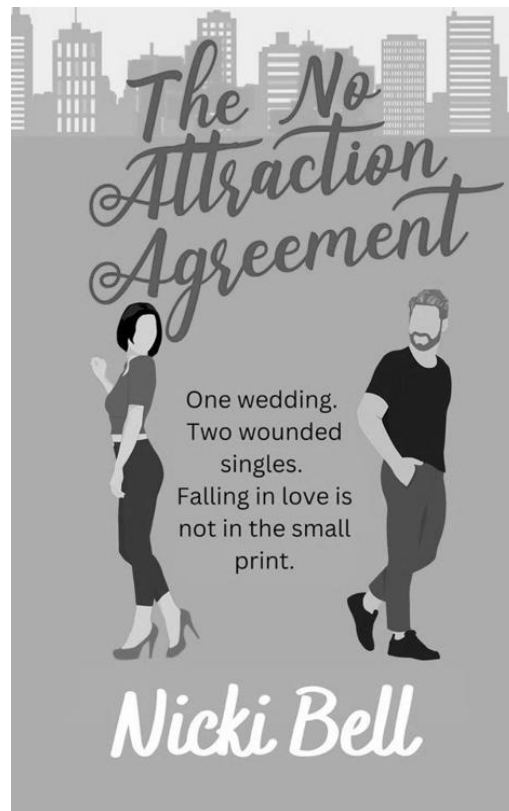
Stuart wheeled his chair closer to me once Michael resumed speaking. ‘She was meant to get married right? Think you’ll pop the question to make it up to her?’

Kayleigh had never come right out and said she never wanted to get married, but I had the distinct impression her first experience had ruined the magic of it. During our conversations about the future, she’d seemed content with just living together while still being financially independent. Callum kicking her out had made her fear not having a backup plan, which I understood. She’d worked so hard and sacrificed so much to clear off her debt so we could have a fresh start.

I smiled at Stuart before answering. ‘Married or not, I’m happy just to have her.’

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicki Bell is an author- obviously, because her name is on this book, and she wrote the words. That's what an author is, right? She's best known for writing and starring in comedy sketches featured on BBC's The Social, BBC3 and BBC Scotland, alongside her own social media videos which have amassed over 20 million views.

She currently lives outside Glasgow with her husband, two kids and a huge washing pile, that never goes away. In between drinking copious amounts of Irn-Bru and watching The Real Housewives re-runs, she plans to release three full-length novels this year alongside ten Instalove shorts.